



REMEMBERING THE IJAW PAST: ORAL HISTORY, INDEGOUS IDENTITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF PRESERVING CULTURAL MEMORY IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on the relationship between oral history, indigenous identity and the indigenous cultural memory of the Ijaw (Ijo) people of the Niger Delta. It argues that the knowledge of the Ijaw is not simply information about the past but a living cultural resource that is passed on through oral stories, genealogy, place names, ritual observance, music, praise poetry, ecology and intergenerational relationships. Anchored in collective and cultural memory theory, and drawing on a purposively selected body of literature in African history, oral history, indigenous knowledge, cultural memory and precolonial education, the article examines the pressures that affect the continuity of indigenous knowledge. This is not a field interview or survey-based study, but a conceptual and literature-based study. It proposes community authority, ethical documentation, critical interpretation, curriculum integration, youth co-creation, community-controlled digital continuity and intergenerational renewal as the components of an Ijaw Cultural Memory Education Framework (ICMEF). The article concludes that cultural preservation cannot be equated with keeping Ijaw culture locked in a so-called past. Preservation should, rather, offer communities the chance to remember and reinterpret, to teach and adapt their heritage. This can facilitate the integration of historical consciousness and enable culturally responsive learning and a plural perception of the histories of Nigeria.

Keywords: Ijaw, Ijo, Oral History, Cultural Memory, Indigenous Knowledge

Introduction

Historical knowledge is not necessarily recorded in written documents. In many African societies, memories of migration, settlement, ancestry, conflict, leadership, spirituality, ecological adaptation and social obligations have been transmitted down the generations through speech, performance, ritual, material culture and intergenerational relations. The Ijaw (Ijo) communities of the Niger Delta provide a telling example of this broader question, because oral history has always been a prominent aspect of the reconstruction of Ijaw history. As the pioneering research of Alagoa (1964, 1966) showed, traditions of origin, memories of lineage and ancestral institutions, when systematically collected and critically interpreted, serve as sources of historical information. Oral history is not only a resource for reconstructing events before colonisation; it is also a source of historical identities. Present-day identity rests on oral memory as well. Knowledge of past events and special places, of how to honour ancestors, of the meaning of names and of how cultural roles are transmitted can shape a sense of belonging in the present. Recent studies on Ijaw oral performance bear this out. Armstrong (2022, 2024) has explored Ijo poetry, oral poets and the communities' use of verbal art to articulate their lived experiences. Oral forms, therefore, operate at the same time as historical sources, as art and as mechanisms of cultural continuity.

The difficulty is that there is no cultural memory without social change. The Niger Delta has experienced colonial transformation, missionary activity, formal and urban schooling, migration, environmental pressures, and mass and digital media. This does not necessarily amount to a total loss



of indigenous culture; it is misleading to think of Ijaw society as progressing from a traditional past to a modern present. Rather, cultural practices are renegotiated continually. Some are preserved, some changed, some challenged and some are new. The issue, then, is not whether Ijaw culture is dying, but what Ijaw communities can do to maintain control over how their histories are told and interpreted.

This article attempts to answer that question by engaging three fields of conversation: oral history, cultural memory and decolonial education. Oral history provides methods for the use of recalled testimony as evidence, taking into consideration the selectivity and performance of memory. Cultural memory is useful for examining the strategies communities adopt to deal with their past through symbolic structures and institutions. Decolonial education serves as a lens for asking whose knowledge is treated as legitimate in schools and universities. Together, these perspectives allow us to consider Ijaw heritage not as an appendage to a 'finished' curriculum but as a source of knowledge with implications for learning about history, forming identities and making learning relevant.

Statement of the Problem

Even though Ijaw oral tradition is rich, the knowledge it holds is not necessarily represented in formal historical and educational institutions. Written archives have long enjoyed a privileged status because of their supposed stability, searchability and institutional authorisation. Oral sources, in contrast, may be rejected as untrustworthy when they are not evaluated with proper historical methods. The danger, however, is not only that oral traditions can be forgotten. The deeper problem is that official institutional knowledge does not necessarily recognise the social context in which indigenous knowledge is generated, evaluated and passed on.

There is also a documentation issue. Studies on indigenous knowledge in the Niger Delta have highlighted the need to document and archive such knowledge and the potential of information institutions such as libraries in this regard (Anyira et al., 2010). Documentation alone, however, is not sufficient for cultural continuity. A recording may retain a voice but separate the knowledge from those authorised to interpret it. There is also the risk that digitisation will release culturally sensitive, restricted or communal knowledge to persons who do not have cultural rights to it. Preservation thus raises issues of ownership, consent, context and control.

