

Cultural and Religious Heritage in the Commune of Covè (Bénin): Current Situation and Socio-Economic Implications

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Abstract

Heritage refers to wealth, property, or inheritance passed down from our ancestors. In the case of Covè, this heritage includes both cultural and religious elements that are available to the commune. The aim of this research is to examine the cultural and religious heritage of the commune of Covè. The methodology used in this study consists of data collection, data processing, and analysis of results. Field surveys were conducted based on questionnaires and interviews with 102 individuals, selected using Marien and Beaud's method. The processing of this data and the analysis of the results led to the following key findings. The results indicate that the commune of Covè possesses a rich cultural and religious heritage that can significantly contribute to its socio-economic development. Nineteen (19) cultural heritage sites and twenty (20) religious heritage sites were identified through the survey responses. This heritage plays a crucial role in ensuring the security of the commune and supports its economy through tourism to local sites and small businesses run by the community during religious ceremonies. Proper management of these assets is essential for preserving and enhancing the heritage, ultimately contributing to the development of the commune of Covè.

Keywords

Covè, Heritage, Cultural, Worship, Development

1. Introduction

A locality's cultural and religious heritage is a fundamental aspect of its collective identity, connecting past, present, and future generations through symbolic practices, objects, and spaces. In the case of the commune of Covè, located in the Zou

department of Benin, this issue holds particular significance due to the richness and diversity of its heritage. This heritage, which encompasses both tangible and intangible elements such as traditional cult sites, sacred objects, religious practices, and historical monuments, plays a key role in the social and economic structure of the commune. Analyzing this heritage helps to better understand its socio-economic implications, especially in a context where globalization, social changes, and economic challenges are reshaping the relationship between communities and their heritage.

The concept of cultural heritage, as defined by Lemoine & Guyard (2012), includes both tangible and intangible objects, as well as cultural practices that carry symbolic value. According to Desbordes (2010), the appropriation of heritage is a foundational act of local identity and a process of reaffirming cultural roots in the face of globalization. In the case of Covè, cultural heritage, as discussed in Gosselin (2013), is essential for social cohesion and the preservation of traditional knowledge. Much of this heritage is tied to traditional religious practices and the worship services held at these sites, as highlighted by Adedeji (2014).

The socio-economic development of the commune of Covè also depends on the enhancement of this heritage. As noted by Aina (2011), heritage enhancement can be a powerful tool for sustainable development, particularly through cultural tourism. However, this process involves complex issues related to management, preservation, and local community involvement, as pointed out by Renaud (2015) in his work on participatory management of cultural assets. Furthermore, Agossou (2016) argues that cultural heritage, often seen as a space of power and collective memory, is also a site of social and political struggle.

Tensions between respect for tradition and the demands of economic development, as discussed by de la Durette (2017), are intensified by the rise of new religious movements and increasing urbanization. Additionally, globalization, according to N'Guessan (2019), is altering heritage conservation and interpretation practices, particularly regarding the staging of traditional cults. Local dynamics are also influenced by public heritage preservation policies, whose impact on the socio-economic development of the commune has been analyzed by Gbaguidi (2020).

Thus, this research seeks to explore the various aspects of Covè's cultural and religious heritage by examining traditional and religious practices, historical sites, and the challenges faced by local communities in preserving this heritage.

2. Geographical Presentation of the Commune of Covè

The commune of Covè is situated in the heart of the Zou department, with coordinates between 7° 5'32" and 7° 33'44" north latitude, and 2° 9'57" and 2° 23'03" east longitude. It is bordered to the north by the commune of Dassa-Zoumè, to the south by the commune of Zogbodome, to the east by the commune of Zagnanado, and to the west by the communes of Za-Kpota and Djidja (Mairie de Covè, 2018). The urban area covers 55 km² and is located 44 km, 32 km, and 157 km from the

towns of Abomey, Bohicon, and Cotonou, respectively (INSAE, 2013). Covè is a rural commune with a population of 51,247 according to the 2013 RGPH census (INSAE, 2013). The commune is divided into eight (8) arrondissements and currently comprises thirty-six (36) villages and town districts. **Figure 1** illustrates the geographical location of Covè commune.

