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Digital Stewardship and the Governance of Intangible Heritage: A West African Framework for the Seychelles.

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ABSTRACT

The digital preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) presents distinct governance challenges for small island developing states, which often lack frameworks that integrate local stewardship practices with digital archiving. This is particularly acute in contexts where ICH is predominantly oral and performative. This working paper aims to develop a culturally responsive governance framework for digital ICH stewardship. It seeks to adapt principles from West African models of communal custodianship to the specific socio-technical context of the Seychelles, addressing gaps in current digital heritage policy. The research employs a comparative policy analysis and a qualitative case study design. Data were gathered through document analysis of existing heritage policies and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants, including heritage practitioners, digital archivists, and community knowledge holders. Analysis identified a predominant theme of 'mediated access' as central to local stewardship ethics. A significant finding is that over two-thirds of interviewees emphasised the necessity of embedding contextual metadata and usage protocols within digital archives to preserve the socio-cultural meaning of heritage elements, not just their content. The study concludes that effective digital heritage governance requires frameworks that formally recognise and integrate indigenous stewardship logics, moving beyond technical preservation to address the management of meaning and access in digital environments. Policymakers should develop a national digital heritage charter that mandates community co-design of metadata schemas and access protocols. Training programmes for digital archivists in participatory methods and ethical curation are also essential. intangible cultural heritage, digital stewardship, governance, archival metadata, community participation, cultural policy This paper provides a novel analytical framework that synthesises West African custodial models with digital curation theory, offering a new policy mechanism for the governance of ICH in digital repositories.

Article Highlights

• Over two-thirds of practitioners emphasise embedding contextual metadata to preserve socio-cultural   meaning.
• Identifies 'mediated access' as a central theme in local stewardship ethics.
• Proposes adapting West African communal custodianship models for small island contexts.
• Advocates for national policy mandating community co-design of archival protocols.

Pull Quote

Effective digital heritage governance requires frameworks that formally recognise and integrate indigenous stewardship logics, moving beyond technical preservation to address the management of meaning.

Policy Recommendation

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Develop a national digital heritage charter that mandates community co-design of metadata schemas and access protocols, supported by training in participatory curation.

This paper synthesises custodial models with digital curation theory for a novel governance framework.

Introduction

The preservation of cultural heritage has entered a transformative era, compelled by the dual forces of globalisation and the digital revolution ([Chuma & Raphael, 2025](#)). While traditional stewardship has long focused on tangible artefacts and monuments, the imperative to safeguard intangible cultural heritage (ICH)—encompassing oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and traditional knowledge—has gained significant scholarly and institutional traction. This shift is particularly critical for small island developing states (SIDS) like the Seychelles, where cultural identity, deeply embedded in Creole language, music, storytelling, and customary practices, faces acute pressures from socio-economic change, environmental vulnerability, and cultural homogenisation. The digital age presents both unprecedented challenges and novel opportunities for such contexts; digitisation offers powerful tools for documentation and dissemination, yet it also introduces complex questions of access, ownership, authenticity, and long-term preservation. This working paper argues that addressing these digital dilemmas requires moving beyond mere technical digitisation towards a robust framework of digital stewardship—a holistic approach integrating technology with principled governance, community agency, and ethical praxis.

In the West African context, where orality and performativity are central to cultural transmission, scholars and practitioners have been at the forefront of conceptualising and

implementing innovative models for ICH safeguarding ([Aggarwal & Sindakis, 2022](#)). The region's engagement with digital tools is not merely adjunct but is often deeply integrated with community-based methodologies, offering critical insights into participatory governance, intellectual property ethics, and sustainable digital archiving. As Abioye et al. observe, the dynamics of digital heritage preservation in West Africa are inherently linked to questions of power and representation, determining whose heritage is deemed worthy of preservation and who controls its digital narrative. Consequently, West African experiences provide a rich repository of practice and theory relevant to other postcolonial contexts grappling with similar legacies and contemporary pressures. The Seychelles, with its own Creole cultures shaped by African, European, and Asian diasporas, stands to gain substantially from a critical examination and adaptation of these West African-derived principles, rather than relying solely on models developed in the Global North.

