

THE ETHICS OF HISTORICAL PRESERVATION IN AFRICA: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE ROLES OF HISTORY AND THEATRE

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Abstract

Historical preservation is fundamental to the survival of every society because it safeguards collective memory, strengthens cultural identity and promotes historical continuity. In Africa, preserving historical heritage has become increasingly urgent due to the enduring effects of colonialism, globalization, armed conflict and the gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge systems. This paper examines the ethical foundations of historical preservation from a philosophical perspective while exploring the complementary roles of history and theatre in sustaining Africa's historical consciousness. Drawing on ethical theory, African communitarian philosophy and the philosophy of memory, the study argues that preserving history is a moral obligation owed to past, present and future generations. History provides the critical methods for documenting, interpreting and preserving the past, whereas theatre transforms historical experiences into living narratives that educate, inspire and reinforce communal identity. Using analytical and critical philosophical methods alongside historical interpretation, the paper contends that an interdisciplinary collaboration among philosophy, history and theatre offers a more comprehensive approach to safeguarding Africa's cultural heritage. It concludes that ethical historical preservation is essential for promoting historical justice, cultural continuity, national development and the decolonization of African knowledge systems.

Keywords: Ethics, Historical preservation, African Philosophy, Cultural memory, History, Theatre, Indigenous knowledge

Introduction

History is more than a record of past events; it is the repository of a people's collective memory, cultural identity and historical consciousness. Through history, societies understand their origins, preserve shared values and draw lessons that shape present and future development. As Carr (1990) argues, history represents a continuous dialogue between the past and the present, making historical knowledge indispensable to social understanding. Consequently, preserving history is not merely an academic exercise but an ethical responsibility that protects cultural heritage and historical truth. The importance of historical preservation is particularly evident in Africa, where slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and globalization have profoundly shaped historical narratives. Colonial scholarship frequently portrayed Africa as a continent without civilization or meaningful history, thereby legitimizing colonial domination. African scholars such as Diop (1974) and Rodney (1972) challenged these distortions by demonstrating the richness of African civilizations and exposing the ways colonialism undermined indigenous institutions and historical consciousness. Preserving Africa's history therefore constitutes both an intellectual necessity and an ethical obligation.

From a philosophical perspective, historical preservation raises important questions concerning justice, memory, identity and responsibility. Ricoeur (2004) argues that truthful remembrance is indispensable for justice because historical memory acknowledges past experiences while providing the basis for reconciliation and accountability. Deliberate distortion or neglect of history undermines both historical integrity and human dignity. African philosophy further strengthens this ethical obligation through its communitarian understanding of personhood. Mbiti (1990) maintains that individual existence is inseparable from the community, while Gyekye (1996) argues that every generation has a moral responsibility to preserve and transmit cultural values to those who follow. Within this framework, safeguarding historical memory becomes a collective duty rather than an individual choice.

History remains the principal discipline through which societies preserve and critically examine the past. Through archival research, archaeology, documentary evidence and oral traditions, historians reconstruct historical realities and protect them from distortion. Vansina (1985) demonstrates that oral traditions constitute reliable historical sources when subjected to critical analysis, while Assmann (2011) explains that cultural memory enables societies to transmit significant historical experiences across generations. Alongside historical scholarship, theatre has long served as one of Africa's most effective instruments for preserving historical consciousness. Through storytelling, ritual, festivals, music, dance and dramatic performance, African societies have transmitted historical knowledge long before the widespread use of writing. Soyinka (1976) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) argue that theatre not only preserves historical memory but also resists cultural domination by transforming history into shared communal experience. Despite its significance, historical preservation in Africa faces numerous challenges including inadequate archival systems, armed conflict, rapid urbanization, declining indigenous languages, globalization

and weak cultural policies. These challenges threaten both tangible and intangible aspects of Africa's historical heritage and increase the urgency of preservation efforts.