Another issue is that of education. Where local history, language and knowledge systems are not part of formal education, younger people may encounter them only outside school. This can weaken the connection between academic and community knowledge. The task is not simply to add "cultural facts" to the curriculum but to think through the connections between knowledge, place, identity and authority (Makokotlela & Gumbo, 2025; Rufai et al., 2021; Seroto & Higgs, 2024).

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this article is to examine the contributions of oral history and indigenous knowledge to the preservation of the cultural memory and identity of the Ijaw people in the contemporary Niger Delta. The specific objectives are to:

1. interpret oral tradition as a means of reconstructing and interpreting Ijaw history;
2. explore the connection between cultural memory, language, place, performance and Ijaw identity;
3. identify present-day pressures on the transfer of Ijaw historical and cultural knowledge;
4. reflect on the importance of indigenous knowledge for the curriculum and for decolonised education; and
5. propose an implementable framework for the preservation and transmission of Ijaw cultural memory.

Research Questions

Corresponding to the five objectives above, the article addressed the following research questions:



1. How do oral traditions and performance practices help to sustain Ijaw historical memory?
2. What is the relationship between language, place, ancestry, cultural practices and Ijaw identity?
3. What social and educational considerations shape the transfer of Ijaw cultural knowledge from one generation to the next?
4. How can Ijaw knowledge be brought into schools and universities without being reduced to folklore or a romanticised past?
5. What criteria should guide the community-based recording and digital preservation of Ijaw cultural memory?

Literature Review

This section reviews the bodies of scholarship on which the article builds. It is kept separate from the theoretical framework in Section 5, which sets out the single theory that guides the analysis.

Oral Tradition and Historical Method

For cultures in which there are few, if any, written records, or in which the written records are those of outside parties, oral tradition is particularly important. Vansina (1985) illustrated the application of oral traditions as a historical source and showed how oral information can be systematically collected and subjected to source criticism. Alagoa's (1966, 1972) work not only introduced this methodological approach to Ijo history but also pointed to the advantages of comparison, the awareness of recurrent patterns and the capacity to separate information from later interpretation. Portelli (1991), however, cautions oral historians not to limit the "value" of testimony to the chronological sequence of facts. A narrator can show how an event has been meaningfully represented in a community by remembering, highlighting, omitting or reconstructing it. Finnegan (2012) adds that African oral literature must be studied as performance, not merely as text, since its meaning depends on the occasion, the audience and the skill of the performer.

Indigenous Knowledge and Decolonial Education

Indigenous knowledge scholarship supports the experiences and perspectives of indigenous peoples by breaking the habit of thinking that only knowledge produced by modern scientific or Western academic institutions is valid. Indigenous knowledge includes ecology, techniques of social control, utilitarian technology, healing, moral education, storytelling and systems of classification. Berkes (2012) highlights the need to see such knowledge as part of the relationship between people, other living beings and their environments. In the African context, it has been suggested that if communities are treated as knowledge holders, rather than merely the objects of education, indigenous knowledge can be used more effectively to contextualise the curriculum (Adebisi, 2016; Rufai et al., 2021; Seroto & Higgs, 2024). Mawere (2015) and Shizha (2013) show that indigenous knowledge has remained marginal in public education in sub-Saharan Africa long after independence, while Avoseh (2013) demonstrates that African proverbs can serve as theoretical frameworks for lifelong learning. From a wider decolonial standpoint, Mignolo (2009) questions the geopolitics of knowledge that ranks Western epistemology above others, and Smith (2012) and Battiste (2000) insist that research and schooling involving indigenous peoples must respect their authority over their own knowledge.

Ijaw Historiography and Institutions as Living Archives

The Ijaw people are spread throughout the Niger Delta, especially in what are now Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta States, but also beyond. Ijaw, or Ijo, is not one community or one language but several, and there is a danger of generalising about Ijaw culture. The population is divided into many *ibe* (community or clan units), and there is great linguistic and cultural diversity (Armstrong, 2021). This diversity matters in historical research because a story from one community cannot automatically be generalised to all Ijaw communities.

