

Sculptural Props as Creative and Communicative Tools for Cultural Preservation, Documentation, and Promotion in Indigenous Yoruba Movies in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Sculptural artifacts are visual embodiments of cultural memory, identity, and creativity. They are veritable means of visual story-telling and cultural narratives, particularly in indigenous movies. However, many of these tangible heritages face threats of destruction from rapid urban expansion, natural disasters, neglect, and the deliberate actions of man. In Nigeria, particularly within Yoruba communities of Southwest, several sculptures that once defined communal spaces have disappeared due to modern construction, weathering, and commercialisation. This paper argued that indigenous Yoruba movies could serve as alternative platforms for documenting and preserving the endangered sculptural forms. Through the creative integration of sculptural props, filmmakers would not only enrich visual storytelling but also immortalise sculpture, which is fading as a means of preserving cultural heritage. The paper adopted a theoretical discourse approach, emphasizing interpretive analysis that drew insights from Cultural Memory Theory, complemented by a newly formulated Artefact Cinematic Bridge Theory. The theories postulated that sculptural props are mediators between tangible cultural heritage and cinematic expressions. The study established the communicative and creative roles of sculptural props as vehicles for cultural preservation, documentation, and promotion in indigenous Yoruba movies. It advocated for the strategic inclusion, archiving, and scholarly documentation of sculptural elements in Yoruba movies as tools for sustaining Nigeria's artistic and cultural continuity amid urban and environmental transformations.

Keywords: Sculptural props, Yoruba indigenous movies, Cultural preservation, Documentation, Promotion.

Word Count: 214

INTRODUCTION

The world of movies is a dynamic field where material culture interacts with performance, sound, and narrative to produce meaning. Within this matrix, sculptural property (also known as props) such as carvings, statues, reliefs, masks, totems, and other three dimensional artifacts occupy a unique space as creative and communicative instruments. Sculpture, as a form of visual art, involves the manipulation of materials into expressive forms that embody spiritual, symbolic, or social significance. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2017) props in cinematic language, refer to physical objects used by actors or within a scene to enhance narrative authenticity and visual storytelling. When sculpture is used in a movie for creative production, it transforms into a sculptural prop, merging art with narrative intention. These constructs interact to form a semiotic system that conveys meaning, identity, and emotion. Film is a cultural mirror and creative platform that uses visual elements to represent life, history, and collective consciousness. The relationship between sculpture and film, therefore, lies in their shared ability to communicate meaning through form and symbolism. In indigenous Yoruba movies, sculptural props operate as carriers of mythology, cosmology, and

history, a point emphasized by Akintonde and Kalilu (2024) and Abiodun (2022), with each object signifying deeper layers of Yoruba worldview. The union of sculpture and film thus produces a multidimensional communication channel that promotes culture while entertaining and educating audiences.

Globally, the use of cultural artifacts in cinema has become a deliberate strategy for identity construction and cultural affirmation. According to Hooks (2020), filmmakers across cultures integrate traditional art forms into motion pictures to reflect the soul of a people and anchor stories in shared heritage. Kawamura (2022) observed that in Asian cinema, for instance, Buddhist relics and miniature sculptures known as netsuke are employed not merely for decoration but as conduits of moral and metaphysical meaning. Similarly, African-American filmmakers deploy ancestral symbols, carvings, and masks as metaphors for resistance, continuity, and collective memory. These examples affirm that the visual language of sculpture extends beyond physical aesthetics to embody the cultural essence of societies and their enduring narratives.

In Africa, the cinematic adoption of sculptural and ritual artifacts has long been intertwined with storytelling. Ekwuazi (2018) noted that early Nigerian filmmakers adopted indigenous art forms to bridge oral tradition and visual performance, creating a distinctly African cinematic syntax. Within this visual grammar, sculptures serve not only as props but as coded texts which are interpretable by culturally informed audiences. In Yoruba culture, where art, spirituality, and social values are inseparable, the presence of sculpture on screen carries sacred and didactic implications. Akintonde and Kalilu (2024) emphasised that Yoruba sculpture embodies symbolic order, community ethos, and cosmological balance, making its inclusion in film a form of visual theology and sociocultural commentary.