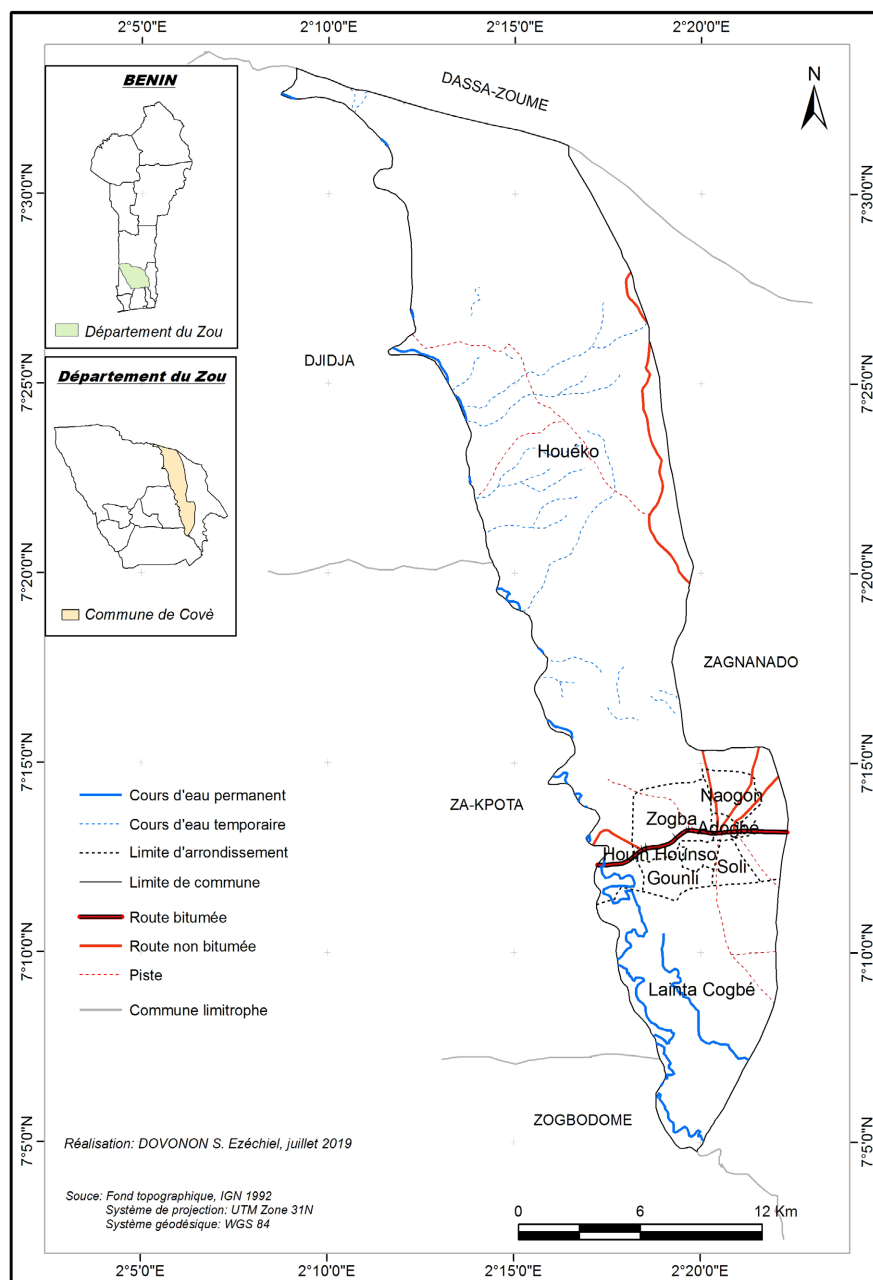


Figure 1. Map showing the geographical location of the commune of Covè.

This map shows the geographical location of Covè, with its boundaries and location.

The geographical context of a locality has a profound influence on its cultural

and religious heritage. This is also the case in the commune of Covè. Geography can shape a locality's heritage through its relief and natural environment, based in particular on climate and vegetation. Indeed, the type of climate influences agricultural and dietary practices, as well as the materials used to build homes, temples, churches and mosques. For example, communities living in hilly regions may prefer stone constructions, while those located in forest or savannah areas will use more local materials such as wood or straw. Similarly, the availability of natural resources such as wood, stone or sand also has an impact on the construction of places of worship and ritual objects. The people of Covè often used these resources to make certain objects.

Similarly, the proximity of trade routes and cultural exchanges, the proximity of natural sacred sites, isolation or openness to other cultures, the history of migrations and invasions, the topography and layout of religious spaces all shape the cultural and religious heritage of the Covè commune.

When it comes to the topography and layout of religious spaces, geography influences the way religious communities organize their space. For example, in urban areas, religious buildings are concentrated in specific zones (such as Christian or Muslim quarters in certain cities), while in rural areas, religious practices take place around isolated temples or sanctuaries, often in the open air or in natural landscapes.

As far as the history of migrations and invasions is concerned, it's important to remember that a region's geopolitical history also plays a role in its religious and cultural heritage. Migrations, invasions and colonizations have often introduced new religions and beliefs into a region, changing the religious landscape. For example, the invasion of the Roman Empire introduced Christianity to many regions, and the routes of Islam spread the religion across Africa. As Benin also experienced these invasions, the people of the Covè commune share their endogenous beliefs with those who preferred to follow imported religions.

In short, geography is a key factor influencing the development and evolution of cultural and religious heritages. Each region, depending on its environment, resources, exchanges and geographical history, forges a unique set of traditions, beliefs and practices that make it an integral part of its inhabitants' identity.

3. Data and Methods

This is the approach used to collect, process and analyze data. This approach involves determining the sample and the study population.

3.1. Sampling

In order to obtain reliable information, the purposive sampling method was used for the key players and for the qualitative approach of this research. Thus, the target population was made up of actors who met the following criteria: be indigenous, have a good knowledge of the commune's cultural and cultic heritage, be involved in the commune's development actions, contribute to efforts to develop

local cultural heritage, be capable of making concrete proposals for local development. Based on these criteria, the actors selected were: the commune mayor, the 08 commune arrondissement chiefs, 27 chiefs of the 36 commune village chiefs and 59 religious followers and leaders. For the quantitative approach, the Beaud and Marien $n' = \frac{NXn}{N+n}$.

Using this method, 102 heads of households were selected at random. The sampling characteristics are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1 provides information on the people who were surveyed, with particular reference to the nature of the information sought. The mayor of the commune was also included.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by research area.

The various districts of the Covè commune	Number of village chiefs surveyed	Number of religious leaders surveyed	Number of heads of household surveyed
Naogon district	5	13	21
Soli district	4	5	9
Houin district	3	6	13
Houeko district	3	6	10
Gounli district	3	6	8
Adogbé district	4	8	15
Zogba district	4	9	16
Lainta district	3	4	10
Total	27	59	102

Source: Field surveys, February 2024.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Households were interviewed using a questionnaire, while key informants (including the mayor, arrondissement chiefs, village chiefs, and religious leaders) were interviewed using a structured interview guide. The topics covered included the current state of the commune's cultural and religious heritage, the socio-economic impacts of this heritage, and strategies for improving its management.

For the questionnaire survey, the questions were designed based on the research objectives and were directed to households in alignment with these objectives.

The data collected was entered into a computer and analyzed using Excel and SPSS version 12.5.0. Word was used for text processing, while Excel and SPSS were employed to generate tables and figures from the various cross-tabulations. Finally, the qualitative data was categorized, classified, and triangulated.

The results were interpreted from a systemic perspective, using the SWOT model to examine both the internal and external factors affecting cultural heritage.

This approach yielded some insightful findings.

4. Results

The main results obtained are organized around the origin and typology of cultural and cultic heritage.

4.1. Origin of Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage is a vital legacy passed down through generations, reflecting the beliefs, customs, and practices of human societies. Its origins can be traced back to the earliest human communities, who began organizing their collective way of life and developing distinct belief systems. Anthropologist [Levi-Strauss \(1962\)](#) argues that culture is formed through a complex process of socialization and transmission, where communities create systems of values, rituals, and traditions that shape their identity. This transmission process, which spans generations, is central to the development of cultural heritage, expressed through both tangible elements (such as monuments and objects) and intangible ones (including beliefs and knowledge).

The origins of cultural heritage are closely linked to the emergence of religious practices. According to historian [Duby \(1994\)](#), the earliest forms of worship appeared in prehistoric societies, where natural forces and deities associated with the earth, water, sun, and moon were revered. These beliefs led to the creation of sacred places, temples, and rituals that remain integral to our cultural heritage today. Religious heritage is defined by its ability to connect individuals to their divinity, their community, and their environment, and it is manifested through ceremonies, religious festivals, and places of worship.

