

Sacred Groves and Natural Sites Conservation for Tourism in Local Communities in Nigeria

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the potentials of sacred groves and natural sites in order to harness them for tourism in local communities of Nigeria. Three communities in Inyi town were chosen as case studies: Umuome, Enugwu-Inyi, and Alum, using a purposive sampling technique. An ethnographic data collection method was adopted which involves in-depth interviews and direct observation. Grove locations were located and mapped using a geographic information system (GIS) in the research area. The secondary data was obtained from scholarly journals, books, theses, etc. The findings showed that the sacred groves and natural sites had exceptional value for cultural and eco-tourism. Existing literature reveals that no study has investigated the tourism dimension of the sacred groves. The implication of the study is that tourism aids in the preservation of sites' integrity. It shields the sacred groves from deteriorating and going into extinction. While this research will help researchers at the universities and research institutions that are seeking to carry out related research, it is more important to the government in that it will help other policymakers adopt a policy that promotes tourism in the sacred groves. Finally, the study recommends that sacred groves should be utilized for tourism since it is a superior conservation alternative.

Keywords: Conservation; sacred groves; natural sites; heritage tourism; local communities

Introduction

Nature worship has been in human society since the dawn of time. A form of nature worship is the worship of sacred groves. In many religions, it is believed that nature is the dwelling place of gods. For instance, the Germans, Britons, Finns, and Celts worshipped under specific trees in their pre-Christian history (Sinthumule et al., 2021). The majority of the sacred groves are believed by the locals to house gods, which aid in the protection of the local people against various disasters. In "Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany," sacred groves are characterized as places of worship where all types of flora, including shrubs and climbers, are protected by the grove's presiding deity. Therefore, removing of any material, even dead wood from a twig, is forbidden (Monteiro & Dayanand, 2016). Many rare, endangered, and unique species have been saved as a result of the isolation of such forests (Gawade et al., 2018).

Sacred Groves form an attraction, both for the community and the area surrounding the community. Attractions are the main motivators for tourist trips and are the core of tourism products (Monteiro & Dayanand, 2016). Without attractions, other tourism services would not be required. In actuality, tourism would not have existed without attractions. Some studies have been conducted on the state of sacred groves and their management in Nigeria. These studies include the works of Nwankwo and Agboeze (2016) and Wahab et al. (2015). These scholars

looked at the safety issues and human activities of sacred groves. No work has studied the tourism dimension of the sacred groves in the study domain.

The researchers support their argument by examining the potential of the three sacred groves and how to harness them for tourism. Presently, the sites have not been developed for tourism. The sites have been neglected and abandoned by some people due to religious fanaticism, causing traditional beliefs to disintegrate. This put the groves on the verge of extinction. For effective management and conservation of the area, tourism is a choice. As a result, the researchers conducted a comprehensive study of the area in order to document and promote it for tourism. The research was guided by four research questions: (1) How are ownership and management practices implemented at the study sites? 2) What function do sacred groves serve in the destination areas? (3) What problems and challenges do the sacred groves encounter? (4) How tourist-friendly are the sacred groves and other natural areas? Investigating ownership and management practices, figuring out the sacred grove's importance to the host communities, examining the issues and challenges faced by the research sites, and assessing the possibilities for tourism at sacred groves and other natural areas are the goals of this study. Numerous suggestions for developing ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism in these locations have been offered. Government officials and policymakers benefit from these research findings. The study also aids the Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Authority in determining where to place the groves in the area's land use planning strategy. As a result, the way society views sacred groves changes. If it is planned for tourism, it helps the local economy by creating jobs and improving the quality of life of people in the area. One could use the documentation from the locales to compare the cultures of different areas.

Materials and methods of research

An ethnographic research method for data collection and a qualitative research approach were used. Ethnography deals with the study of the diversity of human cultures in their particular cultural settings. Qualitative is especially important in behavioural sciences, where the main objective is to discover the underlying motives of human behaviour (Monteiro & Dayanand, 2016). In-depth interviews and direct observation were the instruments used to obtain information. Residents of the three communities were interviewed in semi-structured, open-ended interviews. This makes the respondents react to questions asked with open-mindedness. Observational fieldwork was carried out in the Ajana, Isiugwu, and Iyingwe Sacred Groves to determine the natural features of the destinations and determine their potential for tourism. In each community, six people were interviewed, totalling eighteen people. The participants were in a conducive environment during the interviews, and the first author recorded their responses using a tape recorder and a notebook. Each interview lasted 45 minutes. All the recordings were transcribed, interpreted, and used for data analysis. Five key themes emerged from the interviews: a description of the sacred groves, their ownership and management practices, their importance to the communities, problems and challenges, and their characteristics for tourism. The key informant and snowball sampling methods were used to choose the interviewees. The snowball method entailed, first, discovering a sacred grove community, and then having community members accompany the researcher to the next sacred grove village (Poreku, 2014). Grove administrators (Chief Priest), community leaders, and grove committee members were key informants. In order to avoid gender prejudice, both men and women were chosen for the interview. These groups of people were familiar with the sacred groves under investigation because the majority were grove devotees. Host community members with various occupations were sought to provide a variety of perspectives. Teachers, farmers, artists, and herbalists were among the participants. Informants were asked for their consent before they were interviewed, and they were informed about the aim and scope of the research.

Respondents were promised that their participation was voluntary and that their contributions would not be revealed to anyone. During the fieldwork, photographs were taken and the location/coordinates were obtained using a GPS device. The investigation was carried out in two phases: February to May 2021, was for the identification of the sacred groves while September to November 2021, was the main interview process. Secondary sources include scholarly publications and articles on the study theme.

The research was conducted in Inyi of the Oji River Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. Inyi is about 20 kilometres from Oji Urban, 41 kilometres north-east of Enugu, and 68 kilometres west of Onitsha. Other towns in the area include Achi, Awlaw, Akpugoeze, and Ugwuoba. The population of the study area is 126,587, according to the 2006 Nigerian census. The town has an area of approximately 110 square kilometres. It is made up of nine (nine) communities, which include Amankwo, Obule, Enugwu-Inyi, Alum, Agbariji, Umuagu, Akwu, Nkwere, and Umuome (see fig 1). Inyi has a favourable climate for farming. It is blessed with numerous rivers and streams. Inyi had a long reputation for two main crafts: carving and pottery. The crafts are extensively used during festivals as souvenirs as well as for household utensils. In terms of religion, most of the residents in the study area are Christians and a few follow African Traditional Religion (ATR).