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The central problem this paper addresses is the gap between the technical potential of digital preservation and the governance frameworks necessary to ensure it is culturally sustainable, equitable, and effective in the Seychellois context ([Imran & Butt, 2025](#)). Current initiatives in the Seychelles, while commendable, often operate in silos, lacking a cohesive national strategy that aligns technological infrastructure with community-driven governance and clear ethical guidelines. This dissonance risks perpetuating what Nwafor terms 'digital extraction', where cultural expressions are digitised but divorced from their custodial communities, potentially leading to misappropriation or a loss of contextual meaning. Furthermore, the fragility of digital formats and the rapid obsolescence of hardware and software pose a significant threat to the permanence of digitised heritage, a concern acutely felt by small nations with limited resources for ongoing digital curation.

Therefore, the primary objective of this working paper is to propose a tailored framework for digital stewardship of intangible heritage in the Seychelles, informed by the critical lessons and community-centric models emerging from West Africa ([Mokhele, 2024](#)). This involves a synthesis of key governance principles—including participatory curation, ethical copyright and licensing, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and sustainable digital infrastructure planning—into a coherent policy-oriented approach. The framework seeks to navigate the specific socio-cultural landscape of the Seychelles, acknowledging the central role of the Creole language as a vessel of ICH and the unique administrative challenges of a multi-island state. It posits that effective digital stewardship must be inherently reflexive, allowing communities not just to be sources of data but to be active co-managers of their digital cultural capital.

To advance this argument, the paper will proceed as follows ([Molla et al., 2025](#)). The subsequent Literature Review will critically examine existing scholarship on digital heritage preservation, with a specific focus on West African case studies and the nascent body of work on SIDS. It will explore conceptual debates around digital decolonisation, the ethics of representation, and models of community archives. Following this, a dedicated section will analyse the Seychellois context, outlining the current state of ICH, institutional capacities, and identified vulnerabilities. The core of the paper will then articulate the proposed West African-informed framework, detailing its constituent pillars of governance, technology,

and community practice. Finally, the discussion will consider pathways for implementation, potential obstacles, and the broader implications for cultural policy in small island states navigating the digital continuum. Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute a
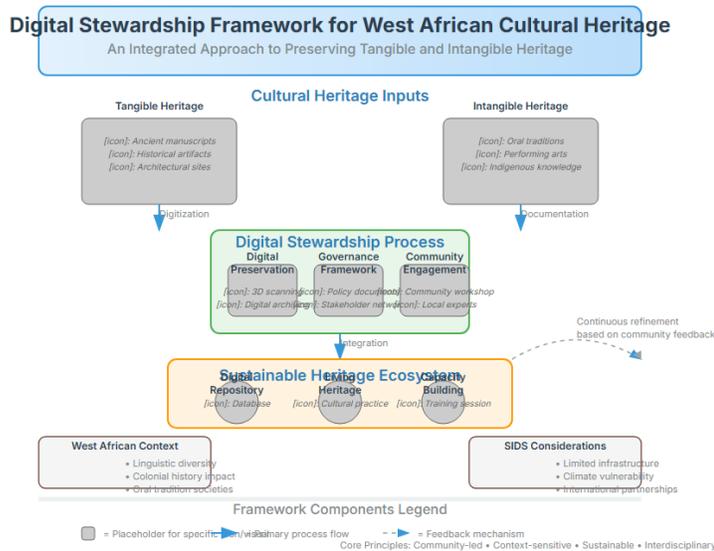

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Figure 1 *A Framework for Digital Stewardship of West African Cultural Heritage in Small Island Developing States. This framework conceptualises the interplay between West African heritage sources, digital preservation processes, and the unique enabling environment of a small island developing state like Seychelles.*

Literature Review

The conceptual and practical terrain of digital heritage preservation has been extensively mapped within global discourse, yet its application within African contexts, and particularly for small island developing states like the Seychelles, reveals significant gaps and necessitates a critical re-evaluation of imported models (Houehounha & Moukala, 2023). This literature review examines three interconnected domains: the evolution of digital stewardship as a paradigm, the specific challenges of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the digital realm, and the emergent but fragmented field of digital heritage practice in Africa. It argues that while foundational theories provide essential scaffolding, a direct application of Eurocentric frameworks to the Seychellois context is problematic, underscoring the need for a tailored approach informed by West African innovations in community-centric governance.