Ancient societies thus played a crucial role in the birth of two key forms of heritage—cultural and religious—through their interactions with the environment and their spiritual beliefs. These heritages have been passed down over time, diversifying across cultures and societies. Historian [Braudel \(1979\)](#) asserts that the evolution of cultural and religious heritage occurs through an ongoing interaction between geography, history, and culture, giving this heritage a collective value and symbolic power unique to each society.

Cultural heritage is rooted in the human need to anchor societies in time and space by creating symbols and landmarks that link them to their past, present, and future. Preserving this heritage has become a critical challenge for maintaining collective identity and historical memory. In this context, the management of cultural and religious heritage is a vital tool for the development of contemporary societies, contributing to social cohesion, the transmission of values, and the safeguarding of global cultural diversity.

4.2. Typology of Cultural and Religious Heritage

The commune of Covè is home to various types of heritage. The figure below illustrates the spatial distribution of both cultural and religious heritage within the

commune. An inventory is provided here, focusing on these two categories: cultural and religious heritage.

Figure 2 illustrates the spatial distribution of Covè's cultural heritage. It provides an inventory of the heritage found throughout the commune, highlighting the widespread presence of forests in all the arrondissements, which are home to divinities such as Oro, Dan, and others. As a result, access to these forests is restricted to initiates of these divinities. The same restriction applies to various sites scattered across the commune, where certain divinities, including Sakpata, Zangbeto, and Egoun (the revenant), are venerated.

Additionally, the presence of the Royal Palace in the commune serves as a symbol of the preservation of ancestral traditions.

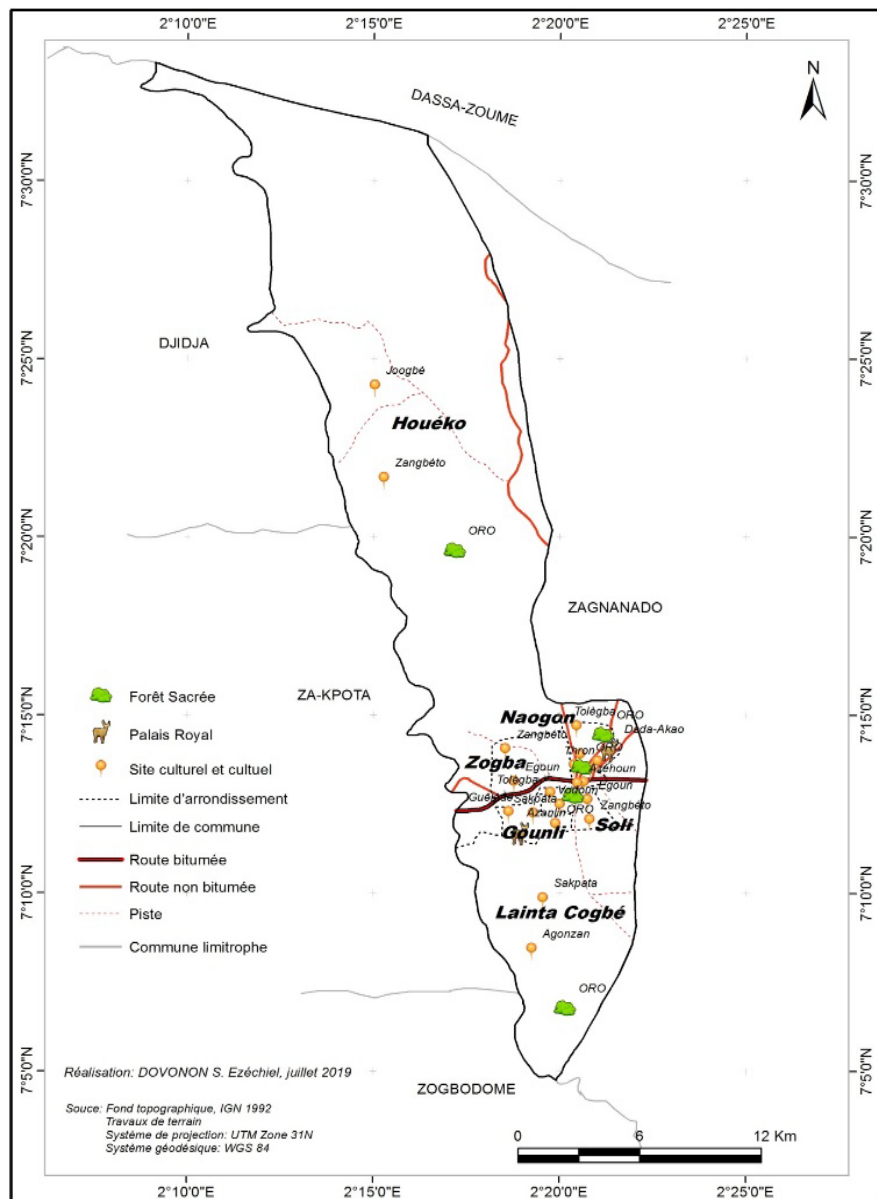


Figure 2. Map showing the spatial distribution of Covè's cultural heritage.

4.2.1. Tangible Cultural Heritage

Tangible cultural heritage encompasses monuments, historic buildings, works of art and other emblematic sites. In the context of this research, this mainly concerns royal palaces.

- **Zéhê royal palace**

The royal palace of Gounlin Covè and Agonlin is currently under construction, featuring a well-crafted facade that represents the dynasty of the kings. This facade overlooks a spacious public square, which is thoughtfully designed and adorned with two additional heritage elements, the sato and guèlèdè, placed by the king. Inside, the palace is minimally decorated, lacking any notable attractions for visitors, and there are no statues on display. The king of this palace holds the title of the king of all Agonlin kings. A project has been proposed to renovate the palace with the goal of promoting cultural tourism, which could make the site a more appealing destination for tourists. Plate 1 shows the royal palace of Agonlin Covè (**Plate 1**).

The first photo shows the entrance to the royal palace, while the second shows the entrance to the public square of King Zéhê's Agonlin royal palace in Covè (Gounli).



Plate 1. Royal Palace of Agonlin Covè (Gounli). Shot: Dovonon, February 2024.

- **Dada AKAO Palace**

The Naogon palace honors DADA AKAO, the founder of the district and a close ally of King Zéhê, who appointed him King of Agonlin after capturing the nagot of Kétou and Oyo. DADA AKAO is buried on the palace grounds, and the site houses various objects in his memory. Every five years, the DOVONON family of Naogon organizes sacrifices (including oxen and sheep) and ceremonies attended by their descendants and followers, who celebrate his legacy through dance and song. Although the palace does not contain statues, it does feature drawings and a deity. The palace stands as a symbol of DADA AKAO's memory and serves to preserve the traditions and identity of the local community. **Photo 1** depicts the DADA AKAO palace in Naogon (**Photo 1**).

