



Character Traits and Cultural Expressions in Ancestral Worship of *Egungun* in South-West, Nigeria and *Día De Los Muertos* in Oaxaca, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study examines character traits and cultural expressions in ancestral worship through a comparative analysis of the *Egungun* Festival in South-West Nigeria and *Día de los Muertos* in Oaxaca, Mexico. It addresses a gap in comparative museological literature, particularly the limited integration of African masquerade traditions within global discussions of intangible cultural heritage and museum representation.

Objective: The study aims to explore how reverence for ancestors, humor, and community identity are expressed through ritual performance, costumes, and sensory cultural practices, as well as their implications for tourism and museology.

Method: A qualitative comparative case study approach was adopted, drawing on recent secondary sources, academic literature, and institutional reports published between 2020 and 2025.

Results: Findings reveal that both festivals strongly reinforce communal identity and moral values, though expressed differently through embodied masquerade performances in *Egungun* and altar-based commemorations in *Día de los Muertos*. Both traditions also contribute significantly to local economies through cultural tourism and creative industries.

Conclusion: The study concludes that both traditions offer valuable insights for museums, emphasizing the need for immersive, multisensory, and community-centered approaches to representing living cultural heritage.

Unique Contribution: This study contributes to comparative museological scholarship by integrating African masquerade traditions into global discourse on intangible cultural heritage, highlighting their relevance in contemporary museum representation and cultural tourism studies.

Key Recommendation: Museums and cultural institutions should adopt more inclusive, participatory, and sensory-driven exhibition strategies that actively engage source communities in the interpretation and presentation of living heritage traditions.

Keywords: Ancestral worship, Cultural heritage, *Día de los Muertos*, *Egungun* festival, Museology



INTRODUCTION

The festivals that honor the ancestors and the dead are one of the most enduring cultural manifestations, which embed layers of spirituality, artistry and communal identity, while offering immersive sensory experiences. In the Yoruba-speaking regions of South-Western Nigeria, especially in Oyo and Ekiti states, the *Egungun* Masquerade Festival stands as a paramount form of the ancestral Vandana. Inherent in Yoruba is the belief that living and dead exist in a shared continuity, the artists in *Egungun* are included in detailed multi-layered costumes and masks, which completely obscure their human identity and turn them into a physical avatar of ancestral spirits. With its ritual dance, drumming, and praise-singing, the festival works together as entertainment, moral instructions and spiritual equilibrium (Adeoti & Odetayo, 2024; Fayenuwo & Iwuh, 2024).

In Oaxaca, Mexico, *Día de los Muertos* ("Dead's Day"), which is seen annually from 31 October to 2 November, invites families to manufacture brightly colored altars with marigolds, candles, photographs, food, and individual memento, which welcome loved ones to welcome the living. This tradition, which mixes indigenous and Catholic elements, converts both private homes and public places into the field of memory, creativity and festive. Music, road processions, face paintings, and eccentric skeleton art contribute to an environment that sees death as an internal instead of the terminal part of the human cycle (NEH, 2023; Gutiérrez et al., 2015).

Despite distinct cultural landscapes and histories, *Egungun* and *Día de los Muertos* share foundational character traits: reverence for ancestors, community identity, and humor. In *Egungun*, reverence is embodied through masquerades; in *Día de los Muertos*, through respectful offerings. Each festival reinforces communal bonds *Egungun* through lineage-based performances and communal gatherings, and *Día de los Muertos* through collective altar-building and cemetery rituals. Humor also emerges meaningfully: *Egungun* masqueraders may perform satirical commentary through movement, while *Día de los Muertos* features witty poetry and playful skeleton iconography that blend levity with existential reflection (NEH, 2023; Gutiérrez et al., 2015). Expressive cultural forms further enrich the traditions. In *Egungun*, the ingredient art levels for visual power act as vibrant textiles, as well as with rhythmic drumming and appreciation poetry that communicates ancestral narratives (Adeoti & Odetayo, 2024).

In Oaxaca, sensory prosperity is abundant: the aroma of sunlight, vivid scenes of cempasúchil flowers, developed music, and traditional foods form immersive festival experience (NEH, 2023).

