

## S2 E7

### Heritage Has a History

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Hello and welcome to Material Memory. I'm your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo.

The climate crisis is the product of human history, often influenced by deliberate choices to maintain wealth and power. This same history ensured that the effects of the crisis wouldn't be felt evenly, and this includes the impact on cultural heritage. In this episode, we'll consider the relationship between cultural preservation and the intricate histories it's bound to, focusing on the specific context of Nigeria. I spoke with anthropologist Dr. Blessing Nonye Onyima about the biggest threats to Nigerian cultural heritage--from climate change to colonialism--how they intersect, and what it means for the country and the many cultures within it.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Let's start now by having you introduce yourself.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** Yeah. I'm Dr. Blessing Nonye Onyima. I look at issues that have to do with culture, health, environments and conflict studies.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Blessing has degrees in both cultural and medical anthropology, specializing in ethnography. She's also published on [the challenges and prospects of preserving cultural heritage in Nigeria](#). I wanted to know what led her to these areas of study.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** I went into anthropology from home. I wanted to study people's culture. You know, Nigeria is a very diverse country. Ethnically, linguistically, and culturally, we are diverse. So that complexity is my attraction.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** I asked Blessing if she could share how she defines cultural heritage.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** Cultural heritage is a sum total of the material or non-material, endowments of a group of people. And by, you know, material cultural heritage, I mean artifacts, relics, antiquities. Then when we talk about non-material heritages, we are talking about the ideological heritages, the intangible heritages. You can't see them physically, but they are part of us: the norms, the values, the world views, the philosophies of a group of people, their philosophies of life. So my interest is in ensuring that we preserve our identity, our future. In fact, I was driven by [sustainability thinking](#) ensuring that what is available or what is handed over from past generations are properly taken care of in the present and then made available to the future.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** The way cultural heritage in Nigeria has been preserved has changed over time.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** In the pre-colonial Nigeria, cultural heritages were preserved by elderly people, and also by kings in their palaces. We had people who are specialists, you know, in dancing, in music, these things are done during festivals. And then by folktales, and proverbs of the people, transmitted from one generation to another, from the elderly to the children. With the introduction of colonialism in Nigeria, things began to change. It introduced looting, trafficking of artifacts, stealing of artifacts, and quite a lot of other issues.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Sometimes the looting that occurred during British colonialism wasn't just about the artifacts themselves.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** One peculiar thing is the one that happened in 1897: the punitive expedition by the British to punish the Oba of Benin, where he was exiled to Calabar.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** This is an [infamous story](#). In 1897, the British Military sought to punish the Kingdom of Benin, located in present day Nigeria, for the death of seven British officers and for demanding control over regional trade. [Benin City](#), one of [the most spectacular metropolises](#) in Africa at that time, was raided by British soldiers, who murdered civilians and celebrated the massacre by [wearing offensive costumes](#) mocking the local population. By the end, they had burned the ancient city to the ground, sparing only what they wanted to keep.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** All the artifacts, the bronze materials that were in the Benin kingdom, were looted to Europe, you know, and then we find most of those artifacts in lots of museums outside of Nigeria.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Following the massacre, over [3000 artifacts](#), including the famous Benin Bronzes, were taken to Britain. Although the Nigerian government has pushed for the restitution of these bronzes since independence, progress has been slow. In 2018 the Benin Dialogue Group was able to negotiate the return of some of the most iconic pieces, but this came with [strings attached](#). Repatriation was contingent on Nigeria building a museum deemed suitable to house the items. And the prospective return would only be temporary, though negotiators in Nigeria continue to push to make it permanent. With the help of the [global Black Lives Matter movement](#), which has spotlighted the issue of colonial looting, public opinion in Britain has finally begun to shift. And after nearly 125 years, these stolen treasures may finally begin to find their way back home.

