

The Significance of Digitalized Visual Museums in the Academic Study of Religion and Culture.**Anthony Okon Ben**

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This work examined the significance of the digitalized visual museum in the academic study of religions and cultures. This work made use of symbolic interactionism of George Mead to explain and decode the religious meanings of religious symbols, artifacts, and cultural remains. It also explored the functionalism theory of Talcott Parsons in explaining the function of religion in society and how religious and cultural remains in museums can be transformed digitally to attract tourists and, in turn, develop tourism at the University of Calabar. The study adopted a qualitative and ethnographic surveys. Primarily, relied on oral interviews for primary data and textbooks and journal articles as its secondary sources of data. The findings showed that the establishment of a digitalized visual museum would function as a scientific laboratory in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies and would aid in the academic study of Religion and Cultural Studies for the scientific study of religions and cultures; and, in turn, to attract tourists to the museum, thereby generating revenue to the department.

Keywords: Digitalized, Visual Museums, Significance, Religion, Culture, University of Calabar**Introduction**

Religion deals with symbols, and as such, religion, art, and museums are very important cultural instruments that are mutually interrelated in some cultures. These three aspects of reality shape the anthropological, sociological, historical, cultural, and religious antecedents of most societies. Art reflects the particular culture it belongs to, the ideas, and the period it spans. In most societies, art is the vehicle for the expression and communication of emotions, beliefs, ideas, and philosophies and is also a means of exploring and appreciating formal elements for their own sake and as mimesis or representative symbols. In most cultures and the Efik society, for instance, art and masquerades such as Ekpe, Akatah, and Nnabor point to their belief supernatural, gods (deities), and the Ekpo Ibibio represent belief in ancestors, immortality of the soul and life after death.

Museums are another human innovation for the preservation of material culture. It is concerned with the coded method of the collection and preservation of items that served as archaeological indices of classification and identification of various cultures. Museums serve as places for the preservation of the different religious and cultural relics. The Ekpe masquerade is among the relics that attracted several foreign and local tourists to the museums in Calabar. However, according to the Curator of the Old Residency Museum Calabar, tourist activities in the museum have consistently declined since 2009. The Curator cited

tourists' denial of access by government house security personnel, the lack of political will by the Cross River State government to develop and renovate dilapidated artifacts and the poor maintenance of the facility as contributing factors to the consistent decline in patronage.

Hence, this research proposed the establishment of a digitalized visual museum in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar, and digitization of the artifacts as a remedy to the decline in museum culture. This will in turn serve as a laboratory for the academic study of religion and culture. In addition, it will promote the development and transformation of religious tourism, attract foreign exchange, create employment, and offer training in micro-programming and robotic engineering in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Computer science and the University of Calabar as a whole.

This study explored how digital visual museums are reshaping research, teaching, and public engagement in religion and cultural studies. If sacred objects, ritual materials, and cultural archives are digitalized, Religious and Cultural studies departmental museums will give fresh opportunities for scholars and students to analyse, compare, and teach about traditions that were once hard to access. Evaluating these shifts will clarify the didactic, methodological, ethical, and preservation consequences of digitization and help institutions adopt thoughtful, responsible practices.

The justification of this work is that digital museums can democratize access to rare and sacred materials, reducing travel and cost barriers for diasporas, students, and remote scholars. Technologies like high-resolution imaging, 3D scanning, and virtual reality protect fragile items and enable new forms of analysis text mining, spatial studies, and virtual reconstructions that enrich scholarship. Crucially, research must also address ethics: digitization should respect source culture area, avoid commodifying sacred objects, and support collaborative stewardship. For teaching, interactive exhibits and virtual labs make abstract cultural and religious concepts tangible and memorable.

This work offered evidence-based recommendations for museums, academic departments, policymakers, and funders on digitization priorities, documentation standards, community consultation, benefit-sharing, educational design, and sustainable revenue models that support artists and heritage holders. The aim is to assess how digital visual museums, if established in the department of Religious and Cultural studies can contribute educationally, scientifically, ethically, conservationally, and economically to the study of religion and culture, and to produce practical guidance for inclusive, respectful digitization.

