

Heritage under Siege: Comparative Perspectives on Vandalism, Climate Change and Global Inequality in Nigeria and Iran

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ABSTRACT

Heritage in Nigeria and Iran is increasingly caught in a difficult tension. Sites and objects are celebrated as evidence of historical depth, collective memory and cultural identity, yet the same heritage is often exposed to climate stress, insecurity, vandalism, urban pressure and unequal systems of governance. This article examines that tension through four case studies: the Sukur Cultural Landscape and the National Museum in Benin City in Nigeria, and the Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex and Pina Shalvar Cemetery in Iran. Bringing together critical theory, postcolonial critique and environmental justice, it asks how heritage becomes “under siege” when ecological, political and economic pressures overlap. The study draws on qualitative fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, field observation, document analysis and critical discourse analysis. It argues that heritage should not be approached as a passive inheritance from the past, but as a contested field in which memory, power, ownership and survival are continually negotiated. The comparison shows that local communities are not only witnesses to heritage loss; they are also custodians whose knowledge exposes the limits of global heritage regimes. Heritage protection, therefore, cannot be reduced to technical conservation. It also requires ecological care, cultural justice and more democratic forms of participation.

Keywords: Cultural heritage; climate change; vandalism; global inequality; environmental justice; Nigeria; Iran

“Memory does not disappear at once; it is often worn away by neglect, inequality and silence”.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural preservation is the highest form of rebellion against the entropy of memory, insisting that some stories are too sacred to fade. The cultural heritage of a people is often described as an inheritance from the past, but in practice it is never so stable. As Smith (2006) argues, heritage is not an inert relic but a cultural process, continually “renegotiated and redefined” through use, memory, conflict, neglect and care. In the twenty-first century this instability has become more visible. Sites, objects, landscapes and practices that once seemed to anchor collective memory now stand at the intersection of ecological breakdown, political conflict, uneven development and global regimes of value. The phrase heritage under siege is used here to call that condition. It refers not only to damaged monuments, stolen artefacts or degraded landscapes, but also to the ways in which the meanings attached to heritage are reorganised under pressure, which Herzfeld (2004) terms the “cultural intimacy” of heritage, where global recognition often coexists with local disenfranchisement. Nowhere is this fragility more evident than in nations like Nigeria and Iran, where heritage stands at the crossroads of ideological vandalism, environmental collapse, and the inequities of a world that often looks away.

The word “siege” is intentionally broad including spectacular acts of destruction, such as attacks on monuments during war or insurgency, but it also includes quieter pressures that are easier to normalise: archaeological sites eroded by urban expansion; living cultural spaces turned into tourist images; local custodians pushed to the margins of decision-making; artefacts circulating through colonial and postcolonial museum systems; and environmental risks that fall most heavily on communities already short of resources. Heritage is not endangered by one force alone. It is drawn into what Eriksen (2016) identifies as a “polycrisis,” where ecological, political, economic and institutional pressures overlap and reinforce one another.

Nigeria and Iran offer two different, but unexpectedly resonant, contexts for examining this convergence. At first glance, the two national contexts appear distant from one another. Nigeria's heritage debates are often framed through colonial extraction, restitution, insurgency and postcolonial state capacity. Iran's heritage challenges are more frequently associated with urban development, seismic vulnerability, conservation policy, tourism pressure and the fragile protection of archaeological landscapes. Yet placed side by side, these cases reveal an important shared pattern. In both contexts, heritage is globally recognised and locally vulnerable. It is celebrated by international institutions, mobilised for national prestige and sometimes commodified through tourism, while local communities often experience its preservation as partial, unequal or imposed from above (Meskell, 2018).

The comparison is not intended to flatten the differences between Nigeria and Iran. Rather, it uses comparison as a critical method for identifying how distinct histories generate similar forms of heritage precarity. In Nigeria, the National Museum in Benin City is inseparable from the history of the Benin Bronzes, the royal and ritual objects looted during the British expedition of 1897 and dispersed across European and North American collections. The question of restitution is therefore not only a matter of object return; it is a struggle over cultural sovereignty, historical injury and the right of communities to interpret their own past (Hicks, 2020). The Sukur Cultural Landscape in Adamawa State, by contrast, reveals how insecurity, environmental stress and limited state support affect living cultural landscapes whose value depends on the continued presence and practices of local communities.

In Iran, the Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex offers a different but related case. As one of the most important, and the longest in scale, historic commercial complexes along the Silk Road, the bazaar has been recognised for its architectural, social, and economic significance. Yet its living character also makes it vulnerable to fire risk, seismic exposure, climate stress, and conservation strategies that may privilege visibility and tourism over the everyday needs of traders and residents (UNESCO, 2010). Pina Shalvar Cemetery, an Iron Age burial ground in northwestern Iran, shows another dimension of the problem: the vulnerability of archaeological heritage that has not yet been fully integrated into strong systems of protection and public meaning. There, vandalism, construction pressure, and neglect expose the fragility of sites whose historical importance is not matched by sufficient institutional care.

Two questions guide this study. The first question examines how climate change, insecurity, vandalism and global inequality combine to place cultural heritage under siege? The second explores how local actors respond to these intersecting pressures, and to what extent do their responses challenge or reproduce existing systems of power? These questions require moving beyond a narrow conservation framework. To preserve heritage is not only to stabilise buildings, document artefacts or regulate access. It is also to confront the social and political conditions that determine whose heritage is protected, whose memory is recognised, and whose voice is allowed to shape the future of a site, a concern that Harrison (2013) locates at the heart of critical heritage studies.

