GSC Advanced Research and Reviews
eISSN: 2582-4597 CODEN (USA): GARRC2
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/gscarr
Journal homepage: https://gscarr.gsconlinepress.com/

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

# FROM HERITAGE AND CULTURAL TOURISM TO THE DYNAMICS OF TOURISM WEALTH DEVELOPMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF BENIN: A FOCUS ON THE ABOMEY PLATEAU IN 2024

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GSC Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 29(02), 112–117

Publication history: Received on 24 September 2026; revised on 02 November 2026; accepted on 04 November 2026

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/gscarr.2026.29.2.0312

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## ABSTRACT

**Background**: The Abomey Plateau, located in the Zou Department of Benin, possesses a remarkable cultural and heritage tourism potential, comprising historic sites, living traditions, and artisanal craftsmanship. Despite this wealth, its tourism potential remains unevenly developed, yielding limited local socio-economic impacts.

**Objective**: This study aims to analyze the contribution of heritage and cultural tourism to the development of the Abomey Plateau.

**Methods**: This research adopts a quantitative approach complemented by observational fieldwork. Data were collected from 205 respondents selected through purposive sampling across the six municipalities of the Abomey Plateau. Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires and direct field observations of tourist sites. Data were processed using IBM SPSS Version 24 to generate descriptive statistics.

**Results**: Findings reveal significant disparities in the development of tourist attractions across municipalities. Abomey accounts for 48% of fully developed attractions and 45% of total visitor arrivals. Furthermore, artworks constitute 68% of goods purchased by tourists, serving as a primary mechanism for redistributing economic benefits to local artisans. However, the heavy concentration of tourism infrastructure and services limits the spatial redistribution of these gains.

**Conclusion**: Cultural and heritage tourism on the Abomey Plateau represents a promising driver of socio-economic development. Achieving sustainable tourism growth requires a more balanced distribution of infrastructure, capacity building for local stakeholders, and an inclusive governance framework that ensures equitable benefit-sharing.

**Keywords:** Cultural Heritage, Tourism, Infrastructure, Abomey Plateau, Benin

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, tourism has established itself as one of the key drivers of the global economy. Ranked among the top international export categories and occupying the leading spot in numerous developing nations, tourism generates billions of dollars globally [1, 2]. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that, provided there is sustained socio-political stability alongside investments in human capital and infrastructure, tourism can significantly reduce the marginalization of least developed countries within the global economy [3].

Member states of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU/UEMOA) adopted a Common Tourism Policy through an additional act in June 2010. This policy is supported by the Regional Tourism Development Program (PRDTOUR), structured around three core components: expanding the regional supply, enhancing destination visibility and competitiveness, and strengthening stakeholder capacity [4]. Benin has fully aligned itself with this regional dynamic. Since 2016, the "*Benin Révélé*" national action plan has positioned tourism as a pillar of economic diversification and job creation, aiming to reach 2 million international visitors annually and raise the sector's contribution to GDP from 6% to 13.4% by 2030 [5]. The nation leverages a rich history, vibrant living traditions, and a distinct cultural legacy, notably its reputation as the birthplace of Vodoun. Nevertheless, capitalizing effectively on this potential remains a primary concern for public authorities, as the sector is still considered underutilized despite its assets.

The Abomey Plateau clearly exemplifies this paradox. As the historical center of the former Kingdom of Dahomey (*Danhomè*), it concentrates a remarkable array of tangible and intangible heritage: the Royal Palaces of Abomey – built by twelve consecutive kings between 1625 and 1900 – offer exceptional testimony to a vanished kingdom and have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1985 [6]. Beyond the palaces, the six municipalities of the Plateau (Abomey, Agbangnizoun, Bohicon, Djidja, Za-Kpota, and Zogbodomey) house numerous other heritage assets: underground villages and shelters, sacred groves, granite outcrops, remnants of battles against colonial forces, sacred waterways, as well as traditional dances, local gastronomy, the Dahomey Festival, and Vodoun Days. Accordingly, public authorities are striving to structure the cultural and tourism offerings across these municipalities to meet growing visitor demand.

From both a natural and cultural perspective, the Abomey Plateau possesses immense tourism potential. Its distinct geographical, climatic, cultural, faunal, and forestry characteristics have elevated the region to a prominent tourist destination. However, while the area is exceptionally rich in raw potential, it has not yet successfully transformed these heritage assets into fully developed tourism products. Overall, this deficit stems from the fact that the rich cultural and natural heritage of the Abomey Plateau has not yet been sufficiently developed or marketed. According to an exploratory survey, few local residents are aware of the tourism value of their territory, and even fewer engage directly in tourism-related livelihoods. Informants noted that tourism development has not yet translated into tangible gains for local community resources. Consequently, the heritage of the Plateau remains underappreciated, underutilized, and vulnerable, even though it could serve as a powerful catalyst for local development. This situation leads to the following research question: What is the contribution of tourism activities to the socio-economic development of the municipalities forming the Abomey Plateau?

