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Community-Based Tourism and Cultural Heritage in Africa: A Systematic Review of Research Distribution, Development Opportunities and Sustainability Challenges

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Abstract: This study systematically reviews spatial inequalities in cultural heritage tourism across Africa, focusing on accessibility, community participation, heritage values, and sustainable destination development. Using Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect, supplemented by reference-list screening, 113 studies were selected and thematically analyzed. The findings reveal significant geographical disparities, with Morocco accounting for 24.5% of studies, followed by Egypt (10.0%) and Cape Verde (9.0%), while several countries remain underrepresented. Key opportunities include heritage conservation, geotourism, community empowerment, livelihood generation, and rural development. However, inadequate infrastructure, limited skills, weak promotion, governance challenges, and restricted accessibility constrain inclusive development. Heritage interpretation also remains visitor-oriented, with recreation and ecotourism representing 37% of identified values, compared with only 2% each for spiritual/religious values, inspiration, and cultural diversity. The study highlights the need for geographically diversified research, improved accessibility, meaningful community participation, inclusive heritage interpretation, and integrated sustainability strategies to promote equitable cultural heritage tourism development in Africa.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Tourism; Spatial Inequality; Community Participation; Accessibility; Sustainable Destination Development.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji ketimpangan spasial dalam pariwisata warisan budaya di Afrika dengan fokus pada aksesibilitas, partisipasi masyarakat, nilai warisan budaya, dan pembangunan destinasi berkelanjutan. Kajian dilakukan melalui tinjauan literatur sistematis terhadap 113 penelitian yang diperoleh dari Scopus, Web of Science, dan ScienceDirect, serta penelusuran daftar referensi. Hasil menunjukkan ketimpangan geografis yang signifikan, dengan Maroko mendominasi 24,5% penelitian, diikuti Mesir (10,0%) dan Tanjung Verde (9,0%), sementara sejumlah negara masih kurang terwakili. Peluang utama meliputi konservasi warisan budaya, geowisata, pemberdayaan masyarakat, peningkatan mata pencaharian, dan pembangunan perdesaan. Namun, keterbatasan infrastruktur, keterampilan, promosi, tata kelola, dan aksesibilitas menghambat pembangunan inklusif. Interpretasi warisan budaya juga masih berorientasi pada pengunjung. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pemerataan penelitian geografis, peningkatan aksesibilitas, partisipasi masyarakat, interpretasi inklusif, dan strategi keberlanjutan terpadu untuk mewujudkan pariwisata warisan budaya yang lebih adil di Afrika.

Kata kunci: Pariwisata Warisan Budaya; Ketimpangan Spasial; Partisipasi Masyarakat; Aksesibilitas; Pembangunan Destinasi Berkelanjutan.

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Introduction

Cultural heritage tourism has become an increasingly important component of destination development because it connects tourism activity with historical places, cultural landscapes, traditions, indigenous knowledge, creative expressions, and community identities. Across Africa, the diversity of tangible and intangible heritage provides substantial opportunities for tourism-led employment, local enterprise development, cultural conservation, and place-based economic development. However, the existence of valuable heritage resources does not automatically translate into equitable tourism development. Recent scholarship indicates that heritage tourism development across Africa remains uneven, with substantial differences in infrastructure, investment, visitor accessibility, institutional capacity, and community involvement between and within destinations (Giliberto & Labadi, 2023; Timothy, 2023).

A central concern is therefore spatial inequality**,** referring to the uneven geographical distribution of tourism opportunities, infrastructure, resources, services, investment, and benefits. In the African context, tourism development is frequently concentrated around established urban centres, internationally recognised heritage sites, and destinations with relatively stronger transport and tourism infrastructure, while rural, peripheral, and less internationally visible heritage areas may remain poorly connected to tourism markets. Recent research on rural heritage tourism in South Africa, for example, demonstrates the importance of context-specific infrastructure, community empowerment, and local participation for sustainable destination development (Phori et al., 2024). Similarly, research on Sub-Saharan Africa identifies infrastructure limitations, constrained investment, and uneven institutional capacity as continuing challenges to sustainable heritage tourism development (Mutanga et al., 2023).

Accessibility is consequently a fundamental dimension of spatial inequality in cultural heritage tourism. Physical accessibility involves roads, transportation networks, site facilities, accommodation, and mobility within destinations, while informational and digital accessibility increasingly determine whether potential visitors can discover, evaluate, and plan visits to heritage destinations. Poor accessibility can restrict tourist flows, reduce local economic opportunities, and reinforce the concentration of tourism activity in already developed locations. Accessibility should also be understood in terms of inclusion, particularly for rural populations, economically disadvantaged groups, older visitors, and persons with disabilities. Recent work on accessible heritage tourism emphasizes that accessibility and inclusiveness are closely connected to social, economic, and environmental sustainability and require coordinated action among communities, businesses, and public authorities.

Community participation represents a second critical dimension. Cultural heritage is embedded within the identities, memories, practices, and livelihoods of communities; therefore, tourism development that excludes local populations may generate economic benefits while simultaneously producing social tensions, cultural commodification, displacement, or loss of local control. Evidence from systematic research shows that heritage tourism can generate employment, infrastructure improvements, cultural revitalization, and other benefits, but can also restrict community participation and access to resources when local people are excluded from governance and decision-making (Brooks et al., 2023). African studies similarly emphasize the importance of community-based approaches, local entrepreneurship, benefit sharing, and participation in heritage management (Lemunge et al., 2025; Giliberto & Labadi, 2023).