Naogon Palace honors DADA AKAO, the founder of the district and a close friend of King Zéhê. He is buried on the palace grounds, and the site preserves objects in his memory. Every five years, the DOVONON family organizes sacrifices and ceremonies in his honor, gathering his descendants and followers. While

the palace lacks statues, it is adorned with drawings and a deity, keeping his memory and local traditions alive.



Photo 1. DADA Akao Palace in Naogon. Shot: Dovonon, February 2024.

4.2.2. Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage encompasses traditions, languages, know-how, rituals and intergenerational transmissions. This research focuses on sacred forests, deities, crafts and traditional gods.

- Houin “kponzoun” sacred forest



Photo 2. Internal aspect of the Kponzoun sacred forest (Houin). Shot: Dovonon, February 2024.

The Kponzoun sacred forest, located in the southern part of the Houin district, spans 38 hectares, although its area is shrinking due to urbanization. It is the sacred home of the Tohiô Bossikpon deity, associated with the twin spirits Housou and Ezinhouedji, who are buried within the forest. Managed by Dah Keli, the forest contains spaces for rituals, including those dedicated to the Hoho and Tohossou twins. A river runs through the area, and it is home to various plant species such as *Annona Senegalensis* and Baobab trees. The local wildlife also

piques the curiosity of the community. Fruit can only be consumed on-site, and red objects are strictly forbidden. Any animals that are killed are prepared and consumed on the premises. **Photo 2** shows the internal layout of the Kponzoun sacred forest (**Photo 2**).

Photo 2 shows the interior of the Kponzoun sacred forest, with its pathway containing several animals and a diversity of plant species supported by deities. The forest is open to all.

Access to the sacred Kponzoun forest is reserved exclusively for the initiated.

- **The Tohossou and Sakpata deities**

Tohossou, in the Fon language, means “king of the waters.” He is a deity embodied by a child with a physical deformity. Upon his death, ceremonies are held, featuring animal sacrifices (such as sheep and roosters), kola nuts, alcohol, and sweets, with offerings made from the sacred river to the home. During these rites, each Tohossou receives a baptismal name. If this deity is not honored after death, he brings misfortunes to his loved ones, including accidents or failures. Therefore, it is crucial to show respect for these deities.

Sakpata, also known as Vodoun Dokounnon (“Evolution”), is the god of the earth, diseases (especially smallpox and measles), and healing. He uses smallpox to punish those who break the rules. His followers wear a distinctive red loincloth and typically bear three scars on their cheeks. Sakpata is linked to two hills that represent angels and prophets, where prayers and sacrifices are offered. This deity requires the presence of a forest, found in every district, to ensure prosperity. **Photo 3** shows the Sakpata convent and forest in Adogbé.

Photo 3 shows the Sakpata (Dokounnon) convent and forest, including the udders of the two angels, where sacrifices are performed. In the background, there is a large building and a mystical hut filled with objects and stones. In addition to Tohossou and Sakpata, several other divinities are worshiped, such as Goun, Sanyì, Dan, the divinized Loko tree (Iroko), Hèbiosso, Tolègba Kplékpan, Botin, Aïzan, Dovo, the sacred path, and Laha, among others. These divinities protect the people of the region and their ancestors, safeguarding communities and preserving tradition.



Photo 3. Convent and forest of the Sakpata deity of Adogbé.
Shot: Dovonon, February 2024.

- **Handicrafts**

The commune's craft industry is rich and diverse, offering a wide range of traditional artworks. Some communities have preserved ancestral techniques, with artisans specializing in basketry (such as baskets and mats), blacksmithing (including gongs, knives, guns, and hoes), and woodcarving (such as masks, religious objects, and drums). Inspired by local cults and heroes, they craft masks, statuettes of deceased twins, animal figures, decorative chairs, and thrones. These creations, often based on contemporary themes and everyday life, are made for sale. Artisans also train apprentices in their crafts.

- **Traditional events and dances**

The events in the commune include vodoun ceremonies and traditional dances, characterized by singing and dancing, which often offer impressive spectacles for both participants and spectators. Oro, Dan, Azehoun, and other vodoun festivals are held annually, while Sakpata, Dovo, Dada Akao, and Azongnigni festivals take place on various dates. Additionally, every January 10, only vodoun devotees visit the national site dedicated to the festivities of indigenous religions.

Traditional dances can be categorized into two types: sacred dances associated with religious cults and celebratory dances. These dances vary according to ethnic group, with notable examples including the Dan, Sakpata, Attingali, Kpogbéloko, Zomandonou, Djoogbé, and Avimandjè dances performed by vodoun followers and religious leaders. Popular dances such as Sato, Toba, Massè, Tchinkoumè, and others bring vibrancy to local festivities. These dances are accompanied by specific instruments, such as tam-tams (used during the Sato dance), which are integral to ritual ceremonies and sacrifices, as shown in **Photo 4**.

The photos on this plate show the different types of Sato drums used in the Naogon district for various festivities and events.



Photo 4. Types of Sato (Naogon). Shot: Dovonon, February 2024.

- **Medjidjo**

This ceremony takes place at the birth of a child to determine, with the help of the fâ, the ancestor or divinity from which the child is descended. The child must

respect the totems to guarantee peace and success in life. However, this practice is less and less followed by families.

4.2.3. Cultural Heritage

The cultural heritage of the Covè commune encompasses religious sites, rituals, and spiritual practices, which are sometimes influenced by other religions. This heritage includes cemetery worship, the Houeli (protection and evolution) and Hoho (twins) deities, Fâ (divinatory science), purification ceremonies (Avodo Hodji, Alindoto), Sôhoun (tam-tam tributes to ancestors), exorcism (Azongnigni), the Agbassa (sacred building), Yôho (sacrifices to the dead), the Temple of the Supreme Chiefs of the Vodounons, the Catholic cult, the Guêlêdê (secret society), and the Zangbéto (night watchmen). Some of these elements will be explored in greater detail in this research.

