

Cinema and Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Contribution of *Ndzobi* to the Valorization of Endogenous Cultural Practices

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<p>Corresponding Author: Chris Emmanuel Bakouma Malanda</p> <p>School of Foreign Studies, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology</p> <p>Article History</p> <p>Received: 19 / 10 / 2025</p> <p>Accepted: 04 / 12 / 2025</p> <p>Published: 14 / 12 / 2025</p>	<p>Abstract: This study demonstrates how cinema can preserve and promote intangible cultural heritage through the film <i>Ndzobi</i> by Congolese director Mike Yombi (2021). In a context marked by the decline of initiatory practices threatened by modernity and urbanization, the film emerges as a strategic instrument for documenting and transmitting knowledge that is gradually disappearing. <i>Ndzobi</i> unveils the world of the eponymous initiatory society, integrating authentic ritual elements such as rites of passage, relations to the sacred, and community structures. Through the trajectory of Akouango, the work explores the tensions between collective traditions and individual aspirations. The analysis highlights the documentary, pedagogical, and symbolic functions of the film, reinforced by its visibility at FESPACO. By revealing the fragility of the rites and their risk of erasure, <i>Ndzobi</i> illustrates the capacity of African cinema to serve as a cultural mediator and a tool for safeguarding traditions.</p> <p>Keywords: African cinema, intangible heritage, safeguarding traditions, <i>ndzobi</i>, cultural memory.</p>
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Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is defined by UNESCO as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage”; these elements are transmitted from generation to generation and constitute a fundamental vector of cultural diversity and collective identity (UNESCO, 2003, art. 2, p. 4). In a globalized and acculturating context, many traditional practices are threatened with disappearance, posing major challenges for their documentation, transmission, and valorization.

In Central Africa, initiatory rites, magico-religious practices, and traditional forms of social cohesion lie at the heart of these heritage issues. Film production constitutes a relevant audiovisual medium for materializing these intangible practices and rendering them accessible to contemporary audiences, while preserving their visual history for future generations. Visual anthropology conceives film not only as a documentary archive but also as a form of mediation, linking indigenous knowledge with the viewer’s aesthetic experience, thus contributing to the social recognition of ritual practices (Ruby, 2000, p. 67).

The film *Ndzobi* (2021), directed, produced, and performed by Mike Yombi, offers a significant and compelling illustration of this approach. This feature film—shot in several local languages, namely Akwa, Mbéti, Laadi, Mboko, Ngaré, and Lingala—stages the rituals and social norms of the *ndzobi* initiatory society, practiced in Congo and Gabon. Through the tragic narrative of the protagonist Akouango, confronted with traditional prohibitions, the film examines the tensions between cultural heritage and modernity (Yombi, 2021). Through its narrative and visual construction, the film makes perceptible an intangible heritage. This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license

often marginalized in contemporary media, while offering an in-depth reflection on the persistence and fragility of initiatory practices in a context of social transformation.

Furthermore, the research problem underlying this study is articulated as follows: How does cinema, through the film *Ndzobi*, contribute to the valorization of endangered intangible cultural practices? Drawing on approaches from the sociology of ritual, visual anthropology, and UNESCO’s heritage framework, we analyze the ways in which the filmic narrative contributes to the documentation, symbolic revalorization, and cultural mediation of *ndzobi* practices.

Literature Review

For this study, we conducted a review of the existing scholarship, examining research addressing cinema, intangible heritage, the humanities, and traditional culture more specifically.

Furlan (2014) examines how ethnographic films and documentary videos can be used to document and present intangible heritage practices, focusing on museum projects and audiovisual strategies developed at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. Zhuoyan (2023), by contrast, studies the narrative strategies of intangible-heritage documentaries, their role in cultural dissemination, their capacity to visually transmit living practices, and their interaction with audiences in the digital age. Ezz Al Arab (2021) analyzes the *heritage film* as a cinematic document that valorizes traditions and reinforces cultural identity by highlighting popular culture, rituals, and traditional skills. Hao (2016), in her doctoral dissertation, explores how animated cinema can document, transmit, and promote elements of intangible heritage through innovative visual and narrative techniques.