Conceptual Clarifications

Ethics

Ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the principles that govern human conduct and determine what is morally right or wrong. It examines concepts such as duty, justice, virtue, responsibility and the common good. Ethical theories provide the normative foundation for evaluating human actions and institutional practices including the preservation of history. From the perspective of virtue ethics, Aristotle (1999) argues that moral excellence is achieved through the cultivation of virtues that promote human flourishing. Preserving historical heritage can therefore be regarded as a virtuous practice because it reflects prudence, justice and respect for the experiences of previous generations. A society that values its history demonstrates a commitment to preserving the cultural and moral resources that sustain communal life. Kant's deontological ethics offers another justification for historical preservation. According to Kant (2012), moral actions arise from duty rather than consequences and must conform to universal moral principles. Preserving authentic historical records is therefore a moral obligation because truthfulness respects the dignity of both past and present generations. The deliberate distortion or suppression of history violates this obligation by manipulating historical truth for ideological or political purposes. Utilitarian ethics also supports historical preservation. Mill (1998) maintains that morally right actions are those that promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Historical knowledge contributes to social well-being by strengthening national identity, informing public policy, promoting civic education, and preventing the repetition of past injustices.

African philosophy reinforces these ethical perspectives through its communitarian conception of personhood. Mbiti (1990) argues that the individual exists within a community that includes the living, the departed and future generations. Similarly, Gyekye (1996) maintains that every member of society has a responsibility to preserve and transmit cultural values. Within this framework, safeguarding historical memory becomes a collective moral duty rather than an optional cultural activity. Ricoeur (2004) further argues that memory is inseparable from justice because truthful remembrance acknowledges historical experiences and provides the basis for reconciliation. Ethical historical preservation therefore requires societies to protect both their achievements and their tragedies while resisting historical distortion or selective remembrance. Recent scholarship has further emphasized that ethical historical preservation extends beyond safeguarding physical artefacts to ensuring equitable access to historical knowledge through digital technologies and inclusive heritage practices. Scholars argue that ethical preservation must respond to contemporary challenges such as digital exclusion, the destruction of heritage during armed conflicts, climate change and the ethical use of emerging technologies in documenting and preserving cultural heritage. Consequently, preserving historical memory remains a moral obligation that requires collaboration among governments, educational institutions, cultural organisations, local communities and technological innovators.

Historical Preservation

Historical preservation refers to the deliberate protection, documentation, conservation, interpretation and transmission of historical knowledge and cultural heritage across generations. It encompasses both tangible heritage such as monuments, archaeological sites, archives and artefacts, and intangible heritage including oral traditions, indigenous knowledge, languages, rituals, music and theatrical performances. Historical preservation is more than the conservation of physical objects; it is a continuous process through which societies maintain cultural continuity and strengthen collective identity. Lowenthal (1985) argues that preserving the past enables communities to understand their present circumstances while providing guidance for the future. In Africa, where oral traditions have long served as primary historical sources, preservation extends beyond written documentation to include storytelling, festivals, praise poetry and other indigenous forms of knowledge transmission. Vansina (1985) demonstrates that oral traditions constitute credible historical evidence when subjected to critical historical analysis.

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory refers to the shared process through which societies preserve and transmit significant historical experiences, beliefs, values and identities across generations. Unlike individual memory, cultural memory belongs to communities and is sustained through institutions such as families, schools, archives, museums, religious traditions, literature, festivals and theatre. Assmann (2011) explains that cultural memory enables societies to preserve meaningful aspects of the past that shape collective identity. In African societies, oral traditions, storytelling, masquerades, music, festivals and dramatic performances have historically served as important repositories of communal memory.