[Music]

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** The legacy of colonialism on Nigeria's cultural heritage is complicated.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** I would say colonialism is a double-edge sword. I've talked a lot about the destructive tendencies, but I want to talk about the preservative tendencies. It was a lot of expatriots that made efforts in advising the then colonial government to begin to pick cultural relics, pick antiques, cultural materials, and preserve them in museums. It was these colonialists that advised the colonial government on the need to build museums across the length and breadth of Nigeria. Nigeria was able to form what was then known as the National Antiquities Service in 1943. And subsequently, within the postcolonial era, that practice continued. The Antiquities Service was now replaced with NCMM, National Commission for Museum and Monuments. And that's why I called it a two-edged sword. It hurts in looting, trafficking, some of those cherished artifacts. But on the other hand, it also helps in the creation of museums across Nigeria and preservation of cultural heritages begins with identification. And then subsequently you start talking about conservation and preservation maintenance of these heritages.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** There are ways that the legacy of colonialism has helped to safeguard heritage in postcolonial Nigeria, but at the same time, that legacy continues to threaten cultural artifacts today. For starters, the looting didn't stop with independence. And although heritage theft may no longer be sanctioned by the state, much of it is still driven by buyers outside of Nigeria.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** The art market has been appreciated in Europe and America, especially African art is appreciated. And this has given rise to illegal trafficking of cultural materials, looting, pillaging, smuggling, thefts, all these are at alarming rates, due to, you know, the popularity of African arts in Europe and America. In fact, some of them have started going into royal palaces, tombs, royal tombs, to loot grave goods.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Blessing doesn't mince words when talking about how she feels about this.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** For me, traffickers, they are involved in cultural genocide of Nigerian cultural heritage. The act of commerce trading in African art is an activity targeted toward cultural genocide. This is also fueled by the activities of greedy museum personnel. Many people feel, "Oh, they're poorly remunerated. Their salaries are low. And that is the reason why they are looting or collaborating with traffickers to loot Nigeria and sell our artifacts." But for me, I don't think so. I think it is greed. The greed of museum personnel, you know, they collaborate with tourists, diplomats, museum workers to loot Nigerian heritage.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Another way the history of colonialism continues to threaten cultural heritage in Nigeria is through its missionary legacy.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** We had our African traditional religions. Each society had their ways of talking to the supreme being. But with the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria... I'm not

just talking about Christianity on its own, but particularly the advent of Pentecostalism introduced the idea of demonization—the need for deliverance. And, you know, from time to time Pentecostal pastors are invited by Christian homes to deliver them of demons in families' shines, religious places, traditional African places.

Christianity is one reason again, why so many Nigerians do not visit the museum—because the museum is the storehouse for quite a lot of traditional religious artifacts. So they feel that's a place where fetish things are kept. [Chuckles] So they have a wrong notion about what a museum is. And then you have this zeal to show or reflect Christianity in you. And then sacred places, shrines, palaces, groups were being bombed and looted by those that are conducting deliverances in the name of Pentecostals. Pentecostalism has a great role in the devastation and destruction of Nigerian cultural heritage.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Blessing also identified what she referred to as the continued "quest for civilization," more commonly framed these days as "development," as another factor endangering heritage.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** Then we have the quest for development, the desire to be like Europe and America and China—the desire to move from the third world to becoming the first world. This is why due diligence [is] not followed. It is the duty of the NCMM—the Nigerian Commission for Museums and Monuments—to ensure that every construction project pass[es] through them and get validation from them before it commences, but this is not done. And, in a bid to build skyscrapers, construct beautiful roads and other things, huge expanses of lands are bulldozed, forest reserves are laid bare and then the wildlife there are also destroyed in the quest for “civilization.”

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Blessing has created a mnemonic device for remembering what she sees as the biggest threats to cultural heritage in Nigeria, which she calls the five Cs. These are Colonialism, Commerce (i.e., antiquities trafficking), Christianity, Civilization, and finally, Climate change.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** The final “C” I would want to talk about is climate change. We have the issue of global warming. We are experiencing it within Nigeria right now, as we are talking. In the north, you know, precipitation is low, and higher in the south. Extreme weather conditions in northern Nigeria, for instance, leads to deforestation, desertification, a reduction in biodiversity, and certain rivers and lakes are drying up because of extreme dryness. So it affected a lot of communities in the north. As the desert is encroaching in the north, it is shifting people down south. And the changes in the climatic conditions often consume cultural heritages and the histories of people are buried within those sand dunes as a result of desertification.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Climate change poses acute risks to archeological sites, but it also threatens cultural heritage in Nigeria's museums.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** During the rainy season, a lot of communities are eroded, and if there are museums, they are often overtaken by floods, especially at peak periods. Then we have the dry season. Excessive dryness can also affect some of the cultural objects. And so for instance, at the [harmattan season](#), everywhere, the rooms are flooded with dust and even the museums too. And this dust can also come with a lot of microorganisms, like termites, like, insects, that can eat up some of these cultural properties.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Climate change also, of course, affects living heritage in Nigeria. Blessing spent a year with the Fulani cattle nomads of Southwestern Nigeria, doing ethnographic research and has seen the impacts firsthand.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:**