Sustainable destination development requires these spatial and social dimensions to be considered simultaneously. Sustainability in cultural heritage tourism encompasses economic viability, cultural continuity, environmental responsibility, social equity, and effective governance rather than tourism growth alone (Mzembe, 2023; Adie et al., 2024). African

heritage destinations also face additional pressures from climate change, inadequate conservation resources, changing land-use patterns, and weak management systems, which can intensify existing spatial inequalities (Saarinen & Moswete, 2023; Mutanga et al., 2023).

Recent research has consequently called for more inclusive, cooperative, and integrated approaches to heritage tourism in Africa. Studies have highlighted the need to diversify tourism products, improve infrastructure, strengthen local entrepreneurship, enhance community participation, and develop governance arrangements capable of balancing conservation with development (Giliberto & Labadi, 2023; Romera et al., 2025). Nevertheless, existing evidence remains dispersed across individual countries, destinations, heritage types, and specific dimensions of tourism development. Studies have addressed community participation, sustainability, accessibility, conservation, or local economic development separately, but there is limited systematic synthesis of how spatial inequality, accessibility, community participation, and sustainable destination development interact across African cultural heritage tourism**.** This fragmentation makes it difficult to determine common patterns, regional differences, persistent barriers, and transferable strategies for reducing inequality.

Therefore, this systematic review examines the spatial dimensions of cultural heritage tourism development across Africa, with particular emphasis on accessibility, community participation, and sustainable destination development. It synthesizes recent evidence to identify the geographical patterns and major forms of inequality affecting heritage tourism, assess accessibility barriers and community participation, and examine their implications for sustainable destination development. The review further seeks to identify evidence gaps and develop an integrated understanding of how more accessible, participatory, and spatially balanced cultural heritage tourism can contribute to inclusive and sustainable development across Africa. This approach responds to continuing calls for stronger community involvement, equitable governance, improved infrastructure, and more sustainable management of Africa's diverse heritage resources (Lemunge et al., 2025; Shabalala, 2024; Madandola & Boussaa, 2023)

Method

This study adopted a systematic literature review design to synthesise evidence on spatial inequality in cultural heritage tourism in Africa, focusing on accessibility, community participation, cultural heritage values and sustainable destination development. A structured literature search was conducted across three academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science and ScienceDirect. The search used combinations of keywords, including cultural heritage tourism, heritage tourism, spatial inequality, tourism accessibility, community participation and sustainable destination development, combined with Africa. Reference-list screening of relevant publications was also undertaken to identify additional eligible studies.

The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. Retrieved records underwent duplicate removal, title and abstract screening, full-text eligibility assessment and supplementary reference-list searching. Studies published in English within the defined review period were considered. Publications were included if they addressed African cultural heritage tourism and provided evidence relating to accessibility, spatial disparities, cultural heritage values, community participation or sustainability. Data were extracted on publication characteristics, geographical distribution, heritage types, research methodologies, accessibility, community participation, sustainability outcomes and major findings. The included studies were critically assessed for methodological quality and synthesised using descriptive, thematic and comparative approaches to identify dominant patterns, regional disparities, research gaps and strategies for promoting inclusive and spatially balanced cultural heritage tourism development.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of the Evidence Base

The systematic review by Lemunge et al. (2025) identified 113 eligible studies addressing community-based tourism in Africa, particularly tourism initiatives associated with geosites and cultural heritage features. The search initially identified 256 records from Scopus, Web of Science and ScienceDirect. After duplicate removal, title/abstract screening and full-text assessment, 76 studies were excluded, while 13 additional studies were identified through by Lemunge et al. (2025) . The final evidence base therefore consisted of 113 studies.

Table 1. Evidence-Selection Process

Review stage	Number of records
Records identified from databases	256
• Scopus	100
• Web of Science	105
• ScienceDirect	51
Records after duplicate removal	206
Records excluded during screening	30
Full-text articles assessed	176
Full-text studies excluded	76
Additional studies identified from references	13
Final studies included	113

The evidence-selection process resulted in a final corpus of 113 studies relevant to community-based tourism in Africa, with particular attention to tourism associated with geosites and cultural heritage features. The initial database search produced 256 records**,** comprising 100 records from Scopus, 105 from Web of Science, and 51 from ScienceDirect. The use of multiple databases provided a broader search base and reduced dependence on the coverage of a single bibliographic database. This is particularly important for interdisciplinary subjects such as cultural heritage and tourism, where relevant evidence may be distributed across tourism, environmental, social science, geography and heritage journals.