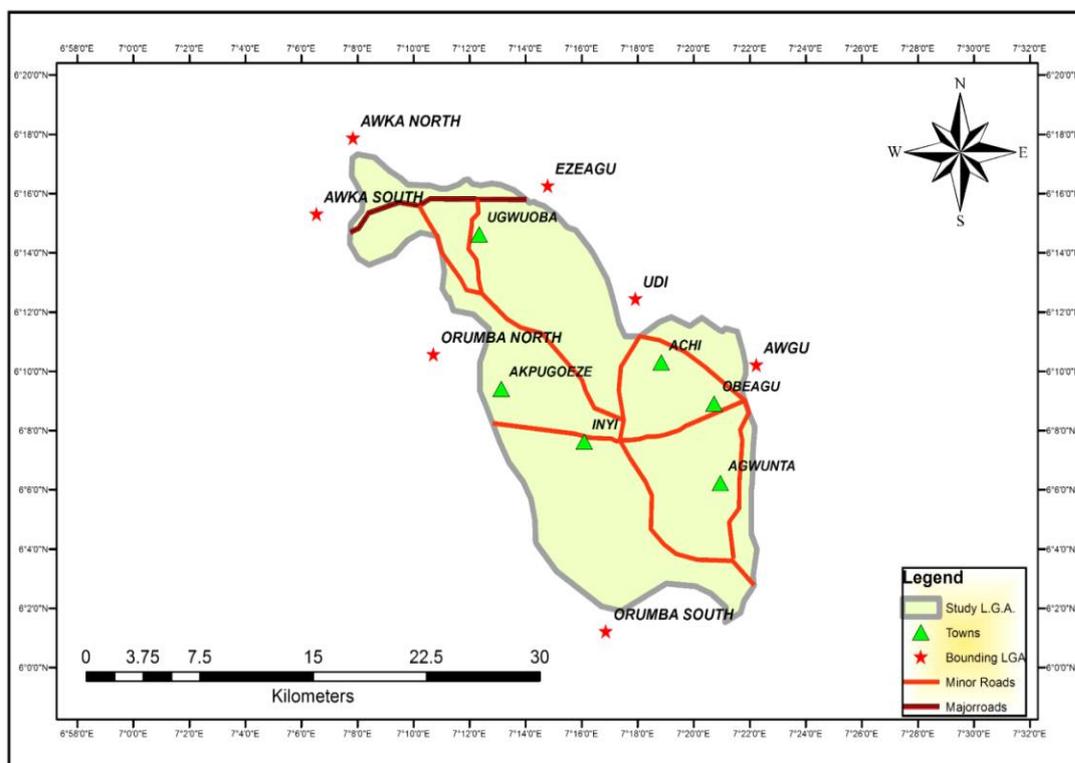


Figure 1: Map of Oji River Local Government Area Showing the Study Area, Inyi
Source: Researchers Fieldwork, 2021

Literature review

The section reviewed works by scholars on sacred groves and their characteristics. Secondly, tourism contributes to the sacred groves' preservation and development.

Sacred Groves and their characteristics

Religious and traditional beliefs, cultural mores, and behaviours all contribute to environmental and biodiversity conservation, which makes them reserve certain areas of nature's landscape

as sacred groves (Singh et al., 2017). Sacred groves can be traced back to hunter-gatherer societies, which saw the environment as an inextricable element of their lives (Monteiro & Dayanand, 2016). According to Oyelowo et al. (2014), a sacred grove is a forest in which villagers perform some rituals to communicate with the spirits and ancestors. It is home to a variety of creatures who seek refuge in the forests (Jagdale, 2021). Evidence shows that sacred groves in Ghana act as reservoirs in the conservation of some important fauna groups and/or species across a landscape matrix that is largely devoid of forest habitat (Nganso et al., 2012). Sacred groves are forest tracts where there is no human interference in the form of deforestation, so the vegetation is intact (Wahu, 2017). Many religions believed that nature was where gods lived. For instance, the Germans, Britons, Finns, and Celts worshipped under specific trees in their pre-Christian history. Similarly, the Hindus, the Shintoists, the Maris, and several cultures around the globe practice their religions (Sinthumule et al., 2021). They regarded extreme weather events like rain, thunderstorms, floods, heat waves, etc. as gods or ultimate powers and were terrified of them (Jagdale, 2021). In order to appease the divine power, people started to worship in the forest lands and to build or designate trees as holy. Jagdale (2021) claims that this idea of designating a tree as holy or a region of forest land as holy progressively gave rise to sacred groves. Trees are universally powerful symbols of physical expression of life, growth, and vigour for urban, rural, and forest dwellers alike (Nlemuonwu et al., 2022).

A wider category of sacred sites may also include human-built structures or monuments (such as temples) (Verschuuren & Furuta, 2016). All over the world, sacred groves occur in form of different features and scales for example pilgrimage routes, waterfalls, a single rock, tree, springs, entire mountain ranges, lakes, forest patches and caves. Some are sources of rivers and streams that can be accessed by members of the community. Kenya's Hurri Hills in Marsabit is an example of this scenario (Wahu, 2017).

Sacredness, religious beliefs, and taboos all contribute to the long-term use and conservation of the area's flora and fauna (Khan et al., 2008). Sinthumule et al. (2021) assert that taboos, cultural rules, and the fear of supernatural punishments have traditionally served as cultural codes for human perceptions of sacred natural sites. Khan et al. (2008) note that every sacred natural site has its own unique myths, lore, and legends attached to it, and this makes it distinct. Tiimub et al. (2021) revealed in their study that some community sacred groves have bylaws for their protection, while others depend on the authority of the traditional elders for the protection and conservation of their unique biodiversity. For Nganso et al. (2012), sacred groves and natural sites are maintained through traditional institutions that sometimes do not require governmental involvement.

Mgumia and Oba (2003) highlight the significance of the sacred forests to the national economy and even to the health sector, where health facilities are far away and the only source of medicine is the sacred forests. Sacred groves benefit the neighbourhood both directly and indirectly, which explains why they are preserved (Rutte, 2018). First, sacred groves are a fundamental component of the cultural and traditional beliefs practised by the local communities (Adesiji & Babalola, 2012). Secondly, it offers a feeling of place-based relationships forged over centuries (Liljeblad & Verschuuren, 2019). Finally, holy groves could benefit economies and household food security (Oyelowo et al., 2014).

However, Ezekwe et al. (2015) contend that sacred groves are gradually fading out as a result of recent modernization efforts, people's changing aspirations, conflicts among sacred grove managers, etc. Nonetheless, sacred groves remain untouched due to their sacredness, and this makes them rich reserves of biodiversity, with various aspects of religious, cultural, and indigenous practices as well as taboos (Khan et al., 2008; Garg, 2013). Serious punishments were imposed on anyone who damaged the sacred forests, and it was regarded more serious

than being taken to a modern court of law (Sheridan, 2009). In most cases, the entire community serves as a watchdog to prevent encroachment and illegal admission to the sacred place, either by its members or visitors as to avoid desecration, (Adeyanju et al., 2021).

