

Promoting cultural heritage for tourism in Mededjonou and Malanhoui districts (Adjarra Municipality, Southern Benin)

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Abstract

The municipality of Adjarra in general, and the districts of Médédjonou and Malahoui in particular, are rich in cultural heritage. However, this cultural wealth is not being properly promoted. This results in a loss of income for the population and local authorities. This research aims at analysing the promotion of the cultural and tourist heritage of the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui in southeastern Benin. The methodological approach adopted in this research revolves around data collection, data processing, and analysis of results. Two main data collection techniques were used: documentary research and field surveys. The tools used for data collection were primarily a questionnaire, an interview guide, and an observation grid. To conduct the field surveys, a sample of 97 people was selected. The collected data was processed using Word 2010 (for word processing), Excel 2010 (for database design, tables, and graphs), and ArcGIS 10.1 (for maps). The results were analysed using the SWOT model. Based on field surveys, interviews with local stakeholders, and strategic analyses, it highlights a rich but underutilised cultural heritage, comprising both tangible assets (traditional masks, carved drums, sacred forests, voodoo shrines) and intangible assets (initiation rites, oral storytelling, indigenous knowledge). Tourism promotion rates vary greatly from one locality to another: from 0% in Lindja-Dangbo, where the sites remain little known, to 33% in Médédjonou and Ouèkè, where community initiatives are beginning to emerge. Malanhoui stands out for its improved accessibility thanks to developed trails and rudimentary signage, encouraging local visits. According to data from the Adjarra town hall, nearly 70% of young people in the research community are involved in heritage-related craft activities, including drum making, basket weaving, and pottery. These skills represent an important economic lever, but suffer from a lack of structure and professionalisation.

Keywords: Médédjonou and Malanhoui; Cultural Heritage; Tourism; Local Development; Adjarra.

1. Introduction

Like the cultural sector, the tourism sector has become an essential pillar of global development. Tourism is, by its very nature, a multidimensional activity in which the relative weight of economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects varies according to context and to the priorities of stakeholders (DGCiD, 2006, p. 33). Today, tourism constitutes a genuine global industry and contributes significantly to wealth creation (F. Ohoubonon, 2016, p. 10). It is a powerful driver of economic growth and job creation worldwide. As a major source of employment and income, tourism enables large numbers of job seekers to access meaningful job and achieve a substantial level of income (World Bank, 2013, p. 2). Statistics from the World Tourism Organization (WTO) indicate that 10% of the jobs created in 2012 were in the tourism sector, representing approximately five (5) million new jobs. Overall, tourism directly and indirectly accounts for 8.8% of global employment (258 million jobs), 9.1% of global GDP (USD 6 billion), 5.8% of global exports (USD 1.1 billion), and 4.5% of global investment (USD 652 billion) (World Bank, 2013, p. 8).

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In Africa, tourism represents a growing economic potential. From 2000 to 2005, revenues doubled, rising from \$10.5 billion to \$21.3 billion in Africa (WTO, 2008, p.12). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism accounted for 10.1% of GDP, 10.7% of investment, and 11.7% of tax revenue in 1995, employing 212.2 million people, or 11% of global employment.

In Benin, cultural heritage is exceptionally rich and diverse, yet its preservation remains a major challenge. Beyond preservation, there is an equally important issue: that of promotion (S. G. Amegnikpo, 2016, p. 11). Nevertheless, Benin captivates visitors across its entire territory with its beaches, stilt villages, museums, cliffs, mountain ranges, and wildlife and flora reserves (CES cited in D. M. Ako, 2017, p. 10). Covering an area of 114,763 km² in West Africa, Benin also boasts 125 km of coastline, along with abundant natural, cultural, and historical resources that constitute significant tourist attractions (N. S. Hounton, 2018, p. 10). Since independence, however, limited sustained efforts have been made to develop tourism into a fully viable economic activity, despite the country's remarkable natural, artistic, and cultural assets that offer genuine opportunities for development. Renowned for its legendary hospitality, Benin could experience exceptional growth in its tourism sector through the effective promotion of its wealth, history, and cultural diversity, particularly as the cradle of Vodun (S. Affolabi cited in B. Adjovi, 2016, p. 13).