Grounded in critical theory, postcolonial critique and environmental justice, the argument developed here is that heritage sites are not passive storehouses of memory. They are contested arenas in which identity, ownership and survival are negotiated. Climate change accelerates material decay, but its effects are mediated by inequality. Vandalism damages heritage, but its causes are often entangled with weak governance, exclusion, and political neglect. International recognition can attract protection and visibility, but it can also reproduce asymmetries between global institutions and local custodians. In this sense, heritage under siege is not simply a story of loss. It is also a story of struggle: over who has the authority to preserve, interpret, access and benefit from the past.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual framework: heritage, crisis and inequality

Recent work on cultural heritage and climate risk has made one point increasingly difficult to ignore: vulnerability is not only a matter of physical exposure. It is also produced through the uneven distribution of resources, expertise, political attention and institutional care. In African heritage contexts, Adetunji and Daly (2024) argue that climate risk management must be made inclusive and locally intelligible, rather than depen-

dent only on highly technical models. Similarly, the application of the Climate Vulnerability Index to Sukur Cultural Landscape demonstrates that climate risk affects both Outstanding Universal Value and the associated community, making community vulnerability inseparable from heritage vulnerability (Megarry et al. 2024). Climate risk, governance and inequality are therefore treated here as mutually constitutive rather than separate analytical categories.

A second starting point is that heritage is not identical with the past. Heritage is a selective, contested and often politically charged relationship to the past. Lowenthal (1998) famously argued that heritage is shaped not only by memory but also by desire, loss and possession. It is never a neutral preservation of what once existed. It is a process through which societies decide what should be remembered, what should be displayed, what should be restored and what may be allowed to disappear. This insight is crucial for analysing heritage in crisis, because the destruction or neglect of heritage is rarely only material. It also affects the symbolic conditions through which communities understand continuity, belonging and historical dignity.

Critical heritage studies have long questioned the assumption that heritage institutions simply protect common human value. Critical theory is useful here because it asks how institutions, publics and systems of communication organise legitimacy and authority. Habermas's concern with the public sphere and communicative rationality is not applied here as a formal model, but as a reminder that heritage governance is also a question of who is allowed to speak, whose claims are treated as rational, and which publics are recognised as legitimate participants in decision-making (Habermas 1984). Laurajane Smith's concept of the "authorised heritage discourse" remains useful in this respect. Heritage is often defined through expert-led, monumental and state-centred frameworks that privilege certain forms of materiality, authenticity and official recognition over lived practices and local meanings (Smith 2006). Such frameworks are not irrelevant; legal protection, documentation and expert conservation matter. Yet when these frameworks become detached from local custodians, they risk turning heritage into an object of administration rather than a living field of social relations.

This problem becomes sharper in contexts marked by colonial history and global inequality. Postcolonial scholars have shown that museums, archives and heritage categories were deeply shaped by imperial systems of extraction, classification and display (Said 1978; Hall 1999). Mbembe's analysis of postcolonial power is also useful because it refuses to treat colonial violence as something simply past; rather, it highlights how forms of domination and representation continue to shape institutions, bodies, territories and memory after formal colonial rule (Mbembe 2001). In the case of the Benin Bronzes, the continued presence of looted artefacts in European museums demonstrates how colonial violence can persist materially long after formal empire has ended. Restitution debates are therefore not merely legal or curatorial. They concern the redistribution of interpretive authority and the repair, however incomplete, of historical asymmetries.

Political ecology and environmental justice add another layer to the analysis. Political ecology insists that environmental degradation cannot be separated from political economy, land use, institutional power and social inequality (Robbins 2012). Environmental justice adds that ecological harm is distributed unevenly, often intensifying vulnerabilities already produced by class, race, colonial history, location and state capacity. Climate change does not affect heritage evenly. Sites located in low- and middle-income regions, or in communities with weaker institutional resources, are often more exposed to environmental risks and less equipped to respond. The ICOMOS report on heritage, climate justice and equity emphasises that climate impacts are most acutely felt by communities that contributed least to the historical causes of climate change. This is not only an ecological problem but an ethical one: heritage loss becomes part of a broader pattern in which environmental harm, economic inequality and cultural vulnerability reinforce one another (ICOMOS 2022).

Recent work on climate change and cultural heritage has similarly stressed that heritage should not be treated only as a victim of climate change. It can also serve as a resource for adaptation, resilience and local knowledge. Studies of UNESCO World Heritage and climate risk show that cultural sites are increasingly exposed to hazards such as extreme weather, flooding, erosion, heat, fire and material degradation (Nguyen and Baker 2023; Aboulmaga et al. 2024). Yet the response to these risks remains uneven. Technological mapping, monitoring and emergency planning are important, but without participation of the community, they may reproduce top-down approaches that separate conservation from everyday life.

This article, therefore, uses “heritage under siege” as an analytic concept rather than a metaphor of destruction alone. A site is under siege when multiple pressures converge in ways that threaten not only its physical survival but also the social relations that sustain its meaning. This includes direct violence, such as attacks by insurgents; indirect violence, such as neglect, underfunding or exclusionary governance; ecological pressure, such as climate-related decay; and symbolic dispossession, such as the continued displacement of cultural objects from their communities of origin. The four case studies examined below demonstrate how these forms of pressure operate differently, but also how they produce comparable questions of justice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Case Selection

The study employed a qualitative comparative research design across four case studies: the National Museum, Benin City and Sukur Cultural Landscape in Nigeria, and the Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex and Pina Shalvar Cemetery in Iran. Case Selection Rationale: Cases were purposively selected using maximum variation sampling based on four criteria: (1) typological diversity (museum, cultural landscape, urban complex, archaeological site); (2) institutional status variation (two UNESCO sites, two non-UNESCO); (3) geopolitical representation (Nigeria and Iran); and (4) accessibility and feasibility. This design enables identification of both common patterns and context-specific dynamics in heritage vulnerability.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three methods:

- 1. Semi-structured interviews:** Twenty (20) interviews were conducted (five per case) with purposively selected participants including site personnel, local traders/artisans, heritage experts, community representatives, and government officials (*see Table 1*). The interview protocol explored: heritage value perceptions; threat identification; conservation experiences; community participation views; institutional support assessment; and environmental pressures. Interviews were conducted between December 2025 to January 2026 lasting 45-90 minutes in participants' preferred languages with interpreters where necessary.
- 2. Field observation:** Systematic observation documented physical conditions, conservation practices, and community interactions using standardised checklists.
- 3. Documentary analysis:** Secondary sources (UNESCO reports, legislation, management plans, academic publications, media) were analyzed for contextualization.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent after being informed of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, withdrawal rights, and confidentiality measures. Data were securely stored with access restricted to the research team. Anonymised transcripts and generic identifiers protect participant identity.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic coding and critical discourse analysis through four stages: (1) familiarization through repeated transcript reading; (2) open coding for preliminary themes (inductive); (3) thematic development through iterative comparison (inductive and deductive); and (4) cross-case comparison to identify shared and context-specific patterns. Critical discourse analysis examined how stakeholders framed heritage threats and conservation responsibilities, attending to power and authority in heritage discourse.

Researcher Positionality

The research team comprises Nigerian and Iranian scholars with expertise in heritage studies, archaeology, anthropology, and conservation science. Nigerian researchers' cultural familiarity facilitated site access and interpretation; Iranian researchers' local knowledge and language skills were essential for Iranian fieldwork. The

team's positionality as both insiders and outsiders was critically reflected upon, with efforts to privilege participant voices.

Sample Size and Limitations

The sample of 20 participants (five per case) is appropriate for exploratory qualitative research prioritizing depth and contextual understanding over statistical generalization, aligning with established qualitative research norms (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). However, findings are exploratory and require further investigation through larger-scale studies; we acknowledge this limitation and frame our contribution as identifying patterns and generating hypotheses for future research. Purposive sampling ensured that participants had direct knowledge or involvement with the heritage properties. The distribution of participants is presented in Table 1. The sample was intended to provide contextual stakeholder perspectives rather than statistical representation, enabling meaningful comparison across the four cases.

Table 1: Distribution of Interview Participants Across the Four (4) Case Studies

Country	Case Study Sites	Site Managers/ Curators	Local Traders/ Artisans	Archaeologists/ Heritage Experts	Community Representatives	Government Officials	Total
Nigeria	National Museum, Benin City	2	1	1	–	1	5
Nigeria	Sukur Cultural Landscape	1	–	1	2	1	5
Iran	Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex	1	2	1	–	1	5
Iran	Pina Shalvar Cemetery	1	–	2	1	1	5
Total	Four (4) Case Studies	5	3	5	3	4	20

Table 1 presents the distribution of participants across the four case studies, showing the stakeholder representation used in the interviews providing a concise overview of the qualitative sample.

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Interview Participants Across the Four Case Studies

Country	Case Study Site	Male	Female	Total
Nigeria	National Museum, Benin City	3	2	5
Nigeria	Sukur Cultural Landscape	3	2	5
Iran	Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex	3	2	5
Iran	Pina Shalvar Cemetery	3	2	5
Total	Four (4) Case Studies	12	8	20

Table 2 presents the gender distribution of the interview participants across the four case studies. Of the 20 participants, 12 (60%) were male and 8 (40%) were female, providing representation of both genders within the qualitative sample.

Case Study 1

Colonial displacement and restitution: the National Museum, Benin City

The National Museum in Benin City is not simply a museum in the conventional sense. It occupies a central position in debates about cultural dispossession, restitution and postcolonial heritage justice. Its importance cannot be understood apart from the history of the Kingdom of Benin and the 1897 British punitive expedition,

during which thousands of royal and ritual objects were looted and dispersed into museums and private collections abroad. The British Museum itself identifies objects in its collection as having been looted during the British expedition of 1897. This historical fact has become a focal point in contemporary debates about the moral and political obligations of museums that continue to hold colonial-era collections. The Benin Bronzes are not merely artworks in the narrow aesthetic sense. They are records of kingship, ritual, diplomacy, social hierarchy and historical memory. Their removal from Benin City fragmented a cultural archive that was embedded in place, ceremony and political authority. When displayed in European museums, these objects often entered interpretive systems that separated them from the social worlds that produced them. The issue, therefore, is not only that objects were taken. It is that the authority to narrate Benin history was also displaced.

The National Museum in Benin City stands at the center of this contradiction. On the one hand, it is a local institution charged with preserving and presenting the heritage of the Benin Kingdom. On the other hand, some of the most significant material expressions of that heritage remain outside Nigeria. This produces a form of absence that is both material and pedagogical. For local visitors, students, artists and community members, the museum becomes a place where heritage is encountered through fragments, replicas, photographs or narratives of loss. The museum is therefore not simply a storehouse; it is a site where cultural sovereignty is continually negotiated. The restitution debate has gained new momentum in recent years, with several European and North American institutions returning or transferring ownership of Benin objects. The Smithsonian's 2022 transfer of twenty-nine Benin Bronzes to Nigeria was widely read as a milestone in ethical returns, although it also generated new debates about Black Atlantic memory, slavery justice and the claims of diasporic communities (Pugh 2025). In 2025, the Netherlands returned 119 looted Benin artefacts to Nigeria, the largest single repatriation of Benin Bronzes to date (Shibayan 2025). These developments matter as restitution is not complete once an object physically returns. It raises further questions: Who should hold returned artefacts? Who has the authority to interpret them? How should relations between the Nigerian state, the Oba of Benin, museums, communities and international institutions be organised? Recent debates over custody show that restitution is not a simple reversal of colonial extraction. It is a complex process through which postcolonial societies must negotiate ownership, public access, conservation capacity and cultural authority.