To honor the divinities, ceremonies were held, and sacred spaces were designated. Covè is marked by the peaceful coexistence of indigenous and foreign religions, with sites linked to both traditional and imported beliefs. In general, the following divinities are venerated:

- **Cemetery**

The cemetery is a sacred site where the dead are buried, with families consenting to inter their loved ones there. While it belongs to the commune, it has become insufficient for burial needs. The graves are in poor condition and have been damaged by vandals, despite security measures in place. The cemetery house is inadequately fenced, and its maintenance, particularly with regard to weeding, is neglected, detracting from its overall appearance.

- **Houeli**

The Houeli deity is a protector, ensuring security and progress. Present in every household, she combats witchcraft, safeguards children, and promotes prosperity within the home. She defends against mystical forces to maintain peace. Houeli is typically placed at the entrance or in the center of the house and can be nourished with red oil or a cornmeal porridge called “tchasin.” Crafted from stone or wood, this powerful divinity continuously watches over the household. She consumes porridge made from simple water plus mixed corn flour. However, she does not take red oil. She protects the family, especially children, from witchcraft.

- **Fâ**

Fâ is a divinatory science that predicts the future, illuminates the past and present, and offers solutions to challenges. It removes negative influences and paves the way for success and peace. Consulting Fâ is crucial, whether for personal matters or significant national events, such as the coming year. In Covè, over 30 Fâ masters practice officially under the Association des “Fa Bokonons” d’Agonlin.

Photo 5 depicts Fâ consultation sessions.

Photo 5 shows two Fa master in consultation. It shows Master Amangbékpo in consultation, with the effigy of his grandfather, Bokonon Xwlesa, a great Fâ master, hanging on the wall.



Photo 5. Fa master in consultation at Houin. Shot: Dovonon, February 2024.

- ***Guêlêdê***

The Gêlêdê is a secret society and ritual dance in which men, dressed in elaborate costumes and wearing sacred wooden masks, perform rhythmic steps accompanied by chants and percussion. The dance, typically held at night or in the evening, aims to select a winner based on the beauty of their dance moves and serves as a form of entertainment. It takes place in public squares, particularly during the funeral of a sect member or at a ritual festival. The Gêlêdê also honors the spiritual powers of elderly women. The following photo shows a Gêlêdê mask (**Photo 6**).

This photo displays the Guêlêdê mask known as “Agbo,” worn by a dancer holding ponytails and surrounded by percussionists and singers forming a circle. This is the first Guêlêdê mask invoked, whether day or night, to seek “Egni Avalou” permission and ensure that events proceed smoothly without chaos, as it is regarded as a spiritual symbol. The entire ceremony is accompanied by song.



Photo 6. Guêlêdê in Naogon Atogon. Shot: Dovonon, February 2024.

- **Zangbéto**

Zangbéto masks, regarded as night guardians, are known by various names and are highly respected. They appear both day and night, but only the initiated are able to see them at night. Present in every arrondissement of the commune, each neighborhood may have several Zangbéto masks, depending on the enthusiasm of the residents. Zangbéto dances, with their rhythmic and distinctive movements, are performed during festivals or cultural weeks, where both locals and foreigners gather. Zangbéto dancers can also be hired to perform, even by foreigners, for a fee. Each arrondissement or district has its own convent, often accompanied by a tolègba for sacrifices. Some convents are poorly fenced and lack decoration.

- **Kouvito ou Egoun**

The Egoun is a vodoun representing deceased ancestors who return to their native environment. Their return to the family is celebrated with popular festivities. They appear during the day, dressed in special costumes, and perform specific dance steps. This cult is honored during festivals or funeral ceremonies, often in public squares. **Photo 7** shows an Egoun in action (**Photo 7**).



Photo 7. Kouvito (Revenant) by Soli. Shot: Dovonon, February 2024.

This photo shows a *Kouvito* or revenant in full performance with *“yalo”* percussionists and spectators watching from near and far, both seated and standing.

Heritage sites play a key role in the socio-economic development of a region, bringing both direct and indirect benefits. The ways in which they can contribute to this development include

Tourism and job creation: In the commune of Covè, this is expressed through tourist attraction. Heritage sites, whether historical, cultural or natural, attract tourists from all over the world. This generates demand for accommodation, catering, transport and other services. For example, the various sites highlighted in

the document attract thousands of visitors every year, generating considerable income for local communities. Similarly, site maintenance, guided tours, souvenir sales, hospitality, tourism management, etc., generate a wide range of jobs, from the most specialized to the most accessible. These jobs provide a source of income for local populations and help reduce unemployment.

Infrastructure development: Within the commune, increased visitor numbers to heritage sites have led to investments in local infrastructure, such as roads, public transport, sanitary facilities, drinking water and electricity networks. These improvements benefit not only visitors, but also local residents, enhancing their quality of life. In addition, site enhancement projects have led to improvements to public spaces that benefit the entire population, such as the rehabilitation of public squares, markets and historic districts.

Promoting local crafts and traditional products: here, too, heritage sites have stimulated local crafts by drawing attention to traditional skills. For example, visitors can buy handicrafts such as pottery, textiles or jewelry made locally, creating markets for these products and supporting the artisans. Last but not least, local products and culinary specialties are promoted at all the sites, attracting a large number of tourists. This helps to boost the local economy by encouraging agricultural production, trade and the sale of specific products.

In addition, strengthening local identity and cultural pride through the creation of social cohesion and public partnerships, education and awareness of local culture through educational programs and support for research and innovation, site enhancement as a driver of attractiveness through destination development and the creation of labels and certifications, Sustainable development and preservation of the environment through the Green Economy and the Conservation and enhancement of natural heritage, and lastly, Strengthening the role of sites in cultural diplomacy through the international collaboration network contribute directly to the socio-economic development of Covè.

In short, heritage sites are important levers for socio-economic development. Thanks to their tourism potential, their ability to generate jobs, promote crafts and strengthen local identity, they contribute to economic growth while preserving and celebrating the cultural and natural riches of the regions.

4.3. Social and Economic Impacts of Cultural Heritage

4.3.1. Social and Economic Impacts of Cultural Heritage on Community Identity

Cultural heritage plays a crucial role in shaping and maintaining community identity. At the intersection of social and economic dimensions, it influences not only how individuals perceive themselves but also how they engage with others within their community. The impact of this heritage is multifaceted, evident in various aspects of communal life.

On a social level, cultural and religious heritage strengthens community bonds by fostering a sense of belonging. Shared traditions, rituals, and practices—whether festive or religious—create opportunities for people to come together and interact.

Cultural festivals and religious celebrations, such as Ramadan or Christmas, unite individuals around common values, thereby reinforcing social cohesion. As anthropologist [Turner \(1969\)](#) notes, these shared experiences help solidify collective identities and forge a collective memory.