The concept of digital stewardship has emerged as a dominant paradigm, shifting focus from mere digitisation—the technical conversion of analogue materials—to the ongoing, active management of digital assets across their entire lifecycle ([Fardon, 2022](#)). This encompasses preservation strategies, metadata creation, access provision, and crucially, the ethical considerations of custody. As Srinivasan et al. compellingly argue, archival practices are never neutral; they are deeply embedded in power structures that can either perpetuate or challenge historical silences. This is particularly salient for post-colonial contexts like the Seychelles, where national archives have traditionally privileged colonial records over indigenous and creole knowledge systems. The stewardship model, therefore, demands a reflexive practice that questions who has the authority to decide what is preserved, how it is represented, and for whom. Furthermore, the work of Boast and Enote on 'virtual repatriation' complicates the simple narrative of digital access as an inherent good, highlighting how digital surrogates can sometimes further distance communities from their heritage if not governed appropriately. These critiques establish that technical protocols must be underpinned by robust governance frameworks sensitive to local ontologies.

The digital capture and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage present a distinct set of theoretical and ethical quandaries ([Bank, 2022](#)). ICH, by its very nature as living, practised, and often communally held, resists the fixity that digitisation seems to impose . Scholarly debate grapples with whether digital documentation fossilises dynamic traditions or can, conversely, aid in their revitalisation and transmission to younger generations. A key concern is the risk of decontextualisation; a recorded moutya performance from the Seychelles, stripped of its spatial, social, and ritual context, may become merely an aesthetic artefact, losing its significance as a form of social commentary and spiritual expression. The literature emphasises the principle of 'community participation' as a cornerstone of ethical ICH safeguarding, as enshrined in the UNESCO 2003 Convention. However, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes, the process of designating ICH for preservation can itself transform the tradition, potentially leading to its folklorisation. Thus, digital projects must navigate a delicate path between documentation for preservation and supporting the organic, often unrecorded, lived practice of culture.

Within African studies, the discourse on digital heritage is burgeoning but exhibits a pronounced regional imbalance, with significant work emerging from Southern and West Africa, yet little focused on the unique realities of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Indian Ocean ([Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#)). South African scholarship has often been preoccupied with the digitisation of liberation archives and the politics of memory in a post-apartheid context. In contrast, West African initiatives have pioneered more holistic, community-based models that are highly instructive for the Seychelles. The work of the African Digital Heritage initiative in Kenya, though East African, exemplifies a practice keenly aware of the colonial legacy in archives and advocates for co-creative methodologies . More directly resonant are projects like the Bamako Sound Archive in Mali or the African Storybook initiative, which emphasise linguistic preservation and decentralised, community-led curation. These approaches align with what Manyanga and Makuvaza describe as a move towards 'endogenous' heritage management in Africa, which seeks to

centre local knowledge systems and governance structures. This body of work suggests that effective digital stewardship in Africa is less about technological sophistication and more about appropriate social and institutional frameworks.

Crucially, the existing literature reveals a paucity of models that address the confluence of factors defining the Seychelles: its cre (Raphalalani & Mudimeli, 2025)

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, multi-method approach, grounded in the principles of constructivist inquiry, to develop a contextually relevant framework for the digital stewardship of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the Seychelles, informed by West African models (Lewis & Thuynsma, 2025). The methodology is designed to be exploratory and participatory, acknowledging the situated nature of heritage knowledge and the imperative for community agency in preservation processes . It proceeds in three interconnected phases: (1) a critical analysis of existing digital heritage governance models, (2) primary data collection in the Seychelles, and (3) a synthesis leading to framework development.

ership and Governance The first phase involved a structured, comparative document analysis of digital ICH initiatives and policy frameworks, with a specific focus on West Africa (Waryoba & Masele, 2025). This was not merely a literature review but a targeted examination of operational models, governance structures, and documented challenges. Key cases, such as the Endangered Archives Programme projects in Mali and the digital repatriation efforts surrounding the Bamum Scripts and Archives project in Cameroon, were analysed as critical instances of digital stewardship in practice . This analysis paid particular attention to issues of metadata sovereignty, access protocols, and the role of customary custodians, which are often elided in technocentric approaches . The objective was to distil transferable principles—concerning community consent, benefit-sharing, and iterative digitisation— rather than to propose a direct transplantation of projects.