From the perspective of this paper, the National Museum in Benin City demonstrates how heritage can be under siege even when it is not physically attacked. Its siege is historical and institutional. It lies in the long afterlife of colonial extraction, in the uneven power of foreign museums, and in the incomplete ability of local institutions to reconstruct a dispersed archive. Here, global inequality is not an external context for heritage loss; it is one of the mechanisms through which heritage vulnerability is produced.



Queen Idia Bronze Head Sculpture at the British Museum



Replica of same sculpture the Benin Museum in Nigeria

Figure 1: Heritage Displacement and Representation as Original Queen Idia Head at the British Museum and Replica at the National Museum, Benin City.

Figure 1 above visually illustrates this disparity, showing how the absence of original artefacts in their place of origin can reduce direct cultural access and reinforce dependence on replicas and mediated forms of representation.

Interviews connected to this case emphasised the frustration produced by slow restitution processes, incomplete cataloguing and limited resources for conservation and public education. Participants also highlighted a deeper issue: cultural loss is not experienced only as the absence of objects but as a weakening of intergenerational transmission. When key artefacts remain abroad, the community's relationship to its own history is mediated through institutions that are geographically and politically distant. This is why the Benin case is central to any discussion of heritage justice. It shows that preservation cannot be separated from repair.

Case Study 2

Insecurity, climate stress and living heritage: Sukur Cultural Landscape

If the National Museum in Benin City foregrounds the displacement of objects, the Sukur Cultural Landscape foregrounds the vulnerability of living heritage. Located in Adamawa State near the Nigeria-Cameroon border, Sukur was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a cultural landscape of exceptional value. UNESCO describes it as a hilltop settlement with terraced fields, traditional architecture, sacred spaces and a palace complex associated with the Hidi. Its significance lies not only in buildings or archaeological remains, but in the continued relationship between people, land, settlement, ritual and agricultural practice. This living character is precisely what makes Sukur vulnerable. A cultural landscape depends on continuity of use. It cannot be preserved simply by fencing off structures or documenting architectural forms. Terraces must be maintained, houses repaired, paths used, ritual sites respected and local knowledge transmitted. When insecurity disrupts community life, it also disrupts the practices that sustain heritage. In 2014, Boko Haram insurgents attacked the area, damaging cultural materials and structures. UNESCO later commended restoration efforts around the Hidi Palace but noted that further work remained necessary on paths, walls, traditional house clusters and agricultural terraces, all of which are attributes of the site's Outstanding Universal Value.

Sukur makes visible the interaction between conflict and environmental pressure. Insecurity damages heritage directly, but it also creates secondary effects. It can force displacement, restrict access, reduce conservation monitoring and weaken the economic practices that sustain local stewardship. Where communities return or resettle under pressure, demographic change may intensify demand for building materials, firewood or agricultural land. UNESCO has noted concerns about demographic pressure, scarcity of local building materials and inappropriate use of new materials in the property. These are not simply technical conservation problems. They reveal the difficulty of protecting a living cultural landscape under conditions of insecurity.



Figure 2: Vandalized Traditional Dry-Stone Architecture at Sukur Cultural Landscape Following the 2014 Boko Haram Insurgency.

Figure 2 illustrates the vulnerability of Sukur's traditional built heritage, highlighting the need to understand how environmental and climate pressures can compound existing threats to the cultural landscape.

Recent heritage-climate research reinforces this point. The CVI assessment of Sukur was the first application of the Climate Vulnerability Index to an African World Heritage property and to a cultural landscape, making Sukur an important methodological precedent for understanding how climate hazards affect both heritage values and associated communities (Megarry et al. 2024). UNESCO's 2025 conservation documentation for Sukur similarly foregrounded the need for climate action, sustainable land-use promotion, revival of traditional crafts and community training, showing that conservation is now inseparable from social and environmental resilience (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2025).

The interviews associated with Sukur pointed to limited state presence, dependence on community custodians and the challenge of sustaining conservation in a context where safety cannot be taken for granted. Community resilience is important, but resilience should not become an excuse for institutional abandonment. Too often, local communities are praised for safeguarding heritage with minimal resources while the structural causes of vulnerability remain unchanged. In this sense, Sukur reveals a central tension in global heritage governance: living communities are treated as essential to heritage value, yet they are not always given the resources, authority or protection required to sustain that value.

Climate stress adds another dimension. Cultural landscapes are exposed to changing rainfall patterns, erosion, vegetation shifts and pressure on local materials. In a site like Sukur, where architecture, agriculture and ritual are integrated, environmental change cannot be treated as a background condition. It affects the materials from which houses are built, the viability of terraced fields and the rhythms through which cultural practices are reproduced. Heritage here is ecological in the full sense of the term: it is made through relations among land, labour, memory and community.

Sukur's vulnerability is therefore different from Benin City's, but the two cases speak to one another. Benin reveals the historical violence of object removal and the politics of restitution. Sukur reveals the ongoing fragility of place-based heritage under insurgency, environmental stress and limited institutional capacity. Together, they show that heritage under siege in Nigeria operates through both displacement and exposure: objects displaced from their communities, and communities exposed to threats that weaken their capacity to maintain living heritage.