Literature Review

Masks and masquerades have occupied a central place in religious and cultural life across many societies, particularly in Africa, where they serve as important media through which spiritual beliefs, social values, and communal identities are expressed. Scholars have consistently emphasized that masks are not merely artistic objects but powerful cultural symbols that embody religious ideas, ancestral authority, and social institutions. This section reviews existing scholarship on the religious, artistic, and cultural significance of masks, with particular attention to African societies, the Oron people of South-eastern Nigeria, museology, and the emerging role of technology in preserving cultural heritage.

Artifacts and cultural heritages are far more than dusty museum pieces or creative wall hangings. In Africa particularly, they serve as the living, breathing heartbeat of spiritual, social, and judicial life. They are dynamic tools used to negotiate power, preserve history, and bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual realms. Bohannan, (1963) in many African ceremonies and court rituals, mask and several artifacts bring stories and spirits to life. When someone puts on a mask, they set aside their personal self and embody the being the mask represents, so masks don't just stand for supernatural forces, they make them present in the community. Masked figures can personify justice, ancestral authority, or other spiritual powers. Bohannan (1963) notes masks are central in rites of passage, especially male initiations: seclusion, teaching,

circumcision, and trials led by masked elders. At the end, elders remove masks and gift similar ones to initiates, marking their entry into adulthood and passing on cultural duties.

Expanding this understanding of masks as artistic expressions, Ben, Duke, et al. (2025) describe Ekpu-Oro ancestral masks as important examples of religious art within Oron society. According to the authors, Ekpu-Oro represents the creative imagination and craftsmanship of the Oron people while simultaneously expressing their religious beliefs and worldview. The carvings illustrate how artistic creativity functions beyond aesthetics to communicate cultural memory, spirituality, and social identity. Consequently, the authors argue that Ekpu-Oro masks should be appreciated not only as artistic masterpieces but also as sacred cultural objects that preserve the history and religious philosophy of the Oron people.

Cotterell, (1999), in the *Encyclopedia of World Mythology*, extends the view beyond Africa to the Siberian Yupik, whose carved masks depict ancestors, animals, and spirits. Worn at festivals, feasts, and rituals, masks let wearers assume those beings' identities and powers. Shamans used them to aid hunting, healing, and spiritual balance. Through masked performances, communities pass myth, belief, and responsibility to younger generations.

The cultural significance of masks, artifacts and cultural heritage extends beyond ritual practice to heritage conservation and tourism development. Ben and Umokoro (2025) argue that masks and other traditional artifacts constitute valuable religious and cultural tourism resources capable of promoting sustainable development. They observe that properly preserved cultural heritage attracts tourist, tourism, generates economic opportunities for local communities, and strengthens efforts toward cultural conservation. Museums therefore perform a critical role in safeguarding both tangible heritages, including artifacts, monuments, and archaeological materials, and intangible heritage such as language, music, dance, customs, rituals, and indigenous knowledge. Through effective preservation, museums help maintain cultural identity while promoting intercultural understanding and historical continuity.

Hackett (1996) gives a powerful rethinking of African masks, arguing they aren't mere disguises but living embodiments of ancestors and spiritual forces an idea that counters European assumptions. Their exaggerated features and elaborate costumes mark them as otherworldly. In rituals initiations, funerals, and communal ceremonies masks make invisible powers present, negotiate social tensions, reinforce authority, and respond to change. Accompanied by music, dance, and sacrifice, masked performances transmit spiritual power and communal values. Even when preserved in museums, these objects retain religious, educational, and social roles: they are dynamic cultural institutions that connect communities with ancestry, belief, and collective memory.

Keith Nicklin (1999), Nicklin's study of Ekpu-Oro ancestral figures and masking among the Oron of southeastern Nigeria shows a rich, living tradition. By the late 1930s masking was waning, and some masks were tarred to look fierce, hiding fine carving beneath. Still, their variety and performances expressed Oron unity and artistic creativity. Nicklin insists Ekpu are not mere ethnographic relics but powerful works of art that convey history, religion, and identity. Citing Fagg, Kiewe, and Nsugbe, he argues Ekpu serve as ancestral monuments, preserving family memory, lineage authority, and social continuity while also standing among Africa's finest wood sculptures.