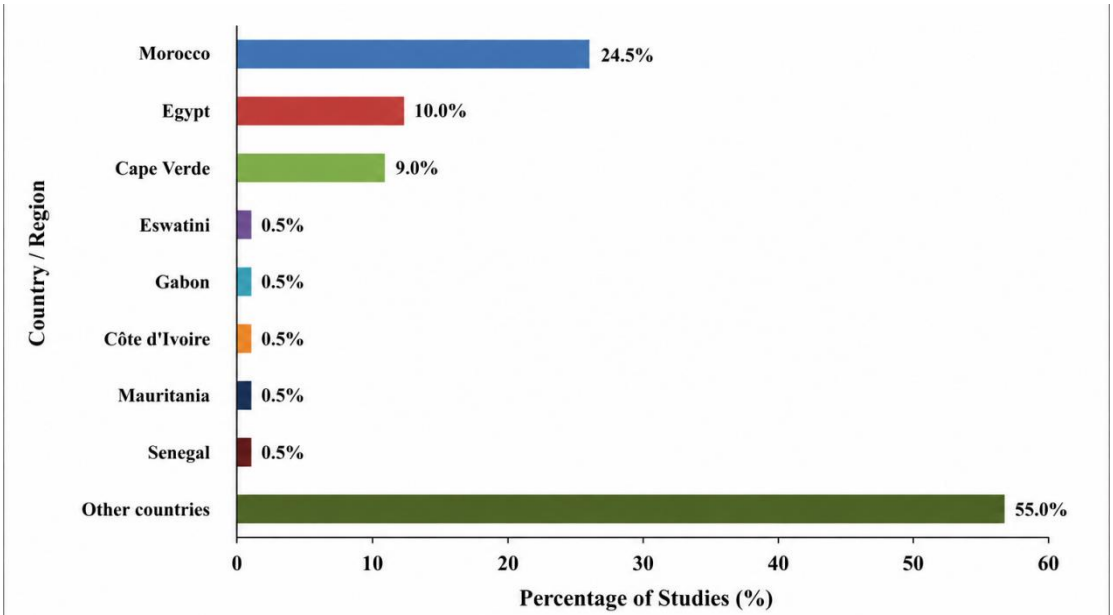
Following the initial search, the number of records was reduced from 256 to 206 after duplicate removal**,** indicating that 50 records were identified more than once across the databases. This substantial overlap demonstrates the value of searching several databases while applying a systematic deduplication procedure. The subsequent screening process excluded 30 records, leaving 176 full-text articles for detailed eligibility assessment. A further 76 articles were excluded at the full-text stage because they did not satisfy the predetermined eligibility requirements. In addition, 13 studies were identified through reference-list searching**,** strengthening the comprehensiveness of the evidence identification process.

The final inclusion of 113 studies represents a substantial body of evidence for examining community-based tourism and cultural heritage tourism across Africa. The selection pathway also demonstrates that the final evidence base was not simply derived from the initial database search; rather, it resulted from successive identification, screening, eligibility assessment and supplementary searching. Such a transparent selection process is important because systematic reviews depend on clearly documented procedures for identifying and selecting relevant evidence. PRISMA 2020 specifically recommends transparent reporting of the numbers of records identified, screened, assessed for eligibility and included in the review (Page et al., 2021).

The difference between the initial 256 records and the final 113 included studies also demonstrates the importance of eligibility criteria in controlling the scope of a systematic review. Only studies that met the predefined requirements were retained, thereby improving the relevance of the final evidence base to the review objectives. Furthermore, the additional 13 studies obtained through reference-list searching demonstrate the usefulness of complementary searching beyond electronic database retrieval. PRISMA 2020 encourages reviewers to report the information sources and selection processes sufficiently clearly to allow readers to assess the completeness and credibility of the review.

The evidence-selection process provides a structured foundation for subsequent analysis of geographical distribution, community participation, cultural heritage resources, tourism opportunities, sustainability and research gaps**.** The final 113-study evidence base therefore provides a sufficiently broad foundation for identifying patterns and inequalities within African community-based cultural heritage tourism research.

Geographical Distribution of Research



Note. The figure illustrates the geographical concentration of community-based tourism research in Africa.

Figure 1 presents the geographical distribution of the studies included in the systematic review of community-based tourism (CBT) in Africa. The distribution is reported as percentages of the reviewed evidence, with Morocco recording the highest representation (24.5%), followed by Egypt (10.0%) and Cape Verde (9.0%). Eswatini, Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania and Senegal each account for 0.5%. The remaining countries are grouped under the category "Other countries," which represents 55.0% of the reported distribution. This category combines countries whose individual contributions are not separately displayed in the figure. The pattern suggests an uneven geographical representation of CBT research, with Morocco, Egypt and Cape Verde receiving comparatively greater scholarly attention than several other African countries. These findings highlight the need for broader geographical coverage in future research to improve understanding of CBT initiatives across the continent (Lemunge et al., 2025).

The dominance of Morocco is consistent with the recent systematic review by Lemunge et al. (2025)**,** which analysed 113 studies on CBT in Africa and reported Morocco as the most represented country, accounting for 24.5% of the reviewed studies. Egypt and Cape Verde followed with 10% and 9%, respectively, while several African countries were represented by only 0.5% each.

This provides strong direct support for the geographical pattern presented in Figure 1 and suggests that the concentration is not merely an artefact of the current analysis but reflects a broader pattern in the African CBT literature.

The particularly strong representation of Morocco (24.5%) may be associated with the country's substantial cultural, natural and rural tourism resources and the growing policy emphasis on rural and community-oriented tourism. Recent research by Sadqaoui et al. (2026) describes rural tourism as an increasingly important component of territorial development in Morocco, particularly through the valorisation of cultural heritage, local knowledge, rural guesthouses and income-generating activities. The authors further highlight the country's efforts to develop rural tourism hubs based on local culture and community experiences.

Similarly, Boujrouf et al. (2025) demonstrated how community tourism in Morocco's protected areas can connect tourism development with traditional ecological knowledge, cooperative governance and local resource stewardship.

These developments may partly explain why Morocco has become a particularly productive setting for CBT research. Recent evidence also shows that Morocco provides a useful context for examining the social dimensions of community-based tourism**.** Kondo and Bahir (2026) found that CBT can contribute to psychosocial well-being and intercultural exchange within Moroccan communities. Their study extends the understanding of CBT beyond income generation by demonstrating its potential social and community-health dimensions.

In addition, Benalla and El Halaissi (2025) identified social entrepreneurship, community-based tourism, eco-lodges and fair-trade handicraft cooperatives as components of sustainable tourism development in Morocco's Al Haouz Province.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate why Morocco represents a particularly fertile research environment for examining community participation, rural development, cultural heritage and sustainable tourism.

