

LIVING HERITAGE AS A CULTURAL TOURISM ASSET: REFLECTIONS FROM THE DÉJÌ'S ROYAL PALACE

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A personal encounter with palace architecture

Cultural tourism is often offered through monuments, museums and carefully preserved historical sites. Some sites, however, have their significance more dependent on their age or architectural grandeur than on their place in the mainstream of culturally built forms. Déjì's Royal Palace in Akure, southwestern Nigeria, is one such area. According to this view, the best asset of the palace for cultural tourism is not just in its most effective physical material, but in its function as a historical setting in which traditional architecture, art expressions, royal institutions and communal traditions remain vibrant additions to life. Based on increasing conversations in important and intangible heritage scholarship, I propose that managers of African cultural heritage should treat sites not just as static monuments, but as cultural landscapes whose meanings are constantly renewed through use.

My interest in the palace began as a fairly conventional interest. Like many design researchers, I had first encountered it in textbooks and lecture slides that framed it, for example, in a historical Yoruba vernacular, as described in Amos Rapoport's "House Form & Culture": rusty roof partitions, carved mud pillars, a series of courtyards and low-height facades. I had predicted, on the trip, that I would be able to see these things live. But I left with a more unique experience.

Walking through the palace during the visit and taking photographs, the building looked more like an artefact than a royal palace. Stories of specific courtyards, shrines,

pillars, and reliefs are no longer introduced as indifferent historical explanations; they were told as part of how the palace works. As the palace's structures and history were being explained by the tour guide, the atmosphere felt useful around me, just like a lived experience. This experience debunked an assumption I had adopted almost without comment; that the value of a historic building can be read off. The carved pillars and geometry of the courtyard of Déjì's Palace are certainly of high quality and deserve careful attention. But what made them go memorable was the realization that those elements are inextricable from the practices, hierarchies, and narratives that sustain them. Remove that living dimension, and one is left with an interesting ruin; keep it, and one experiences a living heritage.

The Déjì's Palace as a living heritage

The Déjì's Palace is the seat of the Déjì of Akure, the traditional ruler of the Akure Kingdom in Ondo State. Like other Yoruba palaces (ààfín), it has historically combined residential, judicial, ceremonial, and spiritual functions within a single walled complex organised around a sequence of courtyards. Ojo's early survey of Yoruba palaces described this arrangement as a deliberate spatial expression of authority, where progression from the outer to the inner courtyards mirrored proximity to the king (Ojo, 1966). The Déjì's Palace retains a recognisable picture of this definition, even after successive cycles of renovation.

Igbaro and Akinbileje's study of the palace's artistic heritage documented in detail the wall reliefs, mud sculptures, carved posts, and symbolic motifs that decorate the complex (Igbaro & Akinbileje, 2013). Their review confirmed that these works are not decorative in the modern sense; they encode genealogies, proverbs, and references to precise ancient episodes within the kingdom's existence. Animal figures, human bureaucracy and abstract styles act as a visual archive that enhances the oral way of life.

What really stood out to me was how simple it is to overlook the significance of this place. If you don't have a guide, the carvings on the walls just look like decorations, the courtyards seem like just a way to get from one place to another, and the shrines appear as nothing more than old, forgotten corners. The architecture carries the memory, but the memory is unlocked by people. This is precisely what UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage insists upon — that practices, expressions, and skills communities recognise as heritage, and transmit across generations, constitute a category of heritage in their own right, not a soft supplement to monumental fabric (UNESCO, 2003; Smith & Akagawa, 2009).

Heritage scholars have pushed this argument further. Smith (2006) has maintained that heritage is best understood not as a thing but as a cultural process, and that authorised heritage discourses tend to privilege material fabric in ways that quietly marginalise the practices and meanings of host communities. Harrison (2013) frames heritage as a relational, future-oriented activity pointing in the same direction. Read through these lenses, the Déjì's Palace is not simply a building that contains intangible elements; it is a site where the tangible and the intangible are co-produced, and where attempting to conserve one without the other will eventually impoverish both.