Portugal, Morales, Karbaum, and Chura (2024) demonstrate how documentaries produced by university students can serve as tools for preserving intangible-heritage memory, functioning as alternative resources and audiovisual media for transmission.

In an academic conference, Adell (2022) shows how intangible heritage is filmed, represented, and analyzed (e.g., a Sardinian festival), and how visual anthropology is used to transcribe and reconstitute unstable cultural practices. Moreover, Jean Rouch (2003), a major figure in visual ethnography, profoundly influenced the way ethnographic cinema documents rites, dances, traditions, and narratives, through a participatory approach closely aligned with the communities observed. Beyond these works, the former committee of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum and other heritage scholars (2018) demonstrate that film is a key tool for documenting, visualizing, and archiving intangible practices by combining ethnography, museology, and visual representation.

Unlike the preceding researchers, Maissa Moustafa (2022) explores the transformation of cinema from a simple commercial medium into a tool for safeguarding both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Her article emphasizes the idea that films can serve as historical documents recording the values, practices, and traditions of societies, and that they should be recognized as heritage assets to be preserved by cultural institutions. Markus Tauschek (2012), for his part, analyzes how filming cultural practices contributes to their recognition as intangible heritage and how these films participate in the production of symbolic, economic, and political value when integrated into heritage-making processes (notably through UNESCO). Finally, Zhang (2024), Dairo (2021), Hiswara, Aziz, and Pujowati (2023) synthesize the work of several scholars on the use of film as a medium for preserving and transmitting cultural traditions.

From the analytical reading of the aforementioned works, it clearly appears that these authors converge toward the idea that film is a powerful tool for documenting and transmitting traditional and intangible practices. It contributes to the valorization of living cultures and to strengthening the cultural identity of communities.

However, without calling these studies into question, it is essential to emphasize that they present certain limitations related to cultural representation and methodology (often based on qualitative analyses of films or documentaries, which restricts the generalizability of the results).

Our study distinguishes itself, first, through the choice of corpus, which is particularly significant as it allows for a focused analysis of a specific intangible heritage. Unlike many African films or ethnographic documentaries that approach cultural heritage in a general or historical manner, *Ndzobi* concentrates on precise cultural practices (songs, dances, rituals, craftsmanship, or traditional community-based knowledge). Secondly, this research stands at the crossroads of several disciplines. Indeed, it interweaves cinema studies, anthropology, oral literature, ethnology, communication studies, and intangible heritage, providing a rich and multidimensional perspective rarely found in the literature. The narrative and ethnographic choices examined herein offer a unique contribution to scholarship.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Intangible Cultural Heritage

UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage establishes the institutional foundations for the recognition and protection of living traditions,

emphasizing their transmission, adaptation, and rootedness in social life (UNESCO, arts. 1–2, pp. 3–5). Thus, ICH is not confined to fixed aesthetic manifestations; it is embedded in dynamic, reflexive, and often community-based practices, underscoring the importance of making them visible and valorized.

Rituality and Initiatory Societies

Victor Turner's (1969) work on rituals interprets them as processes of social structuring articulated through phases of separation, liminality, and reintegration. These ritual sequences ensure the reproduction of social norms and values (Turner, 1969, pp. 94–103). In the context of *ndzobi*, rules, prohibitions, and symbols constitute markers of community identity whose understanding requires sensitive cultural mediation.

Visual Anthropology and Cinema

Visual anthropology examines films as cultural artefacts capable of documenting, interpreting, and engaging with the practices they represent. An ethnographic or fictional film may transcend simple illustration and become a space of interpretation where the viewer engages in a reflexive reading of the world portrayed (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009, p. 45). African cinema, in particular, often weaves together aesthetics, memory, and social engagement.

Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative analysis of the film *Ndzobi*, based on:

- First, a semiological analysis of key scenes illustrating rites, social codes, and narrative dialogues;
- Second, a narrative analysis aimed at understanding how the storyline organizes the representation of cultural norms;
- Finally, an anthropological contextualization, comparing the filmic content with the definitions and recommendations of UNESCO's Convention on ICH.

The film was viewed in its entirety and divided into thematic units related to specific rituals, social interactions, and cultural symbols.

Results

Audiovisual Documentation of *Ndzobi* Practices

The filmic work *Ndzobi* constitutes a valuable audiovisual archive for intangible cultural heritage, meticulously reconstructing the initiatory rituals, social prohibitions, and symbolic codes of the *ndzobi* society. The scenes depicting the ritual sacrifice of the rooster, the songs, dances, and codified gestures are filmed with ethnographic attentiveness, allowing the viewer to grasp the “performative dimension” of these practices (Turner, 1969, p. 101). This documentation goes beyond mere illustration of the rites: it offers a “semiological reading of signs, gestures, and social interactions,” which is essential for understanding the internal logic of *ndzobi*.

Linguistic fidelity—through the use of the Akwa, Mbéti, Laadi, Mboko, Ngaré, and Lingala languages—further reinforces authenticity and cultural contextualization, enabling the preservation not only of ritual acts but also of the “verbal and narrative codes” that structure initiatory knowledge (UNESCO, 2003, art. 2, p. 4). These elements, which are seldom accessible to scholars or the general public, endow the film with an “invaluable documentary and heritage value,” strengthening its role as a cultural mediator.

Cultural Awareness and Mediation

In Mike Yombi's *Ndzobi*, cultural awareness and mediation operate on multiple narrative and formal levels. The aim is to enable the viewer to understand, reflect upon, and immerse themselves in local cultural practices.

To begin with, cultural awareness and mediation unfold through the narrative and its characters. The story focuses on Akouango whose initiatory journey and personal choices allow the viewer to experience indirectly the traditional rules and rituals. The resulting tragedy (his death after initiation) highlights the significance and gravity of customary practices.

Beyond this dimension lies the conflict between tradition and modernity. By depicting the tensions between individual desires (love and freedom) and social obligations, the film invites viewers to reflect on the value of traditions and their relevance in the contemporary world. This constitutes an implicit form of cultural mediation, insofar as the viewer comes to understand the rules of a foreign culture without overt didacticism.

Moreover, Yombi employs dramatic narration to emphasize the moral and social significance of the rituals. In this regard, Grimshaw & Ravetz (2009, p. 47) argue that dramatic narration enables a "tension between individual experience and collective imperatives," thereby revealing to the world the potent moral force embedded in ritual practices.

Secondly, cultural awareness and mediation also materialize through the representation of the rituals and practices themselves. The film depicts *ndzobi* initiation rites, taboos, and ceremonies with reverence for customary codes expressed through gestures, chants, and ritual objects. This visual and dramatic representation functions as a pedagogical tool, raising awareness among younger generations and non-initiated audiences of the richness and complexity of endogenous traditions. Likewise, the *mise-en-scène* emphasizes the symbolic dimension of the rites, without reducing them to mere exotic curiosities—that is, each gesture bears social and spiritual significance.

Thirdly, the choice of languages and cultural expressions contributes to cultural mediation. The film's use of multiple local languages—Mbéti, Akwa, Laadi, Mboko, Ngaré, and Lingala—participates directly in cultural transmission. This linguistic strategy serves several purposes: preserving and valorizing endangered languages, enabling viewers to perceive the authenticity of cultural interactions, and fostering the learning and recognition of these languages within a globalized context.

Fourthly, cultural mediation is reinforced through contextualization and social critique. The film does not limit itself to depicting cultural practices; it contextualizes them by showing their social and human implications—family tensions, moral choices, and social constraints. This critical and reflexive dimension enables viewers to adopt an informed cultural perspective, rather than a merely fascinated gaze. This approach embodies the essence of modern cultural sensitization: not only presenting a tradition, but also explaining it, interrogating it, and making it accessible.