Yeah, I've done quite a lot of ethnographic work, principal among them is the ethnography of the nomads in southwestern Nigeria. They are from the Fulani ethnic group. Originally the cattle nomads are found essentially in northern Nigeria. But as a result of climate change and weather conditions that are not stable, most of the northern pastoralists, they migrate down south for their animals. The animals need water to drink. They also need green vegetations. And during the dry seasons, it is only in the south that they find green pastures for these animals to survive.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Water and vegetation aren't the only valuable resources in the Niger Delta.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** So Nigeria produces quite a lot of oil and the Niger Delta region supplies that since 1956 in Oloibiri where oil was discovered.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Nigeria has traditionally been the largest producer of crude oil in Africa. It was ranked the [6th largest](#) oil exporter in the world in 2018, with [oil revenue accounting for 96.6% of Nigeria's GDP](#). Oil has affected the lives of Nigerians everywhere, but perhaps nowhere so much as the Niger Delta.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** The Niger delta area is known for conflict as a result of, you know, the endowment of oil. Initially the kind of conflict that are peculiar to the Niger Delta region is oil or petroleum oriented, but now [another kind of conflict has been introduced](#) as a result of migration from the north. We have a preponderance of conflicts between herders and farmers, migrants, nomads, and sedentarized people.<sup>1</sup> There is always conflict between them: competition for space, competition for land resources, competition for pasture and water. And that is why by the time they move thousands and millions of cattle down south, it engenders conflict. Now these conflicts were essentially prevalent within the Northern central, but with time it started moving deeper and deeper into the Niger Delta.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sedentarization* is an anthropological term meaning the settling of a nomadic population.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** What are some of the ways that this conflict and this migration of the cattle nomads affects their culture and their community identity?

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** They are really affecting them quite a lot. You know, they are pure nomads, but recently we are beginning to find semi-nomads, you know, partially moving and partially settled. Then we're also finding people who are totally [sedentarized](#). So you will find them in the Southwest. Most of them are totally settled now. They only move their cattle, and then after some time to graze and then come back to that settlement. And as a result of that climate change is affecting or changing the culture of these cattle nomads, essentially the Fulanis.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** The climate crisis has not only affected *where* they live, it's fundamentally altered *how* they live.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** The Ilorin Fulanis in southwestern Nigeria, where I studied, are gradually sedentarizing. Initially they had temporary huts. But gradually in most of their settlements where I studied, as I found out that most of them, apart from having thatched huts or mud houses, they are now having block houses, you know, with roofing sheets. So you see that their culture is changing.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** These changes can also be seen in the cattle nomads' personal relationships.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** If you look at that name "Ilorin Fulani" it means a mixture between the Yorubas and the Fulani. So you can see their culture is also changing in the sense that there is marital exchanges between the Yorubas and the Fulanis that are migrating as a result of climatic changes to the southwest. Then these people also abhor modern education. But in recent time, the nomads have started going to school.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Then there's the issue of language.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** Originally, traditionally they speak Fulfulde, but of recent those in the Southwest, I discovered that majority of them speak Yoruba. And in fact, apart from the older generation—for 70 and above—they are the ones that speak the original traditional pastoralist language, Fulfulde. But the rest—that's the younger generation from those 50 years to one year—they speak Yoruba. So you can see changes going on among these groups. And the root cause is climate change.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Climate change may have been the root cause of the Fulani's migration, but so many of the factors threatening heritage in Nigeria are in a feedback loop with each other. Climate change can fuel conflict, religious extremism, and acts of economic desperation, but is also often made worse by them. Our present day climate crisis arguably began with the [industrial revolution](#), which was powered by the [exploits from colonialism](#). And

with the current pervasiveness of fossil fuels, the drive for development can feel at odds with climate action. The result of all of this is devastating for human communities and their cultures, which could change unrecognizably.

