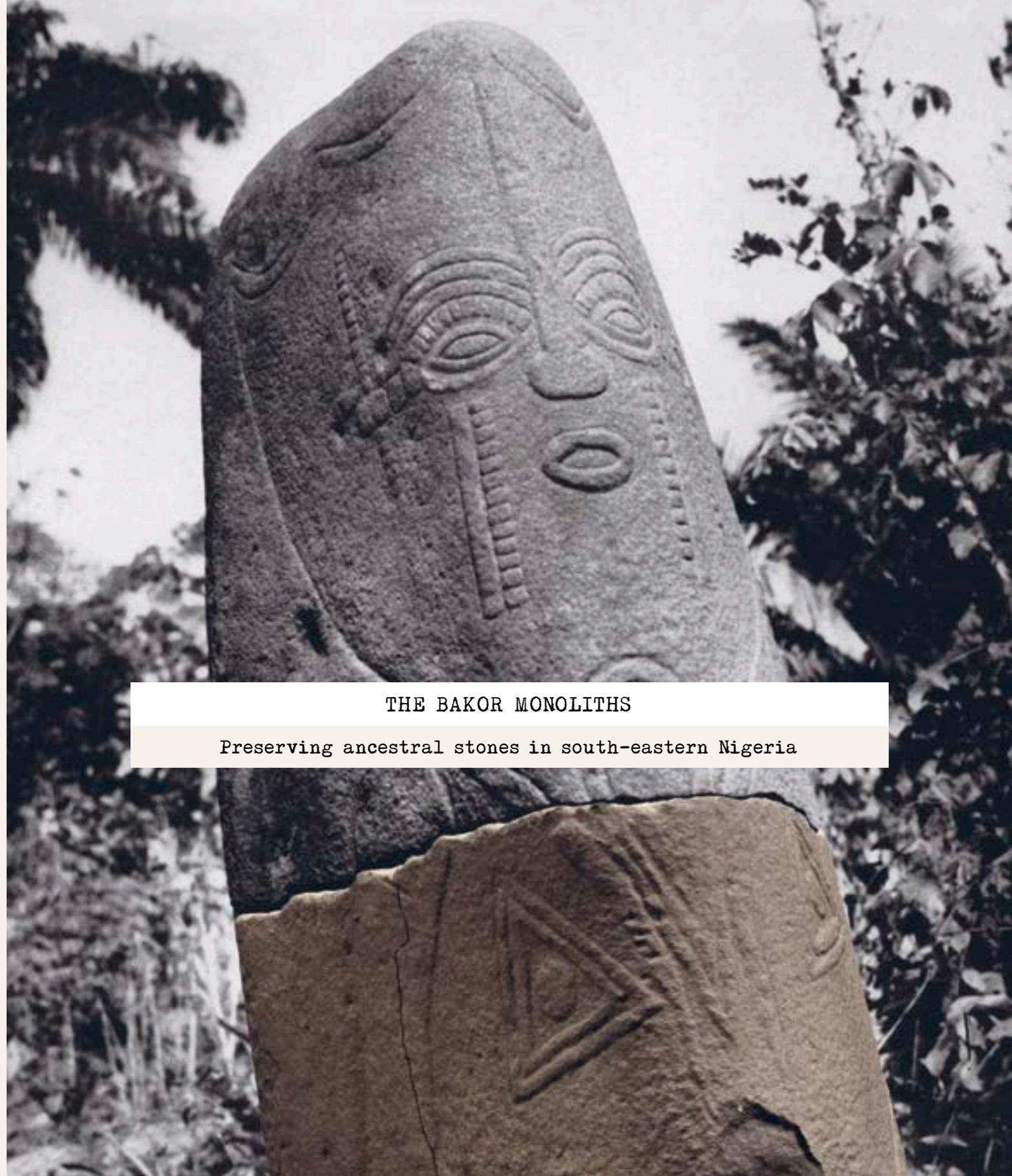




We have to let the world know that we have things like this here.

THE BAKOR MONOLITHS



THE BAKOR MONOLITHS
Preserving ancestral stones in south-eastern Nigeria



Unwrapped texture map of the top half of the Ntito monolith in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

THE BAKOR MONOLITHS

Preserving ancestral stones in south-eastern Nigeria



FACTVM
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FOR DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY
IN PRESERVATION



Chief Sylvanus "Orlando" Akong, sitting on the E'kpopor tree in Alok village. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

"Don't be a party to those who will sell, be a party to those who will preserve.
People are coming to steal to make money, we should not allow them.
Because they are selling our own great-forefathers. They are selling our culture.
We have to let the world know that we have things like this here."

CHIEF SYLVANUS "ORLANDO" AKONG
Curator of the Alok Open Air Museum
1953-2019. In Memoriam



Commemorative Bakor-style monolith of Chief Akong. A. Solomon Edet, 2021.



The "chief" monolith in Alok painted and fed at the Yam Festival. I. Miller, 2014.

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Chiefs at the Akumabal meeting hall. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

FOREWORD

ABBA ISA TIJANI
Director General, National Commission
for Museums and Monuments

The Bakor monoliths are venerated carved stone sculptures representative of ancestors, associated with traditional spiritual and social practices within the forest belt of Cross River State, south-east Nigeria. They are locally known as “akwanshi” or “atal” and found as a collection of stone monoliths within family, clan, or village lands. The more popular collections of these stones are found in the Ikom area of which two sites, Alok and Emanghabe, have been declared National Monuments and protected by law under the purview of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. The stone monoliths are decorated with symbols believed to represent a form of ancient writing and a complex system of coded information known as Nsibidi.

These exceptional sculptures which remain one of the most unique art forms from Nigeria, have suffered from neglect, the effects of the growing demand for land for agricultural use with its activities such as bush burning as well as illegal excavation and export. A number of these sculptures have found their way into museum collections in Europe and the United States. The global efforts geared towards the protection and conservation of cultural heritage has been able to bring about collaborations among cultural institutions, non-governmental organizations and enthusiasts across the globe for sustainable management of cultural heritage. Some of these collaborations have translated into national and international listings of cultural heritage as well as the discovery and repatriation of stolen cultural property. All cultural artefacts and heritage objects are first of indigenous or local value before they attain global significance through a wide range of circumstances. They are artistic expressions of the socio-political, religious, and cultural experiences of the host community that created, preserves, and in a sense curates them. As with the Benin Bronzes, which have now received such international attention leading to the commencement of repatriation of these artefacts, the Bakor monoliths in foreign collections need to be returned to their country of origin because they constitute an integral part of the community and national identity which has been fragmented due to their geographical dislocation.

Nigeria has greatly benefited from the collaboration and partnership with national and international organizations on the conservation of cultural heritage. The collaboration of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) with Factum Foundation, Trust for African Rock Art (TARA), University of Calabar, and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, for the documentation and conservation of the Bakor monoliths is a case at hand that has built on past conservation attempts. The



"Capped" monolith at Etinghi Nta. F. Saumarez Smith, 2018.

work done by the Factum Foundation in building on these past efforts made by some archaeologists and heritage researchers has helped to extensively document and preserve these sculptures.

The digitization of the Bakor monoliths has brought to the fore several important issues relevant to the sustainable conservation of these revered cultural objects. Topics of discourse range from the impact of agricultural activities of the local communities to the discovery of some of these antiquities either in part or whole outside the shores of Nigeria and the linkage between these sculptures and rock art cultures from the North-East to South-East axis of Nigeria. The project has also raised awareness among the indigenes and communities in the Bakor region on the great significance of these cultural artefacts and the need to continue to protect and preserve their highly revered heritage.

The effort to accurately and extensively document these sculptures, which includes digitization of the individual stone monoliths in their natural settings, is important to provide a comprehensive understanding of the traditional knowledge system that birthed this art form. This is vital to the evolving concept of exhibition presentation and interpretation of museum collections that is ongoing in the museum system in Nigeria. In this technology driven age, it is also necessary to digitally document these objects in order to make them more broadly available to the public. This publication and this effort at its various stages outlines the challenges encountered, insights gained and new questions arising for future generations of scholars, researchers, and heritage enthusiasts to provide answers to.

This project has given further impetus to Nigeria's call for the repatriation of her stolen and illegally trafficked cultural heritage. It is important to note that these cultural stones are also on Nigeria's UNESCO Tentative list. The Bakor monoliths have been included on the International Council on Museums (ICOM) Red List of West African cultural objects at risk, which has helped to raise awareness of this threat. They have also been listed on the World Monuments Fund's "World Monuments Watch". While providing additional information about these sculptures, this project will also assist Nigeria in her reparation drive by facilitating their easy identification in international museum collections as well as a number of private galleries and collections.

The support of the Carène Foundation for the exhibition on the monoliths at Alok, will recreate a community cultural landscape which will in turn promote community identity as well as boost community socio-economic life through sustainable tourism.

It is hoped that this publication will further encourage productive discussions on the value of cultural heritage, ownership, preservation and socio-economic development associated with heritage properties and host communities.



Reunited facsimile of Ntitogo monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.

INTRODUCTION: AN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE BAKOR MONOLITHS

ADAM LOWE

Director, Factum Foundation

Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Preservation was established in 2009 to demonstrate the importance of documenting, monitoring, studying, recreating, and disseminating the world's cultural heritage through the development and application of high-resolution recording and re-materialisation techniques. Since 2016, Factum's work in Nigeria, led by Ferdinand Saumarez Smith, has exceeded all expectations in terms of research, discoveries, and outcomes. Factum has worked closely with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, The Trust for African Rock Art, The University of Calabar, and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The focus of the work is on the long-term preservation of Bakor monoliths, carved basalt stones linked to ancestral leaders which are found in an area of approximately 350 square miles in the Middle Cross River region, south-east Nigeria. The Bakor monoliths are residues of spiritual, ancestral, and social practices in a once heavily forested part of the country. Digital technology is being used to preserve and communicate the importance of the monoliths as the residue of a living tradition impacted by the experience of colonialism.¹

The project began with the intention of recording the surface and shape of the monoliths to add to documentation by Philip Allison, who carried out a photographic survey in 1961/2 that was published in 1968 as *Cross River Monoliths* by the Department of Antiquities of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

'This brief survey of a small area of the Middle Cross River, and the illustrations which accompany it, give some indication of the rich fields for research to be found in that little-known stretch of West Africa which lies between the Benue Valley and the shores of the Gulf of Guinea.'

Philip Allison, 1968

Allison documented carved monoliths at 39 sites primarily on the land of six tribal groups in the province of Ogoja and lists 295 stones carved from river-eroded basaltic rock. The addition of engraved notations transforms the stone from natural 'curiosity' to human-made sculpture. The Allison Archive, now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, has been accessible since 2017.

From the start of Factum Foundation's work it was clear that many of the monoliths were no longer in their original location, and that others were in poor condition as a result of deforestation and the destructive impact of agriculture. The initial work consisted of locating the monoliths, recording them in 3D and in colour,

¹ Factum's work has been generously supported by Jim and Paula Crown and by the Carène Foundation, and Trust for African Rock Art's by the Prince Claus Fund and by the United States Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation.

geolocating their exact position, and understanding the dangers they face. Finding ways to involve local communities to secure their preservation has also become a core focus. During six years of work in Cross River State we have documented over 300 monoliths in 30 sites, including some that Allison never visited.

As ‘missing’ monoliths were identified in international collections it became clear that there has been a significant level of trade since 1970 when UNESCO’s Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was internationally agreed. As they were discovered, these ‘migrant’ monoliths have been recorded with the permission of both museums and private dealers who have granted access to the objects in their custody. Through research and a growing understanding of the production and function of the monoliths, it has also been possible to identify later productions made for the international market in neighbouring Cameroon, some of which have found their way into museum collections. The centre of this production is Fouban, a town known since the 1930s for its artisanal quarter, but which from at least the 1960s on became a centre for the trade in antiquities also. Today, it remains both a centre for the production of new monoliths and the sale of old stones. From Fouban, inauthentic as well as authentic monoliths move to Brussels, where they enter the art market. The different narratives contained in this book are intended to raise important questions about preservation, repatriation, the market, and the local benefits that culture can bring.

In debates about restitution and repatriation, the focus in the context of Nigeria has been on the bronzes and ivories that were taken from the Oba’s palace in Benin as the spoils of the British 1897 punitive expedition that destroyed a centuries-old civilisation. This focus is partly the result of the current power and wealth of south-western Nigeria to the detriment of the of the south-east. As a result, the movement of Bakor monoliths to Europe and America since the 1970’s has been largely overlooked. The aim of Factum’s work over the past six years is to create the conditions for recently removed monoliths to find their way back to their original locations. This involves solutions that are both local and global, online (screen-based or virtual) and offline (exhibitions and the production of physical facsimiles) backed by realistic site management plans, sensitive site improvements, the transfer of skills and technologies for recording and monitoring condition, the protection of the monoliths from slash-and-burn farming practices, and signage to promote cross-community consciousness of the value of the monoliths. UNESCO World Heritage status will significantly help raising support and funding.

Today, Bakor monoliths can be found in a variety of conditions: some still stand, while others are fallen and broken, scattered across yam fields of agricultural communities, evidence of both decay and resistance – the determination of objects and cultures to persist. Their previous form and function are articulated as material evidence, embedded in the surface of the stone and informed by the meanings attached to the monoliths, both individually and collectively. The communities have changed in significant ways since the monoliths were carved and the cultural significance of these specific objects has to a significant degree been marginalised, forgotten, or removed. While they are evidence of both a living animistic past and present neglect, they are now considered ‘juju’, or black magic, by Pentecostal Christians. Will they gain new significance as they are recorded, shared, understood and engaged with through the filter of today’s values?

Digital technologies provide the means of safeguarding, sharing, and uncovering the complex histories behind objects and artworks, as well as offering an opportunity to rethink ownership to create new networks of meaning in line with the values of the time. Technology needs to be combined with political will. The aim for the long-term protection of the monolith sites is to combine clan custodianship with supervision by the NCMM. At present only two sites (Alok and Emanghabe) are registered on the existing NCMM listing. All 30 sites need full documentation and ongoing monitoring through the participation of local communities, with the intention being to develop smart-phone based networks.

The work to preserve the Bakor monoliths has aimed to transfer skills and technologies in order to create a new local economy based on preservation. The process to achieve this goal has taken some surprising turns and led to deeper knowledge and understanding of these enigmatic carved stones. The Alok visitor center, the exhibitions on the monoliths at the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos and at the National Museum in Calabar, help to focus attention on the importance of these sculptural forms. This publication aims to present different narratives and focus the philosophical and cultural issues that high-resolution recording, data sharing, and facsimile production raise.

MAPPING BAKOR

BULUS WULGA
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

GPS-BASED MAPPING AND DOCUMENTATION OF THE BAKOR MONOLITHS

The first step in preservation is mapping. The mapping of the Bakor monoliths was intended to provide not only conventional maps of the sites and artefacts, but a database which integrates spatial with non-spatial data (including multimedia data such as 3D models, images, and videos) of the heritage for effective planning, conservation, and promotion. The process was carried out in accordance with “cultural mapping” principles, with community participatory mapping and qualitative GIS employed. Qualitative GIS incorporates nonquantitative (multimedia, ethnographic, and historical) data into GIS.

The process began with community engagement activities, starting with discussions with the Paramount Ruler, then the village chiefs who hold the local knowledge essential to identify the sites. Community representatives were assigned to lead the mapping team through the bush to help locate and identify the sites of the monoliths. Upon arrival at each site, the first task was a thorough examination and search, then when a monolith was discovered it was marked with a number tag bearing a unique identifying number and a letter code. This was performed until all monoliths in the site were tagged. Forms/checklists containing object data (site name, photo ID, GPS coordinates, measurements, ownership/jurisdiction, significance, common usage, conservation status e.g. threats and protection measures, stories associated, and other important data) were used in the field data entry, but GPS coordinates and the photographic ID were directly saved on the GPS device.

On-site recording started with photographing individual monoliths with the number tag visible. The GPS coordinates and other records outlined in the form were captured. After a monolith was recorded, the number tag on it was removed, and it was photographed without the identification information as a portrait for publicisation purposes. This process was repeated until the entire site had been captured, and was then repeated at each subsequent site. After the fieldwork, all the data was transferred to a computer and entered into an ArcGIS Geo-database for further processing. All the information necessary for the conservation and promotion of the Bakor monoliths is stored in this database.