The preservation of such cultural heritage naturally raises questions concerning museums and museology. Ben (2018), drawing on Barbara Miller, Ben defines museums as institutions that collect, preserve, interpret, and display objects for education and aesthetic enjoyment. Tracing museum roots from Nabonidus to the Greek mouseion and Alexandria's library, he shows museums have long combined scholarship, devotion, and public learning. He stresses that many societies like the Oron had indigenous preservation systems (the Ekpu shrines) before modern museums, so national museums continue rather than begin heritage care.

Ben and others argue museums must both conserve and educate: researching collections, improving access, and remaining culturally sensitive. Recent digital tools and AI can boost interpretation, cataloguing, and engagement, but they must respect the spiritual meanings some communities still attach to sacred objects. AI should support museum professionals enhancing preservation, widening audiences, and enabling thoughtful, inclusive presentation of cultural heritage.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates a strong relationship between masks, religion, art, museums, and technological innovation. Taken together, these studies provide a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the religious significance of masks, the cultural importance of Ekpu-Oro ancestral figures, and the evolving role of museums in preserving indigenous heritage. They also reveal an important research gap concerning how artificial intelligence can be responsibly integrated into the preservation and interpretation of sacred African cultural materials without compromising their religious meanings or cultural authenticity. This gap provides a strong justification for further research on the application of artificial intelligence to the preservation and promotion of Oron cultural heritage and related museum collections.

Research Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative and Anthropological ethnographic survey method of collecting data. Primarily, it will rely on oral interviews with museum staff, lecturers, and students of religious and cultural studies that were sponsored by this research through tetfund IBR for field trips to the Oron national museum, The Old Residency Museum Calabar and Slave history museum marina resort Calabar. Participant observation, key informants, and focus group discussions was use in gathering primary data, while textbooks and journal articles were consulted for secondary sources data. Museum curators, Custodians of traditional artifacts, masquerades, and masks were all interviewed.

Descriptive analysis of oral interview data will be employed in analyzing the data collected. Field surveys and video recordings of selected masquerades, masks, and Ekpu-Oro artifacts during displays in traditional festivals such as Nyoro Ekpe, Ababa, selected traditional marriages, and traditional rulers' coronations.

Conceptualization and Types of Digitalized Visual Museum.

Digital visual museums use technology to preserve, present, and interpret religious and cultural artifacts in engaging, accessible ways. As virtual counterparts to physical museums, they recreate objects and exhibitions online through high-resolution images, virtual tours, and interactive displays so people can explore collections remotely. These platforms expand research and teaching, improve access across distances, and foster cross-cultural understanding by putting heritage literally at users' fingertips without the limits of geography.

Tsichritzis and Gibbs (1991), Schweibenz (2019) attributes the first use of “digital museum” to the authors of “Virtual Museum and Virtual Realities,” who describe it as a virtual artifact in a networked environment less a place than a service, existing as data that users access. Britannica (1996) defines a virtual museum as a collection of digital images, sounds, texts, and other data accessed electronically; it notes such museums lack the permanence and physical objects of traditional institutions. Schweibenz (2019) adds that these platforms use varied media to present cultural heritage but cannot replace tangible artifacts. Malraux (1978), in *Museums Without Walls*, used photography to imagine a museum beyond physical limits—an idea often tied to “virtual reality.” Schweibenz (2019), citing Bentkowska-Kafel, warns that the exact phrase “virtual reality” may owe more to translators than to Malraux himself, though his vision remains foundational for digital museum concepts.

Types of Digitalized Visual Museum.

There are several classifications of digital museums by scholars and institutions. This work adopts Pescarin's (2024) classification of digital museums into seven (7) categories, which are:

1. By Context: this is focus on the settings in which it appears or occurs, it encompasses the following: (a) Archaeology Virtual Museum (b) Art Virtual Museum (c) Ethnographic Virtual Museum (d) Historical Virtual Museum (e) Natural History Virtual Museum (f) Technology Virtual Museum (g) Design Virtual Museum (h) Intangible Heritage Virtual Museum (Music, Fashion, Poetry, etc.) (i) Built Heritage Virtual Museum (Architecture and Urban Virtual Museum) (j) Landscape Virtual Museum. The proposed digitalized visual museum for the academic study of religion and culture falls into this first category that focuses on context as it covers religion, culture, and archaeology.