Sacred Groves and tourism development

The term "tour" comes from the Latin word "tornus," which means "a method for creating a circle." Tourism is also a collection of activities performed by a person or a group of people who travel to a location outside of their normal environment for less than a year and whose primary purpose of travel is not to engage in a compensated activity within the destination (Napoleon, 2021). It is the sum of the phenomena and the relationships arising from the travel and stay of non-residents, so long as it does not lead to permanent and is not connected to any cash-earning activity by the travellers (McGuigan, 2018). Tourism is the most effective way of conserving the sacred groves as it offers additional protection. It is encouraging that sacred groves could be conserved as parks, natural gardens, eco- or cultural tourist attractions. This helps to preserve their biodiversity, offer a place for merriment, and yield money to the locals (Bicknell et al., 2017).

The sacred groves in the study area could be conserved for eco and cultural tourism. Ecotourism is a component of natural resource management through creating diversified livelihoods for local people (Dejene et al., 2014). They noted that ecotourism generates income for local communities while conservation goals of protected areas are achieved. Cultural tourism has increased people's awareness of sacred trees, which has led to chances for both individuals and governments to make money (Adeyanju et al., 2021). Zaei and Zaei (2013) assert that a significant portion of the teeming millions of unemployed Nigerians could be absorbed by the tourism industry.

Tourism planning requires sustainability because its growth usually brings increasing pressure on the natural, cultural, and socio-economic environments of the destination (Monisola, 2012). One of the important economic features of the tourism industry is that the income earned in places of residence is spent in places "visited" (Holloway & Robinson, 1995). For Ormsby (2012), tourism offers individuals an alternative and/or supplemental means of living, which encourages them to conserve resources. Tourists are attracted to the cultural elements found in sacred groves and shrines. Russell E. Brayley, in his paper titled "Managing Sacred Sites for Tourism: A Case Study of Visitor Facilities in Palmyra, New York," states that tourists are attracted to sacred sites by curiosity and by devotion (Brayley, 2010). The curious onlookers are drawn by a desire to see something different. Devotees or pilgrims to sacred sites are attracted by a sense of obligation, a desire to boost their faith or spiritual understanding. Whatever be their reasons for visiting a sacred site, tourists and pilgrims both need services, and from that need is born the potential for economic development in the community wherein the sacred attraction is located.

Tourist facilities, which include a variety of basic traveller services and interpretive facilities, can both contribute to making the sacred site experience meaningful to the visitor and enhance the host community's economic base "(Brayley, 2010). Many people visit Nigeria's sacred places in search of esoteric treatments for issues including strange ailments, homelessness, unemployment, and infertility (Yusuf, 2016). An example is the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in southwest Nigeria. While it is admittedly one of the most renowned sacred groves in the country, little attention has been given to lesser-known sacred places (Osegale et al., 2014). In Osun State, cultural sites have contributed immensely to economic and cultural growth (Gbadegesin & Oseghale, 2015). Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, for example, is a key component of the National Tourism Development Master Plan, which was created in collaboration with the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the

United Nations Development Program (UNDP). (Gbadegesin & Oseghale, 2015). The Grove will also serve as a representation of African heritage that upholds the moral principles shared by the entire Yoruba race. Ubiniukpabi grove, which is affiliated with Chukwu shrine in Arochukwu, Abia State; Ohia-Udowerre sacred grove in Ndiowu; and Okija shrine in Ihiala, Anambra State; are among the other important sacred sites. These areas have attracted both local and international tourists.

The Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove and Idanre Hills are both well-known tourist attractions. Each year, thousands of tourists and pilgrims attend OOSG's Osun festival. With government and corporate support, particularly from top communications and brewing businesses, this worldwide festival has grown to be a multi-million dollar event (Ogundiran, 2014). The annual visitor turnout at the Orosun event in Idanre Hills varied from 600 to 8,700 people between 2005 and 2013 (Adigun et al., 2016). Since 2009, the state government has pushed ecotourism in the Idanre Hills grove by hosting the "Mare Festival," an international mountaineering, musical, and cultural festival. The yearly celebration supports the Idanre people's culture and tradition while also raising awareness of the grove and bringing in more visitors (Adigun et al., 2016). According to Onyekwelu and Olusola (2014), economic incentives such as job growth, tourism, and income production support local communities' desire to safeguard and preserve sacred forests.

Tourism represents a possible benefit to groves through recognition and valuing of the site that can lead to funding and conservation support (Ormsby, 2012). In Ghana, for instance, the UNESCO-CIPSEG Project created the sacred Kpalvogu grove as an ecotourism destination (Ziegler, 2019). The ultimate purpose why specialists from the Ghana Tourism Authority assess sacred groves' potential is to develop and make them desirable tourist destinations and then maximize the prospects generated from them (Osei-Bonsu, 2016). The Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (BFMS) and Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary Grove and Cultural Village, both located in Ghana, are visited by tourists Mawphlang, Mawsmal, and Lalong in India also form part of the long list of sacred groves that have become tourist attractions (Ormsby, 2012). Monteiro and Dayanand (2016) note that the performance of ceremonies and events in these sacred groves attracts tourists and visitors. The number of annual visitors, the size of the sacred grove, and the manner of site administration signify different stages of tourist growth. In 2005, Tafi Atome attracted 1,820 foreigners and 1,030 Ghanaians (Ormsby, 2012). BFMS received 150 tourists in 1991, nearly 6,500 tourists in 2002 (Densu, 2003; Fargey, 1992), and more than 14,000 visitors in 2007 (Kankam et al., 2010). There has been a consistent increase in the number of visitors to BMFS, more than 18,000 in recent years (Badiella-Giménez, 2015). Visitors to BFMS have the opportunity to enjoy close-up views of free-ranging primates, especially some of the Lowe's monkeys, who sometimes move around the villages looking for human food (Badiella-giménez et al., 2021). In Tafi Atome, tourist revenue is handled fairly, with some going to the community and the rest to the sanctuary visitor's centre (Ormsby, 2012).

Thus, sacred groves and natural sites provide a wonderful avenue for ensuring biodiversity conservation through community participation and tourism promotion. Sheridan (2009) notes that the establishment of sacred groves as potential tourist destinations could help the government to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study area is not an anomaly, so the Nigeria Tourism Authority should use these tactics to preserve the sacred grove tradition for tourism. In Nigeria, the major challenges to tourism development are security, infrastructural amenities, promotion and awareness, funding and financing, attitude and destination image. Infrastructures such as road networks and various modes of transportation, international and domestic airports, telecommunication and internet access, tour guides, effective road signs and symbols, hotel accommodation and other ancillary services, and

perceived destination image, for example, all have a positive relationship with overall tourism performance (Ndanusa et al., 2014).