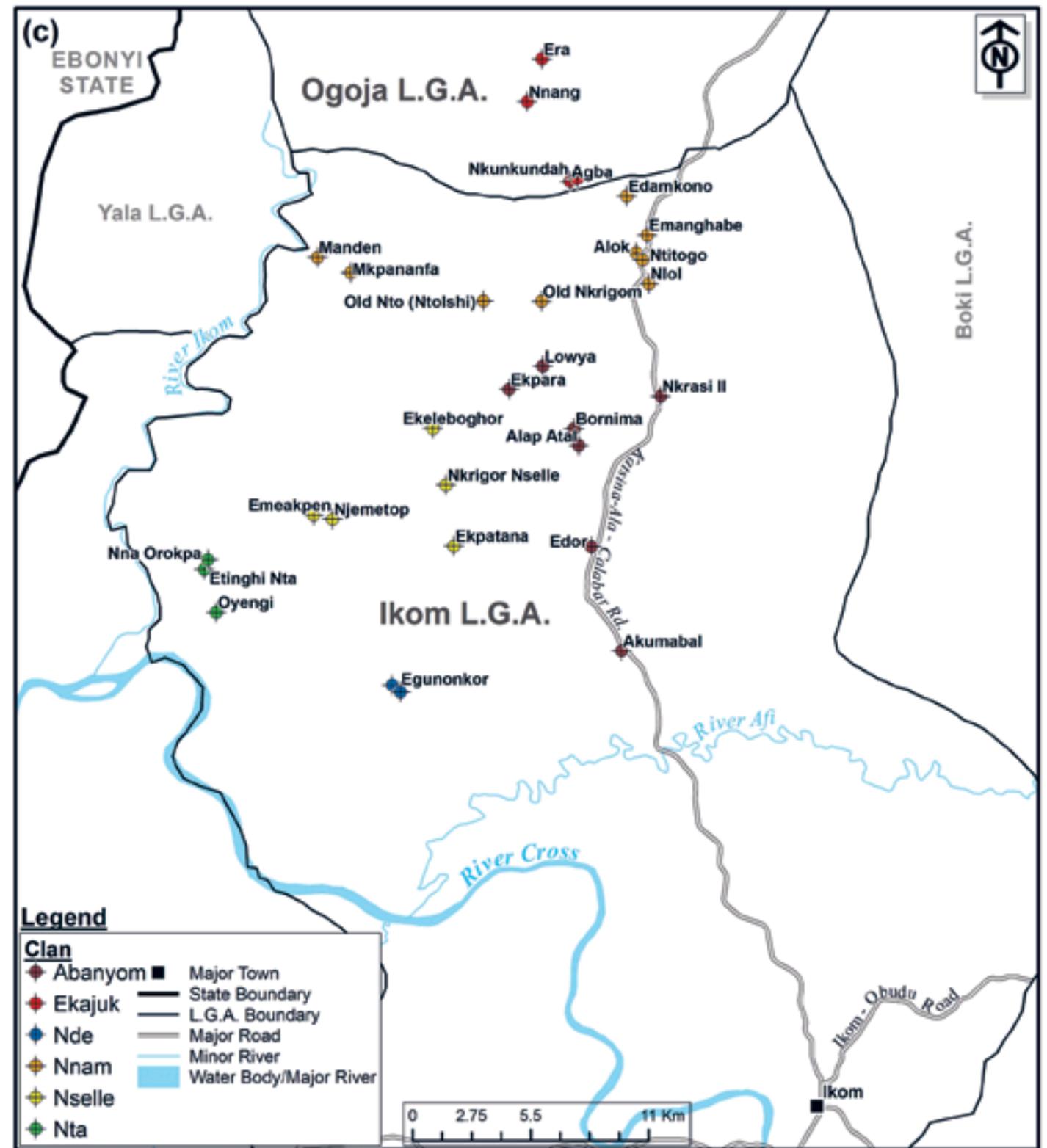
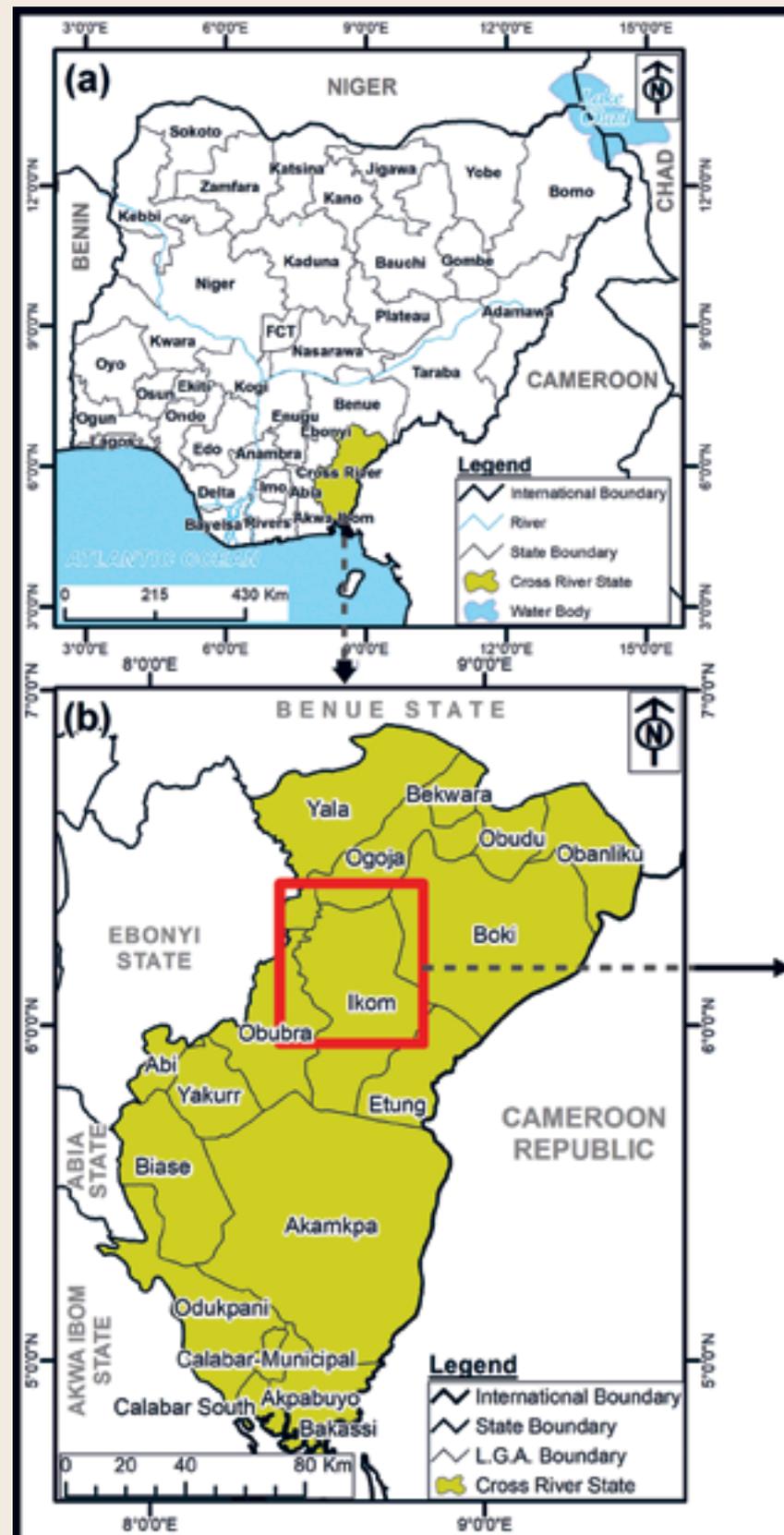
The mapping exercise calls attention to the existence and significance of the Bakor monoliths as a cultural heritage of unique importance. Different types of maps, photos, community engagement videos/audio, graphs, charts, tables, and reports are necessary for the creation of awareness, as well as management and conservation. With web-based GIS platforms such Google Maps, Microsoft Virtual Earth, etc., the coordinates obtained from the field have been used to build a



Afi Mountain on the Nigeria/Cameroon border, home of the Cross River gorilla. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

web-based map. Although this is an extremely valuable resource, the information is as yet restricted as no adequate security measures have yet been put in place for the monolith sites.

The contemporary records have been compared with the survey carried out by Philip Allison in 1961/62 to build up a broad sense of the number of monoliths that have disappeared, either through theft or neglect. It is hoped that these results will raise the monoliths’ profile in public consciousness, both in Nigeria and internationally. The data can also be used by other community sectors to support their own requests for more funding and infrastructure. Finally, the data is an essential resource to support the case for enlisting the Bakor monoliths as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Maps of Nigeria, Cross River State, and the sites in the Bakor region. B. Wulga, 2021.



The Cross River, which flows through the southern portion of the Bakor region. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

FACSIMILES, FAKES, AND THE TRADE IN BAKOR MONOLITHS

FERDINAND SAUMAREZ SMITH
Factum Foundation



Fig. 21. Three of the stones at Agba.

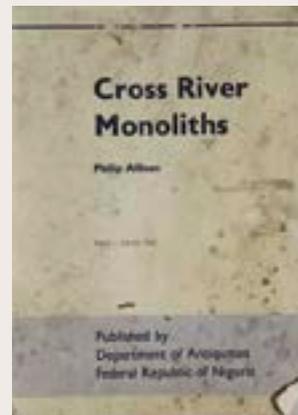


Figure 1: The first photograph of the Bakor monoliths. C. Partridge, 1903.

Figure 2: The same monolith documented at Agba. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

Figure 3: Philip Allison's *Cross River Monoliths* (1968).

The Bakor monoliths, formerly known as the 'Cross River' or 'Ikom' monoliths and locally referred to as *akwanshi* (meaning 'ancestor in the ground') or *alap atal* ('long stone'), take their name from a group of linguistically and ethnically related communities ('clans') in an area of approximately 350 square miles in the Middle Cross River region where they are exclusively found. The monoliths are located on the land of six of these clans: Abanyom, Ekajuk, Nde, Nnam, Nselle, and Nta. The word 'Bakor' means 'come and take', a name that was chosen as a collective title because the phrase is identical in the languages of each of the original clans that make up the Bakor people. Referring to them as the 'Bakor' monoliths, rather than the 'Cross River' (the state) or 'Ikom' (the nearest large town) monoliths as was formerly customary, respects the unique ownership of the monoliths by this people.

The first photograph of the monoliths was taken in 1903 at a site called Abga (Ekajuk clan) by Charles Partridge, a British colonial official, and was published in his book *Cross River Natives* (1905) (fig. 1).¹ These monoliths are still identifiable at Agba today (fig. 2). At another site, Alok (referred to as 'Anopp' by Partridge) the community informed him that the custom of carving the monoliths no longer existed, that the stones were naturally shaped in riverbeds, that they represent past leaders, and that they were painted and "fed" at the time of the yam harvest. In 1961 and 1962, Philip Allison, an employee of the Nigerian forestry department, was commissioned by John Picton, then a curator at the Nigerian National Museum and now Professor Emeritus at SOAS, to carry out a survey of the monoliths. He published the results as *Cross River Monoliths* (1968) (fig. 3), the only publication dedicated to the subject until the present volume.² Since 2016, Factum Foundation has worked with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, The Trust for African Rock Art, The University of Calabar, and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to update Allison's survey using GPS tagging and 3D scanning, as well as photographic documentation. The work has resulted in the recording of 220 carved and 96 uncarved and fragmentary monoliths in 30 sites. Allison's survey documented nearly 300 carved monoliths. Unfortunately, a direct comparison between these figures to establish the number that have been removed or destroyed can only be broadly indicative since Allison did not visit all the sites. Newly registered sites include Egunonkor (Allison documented only part of a site by the name of 'Egunonkwor' and the monoliths in his photographs were unidentifiable), Ekelebohgor, Ekpara, Lowya, Manden (Allison's 'Manden' site is actually Mkpananfa), and Nkunkundah.

¹ (Partridge 1905, 268-277).

² (Allison 1968a).



Figure 4: Fire damaged monolith at Manden (Nnam clan). F. Saumarez Smith, 2018.

The monolith sites can be divided into three categories: the two sites registered by the NCMM that are enclosed by a perimeter wall (Alok and Emanghabe); those which have been subsumed by farmland (for example: Manden and Nkunkundah); and those which remain in forested areas (for example: Nkrigom and Egunonkor). The perimeter walls aim to prevent theft and protect the monoliths from fire, but they destroy the atmosphere that can be experienced in the original forest context and have not stopped the practice of burning to remove vegetation, although this is less damaging as the grass is not allowed to grow as much as in the farmland. Slash-and-burn farming has caused enormous damage to many of the monoliths, with extreme heat followed by rapid cooling causing cracks and fragmentation (fig. 4).³ The sites in the forest are generally the best preserved and their monoliths are the least likely to have been removed because of the difficulty of access, although at sites such as Nkrigom falling trees have also caused damage.

As well as providing the impetus for the documentation work on site in the Bakor region, Allison's work also transformed the other primary activity of the project. His archive, including contact sheets of all the monoliths he surveyed, was donated by Picton to the Bodleian Library in 2008 and became available in 2017. Access to the full archive enabled the identification of a number of monoliths in various international collections. In October 2016, Factum recorded the bottom half of a monolith (fig. 5) using photogrammetry at a site called Ntitogo (Nnam clan, photographed by Allison, fig. 6), the top half of which was identified by Dr Abu Solomon Edet and Dr Ivor Miller of the University of Calabar in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig. 7). After securing permission to record the top half fragment in 2018, Factum produced a reunited facsimile which was returned to the Bakor region in July 2022 and was installed at the Bakor meeting house (fig. 8).

Factum also recorded a monolith identifiable from the site Etinghi Nta (Nta clan) at the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, which was purchased from the Brussels-based dealer Pierre Darteville in 1998 and is on the International Commission of Museums' 'Red List of West African Cultural Objects at Risk' (fig. 9).⁴ 1998 corresponds to the period following the announcement of the establishment of the Quai Branly when approximately one thousand pieces were acquired by the institution.⁵ According to older members of Etinghi Nta village, this monolith was stolen in the 1970s and is known to the community by the name 'Ebi Abu', which connects it to the secret society Ékpè.⁶ During a visit to Etinghi Nta in September 2019, an assembled group of elders broke into an impromptu rendition of the phrase 'bring back Ebi Abu to us' to the tune of the traditional Scottish folk song 'My bonnie lies over the ocean.' Factum first produced a scaled-down model of the monolith to show to the community (fig. 10), and then a full-scale facsimile which was returned in July 2022 and was installed outside the village meeting house following a ceremonial warrior dance by elders of the community (fig. 11-12).

3 (Edet & Takahashi 2003, 118-134; 2000, 117-132).

4 (ICOM 2016).

5 (Sarr & Savoy 2018, 60).

6 On which see Ivor Miller's article in the present publication: pp. 94-139.



Figure 5: Bottom half of the Ntitogo monolith recorded on site. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

Figure 6: Ntitogo monolith documented by Philip Allison. Bodleian Library, 1961-62.



Figure 7: Top half of the Ntitogo monolith, recorded at the Metropolitan. O. Lowe, 2018.

Figure 8: Facsimile of the reunited halves of the Ntitogo monolith, installed at Akumabal in July 2022. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.



Figure 9: The monolith known as Ebi Abu, from the village of Etinghi Nta, now in the Musée du Quai Branly. F. Saumarez Smith, 2018.



Figure 10: The Chief of Etinghi Nta with a scale model of the Ebi Abu monolith. F. Saumarez Smith, 2019.



Figure 11: A libation is poured for the facsimile of Ebi Abu. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.



Figure 12: Chiefs of the Nta clan with the facsimile of Ebi Abu. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.

Research online also led to the discovery of a monolith not documented by Allison belonging to the Brussels-based dealer Didier Claes (fig. 13). Upon receiving permission to record this example, Factum travelled to a warehouse in the outskirts of Brussels to record it in 2018. The warehouse manager brought out two examples wrapped in blankets, neither of which proved to be the monolith expected from the picture online. One was identifiable from Allison's archive as originating from the site Oyengi (Nta clan, 'OY2', fig. 14-15), while the other (fig. 16), which was exhibited in the sculpture garden at Frieze Masters London in 2015, appeared similar to those found at a site not recorded by Allison called Bornima (Abanyom clan). In the early 1960s, Oyengi had four carved monoliths and one uncarved. Today, only one carved and one uncarved remain; of the other three phallic-style examples, aside from the one in the Claes collection, one is missing and the other is owned by Darteville, with the provenance 'purchased from P. Claes, in 1965, in Belgium' (figs. 17-18).⁷ This presumably refers to Didier Claes' father, Patric, who was a collector and 'scientist and worked for the national museums of the Congo.'⁸ The chief of Oyengi entreated us to help return these monoliths to his community.

Another online search led to the discovery of a non-basalt example identifiable from a site called Akumabal (Abanyom clan, 'AK1', fig. 19) held in the collection of Jerome and Ellen Stern in East Hampton, USA. This monolith was donated in 2018 to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where Factum recorded it in December 2019 (fig. 20). The original site remained unknown for a long time, but following the installation of the Ntitogo monolith at the Akumabal meeting hall in July 2022, members of the community requested it to be registered and included in the project database; a tangible result of the exhibition.

Parallel to the circulation of original monoliths in international collections are others that are probably inauthentic on grounds of style, scale, and material. One that is held in the collection of the British Museum was verified by Philip Allison and was bought at auction at Sotheby's in December 1974 from a certain C.A.L. Brooks

⁷ (Darteville & Plisnier 2020, 1:244).

⁸ (Art Market Guru 2018).



Figure 13: Undocumented monolith in the collection of Didier Claes.



Figure 14: Oyengi phallic-style monolith in the collection of Didier Claes. F. Saumarez Smith, 2018.



Figure 15: Oyengi phallic-style monolith documented by Allison in 1961. Bodleian Library, 1961-62.



Figure 16: Abanyom-style monolith in the collection of Didier Claes. F. Saumarez Smith, 2018.



Figure 17: Oyengi phallic-style monolith in the collection of Pierre Dartevelle.



Figure 18: Oyengi phallic-style monolith documented by Philip Allison 1961. Bodleian Library, 1961-62.



Figure 19: Akumabal monolith documented by Philip Allison in 1961. Bodleian Library, 1961-62.

Figure 20: Akumabal monolith in the Israel Museum, 2019. F. Saumarez Smith, 2019.





Figure 21: Bamoun-style monolith in the collection of the British Museum. F. Saumarez Smith, 2019.

Figure 22: Similar Bamoun-style monolith sold at Sotheby's, 1976.

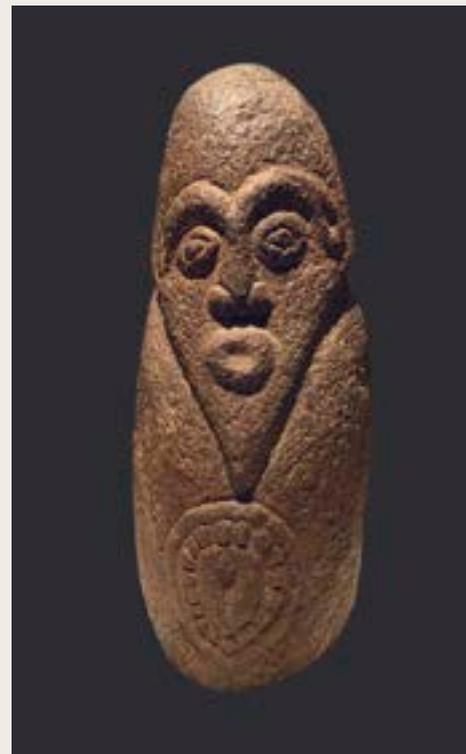


Figure 23: Bamoun-style monolith in the collection of the Israel Museum. F. Saumarez Smith, 2019.

Figure 24: Bamoun-style monolith in the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, 2019.

(fig. 21); however, doubts about its authenticity were raised by Malcom Donald Mcleod, the Keeper of the Department of Ethnography from 1974-1990.⁹ Brooks sold another very similar example 'collected in the 1930's', again at Sotheby's, in July 1976 (fig. 22). Unfortunately, it has thus far proved impossible to find anything out about Brooks, which leaves questions about the provenance open. Analysis of the stone shows it to be carved from a type of granite rather than the traditional basalt or limestone. In terms of style, it is almost identical to one held by the Israel Museum (fig. 23) and another acquired in 2019 by the New Orleans Museum of Art (fig. 24); it therefore seems likely that they come from the same tradition, or were perhaps even produced by the same workshop. In the course of fieldwork in Nigeria, a number of oral sources pointed to the existence of a workshop producing 'fake' monoliths in Cameroon. Narcisse Tchandeu, an art historian who has written in this publication on monolith culture in the Bamoun Kingdom in the Cameroonian grasslands shows how this indigenous style has been adapted to the market for Bakor monoliths (see pages 74-81). His research led to the discovery of Maché Arouna, an elderly carver from the town of Fouban in Cameroon, who claimed to have carved the British Museum, Israel Museum, and New Orleans Museum of Art monoliths. Whether this is true, or whether he is just one among many practitioners of the Bamoun-style of carving, his studio did contain a monolith with an extremely similar style of facial features (fig. 25) and an annotated copy of Allison's *African Stone Sculpture* (1968) (fig. 26).¹⁰

It is of note that in Keith Nicklin's 1975 article "The Rape of Nigeria's Antiquities", after discussing the cross-border trade from Nigeria to Cameroon, he goes on to recount having 'met a man in Fouban who forges Cross River monoliths using some of the standard publications to guide him', concluding that this was perhaps 'indicative of illicit traffic in genuine monoliths.'¹¹ Nicklin was in fact entirely correct in this supposition. Tchandeu's fieldwork on Bamoun carving also led to a discovery which transformed the understanding of how the trade in Bakor monoliths works. He shared an image of five monoliths (fig. 27) in the collection of Njitari Allahamdou, a dealer of African arts also based in Fouban, three of which were verifiable from Allison's archive. In May 2022, Factum Foundation accompanied Tchandeu to Fouban to discover more about these monoliths. Fouban has a long history as an artisanal centre, as well as being a hub for the trade in authentic cultural objects from across sub-Saharan Africa; Allahamdou's role in both aspects is recognised.¹² Allahamdou was extremely open and welcoming and explained the entire process of the trade in the monoliths in a wide-ranging interview included in this publication (pp. 83-93). In it he describes how he would negotiate the sales with the communities, the strenuous community-wide effort to remove the monoliths (which weigh as much as 800kg) from the forest, and the process of transferring the monoliths to Cameroon.