Economically, cultural heritage can significantly contribute to local development. Heritage tourism, for example, serves as a major source of income for many communities. Historic sites, monuments, and places of worship attract visitors, generating various economic activities ranging from hotels to restaurants. According to studies by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), cultural heritage can be a catalyst for sustainable economic development, enabling communities to diversify their income sources while preserving their heritage.

However, it is essential to ensure that the economic exploitation of heritage does not compromise its cultural integrity. The risks of over-commercialization can dilute authentic values. As ethnologist [Gell \(1998\)](#) points out, a profit-driven approach can turn living traditions into mere tourist commodities. Therefore, a management strategy that balances both economic and cultural considerations is vital to preserving heritage authentically.

Lastly, cultural heritage's influence on community identity extends to younger generations. By passing down knowledge and traditions, heritage becomes an educational tool, raising awareness about a community's history and culture. This helps shape identities that, while evolving, remain rooted in a shared heritage. Intergenerational initiatives, such as craft workshops or heritage education programs, support this transmission and empower youth to embrace their culture while remaining open to diversity.

In conclusion, cultural heritage has a profound social and economic impact on community identity. By strengthening social ties, stimulating local economies, and fostering the transmission of traditions, it contributes to the development of dynamic and resilient identities. To fully harness these benefits, a balanced approach is necessary—one that respects both the cultural authenticity and economic needs of communities. Through this synergy, heritage can play a pivotal role in affirming and sustaining community identities.

4.3.2. Social and Economic Impact of Cultural Heritage on Tourism and Economic Development

Cultural heritage plays a key role in the economic development of regions, especially through tourism. As major tourist attractions, heritage sites, historic monuments, and places of worship draw millions of visitors annually, generating significant revenue for local communities and stimulating various economic sectors.

Economically, heritage tourism is a major driver of job creation. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism-related industries such as hospitality, catering, and transportation are heavily dependent on visits to cultural sites. This generates both direct and indirect employment opportunities, boosting the economic development of local communities. For example, in cities like Rome or Kyoto, tourism centered around historic sites not only supports the local econ-

omy but also helps preserve local architecture and traditions, enhancing the region's appeal to visitors.

However, the economic benefits of cultural tourism must be balanced with the need to preserve the integrity of heritage sites. Over-tourism can lead to damage and degradation of these cultural resources. Therefore, sustainable approaches are essential to manage visitor flows while protecting heritage. Strategies like guided tours with limited capacity, promoting ecotourism, and implementing conservation awareness programs are crucial to ensure that economic development does not come at the expense of preserving cultural assets.

On a social level, cultural heritage enriches the tourism experience. Visitors are drawn not only to monuments but also to immerse themselves in local cultural and spiritual practices. This fosters meaningful intercultural exchanges, allowing tourists to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Traditional festivals, religious rituals, and the work of local artisans offer authentic experiences that enhance the appeal of a destination. As anthropologist [MacCannell \(1999\)](#) observes, the desire for authenticity is a powerful driver of contemporary tourism.

Cultural tourism can also strengthen a sense of pride and belonging within local communities. By showcasing their heritage, local people are encouraged to actively engage in preserving their culture. This creates a positive cycle where economic development and heritage preservation support each other. For instance, local artisans are often motivated to create handicrafts that reflect their cultural heritage, attracting buyers who wish to support the local economy while purchasing authentic souvenirs.

Lastly, it is crucial to involve local communities in the management of heritage and tourism. Their participation ensures that the economic benefits directly reach local populations and that decisions reflect their cultural values. Community-based tourism projects, which include locals in both planning and operations, are excellent examples of practices that maximize tourism's benefits while safeguarding heritage.

Over-tourism and over-commercialization of heritage sites represent major challenges for the preservation of the sites, the quality of the tourism experience and the economic equilibrium of local communities. To meet these challenges, several strategies can be put in place to ensure sustainable, respectful site management while enabling communities to benefit from the economic spin-offs of tourism. These include:

Sustainable tourism management: this involves limiting the number of visitors by setting up quotas or ticketing systems to limit the number of visitors per day, thereby reducing the pressure on sites. In the commune of Covè, for example, all the sacred sites have already set up such systems, even if they are not yet working properly, to avoid a massive influx of tourists, with a view to protecting the sacred objects. Increasingly, local site preservation stakeholders are encouraging the use of online advance booking systems via dedicated platforms, to better con-

trol the influx of tourists and avoid visitor peaks. This allows visitors to be distributed more evenly over the year, avoiding periods of overcrowding.

In terms of **promoting ecotourism and sustainable tourism**, we need to encourage responsible tourism that respects the environment, and enhance niche tourism by promoting more targeted forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, rural or cultural tourism, which can help to diversify the offer and ease the pressure on the most visited sites.

As far as **raising awareness of cultural and environmental values** is concerned, it's worth mentioning the education of tourists through the development of educational programs on local culture, the history of sites and the importance of preserving them. For example, organize guided tours with local experts, conferences or workshops on heritage management. Similarly, awareness-raising campaigns are needed to inform visitors about the negative impacts of over-visitation and encourage them to adopt responsible behavior (such as avoiding touching objects or leaving litter).

Finally, **improved regulation and infrastructure, public-private partnerships and local collaboration, cultural valorization without excessive commercial exploitation, and the use of new technologies for optimal management** can help to meet the challenges of over-commercialization and over-tourism at Covè.

In a nutshell, meeting the challenges of over-tourism and over-commercialization requires a multifaceted approach that combines regulation, education, technological innovation and local cooperation. The aim is to reconcile heritage preservation with the economic benefits of tourism, seeking a balance between the sustainable management of sites and the enrichment of local communities. It's an approach that requires the long-term commitment of all stakeholders, from public authorities to tourism operators and visitors themselves.

The commune of Covè is rich in cultural and religious sites that contribute significantly to its economic development. Although precise quantitative data on the economic impact of these sites is limited, several initiatives and ongoing projects testify to their potential.

Current cultural heritage and tourism projects:

- **Development of tourist sites and access routes:** An investment of 4 billion FCFA is underway to improve tourist infrastructure, facilitating access to the commune's cultural and religious sites (beninrevele.bj).
- **Museum of the Amazons and Kings of Danxomè:** An ambitious project with a budget of 35 billion FCFA, aimed at enhancing local history and culture, attracting visitors and stimulating the local economy (beninrevele.bj).
- **Promoting talent and building capacity in the cultural sector:** An investment of 12 billion FCFA is aimed at developing local skills, thereby promoting job creation and economic growth linked to the cultural sector (beninrevele.bj).
- **Support for the development of culture and the arts:** Funding of 5 billion FCFA has been allocated to support local cultural initiatives, boosting the region's tourist appeal (beninrevele.bj).