Egypt's 10.0% share similarly reflects a substantial research presence. Recent empirical evidence from Egyptian ecovillages demonstrates growing scholarly interest in the relationship between tourism development, community participation and local perceptions. Khreis et al. (2026) examined 323 residents of three Egyptian ecovillages and found that perceived economic benefits were particularly influential in determining residents' support for sustainable tourism. The study also examined resident involvement and place attachment, thereby demonstrating the importance of community participation in sustainable tourism planning.

Egypt's relatively high representation in Figure 1 may therefore reflect the country's diverse tourism resources and the increasing interest in community perceptions, ecotourism and rural tourism development.

The 9.0% representation of Cape Verde is also noteworthy because it demonstrates that small island destinations can occupy a disproportionately visible position within the African CBT research landscape. Recent research by **Díaz-Pérez et al. (2025)** examined local people's perspectives on sustainable island tourism in Cape Verde and highlighted the importance of understanding community perceptions in achieving sustainable tourism development.

Earlier work by Bozzato and Pollice (2022) similarly argued for community-driven tourism approaches in Cape Verde, emphasizing the need for tourism development to respond to local needs rather than being driven exclusively by external tourist demand.

Thus, the comparatively high research representation of Cape Verde may be associated with the country's distinctive island-tourism context and the relevance of community participation to sustainable destination development.

The relatively small contributions from Eswatini, Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania and Senegal (0.5% each) reveal an important geographical research gap. The low representation does not necessarily indicate that these countries lack CBT potential; rather, it may indicate that their tourism resources and community-based initiatives have been less extensively documented in the international scholarly literature**.** The systematic review by Lemunge et al. (2025) identified limited research as one of the major constraints affecting the development and understanding of CBT in Africa. The authors also identified inadequate infrastructure and insufficient skills and capacity as important barriers to CBT development. Consequently, countries with fewer published studies may represent evidence gaps rather than evidence of limited tourism potential**.**

The 55.0% contribution attributed to “other countries” is particularly important. Although individual countries outside the leading three have relatively small shares, their combined contribution indicates that CBT research is not entirely restricted to North Africa and Cape Verde. Rather, research is dispersed among numerous African countries. Nevertheless, this dispersion is uneven, and the small individual contributions of many countries suggest that there is no comparable continent-wide research base for CBT. Cordova-Buiza et al. (2025)**,** in a bibliometric and systematic mapping study of community-based rural tourism research, similarly identified geographical patterns and demonstrated that research productivity is unevenly distributed across countries and institutions.

This geographical imbalance has significant implications for African tourism policy and sustainable development research**.** CBT is particularly relevant to rural and marginalised communities because it can provide alternative livelihood opportunities, encourage cultural exchange and support conservation. Lemunge et al. (2025) found that African CBT initiatives can generate local income, strengthen cultural exchange and contribute to environmental conservation, while also identifying infrastructure, research and capacity limitations as major constraints. Similarly, Ramaano (2025) demonstrated in South Africa that tourism development around rural and protected-area communities can provide opportunities for livelihood improvement and local empowerment, although effective tourism planning and community capacity remain necessary. The Nigerian context provides another illustration of

the need to expand the geographical evidence base. Ijose and KC (2025) found substantial potential for community-based homestays in Nigeria but noted that the country has not yet fully exploited its natural and cultural resources for community-based tourism. Their study emphasised stakeholder participation, community involvement, fair benefit sharing, supportive policies and collaborative management as essential conditions for successful CBT development.

The figure also highlights the importance of moving beyond research concentration toward research diversification**.** Recent scholarship increasingly argues that sustainable rural and community tourism requires collaborative governance, stakeholder participation and community agency rather than simply increasing visitor numbers. Maziliauske (2024) emphasised that co-creation involving tourism enterprises and other stakeholders can strengthen the sociocultural sustainability of rural destinations.

Likewise, Mihalic et al. (2024) highlighted the increasing importance of collaborative governance in rural tourism and the transition from hierarchical toward more horizontal governance arrangements.

Furthermore, geographical expansion of CBT research should not simply mean increasing the number of studies. It should also involve greater methodological and thematic diversity**.** Research in less represented countries should investigate community ownership, benefit distribution, Indigenous knowledge, women's participation, youth employment, cultural heritage, conservation, entrepreneurship, digital tourism and resilience to climate and socioeconomic change. This is supported by Durrah and Salem (2026)**,** whose systematic review identifies digital technologies as an emerging area for strengthening sustainable CBT, particularly through improved market access, communication and tourism promotion.

Figure 1 reveals that African CBT scholarship is geographically uneven, with Morocco, Egypt and Cape Verde accounting for a substantial share of the specifically identified national studies, while many other African countries remain sparsely represented. The pattern is consistent with the recent systematic evidence of Lemunge et al. (2025) and suggests that future research should deliberately expand toward underrepresented countries and regions. Such expansion would improve the continent-wide evidence base, enable comparative analyses of different CBT models, and provide policymakers with more representative evidence for designing inclusive and sustainable tourism strategies. The need for broader representation is especially important because CBT outcomes depend strongly on local institutional, cultural, socioeconomic and environmental contexts; therefore, evidence derived predominantly from a few countries should not automatically be generalised to the entire African continent.

Community-Based Tourism Opportunities and Cultural Heritage

The reviewed literature indicates that African cultural and natural assets provide important foundations for community-based tourism. The evidence identifies cultural heritage features such as historical sites, traditional crafts, music and storytelling as tourism resources capable of promoting cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue. Geosites similarly provide opportunities for geotourism, education, community empowerment and sustainable local development.