9 (Mcleod 1994, 52).

10 (Allison 1968b).

11 (Nicklin 1975, 86-88).

12 (Fine 2016, 54-67; Forni 2015, 119-146; 129-130).



Figure 25: Bamoun-style monolith in Foumban. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.

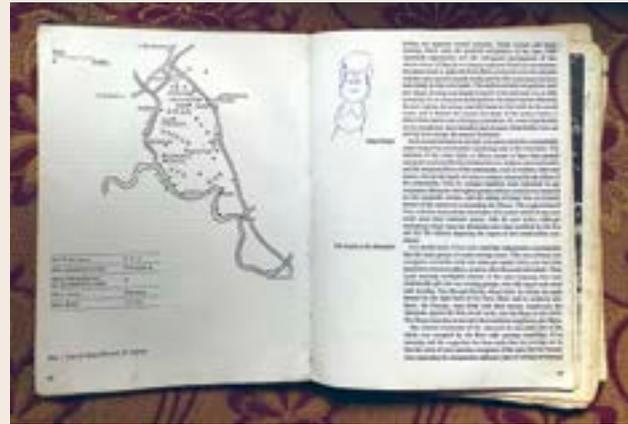


Figure 26: Maché Arouna's copy of Philip Allison. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.



Figure 27: Monoliths in the collection of Njitari Allahamdou, Foumban. N. Tchandeu, 2022.

Allahamdou also mentions the names of several Belgian and French dealers that he claims to have sold to: including Pierre Loos, Jacques Kerchache, Bernard Dulon, and Philippe Guimiot, as well as the aforementioned Darteville and Claes. This corresponds with Darteville's account of his career: his first ever collecting trip to Africa in 1967 was to Foumban. In his words:

There was a lot of talk at that time about Cameroon where, following the Bamileke revolt, artifacts were emerging from the chiefdoms. But there was also talk about the Biafran war where Muslims, who were against pagan animism, were dumping a lot of artifacts on the market. They looted the temples and sent religious objects to neighbouring countries, making a profit from them.¹³

On his second trip the following year, Darteville met Guimiot, who ran an African art gallery in Douala and worked with Kerchache and 'his devoted Yendé.'¹⁴ Both Guimiot and Kerchache, who died in 2001, have attracted criticism for works acquired in Nigeria during the Biafran Civil War (1967-1970): Guimiot for a 'Female Figure from an Obu (house of images)' acquired by him in Abiriba in 1969, which was donated to the Metropolitan in 2017; and Kerchache for a pair of Igbo statues sold at Christie's on the 29th June 2020 that were also acquired by him in situ in 1969.¹⁵ 'Yendé' refers to Allahamdou's older brother, El Hadj Yendé, who is known for his role in popularising the carving of the Mumuye culture and who 'started travelling in the 1960s to the North West Region and across the Nigerian border to look for antiquities for his many European and American customers', many of which 'were exported to Europe via Brussels by Philippe Guimiot.'¹⁶ Guimiot later became Darteville's main client and therefore financial backer. Darteville subsequently made trips to Cameroon in 1970, 1972, 1973, and 1975.¹⁷

As to the other names, Bernard Dulon curated an exhibition in 2010 on Darteville's father Edmond, a colonial official and collector, titled *Carnets de voyages. Edmond Darteville, un valeureux explorateur africain* at the Musée du Président Jacques Chirac. Didier Claes, whose father sold the phallic-style monolith from Oyengi to Darteville in 1965, was mentored by Darteville in his collecting of African art.¹⁸ Pierre Loos, however, whose gallery is adjacent to Darteville's in the Impasse Saint-Jacques in Brussels, denies knowing Allahamdou or ever having been to Cameroon, although he was once involved in buying a monolith head fragment sold at Christie's Paris in 2007 for a client.¹⁹ In terms of the ongoing trade, Allahamdou both states that his children are continuing the business, and that the trade in Bakor monoliths has completely finished on account of the difficulty of crossing the border between Nigeria and Cameroon

13 (Darteville & Plisnier 2020, 1:52).

14 (Darteville & Plisnier 2020, 1:52).

15 (Christies 2020; LaGamma 2020).

16 (Tribal Art 2018).

17 (Darteville & Plisnier 2020, 1:57).

18 (Darteville & Plisnier 2020, 1:173).

19 (Christies 2007; personal communication 09.06.22).

because of the Amabazonia crisis in the south and Boko Haram in the north. His last visit to Bakor was in the 2000s.

The justification of the trade from the perspective of both the Cameroonian middleman and the European dealer is that the willingness of African communities to sell proves they no longer have a living spiritual connection with their cultural heritage. Therefore, the objects are better looked after by international connoisseurs who actually care about them. But this is circular logic. In the case of Bakor, the offer being made to a series of post-conflict communities in the 1970s involved choosing between their cultural heritage and a school or hospital – a choice they should not be forced to make in the first place. Furthermore, if, as is suggested by this justification, the concern of the traders is with the loss of traditional spiritual and cultural value in these communities, the removal of the objects to which these values are attached isn't the obvious way of arresting that process. Finally, although the situation is mixed today, with some communities having stronger living traditions than others, in the 1970s when Nicklin was pursuing his ethnographic work in the region the 'claim that Africans have no use for their 'idols' nowadays... was most definitely *not* true of the areas where I worked.'²⁰

Regardless of the views of the various individuals engaged in the trade in Bakor monoliths, the fact remains that it has long been illegal under international law, with the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, as well as Nigerian law:

Regulations under the Customs Ordinance were published in 1939, to prohibit the export of Nigerian antiquities. In 1953, the Antiquities Ordinance, no.35 of 1953, was finally promulgated, and the Antiquities Commission was created and made responsible for considering all applications for permits for the export of antiquities. In 1974, in order to strengthen their sanctions against the illegal trafficking of antiquities, the Military Government approved an edict, which carries very severe penalties, proscribing, except under special license, the trading of any antiquities within Nigeria itself.²¹

As is suggested by Allahamdou in the interview, the weak point in this situation is that historically there has been an issue of exit permits being issued for objects under false pretences or due to a lack of awareness of their authenticity, in which case the objects would be able to leave Nigeria 'legitimately' – at least on paper.

There are many challenges to the preservation of the monoliths, but what of the solutions? The first point is obvious but paramount: long-term preservation of the monoliths and their sites requires the active participation of the surrounding communities. As Terry Little explores in this publication, the best protection for cultural heritage are people that love that cultural heritage (pp. 167-175). Greater international exposure of the monoliths, for example, the registering of the sites as a UNESCO World Heritage site, can play a key role in this by fostering a sense

20 (Nicklin 1981, 259-260).

21 (Fagg 1977, 18).

of pride in the unique character of the monoliths, as well as of their potential as a resource. Factum's mapping and documentation work also plays a fundamental role in preservation: as well as being a vital resource for study, the record of the monoliths acts as a deterrent to would-be traders. Philip Allison's 1961/2 survey of the monoliths, for all of its shortcomings in the quality of some of the images, enabled the discovery of several monoliths which have left the region. The next phase of the project, which will involve comprehensive 3D-scanning of all the carved monoliths, will establish a much more accurate resource for their study and dissemination and will serve as a digital back-up should any of the monoliths further deteriorate or be removed. Protecting such a large number of monoliths in such a wide area means that intensive protection measures, such as walled compounds, are unfeasible and undesirable. Therefore, at ground level, reliance must ultimately be placed on the communities of the Bakor region to act as guardians. At the level of the market, it is hoped that public awareness of the comprehensive records of the monoliths will act as a deterrent to anyone aiming to trade or sell the Bakor monoliths in the future.

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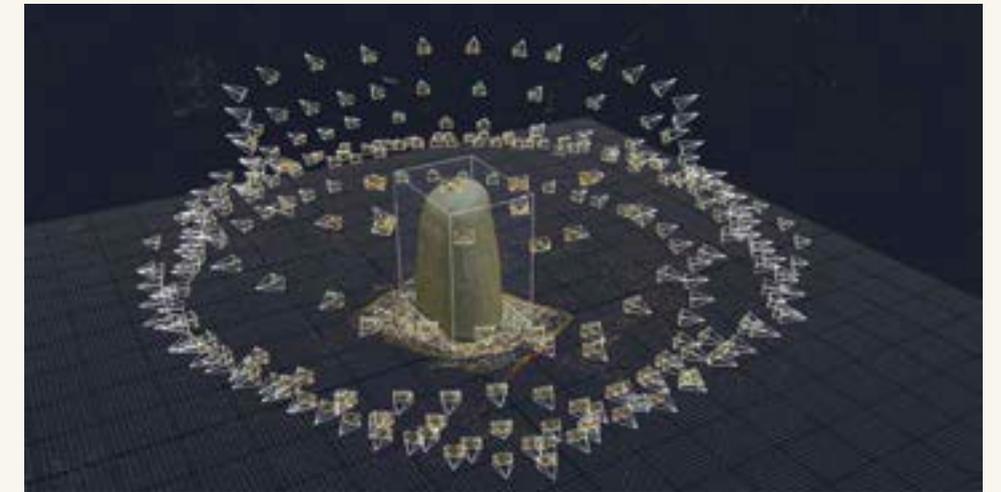
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Left: Render of 3D scan data of monolith at Njemetop. Factum Foundation, 2020.

BAKOR MONOLITHS: 3D SCAN RENDERS

OTTO LOWE & FERDINAND SAUMAREZ SMITH
Factum Foundation



Photogrammetry processing software showing camera positions.

Photogrammetry is a 3D recording technique that employs 2D images to create a 3D model of an object or surface. It involves taking hundreds of overlapping photographs of an object from many different angles and processing them using specialised software such as RealityCapture (RC) or Agisoft PhotoScan. The digital 3D model can be used for study or outputted as a physical object via 3D printing or CNC milling.

Photogrammetry is a fundamentally democratic technology: it can be done by anyone with a phone camera and access to free photogrammetry software. However, in order to produce the kind of high-resolution 3D models that accurately capture the geometry and surface detail of an object, a high level of skill is required for both data recording and data processing. In general, the better the camera sensor and resolution capacity of the lens, the better the data will be. The skill of the operator, the quality and number of images captured and the distance of the camera sensor to the surface of the object also play a large role in determining the resolution and detail of the 3D data. Under ideal conditions, photogrammetry can record 3D data of a surface to a resolution of 100 microns, on par with other close-range 3D recording systems available today.

Factum Foundation used photogrammetry to produce geometrically precise, but also highly detailed, 3D models of examples of the Bakor monoliths featured here. The technique has a number of advantages over traditional 3D scanning technologies, including the possibility of recording colour information at the same time as 3D data. Photogrammetry is also inherently 'portable' – in most cases the equipment (camera, tripod, flashes) can fit into a small camera bag, making it a particularly useful tool for recording at remote sites, such as those in the Bakor region.

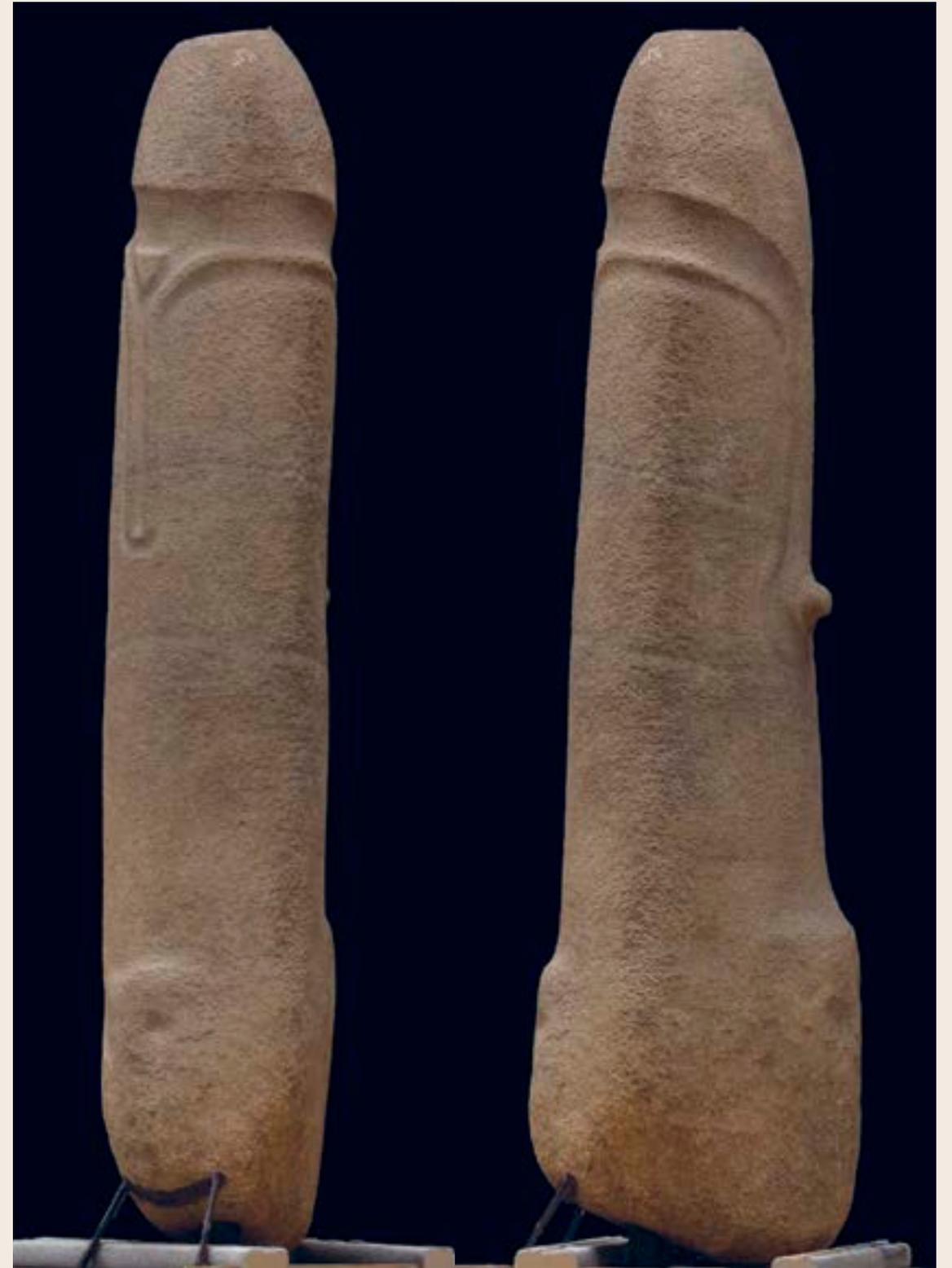


Render of 3D scan data of Etinghi Nta monolith at the Musée du Quai Branly. Factum Foundation, 2020.





Render of 3D scan data of Akumabal monolith at The Israel Museum. Factum Foundation, 2020.



Render of 3D scan data of Oyengi monolith in the collection of Didier Claes. Factum Foundation, 2020.



Render of 3D scan data of unidentified monolith (possibly from Bornima) in the collection of Didier Claes. Factum Foundation, 2020.



Figure 1: Recording the top half of the Ntitogo monolith at the Metropolitan. F. Saumarez Smith, 2018.

REMATERIALISING A MONOLITH: A VISUAL ESSAY

FACTUM FOUNDATION



Figure 2: Recording the bottom half of the Ntitogo monolith on site. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

Once the surface of a monolith has been turned into digital data using photogrammetry, it is possible to either view it as a 3D model or to rematerialise the digital data as a physical facsimile. In the case of the Etinghi Nta monolith, this involved 3D printing individual sections which were then joined. In the case of the Ntitogo monolith, this involved CNC-milling in a high-density foam using a 7-axis robot. For the Bamoun-style monolith in the British Museum, the detailed face was 3D-printed separately and attached to the body, which had been CNC-milled. In each case, this initial output was moulded using silicon, then the Etinghi Nta monolith was cast in Acrylic One (which has greater longevity outdoors) and the Ntitogo and British Museum monoliths were cast in resin (as these monoliths were planned for indoor installation). The next stage involves removing the seams from the cast using a dremel drill. Finally, the cast is ready to be coloured, which is done using a water-based spray system to build up a surface that matches the photographic documentation gathered in the photogrammetry process.

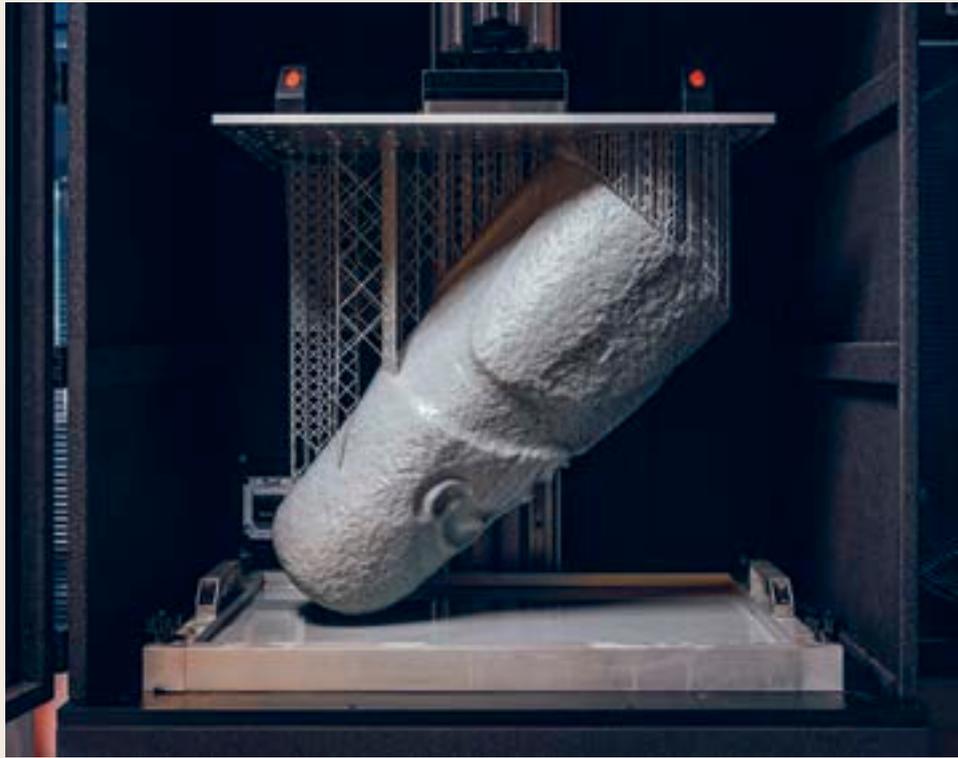


Figure 3: 3D-printing the head of the Etinghi Nta monolith now in the Musée du Quai Branly. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.



Figure 4: Assembling the 3D printed parts of the Etinghi Nta monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.

Opposite page:
Figure 5: CNC-milling the Ntitogo monolith on a 7-axis robot. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.





Figures 10-11: Preparing the silicon mould for the Etinghi Nta monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.

Opposite page: Figure 6: 3D printed face of the British Museum's monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.

Figure 7: Moulding the British Museum's monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.

Figure 8: Moulding the Ntitogo monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.

Figure 9: Concealing the seams on the Etinghi Nta monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.