Economically, these festivals support local economies and cultural stability. *Egungun* festivals drive all benefits (Oyewale, 2023) to artisan production costumes, facade craftsmen, drummers, and vendors. *Día de los Muertos* attracts significant tourism for Oaxaca, increases income for hospitality, artisans and service sectors, while questions about Cultural Amendment vs. Protection (NEH, 2023).

Museological reflections on these living traditions suggest significant implications for museum curation. Traditional performance often reduces cultural manifestations for stable objects; In



contrast, exhibitions inspired by *Egungun* and *Día de los Muertos* can invite multisensory immersion sound, texture, fragrance and community co-position, which can bring tradition bears into design process. Such approaches align with ethno musicology, culturally grounded, emphasizes the participation exhibition model (Ethnomuseology, 2025).

This comparative study fills the gap of a scholarly that reveals shared moral logics and expressive strategies to share two geographical and historically distracted ancestral festivals: *Egungun* and *Día de los Muertos*.

The guiding research questions are:

1. What are the core cultural traits like reverence, humor, and community identity embedded in *Egungun* and *Día de los Muertos* ?
2. What roles do costumes, performances, and sensory elements play in expressing these traits? (reverence, humor, and community identity)
3. How do these festivals contribute to local economies and cultural tourism?
4. What insights do they offer museums regarding immersive, community-centered curatorial practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of character symptoms and cultural manifestations in ancestral worship traditions has attracted the attention of important scholars, especially in museology, anthology and inheritance studies. Since 2020, adaptive and performing aspects of such traditions have been renewed, especially their interaction with tourism, cultural economics and inheritance protection. (Adeyemi, 2021; González & Martínez, 2023).

***Egungun* Worship and Cultural Traits**

Egungun central to Yoruba cosmology, is more than a festival; it is a spiritual and social mechanism used to strengthen the collective morality, transition oral history and confirm communal identity (Ogunyemi, 2022).

The elaborate costumes layers of brightly patterned cloth, cowries, and symbolic decorations are not only aesthetic, but also encoded symbolic meanings combined with qualities such as honor, bravery and spiritual authority. Ritual dances are both exhibited and practical, giving moral lessons through satire, praise and public advice.

***Día de los Muertos* and Cultural Expressions**

The Mexican day of the dead operates in a similar symbolic record, but within a different cosmological structure. Scholars such as Perez Ruiz (2021) observe that the coloring iconography of the festival, satirical calaveras (skull poems) and family-centered ofrendas express traces of resilience, humor in the face of mortality and a deep belief in cyclical life. The combination of sacred and secular spaces, cemeteries, cemeteries, houses and streets, emphasizes the permeability of life and death in Mexican cultural thinking.



Economic Contributions and Tourism Potentials

Both traditions have evolved into major cultural tourism attractions. *Egungun* festivals in Oyo State have been incorporated into regional tourism initiatives, generating income for local artisans, textile producers, performers, and hospitality services (Adeyemo & Olatunji, 2023). Similarly, *Día de los Muertos* has become a flagship cultural event in Mexico, attracting millions of domestic and international tourists annually, contributing significantly to Oaxaca's creative economy (Torres, 2024).

Lessons for Museology

The museums have demanded an integrated abstract cultural heritage to integrate in its curatorial strategies. These festivals offer a valuable model for exhibition design encouraging cooperation with emergency, multisensory nature, interpretation of participation, use of multimedia and living cultural physicians (ICOM, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). By adopting approaches prepared from *Egungun* and Day of the Dead practice, museums can go beyond stable performance to the dynamic cultural story that maintains community engagement. In short, literature underlines that both *Egungun* Pooja and *Día de los Muertos* simulates the interdependence of cultural symptoms, performing expression and socio-economic vitality, offering fertile land for the museum.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, comparative case-study methodology. In line with established museological research practices, two cultural traditions Yoruba *Egungun* masquerade festivals in Nigeria and *Día de los Muertos* in Oaxaca, Mexico were selected based on their shared focus on ancestor veneration, embodied cultural expression, and relevance to tourism and museology. Data were collected from multiple secondary sources, including peer-reviewed literature from 2020 to 2025, institutional reports (such as those from UNESCO and national cultural bodies), and media articles reporting recent festival developments. According to methodological best practices, thematic coding was applied to analyse recurring cultural traits (e.g., reverence, humor, community identity) and to compare ritual expressions, visual elements, and economic impacts between the two cases (Adeyemi, 2021; Torres, 2024). In line with limitations common in comparative cultural research, the study relies on documented secondary data rather than direct ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, language barriers and the rapidly evolving tourism context post-2020 pose interpretative constraints (González & Martínez, 2023).