Thus, Benin's rich and varied cultural heritage, including the lake city of Ganvié, royal palaces and museums, traditional religious practices, oral genres such as the Guèlèdè performance tradition, the national parks and wildlife reserves of the northern region such as Pendjari National Park and W National Park, the fine sandy coastline, the Python Temple of Ouidah, and the waterfalls of Tanougou and Kota, deserves greater investment for its effective promotion and integration into development strategies.

Cultural heritage is a fundamental component of identity and social cohesion; its intentional destruction can have serious consequences for human dignity and human rights (UNESCO, 2003 cited in I. Natonnagnon, 2014, p. 35). It is now widely acknowledged that culture can add significant value to national GDP (UNESCO, 2003, p. 15). Beyond cultural industries, cultural heritage creates favorable conditions for job creation, increased per capita income, individual fulfillment, and international recognition. However, despite progress toward sustainable tourism development in recent years, practical challenges persist. Addressing these challenges represents a considerable global effort if the current dynamism of the sector is to be harnessed for sustainable and responsible growth.

In the Adjarra municipality, more specifically in the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui, local cultural heritage, including Vodun rites, artisanal know-how, and oral traditions, remains vibrant yet under-valued. The absence of structured tourism planning, insufficient visitor infrastructure, and weak coordination among local stakeholders limit the transformation of these resources into drivers of endogenous development. These territories also suffer from limited visibility in national heritage policies, even though they represent a form of rural hub capable of linking urban dynamics with community realities.

It is therefore necessary to examine the conditions and mechanisms through which cultural heritage can be transformed into a genuine lever for local development in the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui.

1.1. Geographical Framework of the Study Area

The districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui, which constitute the focus of this study, are located in the eastern part of the Adjarra municipality in southern Benin. They are predominantly rural and composed of numerous villages and hamlets. These two districts are accessible via a network of roads and rural tracks, some of which become difficult to use during the rainy season. Geographically, they lie between 6°27'30" and 6°31'41" North latitude, and between 2°39'11" and 2°44'03" East longitude (Figure 1).