Case Study 3

Living urban heritage under pressure: Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex

The Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex is one of Iran's most important urban heritage sites. UNESCO describes it as one of the most important commercial centers along the Silk Road and one of the most complete examples of Iran's traditional commercial and cultural system. Its value lies not only in its architecture but in the integration of commercial activity, social organization, religious life, craft production and urban memory. The bazaar is therefore not a monument in the static sense. It is a living environment whose physical structures and social functions remain closely interwoven.

This living quality complicates conservation. Unlike an isolated monument, the bazaar cannot be preserved by treating its built fabric separately from its everyday users. Traders, customers, artisans, residents, religious communities and municipal actors all participate in the life of the site. UNESCO's own statement of Outstanding Universal Value stresses that the social and professional organization of the bazaar is closely interwoven with its architectural fabric. This means that conservation measures which ignore local economic and social relations risk damaging the very qualities they claim to protect.

Tabriz Bazaar has long been exposed to multiple risks. Its brick structures, covered passages and dense commercial spaces create particular fire vulnerabilities. Recent Persian-language research on fire crisis management in the historic bazaar identifies twenty-five components affecting fire occurrence across economic,

physical, socio-cultural, technical and managerial dimensions; it also notes that fires between 2009 and 2019 were more frequent at night, in winter and in trades such as leather and carpet-selling, where combustible materials are concentrated (Esmaili Sangari 2024). This local evidence is significant because it shows that fire risk is not only an architectural problem. It is shaped by work rhythms, commercial specialization, electrical systems, surveillance, night patrols and crisis-management capacity.

Figure 3: Fire damage at the historic Tabriz Bazaar following the fire of 8 May 2019. Photograph by Amir Sadeghi



Figure 3 above shows the fire damage sustained by the historic Tabriz Bazaar following the May 8, 2019 fire incident, illustrating the vulnerability of built cultural heritage to catastrophic damage. *Image credit: "Photograph by Amir Sadeghi, Fars News Agency, 9 May 2019. Licensed under CC BY 4.0."*

Seismic risk is also central in a city shaped by earthquake history. Climate-related stress, changes in temperature and humidity, and the pressures of urban infrastructure further complicate preservation. Fire incidents, including recent blazes that damaged shops, have repeatedly shown how fragile the balance is between use, safety and conservation. Studies on fire risk management in the bazaar underline the importance of risk preparedness, prevention and coordinated management in a dense historic commercial environment (Fahmi 2022). Iranian conservation research on the fire-damaged Sarā-ye Dodari further stresses that post-disaster conservation depends on integrated documentation, including digital documentation, laser scanning and photogrammetry, because authenticity and integrity cannot be restored after a fire without reliable knowledge of the pre-disaster condition of the structure (Zeinalpour Asl et al. 2022).

At the same time, Tabriz Bazaar has often been presented as a successful example of participatory urban conservation. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture notes that since 2000, numerous complexes within the bazaar have been rehabilitated with the participation of owners and tenants, and that the management framework

involved bazaaris alongside municipal authorities and heritage bodies. This history should not be dismissed. It shows that local participation is possible and that heritage conservation can support urban continuity rather than simply freeze historic fabric.

However, the interviews and case analysis suggest that participation remains uneven. Local traders and users may be consulted or involved in some restoration processes, but broader decisions about tourism development, commercial priorities and heritage branding can still be shaped by institutional or economic agendas that do not fully reflect local needs. This is the paradox of living urban heritage. The very life of the bazaar makes it valuable, but that life is vulnerable to being re-organised in the name of heritage visibility. When conservation is tied too closely to tourism, the everyday needs of local users can become secondary.

Tabriz Bazaar is important because it shows that heritage under siege can exist even inside officially protected and globally recognised sites. The bazaar is not abandoned. It is not outside the heritage system. It is precisely inside that system, and yet still exposed to fire risk, climate stress, seismic vulnerability and competing pressures of commercialisation. Its vulnerability emerges from the tension between preservation and use, between global recognition and local agency, between technical restoration and social continuity.

The bazaar also matters symbolically. As a historic node of trade, religion, politics and sociability, it is a space through which collective memory is enacted in everyday life. Turkish-language scholarship on the bazaar and Ahi Evran culture reads Tabriz Bazaar as a symbol of urban liveliness whose architectural form is inseparable from socio-economic and cultural organization (Golkarian 2021). This regional perspective is important because it resists reducing the bazaar to a heritage object for external consumption; it instead situates the bazaar within a wider Iranian-Turkic and Islamic commercial culture of craft, identity and social exchange.

Case Study 4

Archaeological fragility and the violence of neglect: Pina Shalvar Cemetery

Pina Shalvar Cemetery brings the discussion to a quieter, less internationally visible kind of heritage vulnerability. Unlike Tabriz Bazaar, it does not enjoy the same level of global recognition, institutional visibility or public familiarity. As an Iron Age burial ground in northwestern Iran, it offers valuable evidence of ancient funerary practices and regional cultural histories. Yet its archaeological significance has not translated into adequate protection. The site faces threats from vandalism, urban encroachment, construction pressure, environmental exposure and weak enforcement.

Its importance lies partly in the fact that heritage studies often privilege well-known monuments and UNESCO-listed sites. Pina Shalvar shows what happens to heritage that is historically significant but institutionally fragile. Such sites can disappear not through a single catastrophic event but through repeated small acts of damage, informal construction, inadequate fencing, lack of monitoring, looting, weathering and public indifference produced by limited interpretation. This is a slow violence of neglect. It does not always generate international attention, but its consequences are irreversible.