Figure 12: Applying colour to the cast of the Ntitogo monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.



Figure 13: Finishing details on the Etinghi Nta monolith. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.



Figure 14: The completed Ntitogo monolith facsimile. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.



Figure 15: The completed Bamoun-style monolith facsimile in the British Museum. O. Taylor-Smith, 2022.



Figure 1: Chief Akong at Nlol. I. Miller, 2015.

FIRE DAMAGE AND OTHER THREATS

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The primary threat to the Bakor monoliths is fire. The monoliths were originally located in forest groves, but with increased deforestation in the region to clear the way for agricultural land, they are now only found in this natural habitat at a handful of sites, including Agba, Egunonkor, Ntolshi, and Old Nkrigom. At many others, the land has been repurposed as plantations for yam, the cultivation of which periodically uses slash-and-burn techniques to remove the brush and renew the soil. The dry and thick vegetation surrounding the monoliths is highly flammable and as it burns the monoliths are heated up and then crack as they cool. Some of the most badly damaged monoliths are at farm sites such as Alap Atal (Abanyom clan), Edamkono (Nnam clan), Manden/Mkpalanfa (Nnam clan), and Nkunkundah (Nnam clan). Another threat associated with agriculture is the use of the monoliths as whetstones to sharpen machete blades.

As well as the threat posed by fire, there are other environmental risks. In the course of my study of the conservation of the monoliths, I have highlighted the damage done by the sun, acid rain, and microorganisms. Although a degree of risk is inevitable if the monoliths are to remain outdoors within the communities, there are simple measures such as providing tree canopy cover that will have long-term benefits, as is demonstrated by the better-preserved monoliths at the forested sites.

In terms of preservation strategies for damaged sites as the project progresses, the aim will be to balance the importance of demarcating the monolith sites from farmland and retaining a natural setting. One possibility could be the construction of low walls that create a conceptual separation between farmland and the protected area, but which do not close off the monolith sites from either the local community or visitors, as is a risk at sites such as Alok and Emanghabe. A further measure would be the planting of trees that will provide a natural border and create protection for the monoliths.

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Figure 2: Fire damaged monolith at Edamkono. I. Miller, 2015.

Next pages:
Fig. 3: Fire damaged monolith at Nlol. I. Miller, 2015.

Fig. 4: Fire damaged monolith at Old Nkrigom. F. Saumarez Smith, 2019.

Fig. 5: Fire damaged monolith at Nkunkundah. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

Fig. 6: Fire damaged monolith at Nkunkundah. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

Fig. 7: Fire damaged monolith at Nkunkundah. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.

Fig. 8: Chief of Nna Orokpa with damaged monolith. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.











Figure 1: The paramount ruler of Ikom Local Government Area Ntol Emang. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.

NTOL EMANG: PARAMOUNT LEADER OF THE BAKOR PEOPLE

Interview by SEYITAN ATIGARIN¹

Seyitan Atigarin (SA): Your Royal Majesty, please can you start by introducing yourself, telling us who you are, and what your role is in this society?

Ntol Emang (NE): My name is Ntol Emang. Ntol Emang of Nnam. Clan head of Nnam and the Paramount Ruler for Ikom Local Government area.

SA: Could you talk a bit about what the monoliths mean to the Bakor community?

NE: The monoliths, you see, are precious to us. They were handed over to us by our forefathers. We don't toy with them. They are significant to us. The monoliths have so many purposes. In terms of epidemics, they dispel epidemics, and give pre-information to us. In case of aggression, other communities wanting to invade us, the monoliths signal to us there is danger coming and from what direction – so that we keep our life. So, they do so many things for us. For good harvest and yield, they have stood the test of time. The monoliths are so precious.

SA: Your Royal Majesty, I also want to know what do they mean to you personally, do you have a spiritual connection to them?

NE: From the enlightenment I am giving you, it is spiritual. The production of it also is spiritual. Nobody can tell you I went to this warehouse or something and got this monolith. It's not correct. So, it's significant in so many aspects to us. But like I said, the production of it is secret. They use Nsibidi in doing it. Nsibidi is a kind of medium we use. It's a depiction of a type of language. It connects to Ékpè, the leopard society. If you are from Calabar, you know what Ékpè is.

SA: How long do you think these monoliths have been in existence? According to the studies of Ekpo Eyo, they could have been carved in 200 AD. Is that correct?

NE: We came to know about these monoliths, as told to us by our parents, that the movement was from Cameroon. We were initially in the Cameroon area, but we started moving this way to get to where we are. That was when the issue of the monoliths came to surface. In all the villages of this clan, they are circled by these monoliths, they put them at strategic places. They relay information. They dispel disease. And cast away all those things that threaten our existence.

SA: Do you remember when you were growing up, stories that your parents told you about the monoliths? Could you just tell us about the folklore and the legends about these monoliths?

NE: There are times that we appease these monoliths. Especially at festival time. Like during New Yam festival or any big ceremony. We use the service of the monoliths. We will go to appease them also. And we enumerate our desire to the monoliths. And so, at the appointed time, these things start to bring results to us.

¹ This interview was conducted by producer and journalist Seyitan Atigarin for the US Mission documentary on Cultural Preservation of Ikom Rock Art in Nigeria on the 03.07.22.

SA: Do you think that these stones were carved by the Bakor people, or did they discover them here?

NE: They were carved by them. Secretly done. Nobody will tell you. And we didn't meet anything here. Anywhere we pitch, we bring our monoliths to place in a strategic area. They have different purposes for us. We look at the monoliths as our second God.

SA: You said something very interesting, you said that you look at the monoliths as if they are your second God, but now Christianity has come to this area, how do people balance Christianity with the monoliths?

NE: Christianity has come to take the place of the monoliths. And the desire of the monoliths is fast eroding. It is not as usual to find a place where there is total reliance on the monoliths.

SA: Do you think it is possible for people to be Christians and still take the monoliths as second Gods?

NE: Those desires are eroded. They are gradually fading away. There's not much impact on it.

SA: How do we pass on this tradition, the knowledge of the monoliths on to other generations?

NE: We can still pass the information. For instance, there are no principal actors now. The reliance on the monoliths is fast eroding. Because of the infiltration of the Christian religion. So little or no impact is given to it as such. But they are relics of such impact.

SA: Because of your position in society, you know a lot about these things, but there are plenty of people in this society who don't know much, how would you advise them to look after the monoliths?

NE: There is always the desire to advise. But you see, it's said that you can take a cat to the river, but you cannot force it to drink. The generation we have now are imbued with foreign culture, and you can't just change it automatically like that, it's a gradual process. That is the situation we have now. "Don't go to the right, go to the left" and a child will tell you "I must go to the right."

SA: But if we don't talk to these people, our culture will go. How would you challenge them to remember their culture?

It's a gradual process. We're not going to force anybody to do anything. But we would like them to understand that we made these things, as was transmitted to us by our parents. We will give the knowledge to them, whether they like to have the idea or not. We must do our very best, to make sure that they don't go completely extinct.

SA: In the local community, some of the people have admitted that they neglect them, so what would you say to them about how they should they go about protecting them?

NE: I will continue to inculcate in them the need to maintain what they have, because they will have children and they must try to pass that information to them, no matter that the effectiveness of that monolith is less than before. Right now, we are doing a kind of tactical withdrawal. When government is not standing firm to do what it is expected to do. The best thing to do is to go back to the place and begin to gradually come up with a platform that will lead to the actual recovery of our lost treasure. Lost because the effect of it is eroded.

SA: Now, as you know, the project has made replicas of monoliths that they cannot yet bring back. These are people who saw the importance and said that they were going to investigate more. What would you say to them, coming here?

NE: I will say congratulations. The desire they have on us is enormous and we cannot reward them for what they have done. What they are doing is sympathetic work. We have not asked for them to come to do it for us. But they saw the need. It's like somebody drowning and you are close to the river and you see him trying not to gasp water, he's drowning, you will need to sympathise with him. Sympathising is to take the man out of the water. Because people who were supposed to help us from the origin have just gone to brandish their own platform and go away without sharing their results. But their mission is tangible. They have tried their very best, but I wish they would try more for us.

SA: We know that monoliths are important to the Bakor people. But only Alok and Emanghabe are registered at a national level. Do you think that other sites should be registered too?

NE: They should be registered. They have an inventory of all the sites. I pray that they should actually assist us, ensure that Ntitogo enters the group. So that we can enjoy their benevolence on us.



Figure 2: The car numberplate of Ntol Emang, the Paramount Ruler of Ikom Local Government Area. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.



Chiefs of Oyengi with the last remaining carved monolith. F. Saumarez Smith, 2018.

**CARVED MONOLITHS OF SOUTHERN CAMEROON:
EARLY TRADITIONS AND POST-COLONIAL MARKETS
OF "REPLICAS" AND "COPIES" IN FOUMBAN**

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Translated by Ferdinand Saumarez Smith and Terry Little

Almost unrecognised in the literature on the carved monoliths of Africa, those of southern Cameroon are sometimes generically associated with those of Cross River State in Nigeria, better known by the name of *akwanshi* or *atal*. However, there does exist early stone art in the Grassfield region of Cameroon which is distinct from the iconographic traditions of Cross River, even if the allure of the Bakor style in the international art market explains the recent production of copies and replicas among the famous artisans of Foumban. A synthesis of the literature on the subject, accompanied by preliminary investigations and fieldwork in the Grassfield region, has enabled the verification of certain hypotheses as to the antiquity and dispersion of the carved monoliths of the Manyu River in the upper Noun region of Cameroon. Furthermore, this research shows the importance of the Bamoun region in the development of the craftsmanship of carved stones inspired by various earlier styles.

From the south-west of Cameroon where the Cross River originates and is known by the name Manyu to the Grassfield region in the north-west and west, diverse traditions of carved monoliths have been transformed by contemporary influences. The earliest known are characterised by their connections to royal institutions, to initiatory brotherhoods such as Ékpè (as shown by Ivor Miller in this book), to different rites (funerary, agricultural, and those involving tests or ordeals), as well as by the similarity of their decorations with wooden statuary and bodily scarification. By contrast, the systematic destabilisation of traditional institutions during the colonial period corresponds to the progressive abandonment of ritual monuments, first of all with the production of souvenirs for the tourist market, then in favour of the more profitable copies of *akwanshi* or *atal*, originals of which increasingly entered the international antiquities market via Cameroon during and after the Biafran war. From ethnography to the history of art and the sociology of the art-market, this research contributes a preliminary synthesis of data on the historic home of carved monoliths in southern Cameroon, as well as on the influence of the international antiquities market on the production of replicas and copies.

1. EARLY TRADITIONS OF CARVED MONOLITHS

Two early iconographic traditions are principally known to produce carved monoliths in southern Cameroon, which are distributed in particular between the regions of the south-west, the north-west, and the east.

- The Tradition of the River Manyu (upper Cross River) in Widekum land

The Cameroonian upper Cross River is best known for its masks covered with skin and hair, famous also for their elaborate raised hairstyles, which were highlighted in the work carried out by Keith Nicklin and by Nicklin with Jill Salmons.¹ Defending the thesis of a diffusion of these masks from the upper to the lower Cross River, in particular from the forested lands of Ejagham, Nicklin also expressed the hypothesis of a connection between their decoration and those of the carved monoliths: "Skin-covered masks, in their detailed portrayal of the various types of tribal marks, may be compared with Ekoï monoliths."² But overall, the monoliths of this part of the country have largely remained ignored until the initial research of recent decades; although these investigations are limited to certain chiefdoms in the confines of the upper Cross (Mundani, Widekum and western Bangwa), at the cross-roads of the so-called Ikom societies (Ejagham, Keaka, Anyang, Banyang, Boki) and those of the Grassfield.³ Of these works there is a certain consistency in the use of "initiation stones" whose style, sometimes phallic and decorated, evokes those of the *akwanshi*, as J.P. Notué observed.⁴ However, the greatest interest of these works is in the connection of the monoliths to the graphic system of *Nsibidi* (although the analogy remains speculative), which is used in the communication and the codification of grades in Ékpè, the Leopard Society: "The society comprises many lodges or "houses" of which each is directed by the oldest and highest-grade member. The latter has a ritual stone, often in a hexagonal form, decorated with symbolic colours and motifs. This stone is elevated next to a ritual pillar which is generally carved and placed in the middle of the meeting hall."⁵ Considered since 2017 to be one of the most formidable strongholds of the armed rebellion in the so-called Anglophone crisis of "NOSO" (North-West and South-West), the Cameroonian Cross River contains vast areas of landlocked forest which still preserve the mysteries of the creation of megalithic stones.

- The Tradition of the Bamenda Plateau to the valley of the upper Noun

Much less known than the celebrated sculptures in beaded wood, the megalithic heritage of the Grassfield region is nevertheless one of the strongest concentrations in

1 (Nicklin 1974, 7(3), 92: 8, 15, 67-68, 92; Nicklin 1979, 12 (2): 54-90; Nicklin & Salmons 1984, 18(1): 28-94).

2 (Nicklin 1979, 12 (2): 8-11).

3 (Notué 2007/2009, 5:27-64; Tchandeu N.S. & Sambo H. 2021, 17:55-76).

4 (Notué 2007-2009, 5:38).

5 (Notué 2007-2009, 5:38).

sub-Saharan Africa.⁶ Among other examples, there are carved monoliths associated with various cultural functions: commemorative, funerary, fertility, protective, and initiatory. It was in 1909 (not long after the first publication of the *akwanshi* by Charles Partridge in 1905) that a carved monolith from the Bamenda Plateau was first collected at Bambulewe (currently called Awing) by the German colonial officer Adolf Diehl.⁷ Currently found in Leipzig, the object is richly “ornamented by a rosette of four leaves, of vertical rows of lizards and serpents”. The iconography of the lizard and the serpent could, according to P. Harter, still be found in the decoration of the great monoliths in the early 20th century, signifying the prestige of the house of the Royal Palace of Bansa in the Plain of Ndop in the upper Noun.⁸ The author adds that two of the stones with serpent motifs, collected in 1910 by the German Bernhard Ankermann, are found at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin.

Furthermore, many other mentions are made on the subject of carved monoliths, which are associated with commemorative cults of ancestor founders of chiefdoms, but also to pairs of ancestors, of twin figures and deified tutelary spirits.⁹ At Guzang (Bamenda Plateau), the entry of the royal palace features a couple of deified ancestors of which the man, depicted in a phallo-anthropomorphic style, is the founder of the lineage of chiefs and father of the twin *Tagne*; while the woman, with roughly schematized features, represents the wife of the founder and the mother of the twins *Magne*. The theme of the pair of deified ancestors can also be seen at the Royal Courts of Baba 2, the phallo-anthropomorphic appearance of the man (similar to those of Guzang) is distinguished from the woman by his wearing a conical hat. The example of the figures at Guzang is an excellent case study by which to highlight the relationship between megaliths and migratory processes. Indeed, as recalled by J.P. Notué, before the foundation of the kingdom of Bamoun in Noun in the 15th century, the great chiefdom Papiakum of Baba was already established in the centre of the plateau.¹⁰ But following the political turmoil and war impelled in the 19th century by the king Bamoun Mbwebwe, the Baba were defeated and forced to migrate to the plain of Ndop, bringing with them their treasures, including three stone sculptures. Furthermore, recent fieldwork in the region clearly highlights the importance of the upper Noun in the emergence of megalithic culture between the Bamoun Plateau and the plain of Ndop. So, if the locality of Njimom is above all known for its seven mythical monoliths where the council of the founders of the kingdom of Bamoun would have met before the establishment of their capital at Foumban, there is also the site of the escarpment of the forest of Foyet, the main place of the semi-crystalline stones that are naturally-shaped in riverbeds, and are sought out for use as sculpture.

6 (Northern 1975; Perrois & Notué 1997; Notué & Traica 2005: 272).

7 (Partridge 1905, 269; Harter 1986, 105).

8 (Notué 2007-2009, 5:56; Harter 1986, 106-179).

9 (Notué 2007-2009: 39-40-42-45; Tchandeu 2019: 70; 2021: 66).

10 (Notué 2007-2009, 5:40).



Figures 1a, b, c: 6 monoliths from Magba (and detail), placed near to the cemetery of the Nji Njoya family. First quarter of the 20th century. N.S. Tchandeu, 2022.

Also, the oral traditions of Bamoun seem to confirm that the riverine region of Magba, at the edge of Mambila land, had an earlier tradition of stone sculpture. Borrowing simultaneously from Mambila and Bamoun styles of statuary in wood, the monoliths of this area are characterised by their pear-shaped heads, the facial expression of wonderment (with wide open eyes and mouth), the full nose whose bridge is unified with the arch of the eyebrows, the codification of hairstyles and scarification (less facial scarification in favour of bodily), the smaller and more or less dislocated limbs. The variation of this style across the plain of Ndop and the Bamenda Plateau, goes through the above-mentioned adoption of a more marked phallic profile. Claimed by many of our informants to be the true traditional Bamoun style of the *gwo nkaw* (literally stone-someone), the monoliths of Magba are still highly-prized in Foumban. In a small family cemetery in the Foumban quarter of Njih Ouom, six monoliths have been identified originating from Magba around 1970 and attributed to a family of sculptors called Ntadeh Kotto, which possessed this heritage for more than two generations – that is to around the first quarter of the 20th century. Of variable sizes between 57 and 95cm high, the stones are positioned at the interface of three tombs (figs. 1a, 1b, 1c) and the family home. According to the proprietor of the place, Nji Njoya Aboubakar, grandson of the first deputy of King Njoya, a carved monolith could once be set up directly above the tomb, but following the widespread conversion of the Bamoun to Islam and Christianity, this stele was respectively replaced by an unfigured stone (preferably parallelepiped, trapezoidal, or ogival) and a crucifix.

2. POSTCOLONIAL MARKETS OF "COPIES" AND "REPLICAS"

Traditionally intended to satisfy the ritual needs of different chiefdoms of the Grassfield, the artisanal market of replicas and copies has long been monopolised by the chieftains of Babanki, Baboungo and Foumban. But only the last were really able, at the time of independence, to open themselves to an international clientele, while updating their repertoire with popular styles of African art. In Foumban, as



Figure 2: Monolithic head in a fanciful, cubist style, integrating a decorative alignment with the artisanal quarter of Foumban. Recent postcolonial work. N.S. Tchandeu, 2022.

Figure 3: Specimens of rough stone before carving, from the quarry of Foyet, 2022.