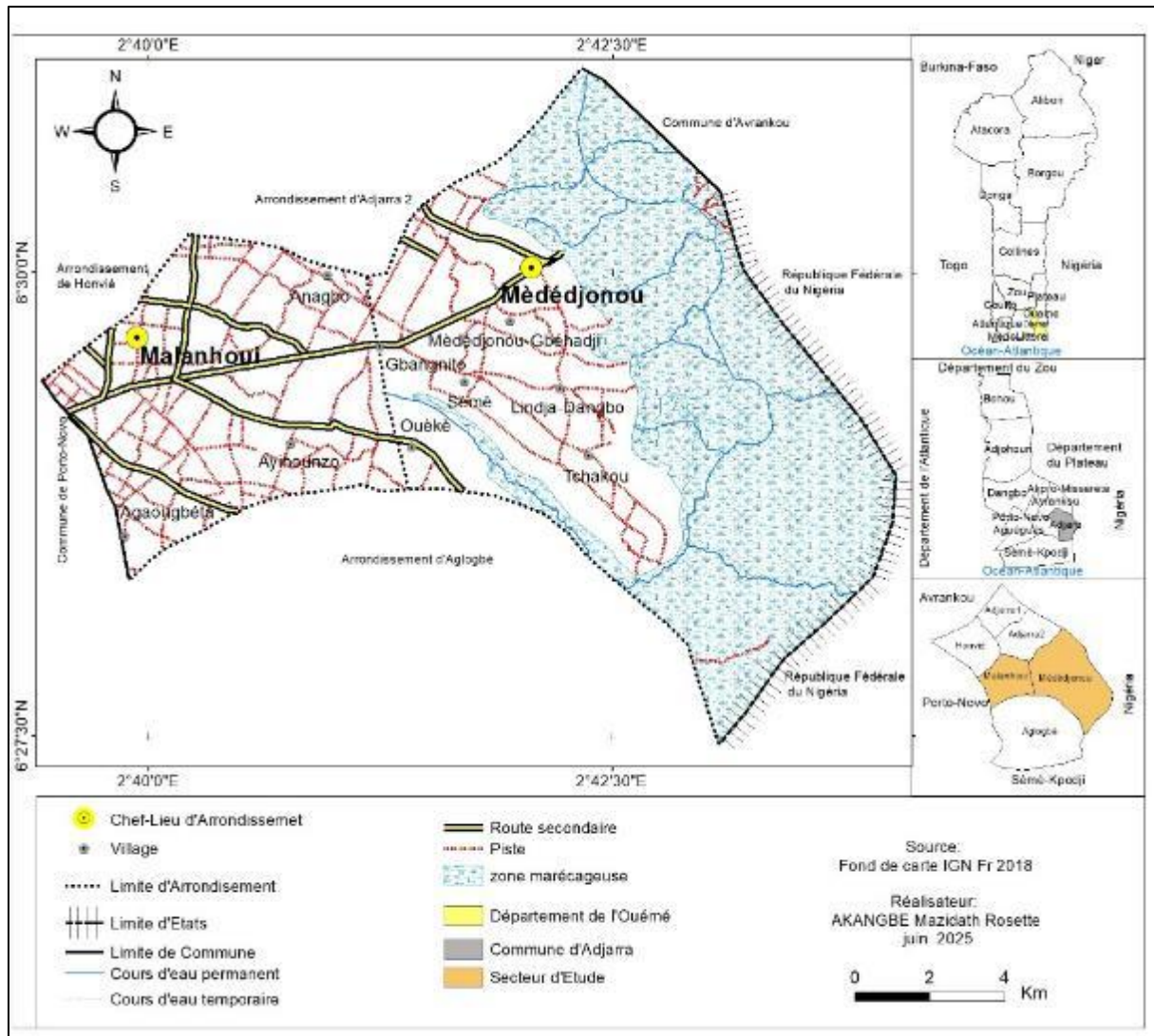


Figure 1 Geographical location of the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui

Analysis of Figure 1 shows that Médédjonou is situated to the east of the Adjarra municipality. It includes villages such as Alladako, Alladako-Dégoète, Djavi, Djavi-Zèbè, Gbangnito, Gbéhamey, Lindja-Dangbo, Médédjonou, Médédjonou-Gbèhadji, Sèmé, and Tchakou. By contrast, Malanhoui is located to the west of the municipality and shares a boundary with Médédjonou. It encompasses localities such as Agaougbéta, Agata, Anagbo, Hèvié-Kpota, Malanhoui, Malanhoui-Kpodo, Ouèké, Tanmè, and Yèvié.

The districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui thus appear as highly fragmented rural units, illustrating a fine-grained territorial pattern. The large number of villages reflects a rich socio-spatial organization but also a situation of relative isolation for many settlements. This configuration highlights the challenges involved in implementing tourism development strategies in areas where accessibility, community coordination, and heritage promotion remain critical issues.

2. Methodological Approach

The methodology adopted for this study is structured around three main stages: data collection, data processing, and results analysis.

2.1. Data Collection

Data collection encompasses the types of data used, the collection techniques, and the tools and materials employed in the field.

2.1.1. Types of Data Collected

The data gathered include:

- biophysical data related to the study environment;
- data on cultural and tourism heritage resources;
- general information on the management of cultural and tourism heritage in the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui within the Adjarra municipality, Benin.

2.1.2. Data Collection Techniques and Tools

Several techniques and tools were employed to ensure the reliability of the data:

Data collection techniques included:

- documentary research,
- questionnaire-based surveys,
- interviews,
- direct field observations.
- Data collection tools consisted of:
- a structured questionnaire,
- an interview guide,
- an observation grid.

The surveys were conducted with a carefully defined sample population.