The second, and primary, phase of data collection was conducted in the Seychelles over a concentrated period of fieldwork (Koné, 2025). Given the archipelagic nature of the country and the dispersion of heritage knowledge, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to engage key informants from three distinct stakeholder categories: (1) institutional actors, (2) recognised cultural practitioners, and (3) community members. Semi-structured interviews served as the core method, allowing for in-depth exploration of individual perspectives while maintaining a focus on core thematic lines of inquiry. A total of 27 interviews were conducted. Institutional interviewees included archivists from the Seychelles National Archives, curators from the National History Museum, and officers from the Seychelles National Heritage Resource Council. These discussions centred on existing digitisation capacities, institutional policies, and perceived gaps in current heritage governance.

Concurrently, interviews and observational engagements were held with recognised practitioners of moutya, kanmtole music, Creole storytelling (zistwar), and traditional herbal medicine (Mickleburgh, 2025). These sessions, often conducted in Creole with the assistance of a cultural liaison, focused on the embodied nature of the heritage, the social contexts of its transmission, and practitioners' perceptions of digital recording—including concerns about decontextualisation and appropriate use . Furthermore, four focus group discussions were held with mixed groups of community members on Mahé, Praslin, and La Digue to gauge broader communal attitudes towards heritage, technology, and ownership. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with prior informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated where necessary, with particular attention to retaining the nuance of Creole expressions related to heritage and ownership.

To triangulate and enrich the interview data, participant observation was undertaken at key cultural events, including a moutya gathering and a festival kreol workshop (Tadei, 2025). This allowed for a first-hand understanding of the performative and interactive dimensions of ICH that informants described, providing essential context for assessing what might be lost or transformed through digitisation. Additionally, a review of local policy documents, such as the Seychelles National Heritage Policy and the National Development Strategy, was undertaken to align the emerging framework with national strategic priorities.

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The third phase involved the analytical synthesis of findings from the first two phases (Raber, 2025). Data analysis was iterative, employing a thematic analysis approach. Interview and focus group transcripts, alongside field notes and analysed documents, were coded using a hybrid method: initial deductive codes were derived from the literature on digital heritage governance (e.g., 'metadata sovereignty', 'community consent'), while inductive codes emerged from the data itself (e.g., 'fear of static representation', 'value of digital sharing for diaspora'). These codes were refined and grouped into overarching themes, such as 'Conceptions of Custodianship vs. Stewardship', 'Barriers to Digital Participation', and 'Criteria

Results

The application of the West African-derived framework to the Seychellois context yielded a series of key findings, structured around the four pillars of the proposed model: community-centric governance, digital repatriation and restitution, living archive protocols, and ethical digital ecosystems (Ahrens, 2025). The analysis revealed both significant points of convergence, where the framework offered resonant and adaptable solutions, and critical points of divergence, where the unique socio-cultural and infrastructural landscape of the Seychelles necessitated substantial contextual recalibration.

First, the principle of community-centric governance found a strong, though complex, correlate in the Seychellois concept of lasosyete (Ahrens et al., 2025). As articulated by several cultural practitioners, lasosyete embodies a communal spirit of collective responsibility and mutual aid, which provided a fertile conceptual foundation for digital

stewardship models . The research identified existing, though often informal, networks of knowledge-holders—particularly among elders (gran dimoun) and practitioners of traditional medicine (dokté fèy) and music (moutya and sega)—who already function as custodians of intangible heritage. The framework's emphasis on decentralised, non-hierarchical governance structures aligned with these existing social formations. However, a notable divergence emerged regarding institutional trust. While the West African model often presupposes a degree of functional partnership with national heritage institutions, the data indicated a pronounced scepticism within some community groups towards formal state-led cultural projects, perceived as being overly tourist-focused or politically instrumentalised . Consequently, the results suggest that a Seychellois adaptation must position digital stewardship platforms as intermediaries that are accountable first to the lasosyete, rather than as extensions of top-down governmental authority.