Figure 4: Fictional ritual staging of monoliths called 'guardians of the place' in the artisanal quarter in Foumban. Recent postcolonial work. N.S. Tchandeu, 2022.

many fraudulent copies of *akwanshi* are found (Makor) as those of the stones of deified ancestors *neba* (Bafut), *wokom* (Baba), *gwo nkaw* (Bamoun), but also kinds of replicas, more or less modified, of each of these styles. Sometimes, from the happy encounter of the random shapes in a block of stone and the imagination of the artisan, an original creation is born which escapes the classic repertoires (fig. 2). Without doubt the long artisanal history in Bamoun, particularly driven in the reign of King Njoya and monopolized by generations of families, explains the highly advanced traditions of stonework today. At the beginning of the process there is a family called Jean-Paul, who monopolise the extraction of minerals at the site of Foyet. The basic forms are produced on site according to the dimensions requested by the customers (fig. 3), before the blocks are laboriously transported to Foumban (a few kilometres of the landlocked route are made on foot). Then comes the turn of the stone craftsmen,



Figures 5a, b, c: Group of five monoliths which come from Cross River State, Nigeria, and are exhibited at the antiquities dealer Allahamdou's property in Foumban II. N.S. Tchandeu, 2022.

of which the most respected and reputable are those of the Maché family. Using just a hammer, chisels (made of steel salvaged from old cars) and a stone polisher, they carve faithful copies of the *akwanshi* and replicas of their heritage styles that are somewhat modified. The artisans are generally put in contact with antiquities dealers by touts and middle-men, maintaining the secret network of contacts of the inter-village production and equipped with a rich address-book for the distribution of products. In this group, Nji Njoya Aboubakar (86 years old) is recognised as the most experienced, controlling the most ancient families who produce carved monoliths, replicas and copies across Bamoun country and the surrounding areas. Finally, at the head of the network, the antiquities dealers impose themselves, steeped in a certain kind of connoisseurship and ruthless in the art of negotiation. From father to son, some have been trained and have acquired a veritable intuition for discriminating between true and false, but they are also able market speculators who judge the racial profile, social status, and mental dispositions of the client. They are very often mixed if not associated with specialists in the ageing of objects (who often use brake oil and tarring with smoke), and who stage fictional rituals (fig. 4), so as to enhance the value of the objects. The name of the antiquities dealer Allahamdou is the most recommended in Foumban for anything which concerns commerce with wealthy customers, and for original Bakor monoliths which are provided directly from the Nigerian Cross River region, as can be seen from his collection at Foumban II (figs. 5 a,b,c).¹¹

Although the market has been lucrative in recent decades, with mostly American customers (fig. 6) paying between 10,000 and 50,000 dollars for small and \$125,000 for large monoliths, it has been experiencing a noticeable recession in the past five years. This is attributed in part to the security crisis of the Anglophone regions of Cameroon which has destabilised a part of the upper Noun, but it has also affected the networks of delivery of Nigerian specimens to the South-West of Cameroon; on the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted, like never before, the tourism sector. Nevertheless, in the shadows of the speculative stakes of the international art

11 (Allison 1964, 1968).



Figure 6: A monolith which was certainly carved in Foumban, despite the reference to origins in "Cross River", in transit to the United States, but stopped by customs at Douala airport (Cameroon). Recent postcolonial work. © H. Samboakwanshi. N.S. Tchandeu, 2022.



Figure 7: The old sculptor Maché Arouna in his house/studio: with two copies of 'akwanshi' in the foreground (in process), followed by a couple of 'gwo nkaw' Bamoun ancestors (21st century), finally, on the left arm of the chair, Philip Allison's book (1968). N.S. Tchandeu, 2022.



Figure 8: Work by Maché Arouna depicting the mother and child carved in laterite. End of the 20th century. N.S. Tchandeu, 2022.

market, it was a pleasure to visit the studio of the oldest sculptor in Bamoun country, called Maché Arouna (89 years old). Keeping Philip Allison's book by his bedside, he still enjoys an uncanny dexterity in his faithful reproductions of the *akwanshi* (fig. 7). But far from limiting his talent to slavish copies alone, the virtuoso also knows how to re-invent his own sculptural traditions, as evidenced in the depiction of serene humanity which emits from his epic figures of pairs of ancestors and of a mother and child (fig. 8).

CONCLUSION

The vitality of the stone-carving craftsmanship in Bamoun land is attested as much in the early sculptural tradition whose homes are in the river Manyu and the upper Noun, as well as in the replicas of cultural heritage and the copies of exported models. In this landscape, it is always possible to distinguish talented artisans, such as Maché Arouna, an excellent copyist and depository of heritage sculptural traditions; but equally the local artisans qualified only as amateurs, since their basic and hesitant carved lines barely touch the mass of a rough-hewn block. All these craftsmen agree, however, that the rise of antiquities dealers who specialise in ageing techniques and misinformation about the origins of the monoliths, has gradually tarnished the image of Foumban on the international crafts market.

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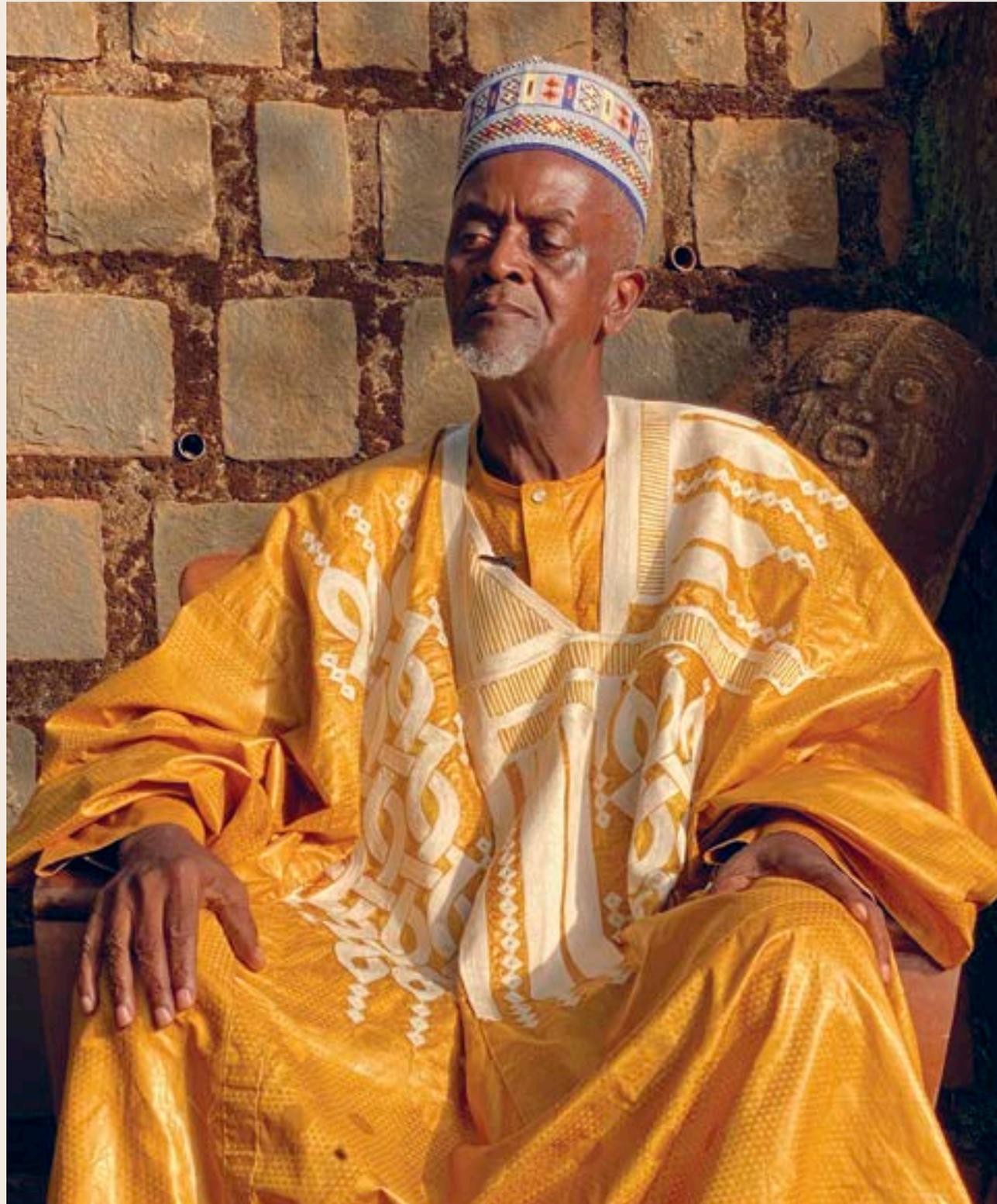


Figure 1: Njitari Allahamdou at Foumban II. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.

NJITARI ALLAHAMDOU: THE TRADE OF THE BAKOR MONOLITHS

Interview by NARCISSE TCHANDEU¹

Narcisse Tchandeou (NT): Thank you for welcoming us to your collection of carved monoliths from the Cross River. We would like to interview you about your status as a collector, your status as an antique dealer, and also about your network of commerce of the *akwanshi*. We will start with your introduction, who are you, what are your origins, and what is your professional status?

Njitari Allahamdou (NA): I am Njitari Allahamdou. Of Bamoun origin. I was born in Foumban, I started out as an artist, a simple craftsman, who made souvenirs for tourists. After some small exhibitions and business, I had the experience of selling antiquities to the request of clients.

NT: We will come back to this. Now, do you have a title in Foumban, a social title?

NA: Yes, I am a notable of the Royal Bamoun Palace. I am a *Nji*, who was ennobled by the former King of Bamoun, here, in Foumban itself.

NT: How old are you now?

NA: Today, I am 71 years old.

NT: Your studies, up to what age did you do them?

NA: I studied until I was around 15, I got my primary school certificate, I left school because I couldn't continue.

NT: In your family, before you, were your parents in the art market?

NA: Yes, my parents, my older brothers, the whole family was in the artisanal circuit. My father was an old artist, he sewed. My older brothers worked in the plastic arts. They worked in foundries, they made sculptures, which is why I went to learn what they were doing and what was good for their lives.

NT: We are going to address the question of Foumban's place in the African art market. What is your opinion, [those] who want Foumban to be... what we call the "City of Arts." Since when was Foumban considered the City of Arts, and especially what is its place in the art market, first in Cameroon, and then in Africa?

NA: You know, Foumban is an ancient capital of the Bamoun department, of the Bamoun region, as it was often called before, which had kings who established the craft industry, where there was practical craftsmanship, everyday craftsmanship, spiritual craftsmanship, and in everything that happened, there was craftsmanship. Which amounts to saying that Foumban, in its nature, has an artistic life.

NT: Which was the first King to establish the artisanal centre at Foumban?

NA: It was King Mbouombouo [Sultan-King Ibrahim Mbouombouo Njoya], and Njoya [Sultan-King Seidou Njimoluh Njoya] established it. From 1925-1930, he established it, there was a craft centre where there were all the craftsmen, the basketmakers, the weavers, the sculptors, the foundrymen.

NT: It is from this moment that Foumban became known as the hub of African art.

NA: It's true. Because in Cameroon there was no other craft centre like Foumban. Even at the arrival of

¹ This interview was conducted by Narcisse Tchandeou (University of Yaoundé 1) on the 09.05.22.

the colonists, they admired the way of doing things of the Bamoun, who already had their crafts, and who had already organised their kingdom and who lived, also, on many activities.

NT: And what is the place of Foumban in Africa?

NA: Foumban is the great centre of the craft industry. First of all, of the Bamoun, and after, in Cameroon, and Africa itself I can say, in sub-Saharan Africa. From Chad, until Congo, it is Foumban which is the great centre of the craft industry.

NT: So, all the antique dealers were interested in western Foumban?

NA: Yes, it started with one thing, when the colonisers arrived, they noticed that Foumban was the centre. So, all the tourists who arrived, were directed to Foumban. This gave the idea to the people of Foumban to attend to the materials of craftsmanship or art.

NT: And you in particular, when did you become an art dealer? Since you said that at the beginning you were a simple sculptor.

NA: From 1975, I became an art dealer. I was selling a little bit of everything, originals as well as copies – not copies, rather recent objects, objects which were made recently. It was the clients who instructed me by saying that I want such and such a thing that has been used, and is a certain number of years old, that I have known that there is a difference between recent craft and ancient craft.

NT: But, antique dealers who sell a lot of wooden objects, which is very common in Africa, are asked why your interest in stone objects? When did your interest in stone objects begin?

NA: You know, when you have contacts with the world, because we had contacts with the Americans, the French, the Germans...

NT: Which? Do you have any names of the dealers?

NA: Yes, there was Philippe Guimiot, there was [Pierre] Dartevelle, there was Pierre Loos, there was [Jacques] Kerchache, all the European dealers, when they arrived here in Africa, it was to Foumban first of all.

NT: When did you become interested in these stone objects?

NA: It was on their request, it was in the 1980s and 1990s, that they began to ask, that they want the stones. We started by leafing through a few art books, they showed me which stones they wanted, which objects from Congo they wanted, which objects from Chad they wanted, which objects from Nigeria they wanted. We had been on the lookout for...

NT: So, you said that it was these Westerners who inspired your wish to engage in the trade of the monoliths. Is there a person in particular with whom you worked who influenced you?

NA: Yes, they are the ones who encouraged. I worked with Pierre Loos, I worked with [Pierre] Dartevelle, with Didier Claes, and all in Brussels. I also worked with a French dealer, Bernard Dulon.

NT: Speaking of this network, how does it operate, how is it organised, from Cameroon to Nigeria, to the Cross River?

NA: It's an adventure.

NT: When you leave Cameroon, what are the main villages of Cross River where you go to buy?

NA: So, in the Cross River I have Njemetop, I have Nton, I have the Nselle tribes, who are generally with the stones. There are many villages. There are villages through which I passed without knowing their names.

NT: When you go to Nigeria, how do you establish contact with the people who preserve these stones?

NA: So, when I arrive, I get in touch with the chief of the community. Let me explain, because each time there is a foreigner, he must know the reason for his trip, he must know why he is there, and what he is doing. So, when I said to them that I wanted such an object, he replied that it was a bit far, in the forest. I said that I could be interested, if I saw the carved stone objects, dated from hundreds or thousands of years ago.

NT: How do you get him to show you the stones you wish to have?

NA: He invites his community, we sit down, like a meeting. They hear me, they know what I want. In turn, they meet, to know what would be possible to do by selling this piece, "what are we going to do with this money." They decide if they want to construct a school, a little hospital, or something like that.

NT: How do you locate these stones, when you go there?

NA: They are the ones who know where to find the stones. They are the ones who lead me to them.

NT: Now, when you find the stones, how do you choose them and finally, how do you determine the price?

NA: That's by chance. When you go to find the stones, you can find only one, after going through a vast forest. You have to buy it, even if it's not... Even if it is not well carved, if it has ancient carved markings, you have to buy it.

NT: Generally, do you find them overturned, or still standing up?

NA: There are those which are still in the ground, those which are lying like those ones there, there are those which are still standing, but the majority are lying down.

NT: Who helps you get them out of the ground?

NA: The villagers, the communities who accompany me.

NT: Once you have found a piece which interests you, what financial reward do you give to the village?

NA: We go back to square one. When I find one, it remains in the bush. We go back to the chief, we re-discuss the price, what I can pay. And when there is agreement, the removal follows. This removal might be... because it happens in the middle of the forest, in the remains of encampments deserted for thousands of years, so far from the town, or the roads where a car or a motorbike can drive... Well, the removal is organised by the villagers who push them from region to region until...

NT: As they are large, they must be rolled. Now, the average price, when you buy these stones, the price varies by how much?

NA: That is a secret that cannot be divulged.

NT: Now, as to the movement of the stones. You said that the zones of extraction are sometimes hard to access, that is to say that cars cannot reach there, to move the stones of the forest to the roads, you give payments...

NA: Yes, I give payments. Even the meetings are paid for, even the visits are paid for. Any movement is paid for.

NT: Can we have an idea, not of the stones but of the payments that are given for moving the objects?

NA: Yes, the payments will range from €3000 and €2000.

NT: From the extraction site to the road?

NA: To the main road. If so, it varies between €10,000 and €5000, because the stone weighs more than 800 kilos.

NT: How many people are required?

NA: About 20 people, or 30, for a single stone, to push it to where I can pick it up with a car.

NT: And they take turns from time to time?

NA: Yes, they take turns. It can last a week, or two weeks, the removal, very gently, without making scratches, without breaking anything.

NT: Is there a technique? Do they wrap it up before moving it?

NA: Yes, there is a technique, you have to cut a piece of wood, and you have to roll it on the piece of wood.

NT: A bit like when they moved Egyptian stones. When you arrive at the road, how is the transportation done? Is it a pick-up? Is it a bus?

NA: It's a pick-up.

NT: How many stones can the pick-up transport on average?

NA: One stone. We don't have the chance to take two stones, or three stones at a time, because it requires a lot of money and you can't buy two or three.

NT: Now, back in Cameroon, when you return to Cameroon, usually before you leave the country of Nigeria you sign, I imagine, an agreement with the sellers?

NA: The sellers sign, to allow me to cross the checkpoints, the towns through which I pass. As soon as I cross the border, to Cameroon, it's no longer a problem.

NT: There are two directions that these stones take, sometimes they come back to Fouban where they are sold, but sometimes also, they can go directly to the office of antiquities of Nigeria?

NA: Yes, well, you raise a clear question to me. In Nigeria, there are two kinds of stones. There are the stones which have been preserved in museums and which have numbers. These you cannot touch. You take what has not been inventoried. You take what you find in the extreme forest, which has never been inventoried. If you touch what has been inventoried, as soon as you start moving it, Lagos will be aware.

NT: So, to leave Nigeria, you just need an exit permit?

NA: An authorisation from the community.

NT: And from there, they check at the office of antiquity, if the stone is inventoried.

NA: Yes, if the stone is inventoried, it cannot leave.

NT: Otherwise, they sign the authorisation for you.

NA: They sign the authorisation for you.

NT: In Cameroon, when you return with these stones to Fouban, how does the removal happen? You arrive at which border with Cameroon?

NA: I arrive at Ekok. It is the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. It is a village of the south-west.

NT: So, it usually goes through Ekok. And that is when you cross the Cross River?

NA: There is a bridge where you have to cross in front of customs and the police.

NT: In the end, if the trip from Nigeria to Cameroon had to be budgeted, it would be approximately how much?

NA: It is a very difficult thing to report. We can budget for the transport alone around €20,000, or something like that. Including labour.



Figure 2: Monolith at Manden photographed by P. Allison. Bodleian Library, 1961/62.



Figure 3: Monolith in the collection of Njitari Allahamdou. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.

NT: Now we are going to talk about your expertise, because that is what we are mainly here for. I imagine that all those years of experience as a dealer has given you a certain expertise. We had a document which speaks precisely of your brother and the fact that his expertise was not recognised, although he is one of the pioneers of the art market, just as much as the European dealers of antiquities. You also were trained by your brother, Amadou. In terms of expertise, how do you distinguish an original stone from Nigeria, and a stone which is not?

NA: It is very easy. An original stone is a sculpture of antiquity. And it has a wonderful finish that the artists of today cannot master. When you see, for example, this stone, how it was carved, that's not how it was when it was collected. Maybe there were bumps which were cut, rounded, polished. While the other stones, from other countries, are never polished. It has been polished by nature, by nature alone, and by age. When you see it, you know it's an old work. When you see a sculpture which was carved today, which has been shaped to seem like it is ancient, it is easy to see when you have the eye.

NT: The five pieces which are currently in your collection, can we know just like that, can we determine the origins of each as you tried to do before the interview, to know which villages they come from? And according to you, what are the materials, the types of stone?



Figure 4: Monolith at Egunonkor photographed by P. Allison. Bodleian Library, 1961/62.

NA: They are made from granite stones.

NT: Which?

NA: These are the granite stones. And those are, I don't really know the name in French but...

NT: Building stones?

NA: Yes, building stones. The others are granite, rocks, boulders.

NT: Indicating each of the stones, can you tell us exactly where they came from in Nigeria?

NA: Yes, there are stones coming from Njemetop, that comes Nkim, that... there is another which comes... that one there comes from Apiapum.

NT: You said that to distinguish them, it depends according to you on the value of age?