Finally, cinema emerges as a mediating tool. In this respect, it functions as a living audiovisual document in which fiction and pedagogy complement one another:

- *First*, fiction captures the viewer's attention and emotional engagement;

- *Second*, the implicit documentary component reveals and explains traditional practices. Accordingly, Yombi uses cinema as a cultural mediator, making the culture accessible to national and international audiences.

Symbolic Revalorization and International Visibility

In the context of Mike Yombi's film dedicated to *Ndzobi*, the notion of symbolic revalorization aligns with a dynamic theorized by numerous scholars. As Jean Davallon notes (2014, p. 52), the heritage-making process relies first on a "symbolic reassignment of value" that enables a community to recognize anew the importance of a cultural element at risk of disappearing.

Within this framework, the filmic work plays a decisive role. Indeed, it restores meaning and legitimacy to a fading practice by presenting it within a coherent, valorizing, and socially meaningful narrative. In the case of *Ndzobi*, Yombi's film performs precisely this function. It contributes to what Stuart Hall describes as the "discursive reconstruction of cultural identity" (Hall, 1990, p. 226), allowing community members to recognize themselves in the gestures, chants, and rites brought back to the forefront on screen. Thus, symbolic revalorization occurs through the reactivation of cultural codes and their reinsertion into a modern narrative framework.

The cinematic dimension also opens *Ndzobi* to a broader space of reception, that is, to international visibility. As Arjun Appadurai (2005, p. 31) argues, media "produce imagined worlds" that circulate globally and enable local cultures to project themselves onto the international stage. The film thereby becomes a vector of cultural globalization; in Yombi's case, it renders *Ndzobi* visible to non-initiated audiences, both African and international.

This function of cinema was clearly identified by Marc Ferro, who considers film "an agent of historical and cultural transmission capable of rendering a people visible to the world" (Ferro, 2009, p. 17). By disseminating *Ndzobi* through an accessible narrative and visual format, Yombi inscribes this practice within a transnational field of recognition—an essential condition for its preservation. This approach aligns with UNESCO's position that safeguarding intangible heritage requires its "visibility, social significance, and transmission" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 4). The film contributes to all three: it documents, disseminates, and valorizes.

Within this same logic of international visibility, it is crucial to underscore the film's selection at FESPACO 2021. This selection constitutes both institutional and symbolic recognition, valorizing *Ndzobi* at the pan-African and international levels. By combining documentary and fiction, *Ndzobi* contributes to an evolving cultural mediation: it does not merely preserve a static heritage, but renders it living and intelligible by integrating viewers into the process of interpretation and understanding.

Discussion

The analysis of the results highlights that cinema constitutes a "strategic instrument for the preservation and valorization of intangible heritage." Unlike classical approaches centered on written transcription or sound recording, film combines "visual, narrative, and symbolic dimensions," offering a multisensory experience that enhances the understanding and memorization of ritual practices (Ruby, 2000, p. 72).

In this respect, it is important to emphasize that the safeguarding of endangered cultural practices today finds a privileged medium in audiovisual forms, particularly in cinema. Mike Yombi's film devoted to *Ndzobi*, a ritual and identity-based practice undergoing marginalization, illustrates precisely how moving images become an instrument of awareness and cultural mediation, symbolic revalorization, transmission, and international visibility. This discussion seeks to analyze the cultural, heritage-related, and political significance of this filmic work, drawing on the scholarship of researchers such as Davallon, Hall, Appadurai, Ferro, as well as the international framework established by UNESCO (2003) through its Convention.

Cinema as a Tool for the Symbolic Revalorization of Disappearing Traditions

Heritage-making, according to Jean Davallon, involves a "symbolic process of value reassignment" (Davallon, 2014, p. 52) applied to vulnerable cultural elements. Evidently, Yombi's film falls fully within this logic. By documenting the gestures, songs, ritual stages, and symbolic meanings of *Ndzobi*, it reasserts the social, identity-based, and historical value of this practice for the community that produced it.