## 2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Study Design, Target Population, and Sampling

This study employs a quantitative research design complemented by observational field assessment conducted across the Abomey Plateau. Geographically, the Abomey Plateau is located in southern Benin and serves as the capital area of the Zou Department. It is historically renowned as the seat of the ancient Kingdom of Dahomey, which flourished from 1625 to 1894. The region encompasses six of the nine municipalities comprising the Zou Department: Abomey, Agbangnizoun, Bohicon, Djidja, Za-Kpota, and Zogbodomey.

Four main target groups were identified for the study: local administrative authorities, public and private sector actors, community leaders and household heads, and domestic as well as international tourists involved in or benefiting from regional development and tourism. A total sample size of 205 respondents was selected using purposive sampling across the six municipalities of the Abomey Plateau.

### 2.2 Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Structured questionnaire surveys administered to respondents enabled the collection of data regarding: (i) the inventory of cultural and heritage tourism attractions across the Abomey Plateau; (ii) the contribution of heritage tourism to local development; and (iii) the operational constraints impeding tourism development. Additionally, direct instrumented field observations and site visits were conducted to inventory and assess the status of tourist attractions.

### 2.3 Data Processing and Analysis

Following field collection, quantitative survey data were cleaned, coded, entered, and analyzed using IBM SPSS software (Version 24). Data processing focused primarily on descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages and graphical representations to highlight key empirical trends.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Distribution of Tourist Attractions by Municipality on the Abomey Plateau

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of developed tourist attractions across the municipalities of the Abomey Plateau based on field data collected in May 2024.

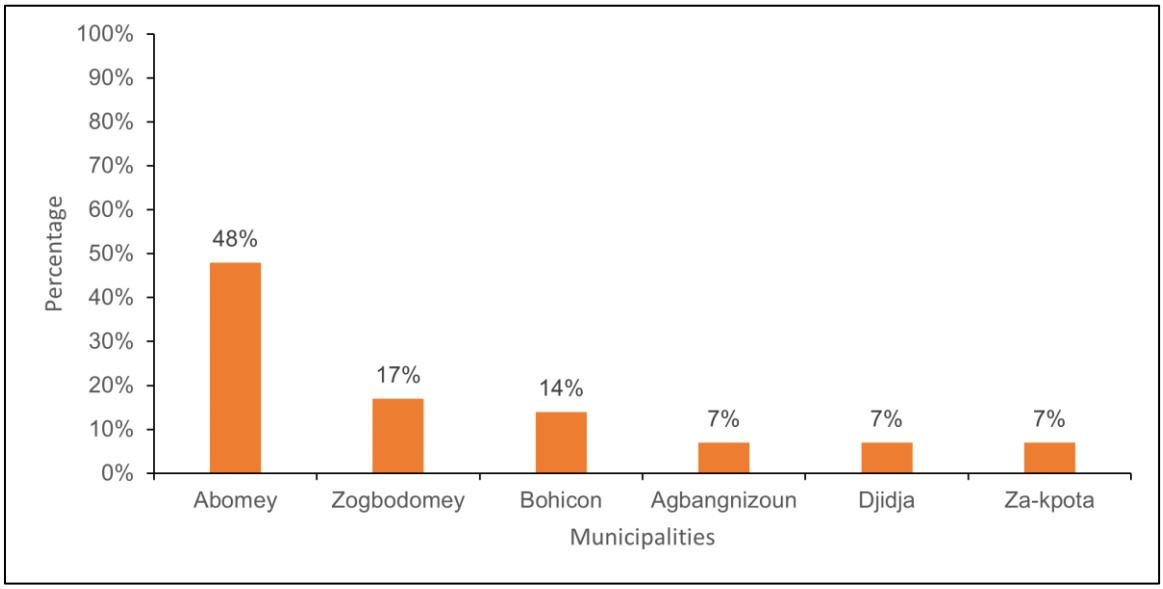


**Figure 1: Proportion of Developed Tourist Attractions by Municipality on the Abomey Plateau**

As shown in Figure 1, while all municipalities on the Abomey Plateau possess tourist assets, there is a pronounced disparity in infrastructure development. The Municipality of Abomey leads significantly, accounting for 48% of all fully developed and operational tourist attractions. Zogbodomey and Bohicon follow with 17% and 14%, respectively. Meanwhile, Agbangnizoun, Djidja, and Za-Kpota each account for only 7% of developed attractions. Ongoing restoration projects are currently underway to add further sites to Abomey's existing portfolio.

### 3.2 Estimated Tourist Attendance Rate by Municipality

Figure 2 presents the breakdown of visitor attendance rates across the six municipalities of the Abomey Plateau based on field data collected in May 2024.