Alagoa's (1964) research remains fundamental because it shows that Ijo oral history carries historical knowledge about origins, settlement and relations among communities. His analysis also cautions that collecting only a limited sample of traditions, or treating different types of oral evidence as equivalent, can produce apparent chronological inconsistencies (Alagoa, 1966). His later studies on long-distance



trade and on the development of institutions in the eastern Delta states demonstrated how oral evidence, read alongside external records, can explain state formation in the region (Alagoa, 1970, 1971). This line of work extends the earlier contribution of Dike (1956), whose study of trade and politics in the Niger Delta helped to establish African-centred historiography, and it is carried further in community histories such as Ejituwu's (1991) study of Obolo (Andoni) and in Cookey's (1974) account of King Jaja of Opobo. Falola and Heaton (2008) place these regional histories within the wider history of Nigeria. The methodological lesson is that preservation should expand documentation in diversity and in context rather than simply multiply recordings.

Institutions constitute historical memory too. Lineage systems, festivals, ritual spaces, names and social responsibilities are ways of honouring ancestors. Such institutions may be regarded as "living archives". A living archive, however, is not the same as a conventional archive, and it requires ongoing involvement. If the community of practitioners loses its understanding of the meaning of a ritual, the recording becomes an artefact of the knowledge system but not necessarily a knowledge system in itself. International instruments now recognise this point. UNESCO's (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage counts oral traditions and performing arts as heritage and stresses community participation, while the United Nations' (2007) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms the right of indigenous peoples to maintain, control and transmit their histories, oral traditions and cultural heritage.

Gap in the Literature

The literature reviewed above has three strands that seldom meet. The first, Ijaw historiography in the tradition of Alagoa (1964, 1966, 1972), established oral tradition as legitimate historical evidence but was concerned chiefly with reconstructing the precolonial past, not with how that knowledge is transmitted, taught or governed today. The second, recent work on Ijaw oral performance (Armstrong, 2021, 2022, 2024), shows that verbal art remains alive and responsive to contemporary issues, yet it is literary in focus and does not address schooling, archiving or digital circulation. The third, scholarship on indigenous knowledge and decolonial education (Adebisi, 2016; Makokotlela & Gumbo, 2025; Mawere, 2015; Rufai et al., 2021; Seroto & Higgs, 2024), argues for curriculum reform in general African terms but contains no Ijaw-specific model. Studies on documentation in the Niger Delta (Anyira et al., 2010) emphasise the role of libraries but give little attention to consent, restricted knowledge and community control. No existing study brings these strands together, through a single theoretical lens, into a practical framework that links Ijaw oral history to classroom practice, ethical documentation and community-governed digital preservation. This article fills that gap by applying collective and cultural memory theory to Ijaw knowledge and by proposing the Ijaw Cultural Memory Education Framework (ICMEF).

Theoretical Framework: Collective and Cultural Memory Theory

The article adopts collective and cultural memory theory as its theoretical framework. The theory was founded by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whose work on the social frameworks of memory first appeared in the 1920s and is available in English as *On Collective Memory* (Halbwachs, 1992). It was later developed by Assmann (2011) into a theory of cultural memory and extended by Erll (2011) and Ricoeur (2000/2004). The theory explains why communities preserve some memories of the past and not others, and it stresses the social and relational character of memory.

Four tenets of the theory guide this study. First, memory is socially constructed: individuals remember within groups, and the groups and structures to which they belong give meaning to what is remembered (Halbwachs, 1992). Second, Assmann (2011) distinguishes between communicative memory, the everyday recollection shared among living generations, and cultural memory, which is stabilised over longer periods through symbolic, institutional, textual, ritual and practical forms such as festivals, sacred sites and specialist performers. Third, memory travels through media; songs, names, rituals, written texts and now digital recordings each shape what is remembered and how (Erll, 2011). Fourth, Ricoeur (2000/2004) adds an ethical dimension, a concern with the relation between memory, history and forgetting, which raises the question of who has the right to remember, to record and to forget.



Applied to the Ijaw social context, the theory reflects the idea that memory does not exist as a standalone entity but is distributed among people and practices. The memory of an elder, a family name, a festival, a sacred place, a song, a river or creek, a praise performance and a family genealogy can each capture a different aspect of the past. None can be regarded as an exhaustive historical record. Their value rests partly on their interaction with one another and on community understandings. The distinction between communicative and cultural memory is especially useful here: it helps to explain why knowledge held only by living elders is vulnerable when intergenerational contact weakens, and why institutions such as festivals, praise poetry and naming practices give Ijaw memory greater durability.