In the face of accelerated modernization, internal migration, the rise of revealed religions, and the disengagement of younger generations, *Ndzobi* risks losing its cultural function. Cinema thus appears as a symbolic arena through which erasure may be averted. As Stuart Hall underscores, culture is not merely transmitted; it is continually "discursively reconstructed" (Hall, 1990, p. 226) through representation. By filming *Ndzobi*, Yombi does not merely show it; rather, he recontextualizes it, reinserts it into social discourse, and contributes to its contemporary legitimization.

Consequently, the filmic work becomes an active agent in identity reaffirmation, both for holders of the practice and for external viewers.

The Role of Film in Cultural Transmission and Pedagogy

Cinema is a strategic tool in the mission to safeguard what has long constituted our civilizations. In this sense, it is reasonable to assert that cinema ensures, to a certain extent, a function of transmission. Filmed *Ndzobi* becomes accessible to those who have never attended ceremonies or who possess only a fragmentary understanding of them. Marc Ferro reminds us that film is "an agent of historical and cultural transmission capable of rendering a people visible to the world" (Ferro, 2009, p. 17). This function goes beyond mere preservation insofar as it mobilizes the meanings, emotions, and social relations underlying the practice.

In Yombi's work, the filmed ritual sequences are not isolated. They are accompanied by testimonies, contextualizations, and cultural commentary, enabling the viewer to grasp the meaning of the ritual rather than merely its form. The film thus becomes an educational medium, a tool for cultural awareness, and a vector of intergenerational transmission.

Cinema and International Visibility: *Ndzobi* in the Global Sphere

The diffusion of the film extends beyond the national framework. Arjun Appadurai, in *Modernity at Large*, explains that contemporary media "produce imagined worlds" accessible to a global audience (Appadurai, 2005, p. 31). Through the mobility of images, Yombi's filmed *Ndzobi* leaves its original environment to circulate in new spaces—festivals, digital platforms, universities, and museological contexts.

This international circulation generates new visibility that may contribute to the cultural recognition of *Ndzobi* well beyond its region of origin. It creates a space for intercultural dialogue, fosters mutual understanding, and may even pave the way for institutional safeguarding initiatives. UNESCO's 2003 Convention stresses the necessity of promoting the "visibility, social significance, and transmission" of intangible practices in order to ensure their safeguarding (UNESCO, 2003, p. 4). The film meets all three criteria—hence its potential to be considered, in official terms, a major cultural work.

Between Cinema, Creation, and Heritage Responsibility

Evidently, the safeguarding of endangered practices through cinema is not free of tensions. As with any representational medium, film involves choices, staging, and a particular point of view. It may at times transform or aestheticize practices. However, such mediation is not necessarily a betrayal; it can constitute a means of ensuring cultural survival by adapting traditions to new symbolic spaces.

In Yombi's film, the methodological approach appears oriented toward ethical fidelity. The objective is to show, explain, and transmit, while avoiding any form of folklorization. The filmmaker thus positions himself not as an external observer but as a cultural mediator—respectful of the holders of the practice and conscious of the documentary responsibility borne by cinema.

***Ndzobi* between Safeguarding and Cultural Revival**

This ancestral practice benefits not only from renewed visibility but also from a process of identity-based revival through the film. Community members may revalorize their own heritage, while younger generations rediscover a practice sometimes considered archaic or outdated.

From this perspective, the film acts as a cultural catalyst, transforming perceptions of *Ndzobi*, conferring upon it renewed cultural dignity, and repositioning it within the present. Safeguarding, then, appears not merely as conservation but as reactivation. A practice on the verge of disappearance ceases to be a relic of the past and becomes a living marker of identity once more.

Conclusion

All things considered, the analysis of Mike Yombi's film devoted to *Ndzobi* has made it possible, from a multidisciplinary perspective, to shed light on the decisive role played by cinema in contemporary dynamics of safeguarding and valorizing intangible cultural heritage. In the wake of economic, social, and religious transformations that weaken the transmission of traditional ritual practices, cinema proves relevant not only as a space of memory but also as a genuine instrument of cultural action capable of breathing new vitality into threatened or marginalized traditions.