For Nigeria today, these essential requirements are lacking or in bad condition. Additionally, there is a sharp decline in the security of life and property. Instances of armed robbery, kidnapping, assassination, suicide bombing, and other related crimes obviously have a detrimental effect on tourism, notably on tourist satisfaction and repeat visits (Johnson, 2001). All parts of Nigeria are facing one form of security challenge or the other, ranging from kidnapping in the East; hostage-taking in the South-South; armed robbery in the West; and Boko Haram terrorism in the North (Ndanusa et al., 2014). The government of Nigeria is only paying lip service to the issue of tourism development. There is no commensurable commitment in terms of the enabling environment and direct investment in the sector. Tourist facilities, which include a variety of basic traveller services and interpretive facilities, can both contribute to making the sacred site experience meaningful to the visitor and enhance the host community's economic base (Monteiro & Dayanand, 2016).

In Nigeria, tourism-specific factors that inhibit growth and development are the dearth of synergy among the various stakeholders in the industry and the absence of reasonable engagement with tourism destinations by Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) (Okure, 2021). Destination management organizations (DMO) ensure the lessening of tourism's negative impacts on the environment and local communities as well as the sharing of opportunities for a vibrant exchange among people (Okure, 2021). Okure (2021) notes that there are no strong DMOs in Nigeria's domestic tourism at the moment. It can be argued that there is a very weak culture of tourism in Nigeria. No tourism destination can be sustainable and competitive in the long term without vocal and practical input from the local communities and residents in its tourism planning and management. Stakeholders' involvement is vital not only in tourism destination management but in tourism destination marketing as well (Paresashvili & Maisuradze, 2016). This way, a culture of tourism can be created right from the local community level.

Findings and discussion

The results were gotten through an ethnographic method using in-depth interviews which involved key informants and direct observation during the fieldwork in 2021 and 2022. The observational fieldwork showed that each sacred grove is situated at the community's entrance, with a large village square.

Naming the groves and ownership

An interview with the respondents revealed that each sacred grove is described in line with the deity's residence in it. In the Inyi dialect, the deity is referred to as "*Aronshi*", the shrine is referred to as "*Ulo Aronshi*" (meaning house of the deity), and the sacred grove is referred to as "*Ohia Aronshi*" (meaning forest of the deity). Thus, the sacred groves studied were "*Ohia Aronshi Ajana* (Ajana Sacred Grove), *Ohia Aronshi Isiugwu* (Isiugwu Sacred Grove), and *Ohia Aronshi Iyingwe* (Iyingwe Sacred Grove). The host communities held that the deities were the ancestors' spirits who had been sent to act as their protectors and god's intermediaries. For them, the sacred grove serves as the home of the god-like deity. According to the responses, the sacred groves are owned by the locals and held in trust by the Chief Priest. Thus, they are community property.

Description of the Scared Groves

Ajana Sacred Grove

The Ajana Sacred Grove is the headquarters of all the sacred groves and shrines in Inyi. It is owned by the entire Inyi community and is located in the Umuome community. Ajana means "earth mother" in control of the affairs of Inyi town. It is located at latitude 06.1268635"N and longitude 007.297355"E. Physically, Ajana Shrine was represented by the Akpu tree (Cotton Tree) (*Ceiba Pentandra*) (L.) Gaertn. The Chief Priest of the Ajana deity is Chief Emmanuel Ndibe Onwe, fondly called "Eze Ajana". Before the call, he was a businessman who resided in Lagos. The grove is about 50 sq km and 3 km from the Nkwo Inyi Market centre. A tarred road leading to Achi town cuts across the Ajana sacred grove. Another road beside Ishi Ajana leads to Umujiana Community. It is accessible by road. The sacred grove has three major sections, which include Obu Ajana, Okpu ofo, and Ishi Ajana. Minor ones were *Aro Ajana*, *Agwu*, *Uru Agwu*, *Okoro Ajana*, *Ngwu*, *Ngene*, and *Ndichie*. Sacrifices are performed in these sections as directed by the deity through the Chief Priest. *Obu Ajana* is the reception place where Eze Ajana hosts meetings and receives visitors. It hosts *Osu Ajana* (effigies; see fig 2), which represents human sacrifice done by the nine communities in Inyi. An effigy is a crude representation of a person, group, or object. The effigies are carved in human figures. Some wore caps, cloth stripes, tie wrappers, and had wooden guns, ofo, and matchets (see figure 2). Animal skins of antelope, goat, lion, and cow and *ofo* sticks were hung there. "*Ishi Ajana*" was demarcated with woven palm fronds and a strip of coloured clothes (yellow, red, and white) signifying sacredness. *Okpu Ofo* is where the *Ofo* tree (*Detarium Senegalense*) is. The *Ofo* stick, when collected and consecrated by the Chief Priest, is a symbol of authority. By observation, I saw pottery products like bowls, pots, and body sherds in *Uru Agwu*. These items, according to the Chief Priest, were used in feeding the gods.

The Ajana sacred grove village square is called *Ezi Ocha* with *Ikoru Ajana* at the centre (see fig 3). *Ikoru* is a big native wooden cultural gong, carved on demand by the god. It is for communication. The grove hosts a lot of plant and animal species. The Python (*Pythonidea*) and the tortoise (*Testudinidae*) were regarded as totem animals in the Ajana sacred groves. Presently, the grove is managed by local laws and taboos. A festival is celebrated annually in October in honour of Ajana.



Figure 2: *Osu Ajana* (nine effigies) (Photo taken by the first author in September, 2021)
Source: Researchers Fieldwork, 2021



Figure 3: Ikorogong (Photo taken by the first author in September, 2021)
Source: Researchers Fieldwork, 2021

Isiugwu Sacred Grove

Isiugwu sacred grove is situated in Umuola Enugwu-Inyi. The Chief Priest is Mr Cyril Agwuna, who was a resigned primary school teacher. The grove is located at the latitude of 06.120815°N and longitude of 007.300985°E. The sections of the deities were *Ekwo Omumu*, *Agwu*, *Ngwu*, *Ngene*, and *Ajana*. These sections have functions and different sacrifices are performed by the Chief Priest. For instance, "*Ekwo Omumu*," according to an interview with the Chief Priest, is a place where women seeking the fruit of the womb perform sacrifices. If the woman conceives and gives birth, the child is named "*Udekwo*," which means that Ekwo the deity answered their prayers. Tortoise (Testudinidae), python (Pythonidea), black ash-coloured snake (Orime akpu), and cobra (Serpentes) were the totem animals. The area is managed through local laws and taboos. A festival is celebrated in honour of the Isiugwu deity annually in October after three native weeks of the Ajana festival. The celebration lasts for four days.