Table 3. Major Opportunities Identified in the Reviewed Evidence

Opportunity	Evidence from reviewed studies	Relevance to sustainable tourism
Cultural heritage tourism	Historical sites, crafts, music and storytelling provide tourism experiences	Cultural preservation and diversification
Geotourism	Geological formations, caves, waterfalls and landscapes attract visitors	Destination diversification
Community empowerment	Local communities can participate in tourism activities	Local ownership and participation
Income generation	Tourism creates opportunities for local economic activity	Livelihood improvement
Cultural exchange	Interaction between visitors and host communities	Cultural understanding
Environmental conservation	Tourism can create incentives for conserving local resources	Sustainable resource management
Rural development	Community-based tourism can diversify rural economies	Inclusive local development

The reviewed evidence demonstrates that Africa possesses substantial cultural, historical and natural heritage resources that can support community-based tourism, local economic development and sustainable destination development. The opportunities identified in the evidence are not limited to the attraction of visitors; they also include cultural preservation, livelihood diversification, community empowerment, environmental conservation and strengthening of local identity. Recent evidence indicates that community-based tourism initiatives in Africa can utilize geosites and cultural heritage features to promote local tourism, cultural exchange, environmental conservation and income generation, although infrastructure and capacity constraints remain important considerations (Lemunge et al., 2025).

Cultural heritage tourism represents one of the most significant opportunities identified. Historical settlements, archaeological resources, traditional architecture, festivals, crafts, food traditions, music, storytelling and other forms of tangible and intangible heritage can provide distinctive tourism experiences. In Nigeria, for example, recent research on Old Oyo demonstrates the potential of cultural heritage tourism to support cultural identity and sustainable physical development, particularly where conservation and adaptive reuse are integrated into destination planning (Madandola & Boussaa, 2024). Similarly, research on gastronomy in Nigeria demonstrates that traditional food and culinary practices can function as intangible cultural heritage and influence tourists' destination motivations (Nomishan et al., 2024).

Geotourism and nature-based heritage provide an additional opportunity for destination diversification. Geological formations, waterfalls, caves, mountains and culturally significant landscapes can broaden the tourism product and create opportunities for communities outside major urban heritage centres. Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa

indicates that the region possesses considerable untapped natural heritage tourism potential, although infrastructure limitations, climate change, political instability and resource-management challenges can constrain realization of these opportunities (Chambwe & Shereni, 2024; Nyikana et al., 2023).

Another major opportunity concerns community empowerment and participation**.** Sustainable heritage tourism is more likely to generate lasting local benefits when residents participate in planning, interpretation, management and benefit-sharing. Evidence from South-West Nigeria demonstrates the importance of community participation in the conservation and management of cultural heritage resources (Oladeji et al., 2022). However, participation should extend beyond consultation. Recent evidence from South Africa shows that community-based heritage management can encounter structural barriers that limit meaningful participation, demonstrating the importance of examining who has decision-making power and who receives tourism benefits (authors of Wildebeest Kuil study, 2024).

Income generation and livelihood diversification constitute another important opportunity. Tourism can create employment and entrepreneurial opportunities through guiding, accommodation, transportation, handicrafts, food production and cultural performances. Evidence from the Goo-Moremi Gorge in Botswana specifically highlights the socioeconomic dimensions of local involvement in community-based tourism development (Dibotlhale & Moswete, 2024). Likewise, research in Musina Municipality, South Africa, demonstrates that cultural and heritage resources have potential for tourism and community development, although stronger tourism strategies are required to translate heritage resources into meaningful livelihood benefits (Ramaano, 2022).

The evidence further indicates that cultural exchange and community interpretation can strengthen heritage sustainability. When residents actively interpret their own history and traditions, tourism experiences can become more locally grounded and culturally meaningful. Recent research in the Mount Kenya region found that community understanding and interpretation of heritage are associated with stronger heritage sustainability, emphasizing the importance of local knowledge in tourism management (Mburu et al., 2025).

Environmental conservation and rural development also emerge as important opportunities. Community-based tourism can connect local livelihoods with the protection of natural and cultural resources, thereby creating economic incentives for conservation. Evidence from Ethiopia, for instance, identifies community ecotourism as a potential mechanism for linking sustainable livelihoods, conservation and post-conflict development (Woldu, 2024). UNESCO's recent initiatives similarly emphasize integrating conservation, tourism and local livelihood strategies at heritage sites through community engagement and capacity development.

Finally, the evidence indicates that inclusive governance and stakeholder collaboration are essential for converting heritage resources into sustainable tourism opportunities. Research in South Africa shows that collaboration among communities, tourism operators and government institutions can contribute to community benefits and strengthen tourism management (Sathiyah & Tomaselli, 2024). At the same time, evidence from recent heritage-tourism planning in South Africa demonstrates that weak implementation, fragmented governance, inadequate infrastructure and tokenistic participation can prevent communities from realizing potential tourism benefits.

Challenges to Community-Based Cultural Heritage Tourism

The review identifies several structural constraints affecting the development of community-based tourism in Africa. Among the major challenges are inadequate infrastructure, limited research, insufficient capacity and skills development**,** and difficulties in effectively promoting tourism based on geosites and cultural heritage features.

Table 4. Major Challenges Identified in the African Evidence Base

Challenge	Evidence status	Implication
Inadequate infrastructure	Major challenge identified	Restricts accessibility and destination development
Limited research	Major challenge identified	Creates evidence gaps for policy and planning
Inadequate skills and capacity	Major challenge identified	Limits community participation and tourism management
Weak promotion of heritage resources	Identified challenge	Reduces destination visibility
Limited community capacity	Identified challenge	Restricts local involvement in tourism
Resource-management difficulties	Identified challenge	May undermine sustainability
Uneven geographical research coverage	Observed from country distribution	Creates evidence deserts across Africa

The review indicates that the development of community-based cultural heritage tourism in Africa is constrained by a combination of infrastructural, institutional, human-capacity, market and geographical factors. These constraints are interconnected and can reinforce one another, particularly in rural and peripheral destinations where heritage resources are often located far from major transport and tourism centres. Recent systematic evidence identifies inadequate infrastructure, limited research and insufficient skills and capacity as major constraints to community-based tourism based on cultural heritage and geosites in Africa (Lemunge et al., 2025).