NA: It depends on the value of age.

NT: Yes, but, at the level of the carvings as well, how do you know that it is not a copy? For example, that an object which comes from Nigeria, and which is copied in Foumban, which has the same type of patterns. How do you distinguish?

NA: There are features. For example, when you see a stone like the one there, there are features which are faultless. There are features that no artist today can reproduce. The features like the ones you see there, it is difficult to give that to artists today because they don't have the equipment. I don't know with what equipment they carved that, but all the artists who try to carve a stone today cannot give such a form, a polished stone. There is also this artistic history, where you see the symmetries.



Figure 5: Monolith in the collection of Njitari Allahamdou. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.

In ancient stones, there is a symmetry which you cannot imagine. Whereas in the other copies, when you use something to measure, there is no symmetry.

NT: Now we are going to talk about prices, not purchase but resale. And it is important to talk about it so that we do not have the impression that African dealers are being cheated all the time. I will not discuss the purchase price because that is your secret, but the sale price, I wanted to say a word about the sale price and what type of customers come to you to purchase these stones?

NA: We have enough with antique dealers and galleries, which are also the dealers in Europe, because the European or American clients are very demanding. He wants to buy from a merchant that he trusts, so that if there is the slightest complaint, he can return it. In this manner, the price varies between the middleman, the reseller, the gallerist and the collector. There are many steps. I can't give you a price, it depends on who is in front of you, and who presents what as a price. The price is always discussed between the client and the seller.

NT: Well, now, in this pyramid I suppose that you are a middleman. As a middleman, you still have average prices. When you sell, it is important to do you justice, so it is important that we have these prices, African collectors compared to... Even if you say that it is normal for the gallerists to have their price, because they pay a certain number of taxes. As a middleman, the average selling price to a collector is how much?

NA: Not to a collector, to a seller. The average selling price to the seller is around €125,000, €130,000, something like that.

NT: Your main customers, which countries are they from?

NA: They are from France, from Belgium.

NT: Are there also Africans who are interested in these works? African elites?

NA: No, the African elites don't know much. The African elites don't collect much, they collect very few works of art, very little. And they don't collect items that are worth hundreds of thousands, €50,000. They don't want to collect that.

NT: When the artworks leave Cameroon, what is your process for the objects to leave Cameroon?

NA: In Cameroon there is no ban on the export of works of art.

NT: Have you ever had any problems with the Cameroonian customs?

NA: No, we pay all the customs that have to be paid. These papers must be made at the Ministry of Culture. This is an object from Nigeria, they have no control over it.

NT: Now, we are going to address the last point of the interview, this connection with your legacy, your heritage, as a dealer. I imagine that Njitari, he also sometimes worked with young people.

NA: Who comes from a big family.

NT: Did he transmit his taste for antiques to these children?

NA: When you see our neighbourhood, it is an artisanal quarter, it is also a quarter of dealers, where I'm not the only antique dealer. There were a lot of dealers. For example, my older brothers were dealers, and this heritage has been handed down from father to son. In all the families, I can say that half of Foumban, the heart of Foumban works in crafts and the majority are dealers. The majority, they are in the United States, they are in France, in Germany, in Spain, everywhere in the world.

NT: You have among your children, here, some who will continue your profession.

NA: Yes, there are those who are already masters. They took over my business, they are masters.

NT: Now, before addressing another issue which is that of the protection of heritage, Terry Little insisted that we talk about something else. These objects were used functionally, they were in functional usage when you found them... What do the communities say about these objects, of their functions?

NA: You know that in Africa, objects like that, they were produced as divinities. They had spirits, they are called spiritual objects. And these spirits were contained in the objects. When it is sold, it is the artistic object that goes away, and the spiritual value remains. In Africa, when we speak about the conservation of an object, it is very difficult to understand. Because an object, I am not talking about stones today, like objects in wood, when they are 100 years old, when they are 200 years old, they will turn into dust, because the temperature and the conservation does not allow it to live any more. So, it disappears. So, conservation in Africa is really verbal.

NT: I'm going to ask you a question, it is a bit silly, don't you think that if people were attached to their objects, to the spiritual value of these objects, would they have sold them in your opinion?

NA: That is a very pertinent question. If they were attached to their objects... But they were attached to their objects! They didn't sell them before, but then came the pastors, the Christian monks, the Muslims, who automatically changed their ideas. They inscribed that these objects had no divine value, so they dropped them. For example, today, in Nigeria, there are the scientologist churches, there are the true churches of God... All the churches, which collect, and it's cruel! Who pick up



Figure 6: Monolith in the collection of Njitari Allahamdou. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.



Figure 7: Monolith at Manden photographed by P. Allison. Bodleian Library, 1961/62.

these pieces and throw them in the water. The stones, the great stones like that, they push them into the water. They don't want to see them, they say it's not a belief, it is not good to have that. So, conservation in Africa, it has changed a lot, up to the point where it is thought that the divine spirit above does not exist.

NT: The people in Bakor, what do they say about the origins of these stones? They say that it was their ancestors which made them, or that it was other people? And who were the artists, the craftsmen who made these stones?

NA: That's another story. The people that worked these stones, who carved the stones, were a race of robust giants, who lived in Cross River at the border of the sea. They made towns, they made cities, where they lived. They made their towns. They carved these stones, they placed them in every corner. Like the deities, they had a god of justice, a god of birth, they had gods, gods of the harvest, all the gods. They had all the crossroads, and they were like monuments, and they prayed to them. After a while, an epidemic arrived, like today we have the Coronavirus, which neutralised all these populations, who left this region, which is why it remained a forest. Now there are the cassava and yam farmers, who are grabbing the land for agriculture. As soon as they grab the land of a town, or a piece of land, they are a community, if there is a stone on their land, it is their stone. They don't know how it was carved, they don't know who carved it, they found it as a legacy, and the history of the sculptors is lost like that.

NT: As an antique dealer, there is something about you that intrigues me, that intrigues me a lot, because many collectors of the *akwanshi*, if I take the example of the head of the Metropolitan Museum, it came amputated. Part of the object had disappeared. Many objects arrive in Europe, a bit amputated. Cut in two sometimes. But with you I find whole objects. What is your conservation philosophy of these stones?

NA: You know, a stone like this one, or that one, was carved in its upper part. And here, down below, there was no carving, no line was drawn. They discovered, to show the sculpture, they could break it from the navel, where the drawings stopped, they broke it from the navel because the bottom part is heavy for nothing, which alleviated the task of carrying the head. And it was accepted by the antique dealers. But when I arrived, I said “no, it’s not possible, I’m going to bring the stone as I found it, I’m going to find a way to do it without removing a single kilo.”

NT: So, you found a conservation technique for the complete object, in contrast to the old antique dealers.

NA: Who wanted us to cut.

NT: We are going to end the interview with this little intrigue: earlier the students at the seminar at the Art School of Foumban were talking a lot about the restitution of cultural heritage. If the young people of Cross River told Mr Allahamdou that they would like you to restore this heritage, how would you react to that?

NA: My god, my reaction would be what a thinker would think. What purpose will it serve in Africa? What will this restitution be used for in Africa? I also blame my officials. Because when they take these repatriated objects, they do not have the expertise to know if the returned object is a real one that has been brought back, or if it is a fake one that has been copied. You always ask me what’s the use, once again. Because when it arrives in Africa, it will no longer be a deity. It will no longer be a divinity.

NT: If it returns to Cross River, will it no longer serve religion?

NA: It no longer serves as a divinity, it serves as a simple image that has artistic value to see how these artisans worked. What was their work, how did they manage to make such a beautiful object.

NT: If we had to make a distinction between these stones, this style and the style of the Bamoun, because the Bamoun also carved stones, in your opinion how can we distinguish these stones, and the carved pieces?

NA: You know, it has an identity. When you see what has been carved by the Bamoun, you know that it is Bamoun. You see what was carved by the Bamileke, you know it is Bamileke, you know that it’s Igbo. That it’s Yoruba. That it’s Bakongo, or Congo. That it’s Kwele. That’s it.

NT: So, if you go to a museum, you know how to determine what is Bamoun, what is...

NA: Yes, as soon as I pass in front of an object I know that it comes from Ivory Coast, that is from the Baoule tribe, that comes from Mali... that comes from such and such a place. It has a sure identity, which every antiques dealer knows. You cannot deceive an antiques dealer. Tell him that the stones that have been carved in Foumban are those that come from Cross River, if he is a real collector, or a real antiques dealer he will not be fooled.

NT: You seem to be one of the last real collectors of monoliths because you said that to do this you have to be courageous. So, you feel that young people no longer have that courage today.

NA: No, there is no longer that courage. Because even I who am here, I no longer have that courage, because today there is Ambazonia.



Figure 8: Monolith in the collection of Njitari Allahamdou. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.

NT: The war.

NA: Yes, there is the Ambazonian war which no longer allows us to cross to Nigeria. There is also in northern Cameroon where we can still get in, there is Boko Haram. You must have money with you. And when they find the money, they can, not to mention your money, they can conceal the traces... you must be killed.

NT: We end with that, when was your last trip to Nigeria?

NA: It was in the 2000s.

NT: We thank you for the time you have given us. Do you have a message for young people who want to engage with ancient stones?

NA: Yes, I want to say that, if it is up to them, that it is a good profession, that they take it as their true profession, because it is a very good profession. The dealer of arts, he is a dealer who is happy, all of his life. According to what he learns about art, he can live his whole life without regretting anything, whether in the way of wealth or in the way of intelligence.

NT: What view do you have, knowing that your interview will be transcribed in a prestigious publication?

NA: It makes me very, very happy, because it will remain a great memory for me, that maybe my children and my grandchildren, when I am dead, an interview like that can be shown on television, or in a conference, they will say that’s their grandfather, it will be marvellous for the people who will be in contact with them.

NT: It was our pleasure.

NA: Thank you for this initiative, because it revives African art. I also thank you very much because in Africa there are also antique dealers, real connoisseurs of African art, which the Europeans don’t want to make known, to hide the marketing of the real art world. They want to hide it so that we always stay on the third point.

NT: Middleman.

NA: Middleman.

CULTURAL STONES IN THE CROSS RIVER REGION AND ITS ATLANTIC DIASPORA

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Údúń ómù, údúń ómù, údúń ómù; èènònú ònwì ònyí?

‘This country, this country, this country; is it not someone who owns it?’

song of the Ékpè ‘leopard’ society

INTRODUCTION

The Cross River region of south-eastern Nigeria and South West Cameroon has specific categories of cultural stones, including:

1) ‘Akwanshi’ monoliths, in the majority “a hard medium textured basaltic rock”, carved anthropomorphically and placed in circle formations, but in some cases carved from limestone.² In this essay, they are referred to as Bakor monoliths.

2) Ékpè stones, primarily volcanic rock with columnar joints. Anthropomorphic Ékpè stones are found in South West Cameroon and southeastern Nigeria, from the coastal Rio de Rey and Calabar moving northwards to Boki and as far as Fontem, Cameroon.³

3) Okwa stones in circle formation, used as seats by village council members when deliberating. Okwa council stones were primarily used in Éjághám-speaking communities, from Okuni to the Kùò-Éjághám [colonial spelling “Qua”] of Calabar.⁴

The Cross River region is characterized by cultural unities within great linguistic diversity. Shaped through the migrations of small groups over centuries, Cross River heritage developed through a process of cultural diffusion resulting in shared or ‘multi-ethnic’ gendered institutions to administer community justice and the division of labour. Among the regional traits is a focus on ritual stones which current inhabitants refer to in order to distinguish themselves from their neighbours in ways to be described below. From the Upper Cross region featuring elaborately carved monoliths of the Bakor people (formerly known as the Íkóm

1 For help in research for this essay, the author is grateful to: Maurice Alobi Ojong, Ayuk Raphael Ayuk, ‘Engineer’ Bassey Effiong Bassey, Nasako Besingi, Dr. Bruce Connell, Nanji Cyprian, Dr. Abu S. Edet, Dr. Jordan Fenton, Dr. Ngoe Fritz, Dr. Victor Manfredi, Dr. Keith Ray, Dr. Ute Röschenhaler, Jill Salmons, Ferdinand Saumarez Smith, Anne Spier-Mazor, ‘Mbe’ Philip Tazi. Thanks to Esther Peter for interview transcriptions.

2 “The great majority of all the stones are carved in a hard medium textured basaltic rock, identified as dolerite . . . Some fifty stones have been carved in a shelly limestone ... [and there are a] few specimens carved in sandstone.” (Allison 1968a, 24).

3 Fontem village, Lebialem division, South West Region, Cameroon (cf. Brain 1967, 1).

4 “The cultural, linguistic, and economic links between the Qua clans in the lower Cross River area and their Ejagham relations in the forest hinterland have been zealously kept alive for the past four centuries” (Ekpo 1984, 60). Kùò is phonetically correct for the colonial “Quä” or “Kwa” (Talbot 1912: 153).

or Cross River monoliths), to the Middle Cross region where the Yakurr and their neighbours have un-worked ritual stones, to the Lower Cross region of Calabar and its estuaries, cultural stones are organized in shrines for collective ancestor reverence and group defence.⁵

The region’s extraordinary linguistic diversity required the creation of common institutions to enable communication through trade networks along the great river and its tributaries, which in the 1600s were extended by coastal traders into a global exchange of commodities. About this region, historian I. R. Amadi reported: “By 1800 the social and political picture had largely crystallized to what it is today. . . . Even though the area may not be seen as a cultural unity, it has subsequently acquired a measure of commercial unity within which the port of Calabar had become an important focal point of the trade originating both from the coast and the hinterland.”⁶

The shared institutions include the Ékpè ‘leopard’ society for community justice, the Iban Isong or Ékpá women’s councils, the Nka age-grade system that organizes youth, and the Mònénkím (Nkughò) coming of age rites for girls and young women.⁷ British archaeologist Keith Ray identified a shared practice of cultural stones; his study “Decorated Stones of the Cross River Region” surveys practices regarding cultural stones from the Bamenda plateau to the south, “that marks this huge area out as distinct from those surrounding it.”⁸ Ray’s article is essentially a call for further research into this phenomenon: “The recurrence of the use of stones in this way . . . provides a subject for further research at the supra-community or regional level that maps the co-histories of stone usage, without necessarily seeking an origin or linking theme for the practice.”⁹ After reviewing highlights of the cultural stones of this region of Africa, the conclusions discuss the impact of this heritage in the Caribbean — a tradition brought by enslaved Cross Riverians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — whose living legacy is found in the cultural stones of the Abakuá initiation society, modelled after the West African Ékpè society.

METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork in the region from 2004-2018 benefited from various methodologies, including reviews of the historical literature and learning from local museum specialists, archaeologists, historians, lineage leaders, and initiated community members. While residing in Calabar since 2004, local elders supported my research by initiating me into the Ékpè ‘leopard’ society, thus enabling my participation in

5 The division of Upper/Middle/Lower Cross regions was created by historian Monday Abasiattai and colleagues based upon geographical perspectives (Abasiattai 1990; Afigbo 1990, 134). Meanwhile, linguists refer to either Upper or Lower Cross regions, placing Yakurr in the Upper Cross category (Connell & Maison 1994, Connell 2022).

6 (Amadi 1989: 73).

7 The rites for puberty and preparation for marriage have various stages, while this institution is named differently in each language community: Mbòpó (Ìbìbìò), Nkugò (Èfìk) or Mònénkím (Éjághám = Mmòñ ‘child’; é ‘in’; nkím ‘circumcision’). Cf. Imeh (2009, 3).

8 (Ray 2004: 209).

9 (Ray 2004: 210).

community rites where stones were primary references. Following the regional paths of diffusion of Ékpè culture, I learned about stone cultures first-hand, their historic uses, as well as the contemporary destruction of them and their associated practices. Their destruction is the result of many factors, but at the lead are members of Pentecostal churches, who have attacked cultural stones as representative of the perceived ‘backwardness’ of the region and the ‘dark forces’ of local heritage.¹⁰

One productive research method was to share with local specialists the early historical literature, mainly written by colonial officers. Colonists and missionaries made careers through accusing locals of ‘idolatry’ through the ‘worship of fetishes’; Percy Amaury Talbot, the first District Officer of the Oban Hills region in the Calabar hinterlands, wrote a chapter called “Stone worship” in his book “The Peoples of Southern Nigeria” (1926). Cross Riverians are acutely aware of the erroneous perceptions expressed in colonial reports that sought to humiliate their traditions. This awareness became evident while reviewing Keith Ray’s survey: “... a number of anthropological studies of material culture carried out in and immediately north of the Bamenda plateau refer to the presence of stones used in a variety of ceremonies, but venerated as representative of ancestors.”¹¹

In response, Calabar author Engineer B.E. Bassey declared that stones are not venerated or worshipped as gods or ancestors, but instead represent the concept of ‘stability’ or ‘eternity’.¹² As consecrated and active objects, the stones represent the core identity of the lineage community using them, and it is taboo for non-members to approach them without consulting with the lineage heads for permission. Local specialists taught that Cross River stones, carved or not, have several shared qualities:

- 1) They are anthropomorphic, often having an identified head and base.
- 2) They represent founding ancestors, named or unknown.
- 3) In Ékpè culture, they represent the autonomy of the community (or principality).
- 4) They are activated during ceremonies through libations of hot drink (alcoholic spirits), palm wine and even pounded yam.
- 5) They are marked in chalk or paint in ways that correspond to initiation marks made on the bodies of neophytes.

While the famous carved Bakor monoliths are the ‘crown jewels’ of the region’s cultural stones, those of many other communities share conceptual features and ritual treatment.

The lack of archaeological studies in the region, coupled with the unwillingness of colonial writers to accept that the people they invaded and enslaved were not savage brutes, has enabled fantastic claims. The colonists

10 The role of Pentecostalism in attacking Ékpè practices in the Calabar region is discussed by art historian Jordan Fenton (2022, 97 ff.).

11 (Ray 2004: 209).

12 (Bassey 2015 personal communication).

devised self-serving prehistorical frameworks which allowed them to dismiss indigenous cultures. Some British writers attributed the arts of southern Nigeria to Mediterranean migrations and influences, inspiring a legacy of unfounded and unprovable migration stories. P.A. Talbot thought that the angles “cut out” on some Ékpè stones “Point to the possibility of a Carthaginian origin.”¹³ Such speculation led to a practice of far-fetched fables about origin and migration in local ethnic history publications and court cases.¹⁴ The only group with a substantive dictionary and literature are the Èfìks of Calabar, whose early trade relationships with Europeans led to the prevalence of their perspectives in the literature. Contributing to these problems are the balkanized ethnic histories written by colonial anthropologists, aimed at understanding community structures for the purposes of taxation and government re-organization. In response, locals sought ‘strength in unity’ by creating ethnic organizations like the Ibibio Union founded in 1928¹⁵; the Éjàghám Improvement Union in 1937¹⁶; the Bakor Union created in 1963.¹⁷ Previously, following an Èfìk perspective, all groups north of Calabar towards Íkóm were known as Ekoi. P.A. Talbot described the Éjàghám as a “Clan” of the Ekoi “Sub-Tribe”, and wrote: “The name Ekoi itself is an Èfìk world applied to the Ejagham of the northern part of Calabar Division.”¹⁸ The term Éjàghám derives from the deity of a lake near Mamfe, Cameroon, considered a point of migration into present-day Nigeria for many Éjàghám-speaking groups, who stretch down to the Kùò-Éjàghám [“Qua”] of Calabar.¹⁹ Bakor itself is considered one of many variants of Éjàghám. Through trade networks extending north from Calabar, the Èfìk language became the regional trade language; most locals communicate in several languages, while today Nigerian Pidgin is the *lingua franca*. Given this historical complexity and obscurity, this essay avoids speculation about ‘origins’ of a group or their practices, with the exception of some examples from the Ékpè society, which has a generally accepted diffusion pattern, evidenced in the type of ritual stones used by a given community.