Iyingwe Sacred Grove

The Iyingwe sacred grove is home to the chief shrine in Alum Inyi. This is the largest of all the sacred groves because it's a bit out of the village. The Chief Priest is Ezi Roland Atuadu, who was inaugurated in 2021 to replace the late Chief Anyagbakoba, who died in January 2019. The shrine was represented by "*Ube Mgba*" (*Canarium schweinfurthi*) and the Ogirisi tree (castor oil bean) (*Ricinus communis*). The main grove is in Umuachaogu village, located at the latitude of 06.113678°N and the longitude of 007.284433°E. A branch is in Umuochie village square. The Chief Priest comes from the community. This branch section is called *Agwu ukwu* deity or *Odundu nla Iyingwe* and is located at the latitude of 06.11774°N and the longitude of 007.28877°E.

The sacred grove of Iyingwe has three streams: Nwaomaocha, Ike Nwoko, and Nwoko. These streams were practically worshipped by the host community. From Nwoko and *Nwaomaocha* streams, tap water was circulated to the entire village. Nobody kills the aquatic animals in the streams. Anybody that does that must perform a sacrifice to the deity or faces his wrath.

Iyingwe Grove has a Monkey Sanctuary that has Mono monkeys (*Cercopithecus Mono*). They are black and white in colour, with red lips and bare buttocks. The Inyi people call it "*Enwe Ike Nzu*". In Iyingwe grove, mono monkeys, tortoises, alligators, and pythons were totem animals. Part of the area is swampy and grows thousands of raphia palms. Palm

wine tappers go to the grove to tap palm wine with permission. Cultural materials were found inside the grove, which included potsherds and body sherds. The Iyingwe festivals come in two seasons. "*Iyingwe Okochi*" (dry season) and "*Iyingwe Udummiri*" (wet season). The place is managed by traditional laws and taboos. Some vegetables, economic trees, and medicinal plants are found in the three sacred groves.

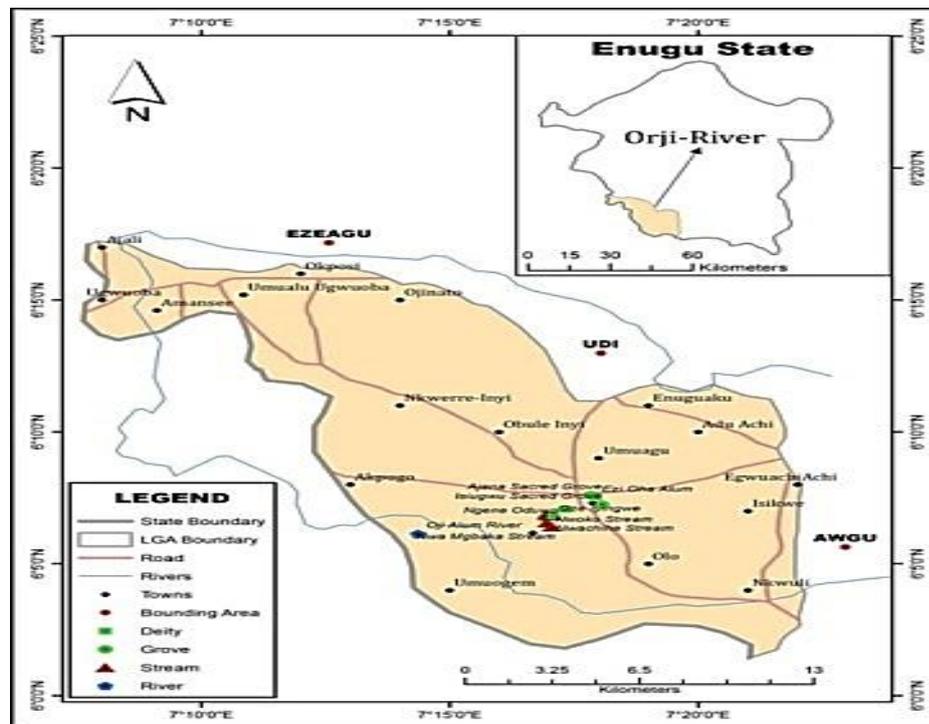


Figure 4: Map showing the location of the three Sacred Groves
 Source: Researcher's Fieldwork 2021

Management practices

In-depth interviews show that in the study area, the traditional laws and taboos aid in the administration of the three sacred groves as the way forward for sustainable management of ecotourism and cultural tourism resources. The leaves and fruits could be collected by local people but no harm should be done like uprooting them, said the respondents. Taboos played an important role in local resource management and conservation in sacred natural sites in Uttarakhand and the Central Himalaya (Negi, 2010). Ormsby (2013) also notes that traditional rules support conservation by limiting activities within sacred forests.

The extraction of forest resources in the groves and their environment is prohibited, especially timber exploitation. For instance, the defaulters pay a fine of N100, 000.00 and still meet the Chief Priest for cleansing. The mature trees are cut with authorization to build a community hall (*obu*), but not for personal gain. This is consistent with Jagdale (2021)'s findings, which note that until the trees are necessary for religious activities, including temple construction and maintenance, worship, funeral rituals, and temple rites, sacred trees are not felled or hacked. The respondents revealed that the erection of electric poles and power lines that lead to the cutting of tall trees in the sacred groves is done with permission and after offering sacrifice to the gods. In the same vein, some species are protected by totemic belief. This was in agreement with the study of Onyekwelu & Olusola (2014), which asserts that

species protection is secured using taboos, religious beliefs, or by dedicating the species to one or more deities.

The local people revealed that deities are offered cows, goats, sheep, and chickens as living sacrifices. They scavenge the sacred sites and villages. The community believed these animals were used in exchange for human sacrifice to the deity. For instance, the Umuome community has a village called *Umuaronshi* (people dedicated to the Ajana deity). For instance, the Umuome community includes the Umuaronshi village (people dedicated to the Ajana deity). The community was established as a result of the ancient practice of offering their ancestors as sacrifices to the Ajana deity. The local people believed that the totem animals in the groves were protected as the reincarnates of their forefathers (ancestors). Thus, they were messengers to the gods. They also believed that some people have the ability to change into these animals. The killing of totem animals and living sacrifices are forbidden. If this occurs, you must bury them as human beings. When the totem animals, especially the Mona monkey, approach their homestead, they hail them, calling them exalted names like "*Papa Nnukwu*" or "*Nnam Ochie*" (meaning our ancestors). The respondents also mentioned that small animals like squirrels and birds could be hunted within the buffer zones.

According to the responses, designating Eke Day (the second native day) as a special day for the deity's worship by the devotees is another management strategy in the sacred groves. Women among the worshipers assist in keeping the reception area tidy every early morning. From 4:00 p.m. on Nkwo day till the whole of Eke day, it is forbidden to fetch water from Iyingwe streams. It was taboo to kill any aquatic animals like fish, reptiles, etc. People enter the streams barefoot. Using the sacred groves as toilets and entering with a torch at night are forbidden.