- **Development of the crafts sector (PDSAB II):** With a budget of 8 billion FCFA, this project aims to promote local crafts, creating economic opportunities for local residents and enriching the tourism offer (beninrevele.bj).
- **Construction of a mini-refinery:** with a budget of 120 billion FCFA, this project aims to strengthen the region's industrial infrastructure, stimulating the local economy (beninrevele.bj).

These initiatives illustrate Covè's commitment to enhancing its cultural and religious heritage, thus contributing to local economic development. Although specific quantitative data on the direct economic impact of these sites is limited, these projects testify to a desire to boost tourist appeal and stimulate the regional economy.

In conclusion, cultural heritage has a profound social and economic impact on tourism and regional development. As major tourism drivers, these elements strengthen the local economy while promoting cultural exchange and community pride. To ensure sustainable growth, it is essential to adopt heritage-conscious practices and actively involve local communities in the management of cultural resources, thus ensuring a prosperous and balanced future.

4.3.3. Role of Local Communities in Heritage Management and Tourism Development

Local communities play an essential role in heritage management and tourism development, as they are the guardians of traditions, the primary beneficiaries of economic spin-offs and the most knowledgeable about the specific characteristics of their territories. Actively involving local communities in these processes can make heritage management more sustainable, respectful and beneficial to all stakeholders. Here are some detailed aspects of the role of local communities in heritage management and tourism development.

- **Preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage:** Within the commune of Covè, local communities are the custodians of numerous skills, craft traditions, cultural and religious practices that form the core of intangible heritage. For example, traditional building techniques, music, dances, festivals and culinary recipes are precious elements that they can preserve and pass on to visitors. This is why, by being involved in heritage management, communities can better sensitize tourists to the value of their traditions and the importance of preserving them. They can explain local practices, organize cultural events, or initiate preservation projects that respect local ecological and cultural standards.
- **Developing authentic, sustainable tourism:** Local communities play a key role in welcoming visitors, offering authentic experiences and ensuring quality interactions. These range from homestays and guided tours led by community members, to traditional meals and craft workshops. Local and community tourism are also practiced. This enhances the attractiveness of the site and guarantees a richer, more respectful experience for visitors. The benefits are shared within the community, whether through the creation of small businesses, the improvement of local infrastructure or the generation of jobs for young people

and women. This type of tourism can include local history tours, guided hikes, visits to local markets or farms.

Strengthening cultural identity and social cohesion by reinforcing local pride and identity, and social cohesion and inclusion. This inclusive approach strengthens unity and solidarity between community members, while giving them the tools to develop economically and culturally.

Local capacity building and vocational training through the ability of local communities to manage heritage sites and the training of local tourism stakeholders.

- **Participation in decision-making and governance:** this approach involves consulting and involving local communities in heritage management and tourism development. This ensures that preservation and development projects respect their needs and aspirations.
- **Job creation and economic diversification:** this concerns the creation of local jobs and the diversification of sources of income, as tourism can become a complementary activity that contributes to economic stability, particularly in rural or isolated areas.
- **Protection and sustainable management of natural resources:** this involves local ecological practices and the active participation of local communities in the management of the environment and heritage sites. This contributes to the long-term preservation of these resources.

In general, involving local communities in heritage management and tourism development is about more than just economic participation. It's about recognizing their central role in preserving their culture, environment and history. Collaborative and inclusive heritage management helps to ensure the sustainability of heritage while guaranteeing positive social and economic benefits for local communities. It is also a way of strengthening local identity, improving the quality of tourism and promoting a sustainable approach to development.

4.3.4. Examples of Other Communes or Regions with Similar Heritage Management Strategies and Comparison with Covè

Several communes and regions in Benin have implemented heritage management strategies similar to those of the commune of Covè, with a significant impact on economic development and the preservation of cultural heritage. These initiatives are often characterized by collaboration between local authorities, communities, private investors and tourism stakeholders. Here are a few examples of success stories from other regions of Benin, and a comparison with the situation in Covè.

- **Heritage management in Ouidah (Benin)**

Ouidah, located on the south coast of Benin, is one of the country's most important tourist destinations, thanks to its rich historical and cultural heritage, particularly linked to the slave trade. The city has set up several heritage management initiatives to attract visitors and preserve its history:

- the Parc des Immeubles Historiques de Ouidah;
- the Ouidah History Museum;
- the Slave Route.

In comparison with Covè, it has to be said that, like Ouidah, Covè has a significant cultural and religious heritage, particularly in terms of historical sites and local traditions. The commune of Covè could benefit from similar strategies by enhancing its religious and cultural sites, while developing infrastructures suited to quality tourism. Ouidah also demonstrates the importance of collaboration between local authorities and international partners in financing and managing preservation projects.

- **Developing cultural tourism in Abomey**

Abomey, another heritage city in Benin, is known for its royal and historical heritage, notably the Palais Royal d'Abomey, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The management of this site has been a successful model for cultural heritage preservation and tourism development:

- restoration of the Palais Royal d'Abomey;
- the promotion of community tourism;
- the creation of cultural events and festivals.

Comparison with Covè: Abomey has succeeded in integrating local communities into the management of its heritage, creating economic spin-offs and social development. Covè could emulate this model by further involving communities in the management of its cultural and religious sites, and developing local cultural events to attract visitors.

- **Pendjari National Park (Northern Benin)**

The Pendjari National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a successful example of natural site management in Benin. Although it is not a cultural or religious site, its management model may be relevant to Covè:

- **Participatory management:** The park operates on a participatory management model, where local communities are involved in surveillance, management of tourist areas and conservation activities. This has improved economic conditions for local populations while preserving the environment.
- **Development of tourism infrastructure:** Investments in infrastructure (roads, accommodation, tourism services) have enhanced the park's attractiveness and created local jobs.

Comparison with Covè: The Pendjari Park model demonstrates the importance of sustainable, participatory management of natural and cultural sites. Covè could benefit from similar strategies for its cultural and religious sites, by involving local communities in site management and developing infrastructures suited to sustainable tourism.

- **The Zou historical sites enhancement project**

In the Zou department, to which Covè belongs, a number of historical and cultural sites are being developed. The Protocole d'accord pour la préservation et la gestion des sites historiques du Zou aims to integrate heritage management into local economic development:

- **Tourism infrastructure:** The project has enabled the construction of access

roads and visitor facilities (rest areas, museums, information centers).