Scholars such as Ifeta (2020) and Oriola (2024) argued that indigenous art forms in Nigerian cinema act as reservoirs of cultural education and moral instruction. By situating sculptural props within filmic narratives, Yoruba directors do more than create visual appeal they engage in cultural pedagogy. This cinematic pedagogy teaches audiences about ancestral wisdom, civic values, and spiritual codes embedded in material forms. However, despite the centrality of such visual heritage, the documentation and theoretical interrogation of sculptural props remain sparse in scholarly discourse on Nigerian film. Extant literature focuses largely on orality, performance, and language (Adesokan, 2021; Adeoti, 2023), leaving the visual and material dimensions underexplored. In view of the limited scholarly attention to the narrative potentials of sculptural props in indigenous movies, this paper examined the roles of sculptural props as creative and communicative tools in preserving, documenting and promoting cultural values in indigenous Yoruba movies.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed in this study is the persistent neglect, distortion, and inadequate documentation of sculptural artifacts in Indigenous Yoruba movies, which threatens cultural continuity, identity preservation, and scholarly heritage in Southwest Nigeria. While Nollywood has attained global recognition as the second largest film industry and a dynamic cultural voice, its representation of Yoruba heritage is uneven and selective. Sacred carvings, shrine sculptures, palace art, and masquerade forms critical repositories of Yoruba cosmology, history, and spirituality are frequently omitted, superficially presented, or misrepresented on screen. This lacuna undermines both cultural authenticity and the role of cinema as a medium for heritage conservation. The consequences of this neglect are profound. Culturally, the erosion of sculptural memory accelerates as oral traditions wane and custodians of indigenous knowledge diminish. Artistically, Nollywood impoverishes itself by overlooking authentic visual resources and substituting them with repetitive, urban-centered narratives that fail to capture the full spectrum of Yoruba identity. Economically, the absence of sculptural heritage in film diminishes opportunities for cultural tourism, creative entrepreneurship, and global competitiveness. At stake is not only accurate cultural representation but also the survival of an irreplaceable visual archive of identity, memory, and spirituality. Despite the centrality of Nollywood in shaping cultural perception, a significant scholarly gap persists. Existing research has emphasized Nollywood's entertainment value, socio political commentary, and linguistic influence, yet few studies critically interrogate its potential for sculptural preservation and documentation. Questions remain unanswered about how Indigenous Yoruba films can serve as living archives that both conserve and promote sculptural heritage. This theoretical study therefore addresses

this urgent need by situating Yoruba sculptural artifacts within cinematic discourse, proposing Nollywood as a critical tool for safeguarding and revitalizing Yoruba cultural memory in the twenty first century.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Cultural Memory Theory as its primary conceptual foundation, complemented by Pluralist Artifact Theory (PAT). Together, these frameworks offer a rigorous lens for understanding how sculptural props in indigenous Yoruba films function as cultural, symbolic, and archival devices.

Cultural Memory Theory, developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann and grounded in Halbwachs's earlier work on collective memory, explains how societies preserve identity through material and symbolic forms. Jan Assmann's differentiation between communicative and cultural memory, along with Aleida Assmann's elaboration on archival and performative dimensions, underscores the role of objects, rituals, monuments, and media in storing and transmitting cultural meaning. Erll's extension of this theory to cinema further demonstrates how film acts as a medium through which cultural narratives and memory forms are transported across time. Core principles such as the materiality of cultural memory, mediation through ritual and media, symbolic encoding, durability, and identity formation clarify why sculptural objects serve as enduring repositories of Yoruba historical, spiritual, and moral knowledge (Assmann, 1995; Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). Within Yoruba cinema, sculptures, masks, carvings, and totems continue this long standing role by embodying mythology, cosmology, ancestry, and communal ethics (Abiodun, 2022; Kolawole, 2022). Their integration into film translates these meanings into digital form, ensuring continuity even when the physical artifacts face erosion or neglect (Ifeta et al., 2020). Thus, film becomes a cultural archive that preserves and disseminates sculptural memory across generations.

Pluralist Artifact Theory (PAT), also known as Artifact Concept Pluralism, provides a complementary interpretive framework by rejecting the idea that artifacts can be defined through a single essential property. As articulated by Mag Uidhir and Magnus (2011), PAT argues that artifacts must instead be understood through multiple context dependent concepts—a position influenced by broader philosophical debates between essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives (Zangwill, 2001). This pluralistic orientation is especially valuable for examining sculptural objects, which often carry aesthetic, cultural, spiritual, material, and narrative significance simultaneously. PAT accommodates these layered meanings, permitting diverse interpretive lenses to coexist without privileging any single perspective.