From the ethnographic interview, it appears that in the three sacred groves, only men consult the gods on behalf of the people. Men act as mediators between the people and their ancestors. An interview revealed that women are not appointed as Chief Priests by the gods. When pressed further, they stated that women were the weaker sex to act as their mouthpiece. One of the elderly women interviewed said, "We cannot consult the gods directly; we have to pass our problems through our husbands." Women in their menstrual cycle do not visit the sacred groves, even to fetch water from the streams. Moreover, visitors and tourists are not allowed to access the grove without permission from the Chief Priests. This is because they have to direct them on the terrain so that they will follow the rules guiding the groves. The Chief Priests serve as the grove's forest guides. Some visitors who come to consult the deity are accompanied by the Chief Priest to make offerings depending on the kind of issue being addressed. There are no offerings made to the deity by visitors or tourists who only come for sightseeing. Tourists and researchers were allowed to take pictures inside the groves during the festivals. For the locals, death awaits anyone that violates the taboos, restrictions, and by-laws.

The importance of the Sacred Groves

The findings of the study reveal the importance of the sacred groves. From an ecological standpoint, sacred groves in the study area act as natural habitats for biological variety. They harbour varieties of medicinal plants, economic trees, fruits, fodder, fuel wood, spices, etc. They are regarded as scenic areas that provide pleasure to tourists and visitors. Tourists see varieties of birds, and their cries and sounds bring the soul closer to nature. Thus, bird watching is available in the study area. Protected areas provide a breeding ground for birds that control insects and mammal pests on farmland (Tiimub et al., 2020). Animal species like giant squirrels, which have disappeared from most parts of the communities, are found in Ajana and Iyingwe sacred groves. The protection of animals as totems and living sacrifices displays the

culture of the Inyi people. The ecological benefit remains that these animals are indirectly prevented from going into extinction. The ecological implications of these practices rest mainly on environmental protection and conservation. The conversion of a portion of land as sacred by the community shows that the environment influences their worldview. A notable illustration of how ecology has influenced the Inyi people's philosophy is the widespread practice of using *oku* (earthen objects) to feed the gods.

Waterbodies in the Iyingwe Sacred Grove provide environmental stabilization and sanitization. Aquatic plants and animals can survive well in streams. African pepper (*Piper guineense*) and *utazi* (*Goncronema latifolium*) leaves cover the entire area like carpet grass. When cooking, these leaves are used as veggies and seasonings. The communities and surroundings as a whole get their drinking water from the streams. The government distributes the stream as tap water to the villages using subterranean pipelines. Thus, community development is encouraged.

The sacred groves are home to medicinal plants that have major uses in both contemporary pharmacopoeia and primary healthcare for village people. Herbalists gather therapeutic plants from the sacred groves and use them to treat patients, earning a living in the process. The sacred groves' resources help to increase local income, thereby raising their standard of living. Palm wine tappers tap palm wine from *Raphia* palms in Iyingwe Sacred Groves, which they sell in the Nkwo Inyi market. People travel from different places to buy authentic and unadulterated palm wine from the Nkwo Inyi market. Lovers of fresh palm wine also get sorted out under a cool canopied shed in the town. Women harvest a large number of marketable fruits and vegetables from fruit trees. The fieldwork shows that Inyi people are good at producing traditional crafts like local mats, hand fans, woven bags, and carved wooden mortar and pestle. The raw materials for the craft are got from the forest's resources. You can buy handcrafted goods while you stroll through the village. To generate revenue for the producers, they are sold on the market. This aids in reducing poverty and preserving the Inyi people's way of life.

The sacred groves in the study area are home to gods who serve as intermediaries between humans and God. Offerings are made to the gods through the shrines, which are tangible representations of them. The respondents are of the opinion that the deities are for the well-being of the communities, families, and individuals. This was evident in setting aside a special day of the week (Eke day) for the worship of the deities. The artefacts discovered in the shrines amid the groves illustrate how nature and religion interact. The types of animals used for sacrifice are identified by hung animal skins at Ajana's reception area. Seeing these objects is fascinating for tourists.

Culturally, the sacred groves provide cultural space to the communities as a common property resource. During festival events, communities renew their covenant with the deities, thanking God for the bountiful farm harvest and protection throughout the year. The festivals are held at each village square. An interview section revealed that on the morning of the festival celebration, the Chief Priest performs sacrifices to the gods and prays for the people. In the afternoon, he moves to the arena (village square) for celebration with his entourage, making melodious music from a drum he plays. The festivals draw the sons and daughters of the land home. It is always a glorious and groovy moment as there are lots of activities that feed the tourists' eyes. There is a masquerade display, a dancing troupe performance, and an exchange of gifts. During the festival, craftsmen display their crafts at the festival venue. Tourists and visitors buy the products as souvenirs, which when taken home remind them of such a visit. People make sales of their farm produce, thereby increasing the local income.

By observation, the local meals prepared during the festivals include tapioca (*ncha*), porridge cocoyam food (*achicha ede*), and *fufu* with *oha* soup. Most tourists and guests who

have eaten Inyi tapioca meals for the first time agree that it has the best flavour and aroma all at once. On the occasion, part of the food is offered to the god by the Chief Priest before being served to the visitors and tourists. No serious farm work is done during the festival season. Men come out with special apparel and women take time to decorate their bodies with *uli* (indigo dye). The youths and children dress in good-looking clothes. At times, marriage proposals are made during the season as people look different and beautiful.

The sacred groves are ideal sites for students and researchers, especially those in forestry and natural resource studies. Teachers take school children to the area for educational purposes. Psychologically, the place inspires people as they enjoy the serene nature of the groves. It is medicine for a wounded soul because of its cool and quiet nature. Tourists have the opportunity to commune with nature.

Problems and challenges facing the Sacred Groves

The sacred groves were faced with some problems and challenges, which were discussed as follows:

Encroachment and modernization: There is evidence of progressive encroachment within the three sacred groves. This could be as a result of agriculture, grazing pressure from a growing livestock population, fuel wood exploitation and modernization. Towns were sparsely populated in the past and there was plenty of space for farming. However, as the population has grown, people require more land to farm. The respondents show that the three sacred groves have shrunk in size, indicating that customary regulations governing the area are eroding or that people place less value on the area. The respondents revealed that during the dry season, numerous uncontrolled bushfires enter parts of the sacred groves. Using bushfires to clear land for cultivation and animal hunting near sacred groves is not acceptable to the local people. Offenders are made to pay a fine when caught.