The process of critically reviewing the colonial literature and learning from local specialists has resulted in the following three sections regarding the major cultural stone categories of the region, and a fourth on the Cross River region diaspora in Cuba:

13 (Talbot 1912, 172).

14 (cf. Afigbo 1965, 1971; Aye, 1967, 1990, 2005, 2006; Jeffreys 1966).

15 cf. Noah (1987).

16 “The Ejagham Improvement Union, 1937-61. The founding of the Ejagham Improvement Union (EIU) was predicated on the emergence of ethnic nationalism in the Cross River area in the 1920s and 1930s. The formation of ethnic unions such as the Oron Improvement Union (1925) and Ibibio State Union (1928) . . .” (Tangban 2008, 279). “[T]he meeting members of the Union held with J.V. Dewhurst, D.O. of Calabar Division during which they raised objection to the name ‘Ekoi’ being applied to the Ejagham. They insisted on the people being referred to as ‘Ejagham’. Thereafter, the sub-groups the Union represented became officially known as Ejagham.” (Tangban 2008, 283. See also Röschenthaler 2011, 489, note 16).

17 Chief Sylavvus Eko Akong, ‘Orlando’ (personal communication, September 12, 2014).

18 (Talbot 1926/1969, 62, 94).

19 “Lake Ijagham, the sacred lake of the Ekoi”; “The word ‘Ijagham’ bears a strong affinity to ‘Ejagham’, the name by which the Ekoi call themselves” (Talbot 1912, 150, 153).

1. 'AKWANSHI' MONOLITHS (A.K.A. BAKOR MONOLITHS)

Ákúâhshì is an Éjághám term for a carved monolith, meaning ‘ancestors in the ground’.²⁰ The earliest known photographs of these Upper Cross Region carved monoliths were taken by Charles Partridge at the Agba site on Ekajuk land (figure 1), during his tenure as Acting District Commissioner of Obubura Hill district in 1903-1904; they were published in his *Cross River Natives* (1905), subtitled “a description of the circles of upright sculptured stones on the left bank of the Aweyong River.”²¹ Figure 1 reproduces an edited photograph by Partridge, with both monoliths displaying carved human faces, a large protruding umbilicus, multiple designs on the face, chest and belly that represent cicatrix marks, while one also has arms. Of the designs, Partridge observed that: “Some of the stones at Alok have plain coils on both sides of the abdomen, and a rough sketch of one of them shows a horizontal row of dots between each ear and eye, and a vertical row of the same running down each cheek. A careful survey of all such marks within the district, accompanied by photographs or drawings, would probably yield very interesting results, which might perhaps throw light upon the descent and history of the different tribes.”²² From 1961-62, Philip Ashby Allison surveyed nearly 300 other monoliths with similar features (figs 2A,B,C,D,E), some with coil designs that were reproduced in cicatrix marks on the faces of contemporary people and skin-covered dance masks of the region (figures 3A,B,C). Near Mamfe, Cameroon, similar coils were documented on an anthropomorphic basalt stone of the Ékpe ‘leopard’ society, in a cicatrix mark of a decorated face, and the face of a skin-covered dance mask, as photographed by German colonial officer Alfred Mansfeld in the early 1900s (figures 3D,E,F). A colonial report on the Éjághám-speaking peoples of Íkóm, Nkum and Etung (all of whom are discussed in this essay), claims that “The only tribal markings are a series of concentric rings on the temple,” apparently the same design as on the monoliths.²³ The idea of ‘tribal marking’ is a random guess, while the coils could be simple decorations or a mark of status.²⁴

A parallel relationship between ritual objects and culturally marked bodies was observed in the Upper Benue valley to the north, where Marla Berns documented correspondence between cicatrised incisions on the torsos of women and designs on clay pots created for shrines.²⁵ Regarding the Bakor monoliths, were the carved designs inspired by cicatrix marks on human bodies, or vice versa? There’s no way

20 (cf. Allison 1968a: 22). ákú ‘ancestors’; kâ ‘in’; hshì ‘ground’.

21 Figures 70 and 71 feature carved monoliths, between pages 268-269 (Partridge 1905).

22 (Partridge 1905, 170-171). Allison observed that Partridge wrote “Anopp” instead of “Alok”; I have corrected the error with “quiet copyediting”.

23 Fellows (1934, 2). Fellows referred to Ikóm, Nkum and ‘Obokum’ “clans”. ‘Obokum’ is correctly “Agbokim”, a community in northern Etung L.G.A. Each of the three communities speaks a different language, so the idea of ‘tribal markings’ is erroneous.

24 In his study of facial scarifications of an Igbò-speaking group, Jeffreys also concluded: “Itfi scarification is not a tribal mark, but a sign of status, rank, or nobility” (Jeffreys 1951, 96).

25 (Berns 2011, 509, figure 17.13).



Figures 2A,B: circle designs on monoliths in Alok circle. I. Miller photos, 2014, 2020.



Figure 2C: circle design on monolith in Njemetop-Nselle, Íkóm L.G.A. I. Miller photo, 2015.



Fig. 71. Three of the stones at Agba.

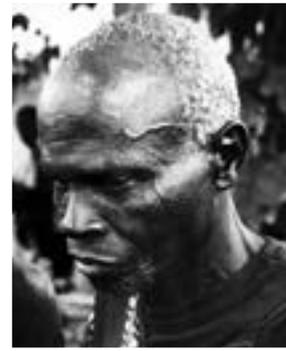
Figure 1: "Stones at Agba." Charles Partridge photo, 1905. B&W.



Figure 2D: circle design on monolith in Emangebe, Íkóm L.G.A. I. Miller photo, 2015.



Figure 2E: Bakor monolith on grounds of National Museum, Oron, Akwa Ibom State I. Miller photo, 2020.



Figures 3A,B: circle designs on faces of local elders. Bodleian Library.

Figures 3C,D: circle designs on face of Mamfe woman and skin-covered mask. Alfred Mansfeld photos, 1928.



Figure 3F: Circle designs on sides of an anthropomorphic Ékpè stone, Mamfe, Cameroon. "Eta-ngbe: Altar, meaning Prayer and Sacrifice Place inside of the Palaverhouse (Keakaland) Alfred Mansfeld (1928, 218).



Figure 3E: A rare performance of a skin-covered mask with a round cicatrise mark on the face. Ohafia community, Ofahia L.G.A., Abia State. I. Miller photo, 2012.



Figure 4: Elder woman paints the carved channels of an Alok monolith. Ivor Miller photo, 2014.

to test this question, but clearly generations of humans living around the monolith sites have had a cultural relationship with the carved monoliths.

In the Bakor region, local specialist Chief Sylvanus Eko Akong, alias 'Orlando', spent decades curating the monolith circles of Alok, the site of an Open-Air Museum. Akong learned about the monoliths from his father and other elders, who reported several generations of ritual interactions with the monolith circles and trees therein, principally during the New Yam harvest festival. When Charles Partridge visited in 1903, the "head-chief" of Agba told him: "We still give fufu to every stone and also to the big tree. Our forefathers said to us, 'These stones are your forefathers, your great chiefs; every year you must sacrifice to them.'" Nearby in Alok, Partridge was told: "Once a year we give the stones food, namely, when we eat new yams."²⁶

Over a century later, Akong reported:

"As we learned about the monoliths traditionally, we were told of the great role they played during the New Yam festival. Whenever our communities want to celebrate a New Yam festival, they start their actions in the monolith sites, to appease the ancestors. Every September 14, the elders will go there to pour libation and pray, saying, 'tomorrow we are eating our new yam'. The libation is always up-wine [palm wine], kola nut, fresh water from the stream, palm oil and dry mud fish; there is no blood. They will say, 'We are about to celebrate our New Yam Festival for the labour we have done for nine months, and there should be peace'.

²⁶ (Partridge 1905, 270-271, 273).

After the Chief Priest and elders pour libation, post-menopausal women will begin to paint the monoliths [see figure 4]. The painting is done with special materials to create five colours: white chalk, red camwood, yellow camwood, green and blue. Each colour has significance: white is for peace; red is for war; yellow is for victory; green is for agriculture; and blue is for fertility.”

The Bakor community New Yam festival celebrates the fertility of the land, the harvest, and the people, as Akong reported:

“After painting on the 14th, the community celebration starts in the early morning of the 15th.²⁷ The ancestors are appeased with fresh yam brought from the farm that is boiled and pounded, then divided in two: one part is mixed with palm oil and turns yellow, and the other is not and remains white. Then the male and female children gather outside the monolith site, along with some elders. The group ties wrappers around their waists, while their chests and faces are decorated with designs in white chalk; all will enter the monolith circle in a procession to sing and dance.

An iron gong will be hit to make traditional music, as they call out the names of the elders, both those who are late [deceased] and the present ones who are administering the community, male and female. The singing calls and honours those who care for the community, to praise them, as in ‘Chief So and So, you are the person controlling your community today, hold your community well and let there be peace’. The youth and elders have white chalk marked on their chests as a symbol of peace, and they dance inside the circle of monoliths to appease the ancestors with the red and the white yam, the water, the palm wine and fish. They go to each of the monoliths and dance. While the chief priest and I use those smashed yams to place the sacrifice on each monolith, we will pray against epidemics, accidents, and pray for peace and a good harvest. We carry up-wine in the native horn, and we pour it on the stones, along with water [see figures 5, 6, 7]. Then we dance till we come to the middle of the town, where we sit together under the old tree to drink palm wine; that must happen before we could eat the pounded new yam.”

Chief Akong’s narrative shows a continuous practice of feeding the community monoliths for over a century, with the participation of local youths to teach them the process.

Regarding the use of ‘oral tradition’, Philip Allison cautioned that, “Certain dangers may arise from the premature publication of detailed records of oral evidence, and collectors of such evidence have learnt to beware of recording ‘traditions’ which may in fact be based on earlier published sources.”²⁸ Allison referred to P.A. Talbot’s (1912) discussion of Nsibidi, the coded symbols used throughout the Cross River region that are also exhibited on the ùkára cloth worn by Ékpè members; he suggested the monoliths may feature such codes.²⁹ Chief Akong developed this idea to identify examples of Nsibidi on the monoliths, and described the Alok monolith circle as the

27 Chief Akong reported that with the creation of the Bakor Union in 1963, the New Yam Festival was revived the same year and its rituals were expanded.

28 (Allison 1968a, Forward).

29 Regarding an “Old Nkrigom” monolith, Allison observed that, “The hooped decoration above the navel resembles the Nsibidi sign denoting wealth” (Allison 1968a, figure 32).



Figure 5: With palm wine in the left hand and yam in the right, decorated youth ‘feeds’ the monoliths in Alok. I. Miller photo, 2014.



Figure 6: Monolith in Alok, painted and fed during the New Yam Festival. I. Miller photo, 2014.



Figure 7: Ékpè stone in Alok, painted and fed during the New Yam Festival, with manilla coils and bars at its base. I. Miller photo, 2014.



Figure 8: Ékpè stone in Alok, surrounded by òpòti trees. I. Miller photo, 2014.

centre of Ékpè authority in the Bakor region. But because the dating of the monoliths is unconfirmed, and the foundation period of the Ékpè society is unknown, their correlation is impossible to know. Nevertheless, Chief Akong articulates an active relationship between the Bakor people, their monoliths, and the Ékpè society:

“In the monolith circle here, next to the Ékpè stone, there is a record of when somebody in the past committed a crime, and he was fined money, which at that time was in the form of curved manila rods [see figures 7 & 8]. Only those who were wealthy could afford them. So, one can see that they were using the authority of Ékpè till today and tomorrow. My late uncle Nsofal Ogbo had committed a crime, and Ékpè said, ‘come and pay’. He now started quoting law [i.e., refusing the customary fine by quoting British colonial law], so the order came from the elders, saying, ‘Okay let them carry the Ékpè costume, get to the playground, to catch any of the biggest goats.’ They started playing the Nyàmàngbè [i.e., Ékpè], and dancing with the gun; they saw the biggest goat and shot it; it was my paternal uncle’s own goat, whereas my maternal uncle had committed the crime.³⁰ They prepared the goat and ate it, and he had to pay for it because that is what the law stated. Ékpè law had a meaning. The stones also have meanings, and they are related to Ékpè. For example, some of the inscriptions one sees on the Ékpè cloth called ùkára are also found on the monoliths.

In this part of the world, the community laws were created and enforced by Ékpè chiefs. With British colonization, the laws of the customary courts were based upon

30 Ékpè society has various regional names. In Èfìk, Ékpè; in Bakor, ‘Nyàmàngbè’ or ‘Nyàngbè’. Èfùts call it ‘Mgbè’. In the Upper Cross region, “Nangbei” and “Nankbei” (Partridge 1905, 215). In the Mamfe region, “Ngbe or Nyangbe” (Mansfeld 1928, 26).

many of the Ékpè laws, and these also influenced the magistrate court, and from there the higher authority. This is why when anything happens, lawmakers look to the lower court judgments, to capitalize on the tradition, the norms of the people. Even today in the Bakor region, if someone wants to foster a new idea, it may not work because some will say: 'It is not part of Ékpè law'. In the whole of Íkóm, from here to Okuni, and south into Ákámkpà, and among the Kúòs ["Quas"] in Calabar, we are all from one source of Éjaghám people, who came with Ékpè from Cameroon."

In the Alok monolith circle, an Ékpè stone is surrounded by òbòti trees (*Newbouldia laevis*) that demarcate a ritual space; in this region they are the banner of the Ékpè 'leopard' society (see figures 7 & 8).³¹ Chief Akong refers to the material culture of the Alok monolith site to narrate a centuries-old relationship between the carved monoliths, the Ékpè society, and the migration of Éjaghám-speaking peoples. But were these monoliths met by his ancestors upon arrival, or did they create them afterwards?

Chief Akong reported that Ékpè titleholders instructed local youths organized into age-grades to bring the monoliths from a local riverbed to be carved and placed in circles:

"It seems likely that most of these monoliths were carried from a mother quarry or riverbed called Ndi Nto in Nnam [see figure 9].³² From there, they were carried to different communities wherever they settled. The system used to convey them was logging. They would get a rope in the forest and tie it to a particular stone. Then they would hit a gong to evoke the authority of Nyàmàngbè [i.e., Ékpè], because all of them respected the Nyàmàngbè society, to enforce compliance of young men in a particular age-grade to roll the monoliths on logs into the village. Nyàmàngbè was used to govern the people with rules and regulations that guided the entire community. Some activities are meant for women only and are taboo for men; there are others for men only and are taboo for women, and our ancestors lived by those kinds of laws.

In our communities, all people, both men and women, belong to age grades, which are named Monkóm, Efik, Amon, and Aribo, and the names rotate through the generations. Monkóm is the most senior age grade; Monkóm are the elders of Efik; Efik are the elders of Amon; Amon are the elders of Aribo. When the Aribo age-grade members have their children, they will become part of the age-grade Monkóm, which is recycled every four generations.

In this area, it is believed that Nyàmàngbè is where the customary laws started; they were not formed by one person, but in council by seven representatives, one from each of the leading families in the community."

31 The 'Ékpè tree' (*Newbouldia laevis*) is called 'òbòti' in Èfik: "Ö-böt'-i, v., Äbäti, q. v." (Goldie 1862/1964, 245); "Ä-bä-ti, n. A tree having a red flower. Frequently planted in Isü Abasi, or before a palaver-house. The leaves are used medicinally" (Goldie 1862/1964, 2). In Bàlónódó the tree is called 'ikení' (Nanji Cyprian 2021 personal communication); in Yorùbá called 'akòkò', it is used when investing traditional titles (Verger 1995, 343, 484).

32 Partridge reported that the 'head-chief' of Agba told him: "Yes, the stones came from the bottom of the Nawa Creek" (Partridge 1905, 271).



Figure 9: Riverbed called Ndi Nto in Nnam with basalt stones. Bodleian Library.

To conclude, Chief Akong narrates an observable relationship in the Alok monolith circle between the Ékpè stone and seven leading families of Bakor-speaking people:

"In the Alok stone circle, where the Ékpè stone is, one can see seven major stones around it; each representing a family. The relationships between the monoliths and the Bakor people were discovered through the tattoo marks on the seven major stones surrounding the Ékpè stone, which were the same marks that the Bakor people used on their bodies. They looked at the marks on the stones and identified some as from the Shamuyun, Shampe or Nobafon families. When they identified a tattoo mark given to Nobafon family, for example, they all believed that anybody carrying that kind of tattoo or tribal mark belongs to that family; that was how they were able to identify themselves."

Chief Akong devoted his life to promoting the history and culture of the monoliths as he learned it from his elders, Allison's reports, and his own research. His vision places them at the centre of a widespread ritual stone culture in the Cross River region, represented spectacularly through anthropomorphic stones of the Ékpè society.

2. ANTHROPOMORPHIC ÉKPÈ STONES



Figure 10: carved monolith in Okuni in front of Ékpè hall. E. Dayrell photo, 1913.

A remarkable meeting point for the Bakor monoliths and the Ékpè volcanic rocks of the Lower Cross region is the Okuni community, known by locals as Òlùlùmò, on the southern bank of the Cross River near Íkóm.

In 1905 Charles Partridge wrote: "I have noticed in the neighbourhood of Okuni several small conical stones with roughly-cut human faces."³³ In 1913 Elphinstone Dayrell published a photograph from Okuni of a carved monolith, similar to the Bakor monoliths to the north, placed in front of a carved wooden pillar on a plaza in front of the Ékpè hall (see figure 10).³⁴ Dayrell's caption was: "Stone Ju-ju and carved wooden pillar: Egbo House in background." By 'juju' he meant 'ritual object'; by Egbo he meant Ékpè.³⁵ Allison made no mention of Dayrell's monolith, but reported: "A carved stone mentioned by Partridge at Okuni was subsequently removed to the District Office at Íkóm and later to the Lagos Museum."³⁶ In 2015 when I visited Okuni, community elders reported that they

33 (Partridge 1905, 276).

34 Dayrell was "Assistant District Commissioner in charge of Okuni" (Partridge 1905, 126-127). "In 1903 Mr. Dayrell, Acting District Commissioner, was stationed at Okuni which became, for a time, the local Government Head Quarters" (Fellows 1934, 13).

35 The British colonial spelling 'Egbo' was a blended label confusing the Ékpó (ghost) mask performance society of Ìbibìò-speaking people with the Ékpè (leopard) mask performance society of Calabar (cf. Waddell 1863: 314; Goldie 1890/1901: 30; Talbot 1923: 170).

36 (Allison 1968a, 21-22). The author was unable to find evidence of this monolith in the Nigerian



Figures 11A,B: Ékpè hall with monoliths and iron staff, Omon group, Okuni village, Íkóm L.G.A., 2015. I. Miller photo.