Inadequate infrastructure represents one of the most immediate barriers. Poor roads, limited public transportation, inadequate accommodation, unreliable electricity, weak telecommunications and insufficient digital connectivity can make heritage destinations difficult to reach and reduce the quality of visitors' experiences. Evidence from African tourism development assessments similarly emphasizes the importance of transport, broadband connectivity, energy and tourism facilities for destination development (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2024; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2024).

The review also identifies limited research and information as a significant constraint. Some African destinations possess substantial cultural and natural heritage resources but remain poorly documented, interpreted and promoted. This limits evidence-based destination planning and makes it difficult for governments and communities to determine which resources have tourism potential and how they should be conserved. Lemunge et al.

(2025) particularly identify limited research on community-based tourism involving geosites as an important knowledge deficit.

Inadequate skills and capacity constitute another major challenge. Community members may have limited access to training in tourism management, guiding, hospitality, digital marketing, entrepreneurship, heritage interpretation and conservation. The result is that communities possessing valuable cultural resources may remain dependent on external tourism operators. Recent evidence from Ethiopia, for example, found that shortage of skilled personnel and weak stakeholder coordination constrained community participation in ecotourism development (Dubale & Esubalew, 2024).

The evidence further points to weak marketing and destination visibility**.** Community-based tourism enterprises can struggle to reach domestic and international visitors because of limited promotional resources, weak digital presence and dependence on established intermediaries. The African systematic review indicates that inadequate marketing resources and limited visibility on online platforms can restrict communities' direct access to potential tourists and reduce their control over tourism distribution and pricing (Lemunge et al., 2025).

Limited community capacity and unequal participation are also important concerns. Community-based tourism does not automatically guarantee meaningful community involvement. Historical inequalities, institutional arrangements and unequal access to decision-making can restrict participation. Research on the Wildebeest Kuil rock-art tourism centre in South Africa demonstrates that structural and historical conditions can create substantial limits to community participation in heritage management (2024).

Furthermore, resource-management and governance difficulties may undermine sustainability. Heritage tourism involves competing objectives involving conservation, economic development, community interests and visitor use. Adie et al. (2024) note that these objectives can become difficult to reconcile where decision-making is hierarchical and multiple stakeholders have competing interests. Recent evidence from Sekhukhune District Municipality in South Africa similarly identifies fragmented governance, inadequate infrastructure, weak promotion and limited community involvement as barriers to translating heritage tourism plans into practice.

Finally, the geographical distribution of research points to uneven evidence coverage across Africa**.** Concentration of research in selected countries means that lessons from better-studied destinations may not necessarily apply to countries and communities with different cultural, institutional and geographical conditions. This creates evidence deserts that can weaken continent-wide policy formulation. The problem is particularly important because Africa's natural and cultural assets are widely distributed, while tourism-enabling infrastructure, research capacity and institutional support remain uneven (WEF, 2024).

Recent Evidence on Heritage Interpretation and Cultural Values

A complementary 2026 systematic review of 77 empirical articles provides additional verified evidence for the interpretation and cultural-value dimension of heritage tourism in sub-Saharan Africa. The review found that research was strongly visitor-centred**,** with recreation and ecotourism accounting for 37% of the studies/themes examined. In contrast, spiritual and religious values, inspiration, and cultural diversity each accounted for only 2%**.**

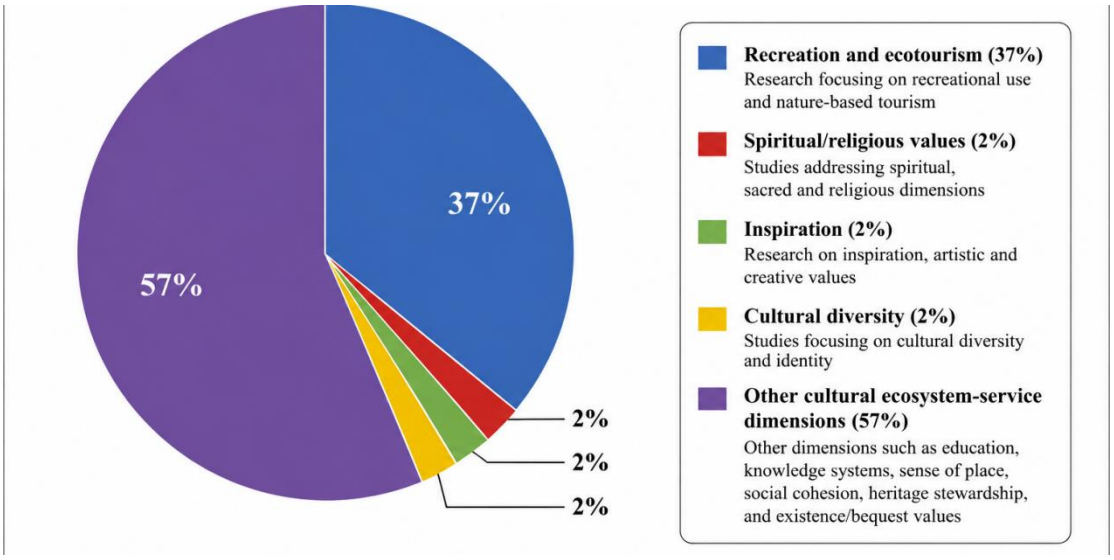


Figure 2. Thematic Imbalance in Heritage Interpretation Research in Sub-Saharan Africa

Figure 2 demonstrates a pronounced thematic imbalance in heritage interpretation research in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)**.** Recreation and ecotourism represent the largest explicitly identified thematic category, accounting for **37%** of the reviewed research, whereas spiritual/religious values, inspiration, and cultural diversity each account for only **2%**. The remaining **57%** encompasses other cultural ecosystem-service dimensions. This distribution suggests that heritage interpretation research in SSA has predominantly focused on visitor-oriented and tourism-related benefits, while culturally embedded and Indigenous dimensions of heritage have received considerably less scholarly attention.