Sneaking to collect forest resources puts pressure on the area. Many people have been caught timber-logging without permission. Some people debark and remove the roots of plants. This study agrees with Ezekwe et al. (2015) that one of the reasons why people invade sacred forests is poverty. This is in line with the findings of Oyelowo et al. (2014), who postulated that poverty in south-western Nigeria is an unfortunate circumstance that makes it impossible for sacred groves to thrive and be maintained. They assert that poor people who live adjacent to sacred trees would be compelled to loot the groves' resources in order to meet their fundamental household needs, such as fuel wood, vegetables, medicinal plants, etc.

Urbanization causes the disappearance of these sacred groves. This supports the finding from the study by Ezekwe et al. (2015) and Ormsby (2013) that urbanization is another cause of people encroaching on sacred groves. The researchers observed that farmlands and residential buildings were close to the Ajana and Isiugwu Sacred Groves. The three sacred groves were split during the investigation as a result of walkways, roads, and power line extensions. For instance, the Achi-Inyi tarred road demarcates Ajana Sacred Grove into two.

The absence of clear boundary and signboard: The grove's lack of a clear boundary affects the management of the area. The respondents said that the boundary is only known by the devotees and a few community members. There is no signboard showing the direction of the groves.

Lack of safety and security measures: In some parts of the groves, the terrain is too bushy. This made some tourists nervous about visiting the groves. The living sacrifices are a menace to entire host communities and the groves since they can enter people's farms in search of food. During the dry season, the only supply of water is the streams, so they drink from them, contaminating the water and making it dangerous for humans to drink. There is a total lack of security officials, like the vigilante groups to secure the lives of people and property.

Shift in belief system: In an interview section with community leaders, a shift in aims has resulted in a complete lack of cooperation among community members. In the study area, the belief in a new religion, Christianity, has made the management of the area porous. To them, the traditional belief system is a fetish and mere superstition. According to the study by Nlemuonwu et al. (2022), the spread of new faiths, primarily born-again "Christianity," is the biggest threat to sacred groves. Nlemuonwu et al. (2022), assert that the community's sacred grove was destroyed by religious extremists who believed that their destiny was tied to the trees there. This was consistent with the findings of Chima et al. (2009) in the district of Ohaji West in South Eastern Nigeria, where religious fanatics had felled sacred trees on the pretext that the groves held the key to the youth's destinies.

Lack of promotion and documentation: The lack of a promotional campaign on the culture of the study area has caused the dwindling of the sacred groves. As a result, the institution of sacred groves is losing its cultural importance for the younger generations. The modern educational system fails to instil respect for local traditions. No records of tourists or other visits to the sacred groves exist. People move in and out without any form of documentation of their visit.

Absence of tourist facilities: There is an absence of tourist facilities within the area of the sacred groves. However, Inyi town has infrastructural facilities that can keep tourists.

Conserving the potentials of the Sacred Groves for tourism

From the findings, the area studied promotes conservation in spite of the challenges. Apart from traditional laws and taboos that help to keep the groves, tourism is another option that could safeguard the area from going into extinction. Two sacred groves, Ajana and Iyingwe, encourage cultural and eco-tourism. Isiugwu encourages cultural heritage tourism. These were service sectors that could generate significant economic activity in the study area. Ecotourism helps in community development by providing an alternate source of livelihood to the local community, which is more sustainable. Cultural tourism creates an avenue for tourists to visit and witness the cultures of a destination in another area of interest. Tourism helps to rehabilitate and preserve the sacred groves and their cultural resources and values. The groves' flora and wildlife, religious rites, worship centres, the Mona monkey sanctuary, cool, cold water streams, aquatic animals, cultural objects, evergreen foliage, the groves' history, and festivals add to tourism potential of the locations.

The tourism potential of sacred groves is unique in that they could absorb visitation. Harnessing them as tourist products is a good idea. Tourism is the most effective way of conserving the sacred groves as it offers additional protection. Apart from the potential, there are factors that help tourism thrive in the study area. The sacred groves are known beyond Inyi town and are situated within the centre of Inyi town and close to urban centres such as Oji, Enugu and Anambra urban areas. An international tourist boarded an aircraft from Lagos to Enugu airport, then drives to Inyi town.

This is consistent with Okpoko et al.'s (2008) "Understanding Tourism." They emphasized the factors that influence the choice of potential tourism resources for development. They are as follows: a) they must be known beyond the host or local community, b) they provide experiences that can be consumed, c) they are unique and interesting, d) they are robust and, therefore, can absorb visitation, e) they are accessible f) and they are close to a large population or a major tourism destination or gateway to a major city or cities. The findings showed that the sacred groves in the study area met these requirements.

However, the respondents agreed that the history of each grove depicts the reality of the area under investigation from a wider perspective. Tourists enjoy the stories and, sometimes, bring a tape recorder to record them. The documentation could be used in

comparing such cultures with other cultures. The artefacts and cultural materials found in the study domain attract the curiosity of tourists. Some tourists have a chance of seeing the "Ofo" tree, which is very rare in Igboland and was only identified at Ajana grove.

The sacred groves are seen as a natural zoo, which attracts tourists from far and near. The respondents also posited that the floral diversity components of these sacred groves attract tourists or researchers. This broadens their understanding. The grove deities are consulted by both the indigenes and non-indigenes. Visitors and tourists flock to the monkey sanctuary, whose species, *Cercopithecus mona mona*, was discovered in the Iyingwe sacred grove in Alum Inyi. The killing of any of them attracts severe consequences from the gods. By observation, the mother monkeys carry their young ones on their bellies. Tourists take delight in watching these monkeys and the entire groves. Tourists enjoy seeing a variety of birds. In Iyingwe sacred groves, the aquatic animals from the water bodies satisfy tourists' eyes. With the approval of the Chief Priest, tourists were allowed to take some fruits home with them as a reminder and evidence of their visit. The uniqueness of flora for touristic attractions has been confirmed recently elsewhere by Wuerthner (2020) and Hang et al. (2019), as previously highlighted by Cobbinah et al. (2015) in Ghana.

Tourists always like to experience another culture apart from their own. The Sacred Groves festivals are one of the tourist attractions that attract both local and international tourists. Inyi people who live in different parts of the country return home for the festivals. There are activities like masquerading, drumming, and cultural dance performances. During the celebrations of these festivals, the prices of goods are always high due to high demand. There is a lot of fanfare as people relax and make merry with their friends and relatives. The cultural festivals are held to enlighten and teach the younger generation the valour and selflessness of their forebears in ensuring the progression of society (Alisa & Ridho, 2020).