The theory has been criticised for sometimes overstating consensus within groups and for paying too little attention to contested or divergent memories. This study addresses that weakness by reading the theory alongside the oral history methods of Portelli (1991) and Vansina (1985), which treat variation between versions as evidence rather than error. Collective and cultural memory theory was chosen over a purely postcolonial or decolonial framework because the central problem of this article is the transmission and governance of memory itself; decolonial scholarship is drawn upon as a supporting lens for the questions of curriculum and authority, not as the guiding theory.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, conceptual and literature-based design. It does not claim to be an original ethnographic study, nor does it claim to present original interviews, participant observation or survey data. Published literature on Ijaw history and oral history, indigenous knowledge in Africa, oral history methodology, cultural memory, decolonial education and heritage preservation served as the data for the analysis. Wherever possible, Ijaw-specific scholarship is used, and a conceptual argument is advanced with the help of more general African and international literature.

The sources were selected purposively according to four criteria: (a) direct relevance to Ijaw or Niger Delta history and culture; (b) methodological or theoretical standing in the fields of oral history, cultural memory and indigenous education; (c) publication in peer-reviewed journals, by established academic publishers or by recognised international bodies; and (d) for recent debates, publication within the last ten years. Several foundational books and institutional documents were retained because they offer concepts and primary historical frameworks that more recent journal articles cannot replace. Table 1 lists the works used, their authors, year of publication, type of source and the rationale for selecting each.

Table 1: Sources of Data and Rationale for Selection

S/N	Author(s) and Year	Work	Type of Source	Rationale for Selection
A. Ijaw and Niger Delta historiography				
1	Alagoa (1964)	<i>The small brave city-state: A history of Nembe-Brass in the Niger Delta</i>	Monograph	Pioneering reconstruction of an Ijaw state from oral tradition; earliest demonstration of oral evidence in Ijaw history.
2	Alagoa (1966)	"Oral tradition among the Ijo of the Niger Delta"	Journal article	Methodological statement on collecting and evaluating Ijo traditions; basis of the source-critical approach used here.
3	Alagoa (1970)	"Long-distance trade and states in the Niger Delta"	Journal article	Shows how oral evidence, combined with external records, explains state formation in the Delta.
4	Alagoa (1971)	"The development of institutions in the states of the eastern Niger Delta"	Journal article	Supports the argument that institutions function as carriers of historical memory.
5	Alagoa (1972)	<i>A history of the Niger Delta</i>	Monograph	Most comprehensive synthesis of Ijo oral tradition; benchmark for Ijaw historical reconstruction.



S/N	Author(s) and Year	Work	Type of Source	Rationale for Selection
6	Dike (1956)	<i>Trade and politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885</i>	Monograph	Foundational work of African-centred Niger Delta historiography.
7	Cookey (1974)	<i>King Jaja of the Niger Delta: His Life and Times, 1821–1891</i>	Monograph	Case study of Delta leadership and the colonial encounter.
8	Ejituwu (1991)	<i>A History of Obolo (Andoni) in the Niger Delta</i>	Monograph	Community history built on oral evidence; shows the diversity of Delta histories.
9	Falola & Heaton (2008)	<i>A history of Nigeria</i>	Monograph	Places Niger Delta history within the national narrative.
B. Oral history method and oral literature				
10	Vansina (1985)	<i>Oral tradition as history</i>	Monograph	Standard work on the source criticism of oral tradition.
11	Portelli (1991)	<i>The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories</i>	Monograph	Treats variation and meaning in testimony as evidence; balances memory theory.
12	Thompson & Bornat (2017)	<i>The voice of the past: Oral history</i>	Monograph	Current reference text on oral history practice and ethics.
13	Finnegan (2012)	<i>Oral literature in Africa</i>	Monograph	Establishes performance as central to African oral forms.
C. Memory theory (theoretical framework)				
14	Halbwachs (1992)	<i>On collective memory</i>	Monograph	Founding statement of collective memory theory.
15	Assmann (2011)	<i>Cultural memory and early civilization</i>	Monograph	Distinguishes communicative from cultural memory; core of the framework.
16	Erlil (2011)	<i>Memory in culture</i>	Monograph	Explains the media through which memory travels, including digital media.
17	Ricoeur (2000/2004)	<i>Memory, history, forgetting</i>	Monograph	Provides the ethical dimension of remembering and forgetting.
D. Ijaw and Nigerian oral performance				
18	Armstrong (2021, 2022, 2024)	Studies of Ijo praise poetry	Journal articles	Most recent Ijaw-specific scholarship on living oral performance.
19	Eze et al. (2021)	“Modernity could not destroy them”	Journal article	Historicises the Nigerian oral artist as communicator.
20	Zezeza (2006)	“The inventions of African identities and languages”	Conference paper	Supports a non-essentialist reading of identity and language.
E. Indigenous knowledge and decolonial education				
21	Adebisi (2016)	“Decolonising education in Africa”	Journal article	Links decolonised education to culture and indigeneity.
22	Rufai et al. (2021)	Indigenous knowledge in teacher education curricula	Journal article	Recent African study on curriculum design.
23	Seroto & Higgs (2024)	“African Indigenous education in the postcolonial period”	Journal article	Recent critical reflection on indigenous education.
24	Makokotlela & Gumbo (2025)	Decolonisation of the curriculum in higher education	Journal article	Most recent evidence on integrating indigenous knowledge in universities.
25	Mawere (2015); Shizha (2013)	Indigenous knowledge in African public education	Journal articles	Document the marginality of indigenous knowledge in African schools.
26	Avoseh (2013)	Proverbs and lifelong learning	Journal article	Shows indigenous oral forms as frameworks for learning.
27	Berkes (2012)	<i>Sacred ecology</i>	Monograph	Relational understanding of indigenous ecological knowledge.