2. By Interaction Technology: this are museums that can digitally relate or act mutually with the visitors and tourists with the aid of some technological and programming devices. They include the following: (a) Interactive Virtual Museum (Device-based, Natural, and Gesture-based Interaction)(b) Non-interactive Virtual Museum

3. By Duration:(a) Periodic Virtual Museum (b) Permanent Virtual Museum(c) Temporary Virtual Museum

4. By Communication:(a) Descriptive Virtual Museum (b) Narrative Virtual Museum(c) Dramatization-based Virtual Museum

5. By Level of Immersion:(a) Immersive Virtual Museum (b) Non-immersive Virtual Museum

6. By Sustainability Level:(a) Reusable Virtual Museum (b) Non-Reusable Virtual Museum

7. By Type of Distribution:(a) Distributed Virtual Museum (b) Non-Distributed Virtual Museum.

These seven classifications of digital museums are further subdivided into two broad categories: Education-based and Gamified Digital Museums.

(1) Education-based Digital Virtual Museum are established with the sole objective of teaching and educating visitors and giving all-encompassing learning opportunities. In addition to providing comprehensive information, they also incorporate their content with curriculum and give interactive learning possibilities like virtual tours and quizzes. The proposed digitalized visual museum for the academic study of religion and culture will be of great importance for the teaching of religion and culture, just like the Smithsonian Learning Lab, which provides a wealth of instructional materials that are in line with school curriculum, such as lesson plans and interactive exercises inspired by artifacts from the Smithsonian museums.

(2) Gamified Digital Museum: Gamification is the use of game aspects in digital museums to increase visitor satisfaction and participation. To encourage users and enhance the interactive nature of learning, they include gaming mechanisms such as points, levels, challenges, and rewards. These museums frequently employ stories or situations to entice visitors to explore and solve problems, drawing them fully into the museum experience. One educational game that allows players to visit ancient Greece, solve riddles, and learn mysteries about the Parthenon statues is called "A Gift for Athena" from the British Museum.

Concept, Relevance and Factors Militating against the Academic Study of Religion and Culture

The academic study of religion and culture is the scientific learning and teaching of religion and culture; it's like putting on a pair of glasses that allows you to see the world from many angles. Ben (2018), described religion is as recognizing duties toward the divine and forming the moral core of human adoration, Tillich sees it as an ultimate concern. The academic study of religion, Armin Geertz (2007) notes, applies empirical, neutral methods to examine beliefs, rituals, and practices across traditions showing how religion shapes thought, behavior, and social life. Paul Tillich's idea of religion as "ultimate concern" emphasizes that religion seeks meaning beyond facts, shaping identity and experience.

Ben (2017) defines culture as a society's collective life, the patterns of behaviours, achievements, and survival strategies passed down through language, art, ritual, and custom. The scholarly study of religion and culture therefore preserves communal memory and deciphers how communities transmit values across generations. Waggoner (2011) observes renewed appreciation for religion and spirituality within cultural life, underscoring the field's contemporary relevance. Scholars document texts, oral traditions, artifacts, and rituals through ethnography, archival research, linguistics, and archaeology to recover hidden

narratives and historical meaning. This research fosters cross-cultural dialogue: careful analysis helps dispel myths, bridge differences, and promote peaceful coexistence.

Academic study addresses social problems, religious extremism, cultural conflict, and injustice by using sociological and historical tools to reveal structural causes and suggest rights-based reforms. The academic study of religion and culture combines rigorous methods with ethical engagement to illuminate human meaning, preserve heritage, and contribute to more informed, tolerant societies.

Factors Inhibiting the Academic Study of Religion and Culture

The academic study of religion and culture faces numerous challenges that impede its growth and expansion. Some of these challenges include:

1. Lack of Access to (Digital) Museums

Ihionu, noted that the lack of museums in the academic study of religion and culture undermines the study and makes it uninteresting for students, who focus only on the theory, whereas the museum would have served as the laboratory with artifacts and religious and cultural remains that would serve as specimens for the empirical study of religion and culture (Oral Interview). Effiom adds that the excursion in the museum and the physical study of some artifact and the shrine prove the historical study of religion and culture before the advent of the missionaries to be true, interesting, and exciting (Oral Interview).