The cemetery also raises questions about the relationship between archaeological knowledge and public value. Excavated or uncovered burial sites may be meaningful to archaeologists, but without public interpretation and community engagement they can remain socially vulnerable. If local communities are not given access to the significance of a site, or if development pressures are allowed to frame the site as an obstacle rather than a resource, vandalism and neglect become more likely. Protection, in this sense, requires more than legal designation. It requires making the site meaningful within local cultural life.

Interview material related to Pina Shalvar indicated concern over urban expansion and the weakness of protective measures. Community input appeared marginal in preservation and planning. This is significant because archaeological heritage often sits at the edge of competing land-use claims. Construction, infrastructure and urban growth are frequently presented as urgent needs, while archaeological protection is treated as secondary or inconvenient. In such cases, heritage becomes vulnerable not because it lacks value but because its value is not politically powerful enough to resist development priorities.

Figure 4: Anthropomorphic gravestone at Pineh Shalvar (Shadabad-e Mashayekh) Cemetery, Tabriz, Iran.



Figure 4 above showcases an anthropomorphic gravestone at Pineh Shalvar (Shadabad-e Mashayekh) Cemetery in Tabriz, Iran, illustrating the distinctive funerary and cultural heritage practices associated with the site.

Pina Shalvar also complicates the meaning of vandalism. Vandalism is often understood as intentional damage by individuals. Yet in archaeological sites with limited formal protection, vandalism often overlaps with looting, informal construction, weak enforcement and the absence of public interpretation. In this sense, Pina Shalvar may be read alongside other vulnerable archaeological landscapes where the destruction of context is as damaging as the removal of objects. For burial sites in particular, the loss is not only material but epistemic: once stratigraphy, orientation, associated objects or spatial relations are disturbed, knowledge of funerary practice and social memory is permanently weakened.

Placed beside the Tabriz Bazaar, Pina Shalvar reveals two different scales of Iranian heritage under siege. The bazaar is a recognised living urban complex whose vulnerability lies in the tensions between use, conservation and commodification. Pina Shalvar is a fragile archaeological site whose vulnerability lies in insufficient recognition, weak protection and pressure from development. Together, they show that heritage crisis in Iran cannot be reduced to one type of site or one kind of threat. It includes both the overexposure of celebrated heritage and the under protection of a less visible archeological memory.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative findings: vulnerability, visibility and local agency

The respondent analysis presented in Table 3 reveals several patterns that cut across the four case study sites. The strongest finding concerns the relationship between heritage preservation and cultural memory. Nineteen of the twenty respondents (95%) identified heritage protection with the preservation of collective memory, identity, or intergenerational continuity. This finding is particularly significant because it demonstrates that respondents

did not conceptualise heritage simply as a collection of physical structures or archaeological objects. Rather, heritage was understood as a carrier of social memory and cultural meaning.

A second dominant pattern concerns institutional capacity. Eighteen respondents (90%) identified weak institutional or infrastructural support as an important factor contributing to heritage vulnerability, while seventeen respondents (85%) referred to inadequate funding or conservation resources. The convergence across both countries suggests that heritage vulnerability is not produced solely by spectacular events such as vandalism, armed conflict or fire. It is also produced through chronic institutional limitations that reduce the capacity to prevent, monitor and respond to threats.

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of respondents whose interviews could be coded to each theme. As participants discussed multiple themes, percentages are not mutually exclusive and do not sum to 100%.

Table 3: Cross-Case Thematic Analysis of Respondent Perceptions

Major Theme	Benin Museum (n=5)	Sukur (n=5)	Tabriz Bazaar (n=5)	Pina Shalvar (n=5)	Total Respondents (n=20)	Overall %
Weak institutional/infrastructural support	4	5	4	5	18	90%
Inadequate funding for conservation	5	4	4	4	17	85%
Community participation/custodianship	4	5	5	3	17	85%
Vandalism/physical damage	2	4	3	5	14	70%
Environmental/climate vulnerability	2	5	5	4	16	80%
Insecurity/conflict-related vulnerability	3	5	1	1	10	50%
Urban/development pressure	2	3	5	5	15	75%
Tourism/commercialization pressure	4	2	5	2	13	65%
Loss of cultural memory/identity	5	5	4	5	19	95%
Weak documentation/monitoring	4	4	4	5	17	85%
Need for stronger government intervention	5	5	4	5	19	95%
Need for greater local/community authority	4	5	5	4	18	90%

Source: Author's analysis of semi-structured interview data, 2026.

Table 3 above illustrates the cross-case thematic analysis of respondents' perceptions across the four heritage sites, highlighting the recurrence of key themes related to heritage vulnerability, governance, conservation, community participation, environmental pressures, tourism and cultural memory.

The analysis further demonstrates the importance of community participation. Seventeen respondents (85%) discussed community involvement or local custodianship, while eighteen (90%) expressed a need for stronger community authority in heritage management. This pattern was particularly pronounced at Sukur and Tabriz, where heritage remains embedded in living social and economic practices. The findings suggest that conservation models based exclusively on state or expert intervention may be insufficient where heritage depends upon continuing community use and cultural practice.

Environmental vulnerability was identified by sixteen respondents (80%). However, its character differed substantially between cases. At Sukur, respondents connected environmental pressures to agricultural terraces, local materials and the sustainability of the cultural landscape. At Tabriz, environmental vulnerability was intertwined with fire, seismic exposure and the physical condition of the historic urban fabric. At Pina Shalvar, environmental exposure interacted with archaeological fragility and urban expansion. The comparative evidence therefore suggests that climate change and environmental vulnerability should not be treated as uniform threats; their effects are mediated by the social and material characteristics of individual heritage sites.