S/N	Author(s) and Year	Work	Type of Source	Rationale for Selection
28	Freire (1970/2000); Mignolo (2009)	Critical pedagogy; epistemic disobedience	Monograph; journal article	Theoretical grounding for learner-centred and decolonial education.
29	Smith (2012); Battiste (2000)	Decolonising research; reclaiming Indigenous voice	Monographs	Ethics of research with Indigenous communities.
F. Documentation, environment and digital media				
30	Anyira et al. (2010)	Libraries and indigenous knowledge in the Niger Delta	Journal article	Only Niger Delta-specific study of documentation by information institutions.
31	Obi et al. (2021)	Indigenous flood knowledge in coastal Nigeria	Journal article	Empirical evidence on the present value of environmental memory.
32	Nasidi et al. (2025)	Digital media and indigenous voices in Nigeria	Journal article	Recent Nigerian evidence on digital media and indigenous communities.
G. International and policy documents				
33	UNESCO (2003)	<i>Convention for the Safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage</i>	International instrument	Defines oral traditions as heritage and requires community participation.
34	United Nations (2007)	<i>Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples</i>	International instrument	Affirms indigenous control over histories, oral traditions and heritage.
35	World Bank (2020)	<i>Realizing the Future of learning</i>	Policy report	Policy context on learning quality and relevance in developing countries.

Source: Compiled by the author, 2026.

The literature was analysed thematically. Each work was read for what it says about the transmission of memory, the authority of knowledge holders, the place of indigenous knowledge in education and the risks and opportunities of documentation. The themes that emerged were then organised under the five research questions. The approach is interpretative, not positivist. Oral tradition is neither accepted as automatically true nor dismissed as automatically false. Remembered stories are discussed critically in the light of other versions, social context, delivery, time and corroboration, following the model of oral history. This methodological approach is similar to that of Alagoa (1966), which relied on Ijo oral tradition, and to other oral history works (Portelli, 1991; Thompson & Bornat, 2017).

Results and Discussion

Oral History, Identity and Belonging

This subsection explores how oral history and identity are linked, with special attention to belonging. Identities are not fixed or given by nature or by geographical location; they are formed through narration and performance. Oral recitals of kinship explain why people belong to a particular community, how families are interrelated and what responsibilities come with belonging. In this way, history can be a source of social cohesion. Memory can also be contested. An origin story may be told in several ways depending on the family or community, and politics and social interests help to shape which version is told (Zezeza, 2006).

Hence, a responsible attitude makes the difference between keeping a story alive and declaring that story the sole truth. Part of the value of oral history for education is that it gives students experience of the complexity of historical interpretation. Students can ask who told the story, when and why it was told, and whether there are other versions or evidence that support or challenge it. These questions make indigenous history a space for critical historical thinking, not a space for unquestioned tradition.

This agrees with existing research on Nigerian oral artists. Eze et al. (2021) highlights the social function of the African oral artist as a communicator, and Armstrong (2021) shows that Ijaw praise



poetry is able to address contemporary social issues. Oral performance is thus a link between the past and the present, not merely a window into a distant past.

Language, Place and Memory

Language and place also carry memory. Names, phrases, sayings, kinship terms, descriptions of places and other expressions of language are among the many ways in which memories of the past are passed on. Translation may convey the general idea but cannot carry the cultural associations that are clear to a fluent speaker. In some preservation projects, therefore, as in the documentation of Ijaw histories in English, the content may be preserved at the expense of its linguistic context.