2. Wrong association of the study to theology, Preconceived notions and bias:

Uzokwe noted that it is very discouraging to study religion and culture, as many people wrongly associate the study with theology and will go as far as asking ignorantly if one wants to become a pastor for studying Religion most especially (Oral Interview). John Edet explained that there is a wide level of ignorance by most members of the society who mistakenly associate religious and cultural studies with theology. he further adds that he was discouraged by his immediate family members from studying religion and culture, as he will become a pastor at the end of his study (Oral interview).

Okemmah, explains that negative preconceived and biased notions about other people's religion also discourage people from studying religion. she adds that she was told not to study religion, that as a female and non-Muslim she is not permitted to discuss Islam and that if she does, it can lead to her being stoned to death. this frighten and almost discouraged her from the study if not for the intervention of a philosophy graduate that took time to disabuse those negative notions (Oral Interview).

Preconceived notions and bias make it difficult to academically research religion and culture. Some premature scholars and researchers are often times biased, holding onto their own worldview, opinions, or assumptions and beliefs towards other people's religion and culture, clouding their interpretation of evidence and limiting the impartiality of their deductions/inferences, where prejudices overwhelm their perception of the issue, ideology, beliefs, and several others (Oral Interview).

3. Lack of Access to Resources/original sacred text and Ethical Dilemmas:

Lack of access to original sacred scrolls, artifacts, and cultural remains of the study area culture and religion often poses a barrier to certain academic studies of religion and culture. Aleke Emmanuel added that the Ekpu-oro ancestral artifact serves as valuable evidence of the Oron people's civilization, religion, and culture. He further added that the uncording of the symbols on the artifact is an important aspect of symbolism that needs further research for the deeper hidden religio-cultural knowledge imbedded in the Ekpu-oro.

Abah further posits that if the Oron people did not preserve the Ekpu-oro ancestral artifact for posterity, studies on the Oron people's civilization, religion, and culture would have been classified as mythology and neglected by contemporary scholars (Oral Interview). Lack of finance for ethnographic surveys, oral interviews, and inaccessibility to material culture remain can be significant inhibitions. In the academic study of religion and culture, access to original material cultural remains, artifacts, historical records, and cultural objects for empirical study is a necessity (Oral Interview).

Isohyip noted that finance plays a critical role, especially in primary research, as it can be a big constraint to most researchers and negatively affects the outcomes of the research as a result of a lack of access to primary data. institutional constraints may force limited access, reducing the extent and hidden data penetration in the academic study of religion and culture (Oral Interview).The academic study of

religion and culture often times raises ethical issues such as lack of respect, bias, and use of derogatory and humiliating terms on the study area of religion and culture. Scholars must observe agnostic neutrality in their research and differentiate between academic curiosity and cultural insensitivity.

Significance of Digitalized Visual Museum in the Academic Study of Religion and Culture

Digital museums preserve and interpret religion, culture, and history, giving scholars, students, and the public meaningful access to artifacts and sacred objects. Through curated collections, interactive exhibits, and educational programs, they deepen understanding of cultural and religious diversity. Though some physical museums face neglect, their core roles—documentation, preservation, display, conservation, interpretation, research, and education—remain essential to cultural life.

. Museum is highly relevant to the academic study of Religion and Culture and below are some of its objectives and importance:

1. Collection: A museum's first role is collecting cultural and historical objects often donated by individuals, families, or communities and making them available to the public. Museums also preserve these items to prevent decay and safeguard them for future generations. Acquisition happens in two main ways. Direct acquisition comes from fieldwork archaeological digs, ethnographic research, and scientific expeditions followed by careful documentation at the site. Indirect acquisition involves purchases, donations, loans, exchanges with other institutions, or recovery from illegal trafficking. Together these methods build collections that museums document, conserve, interpret, and share for education and posterity.
2. Education: Museums educate the public formally and informally by making cultural, historical, and religious objects meaningful. As Essio (oral source) says, museums create cultural awareness for students and visitors by labeling objects, offering context, and explaining their significance. They also produce secondary materials texts, guides, manuals and support learning through education rooms, craft shops, and libraries. Okpoko observes that this educational work fosters belonging, sympathy for ancestral creations, and a commitment to preserving heritage. By combining information with engaging displays, museums both teach and entertain, linking people to their cultural past while encouraging fresh thinking about tradition and modern life.
3. Preservation: The museum is also responsible for the protection of objects against theft, destruction (physical or chemical decay), and attack by organisms such as insect pests by building a reliable museum and gallery. Though in Nigeria, maintenance is a big threat to our national heritage, as many museums have not been renovated for about ten to twenty years (10-20).
4. Exhibition This is the arrangement and display of objects so as to catch the eyes of the visitors and arrest their attention for a closer examination of the object. This process is a technical and systematic process left in the hands of the curator, who is specially trained for this task. This work will examine the following significance of digitalized visual museums:

a. Digitalized Visual Museum as an Empirical Laboratory for Research and Innovation:

Museums serve as empirical laboratories for the scholarly study of religion and culture, providing access to artifacts, artworks, and primary historical records. Gregory Onah notes that the establishment of a digitalized visual museum for the academic study of religion and culture will make the studying experience practical, more interactive, and accessible with the digitization of museums, enabling in-depth investigation regardless of location (Oral Interview). According to him, the enormous collection of religious and cultural artifacts that digitalized visual museums offer allows scholars to conduct interdisciplinary innovative research, comparative studies, and creative interpretations. This accessibility promotes cooperation, protects cultural legacy, and deepens awareness of other belief systems and traditions, all of which improve the academic study of religion and culture (Oral Interview).

Museums are irreplaceable vital resources for academic research in the fields of religious studies, anthropology, art history, and archaeology. Researchers rely on museum collections for studying ancient scripts, iconography, cultural civilization, ritual practices, and the socio-political impact of religion. Additionally, technological innovations such as digital archives, virtual reality exhibits, and 3D

reconstructions enhance scholarly research by providing new ways to interact with and analyze historical artifacts.

b). Revenue Generation through Religio-Cultural tourism, Interfaith and Cross-Cultural Dialogue:

Nwosu explained that Digitalized visual museum, if established, will globalize and interconnect the world with the department of religious and cultural studies, University of Calabar. Digitalized visual museums will bring about understanding and dialogue by showcasing the beauty and complexity of diverse religious and cultural traditions, beliefs, values, and worldviews (Oral Interview).

Usang also posits that it will provide academic opportunities to viewers to explore and learn belief systems, rituals, and philosophies with openness and respect. By engaging with these narratives visually and contextually, students gain a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity, which is essential for both scholarly inquiry and global citizenship (Oral Interview).

Religious and cultural tourism means visiting places with deep spiritual or cultural roots to learn and grow. Digital visual museums expand that reach by offering virtual access to artifacts, sites, and immersive experiences, helping scholars, students, and the public explore traditions beyond travel limits. Museums also act as neutral spaces for interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue, using exhibits and programs to foster respect, tolerance, and conversations between religious leaders, scholars, and communities.

Christian Ihionu added that digitized visual museums create a global storefront for cultural items like Ekpe and Ekpu-oro artifacts letting visitors view and buy souvenirs online (oral interview). By widening audiences and tapping international markets, digital platforms boost the visibility and commercial value of these traditions. Sales can generate income for artists, craftsmen, departmental museums, and universities while promoting cultural heritage responsibly.

d) Inclusivity, Accessibility and Preservation of cultural heritage and civilizations:

Essien, noted that creating a digital visual museum in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies will broaden access to Efik, Ejagham, Efut, Oron, and Ibibio heritage: Ekpe, Nsibidi, Ekpu-oro, monoliths, and terracottaonline (oral interview). Udom (oral interview) adds that researchers can study sacred artifacts and sites virtually without traveling, widening scholarship and public access.

Edidiong Jedidiah (oral interview) argues that a digital visual museum would expand long-distance study by removing access barriers and cutting travel, lodging, and logistical costs. Its inclusive nature would welcome researchers from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds to study scarce artifacts and remains. Museums' core role remains protecting cultural and religious objects manuscripts, sculptures, paintings, and ritual implements—that reveal beliefs, practices, and artistic expression across societies. Careful conservation keeps these pieces available for future scholarship and public understanding.

Digitizing collections extends museums' reach while safeguarding heritage from decay, loss, or destruction. Trilce Navarrete (2020) notes that preserving both physical and digital assets prevents degradation and can increase their value through research and enhancement. Digital visual museums use high-resolution imaging, 3D scanning, and virtual reality to recreate artifacts in rich detail, providing immersive experiences that capture their spirit.