The data reveal that visitor attendance closely reflects the distribution of developed infrastructure. Abomey captures the highest share of visitor traffic at 45%, followed by Bohicon at 22%, Zogbodomey at 19%, and Agbangnizoun at 8%. Djidja and Za-Kpota account for the lowest attendance rates, at 3% each.

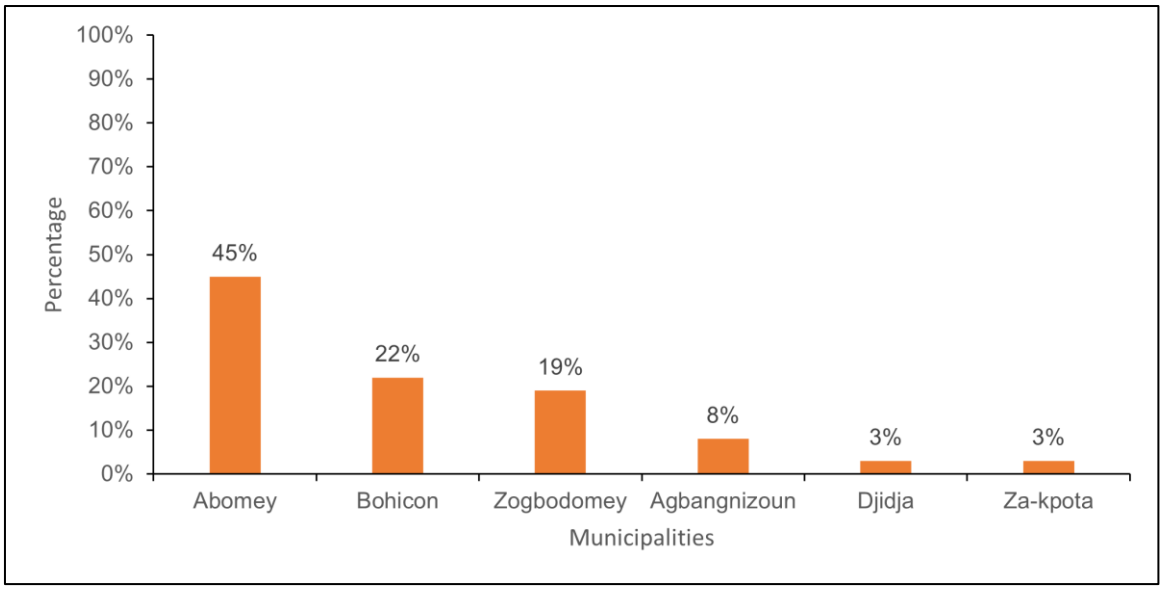


**Figure 2: Tourist Attendance Rates by Municipality on the Abomey Plateau**

### 3.3 Handicrafts and Art Objects as Income Sources for Local Artisans

Figure 3 depicts the proportion of art objects and handicraft products purchased by visiting tourists, based on survey data gathered in June 2024.

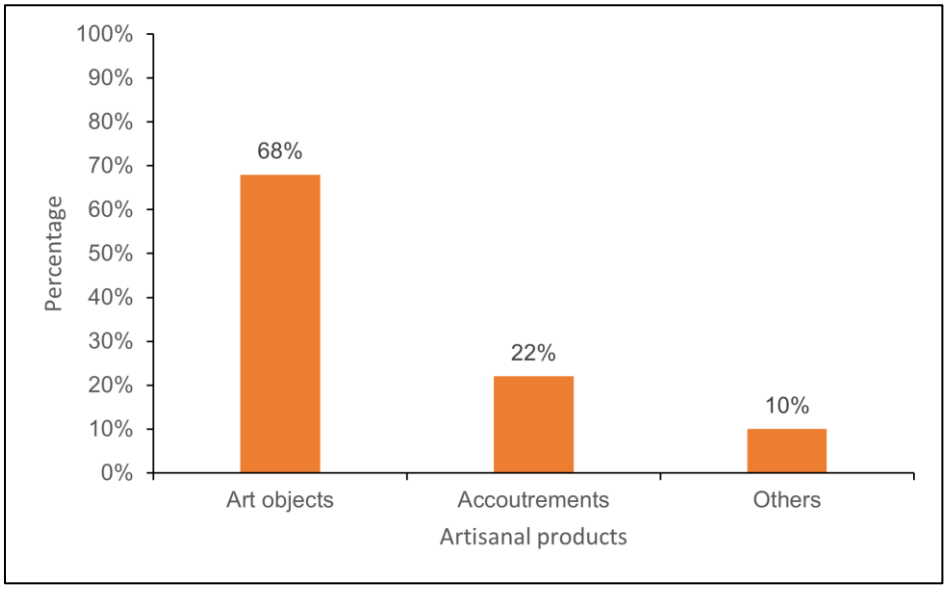


**Figure 3: Artisanal Products as Primary Income Drivers for Local Craftspeople**

The results highlight that art objects represent 68% of all goods purchased by visiting tourists in the study area. These purchases primarily consist of wood and bronze sculptures, woven bags, handcrafted footwear, paintings, bracelets, and necklaces. According to the manager of the Abomey Historical Museum, local artisans generate substantial revenue from tourist purchases, directly contributing to youth employment and reducing idleness in surrounding communities.

