

Cross River monoliths: community efforts to salvage their heritage

Text and photographs (2015) by

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Hon. (Mrs.) Margaret Agbor Ella of Emangagbe community. She has become a local hero for her efforts to save the carved monoliths from destruction.

Problem: In contemporary Nigeria, local communities are faced with the end of their heritage, whether linguistic, artistic, spiritual and communal, due to two major factors: the invasion of foreign monotheistic religions and incompetent governance at both state and federal levels. Our recent trip to the historic areas of the Cross River monoliths found several examples of both the devastation of heritage, and the critical community response to take local action in defense of their heritage.

February 16, 2015, in the company of Chief 'Orlando' Akong, we visited Njemetop village in Nselle Clan (Ikom L.G.A.), where we found that community leaders, motivated by their concern for the theft, vandalism and destruction by fire of their monoliths, had moved six of them into their village square, where they are surrounded by houses. An elder teacher, Mr. Paulinus Ayambe, told us:

“Our fore-fathers lived in Nkrigom village, but when the elders died, the younger ones moved to found new villages. Then Mbembe people occupied the land, but they began to remove those monoliths, selling them to outsiders; we don’t know who. In 1993 we were able to drive the Mbembe away from the land.

In the Old Njemetop village, we had about 100 and stones, but when we went to clear that area, we found only six stones left. In response, the village committee wrote to the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, with a copy to the Curator, National Museum, Calabar. I took the two letters to Calabar, handed them to the Curator, who then forwarded one to Abuja. Up to now we have not heard any response. Because of this, we have relocated the six stones to the current Njemetop village, then molded cement blocks to make a civic center, and to make a secure fence to protect our monoliths” (Paulinus Ayambe).



Circle of relocated stones at Njemetop village. The surrounding brush leads to continual fire damage. Note the spalls and cracks on the stone at right.

In spite of the efforts of village leaders, the stones are still being damaged by fire, because locals burning the brush around the stones. A complete response requires educating the communities about their preservation, and hiring them in support programs of preservation.

Each monolith has unique features: inscriptions, symbols and style. Below: a rare representation of male genitals (left); an adult and small 'child' stone (middle); three stones beneath an Ekpe 'oboti' tree in a shrine formation (right).



Njemetop village, relocated stones.

February 17, 2015, we visited Emangagbe community, where 'Honorable' Margaret Agbor Ella, told us of her efforts to save the monoliths. The daughter of a royal family, Hon. Ella identifies deeply with the monoliths as representing her ancestors. She reported that when her maternal grandfather spoke to the monoliths, they would respond. When she discovered monoliths being destroyed by fire in a nearby abandoned village, she urgently relocated them to Emangabe village square for protection. The stones were too heavy to move, so in her words,

"I began to pray to the monoliths. I told them, 'My concern is that you no longer burn in the fire. Please!, the old men of Nnam, would you help me so that I will be able to lift you from this place to save you from the fire.' As I spoke, the four young men were able to lift these stones in a truck.

After this, all the chiefs of Nnam clan called me to interrogate me. When I explained the situation, they responded: 'You deserve appreciation'. They gave me a blessing, and prayed for me that I will be blessed for preserving these monoliths."

Hon. Ella suggested that the most important tool for preservation of the monoliths is to educate the local communities, especially the youths. This is because Nigerian pastors in local churches, particularly Pentecostal, have played a destructive role by dissuading the people from appreciating and preserving their heritage, by labeling the monoliths and any form of traditional culture as 'witchcraft' and 'sinful'.



Monoliths in an abandoned village. Bush fires made cash crop farmers are destroying them.



Emamgabe village. Four monoliths relocated by Hon. Ella to save them from destruction.