These platforms also advance teaching and research: scholars can perform comparative analyses, track cultural trends, and explore interreligious connections, while students gain virtual access to original materials that deepen comprehension and appreciation. Onah (oral interview) highlights the urgency: many objects such as Ekpu-Oro figures in the Oron National Museum face theft, termite damage, and neglect, undermining physical preservation. Digital replication can protect knowledge even when originals are at risk.

Overall, digital visual museums offer practical conservation, broaden scholarly participation, and revive interest in lesser-known traditions by curating inclusive narratives that reflect the diversity of world religions and cultures.

e.) Providing Contextual Learning, Research, and Comparative Studies Opportunities:

Udom Christiana explained that Digital visual museums are multi-functional by educating, acting as research platforms and serving entertainment purposes. It gives researchers opportunities to trace iconographic patterns across regions, study changes in religious traditions, beliefs, and architecture over

centuries, or conduct comparative analyses of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and several other sacred texts (Oral Interview). The integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning into these platforms further enhances their research capabilities.

Museums offer unique historical educational experiences by providing historical and cultural contexts to religious artifacts. It displays uncoded symbols and textual descriptions on objects in the museums and enables learners to visualize religious practices and appreciate the artistic and symbolic elements of diverse cultural and religious traditions. Atypical example is the centuries-old Ekpu-Oro intricately carved ancestor statue/sculpture, which provides researchers and scholars with a more profound appreciation of the craftsmanship and religious devotion involved in their creation, beliefs, traditions, and worldviews.

The various religious collections, artifacts, and cultural remains housed in museums allow for comparative studies of religious and cultural traditions. Through the visual examination of artifacts from various religions side by side globally, researchers and scholars can explore common themes, shared influences, and distinctive characteristics of different faiths. Comparative approach gives a deeper understanding of the interconnectivity of human religion, culture, societies, and the ways in which they have evolved through cross-cultural interactions.

Digital visual museums cheer interdisciplinary study by integrating several disciplines such as computer science, art history, anthropology, religion, culture, linguistics, and digital humanities, among several others. Through high-resolution images, 3D models, augmented reality, and interactive timelines, students and researchers can examine religious symbols, ritual objects, and cultural expressions in a more holistic and contextual manner. These tools support immersive learning, helping users understand the sociocultural, religious, historical, and theological nuances embedded in religious practices and cultural traditions.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Museums are very significant in the academic study of religion and culture, as they primarily act as storage houses and custodians of religious heritage, deliver immersive educational experiences, facilitate comparative and interdisciplinary studies, and encourage intercultural dialogue. Digitalized visual museums are technological innovations, educational and scientific integrations, and revolutions in the study of religion and culture. It gives remarkable distance learning opportunities, preserves religious and cultural heritage scientifically, and enriches academic study of religion and culture. The integration of digital technology in the form of a digital visual museum into religious and cultural studies firstly serves as a laboratory where artifacts and cultural and religious remains can be studied empirically, unraveling and deepening one's understanding of other human spiritual and cultural journeys, and in turn makes knowledge accessible, inclusive, and impactful irrespective of distance.

The significance of museums in the academic study of religion and culture cannot be overstated. They act as custodians of religious heritage, provide immersive educational experiences, facilitate comparative and interdisciplinary studies, and encourage intercultural dialogue. As society continues to evolve, museums will remain essential institutions that bridge the past and the present, offering invaluable insights into the diverse spiritual and cultural traditions that shape human history.

Digitalized Visual Museums brings a plethora of opportunities into the academic study of religion and culture. These digital museums have revolutionized the way we study, investigate, and value many belief systems and traditions by giving us virtual access to an enormous variety of religious and cultural artifacts. With unparalleled ease and depth, researchers may perform interdisciplinary research, comparative studies, and creative interpretations with the aid of digital technology. Digitalized visual museums expand the comprehension of many religions and cultures and directly cheer collaboration, protect cultural legacy, and advance moral reflection in the academic study of religion and culture.

As a recommendation, this work calls for the establishment of a digitalized visual museum in the department of religious and cultural studies based on its significance in our contemporary global society and the enormous value that digitalized visual museums bring to the academic study of religion and culture.

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