2.1.3. Sampling Procedure

In order to obtain reliable information on the promotion of cultural and tourism heritage in Médédjonou and Malanhoui, a representative sample was determined. The two districts comprise a total of 20 villages. The study focused on six (06) villages selected based on criteria of geographical, socio-cultural, and heritage representativeness. These villages were chosen because they display a diversity of cultural practices, significant community density, and sites with clear tourism potential.

Respondents selected for the field survey met the following criteria:

- having lived in the village for at least five (05) years in order to ensure familiarity with local cultural realities;
- being a household head residing in the village for at least three (03) years;
- having their place of work or main activity within the area;
- being a recognised community elder or respected figure, regarded as a “living repository” of local history and cultural knowledge;
- being a local authority capable of providing relevant information on cultural heritage and its management within the study area.

The sample size was determined using the formula proposed by J. P. Beaud and Marien (2003), which is particularly suited to small samples. The formula is expressed as:

$$n = \frac{N \times 400}{N + 400}$$

Where:

n = sample size,

N = total population of the selected villages,

400 = correction coefficient.

$$n = \frac{14981 \times 400}{14981 + 400} = 389.59 \approx 390$$

A reduction rate of 4% was then applied:

$$n = 97.39 \approx 97$$

Thus, a total of 97 respondents were surveyed for this research. This sample was distributed among the selected villages as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of the surveyed population

Villages	Total number of households	Number of household heads interviewed
Agaougbéta	1855	14
Malanhoui	4501	29
Ouèkè	1235	08
Gbangnito	2712	17
Lindja-Dangbo	2439	15
Médédjonou	2239	14
Total	14981	97

Source: INStatD 2013 and field surveys, July 2025

An analysis of Table 1 shows that 97 heads of households were interviewed as part of this study. In addition to these heads of households, the head of the local development and planning department, the director of information systems, and certain members of the Adjara town hall administration were also interviewed.

2.2. Data Processing and Results Analysis

The survey forms were manually reviewed and processed using computer software. The tables and graphs were created using Excel 2013. Cartographic processing was performed using ArcGIS 10.1 software.

The analysis of the results was based on certain calculations and the use of the SWOT analysis model.

3. Results

This section presents the main results obtained in this study.

3.1. Typology of Heritage Resources

3.1.1. Tangible Cultural Resources

The tangible cultural resources identified in the study area are grouped into three categories, namely:

- sacred sites: forests, altars, convents;
- traditional objects: drums, masks, mats;
- infrastructure: sodabi workshops, cultural center.

The following plates illustrate a scene of local traditional craftsmanship. It demonstrates the mobilisation of community know-how in the production of cultural objects, revealing the vibrant artisanal activity in the districts where the research was conducted.



Figure 2 Drum-making workshop in Mèdédjonou

Field photographs by: AKANGBE, July 2025



Figure 3 Drum workshop and exhibition spaces in Médédjonou

Field photographs by: AKANGBE, July 2025

It is clear that the drum workshop located in Médédjonou is an iconic site of Beninese musical culture. Known as the “City of Drums,” Adjarra fully celebrates this artisanal expertise passed down from generation to generation. Under a thatched shelter, a series of traditional drums of various sizes and designs are on display, reflecting the local mastery in the crafting of these instruments essential to ritual, festive, and community ceremonies. The workshop’s rustic and well-preserved setting reinforces the site’s heritage value as a vehicle for cultural transmission and the promotion of intangible heritage.

Figure 4 presents a partial view of the Sokè site, located in Malanhoui. It highlights the physical and spiritual components of the site, notably the ritual buildings, wooded areas, and landscape features associated with its religious and initiatory purpose.