[Music]

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Cultural change in Nigeria isn't limited to the Fulani. Blessing mentioned that cultural norms are shifting among urban populations as well.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** There's a craze among Nigerian younger generation to travel to Europe and America. So as they move, they move with the cultural resources, and most times just like some of these things are like ideologies, values, norms, and the rest of them. They infiltrate some of these values, African values into Europe, but most times what we discover is that at the end of it all, when they get to Europe, most of the cultural values, you know, norms and philosophies of life, world views are diluted, and they begin to imbibe Western values. So by the time they migrate back or they return, they lose quite a lot of these values.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Blessing would like to see more education around issues of culture in Nigeria and greater attention to preserving it.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** The custom officers should be enlightened about the need to search for looters, traffickers, and illegal antiquarians who are interested in Nigerian cultural heritage and also maybe we can make use of the media, so also sensitize the public on the importance of some of the cultural artifacts in Nigeria. The only thing I would want to advocate for is that we begin to think of ways of ensuring that Nigerian culture heritage is appreciated—is taught in schools—although quite a number of universities have courses on Nigerian cultural heritage. The issues about our history, Nigerian history, we should take it serious.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Asking to take history seriously has an added layer of significance in the Nigerian context. This may be especially true if you are Igbo, like Blessing is.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** History is a beautiful subject. But unfortunately in the Nigerian case, we do not have history right now in our curriculum.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Really?

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** Yeah, um, some few years back it was removed from the curriculum and that was as a result of, there are a whole lot of political undertones because in teaching history, we have to talk about the Biafran Nigerian War and they would not want to talk about that.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** [The Biafran War](#) was a civil war in Nigeria that lasted from 1967 to 1970 following the secession of [The Republic of Biafra](#) in the Southeast, a region that's

traditionally been home to a large concentration of the Igbo people. It's also home to the Niger Delta and its oil reserves. The war resulted in approximately 100,000 military casualties. A blockade caused another 500,000 to 2 million civilians in Biafra to die of starvation, many of them children. For many Nigerians, this is a difficult memory, and one that helped lead the government in 2007 to [remove the subject of history](#) from its primary and secondary school curriculums. It was not restored until 2019, skipping nearly an entire generation of students. With half of Nigerians currently [under the age of 19](#), this policy has touched a substantial portion of the population.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** There is also the challenge of insufficient or inadequate history teachers to go around and then no appreciation of the importance of history. People do not want to study history above the secondary school level. So just quite a few are attracted to studies like archeology, anthropology, and history. And I think that's something that is also affecting cultural heritage, because when we begin to inculcate the issues about our past into our younger generations we'll help to preserve some of our valued heritages.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** When I spoke with Blessing, in October 2020, Nigeria as a country had just turned 60, and Blessing along with many other Nigerians, was reflecting on the past six decades.

**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** Nigeria did well, has done well so far. The fact that we have not disintegrated is commendable. So, in spite of the fact that there are quite a lot of conflicts, it doesn't mean that we don't have something to rejoice over or celebrate. You know, most people call it an "unholy marriage." Britain, that colonized us, forced different kingdoms to merge to form Nigeria, "Niger area." They brought in the south and the west and the east and the north together to form the country of Nigeria.

Nigeria is a country that gained its independence on 1st October, 1960. And then in the seventies, it was confronted with the Nigerian Biafra war, and then subsequently in the eighties, Nigeria was plunged into about 16 years of military rule, [which] ended in the nineties. May 29, 1999, we had a launch into what we call democracy. Although we have not gotten to the level, the level of democracy we envisage or ask for, but we are working on it. Nigeria has experienced about 21 years of democratic dispensation without interruption, and it is worthy to be celebrated.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** There may be lessons the world can learn from Nigeria as we look to adapt to climate change. As more people are displaced globally and forced to relocate into other people's homelands and neighborhoods, more communities may find themselves pushed together into an unholy marriage.



**Blessing Nonye Onyima:** It is a marriage of diverse ethnic groups, diverse linguistic groups, people with diverse histories, diverse cultures, diverse values into one entity. And it has been a big problem, a huge problem in Nigeria, but we are surviving. We are moving. The country is moving on. So we tend to appreciate this unholy marriage, as unity in diversity.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** In Nigeria, the impacts of the climate crisis can't be untangled from the nation's past, and the compound threats to culture that have grown out of it. If we are to preserve culture in any meaningful way, we must acknowledge and work with this complexity. Our history is inextricable from our heritage.

[Music]

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Thank you to our guest, Dr. Blessing Nonye Onyima. You can learn more about Blessing's work and the topics covered in this episode on our website, [material-memory.clir.org](http://material-memory.clir.org). If you can believe it, this is the second to last episode of the season. In our final episode, we'll be reflecting on what we've learned over the course of the season and think about where we can go from here. We hope you'll join us.

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I'm your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo, and this is Material Memory.