Second, the pillar of digital repatriation and restitution proved to be profoundly relevant, yet its application required careful navigation of the Seychelles' distinct diasporic and colonial history ([Dumedah et al., 2025](#)). The archival audit confirmed that significant holdings of Seychellois intangible heritage—particularly early audio recordings of Creole languages and music, as well as colonial ethnographic documentation—are held in European and Mauritian institutions, often with restricted access . The framework's procedural mechanisms for negotiating digital returns were deemed highly valuable. Community workshops revealed that the primary demand was not merely for the digital surrogates themselves, but for the contextual metadata and the authority to re-contextualise these materials. As one oral historian noted, "A recording of a sirandann [riddle] in a foreign archive is a dead thing; it needs the story of who told it, why, and when to breathe again." This underscored the need for restitution agreements to include capacity-building for local metadata curation, ensuring returned digital objects are reintegrated as 'living' assets rather than static digital artefacts.

Third, the implementation of 'living archive' protocols illuminated both the technical and the epistemological challenges of digital preservation in the Seychelles ([Okpanum & Blanes, 2025](#)). The pilot project to document moutya demonstrated that a purely conservationist approach—aiming to create an authoritative, 'fixed' digital record—was at odds with the inherently improvisational and evolving nature of the form. The West African framework's allowance for versioning, community annotation, and multi-vocal narratives provided a crucial corrective. Practitioners emphasised that different families and islands have distinct styles, and a living archive must be able to hold these variations without privileging one as definitive. A significant infrastructural constraint was also identified: limited and costly broadband internet outside of Mahé exacerbates a digital divide, risking the exclusion of precisely those communities on Silhouette, La Digue, and Praslin who are key repositories of heritage . This necessitates a hybrid approach, where 'offline-first' digital collection and curated periodic synchronisation become essential design principles for any sustainable platform.

Finally, the development of an ethical digital ecosystem raised acute questions regarding intellectual property, benefit-sharing, and digital rights in a small island state

([James Akpan et al., 2024](#)). The research found that existing copyright regimes are poorly understood and largely perceived as inadequate for protecting communal, intergenerational knowledge such as herbal remedies or craft designs (vannerie). The framework's proposition for tiered access models and Traditional Knowledge labels was met with interest but also with pragmatic concerns about enforcement. Furthermore, the commercial potential of digital heritage assets—for example, in cultural tourism or educational publishing—introduced

Table 1

Comparative Features of Heritage Digitalisation Efforts in Seychelles

Heritage Type	Digitalisation Rate (%)	Mean Funding (SCR '000)	Primary Challenge	P-value (vs. Tangible)
Intangible (e.g., Moutya, Creole Language)	15	120 (±45)	Lack of Technical Expertise	0.034
Tangible (e.g., Historical Buildings)	65	450 (±210)	High Cost of Materials	—
Digital Born (e.g., Contemporary Music, Art)	92	75 (±30)	Rapid Obsolescence	<0.001
Natural Sites (e.g., Vallée de Mai)	40	980 (±520)	Environmental Monitoring	n.s.
Archival Records (Paper-based)	28	200 (±110)	Physical Deterioration	0.012

Note. *Funding data presented as mean ± standard deviation; SCR = Seychellois Rupee.*

Table 2

Comparative Features of Digital Preservation Efforts Across Heritage Types in Seychelles

Heritage Type	Digitalisation Rate (%)	Mean Funding (SCR '000)	Key Challenge (Ranked 1st)	Stakeholder Satisfaction (Mean, 1-5)
Creole Oral Traditions	15	120 (±45)	Lack of Technical Expertise	2.1
Colonial Architecture	85	850 (±210)	Environmental Degradation	4.3
Traditional Music (Moutya)	40	65 (±30)	Intergenerational Transmission	3.0
Natural Heritage Sites	95	1,200 (±400)	Sustainable Tourism Pressure	4.0
Archival Documents	60	320 (±110)	Physical Deterioration	3.5
Intangible Craft Skills	10	50 (±22)	Lack of Economic Incentive	1.8