- **Training of local communities:** Training programs have been set up to enable local people to become active players in tourism management, by training them in tourism-related professions (guides, hotel management, catering).
- **Networking sites:** The creation of tourist circuits linking a number of historical and cultural sites in the Zou region is helping to diversify the offering and attract a greater number of visitors.

Comparison with Covè: This project is similar to that of Covè, as it highlights the importance of tourism infrastructure and training for local communities. Covè can take advantage of this approach to structure a network of cultural and religious sites and develop attractive tourist circuits.

The examples of Ouidah, Abomey, Pendjari and Zou show that the management of cultural and religious heritage, combined with sustainable and participatory tourism strategies, can generate significant economic benefits for local communities. Comparing these examples with the situation in Covè, it appears that the commune has great potential to develop its tourism sector, in particular by enhancing the value of its cultural and religious sites. To achieve this, it is essential to adopt an integrated approach that includes heritage preservation, tourism infrastructure, training for local communities, and the promotion of responsible, sustainable tourism.

5. Discussion

Cultural and religious heritage is a vital aspect of a society's collective identity. It encompasses not only physical assets such as monuments, archaeological sites, and works of art, but also intangible elements like knowledge, religious practices, beliefs, and rituals. This dual aspect—cultural and religious—plays a crucial role in shaping both individual and collective identity while simultaneously facing numerous challenges related to preservation and enhancement in an increasingly globalized world. The management of this heritage is part of a complex dynamic, where balancing preservation, modernity, and accessibility is key.

At its core, cultural heritage is about memory and transmission. As [Nora \(1997\)](#) notes, “heritage is a vector of memory, a tool for social cohesion that forges and reinforces collective identity.” Whether religious, tangible, or intangible, heritage helps construct a sense of history and belonging. Religious rituals, beliefs, and local festivals, for example, maintain connections to ancestors and strengthen community values. In African societies, places of worship and rituals tied to voodoo or other traditional religions serve as critical means of social cohesion ([Gonou, 2010](#)). Religious heritage, often tied to ancestral spiritual practices, forms a cornerstone of both local and national identity.

The significance of this heritage also lies in its capacity to provide a sense of continuity over time. As [Deliege \(2002\)](#) asserts, heritage “connects us to our past, and thereby defines us as a human group”; it serves to preserve a living history

that unites community members across generations. In this context, cultural heritage is more than the veneration of deities or ancestors; it also embodies social, economic, and political values.

Managing cultural heritage comes with major challenges, particularly in a globalized world. A key challenge is preserving heritage in the face of threats such as degradation and loss. Intangible heritage, such as sacred songs, ritual dances, and religious beliefs, is especially vulnerable to the rapid changes of modern societies. As [Levi-Strauss \(1962\)](#) notes, “traditional societies have always used cult and cultural heritage as a foundation for daily practices,” but modernization and urbanization can distance younger generations from these traditions.

Religious practices are also affected by globalization, which has led to the standardization of beliefs and rituals, sometimes eroding local variations. In Africa, for example, many traditional religions are in decline due to the rise of Christianity and Islam. [Falola \(2011\)](#) highlights that globalization, with the spread of monotheistic religions, has often marginalized traditional belief systems, which are frequently seen as outdated or superstitious by dominant religions. This phenomenon affects the preservation of both ancestral religious practices and the sacred sites associated with them.

In addition to preservation, promoting cultural and religious heritage presents a significant economic challenge. Cultural tourism, which highlights historic monuments, places of worship, and religious festivals, is a rapidly growing industry. However, [Akbari \(2005\)](#) cautions that this promotion must be approached sustainably, balancing economic development with respect for traditions. Poorly managed mass tourism can lead to the trivialization or even destruction of heritage. Examples such as Peru’s Machu Picchu and Cambodia’s Angkor temples illustrate how mismanaged tourism can cause irreversible damage.

Cultural heritage is not just an aesthetic or tourism issue; it also serves as a political and social tool. Tensions often arise between the preservation of traditional heritage and the demands of modernity. For example, certain cultural practices can become the subject of political debate, especially when they conflict with modern standards or national laws, as seen in the case of ritual animal sacrifices in some communities.

Heritage can also become a point of social conflict when it is appropriated or reinterpreted for political purposes. When governments or interest groups appropriate cultural heritage, it can lead to tensions between different communities. As [Trouillot \(1995\)](#) explains, “heritage becomes a battleground, a way for groups to define themselves against others.” This underscores how heritage management is often intertwined with issues of power, and that its preservation cannot be separated from the social and political dynamics that influence various cultural practices.

In conclusion, cultural and religious heritage—through its diversity and richness—presents a significant challenge for contemporary society. It is not only a means of asserting collective identity but also a potential driver of economic de-

velopment, particularly through tourism. However, it must be managed thoughtfully, taking into account the challenges posed by globalization, modernity, and political tensions. Cultural heritage should be seen not merely as a legacy of the past but as a dynamic, living force—both a custodian of memory and a guide for the future.

6. Conclusion

The primary objective of this work is to invent and evaluate the cultural and religious heritage, the socio-economic impact of this heritage, and strategies for better managing the cultural and religious heritage of the Covè commune.

Based on the findings from our fieldwork, we discovered that Covè's cultural and religious heritage holds significant potential, which could contribute to the development of a relatively diverse tourism industry. However, several challenges are hindering the development of local cultural heritage in this commune. To address these challenges and facilitate tourism development in this part of southern Benin, strategies must be implemented to enhance and promote the local cultural heritage.

In light of the issues related to cultural heritage, several recommendations were made to improve, enhance, and promote the local cultural heritage, such as rehabilitating the commune's tourist sites to transform Covè into a cultural hub of Benin.

The commune of Covè has made progress in promoting and conserving its cultural and religious heritage. There is a noticeable evolution in terms of the importance and development policies regarding heritage preservation, compared to the past.

Today, it is evident that Covè requires projects to address the challenges it faces. For this objective to be achieved in the long term, collaboration with NGOs, donors, and other stakeholders is essential for the protection and promotion of cultural and religious heritage, ensuring its realization. Strong political will from the highest levels of the Beninese government can position Covè as a cultural tourism destination, benefiting national tourism as a whole.

To enhance Covè's profile, it is crucial to safeguard its cultural heritage and rehabilitate its tourist sites. This will require the implementation of a comprehensive policy for the development of Covè's cultural heritage.

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