This approach aligns with Yoruba sculptural traditions, which, as Abiodun (2022) and Adebisi (2022) demonstrate, encode interconnected layers of aesthetic expression, ritual symbolism, and cultural knowledge. When transposed into cinematic contexts, these objects acquire additional functions, operating as symbolic cues, cultural markers, and narrative components (Ajibade, 2020). Akanbi (2023) further highlights film's role as a medium for documenting and transmitting intangible cultural heritage, reinforcing PAT's argument that no singular explanatory model can capture the dynamic roles played by sculptural props in Yoruba cinema.

In this study, PAT clarifies why sculptural objects in Yoruba films cannot be reduced to purely aesthetic decorations or narrative tools. Their significance is multidimensional, encompassing aesthetic qualities (Zangwill, 2001), cultural and historical embeddedness (Hall, 1997), spiritual resonance, and archival value. This pluralistic framing positions Yoruba filmmakers as both creative artists and cultural custodians who use film to preserve sculptural traditions threatened by globalisation, urbanisation, and cultural attrition. As demonstrated in films such as *Saworo Ide* and *Agogo Eewo*, sculptural props serve as bridges of cultural memory, embodying Yoruba metaphysics, sociopolitical ideals, and communal values (Bolarinwa, 2023). Through these rich layers of meaning, Yoruba cinema functions as a living memory institution, transforming moving images into repositories of sculptural heritage and ensuring their preservation, circulation, and reinterpretation across generations.

Sculptural Props as Movie Elements: Significance for Cultural Promotion

As Ifeta et al. (2020) observed, the urgency of documentation grows increasingly critical as Yoruba sculptural

heritage faces escalating threats from urbanisation, infrastructural expansion, neglect, natural decay, and deliberate human actions. Many public, ritual, and domestic sculptures have been displaced or destroyed, and according to Abiola (2021), the absence of systematic archiving has already resulted in the loss of invaluable sculptural records from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Within this climate of cultural erosion, Benson (2020) argues that indigenous Yoruba cinema offers an unconventional yet powerful medium for preserving endangered material culture by converting sculptural artefacts into durable visual archives. These artefacts serve as movie props that have huge potentials for documenting and preserving cultural history, norms and values.

From an aesthetic perspective, Bolarinwa (2023) emphasised that the integration of indigenous visual elements into film enriches narrative depth, enhances authenticity, and reinforces cultural identity. Sculptural props—whether carved figures, masks, or totems, thus function, as Kalilu (2019) explained, as semiotic devices that embody Yoruba cosmology, spirituality, and moral codes, linking cinematic narratives with lived cultural realities. Despite such intersections between art and film, Adesokan (2021), Adeoti (2023), and Ekwuazi (2018) collectively highlighted that scholarly discourse on Yoruba cinema has largely prioritised linguistic and sociopolitical analyses, leaving material culture significantly under theorised. This study therefore responds to this dual scholarly gap by examining how sculptural props operate as communicative and creative vehicles for cultural preservation, documentation, and promotion in Yoruba movies, while also recognising, as seen in films like *Saworo Ide* and *Agogo Eewo*, that such props project Yoruba artistic identity into both local and global cinematic spaces, including platforms such as Netflix and Africa Magic Yoruba.

Communicative and Creative Potentials of Sculptural Props in Indigenous Yoruba Movies

Sculptural props embody profound communicative power because they merge the symbolic depth of Yoruba artistic traditions with the narrative immediacy of cinema. Yoruba sculpture, as Abiodun (2022) explained, constitutes a sophisticated philosophical language in which form, iconography, and cosmological symbolism encode metaphysical beliefs, ethical values, and communal identities. When such sculptural forms appear in film, they retain this semiotic density but acquire new modalities of expression through cinematic framing, lighting, sound, gesture, and narrative context. Thus, sculptural props operate as non-verbal communicative agents, speaking through presence rather than dialogue. A carved deity, ancestral mask, or ritual totem can signal themes of authority, justice, or spiritual legitimacy thereby functioning as visual metaphors that activate layers of Yoruba cosmology embedded in collective memory.

From a creative standpoint, scholars such as Balogun (2023), Benson (2020), and Bolarinwa (2023) noted that visual objects in African cinema serve as dynamic cultural signifiers capable of educating, entertaining, and preserving Indigenous identity simultaneously. Sculptural props expand the visual vocabulary of film by enabling directors to integrate traditional aesthetics into contemporary storytelling. Their inclusion allows filmmakers to manipulate mood, intensify dramatic tension, and anchor fictional narratives within recognizably Yoruba symbolic landscapes. This aligns with broader arguments in African visual culture scholarship which maintain that artistic forms in African societies are inherently communicative, morally instructive, and spiritually resonant (Kalilu, 2019; Adeoti, 2023). Through such creative integration, sculptural props bridge traditional art with digital media, generating what media theorists describe as transmedia continuity the movement of cultural meaning across artistic platforms. Consequently, indigenous Yoruba films do not simply depict sculpture; they activate it within living cinematic worlds, transforming artworks into narrative catalysts, cultural texts, and semiotic resources that enrich filmic expression.