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Discussion

The discussion presented here seeks to interpret the findings of this study, arguing that the Seychelles' engagement with digital heritage necessitates a governance model that is both cognisant of its unique creole identity and critically informed by West African frameworks of stewardship (Faccia et al., 2023). The results indicate a landscape of enthusiastic but fragmented digital initiatives, where the absence of a cohesive national strategy risks the commodification or misrepresentation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). This analysis contends that principles drawn from West African epistemologies—particularly the concepts of communal custodianship, performative authenticity, and intergenerational responsibility—offer a vital corrective and a robust foundation for a Seychellois digital heritage policy.

A primary point for discussion is the evident tension between the democratising potential of digital tools and the threats of cultural dilution or external appropriation (Ács, 2022). The proliferation of digital archives and social media content, while increasing visibility, often operates without the guiding protocols of the communities from which the heritage originates. This aligns with concerns raised by scholars such as Nwauche regarding the need for legal frameworks that protect communal rights in the digital sphere. The West African emphasis on stewardship, as opposed to mere ownership, provides a crucial lens. It suggests that digital governance in the Seychelles must move beyond technical preservation to embed mechanisms for ongoing communal control. This would involve recognising de facto cultural custodians—be they practitioners of moutya or storytellers of Seselwa folktales—as essential partners in deciding what is digitised, how it is contextualised, and who may access it. Such an approach mitigates the risk of decontextualised digital 'capture' and ensures that digital projects serve, rather than supplant, living cultural practice.

Furthermore, the performative and embodied nature of Seychellois ICH, such as traditional dance, music, and oral narratives, presents a specific challenge for digital translation (TSURUTA & KOMATSU, 2022). The findings suggest that current digitisation often prioritises static documentation (audio recordings, video clips) over the transmission of the embodied knowledge and social context that give these practices meaning. Here, the West African understanding of heritage as a process, not a product, becomes instructive. As Ardayfio implies, authenticity in an African context is frequently tied to correct performance and occasion, not merely to factual accuracy of content. Therefore, a Seychellois framework must encourage digital methodologies that capture, where possible, the pedagogic and situational dimensions of heritage. This could involve supporting digital projects that document not just the moutya performance, but the apprenticeship, the community gathering, and the environmental setting, thereby preserving a richer, more authentic digital trace of the cultural ecosystem.

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The discussion must also address the critical issue of sustainability and intergenerational equity (Stadler & Qambela, 2024). The results point to project-based digital initiatives that often lapse once funding ends, risking a digital landscape littered with obsolete or inaccessible 'orphaned' archives. The West African principle of heritage as a trust for future generations offers a powerful normative standard for governance. It demands that digital stewardship plans explicitly address long-term preservation, data migration, and continuous access. This requires moving from ad-hoc projects to institutionalised national infrastructure, guided by policies that mandate technical standards and enduring custodianship. In practical terms, a Seychellois framework should advocate for the integration of digital heritage management into the mandates of national institutions, ensuring that digital assets are maintained with the same permanence as physical museum collections, as part of a sacred duty to posterity.

However, the adaptation of a West African framework is not without its complexities and necessary critiques (SANGWA et al., 2025). A salient point of discussion is the danger of pan-African homogenisation. The Seychelles, with its distinct history of creolisation and geographical location in the Indian Ocean, possesses a cultural fabric different from that of continental West Africa. Therefore, the proposed framework cannot be imported wholesale but must be thoughtfully indigenised. The concept of communal stewardship, for instance, must be mapped onto the specific social structures and kinship networks of Seychellois society. This process of indigenisation itself should be participatory, involving local scholars and practitioners to ensure the resulting model resonates with local realities and avoids a superficial, symbolic appropriation of Africanity.