The Ethical Imperative of Historical Preservation in Africa

Historical preservation in Africa is not merely an academic or cultural undertaking but an ethical obligation rooted in justice, identity, responsibility and respect for human dignity. Every generation inherits the duty to preserve the experiences, values and achievements of those who came before while ensuring that future generations receive an authentic account of their historical heritage. In this sense, historical preservation serves as a bridge between the past, present and future, safeguarding cultural continuity and collective identity. Africa's historical experience makes this obligation particularly compelling. The transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, apartheid and postcolonial conflicts profoundly altered the continent's historical narratives and cultural institutions. Colonial scholarship often misrepresented Africa as a continent without civilization or history, thereby legitimizing foreign domination. Rodney (1972) argues that colonialism systematically disrupted African political, economic and cultural institutions while distorting indigenous historical knowledge. Likewise, Diop (1974) demonstrates that Africa possessed sophisticated civilizations long before European contact, challenging colonial interpretations of African history. Preserving these histories therefore becomes an act of historical justice that restores marginalized voices and corrects long-standing distortions.

Recent scholarship has equally emphasized that decolonizing African historical narratives requires preserving indigenous epistemologies, oral traditions and local archives alongside conventional documentary sources. Such efforts contribute significantly to restoring Africa's intellectual heritage and promoting historical justice in contemporary scholarship.

From an ethical perspective, preserving history reflects respect for those whose lives and sacrifices have contributed to contemporary society. Every generation benefits from the cultural, political, and intellectual achievements of its predecessors and therefore has a moral responsibility to preserve this inheritance. This obligation extends beyond recording triumphs to acknowledging painful experiences such as slavery, colonial oppression, civil conflict and political violence. Ricoeur (2004) argues that truthful remembrance is essential for justice because reconciliation cannot occur where historical realities are ignored or deliberately distorted. Accurate historical preservation thus provides the moral foundation for accountability, healing, and sustainable peace. Recent studies on memory and transitional justice similarly maintain that preserving historical records enables societies emerging from conflict to pursue reconciliation, strengthen democratic institutions and prevent the recurrence of historical injustices.

African communitarian philosophy further reinforces this responsibility by emphasizing the interconnectedness of generations. Mbiti (1990) argues that African conceptions of personhood extend beyond the individual to include ancestors, the living and those yet unborn. Similarly, Gyekye (1996) maintains that communal life imposes obligations on every member of society to preserve cultural values and historical traditions. Within this worldview, historical preservation is a shared responsibility involving families, educators, governments, historians, artists, religious institutions and local communities. This communitarian understanding remains particularly relevant today, as many African societies increasingly recognize community participation as an essential component of successful heritage preservation and cultural sustainability.

Contemporary challenges have made this ethical responsibility increasingly urgent. Rapid urbanization, globalization, armed conflicts, environmental degradation, climate change and the erosion of indigenous languages threaten both tangible and intangible aspects of Africa's historical heritage. Historical monuments continue to deteriorate, oral traditions disappear with the passing of elderly custodians and younger generations often become detached from indigenous knowledge systems. Addressing these challenges requires sustained investment in historical research, archives, museums, cultural institutions, theatre and digital preservation initiatives. Recent advances in digital technology have also demonstrated that electronic documentation, digital repositories, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), three-dimensional heritage documentation, and community-based digital archives can significantly strengthen historical preservation while complementing conventional conservation methods.

The Complementary Roles of History and Theatre in Preserving Africa's Historical Heritage

History and theatre are indispensable instruments for preserving Africa's historical heritage. While history reconstructs, documents and critically interprets the past through scholarly inquiry, theatre transforms historical experiences into living narratives that educate, inspire and strengthen communal identity. Together, they provide an interdisciplinary framework through which historical knowledge is preserved, transmitted and made meaningful across generations. History occupies a central place in preserving Africa's cultural heritage because it provides the methods through which historical events are investigated and interpreted. According to Carr (1990), history is a continuous dialogue between the historian and historical evidence, requiring constant critical examination rather than the mere recording of events.

Through archival research, oral traditions, archaeology, documentary analysis and material culture, historians reconstruct the past while correcting distortions that have shaped historical narratives. African historiography demonstrates that historical knowledge extends beyond written records. Before the widespread adoption of writing, African societies preserved their histories through oral traditions, royal genealogies, praise poetry, folklore and communal rituals. Vansina (1985) established that oral traditions are legitimate historical sources when subjected to critical historical analysis, thereby challenging colonial assumptions that authentic history exists only in written form. This recognition has significantly strengthened the study of Africa's precolonial past and restored confidence in indigenous knowledge systems. More recent studies on African heritage have equally emphasized that oral traditions remain indispensable historical sources, particularly where written documentation is limited. Contemporary historians therefore advocate integrating oral testimonies with archival and archaeological evidence to produce more comprehensive and inclusive historical narratives.