Figure 4 Partial view of the SOKE site in Malanhoui

Field photographs by: AKANGBE, July 2025

It is evident that the Sokè site in Malanhoui features well-preserved traditional architecture that reflects the local cultural identity. The central building, topped with a thatched roof, stands out for its vernacular style, adapted to local climatic conditions and imbued with communal significance. A pole erected at the front suggests ritual or ceremonial functions specific to the region's indigenous practices. The site is surrounded by a low wall painted in red ochre, reinforcing its symbolic character while setting it apart from the surrounding rural environment. The laterite ground and tree-covered vegetation emphasize the site's deep roots in an authentic landscape. Despite the unobtrusive presence of contemporary elements such as electrical wires, the site retains its integrity, illustrating a harmonious coexistence between tradition and modernity.

Figure 5 presents a symbolic view of the sacred forest of Lindja-Dangbo, through a mural depicting traditional practices, indigenous rituals, and the spiritual connection between nature and community identity. It bears witness to the site's cultural richness and its heritage potential.



Figure 5 Partial view of the entrance to the sacred forest of Lindja Dangbo

Field photographs by: AKANGBE, July 2025

It is evident that the entrance to the sacred forest of Lindja Dangbo is a highly symbolic place, preserved and still active in the indigenous cultural practices of the Nago community. Located in the Adjara municipality, this entrance facade, adorned with ritual paintings and topped by the circular emblem "GRABE-BENIN," clearly indicates the site's sacred nature. The central opening, covered with palm fronds, marks the boundary between the secular world and the sacred realm, governed by strict customary rules. This site, associated with the deity Oro, remains a vibrant center of spirituality, where biennial ceremonies, traditional medicinal practices, and community efforts to preserve biodiversity still take place. Despite modern influences, the forest retains its cultural integrity, protected by local dignitaries and respected as a natural and spiritual sanctuary.

3.1.2. Intangible Cultural Resources

The study anticipates the presence of the following elements:

The Rivière Noire is a cross-cutting component of the cultural and ecological landscape.

Figure 6 presents an iconic view of the Rivière Noire, located in the Médédjonou borough. It illustrates a major feature of the local hydrographic landscape, imbued with cultural and spiritual significance, and constituting an asset for the development of community-based ecotourism.



Figure 6 Partial view of the Rivière Noire

Field photographs by: AKANGBE, July 2025

It is evident that the Black River, as observed in the field, offers a striking glimpse of a wetland landscape whose natural charm remains intact. Its moderate yet steady flow winds through lush tropical vegetation, consisting mainly of palm trees and native species. The brownish hue of the water suggests a high sediment load, indicative of active hydrological dynamics and soil rich in organic matter. The absence of visible development along the banks reflects an environment that remains unspoiled, capable of playing a key role in strategies for ecotourism development or environmental conservation. This scene attests to the natural richness of the territory and its potential in discussions related to sustainable development.

Table 2 presents a typology of natural resources and community practices associated with certain targeted localities in the Médédjonou and Malanhoui districts. It highlights the presumed uses and symbolic values attributed to these elements, revealing their heritage potential and their roots in the collective imagination.

Table 2 Projected Cultural and Tourism Roles of the Rivière Noire

Places concerned	Presumed uses	Symbolic value
Médédjonou	Raffia, distillation, fishing	Sacred site, war memorial
Malanhoui	Agriculture, ritual crossing	Cultural taboos
Ouèkè, Gbangnito	Spiritual access, traditional medicine	Places of purification

Source: Field survey results, July 2025

This table provides a detailed regional overview of local resources and practices, while highlighting the symbolic values associated with them:

- in Médédjonou, raffia, traditional distillation (sodabi), and fishing are practices that are both economic and cultural. Their association with sacred sites and a memory of warfare suggests a strong historical significance, likely linked to stories of resistance or the founding lineages of the area;

- In Malanhoui, agriculture and the ritual crossing of certain spaces (rivers, convents, symbolic paths) are governed by cultural taboos. These practices reflect a ritualization of space that confers upon the territory a mediating function between the visible and invisible worlds;
- The villages of Ouèkè and Gbangnito are distinguished by their role in spiritual access and traditional medicine. The purification spaces they house are used during ceremonies of healing, family reconciliation, or social reintegration, making these localities strategic ritual hubs.