This co-production also explains why the palace resists the familiar distinction between authenticity and change. Traditional Yoruba layout vocabularies coexist with factors that produce encounters with colonial administration, Afro-Brazilian builders returning along the West African coast, and more recent contemporary interventions. These layers do not dilute the palace now; they are part of how the institution has remained relevant. Continuity in Déjì's Palace has always been continuity by adaptation over the years.

Lessons from comparable living-heritage sites

Treating the Déji's Palace as living heritage is not an isolated proposal. The Royal Palaces of Abomey in the Benin Republic, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, have for years been managed in close cooperation with the descendants of the royal lineage, demonstrating that royal heritage in West Africa is inseparable from its custodian communities (UNESCO, 2024). Recent restitution debates around bronzes and other palace objects have only reinforced this lesson.

The management of Patan Durbar Square in Nepal, particularly following the 2015 earthquake, offers a second instructive case. Reconstruction there has had to balance the conservation of monumental fabric with the continuation of daily rituals, festivals, and residential life within the complex. Recent scholarship on historic buffer zones in the Kathmandu Valley has argued that safeguarding the routines of inhabitants is as important to the integrity of the site as repairing its temples (Shakya Bajracharya et al., 2025). In Akure, a similar principle applies: the courtyards of Déji's Palace are most important when they can host the gatherings, audiences, and ceremonies for which they were built.

Closer to home, the inscription of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove in Osun State on the UNESCO World Heritage List has shown that the Nigerian practice of history already recognises, at least in principle, that landscape, rituals and networked lifestyles can themselves be the heritage. The challenge is to extend that reputation to royal palaces, which have similar cultural weight but remain outside official global listings.

Recommendations

If Déjì's Palace is critically considered as a living heritage, there are 3 realistic implications for cultural tourism in Nigeria. First, interpretation matters as much as restoration. A traveller who walks through the palace without access to the stories embedded within the partitions only gets a fraction of what the web page has to offer. Investments in well-trained guides, carefully prepared interpretive material co-authored with the palace network, and ethically curated virtual resources can add just another round of bodily repair to the traveller's experience.

Second, conservation plans should be designed with the palace in mind rather than the surrounding area. Decisions about which walls to stabilize, which reliefs to fix, and which courtyards to open to access have consequences for a ceremonial lifestyle best assessed by the palace community. Participatory methods that bring conventional authorities, conservation practitioners, tourism organisations, and researchers to the same communicate are likely to yield more sustainable outcomes than top-down interventions.

Third, cultural tourism strategies should resist treating the palace primarily as a monument. The most memorable element of my own visit has changed from no longer an unmarried architectural feature, but the experience of moving through a place where the records are still lived. That experience is, in tourist terms, an aggressive advantage, and it's also vulnerable. When the pressure of travellers or insensitive interference begins to push ceremonial life out of the palace, the site will gradually become the kind of empty monument that an increasing number of site visitors now don't need.

Conclusion

The Déji's Royal Palace is an amazing building that deserves our reflection. Its walls, sculptures, and courtyards are all worth taking a closer look at and should be preserved for future generations. But it's not just about the physical setting - it's about the stories, traditions, and institutions that bring it to life. The real value of the palace lies in its ability to connect us to the past and to the people who lived there. As Africa invests more in cultural tourism, we should be asking ourselves not just how well we're preserving the physical site, but also how well we're keeping its spirit and meaning alive. For a place like the Déji's Palace, its living heritage is its greatest asset, and it's what will really make it stand out as a tourist destination.



Figure 1. Tourists at the entrance of the Déji's Royal Palace, Akure, background showing traditional artistic and architectural elements. (author)



Figure 2. Déjì's Royal Palace entrance. The statue of the Akure progenitor. (Wikimedia.org)



Figure 3. Traditionally carved column Mounds (author)



Figure 4. Approach view of *Ua Lila*, the largest courtyard of the Déji's palace (author)

Disclosure statement

There are no competing interests to declare.

AI declaration statement

Grammarly was used to aid basic grammar corrections and punctuation oversights.

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