## 4 DISCUSSION

### 4.1 From Potential to Attendance: Infrastructure and Spatial Disparities

The findings demonstrate that while all six municipalities on the Plateau possess notable tourist assets, infrastructure development is highly asymmetrical. Abomey concentrates nearly half of all developed sites and commands a proportional share of visitor attendance. Conversely, Bohicon attracts significantly higher visitor traffic (22%) relative to its share of developed tourist sites (14%), whereas Djidja and Za-Kpota capture less than half of their expected visitor

potential. Field observations explain this trend: primary accommodation facilities and major hotels are concentrated in Abomey and Bohicon, leading tourists to visit peripheral municipalities during the day but return to these two urban hubs for lodging and dining. Consequently, destination attractiveness depends not only on raw heritage sites, but critically on support services (hospitality, catering, transport) that capture visitor expenditure.

These findings align with longitudinal studies in Romania spanning over two decades, which demonstrated that "leading territories" with established tourism infrastructure capture the vast majority of demand growth [7], thereby widening spatial disparities rather than reducing them [8]. The heavy concentration of development in Abomey also reflects historical central government prioritization. Furthermore, the passive involvement of local communities despite participatory intentions [9] clarifies the low level of local "tourism culture" observed during our field surveys. This observation echoes broader findings in Benin regarding low local awareness of regional tourism assets, such as in Porto-Novo [10].

Moreover, inter-municipal cooperation alone is insufficient. In the South African case of the Highlands Meander, five towns combined promotional efforts, yet benefits failed to reach local Black communities effectively due to structural exclusion [11]. Establishing an inter-municipal tourism circuit on the Abomey Plateau must therefore incorporate explicit revenue-sharing and benefit-redistribution mechanisms.

### 4.2 Socio-Economic Impacts of Tourism on Local Communities

Economically, artisanal products – comprising wood and bronze sculptures, woven textiles, leatherwork, paintings, and jewelry – account for over half of total tourist expenditures. Handicrafts thus serve as the primary conduit channeling visitor spending directly into local household economies. Employment spans direct roles (hospitality, catering, guiding) and indirect or informal activities (craft vendors, informal transport operators, currency exchangers). Informal currency exchange around hotels further highlights the prominent role of the informal sector in the Plateau's tourism economy.

Previous scholarly work emphasizes that tourism can be highly labor-intensive, offering pathways for women and informal workers while leveraging cultural assets [12, 13]. Broadening community benefits requires engaging actors across all levels of the value chain [14, 15]. However, ownership structure remains a crucial bottleneck. In Overstrand, South Africa, local tourism fostered overall growth and employment, yet highly concentrated ownership prevented it from achieving true inclusivity [16].

Similarly, research in Ethiopia demonstrates that while handicrafts generate crucial income and employment as a key link in the tourism value chain, they often remain poorly integrated into broader tourism strategies due to persistent institutional constraints [17]. Effective local tourism planning requires dedicated municipal capacity and institutional resources [18]. The absence of dedicated municipal budget lines explains why heritage attractions in Djidja, Za-Kpota, and Agbangnizoun remain underdeveloped and under-visited.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the potential of cultural and heritage tourism as a foundation for economic and social development across the Abomey Plateau. However, heritage enhancement remains highly unequally distributed across the six municipalities, with infrastructure and visitor traffic heavily concentrated in Abomey and Bohicon. Findings also highlight the vital role of local craftsmanship in diffusing economic benefits to households through the sale of art objects.

Nevertheless, the broader socio-economic impacts of tourism remain constrained by spatial disparities, low community involvement, and insufficient support infrastructure in surrounding municipalities. To achieve sustainable tourism development, public authorities must focus on capacity building, product diversification, and inter-municipal collaboration. Particular attention should be devoted to fostering active community participation in heritage management and ensuring an equitable distribution of economic returns. Such strategic alignment will strengthen tourism's contribution to local livelihood development while preserving rich cultural heritage for future generations. Future research should further examine the empirical relationship between capital investments in tourism infrastructure and actual household economic returns to guide evidence-based public policy.

## STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

*Acknowledgments*

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the local administrative authorities, public and private stakeholders, community leaders, household heads, as well as tourists who participated in and contributed to this research study.

*Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

*Statement of informed consent*

Authors declare that informed consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection.

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