Complementing the work of historians, theatre preserves history by transforming documented events into shared cultural experiences. Long before literacy became widespread, African societies relied on storytelling, music, dance, masquerades, festivals and ritual performances to communicate historical knowledge, celebrate communal achievements and transmit moral values. These performances functioned as living archives through which societies preserved their collective memory. Unlike written historical accounts, theatre appeals simultaneously to emotion, imagination and communal participation. Schechner (2013) argues that performance enables societies to repeatedly enact and transmit significant cultural experiences, ensuring that historical memory remains relevant to successive generations. In African societies, dramatic performance not only entertains but also educates, commemorates and reinforces communal identity. Soyinka (1976) emphasizes that African theatre is inseparable from ritual because both emerge from a shared cultural worldview that connects the living with their ancestors and cultural traditions. Through dramatic performances, communities preserve historical events while reflecting on their ethical significance.

The significance of theatre in preserving historical consciousness is further illustrated in the dramatic works of Wole Soyinka. *His Death and the King's Horseman* is based on the historical interruption of the ritual passage of the King's Horseman in Oyo during British colonial rule in 1946. Although the play is not intended as a literal historical reconstruction, it preserves important aspects of Yoruba cosmology, indigenous political institutions, ritual obligations and colonial encounters. By dramatizing the conflict between African cultural values and colonial intervention, Soyinka demonstrates that theatre possesses the capacity to preserve historical memory while provoking ethical reflection on cultural misunderstanding, colonial domination and historical injustice. The play therefore serves not merely as literature but as a repository of cultural memory through which future generations encounter important aspects of African history and philosophy.

Similarly, Femi Osofisan employs theatre as an instrument of historical preservation in *Morountodun*. Inspired by the Agbekoya farmers' uprising in Western Nigeria, the play reconstructs a significant episode in Nigeria's socio-political history to interrogate issues of oppression, resistance, justice and class relations. Rather than simply recounting historical events, Osofisan creatively reinterprets them to encourage audiences to examine the ethical and political implications of social inequality and popular resistance. In doing so, *Morountodun* preserves the memory of a major historical struggle while ensuring that its lessons remain relevant to contemporary discussions of governance, justice and national development. The play illustrates that theatre complements historical scholarship by transforming historical experiences into accessible narratives capable of educating wider audiences beyond the classroom and the archive.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o equally demonstrates the indispensable role of theatre in preserving Africa's historical heritage through *I Will Marry When I Want* (co-authored with Ngugi wa Mirii). The play reflects the socio-economic realities of postcolonial Kenya by dramatizing the continuing effects of colonialism, class exploitation, religious manipulation and cultural alienation. Performed originally in the Gikuyu language, the play deliberately employs indigenous language and community theatre to preserve local history and cultural identity. By presenting the lived experiences of ordinary Kenyans, Ngugi transforms historical realities into collective memory, ensuring that the struggles against economic exploitation and cultural domination remain part of the historical consciousness of future generations. The play therefore illustrates that theatre functions not only as entertainment but also as an instrument for documenting history, resisting cultural erasure, and advancing the decolonization of African knowledge systems.

Similarly, Ahmed Yerima's historical drama *Attahiru* contributes significantly to the preservation of African historical memory. The play dramatizes the resistance of Sultan Attahiru I of the Sokoto Caliphate against British colonial conquest in the early twentieth century. Through this historical reconstruction, Yerima preserves an important episode in Nigeria's anti-colonial history while inviting audiences to reflect on themes of patriotism, sacrifice, leadership, religious conviction and national identity. Rather than allowing such historical events to remain confined to historical documents, the dramatist transforms them into living cultural experiences capable of educating contemporary audiences. In doing so,

the play demonstrates that theatre preserves not only historical facts but also the moral values, emotions and philosophical questions associated with those events.