The distribution of vandalism and physical damage is similarly uneven. Pina Shalvar produced the strongest concentration of responses concerning vandalism, with all five respondents associated with the case identifying physical damage or inadequate protection as a concern. Sukur followed with four respondents, reflecting the interaction between insecurity, conflict and damage to cultural resources. By contrast, only two respondents associated with the National Museum identified vandalism as a principal concern. This distinction is analytically important because it demonstrates that the meaning of "heritage under siege" differs across contexts: in Benin, the dominant concern is historical displacement and institutional inequality, whereas in Sukur and Pina Shalvar vulnerability is more directly manifested through physical exposure and inadequate protection.

The comparative analysis suggests four key findings:

Finding 1: Heritage vulnerability is produced through intersections rather than isolated threats. In Nigeria, the National Museum in Benin City is shaped by colonial extraction, global museum inequality, limited resources and contested restitution politics. Sukur is shaped by insurgency, environmental pressure, demographic change and weak institutional support. In Iran, Tabriz Bazaar is shaped by fire risk, seismic exposure, climate stress, tourism pressure and uneven local participation. Pina Shalvar is shaped by vandalism, urban encroachment, environmental exposure and weak enforcement. In each case, the threat is not singular. Heritage is placed under siege because several pressures reinforce one another.

Finding 2: Global recognition does not guarantee local protection. UNESCO designation, international prestige or global museum attention can produce visibility, but visibility does not automatically translate into justice. Sukur and Tabriz Bazaar are World Heritage sites, yet both remain exposed to threats that require sustained local capacity. Benin's heritage is globally famous, yet much of its material archive remains outside its community of origin. Pina Shalvar's relative invisibility reveals the opposite problem: without global recognition, archaeological sites may struggle to attract protection. The comparison shows that both visibility and invisibility can be problematic when they are not accompanied by local agency.

Finding 3: Vulnerability is shaped by different temporalities of violence. In Benin City, violence is historical and colonial but continues through displaced ownership and contested restitution. In Sukur, violence is immediate and security-related, but also ecological and slow. In Tabriz, risk is recurrent, accumulating through fire, seismic exposure, commercial density and uneven crisis management. In Pina Shalvar, violence is gradual, taking the form of neglect, vandalism and development pressure. The comparative point is that heritage under siege is not always dramatic. It may also be incremental, bureaucratic and barely visible until loss becomes irreversible.

Finding 4: Local communities are central to heritage survival but often peripheral to heritage governance. In all four cases, local actors possess knowledge, practices and attachments that are essential to preservation. Benin communities hold cultural memory that cannot be replaced by museum catalogues. Sukur residents maintain the landscape through habitation, agriculture and ritual practice. Tabriz bazaaris sustain the social and economic life of the bazaar. Communities around Pina Shalvar are crucial for monitoring, meaning-making and protection. Nonetheless, these actors are frequently positioned as stakeholders rather than decision-makers. They are consulted, represented or invoked, but not always empowered.

These findings bring the central argument into sharper focus: heritage under siege is not only a conservation problem. It is a justice problem. The physical vulnerability of sites is inseparable from the unequal distribution of authority, resources and recognition. Climate change accelerates decay, but inequality determines who has the capacity to respond. Vandalism damages sites, but weak governance and exclusion often create the conditions for damage. Restitution returns objects, but without local authority and public access it may reproduce new forms of contestation. Conservation restores buildings, but without community participation it risks producing heritage as image rather than lived relation.

Table 4: Cross-Case Vulnerability Assessment and Heritage Conservation Priorities

Case	Dominant Threats	Principal Respondent Concern	Character of Heritage Vulnerability	Main Preservation Priority
National Museum, Benin City	Colonial displacement, restitution challenges, limited resources, weak documentation	Loss of cultural ownership and memory	Historical and institutional	Restitution, documentation, conservation funding and cultural sovereignty
Sukur Cultural Landscape	Insecurity, climate stress, environmental degradation, weak institutional presence	Disruption of living cultural practices	Ecological, social and security-related	Community-led conservation, climate resilience and institutional support
Tabriz Historic Bazaar	Fire, seismic risk, climate stress, tourism and commercial pressure	Maintaining the relationship between conservation and everyday use	Urban and socio-economic	Risk management, participatory conservation and sustainable use
Pina Shalvar Cemetery	Vandalism, urban encroachment, weak monitoring, neglect	Loss of archaeological context and historical knowledge	Archaeological and institutional	Protection, monitoring, documentation and community engagement

Source: Author's synthesis of interview and observational data, 2026

The comparative findings in Table 4 demonstrate that the four case study sites experience heritage vulnerability through different combinations of pressures, rather than through a single dominant threat. While the Benin City case is strongly shaped by colonial displacement and restitution, Sukur reflects the interaction of insecurity, climate stress and living cultural practices. Tabriz demonstrates the tensions between urban conservation, commercial activity and disaster risk, while Pina Shalvar illustrates the vulnerability of less visible archaeological heritage to vandalism, neglect and urban expansion. Table 4 integrates these differences by identifying the dominant threats, principal respondent concerns, character of vulnerability and corresponding preservation priorities across the four cases.

From preservation to heritage justice

The comparison between Nigeria and Iran pushes the discussion beyond conventional preservation language. It also confirms that the present heritage crisis cannot be read as a simple accumulation of separate problems. Morin and Kern's formulation of planetary crisis is helpful in this regard, because it stresses the interdependence of ecological, social, political and epistemological crises (Morin and Kern 2020). Heritage under siege is one expression of that wider condition. Conventional preservation frameworks often begin with the object or site: a building to stabilise, an artefact to conserve, a landscape to document, a boundary to regulate. These tasks remain necessary. But the cases examined here suggest that preservation must also begin with relations: relations between communities and institutions, between local memory and global recognition, between ecological change and cultural survival, between past injustice and present governance.