This table contributes to the recognition of local intangible heritage by articulating practices, resources, and symbolism. It serves as a valuable methodological tool for developing a tourism and heritage promotion strategy rooted in local realities.

Figure 7 depicts a marshy landscape characterized by dense tropical vegetation and a humid atmosphere. It attests to the site's ecological richness and its role in the natural and cultural dynamics of the region.



Figure 7 Marshy landscape along the Rivière noire in Malanhoui

Field photographs by: AKANGBE, 2025

It is evident that the marshy landscape observed reflects a rich and sensitive wetland ecosystem, characterized by abundant vegetation dominated by palm trees, indicating a high water content. The moisture-saturated soil appears partially cleared, suggesting agricultural use or attempts at human development. The cloudy sky and saturated atmosphere reinforce the site's tropical character, which supports specific biodiversity and essential ecological functions such as hydrological regulation and natural filtration. This landscape reveals a constant interaction between natural dynamics and human activities, and offers remarkable potential for ecological and territorial enhancement within a sustainable development framework.

Figure 8 presents a river scene depicting a local landing stage as well as a community space with a spiritual purpose, often referred to as a “river convent.” It highlights the close relationship between the natural environment and ritual practices, while also demonstrating the socio-economic function of wetlands within local dynamics.



Figure 8 River landing stage in Médédjonou

Field photographs by: AKANGBE, July 2025

It is evident that the landing stage shown in this image serves as a strategic river transit point between Benin and Nigeria, used by local residents to transport goods and people. Set in a tropical environment characterized by dense vegetation and palm trees, this site reveals dynamic human activity: barrels are being loaded onto a boat, while people are wading across a shallow stretch of water. The wooden structure with stairs facilitates access to the water, illustrating a functional adaptation to local conditions. This site plays an essential role in informal cross-border trade, revealing both the fluidity of territorial interactions and the limitations of formal infrastructure. It reflects a community-based organization centered on mobility, in a context where the river serves as a conduit for economic and social ties between the two countries.

3.2. Accessibility and Promotion of Sites

Table 3 presents a qualitative assessment of accessibility, tourist signage, and the level of organization of tourist activities in the targeted villages of Médédjonou and Malanhoui. These indicators make it possible to assess visitor reception conditions, site visibility, and the degree of institutionalisation of local tourism.

Table 3 Estimated status of infrastructure and tourism promotion

Village	Accessibility	Signage	Organised tourism
Médédjonou	Average	Low	Emerging
Malanhoui	Average	Average	Developing
Ouèkè	Poor	None	None
Agaougbéta	Good	None	Low
Lindja-dangbo	Poor	None	None
Gbangnito	Average	Low	Average

Source: Field survey results, July 2025

Table 3 highlights the existing disparities between villages in the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui in terms of tourist facilities. Three key areas are assessed: accessibility, signage and the organisation of tourist activities.

- In Médédjonou, average accessibility and poor signage indicate that efforts to open up to visitors are still in their infancy. However, the description 'emerging' suggests a local dynamic is underway, particularly around traditional distillation, masks and the Rivière Noire.
- Malanhoui displays average accessibility and more prominent signage, reflecting a desire for organisation. Ritual agricultural practices, sacred sites such as Sokè, and the presence of the national headquarters of the Apostolic Church support an identity that is conducive to tourism development.
- Villages such as Ouèkè and Lindja-Dangbo suffer from poor or non-existent accessibility, a lack of signage, and a non-existent tourism infrastructure. Yet they are home to ritual practices and sacred forests that could be integrated into a cultural ecotourism strategy.
- Agaougbéta, although easily accessible, has no signage and its tourism offering remains poorly structured, despite its strengths in crafts and community storytelling.
- Only Gbangnito combines average accessibility, minimal signage and a moderate level of tourism infrastructure, notably thanks to the women's ritual dances that give it a unique heritage identity.

Figure 9 illustrates an estimate of the accessibility of heritage sites by village, by cross-referencing the average travel time and the level of accessibility. It provides a visual assessment of the regional disparities that influence site visitation and the development of local tourism in the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui.

