

**CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND NIGERIA'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC SUSTENANCE
THROUGH IJAW CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Weridonghan, Ernest Jackson (PhD)

Department of Theatre Arts
Niger Delta University
0009-0000-3672-2302
ernestw4all@gmail.com 08140062088

Fred Mayford

Department of public relations
Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education
08036696019

And

Banabo, Ekankumo (PhD)

Department of Marketing
Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education
Sagbama, Bayelsa State
07066980905 [bana..@gmail...](mailto:bana..@gmail.com)

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between cultural entrepreneurship and socioeconomic sustainability in Nigeria via the perspective of Ijaw cultural heritage in the Niger Delta region. According to the study, indigenous cultural practices are more than just symbolic traditions; they are productive economic resources that can contribute to long-term national development. Using Cultural Economy Theory, the study investigates how Ijaw cultural practices such as fishing, canoe carving, festivals, masquerade performances, crafts, music, dance, and boat regattas serve as entrepreneurial activities that generate employment, tourism, creative innovation, and communal stability. The study also emphasises the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in environmental management, cultural production, and social cohesiveness among Ijaw communities. Using qualitative and analytical approaches, the study identifies major challenges to Ijaw cultural entrepreneurship, such as environmental degradation caused by oil exploration, globalisation, youth migration, insufficient institutional support, and over-commercialization of indigenous traditions. The study concludes that preserving and commercialising Ijaw cultural heritage can significantly boost Nigeria's creative economy and socioeconomic resilience if supported by effective cultural policies, environmental restoration, tourism development, digital promotion, and youth empowerment initiatives. The study recommends for more government and private-sector investment in indigenous cultural industries as feasible pathways to inclusive economic change and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Cultural entrepreneurship, Ijaw culture, indigenous knowledge, socio-economic sustenance, creative economy.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship has become one of the most significant concepts in contemporary economic and development discourse because of its role in wealth creation, innovation, employment generation, and social transformation. Since the late twentieth century, scholars in economics, sociology, management, anthropology, and cultural studies have increasingly examined entrepreneurship as a vital instrument for sustainable national development. The growing global interest in entrepreneurship is closely linked to the search for development strategies capable of addressing unemployment, poverty, economic dependency and social instability in developing societies.

Scholars have conceptualised entrepreneurship from different perspectives. Byjus. (2023) describe it as the process of creating and managing opportunities through innovation and resource mobilisation. Deakins, D., & Freel, M. (2012) define entrepreneurship as the identification, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities that generate value within society. Similarly, Throsby, D. (2010). emphasises the entrepreneur's contribution to economic growth and social advancement through the creation of products, services, organisational structures, and employment opportunities. Although entrepreneurship is often associated with business enterprises and private innovation, the concept has expanded to include cultural and indigenous practices. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises culture as an economic resource capable of generating employment, tourism, revenue, and social stability. This development has contributed to the emergence of cultural entrepreneurship.

Cultural entrepreneurship involves the use of cultural resources, indigenous knowledge systems, artistic expressions, and heritage practices for socio-economic development. It transforms cultural identity and traditional practices into sustainable economic opportunities while preserving communal values and heritage systems. This form of entrepreneurship is particularly relevant in African societies where indigenous traditions continue to shape social organisation, economic activities, and collective identity.

Nigeria, one of Africa's most culturally diverse countries, possesses vast cultural resources across its ethnic nationalities. The country's heritage of music, dance, festivals, oral traditions, crafts, masquerades, cuisine, theatre, and indigenous technologies provides a strong foundation for economic growth and creative innovation. However, despite the economic potential of these cultural resources, national attention has focused largely on petroleum and formal economic structures while indigenous cultural economies remain underexplored.

Within Nigeria's cultural landscape, the Ijaw people occupy a distinctive position because of their riverine civilisation, maritime orientation, ecological adaptation, and vibrant performance traditions. The Ijaw are among the oldest ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta region and are historically associated with fishing, canoe carving, maritime trade, water transportation, festivals, masquerades, oral literature, and aquatic cosmology.

Ijaw culture extends beyond ritual and entertainment. It functions as a socio-economic system that influences livelihoods, environmental management, communal governance, artistic production, and identity formation. Traditional occupations such as fishing, boat construction, seafood processing, and local craft industries remain central to the economy of many Ijaw communities. Likewise, Ijaw festivals, music, dance, masquerade performances, and oral traditions contribute to tourism and the creative industry in Nigeria.