Critical theory is useful because it directs attention to power. Heritage is never outside power. It is authorised, funded, displayed, repaired, interpreted and sometimes ignored through institutional arrangements that reflect broader inequalities. In Benin City, the afterlife of colonial violence is visible in the unequal circulation of artefacts and the slow politics of restitution. In Sukur, insecurity reveals the limits of a heritage system that celebrates living landscapes but cannot always protect the living communities who sustain them. In Tabriz, conservation is caught between participation and commodification. In Pina Shalvar, archaeological value is weakened by the absence of effective protection and public integration.

Environmental justice further clarifies the stakes. Climate change is sometimes presented as a universal threat to heritage, but universality can obscure inequality. Wealthier institutions and states are often better equipped to monitor, adapt and recover. Communities with fewer resources face greater exposure and fewer choices.

Heritage loss under climate stress therefore cannot be discussed separately from questions of responsibility, capacity and distribution. If climate change places heritage at risk, global inequality determines which heritage is most likely to be saved.

The cases also challenge the comforting idea that local communities are simply guardians of tradition. They are not romantic figures outside modernity. They are actors negotiating difficult conditions: traders balancing livelihood and conservation in Tabriz; residents sustaining cultural landscape under insecurity in Sukur; museum professionals and cultural authorities navigating restitution politics in Benin; communities living near archaeological remains in Pina Shalvar amid development pressures. Their responses may challenge power, but they may also be constrained by it. Local agency is therefore real but uneven.

For this reason, heritage justice has to mean more than inclusion language. It requires changes in decision-making structures. Community participation should not mean inviting local actors after priorities have already been set. It should mean recognizing them as co-producers of heritage knowledge and co-authors of preservation strategy. In practical terms, this could involve shared governance models, transparent restitution frameworks, community-based monitoring, climate adaptation planning rooted in local knowledge, and heritage education that connects archaeological or monumental value to everyday life. The cases also suggest that heritage protection must become more interdisciplinary. Fire risk in Tabriz cannot be solved by architectural conservation alone. It requires emergency management, infrastructure planning, trader participation and climate-sensitive materials knowledge. Sukur cannot be preserved through monument repair alone. It requires security, agricultural sustainability, youth involvement and support for traditional building practices. Benin restitution cannot be solved by object transfer alone. It requires museum capacity, public interpretation, legal clarity and cultural diplomacy that does not reproduce paternalism. Pina Shalvar cannot be protected by excavation alone. It requires planning enforcement, public communication, site interpretation and local stewardship.

The newer literature on climate risk and restitution confirms the urgency of this shift. In Nigeria, recent climate-risk work calls for inclusive assessment methods that make local knowledge central to adaptation planning rather than supplementary to expert modelling (Adetunji and Daly 2024). In Benin restitution debates, recent returns have opened new questions about custody, royal authority, state museums and diasporic claims, demonstrating that repatriation is a beginning rather than an endpoint (Pugh 2025; Shibayan 2025). In Iran, local Persian research on Tabriz Bazaar shows that risk management depends on very specific socio-economic and technical factors, including trade type, night-time surveillance, electrical equipment and local crisis-response capacity (Esmaili Sangari 2024). These sources reinforce the article's central claim: heritage justice must be grounded in place-specific knowledge while remaining attentive to global structures of inequality.

The concept of heritage under siege is useful because it brings together threats that are often treated separately. Vandalism, climate change, insecurity and inequality are not parallel topics. They interact. A poorly governed site is more vulnerable to vandalism. A community under economic pressure may be less able to prioritise conservation. A climate-stressed landscape may intensify resource competition. A museum deprived of key artefacts may struggle to transmit cultural memory. A restoration project that privileges tourists may weaken local attachment. These are not accidental connections; they are the structure of heritage crisis in the present.

CONCLUSION

Cultural heritage in Nigeria and Iran is under pressure in ways that cannot be explained by material decay alone. Buildings burn or deteriorate, artefacts are displaced, landscapes are damaged and archaeological sites are neglected; but behind these visible losses are wider systems of ecological stress, political insecurity, uneven development and global inequality. The National Museum in Benin City, Sukur Cultural Landscape, Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex and Pina Shalvar Cemetery each show a different route into the same problem: heritage becomes vulnerable when material fragility meets institutional weakness, and when communities are expected to carry responsibility without enough authority, protection or resources.

The comparison between Nigeria and Iran is not based on sameness. The Nigerian cases are deeply shaped by colonial extraction, restitution and insurgency. The Iranian cases are shaped by urban conservation,

archaeological neglect, seismic and climatic vulnerability, and development pressure. Still, the cases meet around a shared contradiction. Heritage is valued, but unevenly protected. Communities are praised, but not always empowered. Sites are recognised, but not always sustained in ways that preserve their living meanings.

The article has therefore argued for a shift from preservation as technical management to preservation as heritage justice. This does not mean abandoning conservation expertise. It means placing that expertise within a wider ethical and political framework. Heritage protection must include climate adaptation, community governance, restitution, local education, emergency planning and accountability for historical and structural inequality. The question is not only how heritage can be saved, but for whom, by whom and under what conditions.

In the twenty-first century, heritage cannot be protected by nostalgia alone. Nor can it be secured through global labels that leave local custodians at the edge of decision-making. If heritage is a site of memory, it is also a site of struggle. To defend it is to defend the conditions through which communities sustain identity, transmit knowledge and imagine justice across generations. In Nigeria and Iran alike, the past is not simply behind us. It is being contested, damaged, repaired and remade in the crises of the present.

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