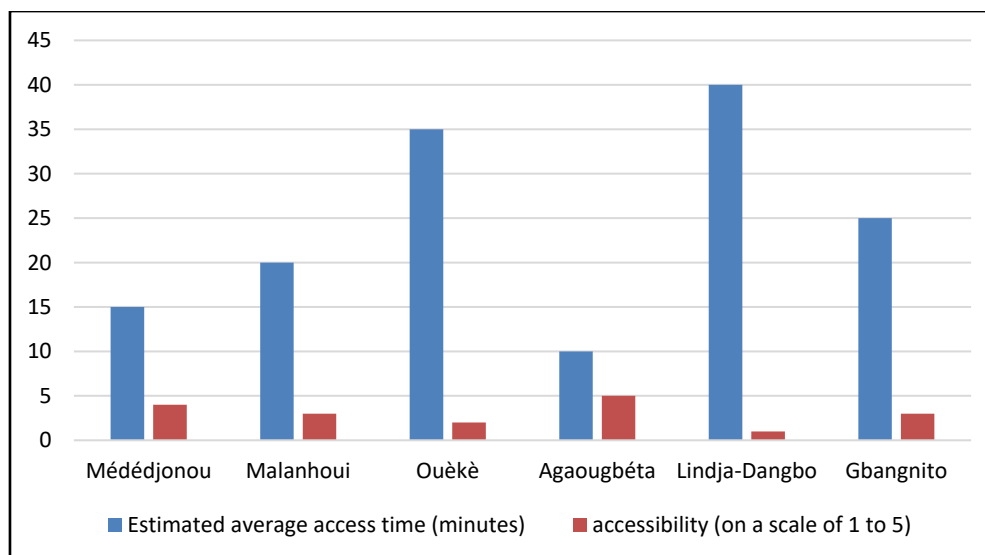


Figure 9 Village-level accessibility assessment

Source: Field survey results, July 2025

Analysis of the accessibility of heritage sites reveals significant disparities between the villages studied. Médédjonou and Gbangnito stand out for their short travel times (between 10 and 15 minutes) and high accessibility scores, reflecting good road links and proximity to major transport routes. Conversely, Ouèkè and Lindja-Dangbo have the longest travel times (around 35 minutes) and low accessibility, illustrating a relative isolation that is likely to hinder local tourism development. This spatial heterogeneity highlights a territorial inequality that could act as a barrier to the balanced development of heritage tourism in the region. Targeted improvements to transport infrastructure in landlocked areas therefore appear to be a strategic lever for enhancing their attractiveness and their integration into regional tourism dynamics.

Figure 10 presents the rate of heritage promotion by village in the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui. It cross-references the number of identified sites, the number of sites actually developed, and the development rate expressed as a percentage. This graphical representation allows us to assess the uneven efforts to develop local heritage and to identify areas of importance within a cultural and tourism development strategy.