Location is another element to consider. The Niger Delta is not merely the geographical setting of Ijaw history. Rivers, creeks, islands, forests, fishing grounds, settlements and sacred sites can serve as mnemonic anchors. Careful observation of seasons, water flows, fisheries, plants and hazards can all form part of indigenous environmental knowledge. Obi et al. (2021) found that indigenous knowledge may contain practical environmental knowledge whose relevance to disaster risk reduction in Nigeria's coastal communities can be measured. That study is not specifically Ijaw, but it supports the general idea that the environmental memory of coastal communities can also hold information relevant to the present.

Place-based learning should therefore be part of the preservation of cultural memory. Learners could research the settlement history of their local area, document place names, compare oral history with maps, and consider the significance of place names in relation to the environment and its change. Such activities integrate History, Geography, Environmental Studies and Civic Education.

Music, Performance and Embodied Memory

Culture is not expressed only in spoken prose. It is also expressed in rhythm, music, dance, gesture and performance, especially in societies where performance, rather than written documents, has traditionally been used to transmit knowledge. In his research on Ijo praise poetry, Armstrong (2022, 2024) demonstrates that oral performance involves specialised knowledge and evolving art forms. His work also shows that present-day Ijo oral poetry may express political and social experience, so that cultural continuity is not merely repetition but can also be a sign of innovation.

Performance, therefore, challenges a narrow understanding of preservation. A community can maintain a cultural form while altering its musical context, its audience or its medium without losing its cultural references. While it may be helpful to document such practices, recordings should not replace the social contexts in which the practices are taught and performed. Youth programmes that teach young people to perform can do more to secure continuity than an archive of thousands of recordings that communities do not use.

Intergenerational Transmission and Social Change

Cultural memory is a product of relationships. Transmission involves parents, grandparents, elders, religious specialists, artists, community leaders and younger people in a variety of ways. Traditional learning takes place through observation, participation, storytelling, mastery of technique, correction and repetition. Formal schooling can break these patterns, but the school can also become a place of transmission if community knowledge holders are suitably involved.

Migration and urbanisation complicate this process. Young people can be separated from their cultural communities, and families become geographically scattered. Sharing recordings, stories and language materials with relatives through digital devices can partly compensate for this. Digital media, however, also encourage short attention spans, "information out of context" and the quick spread of false information about the past. The proper answer is not to reject digital technologies but to establish community guidelines for their use.

Youth participation is one of the key principles. Young people should not be regarded merely as receivers of an established tradition. They can be interviewers, translators, filmmakers, archivists, performers, designers and researchers. This model of intergenerational transfer works in both directions:



elders pass on knowledge and authority, while the young contribute new technologies, new formats and new communicative skills.

Colonial Education, Curriculum and Decolonial Learning

Colonial education transformed the institutional basis of African knowledge. In many cases, Western-style education was separated from the land, from communities, from production and from indigenous knowledge systems. Western knowledge is not wrong in itself; the problem arises when it becomes the sole norm by which all other knowledge is judged right or wrong. African indigenous education should not simply be celebrated; it can contribute to the transformation of education in the contemporary world, but only if it is critically engaged (Seroto & Higgs, 2024), and decolonising education must take culture and indigeneity into account (Adebisi, 2016). Freire's (1970/2000) argument that education should begin from the lived reality of learners points in the same direction.

As far as Ijaw history is concerned, the curriculum should not reduce Ijaw traditional culture to a brief topic. Students can read Ijaw historical texts alongside colonial and missionary documents, archaeological findings, maps, literature and recent studies. This creates a space in which indigenous evidence is neither romanticised nor taken for granted. Pupils learn to compare sources and to understand why different historical actors produced different accounts.

Curriculum reform also requires teacher preparation. Rufai et al. (2021) argue that teacher education curricula should be responsive to the African context, and Makokotlela and Gumbo (2025) give an example of how indigenous knowledge can be integrated into curriculum decolonisation in higher education. The implication for the Niger Delta is that teachers should receive practical support in working with community knowledge, community languages, community oral testimony and place-based learning.

Digital Preservation: Opportunity and Risk

Digital technologies hold great potential for cultural preservation. Oral interviews may be recorded on audio or video, photographs catalogued, old manuscripts digitised and language materials organised, while young people may develop podcasts, documentaries and educational websites. A recent study of indigenous communities in Nigeria shows that digital media can serve as tools for amplifying indigenous voices and countering their marginalisation on mainstream media platforms (Nasidi et al., 2025).

Digitisation, however, is not neutral. Once a recording is placed on an open platform, it can be hard to control its dissemination. Sacred knowledge, restricted family histories or community-owned cultural expressions may not be appropriate for unrestricted publication. Hence, a community-centred digital archive should have levels of access: public, community, restricted and confidential. Permission for recording should be negotiated, and communities should control the description, sharing and reuse of materials (Smith, 2012; United Nations, 2007).

