

Cross River Monoliths: in critical danger of total destruction

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Nlul monolith site, January 2015

Problem: Cross River State, Nigeria is home to some 450 ancient carved monoliths, widely known as Akwanshi, which are exclusive to this region. Although adequate carbon dating has not been conducted, current estimates of their age range from 1,500-500 years before present. In spite of several important studies — Partridge (1905), Allison (1968), Nicklin (1975), Eyo (1986), Edet (2000, 2003) — the monoliths are yet to be systematically documented. In Éjághám, *Ákúânshì* means ‘ancestors in the ground’; *ákú* ‘ancestors’; *kâ* ‘in’; *nshì* ‘ground’ (cf. Allison 1968a: 22).¹ Because the monoliths may be sitting on burial sites that have not been archeologically excavated, they must not be removed; instead they should be preserved *in situ* until the overall goal of conducting archeology is possible. Some communities, like Nkarasi (Ikom L.G.A.), have removed monoliths from their original sites and placed them near the highway as tourist attractions, thus destroying their archeological context. In addition, several monoliths have been reported in western collections; these also appear to have been illegally removed from their sites.

Our recent two-day expedition discovered that the remaining stones are in critical danger of total destruction, either by fire damage caused by local communities or theft. If this process continues, we risk losing a unique part of our World Heritage before we can understand it. The National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria, which is responsible for their preservation, has not been able to cope with this crisis. Therefore we appeal to the international community for assistance for better documentation, preservation and conservation of the sites.

January 23, 2015: we traveled from Calabar to Okuni in Ikom L.G.A. to meet with local historians. They showed us the monoliths that stand next to their Ékpè (Mgbè) ‘leopard

¹ Thanks to Mrs. Rosaline Ntui Egbe, Department of Linguistics, University of Calabar, and an Éjághám speaker, for this interpretation.

society' halls. There is an obvious relationship between the Akwanshi monoliths and the Mgbè stones of Okuni that had never before been documented.



Okuni Mgbè stones compared with an Emangabe Monolith

January 24: In Alok, Ikom L.G.A., led by Dr. Edet, we documented with photographs the condition of the monoliths in the Alok Open Air Museum, as well as in the Emangabe Open Air Museum in the next village (it sits behind the health care center, but there is no signpost to indicate a museum). From there we went to the Edamkono monolith site, a five-minute drive north towards Mbok junction. All these sites are to the west of the Ikom-Ogoja highway, and only Alok has a signboard.

Our overall impression of the monolith sites was dismay and shock. Even in the sites protected by walls and museum staff, there was significant damage by fire and the elements. In the Alok museum, a large mango tree with several monoliths beside it had been repeatedly burnt. A huge silk cotton tree had fallen; luckily it did not hit any monoliths, but because it was hard to cut and remove, it had been intentionally burnt, which did damage the monoliths.



Alok Open Air Museum: burnt mango tree with several monoliths beside it



Silk-cotton tree fallen and burnt in the Alok Open Air Museum, with monoliths behind

In the Emangabe Open Air Museum, we witnessed active yam farms around all the perimeters of its walls, where farmers were using slash and burn methods. Inside the Open Air Museum, the gardeners maintaining the place had been burning the grass instead of cutting it; this has led to continuous deterioration of the monoliths.



Emangabe Open Air Museum with farms burning fire at the perimeter.

At the Edamkono monolith site, we witnessed the absolute destruction of the monoliths. All the monoliths were once standing upright, but now most had fallen. One was lying along the road, partially buried in the ground and cars were driving over it. Others were completely cracked from fire damage.



Edamkono monolith site: left, monolith buried in the road; right, fire damaged

January 25: In Alok, we met the former curator of the Alok Open Air Museum, Chief 'Orlando' Akong, who led us to document the monoliths at the Ebanembim and the Nlul Monolith Sites, both near Alok village on the eastern side of the road. He then led us to Nnang Ekurabe village, Ekajuk Clan, Ogoja L.G.A. As we returned to Alok, we stopped at a nearby village where a local had rescued several monoliths from a farmland where they were being destroyed by fires set by both hunters and farmers. Reports are that more monoliths remain there.



Ebanembim monolith site with destroyed monoliths; both have top sections missing



Nlul monolith site: This is our World Heritage today; what is its future?

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