Despite the significance of Ijaw cultural heritage, modernisation, globalisation, environmental degradation, and inadequate institutional support threaten the survival of many indigenous practices. Oil pollution and gas flaring have damaged aquatic ecosystems and weakened traditional

occupations in the Niger Delta. In addition, urban migration and foreign cultural influences have reduced youth participation in indigenous cultural activities.

This study, therefore, examines the relationship between cultural entrepreneurship and socio-economic sustenance in Nigeria through the lens of the Ijaw indigenous culture. It explores how Ijaw cultural resources contribute to economic development, tourism, environmental sustainability, social stability, and creative innovation. The study also investigates the challenges affecting the preservation of Ijaw cultural heritage and proposes strategies for integrating indigenous cultural resources into sustainable national development.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing discourse on indigenous culture and development in Africa. By focusing on Ijaw cultural entrepreneurship, the study expands scholarly understanding of how indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices can serve as viable tools for socio-economic transformation in contemporary Nigeria.

Clarification of Key Concepts

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship refers to the process of identifying opportunities, mobilising resources, and creating value through innovation and enterprise development. Joseph Schumpeter conceptualises entrepreneurship as a process of “creative destruction” through which innovation transforms economic systems and introduces new forms of production. Throsby, D. (2010). further define entrepreneurship as the relationship between opportunities and individuals capable of exploiting those opportunities within society.

Contemporary development discourse extends entrepreneurship beyond commercial activities to include social entrepreneurship, cultural entrepreneurship, and community-based innovation. Entrepreneurship, therefore, involves not only economic productivity but also creativity, sustainability, and social transformation.

Culture

Culture refers to the total way of life of a people, including their beliefs, customs, language, values, artistic traditions, social institutions, and knowledge systems. It includes tangible elements such as artefacts, architecture, costumes, and crafts, as well as intangible aspects such as rituals, oral traditions, music, festivals, and indigenous philosophies. Culture is dynamic and evolves through historical interaction, environmental adaptation, and social change. Nevertheless, indigenous cultures remain important sources of identity, continuity, and communal memory in many African societies.

Cultural Entrepreneurship

Cultural entrepreneurship refers to the strategic use of cultural resources, indigenous knowledge systems, artistic expressions, and heritage practices for economic and social development. It involves transforming festivals, performances, crafts, cuisines, and indigenous technologies into productive enterprises capable of generating employment, tourism, and community development. Cultural entrepreneurship combines preservation with commercialisation by recognising culture not only as heritage to be conserved but also as productive capital capable of sustaining livelihoods and creative industries.

Socio-Economic Sustenance

Socio-economic sustenance refers to the ability of social and economic systems to maintain human welfare, productivity, ecological balance, and communal stability over time. It involves the creation of sustainable livelihoods, social cohesion, environmental protection, and economic resilience that support long-term development. Within the context of this study, socio-economic sustenance refers to the ways in which Ijaw cultural heritage contributes to economic productivity, environmental management, tourism development, social stability, and creative innovation in Nigeria.

The Ijaw People and Their Ecological Environment

The Ijaw people are one of the major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and the primary inhabitants of the Niger Delta region. Their environment consists of rivers, creeks, lagoons, estuaries, mangrove forests, swamps, and other aquatic ecosystems connected to the Atlantic Ocean. This environment significantly shaped their occupations, spirituality, artistic traditions, and social organisation.

Over generations, the Ijaw developed indigenous knowledge systems suited to aquatic living. Fishing became the dominant occupation, while canoe carving, seafood processing, water transportation, and maritime trade emerged as important economic activities. Indigenous technologies relating to boat construction, fishing equipment, and aquatic navigation evolved through centuries of environmental interaction and practical experience.

The aquatic environment also influenced Ijaw spirituality and performance traditions. Many myths, oral narratives, festivals, and masquerade performances revolve around marine spirits, river deities, and aquatic cosmologies. Boat regattas and fishing festivals celebrate the relationship between the people and their environment while reinforcing communal identity and spiritual continuity.