Context should also be preserved as part of digital preservation. A single short video on social media can take a song or story out of context. Therefore, the language or dialect, the community and, where possible, the performer or narrator, date, location, genre, topic and access conditions should be recorded in the metadata. The goal is not only to create a large database but to build a meaningful cultural memory infrastructure.

Learning as a Bridge between the Present and the Past

When culture and memory are treated as intellectual resources, learning can connect them with contemporary citizenship. Oral history projects, community mapping, traditional stories and family history projects offer learning opportunities at both primary and secondary levels. At university level, students can undertake supervised research in oral history, heritage management, linguistics, theatre, literature, environmental studies and education.

Not all community traditions are moral lessons, and they should not be interpreted as such in these programmes. Like all human knowledge systems, indigenous knowledge systems contain disagreements, inequalities and historical changes. Critical engagement is therefore essential. Learners



need to ask difficult questions about gender, authority, social hierarchy, conflict, migration and change, while remaining respectful of the communities they are learning about.

Decolonial education rests on balance. Decolonisation should not mean replacing one canon with another. It must create a more plural knowledge space that critically engages various traditions and sets them in dialogue. Makokotlela and Gumbo (2025) likewise see the incorporation of indigenous knowledge as a way of making higher education more relevant and of exposing learners to other knowledge systems.

The Ijaw Cultural Memory Education Framework (ICMEF)

Building on the literature examined, this article proposes the Ijaw Cultural Memory Education Framework (ICMEF). The framework is intended as a practical model for adoption by schools, universities, museums, libraries, cultural organisations and community associations. It rests on the principle that communities preserve their cultural knowledge with outside institutions, not that they surrender ownership of it to them. Its components are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Components of the Ijaw Cultural Memory Education Framework (ICMEF)

Component	Core Principle	Possible Practice
1. Community Authority	Knowledge holders retain decision-making power.	Community advisory panels; consent protocols; elders and cultural specialists as partners.
2. Ethical Documentation	Record with permission and context.	Audio/video interviews; metadata; multilingual transcription; restricted-access categories.
3. Critical Interpretation	Tradition is preserved without treating every account as an uncontested fact.	Source comparison; corroboration; classroom analysis of variants and historical context.
4. Curriculum Integration	Local knowledge becomes part of serious academic learning.	History, language, literature, geography, environmental studies and teacher education modules.
5. Youth Co-creation	Young people actively produce and transmit knowledge.	Podcasts, documentaries, oral history clubs, digital storytelling and community exhibitions.
6. Community-controlled Digital Continuity	Technology supports rather than replaces community authority.	Local archives, access permissions, backups and community-owned descriptions.
7. Intergenerational Renewal	Continuity includes adaptation and innovation.	Mentorships, apprenticeships, festivals, school–community projects and annual memory events.

Source: Developed by the author, 2026.

Implementing the Framework in Schools and Universities

A local cultural memory project is the first step in implementing the framework. Students choose a theme, for example, migration, naming, fishing knowledge, festivals, music, settlement history or environmental change. Before any interviews take place, teachers are given guidance on informed consent, respectful interviewing and source criticism. Students then engage with knowledge holders, with the consent of the community, to record the stories in the original language where possible, together with translation and transcription.

The next step is interpretation. Students compare oral accounts with written histories, maps, photographs, archival materials and published research. They identify similarities and differences and consider why versions differ. Students should be assessed on careful documentation, ethical practice, source comparison and historical reasoning rather than on whether they produce one “right” story.

Community re-entry is the last phase. Copies of the materials and recordings should be returned to participants and communities through print, exhibitions, school libraries, community archives or an approved digital platform. This closes the research loop and makes scholarship less extractive, that is,



less a matter of researchers gathering data that is then used without benefit to, or access for, the people from whom it was taken.

Challenges and Risks

The first risk is romanticisation. The idea of a harmonious, pure or unchanged past can be just as damaging as the idea that Indigenous culture is irrelevant. Adaptation, conflict, political negotiation and interaction with neighbouring societies have been an integral part of Ijaw history. Preservation must therefore make room for that history of change.

The second is representation. No single narrator can represent all Ijaw communities. Documentation of a community account should state the community, dialect and social context to which it belongs, and it should not be merged into general claims about the Ijaw as a whole.

The third concerns intellectual and cultural property. Recording something does not give the researcher, the school, the museum or the digital platform unlimited rights to publish or commercialise the recording. Consent should cover future use and not only the interview itself.