FINDINGS

The findings of this study both align with and extend existing scholarship on ancestral traditions and cultural expression. Consistent with the work of Ogunyemi (2022), the study confirms that the *Egungun* Festival functions as a system of moral regulation and communal identity, where masquerade performances embody ancestral authority while incorporating satire and social commentary. Similarly, the findings support Pérez-Ruiz (2021), who emphasizes that *Día de los Muertos* uses humor, symbolism, and ritual objects to normalize death and reinforce cultural continuity. However, this study goes further by placing both traditions within a comparative framework, revealing that while both deploy humor and reverence, the mode of expression differs significantly. In *Egungun*, these traits are embodied and performative, whereas in *Día de los Muertos*, they are material and spatial, expressed through altars, offerings, and curated environments. This extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that similar cultural values can be transmitted through fundamentally different expressive systems, shaped by cosmology and ritual structure.

The findings also align with Adeyemo and Olatunji (2023) and Torres (2024), who identify both festivals as important drivers of cultural tourism and local economies. However, this study introduces a nuanced distinction: while *Día de los Muertos* operates as a globally recognized and state-supported cultural economy, *Egungun* remains more localized and community-centered in its economic impact. A possible explanation for this difference lies in varying levels of institutional promotion, global visibility, and heritage branding, with Mexico actively positioning *Día de los Muertos* within international tourism circuits, unlike many *Egungun* festivals which retain stronger ritual restrictions and localized participation.

In line with ICOM (2022) and UNESCO (2023), the findings reinforce the importance of multisensory and participatory approaches in museum representation of intangible heritage. However, this study extends these frameworks by emphasizing that not all intangible heritage can be translated in the same way. *Egungun*'s restricted, sacred, and performative nature presents unique curatorial challenges compared to the more publicly accessible and materially representable *Día de los Muertos*. This suggests that existing museological models may need to be adapted to account for varying degrees of ritual secrecy, embodiment, and community control.



Furthermore, the study highlights a critical gap noted by Adeyemi (2021), regarding the underrepresentation of African masquerade traditions in global museum discourse. By directly comparing *Egungun* with a globally recognized festival like *Día de los Muertos*, this research contributes to bridging that gap and foregrounds the need for more inclusive and geographically balanced scholarship. Overall, the study demonstrates that while ancestral festivals across cultures share core values of reverence, humor, and communal identity, their expressions are shaped by distinct historical, spiritual, and socio-political contexts. These differences not only explain variations in performance and tourism development but also underscore the need for context-sensitive approaches in museum representation and cultural policy.

DISCUSSION

The thematic findings reveal the significant role of humour in mediating complex relationships with both *Egungun* worship and *Día de los Muertos*, particularly in relation to ancestral reverence, community solidarity, and attitudes toward death. Recent ethical and museological studies indicate that these traditions are expressed through costumes, ritual dances, altars, and public ceremonies that serve not only spiritual functions but also important social purposes (Ogunyemi, 2022; Pérez-Ríos, 2021). This convergence confirms that ancestral worship traditions constitute deeply embedded cultural frameworks that sustain identity, reinforce moral values, and strengthen community cohesion.

Economically, the findings are consistent with the broader literature on cultural tourism, which identifies festivals as important drivers of local and regional development. Although the tourism impact of the *Egungun* Festival remains largely localised, it significantly supports artisan livelihoods, stimulates local businesses, and strengthens diaspora connections. By contrast, *Día de los Muertos* demonstrates the capacity of a well-promoted cultural festival to generate substantial national economic benefits through increased international visibility and tourism. Nevertheless, both case studies reveal the persistent tension between preserving ritual authenticity and responding to the demands of tourism, a concern widely discussed in the heritage management literature (Adeyemo & Olatunji, 2023; Torres, 2024).