Traditional governance systems among the Ijaw reflected communal adaptation to environmental realities. Councils of elders, age-grade associations, women's groups, and communal labour systems regulated social order, conflict resolution, and resource distribution. These institutions promoted cooperation and collective responsibility within the challenging ecological conditions of the Niger Delta. Ijaw culture, therefore, represents an adaptive indigenous knowledge system shaped by continuous interaction between human communities and aquatic ecosystems. The culture remains closely connected to the environmental realities that influenced its economic practices, artistic traditions, and social structures.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Cultural Economy Theory, which views culture as productive economic capital rather than merely symbolic heritage. The theory argues that artistic expressions, festivals, crafts, performances, indigenous technologies, and cultural identities possess economic value capable of generating employment, tourism, wealth, and community development.

The theory is particularly relevant in African societies where cultural industries contribute to local economies and national identity formation. Festivals, masquerades, music, dance, theatre, and crafts often stimulate commerce, create employment opportunities, and attract tourism investment. Within the context of this study, Cultural Economy Theory explains how Ijaw cultural practices, such as regattas, masquerades, fishing traditions, cuisines, crafts, and indigenous performances, function as entrepreneurial resources that contribute to socio-economic sustenance in Nigeria.

Pathways for Ijaw Culture to Economy and Entrepreneurship

There are several cultural practices that the Ijaw people engage in if fully harnessed can be of economic and entrepreneurship benefit to Nigeria. These include but not limited to:

- *Fishing and Canoe Carving*

Historically, fishing and maritime life/work has been the support of almost all Ijaw communities. The people engage in fishing by applying local fishing methods such as the use of hook, line, and casting of nets. The fishes are processed using smoking method and then transported through the rivers or riverine shores to improved livelihoods and encouraged regional trade in the Niger Delta. Another riverine activity include canoe carving.

Canoe carving is a skilled indigenous industry. Wooden boats served for fishing, transportation, and trade among Ijaw and other riverine communities. Carved wooden boats are used to transport processed fish and other seafood such as prawn, crayfish and crabs thereby providing economic prospects, particularly for women involved in local trade. These indigenous occupations made major contributions to food security, job creation, and community survival.

- *Performance Traditions and Cultural Tourism*

The different performances and cultural displays by the Ijaw people are increasingly providing money for performers, drummers, costume and make-up designers, dancers, and cultural organisers alike. Sometimes, these performances are venerated to festival status, thus attracting scholars, visitors, researchers, filmmakers, and cultural lovers from all over the world (that is, tourists). The people come to the Ijaw villages as cultural tourists.

One of the most important aspects of cultural entrepreneurship among Ijaw people is the growth of cultural tourism and participation in Nigeria's creative economy. Some performances the Ijaw people involve themselves that attract cultural tourists include, masquerades, music, dancing, moonlight folkloric sessions performed with accompanied instrumentation, festivals, and boat regattas. All these performances have all served as tools for social entertainment, ritual communication, historical preservation, and communal integration. Many of these performances evolved over time from strictly communal ritual settings to secular cultural festivals attracting larger crowds and creating commercial benefit.

- *Material and Crafts Making*

Ijaw indigenous crafts like as sculpture, weaving, bead making, costume design, canoe ornamentation, and fishing equipment manufacturing first arose to suit local communal requirements. However, the commercialization of these artifacts has gradually expanded their economic significance within tourism and creative industries. Traditional craftspeople are now creating cultural products for festivals, museums, tourists, collectors, and art exhibitions. Indigenous crafts thus serve as key sources of local business and revenue generating while also maintaining traditional artistic expertise.

- *Creative Economy*

Nigeria's cinema, theatre, and music industries when having stories related to the Niger Delta commonly use Ijaw indigenous-inspired motifs, rhythms, costumes, symbols, and narrative frameworks. This integration broadens the economic appeal of Ijaw cultural aesthetics while also providing job opportunities in filming, costume design, choreography, stage production, event management, photography, and cultural retailing. As a result, Ijaw cultural legacy benefits both local economies and Nigeria's overall creative economy.

- *Social Media*

The modern social media era has further altered the commercialisation and distribution of indigenous culture. Social media platforms, digital video creation, online music distribution, and virtual cultural displays have made it possible for indigenous artists and performers to reach larger worldwide audiences. Digital platforms have opened up new business options for cultural promotion, storytelling, tourism marketing, and artistic networking.