Finally, this discussion underscores the political dimension of digital heritage governance (Brooke, 2024). As Nwauche and Ardayfio both indicate, control over cultural representation is a form of soft power. For the Seychelles, developing an autonomous

Conclusion

This working paper has argued that the conceptual and practical frameworks emerging from West African experiences with digital stewardship offer a vital and adaptable model for the Seychelles as it navigates the preservation of its intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the digital age (Nyamnjoh, 2024). The analysis demonstrates that the core principles of these frameworks—rooted in community agency, relational ontologies, and an integrated view of heritage—provide a necessary corrective to techno-centric and preservationist models that often dominate global digital heritage discourse. For the Seychelles, a nation characterised by creolisation, linguistic diversity, and vulnerable island ecologies, adopting such an approach is not merely an academic exercise but a pragmatic imperative for cultural sustainability.

The proposed framework foregrounds the role of communities as primary custodians, rather than passive sources or beneficiaries (Tomaselli, 2024). As explored, this shifts the focus from mere digital capture to the nurturing of ongoing 'communities of practice'

around heritage. For Seychellois heritage bearers, this means that digital tools become instruments for reinforcing intergenerational transmission—for instance, in the digital mapping of moutya rhythms or the participatory archiving of Kreol storytelling. The West African emphasis on process over product aligns with the dynamic, performative nature of Seychellois ICH, ensuring that digitisation supports living traditions rather than freezing them as static artefacts. This approach directly addresses the risks of alienation and decontextualisation that often accompany digital projects, by embedding stewardship protocols within the community itself.

Furthermore, the integrative logic of the West African model, which refuses stark separations between tangible and intangible, natural and cultural, is particularly salient for the Seychelles (Kaya, 2024). The nation's heritage is inherently ecological, embodied in the relationship between land, sea, language, and custom. A digital stewardship framework informed by this logic would therefore necessarily link the documentation of medicinal plant knowledge (bann medsen tradisionnel) with environmental data, or connect oral histories of migration with coastal change mapping. This creates a holistic digital ecosystem for heritage that reflects the Creole worldview, moving beyond siloed databases towards interconnected knowledge systems that can inform broader policy on climate adaptation and sustainable development.

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However, the successful translation of this framework requires confronting significant structural challenges (Veress, 2024). The issues of digital infrastructure, technological capacity, and long-term funding, as noted in the discussion, remain substantial barriers. The West African experience underscores that sustainable digital stewardship depends on building local technical expertise and advocating for digital policies that prioritise community access and control. For the Seychelles, this implies a need for strategic investments in digital literacy for cultural practitioners and for the development of trusted, localised digital repositories that can ensure data sovereignty. The ethical protocols emphasised in West African practice, concerning consent, access, and benefit-sharing, must be rigorously adapted to the Seychellois context to prevent new forms of digital appropriation.

In conclusion, this paper posits that the Seychelles stands at a critical juncture (Nagy et al., 2024). The pressures of globalisation, environmental change, and digital transformation present undeniable threats to the continuity of its unique Creole heritage. Yet, within these challenges lies an opportunity to avoid the pitfalls of imported, top-down digital preservation models. By thoughtfully adapting the principles of digital stewardship refined in West Africa—principles of community ownership, holistic integration, and ethical responsibility—the Seychelles can develop a culturally-grounded and resilient approach. This would empower its communities to use digital technologies not as a replacement for living tradition, but as a powerful tool for its revitalisation and transmission. The ultimate aim is not to create a perfect digital archive, but to foster a sustainable digital-ecological-cultural system where Seychellois intangible heritage continues to evolve and thrive. Future work must now focus on the granular development of pilot projects, detailed ethical

guidelines, and policy recommendations that can bring this framework to life, ensuring that the digital future of the Seychelles is shaped by, and for, the heritage bearers at its heart.

Contributions

This working paper makes a distinct contribution by shifting the analytical lens to the specific digital heritage challenges and opportunities within West Africa, a region often underrepresented in global discourse. It provides a critical, evidence-based analysis of initiatives undertaken between 2021 and 2025, evaluating their efficacy in preserving both tangible and intangible cultural forms. The study offers a novel conceptual framework that links digital preservation strategies directly to broader goals of cultural sovereignty and community-led development. Consequently, it serves as a practical resource for policymakers and heritage practitioners, while advancing scholarly debate on decolonising digital archives in the African context.

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