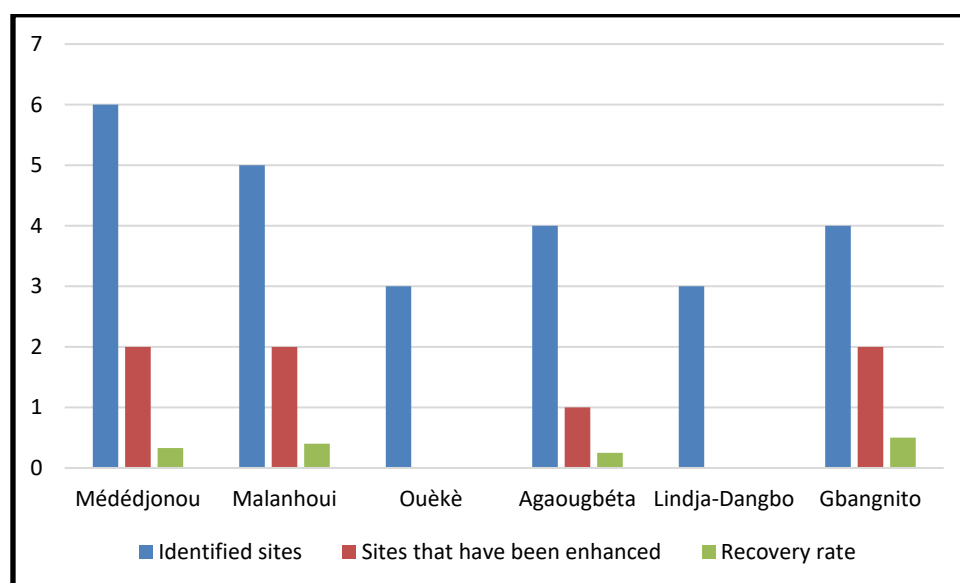


Figure 10 Heritage enhancement rates

Source: Field survey results, July 2025

Analysis of heritage enhancement rates reveals an important disparity between the villages studied; although Médédjonou and Gbangnito have the highest number of identified heritage sites (six each), their promotion remains insufficient, with only 33% and 17% of sites promoted, respectively. In contrast, Ouèkè and Agaoubéta, despite having a smaller number of sites (three and four respectively), achieve a promotion rate of 33%, indicating more targeted or better-structured efforts. Lindja-Dangbo presents a worrying situation, with no promotion recorded despite the presence of sites. This heterogeneity reflects a lack of harmonisation in promotion policies and highlights the need for a coordinated strategy to strengthen heritage promotion at the local level.

4. Discussion

The results obtained in this study reveal that there is a wealth of cultural heritage in the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui in the municipality of Adjarra. Indeed, the promotion of this cultural heritage would contribute significantly to the development of the study area. This is because similar work was carried out by B. Adjovi (2016, p.50) in the municipality of Ouidah, and his research showed that the municipality's tourism potential constitutes an important source of income. However, despite this rich cultural identity, the results indicate low visibility and poor promotion of local cultural heritage. The lack of documentation, poor signage and the absence of a structured tourism framework limit the realisation of this potential for the benefit of the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui and the entire municipality of Adjarra. These findings are confirmed by P. A. Zannou (2016, p.46), who revealed that similar situations of under-promotion of cultural heritage also exist in the Adakplamè district of the municipality of Kétou, where considerable cultural potential remains to be developed. In the same vein, research carried out by D. M. Ako (2017, p.65) in the municipality of Lokossa revealed that this municipality possesses tourism potential, the efficient management of which would contribute to its development. However, several factors limit the impact of its tourism heritage. Ranked by importance, these constraints are as follows: the issue of an appropriate framework for tourism heritage (42.6%), inadequate tourism infrastructure and facilities (31.3%), and finally structural and organisational constraints (26.1%). The same observation is also made by G. O. Omolara (2018, p.82) in the municipality of Porto-Novo, where she identifies shortcomings related to the full promotion of the municipality's cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

An analysis of the cultural and tourism heritage in the districts of Médédjonou and Malanhoui reveals a wealth of resources that remains largely untapped, yet holds considerable potential for local development. These areas are characterised by the diversity of their cultural practices, the vitality of their traditional knowledge, and the presence of natural landscapes well-suited to ecotourism. This heritage, both tangible and intangible, constitutes a strategic resource for strengthening local identity, stimulating the community economy and promoting inclusive territorial governance.

However, this dynamic remains hampered by major constraints: inadequate tourism infrastructure, poor physical and digital accessibility of sites, a lack of institutional recognition of local heritage, as well as threats linked to uncontrolled urbanisation and the gradual loss of cultural practices. These challenges call for an integrated approach, based on consultation between local stakeholders, public institutions and technical partners.

The promotion of heritage should not be viewed as an isolated tourism objective, but as a cross-cutting lever for sustainable development, capable of strengthening social cohesion, preserving ecological resources and structuring territories around their cultural specificities. From this perspective, Médédjonou and Malanhoui can become a significant framework for heritage promotion, combining collective memory, territorial innovation and tourist appeal.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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