Contemporary Challenges Confronting Ijaw Cultural Entrepreneurship

The evolving nature of today's contemporary society poses a great number of threats to Ijaw cultural entrepreneurship. Some of these challenges are:

- *Environmental Degradation*

One of the most important challenges to Ijaw socio-economic life is environmental deterioration caused by oil exploration and industrial pollution in the Niger Delta. Oil spills, gas flaring, water contamination, and the degradation of mangrove forests have all had a substantial impact on fishing, aquatic biodiversity, and traditional livelihoods. Environmental devastation undermines the ecological base on which many indigenous cultural practices rely and jeopardises long-term socioeconomic viability.

- *Globalization*

Most Ijaw youths are influenced negatively by the global media. Most young people abandoned Ijaw traditional life and adopts foreign identity through the social media, films and western movies. Also, the migration of rural people to urban areas, and Western cultural norms have all contributed to a decline in youth engagement in indigenous ceremonies, languages, and communal traditions. Many ancient behaviours are increasingly fading as younger generations that migrate to urban areas prefer and adopt foreign lifestyles.

- *Lackluster Institutional Support*

Despite the economic importance of indigenous cultural industries such as amusement parks, tourist sites and museums, the government's investment in these industries is inadequate. National development plans frequently favour petroleum revenue and formal industrial sectors over indigenous creative economies.

- *Economic Hardship*

Economic hardship and unemployment continue to drive migration from rural riverine populations to metropolitan areas. This movement interrupts intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge and limits involvement in traditional vocations including fishing, crafting, and performing arts.

- *Commercialization Without Preservation*

Although commercialisation creates economic opportunities, excessive market-driven exploitation of indigenous rituals can damage their spiritual, communal, and symbolic importance. Balancing commercial use and cultural preservation is a significant challenge for long-term cultural entrepreneurship.

Strategies for Sustainable Cultural Entrepreneurship

To increase the socioeconomic value of Ijaw cultural heritage, comprehensive interventions are required at the immediate, medium, and long term levels. Government agencies and private stakeholders should:

1. Document and archive Ijaw indigenous oral histories, rituals, music, and crafts through digital technology and community-led archives. Language preservation programs, oral history projects, archives, museums, and indigenous arts education should all be expanded.

2. Lead Cultural education: Incorporate indigenous studies into both formal and informal curricula to encourage pride and transmission. Indigenous knowledge systems and communal governance institutions should be included in regional development planning and policy making. Digital platforms and creative industry networks should also be created to preserve intellectual property rights, enable equitable benefit sharing, and encourage the long-term commercialisation of indigenous cultural products.
3. Invest in tourism infrastructure such as water transportation networks, cultural institutions, museums, lodging facilities, and performance venues that can accommodate cultural festivals and tourism development.
4. Order environmental cleanup and tougher ecological controls for restoring fisheries, mangrove forests, and aquatic ecosystems that are critical to traditional livelihoods. Also, implement rules that protect mangroves, streams, and fisheries using indigenous ecological knowledge.
5. Encourage the creative industries by providing funding, training, and market access to artists, performers, and cultural entrepreneurs.
6. Community engagement: Support community-driven preservation activities to maintain authenticity and local ownership.

Conclusion

Ijaw cultural entrepreneurship illustrates how indigenous cultural systems contribute significantly to socio-economic sustenance and national development in Nigeria. Festivals, performance traditions, fishing economies, crafts, maritime knowledge, and ecological practices continue to support employment, tourism, creative industries, food security, and communal stability within the Niger Delta region. However, environmental degradation, globalization, inadequate institutional support, youth migration, and excessive commercialization threaten the sustainability of these cultural resources. Addressing these challenges requires integrated policies that recognize culture as productive economic capital rather than merely symbolic heritage. The study recommends that government and private investors need to/should invest in tourism by building and creating an environment worth visiting. Also, look at avenues for environmental restoration, cultural education, digital promotion and youth empowerment. Furthermore, provide teachers schooled in indigenous knowledge that can pass this knowledge to younger youths, thus preserving Ijaw knowledge and culture. Ultimately, Nigeria's sustainable national development depends not just on its petroleum resources and industrial growth, but also on the deliberate commercialisation and preservation of its indigenous cultural heritage as a basis for social resilience and inclusive economic transformation.

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