Challenges to Historical Preservation in Africa

Despite growing recognition of the importance of preserving Africa's historical heritage, numerous challenges continue to threaten the continent's collective memory. These challenges are political, economic, institutional, cultural and technological, requiring coordinated responses from governments, scholars, cultural institutions and local communities. One of the most enduring challenges is the legacy of colonialism. Colonial administrations not only exploited Africa's resources but also reshaped historical narratives to justify imperial domination. Indigenous political systems, cultural practices and knowledge traditions were frequently dismissed as primitive while colonial historiography portrayed Africa as lacking civilization and history. Rodney (1972) argues that these distortions alienated Africans from their historical identity, whereas Diop (1974) demonstrates that recovering Africa's authentic history is essential to restoring cultural confidence and intellectual independence. Contemporary African scholars have continued this intellectual project by advocating the decolonization of archives, museum collections and educational curricula to ensure that African voices occupy a central place in narrating the continent's history.

Institutional weaknesses also undermine preservation efforts. Many archives, museums, libraries and heritage centres across Africa face inadequate funding, poor conservation facilities, limited digitization, shortages of trained personnel and weak policy implementation. Consequently, valuable manuscripts, photographs, archaeological collections and official records remain vulnerable to environmental deterioration, theft, natural disasters and permanent loss. In many countries, inadequate government investment has significantly limited the capacity of cultural institutions to preserve historical materials according to international conservation standards. Political instability, armed conflict, terrorism and environmental degradation have further endangered Africa's historical heritage through the destruction of cultural sites, museums, monuments and archives. Violent conflicts have resulted in the loss of irreplaceable cultural artefacts and historical monuments that embody the collective memory of many African societies. Climate change has equally emerged as a growing threat to heritage conservation, as flooding, desertification, coastal erosion and changing environmental conditions continue to damage archaeological sites and historic buildings across the continent.

An equally significant contemporary challenge concerns the ethical use of emerging digital technologies. Although digitization has expanded opportunities for preserving archives and cultural heritage, many African countries continue to experience inadequate technological infrastructure, unstable electricity supply, limited internet access and insufficient digital literacy. These limitations restrict the effective implementation of digital preservation programmes. Furthermore, concerns relating to data ownership, intellectual property rights, cyber security and the unauthorized commercialization of indigenous cultural resources raise important ethical questions regarding digital heritage

management.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has also emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge for historical preservation. AI-assisted technologies can facilitate the digitization of fragile manuscripts, restore damaged historical documents, transcribe handwritten archival materials, translate endangered indigenous languages and improve access to historical collections through intelligent search systems. Similarly, virtual museums, digital exhibitions, three-dimensional modelling and immersive heritage technologies have expanded opportunities for preserving and presenting African history to global audiences. However, these technologies also require careful ethical regulation to prevent historical distortion, algorithmic bias, unauthorized reproduction of cultural heritage and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems. Consequently, technological innovation should complement rather than replace the critical role of historians, philosophers, theatre practitioners, archivists and local communities in preserving authentic historical knowledge.

Conclusion

Historical preservation is fundamentally an ethical responsibility that safeguards collective memory, cultural identity and historical continuity. Throughout this paper, it has been argued that preserving Africa's historical heritage extends beyond academic inquiry to become a moral obligation owed to past, present, and future generations. Ethical reflection demonstrates that preserving historical truth promotes justice, responsibility, reconciliation and respect for human dignity. The paper has further shown that history and theatre perform complementary roles in preserving Africa's historical consciousness. History critically reconstructs and documents the past while theatre transforms historical knowledge into living cultural experiences that educate, inspire and strengthen communal identity. Through the analyses of selected dramatic works by Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ahmed Yerima, this study has further demonstrated that African theatre functions as a vital repository of historical memory by preserving significant historical events, indigenous values and collective cultural experiences. Together, history and theatre contribute significantly to the decolonization of African knowledge systems and the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

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