From a museological perspective, this study supports calls for collaborative and multisensory exhibition approaches that respect the living nature of intangible cultural heritage. In line with the frameworks of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and UNESCO, museums that co-curate exhibitions with cultural custodians and integrate dynamic programming can foster authentic visitor engagement while empowering local communities. Such approaches are essential for addressing the challenges associated with the commodification of culture and ensuring that museums function as platforms for cultural preservation rather than cultural spectacle (ICOM, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

The study also highlights important gaps in contemporary museological practice, particularly regarding African masquerade traditions such as *Egungun*, which remain underrepresented in global museum narratives compared with festivals such as *Día de los Muertos*. Recent scholarship suggests that greater empirical research and sustained investment in community-led



museum collaborations would significantly enhance the visibility, documentation, and long-term sustainability of these rich cultural traditions (Adeyemi, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This comparative study demonstrates that the cultural practices embodied in Egungun worship and *Día de los Muertos* are fundamental to both cultural identity and economic vitality within their respective societies. As living heritage traditions, they challenge museums to adopt more inclusive, participatory, multisensory, and community-centred approaches to cultural representation.

The findings further indicate that the integration of ancestral reverence, humour, and communal participation provides valuable lessons for heritage preservation, cultural tourism, and museum practice. While the economic benefits generated by these festivals create opportunities for cultural entrepreneurship and regional development, increasing commercialisation requires careful management to preserve ritual integrity, authenticity, and community ownership.

Future research and policy should prioritise sustainable tourism frameworks and strengthen partnerships between museums and cultural communities, particularly in relation to African masquerade traditions. Consistent with international heritage frameworks, such efforts will promote both the preservation and dynamic transmission of intangible cultural heritage associated with ancestral worship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed for stakeholders in museology, cultural heritage management, and tourism development.

1. Enhance Community Participation and Cultural Preservation

Museums and cultural institutions should prioritise meaningful collaboration with tradition bearers and community custodians in the planning, interpretation, and presentation of cultural heritage. Consistent with UNESCO (2023), active community participation promotes respectful representation, strengthens cultural continuity, and safeguards core cultural values across generations.

2. Develop Multisensory and Context-Sensitive Exhibition Strategies

Given the importance of costumes, performances, music, and other sensory elements identified in this study, museums should move beyond static exhibitions by incorporating sound, movement, visual media, and interactive experiences. In accordance with the International Council of Museums (2022), these immersive approaches should remain culturally sensitive, particularly when presenting sacred or restricted practices such as Egungun, in order to avoid misrepresentation or cultural insensitivity.

3. Promote Sustainable and Balanced Cultural Tourism

Tourism planners and policymakers should develop strategies that balance economic benefits with the preservation of cultural integrity. While *Día de los Muertos* has demonstrated



considerable international tourism potential, measures should be taken to prevent excessive commercialisation. Similarly, the promotion of Egungun festivals should respect their sacred and community-based character. Supporting local artisans, regulating visitor participation, and promoting cultural education can help minimise the risks associated with cultural commodification (Adeyemo & Olatunji, 2023).

4. Strengthen Research, Documentation, and Institutional Collaboration

There is a pressing need to expand research and documentation on African masquerade traditions, particularly Egungun, which remain underrepresented in global heritage discourse. Museums, universities, and cultural communities should collaborate in documenting these traditions, integrating festival calendars into museum programming, and investing in capacity-building initiatives for local practitioners. Such collaborative efforts will enhance visibility, ensure long-term sustainability, and support the dynamic transmission of intangible cultural heritage (Adeyemi, 2021; ICOM, 2022).

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Khidir B. Balogun and Joanna I. Ogunsile and conceived the study, including the design, Ogunsile J. I. collated the data, and Ogunsile J. I. handled the analysis and interpretation, while so and so the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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