Inyi town has a power supply, a communication network and boreholes all around the town. The communities have tap water in strategic places. A good tarred road network cuts across Inyi to Ufuma, Anambra state. The road leading to the three sacred groves is accessible by car, motorcycle, tricycle and foot. There are hotels where tourists can relax after visiting the groves. Inyi town has a good health centre and a big market that could take care of the health and comfort of tourists. The study area has numerous rivers and streams that serve as recreational areas. An example is the Oji Alum River, close to Iyingwe Sacred Grove. Swimming aficionados and nature lovers are among the visitors. The river is a natural swimming pool. To top it all off, the Inyi people are known for their hospitality. They serve tasty food that entices tourists and other guests to consider returning. Ejikeme (2020), in her study "Traditional dishes....." notes that tourists/visitors wanted to return to Inyi so they could sample the unique traditional dish called "ncha". Due to the town's tourist potential and its residents' warmth, visitors and tourists find it comfortable to stay, especially during festivals. In an interview, the researchers asked the respondents "Would you encourage the groves' development as a tourist centre?"

They answered yes, that tourism development would create the economic opportunities they are waiting for by boosting the local economy. They emphasized that it would raise their standard of living and offer job opportunities. It also exposes the study area globally and brings full infrastructural development. They pointed out that the quick conversion of the groves to eco or cultural tourism centres is for better care and management.

Conclusion

From the findings and discussion, the researchers made recommendations that could help to promote tourism in the study area. For them, a round-table discussion with the stakeholders is needed for the effective development and management of the three sacred groves for eco and cultural tourism. Eco-tourism is based on the ecosystem's features, while cultural tourism is based on cultural festivals and their activities. The stakeholders in this context are the host communities, tourism experts, and government officials at all levels who are participants in decision-making processes. It is essential to involve the local community members, in particular, in the planning process. Without their help, no sustainable tourist business can succeed.

For Thomas (2013), community participation results in better decisions that involve the whole community. Gunn and Var (2002) suggest that in order for tourism to fulfil its positive potential, it must be meticulously managed. They also believe that the successful involvement of stakeholders in a destination plays a key role (Gunn & Var, 2002). Sacred groves, by virtue of their cultural association with the local people, have intrinsically imbued in them a natural desire to conserve the exhibit potential. The participation and cooperation of the local population are critical in preserving the potential of sacred groves as ecotourism destinations (Tiimub et al., 2020).

An awareness campaign targeting other relevant stakeholders would strengthen the sustainability of the sites. This category involves school students, both local and international. The programmes help people understand the importance of harnessing the area for tourism. Such publicity could be in the form of workshops, seminars, adverts, radio jingles, billboards, the internet, handbills, or documentaries. The publicity also brings potential tourists. The sacred groves are believed by the communities to be the homes of deities. Therefore, access to the area by visitors should be guided by the Chief Priests. This is why the researchers suggest that each sacred grove should have a signboard at the entrance with the rules and regulations written on it. The signboard directs visitors and also helps them to have a brief knowledge of the area.

The researchers advise the use of barbed wire with pillars to separate the area from the rest of the forest in order to create a distinct boundary. Second, a survey and inventory of the sacred groves should be done. In securing the area, warning signals, either verbal or written, should be made available to prevent human encroachments at such points. The encroached areas should be recovered through local community initiatives.

To safeguard the lives of the tourists and sites, a security guard has to be employed along with a vigilante group. Security is a vital component that gives the tourism industry the desired cover, especially when considering the lives of tourists (Bankole & Odularu, 2006). They assert that the security force has a crucial role to play in promoting tourism in order to get rid of violent crimes and armed robbery in the destination area. Thus, tourists must be guided through the area's landscape by a qualified guide.

To keep the grove routes tidy and secure, the communities should either include their youth or hire labourers. The taboos should be blended with contemporary norms while developing tourist attractions. The researchers advise that when organizing the grove celebrations, the tourism board personnel should work closely with the locals. The festivities should take place on a specific day, not on alternate days.

The area needs an ethnographic museum to help preserve the history and cultural relics present in the groves' natural setting. To flourish in these sacred groves, tourism development requires funding from the government or non-governmental organizations. The stakeholders should emphasize their needs. To protect the sacred groves and yet make the visitor experience more meaningful, well-designed tourist facilities should be built for the comfort of the tourists

and visitors. A study by Oladeji, Sunday on the "impact of tourism products development on Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove and Badagry Slave Trade Relics", showed that the development of tourism facilities contributes to lasting economic development. He maintained that the development of tourism facilities creates permanent jobs for local people and could drive the development of other related industries (Oladeji, 2020). For tourism development to thrive in the sacred groves, guidelines for sustainable tourism are needed. Eagles et al. (2001) note that guidelines help to combat the potential errors associated with a rapid pace of development and help to defend the protected areas from the variety of pressures that can damage them. Protecting the environment and achieving successful tourism development are inseparable.

The researchers recommend implementing a well-targeted promotion and marketing strategy that would support tourism growth in these sacred groves. For the tourism industry to be able to contribute as much as possible to the Nigerian economy, such policies and programs must emphasize the importance of the sector in terms of wealth creation, individual initiative, self-gainful occupation, conducive operating environment, and dynamic competitiveness (Bankole & Odularu, 2006). Utilizing the sacred groves for tourism implies choosing an environmentally friendly course of action. It is not advisable to visit the three sacred groves in large groups. Urry (1990) notes that the initiation of mass tourism in environmentally fragile or protected areas is neither desirable nor legally feasible. People should take cognizance of this and go in batches to avoid destroying the ecosystem and its potential. Tourists' and visitors' visits to the holy groves ought to be properly documented. This would also assist in emphasizing the significance of the visitor and the reason for their visit.

In conclusion, the excellent tourism potential of the areas motivates tourists to visit them. This is consistent with Vengesayi et al. (2009), who believe that the objects of attractions, associated facilities, and people are what make a tourist destination appealing. The research demonstrates the significance of the three sacred groves to both the host communities and the global community. Tourists are drawn to the Inyi people by their friendly hospitality and authentic cuisine. The growth of tourism in the studied locations will boost local economies, open up job possibilities, improve infrastructure, protect the environment, and preserve local culture. Numerous jobs, from low-skilled to highly specialized, are available in the tourism industry, which employs a large number of people (Zaei & Zaei, 2013). According to UNCSD NGO (1999), tourism benefits the socioeconomic and political progress of destinations by generating new employment options. The building of infrastructure, utilities, and amenities made necessary by the tourism industry benefits the local population as well as tourists (Zaei & Zaei, 2013). The mingling of various cultures is regarded to be one of tourism's cultural contributions to community enrichment. The crafts, architectural and ancestral traditions of an area are revived thanks to tourism, which also helps preserve the area's unique cultural heritage (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). The three groves have special qualities that greatly highlight their potential for ecotourism and cultural tourism. The vegetation and the cultural practices are all included in this. Consequently, developing the area as a tourist destination is a better conservation option.

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