The fourth is technological inequality. A digital archive may require expensive equipment, a reliable internet connection or external technical skills that are not available locally. Multiple backups, accessible formats and local capacity building are therefore crucial.

The fifth is institutional continuity. A project may succeed while a particular researcher, teacher or donor is present and then collapse when that person leaves. Institutions, budgets, training, community partnerships and clear responsibilities are all needed for sustainability.

The literature reviewed shows that the cultural memory of the Ijaw people should be seen not as a collection of endangered artefacts but as an active system. Alagoa's (1966) work was important in establishing the historical value of oral traditions, and present-day studies of Ijaw oral poetry make it clear that oral genres are still performed in new social situations (Armstrong, 2021, 2022, 2024). Modernity, in other words, does not automatically bring indigenous culture to an end. This finding answers RQ1 and confirms the tenet of cultural memory theory that durable memory is carried by institutions and performance, not by individuals alone.

Continuity, however, cannot be guaranteed. Language shift, geographical mobility, changing educational priorities and environmental change can all alter the conditions under which cultural memory is transmitted (RQ2 and RQ3). Preservation is therefore an institutional issue as well as a cultural one. Schools, libraries, universities, museums and community groups can improve continuity by expanding opportunities for intergenerational exchange. Yet they can also unwittingly add to the marginalisation of local knowledge if they exclude it or handle it outside local control.

The most apparent implication is that preservation is not the enemy of innovation. A youth-led cultural documentary, a university course on Niger Delta historiography and an Ijaw podcast in English and Ijaw can all be products of Ijaw culture. Their value lies not in repeating earlier representations but in sustaining meaningful relationships between people, knowledge, language, place and memory.

The ICMEF therefore moves away from the notion of "saving a disappearing culture" towards the notion of "conditions for cultural agency" (RQ4 and RQ5). This aligns with decolonial literature that calls for multiple modes of knowledge in education and for the involvement of communities in educational change (Adebisi, 2016; Rufai et al., 2021; Seroto & Higgs, 2024).

Recommendations

1. Universities in the Niger Delta should establish community oral history and heritage programmes in collaboration with community knowledge holders. Oral history skills, the use



- of local-language resources, ethical documentation and community-based curriculum planning should be included in teacher education courses.
2. Libraries and museums should not only house community collections but also create them with communities. Collection policies should include consent, access, attribution and intellectual property procedures agreed with the communities concerned.
 3. State and local education authorities should support place-based history projects in which local communities share their knowledge with history teachers. Such programmes should not replace the national history curriculum; they should enrich it and make learning more meaningful as learners connect local and Nigerian history.
 4. Cultural organisations should support intergenerational programmes involving elders, artists, language practitioners and youth. Continuous investment in skills and infrastructure should take priority over one-off recording exercises.
 5. Digital initiatives should have clear governance procedures. Decisions on what is digitised, what is public and what is restricted should be made with the involvement of the community. The goal is not simply to be visible online but to ensure the continuity of culture with dignity and control.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This is a conceptual and literature-based study. It does not present new interviews, ethnographic observations, survey data or community validation. The ICMEF should therefore be seen not as a tested intervention but as a proposal to be implemented and evaluated through research. Participatory research needs to be carried out with particular Ijaw groups, and experiences across different *ibe* and linguistic varieties should be compared. Future research in the region could examine how young people use digital media to learn the Ijaw language, how teachers engage with Ijaw traditions in the classroom, how communities take ownership of cultural recordings and how the environment influences place-based memory. Longitudinal studies would also be useful, since cultural transmission is a process, not an event.

Conclusion

Recalling the history of the Ijaw is not enough; one must also remain watchful over how it is kept and told. The question is what communities can do, and need to do, to be able to read their own stories in a changing world. Historical memory can be conveyed in many ways, including oral traditions, genealogies, place names, language, music, praise poetry, ritual and environmental knowledge. The materials presented here show that, when used critically and systematically, these sources can contribute significantly to the reconstruction of Ijaw history.

The task is not only to preserve cultural materials but to preserve relationships: between generations, between language and memory, between place and identity, and between community knowledge and formal knowledge. Documentation and digitisation can help, but they must be governed by ethical standards that recognise community authority.

The proposed Ijaw Cultural Memory Education Framework is one way forward. It embraces community authority, ethical documentation, critical interpretation, curriculum integration, youth participation, community-controlled digital continuity and intergenerational renewal, and it reimagines heritage preservation as an ongoing educational and cultural process. This can enrich the narratives of Nigeria's history and enable Ijaw communities to be the actors of their history and the shapers of their future.

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