Need for Cultural Preservation through Application of Sculptural Props in Indigenous Yoruba Movies

The need to preserve sculptural heritage through film has become urgent amid rapid urbanisation, environmental degradation, and sociocultural disruptions across Nigeria. Scholars such as Adeyemi (2021) and Adebisi (2022) observed that many traditional sculptures in public spaces, shrines, and family compounds have been lost due to infrastructural expansion, gentrification, erosion, and the displacement of sacred sites. In addition, human activities—ranging from theft and illicit art trafficking to commercial exploitation pose

significant threats to the survival of these culturally important objects. In the face of such losses, indigenous Yoruba films provide an invaluable medium for capturing, preserving, and transmitting sculptural knowledge.

Cinema becomes a critical preservation tool because, as Kalilu (2021) argued, visual documentation extends the lifespan of artworks beyond their physical fragility. When sculptural forms are incorporated into Yoruba films, they are not merely represented but archived within a durable digital format, allowing future generations to access, study, and reinterpret them. This transformation of ephemeral or endangered material culture into stable, reproducible media aligns with Cultural Memory Theory, which emphasises that societies preserve memory through durable symbolic forms and mediated representations (Assmann, 2011). Thus, Yoruba filmmakers contribute not only to artistic production but also to the safeguarding of endangered heritage. Their films become dual-purpose artifacts simultaneously serving as entertainment and as repositories of cultural memory. Sculptural props therefore operate as memory stabilizers, ensuring that even when physical sculptures deteriorate or disappear, their aesthetic forms, ritual significances, and cultural meanings continue to circulate within public consciousness through cinema.

Significance of Documentation of Sculptural Props in Indigenous Yoruba Movies

Documentation of sculptural props within film is both a cultural imperative and a scholarly necessity. When sculptural artifacts appear in Yoruba cinema, they become part of a visual ethnographic record that preserves material forms, stylistic conventions, and symbolic codes for future research and cultural education. Ifeta and Olusola (2021) emphasised that systematic documentation and cataloguing are central to strengthening national heritage infrastructures, particularly in regions where physical artworks face risks of loss or displacement. From the perspective of media studies, digital film documentation contributes to what Erll (2011) described as the circulation of cultural memory through media technologies. Film captures not only the physical form of the sculpture but also its contextual use—its ritual functions, social meanings, and narrative symbolism. This multidimensional recording offers scholars, artists, and cultural institutions a richer understanding of Yoruba artistic epistemologies.

Moreover, scholars such as Akintonde (2023) and Awe (2023) argued that documentation of indigenous artworks through creative media supports the creative economy by promoting cultural tourism, art education, and scholarly engagement. By integrating sculptural props into filmic narratives and institutionalizing their scholarly indexing, Nigeria can build a sustainable visual archive that bridges art history, heritage studies, and film scholarship. Thus, the documentation of sculptural props in Yoruba cinema becomes a strategic mechanism for safeguarding cultural knowledge, enhancing academic inquiry, and strengthening national identity. It ensures that Yoruba sculptural traditions notwithstanding physical vulnerabilities—remain vibrant, visible, and intellectually accessible in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

Sculptural props are more than cinematic accessories: they are cultural texts, communicative symbols, and creative instruments of heritage documentation and preservation. As physical sculptures continue to face threats from urban development, environmental degradation, and human negligence, their documentation in indigenous Yoruba movies becomes an essential strategy for survival. In view of the rich historical and cultural preservation potentials of sculptural props, it is crucial that indigenous Yoruba filmmakers collaborate with sculptors, art historians, and cultural institutions to curate authentic sculptural props. Film schools and art departments should introduce interdisciplinary modules on 'Art in Cinema' to strengthen collaboration between visual artists and filmmakers. Government agencies, including the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), should support projects that integrate sculptural documentation into indigenous films. Researchers should establish databases that catalogue and analyse sculptural props used in Nigerian films as part of visual cultural archives. Continuous documentation through digital film production should be prioritised as a means of cultural preservation, economic growth, and creative innovation. Through these measures, Yoruba indigenous movies can transcend entertainment to become a living archive of Nigeria's sculptural and cultural legacy as well as serve as a bridge between the ancestral past and the digital future.

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