To begin with, this research has underscored the capacity of cinema to function as a device for symbolic revalorization. By reassigning social, identity-based, and historical value to *Ndzobi*, in line with the heritage-based logic described by Jean Davallon, Yombi's work renews the legitimacy of a practice on the brink of disappearance. The film does not merely record a ritual; it restores meaning to it by recomposing symbolic references, reactivating dormant memories, and reinscribing the practice within a contemporary horizon of signification. This process echoes Stuart Hall's assertion that cultural identity constitutes a discursive field in perpetual reconstruction. Far from being a simple reflection of

the past, cinema becomes one of the spaces where communities elaborate the continuity of their identity.

Secondly, this study has shown that cinema serves as a privileged vector of intergenerational transmission. Through the narrative and immersive power of images, Yombi's film enables the circulation of ritual knowledge not only among younger generations in the culture's region of origin but also among audiences distant from that cultural context. The pedagogical dimension of the film—rooted in the contextualization of ritual sequences and the integration of the voices of knowledge bearers—confirms Marc Ferro's view of cinema as an agent of historical and cultural transmission. By rendering the symbolic system of *Ndzobi* intelligible and accessible, the film contributes to the consolidation of cultural knowledge and its reappropriation by the concerned communities.

Thirdly, the study has demonstrated that the film opens an international space of visibility for *Ndzobi*. In an era shaped by soft power and cultural globalization, as described by Arjun Appadurai, audiovisual circulations allow local practices to enter transnational horizons. Yombi's filmic work creates an "imagined world" in which *Ndzobi* can be seen, understood, recognized, and potentially valorized by foreign audiences. This external visibility strengthens safeguarding strategies and fosters intercultural recognition, in line with the requirements of UNESCO's 2003 Convention, which emphasizes the visibility, social significance, and transmission of intangible heritage.

Finally, the research has highlighted the fact that film-based safeguarding is not merely an act of preservation but a vital process of cultural revitalization. By inscribing *Ndzobi* within an artistic language, the film enables customs and traditions to recombine and open themselves to modernity without losing their essence. Cinema thus appears not as a substitute for the ritual but as an extension—an alternative symbolic space through which the community can redeploy its heritage. Filmic mediation thereby reveals the capacity of traditional practices to transform, reinvent themselves, and find new modes of existence within the contemporary world.

Evidently, the study makes clear that Mike Yombi's film constitutes a significant example of how cinema can contribute concretely and sustainably to the safeguarding of endangered cultural practices. In documenting, interpreting, and disseminating *Ndzobi*, the film emerges as a major heritage act that interweaves memory, identity, and artistic creation. It illustrates perfectly that the safeguarding of intangible heritage is not limited to the conservation of the past but requires a creative engagement rooted in the living dynamics of cultures.

Scientific Contribution of This Study

This study offers an original theoretical interpretation of the film as a hybrid heritage dispositif situated at the intersection of memory, mediation, and creation. It constitutes a theoretical contribution that advances current understandings of the role of cinema in safeguarding intangible heritage, conceptualizing film as a cultural agent capable of generating heritage legitimacy, in the sense articulated by Jean Davallon.

Beyond this theoretical dimension, the research demonstrates the value of a cross-disciplinary method for analyzing cultural transmission dynamics. It therefore provides a replicable analytical framework for studying other filmed rituals or audiovisual heritage objects. In this respect, it constitutes an indisputable methodological contribution grounded in the

multidisciplinary approach applied to ethnographic cinema, combining theories of intangible heritage, oral literature, ritual anthropology, film studies, and information and communication sciences.

Furthermore, this research is also an empirical contribution insofar as it offers a detailed and contextualized analysis of the *Ndzobi* ritual itself, its contemporary fragilization, and its revalorization through Mike Yombi's film.

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Film Ndzobi

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