The strong emphasis on recreation and ecotourism is consistent with the findings of Abrahams et al. (2026)**,** who systematically reviewed 77 empirical studies on cultural ecosystem services and heritage interpretation in SSA. They reported that the existing literature was overwhelmingly visitor-centric, with recreation and ecotourism emerging as the most frequently studied cultural ecosystem-service dimensions. According to Abrahams et al. (2026), this orientation reflects the tendency to interpret heritage primarily through its contribution to visitor experiences and ecotourism development.

The dominance of recreation and ecotourism can partly be explained by the economic and developmental importance of tourism across African destinations. Heritage sites, protected landscapes and culturally significant environments provide opportunities for recreation, sightseeing, nature-based tourism and destination development. Consequently, researchers and policymakers may prioritise dimensions that can be readily connected to visitor demand, tourism revenue, employment and destination competitiveness. However, an excessive emphasis on recreational values can result in a narrower understanding of heritage, particularly when the cultural meanings attached to landscapes by local communities are not adequately incorporated.

The 2% representation of spiritual and religious values is particularly noteworthy. Spiritual values are often closely connected to sacred landscapes, ancestral places, traditional religious practices, sacred forests, mountains, rivers and other culturally

significant environments. The extremely low proportion shown in Figure 4 indicates that these dimensions remain substantially underrepresented in the research literature. Abrahams et al. (2026) similarly found that Indigenous-centred values, including spiritual and religious values, were virtually ignored within the reviewed heritage interpretation literature. They argue that failure to incorporate such values can contribute to heritage dissonance and may reinforce interpretations that privilege external or visitor perspectives over local cultural meanings.

The limited representation of inspiration (2%) also highlights an important research gap. Inspiration is a less tangible cultural ecosystem service that encompasses emotional, aesthetic, artistic and creative relationships between people and their environments. Such values may be expressed through traditional art, music, storytelling, landscape appreciation and cultural creativity. Ebido et al. (2025) demonstrated the difficulty of capturing such intangible ecosystem benefits in Nigeria and argued that conventional ecosystem-service assessments can overlook values that are not easily quantified or traded in markets. Their findings support the need for participatory approaches capable of revealing locally situated and shared cultural values.

Similarly, the 2% representation of cultural diversity suggests insufficient attention to the diversity of cultural identities, Indigenous knowledge systems, traditional practices and locally specific interpretations of heritage. This is important because heritage is not simply a physical resource; it also embodies meanings, memories, identities and knowledge transmitted across generations. Abrahams et al. (2026) emphasise that Indigenous-centred values need greater recognition in heritage interpretation if ecotourism in SSA is to become more culturally inclusive and responsive to local communities.

The findings therefore indicate that the imbalance is conceptual as well as numerical**.** When recreation and ecotourism dominate research, heritage may be interpreted primarily as a tourism product rather than as a living cultural system. Abrahams et al. (2026) caution that visitor-centric interpretation can reproduce simplified representations of African landscapes and histories and may fail to adequately address contested histories, cultural identities and Indigenous perspectives. Their argument is particularly relevant to Figure 4 because the three least represented dimensions—spiritual/religious values, inspiration and cultural diversity—are precisely those that can provide deeper community-centred interpretations of heritage. The findings also have implications for sustainable tourism development**.** Sustainable heritage tourism should not be assessed exclusively in terms of visitor numbers, recreation or economic benefits. It should also consider cultural continuity, community identity, spiritual relationships with landscapes, traditional knowledge and locally defined heritage values. Ebido et al. (2025) demonstrated that participatory approaches can reveal otherwise hidden intangible ecosystem-service values in Nigeria, suggesting that future heritage research should involve local communities directly in identifying and interpreting the cultural benefits they derive from their environments. Figure 4 reveals a significant gap in the existing scholarship. The 37% concentration on recreation and ecotourism**,** compared with only 2% each for spiritual/religious values, inspiration and cultural diversity**,** indicates that heritage interpretation research in SSA remains strongly oriented toward visitor and tourism interests. This finding reinforces the recent conclusion of Abrahams et al. (2026) that future research should move beyond conventional visitor-centred interpretation toward approaches that recognise Indigenous values, community knowledge, contested histories and interpretation sovereignty. Such a shift would allow heritage

interpretation to contribute not only to tourism development but also to cultural safeguarding, community empowerment, identity preservation and long-term sustainability**.**

Spatial and Thematic Inequalities in the Evidence

The combined evidence reveals two important inequalities. First, the geographical distribution of research is uneven**,** with Morocco, Egypt and Cape Verde accounting for substantial proportions of the 113-study African CBT evidence base, while several countries have only minimal representation. Second, the thematic evidence is uneven: heritage interpretation research strongly favours recreation and ecotourism, whereas indigenous-centred values such as spirituality, cultural diversity and inspiration receive considerably less attention.

Table 5. Summary of Identified Evidence Gaps

Dimension	Strongly represented	Underrepresented
Geography	Morocco, Egypt, Cape Verde; Southern Africa in recent SSA evidence	Several countries and Central Africa
Tourism orientation	Recreation and ecotourism	Indigenous cultural values
Community dimension	Community-based tourism opportunities	Community capacity and long-term empowerment
Heritage interpretation	Visitor experience	Spiritual, religious and indigenous narratives
Infrastructure	Tourism potential	Accessibility and infrastructure constraints
Sustainability	Conservation and economic opportunities	Integrated long-term resilience

The synthesis of the reviewed evidence reveals significant spatial and thematic inequalities in research on community-based cultural heritage tourism (CBT) across Africa. These inequalities demonstrate that the availability of heritage resources does not necessarily correspond with the intensity of research attention, tourism development, or community benefits. While Africa contains extensive cultural landscapes, archaeological sites, indigenous knowledge systems and living heritage practices, research activities remain concentrated in a limited number of countries and destination types.

The geographical distribution of evidence indicates that countries with internationally recognized heritage assets, stronger tourism industries and greater research capacity receive disproportionate scholarly attention. Morocco, Egypt, South Africa and Cape Verde are among the more frequently represented destinations because of their established tourism sectors, UNESCO-listed heritage sites and relatively developed tourism infrastructure. Conversely, many countries in Central Africa, parts of West Africa and several inland regions remain poorly represented despite possessing significant cultural and ecological resources. This uneven distribution creates evidence deserts**,** where policymakers and local stakeholders lack sufficient empirical information to guide sustainable tourism planning. Recent studies on African heritage tourism similarly highlight that research and investment are often concentrated around internationally recognized destinations, leaving community-based and rural heritage sites less documented (Giliberto & Labadi, 2023; Lemunge et al., 2025).

The evidence also demonstrates thematic inequality within the reviewed literature. Existing studies frequently emphasize tourism opportunities, visitor experiences, ecotourism development and economic benefits, whereas deeper exploration of indigenous cultural values, spiritual meanings, traditional knowledge systems and community identity remains limited. Heritage is often evaluated primarily through its tourism attractiveness rather than its social and cultural significance to local communities. This imbalance may result in the commercialization of heritage resources while neglecting their symbolic, spiritual and historical importance. Recent scholarship argues that sustainable heritage tourism requires recognition of local meanings, indigenous narratives and community values rather than focusing only on economic outcomes (Adie et al., 2024; Giliberto & Labadi, 2023).

The community dimension also reveals important gaps. Although many studies acknowledge community participation as essential for sustainable tourism, fewer investigations examine how communities build long-term capacity, acquire decision-making power, access tourism revenue or participate in governance structures. In many African destinations, communities are frequently included as beneficiaries or cultural performers but have limited influence over planning and resource management decisions. Evidence from community-based tourism initiatives in Botswana, Ethiopia and South Africa indicates that meaningful participation requires institutional support, capacity development and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms (Dibotlhale & Moswete, 2024; Dubale & Esubalew, 2024).

Similarly, research on heritage interpretation remains strongly oriented toward visitor satisfaction, destination marketing and recreational experiences. Less attention has been given to indigenous interpretation frameworks that incorporate oral histories, spiritual connections, ancestral relationships and community-defined meanings of heritage. This represents an important limitation because interpretation influences how heritage is understood, preserved and transmitted between generations. Recent studies emphasize that locally controlled interpretation can strengthen authenticity, cultural continuity and community ownership of tourism development (Mburu et al., 2025).

Infrastructure-related evidence shows another dimension of inequality. Research commonly recognizes tourism potential, but fewer studies investigate accessibility barriers such as transportation limitations, inadequate digital connectivity, poor visitor facilities and limited investment in peripheral destinations. These factors contribute directly to uneven tourism development by restricting the ability of rural communities to participate in tourism economies (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Finally, sustainability research has largely focused on conservation and economic opportunities, while integrated approaches combining environmental protection, cultural resilience, social inclusion and long-term adaptive capacity remain insufficiently explored. Future research should therefore move beyond measuring tourism growth and examine how community-based heritage tourism can contribute to inclusive development, climate resilience and social sustainability across diverse African contexts.

Conclusion

This systematic review concludes that cultural heritage tourism in Africa possesses considerable potential to support sustainable destination development, community empowerment, livelihood diversification, cultural preservation, and environmental

conservation. However, the realization of these benefits remains constrained by pronounced spatial, infrastructural, institutional, and thematic inequalities. The evidence base of 113 studies demonstrates that research attention is unevenly distributed, with Morocco, Egypt, and Cape Verde receiving considerably greater scholarly attention than many other African countries. This geographical concentration creates evidence gaps that limit the development of context-specific tourism policies and reduce understanding of heritage tourism conditions in less-studied destinations.

The review further establishes that African cultural and natural heritage resources provide diverse opportunities for community-based tourism, including historical sites, traditional crafts, storytelling, festivals, geosites, cultural landscapes, and nature-based attractions. Nevertheless, inadequate infrastructure, limited accessibility, insufficient technical capacity, weak promotion, fragmented governance, and unequal community participation continue to restrict destination development and equitable benefit distribution.

A major finding is the thematic imbalance in heritage interpretation. Research remains strongly oriented toward recreation, ecotourism, and visitor experiences, while spiritual values, Indigenous knowledge, cultural diversity, and locally defined meanings of heritage receive substantially less attention. This indicates the need to reposition heritage tourism from a predominantly visitor-centred model toward a more community-centred and culturally responsive approach.

Sustainable cultural heritage tourism in Africa requires inclusive governance, improved physical and digital accessibility, stronger community ownership, equitable benefit-sharing, culturally sensitive interpretation, capacity development, and geographically diversified research**.** Future interventions should recognize local communities not merely as tourism beneficiaries but as active custodians, interpreters, decision-makers, and co-creators of sustainable heritage destinations.

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