Figure 12: Paired large/small anthropomorphic monoliths in Bakor. Bodleian Library.

had no knowledge of such carved monoliths, but that British authorities had once destroyed their Okwa stones for council meetings (as described below), while the later Biafra (or Civil) War had also destroyed much of their material heritage.³⁷ They led me to a large monolith commemorating the hunter who discovered the current location of their community, with a smaller one for his wife. Okuni town is comprised of four lineage groups that migrated in different periods from what is today Cameroon, each represented by an Ékpè lodge. The first group to settle was Omon, whose Ékpè lodge features a basalt monolith representing the hunter who identified this ideal location near the river (figures 11 A & B).³⁸

Mr. James Okongor, an educator and historian from Okuni, narrated the story:

"The monolith standing beside the Mgbè [Ékpè] hall in Omon community represents Tata Eruk Monse – an elephant hunter who founded this settlement. On either side of the Eruk Monse monolith, there are iron 'okuta' staffs, representing the summit of spiritual power in Okuni. This monolith came from our previous settlement, and is kept at the Mgbè hall for protection. This most revered monolith of Okuni was exposed to sun and rain, so there was a fear that the monolith would lose its form with time. Therefore, in 1998, Òlùlùmò community decided to protect it further by constructing a shed over it, and then coating it with cement. The cement cover maintains the original shape of the stone. A smaller monolith representing Eruk Monse's wife is next to his, and given the same protection. Our myth states that the wife encouraged him to go after the elephant for as long as possible, leading to his discovery of our present settlement."³⁹

The legend tells of a great hunter who followed an elephant through the bush, killing it at the site that would later become Okuni through subsequent migrations to this place. The status of the hunter was elevated in his community, to the point where he was memorialized next to the Ékpè lodge. This narrative is consistent with many others of the region that describe the elevation of high achieving community members through titles in the Ékpè society, normally reserved for members of the founding lineage of the community. Dayrell himself photographed around 1910 "Ostum Ofang, Chief hunter of Akparabong", an Éjaghám-speaking community near Íkóm.⁴⁰ The hunter wears a leopard's tooth around his neck, holds a staff of authority, and has an *ùkàrà* cloth of Ékpè membership over his shoulder, a sign of elevated status. Historian Ojong Echum Tangban documented the recognition of a great hunter in the traditions of Éjaghám-speaking peoples:

National Museum, Lagos.

37 For example, as documented in Calabar, much of the traditional architecture was destroyed during the Biafra War; the destroyed palm thatched compounds were rebuilt with cement blocks. (cf. Edet 2017). So too in Okuni, what were once palm thatched compounds are now cement block structures.

38 To the north of Okuni and Íkóm, in an Éjaghám-speaking community of Akparabong clan, Keith Nicklin documented a carved stone representing "the first chief of Opu when they found the land" (Nicklin field notes, March 1978 in Opu village). Thanks to Jill Salmons.

39 The hunter Tata Eruk Monse was a slave of Etuk Oba. The wife of Eruk Monse is unnamed (James Okongor, personal communication)

40 Photograph 400_004753, Elphinstone Dayrell archives, Royal Anthropological Institute.



Figure 13: Monolith custodian communicates with the community ancestors. Òwòm, Íkóm L.G.A., I. Miller photo, 2016.



Figure 14: Upright Ékpè stone and wooden pole wrapped in copper coil, with round basalt stone at its base. Efi group, Okuni village, Íkóm L.G.A., 2015. I. Miller photo.



Figure 15 & 16: Upright Ékpè stones in community meeting halls, Mamfe region, South West Cameroon. Hans Wildi photos, 1924-28? Basel Mission Archives.



Figure 17A: Drawing of an Ékpè stone, Ojok, Ákámkpà L.G.A., Cross River State, Nigeria. Talbot (1926/1969 vol 2 : 346).



Figure 17B: Drawing of an Ékpè stone, Ndebeji, Ákámkpà L.G.A., Cross River State, Nigeria. Talbot (1926/1969 vol 3: 346).

(see figure 13). Next to this monolith was a smaller rounded rock, carved with a human face, a brass manilla rod lying in front of it. This arrangement corresponds to the pairing of large/small, male/female stones found throughout the region (see figure 12).

In Okuni, the interior of each of the four Ékpè lodges features an elongated volcanic rock, akin to those of other lodges throughout the Cross River region. The Ékpè stone of the Efi lodge of Okuni stands upright, attached to a wooden pole of the same height, with copper coils around them.⁴⁵ At the base of the upright stone is a rounded basalt stone, where libations are poured at the commencement of any Ékpè activity (see fig. 14).

The earliest known photographs of Ékpè stones are from the Mamfe region, taken between 1924-28 by a Swiss employee of the Basel Mission in Cameroon (figs. 15 & 16), and by Alfred Mansfeld in the same period (figure 3F).

These photographs show a central post with an upright stone before it, typical of the Ékpè hall architecture of the region.⁴⁶ In figure 15, the stone is capped, with two eyes rendered in white paint and horizontal bands of white and red paint down its shaft.

Figure 16 shows a capped stone with a raffia fringe and eagle feather. The base of the monolith is also bound in raffia fringes and rope, while the body, like the pillar behind it, is marked in broad stripes of white chalk. Ékpè stones are treated similarly throughout the Mamfe region, as well as to the south in Ngólóland, in coastal Isangele (Usagaré) in Cameroon and also Calabar, Nigeria. Such upright stones are regarded as ‘guardians’ of the lodge hall, believed to discipline unauthorized persons who enter the space.⁴⁷ P.A. Talbot published a drawing of an Ékpè stone in Ojok, an Éjaghám-speaking community in Ákámkpà L.G.A., Cross River State (figure 17A). The capped monolith stands in front of a wooden pillar supporting drums. Expressing the Éjaghám and Èfik terms for stone (*etai* and *ítiát*), Talbot wrote: “The *Etai Ngbe*, the Èfik *Itiatt Ekkpe*, is the principal symbol belonging to the secret society.”⁴⁸ Another drawing published by Talbot shows a lodge pillar in the Éjaghám-speaking community of Ndebeji, with a Nyámkpè body-mask drawn on one side and a goat on the other, both key symbols of Ékpè. In front of the pillar is a capped monolith with brass rods curving up its face (figure 17B).⁴⁹ Alfred Mansfeld described the Ékpè stone (“*Eta-ngbe*” in Éjaghám) as an “altar, i.e. place of prayer and sacrifice inside the Palaver House (Keakaland).” Mansfeld wrote: “The fact that the *Eta-ngbe* is the most important part of the whole house of God is also clear from the fact that the laying of the foundation stone is connected with festivities, just as it is when we build a church.”⁵⁰

45 Talbot published a photograph of an ‘*Etai Ngbe*’ in an Ékpè hall in Okuni, possibly the same stone photographed by the author in 2015. (Talbot 1912, facing p. 172).

46 These are identified as ‘Isango stones’ in the Basel Mission Archive records. An author and Ékpè member from Ekondo Titi, South West Cameroon, identified these as ‘Dikòki’ in the Bálóndó language, in which Ékpè is known as ‘Matamu’. (Mr. Nanji Cyprian 2021, personal communication)

47 Jordan Fenton reported the same idea, wherein “the ancestral energies of the stone travel to the offender’s stomach and mystically ‘sounds or talks’ within their belly. A painful death then follows” (Fenton 2012, 67).

48 (Talbot 1926/1969 v2, 347). In another volume he wrote: “The most important part of the club-house is the *Itiatt Ekkpe* or, in Ekoi, *Etai*, or *Ta*, *Ngbe* — the cut stone pillar” (Talbot 1926/1969 v3, 782).

49 Talbot wrote “Ndebbiji”, which is “Ndebeji” on contemporary maps. This is likely Old Ndebeji, closer to the Cameroon border, while New Ndebeji is closer to Oban along the same road.

50 (Mansfeld 1908, 218). Translation by Anne Spier-Mazor. Palaver House means Ékpè lodge house. Keaka are an Éjaghám-speaking people.

“A hunter who single-handedly killed a ferocious predator, for example, a leopard, was honoured with the title *Ntufam Oroom* (brave man).⁴¹ He was usually decorated by the village head with a goat or sheep skin on both arms and this became his outfit on every important occasions. Holders of the title *Ntufam Oroom* played significant roles in the defence of the village in the event of war. When a brave hunter died, he was buried by his professional colleagues in a solemn and awesome ceremony.”⁴²

The Okuni monoliths identified with named historical figures has parallels in a monolith site of the Bakor region called *Etinghi Nta*, where one is named ‘Ebi Abu’ after an initiation club associated with Ékpè.⁴³

Another correspondence between Bakor and Okuni are paired arrangements of large and small monoliths, identified in Okuni as husband and wife. The Òwòm village of the Nkum Iyala group has a living monolith practice.⁴⁴ During my visit, the Paramount Ruler instructed the monolith caretaker to alert the ancestors of our presence, which he did by beating the wooden gong next to a tall monolith

41 Ntúfàm ‘village head’; therefore Ntúfàm Oroom would be ‘chief of the brave’.

42 (Tangban 2008: 101).

43 Local elders of the Eting Nta village, Íkóm L.G.A., reported that the monolith named Ebi Abu was stolen in the decade of 1970, and they brought the matter to court in Ogoja. (Video interview by Dr. Abu Edet and Ferdinand Saumarez Smith, September 2019). This monolith is now in the collection of the Musée de Quai Branly.

44 A colonial report states: “Nkum . . . do not recognize their name as being appropriate or correct. . . They maintain that their correct name is Iyala and this points to their connection with Iyala in Ogoja Division” (Fellows 1934, 6).



Figure 18: Upright Ékpè stone in Ékpè hall, Kembong community, Mamfe region, South West Cameroon. I. Miller photo, 2011.



Figure 19: Upright Ékpè stone in Bachou-Akagbe meeting hall, Mamfe region, South West Cameroon. I. Miller photo, 2011.



Figure 20: "The Ngbe Stone." Drawing of stone in a Banyang community near Mamfe, Cameroon. Malcolm Ruel 1969, p. 222. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 21: Ékpè house, 1924-25. "The Njamkwe house in Besongabang with the Njamkwe stone, in front of the house of the chief (1926)." Mr. Eduard Wunderli photograph. Basel Mission Archives.

Near Mamfe, the Ékpè lodges of both Kembong and Bachou-Akagbe feature a central pillar with an upright monolith in front, capped and painted in bands of white, yellow and red (figures 18 & 19). These monoliths have a curved rod of brass or copper alloy undulating upwards from the base, where oracular equipment is placed. Throughout the Cross River region, brass and copper alloy signify 'wealth' or material abundance. From the Bachuo-Akagbe monolith are hung two bags of woven raffia with small animal horns attached, used by a lodge member during ceremony to collect leaves that fall from the performing body-mask that holds a branch of 'the Ékpè tree' (*Newbouldia laevis*).

British social anthropologist Malcolm Ruel lived from 1953-1954 in the Kenyang-speaking community of Besongabang, near Mamfe, where he wrote about the Ngbè [Ékpè] 'leopard' institution. Ruel described one of the Ngbè stones of this community (see figure 20):

"The 'stone of Ngbe' is usually placed in front of the central pole-support in the aca or meetinghouse of its owner⁵¹; when formally set out, a variety of objects cover or surround it, including: an inverted satchel forming a kind of 'head' on which are fixed a collection of feathers, twisted copper or brass rods of the type that was formerly used as currency, two chains with padlocks holding the stone to the ground, a tortoise-shell, decorated calabashes, certain seeds, a white

cloth around the 'waist' of the stone in which is fixed a knife, and so on. In general, these objects have emblematic reference to the various sections and activities of Ngbe: the 'stone' then forms a kind of visual 'charter' for the association (of which, however, only its members have exact knowledge, and then only to the extent of their membership). The setting up of an 'Ngbe stone' is one of the most elaborate of all Ngbe procedures. I was told by one senior elder and Ngbe leader how he had previously helped a senior relative (then the formal owner of the lodge) to do this, taking care to provide all the items required and to arrange them exactly; then on completion other Ngbe leaders in the village and neighbourhood were invited to come to 'test' his work and knowledge. He reported, proudly, that they could find no fault with him – he passed his 'test' and no one could surpass him."⁵²

As Ruel readily admits, his description of the materials lacks insight into their meanings. Nearly three decades earlier, a Basel Mission employee photographed one of several Ékpè halls in the Besongabang community, with an Ékpè stone planted upright on the front porch, between two doorways (see figure 21). The stone is painted with a design reminiscent of the curved brass coils in figures 17-20. An elder man holding a staff of authority, wearing a cap, with a wrapper around his waist and a European-styled jacket, stands at the entrance; he is the lodge leader, or Seseku.

Cultural anthropologist Ute Röschenhaler conducted extensive research from 1987 onward in the Cross River region on the dissemination of initiation clubs. She observed local variations in treating Ékpè stones:

51 'Aca' is written incorrectly. Local specialists report 'ochaah' as the Éjághám term, from which derives 'achaah', the Upper Banyang term ('Mbe' Philip Tazi 2021 personal communication; Ayuk Raphael Ayuk 2021 personal communication).

52 (Ruel 1969, 22-223).

“The Ekpe stone underwent changes as Ekpe spread from the coast to the hinterland. Near the coast of Isangele, in the Balundu [“Bàlondó”] villages, there were two stones: one, a meter high, placed under a shed or inside the hall, and a shorter one, in front of the hall, without a shed.⁵³ The larger stone was decorated with black, red and white paint. After the Ekpe chief’s death, the smaller stone was uprooted, and a goat killed. At the installation of the new chief, another stone had to be planted. Lianas or chains were tied around some of them, or their ‘necks’ were pinned to the ground with two liana chains. A red hat with a feather was placed on some; others had a painted face on their upper part.”⁵⁴

Röschenthaler refers to the known sources for Ékpè culture in Isangele, the French colonial name for what locals call “Usagadet” or “Usagaré”, a coastal community contacted by early Portuguese traders.⁵⁵ The practice of uprooting the stones at the death of a titleholder implies that the descendants of the deceased who want to assume his mantle must equally be prestigious community members who have acquired wealth through industry and discipline, in order to pay for the subsequent rites of ‘planting’ the stone with a goat sacrificed to feed the community. In a Bangwa-speaking community to the north, the author was present at the rite of ‘planting’ an Ékpè stone. On this occasion, ‘Mbe’ Philip Tazi replaced his late father as the Seseku or head of Ékpè in a lengthy ceremony from late December, 2011 to early January, 2012.⁵⁶ He describes the processes:

“[I]n my culture [this] is called ‘the planting of the Ékpè Stone’ (the Monolith). Ékpè is bought in stages, in grades. An Ékpè chief who buys the highest grade or rank of Ékpè typically has a monolith planted at the entrance of his Ékpè Lodge or the ‘achaah Ngbè’. When the chief passes on, the monolith is uprooted and placed on its side, pending the day when the new chief would officially assume his place in the lodge. This occurs in the presence of fellow Ékpè chiefs, ranking members of lodges in the area, and the entire village. During this event, rituals are performed to replant the monolith in a ‘hail to the king’ sort of way [see figures 22A & B]. Ékpè members convene in the Ékpè Forest, where the Sesekou and new titleholders of the lodge are subjected to advanced education by Ékpè elders and philosophers over a certain period. I was instructed in Ékpè decorum and my role as the Ékpè Chief, the Nfor Ngbè of my lodge [see figure 23]. Most important, one takes an oath to safeguard Ékpè and its secrets, and then is anointed by the elders with special herbs to enable one to perform



Figure 22A&B:
A: Ékpè stone with machete at each side and copper wire, before the rite of ‘planting’. Njeh-Mveh village, Fontem, Cameroon, Mbe Tazi photo, 2011.
B: Ékpè stone after the rite of ‘planting’. Njeh-Mveh village, Fontem, Cameroon, I. Miller photo, 2012.

53 Londo speakers call themselves Bàlondó, while Europeans erred in rendering this “Balundu” (Nanji 2019, 1).

54 (Röschenthaler 2011, 106). Röschenthaler documented three Ékpè stones (figures 3.13, 3.14, 3.15).

55 In 1902, a German map by Paul Langhans rendered three versions of this place name: “Isangilli, Nsaharet, Usaharet”, rendered as Isangele by the later French colonial regime, and used officially into the present. Meanwhile locals call their home “Usaghadet”, pronounced “Usagaré” as per Cuban Abakuá usage. In Calabar, Èfìks render this term “Usak-edet.”

56 ‘Mbe’ Tazi’s great-grandfather Fontem Asonganyi of Lebang-Fontem and Folewoh Agendia of Lewoh had brought Ékpè into the Bangwa-speaking region. Tazi’s father purchased Ékpè for the Ngbè Mbe Tazi lodge of his family (Tazi 2021, personal communication).



Figure 23: Mbe Tazi (left) sits next to the Ékpè stone and his Ékpè teacher. Njeh-Mveh village, Fontem, Cameroon, January 2, 2012. I. Miller photo.

functions without inhibition. Following this, a huge celebration takes place with the processions of other societies under Ékpè, including Angbu, Mboko, Bakundi, and so on. All those processions emerged from the forest and performed in front of the hundreds of people assembled. Finally, I emerged from the forest ahead of a procession followed by an ‘ark of the covenant’ of sorts (Nsuk, or ‘Elephant of Ngbè’) from whence emerged Mutama, ‘the Voice’. I was dressed in a white sarong cloth around my waist and held the commanding staff of the Sesekou (i.e., Munyong). My torso was decorated in white paint with Nsibidi signs. Dancing to the tune of Obungbu, I left the procession that made its way slowly into the dance arena. We came to a stop, and the Mutama ‘Voice’ subjected me to several questions that I had to respond to, not unlike the way a Ph.D. candidate defends a thesis. All this is happening in front the entire community. If a question is not answered, the Mutama repeats the question. It is a nerve-racking exercise. Some people forget the answers and therefore fail the test. They must return to the Ékpè sacred forest and start their training again.”⁵⁷

All sources point to the diffusion of the Ékpè institution over past centuries from Usagaré northwards into Mamfe and Bangwa, and westwards into Calabar and its

57 (Miller 2018, 133-134).



Figure 25: Nyàmkpè body-mask with characteristic symbols: a plumed rod attached to the head; a whip in the right hand; Ékpè leaves in the left. Íkóm urban. I. Miller archives.

hinterlands. When the rights to practice Ékpè are purchased by one community from another, the seller brings the entire institution, including stones, to instruct the purchasing community on their uses. As a source community, the practices of Usagaré should be the model that others follow.

In Ndian Division, South West Cameroon, the Ékpè hall of Oron village in Isangele (Usaghadet / Usak-edet) features a volcanic rock placed upright, and decorated to evoke an initiated body. Marked with red and white stripes, it has a white sash and bell at the waist, machetes on either side for defence, a branch of Ékpè leaves in front, and is capped, with a feathered plume pointing forwards like an antenna (see figure 24). The stone represents an initiated ancestor who stands to defend the ritual space from trespassers. Chalk marks, red for energy and power, white for peace and health, mark an initiate's body. The plumed rod, bell and leaves evoke Nyàmkpè, the Ékpè body-mask that represents a founding ancestor who performs in ceremonies, to observe that only initiates are present, and that the rites are accurately performed. Nyàmkpè is the defining Ékpè mask throughout the Cross River region. In Calabar, it's referred to as 'night mask' that appears only in the presence of initiates. In the hinterlands of Calabar, Nyàmkpè is often the only mask used by rural lodges, which explains why the Ékpè institution is referred to as Nyàmkpè in many regions. Figure 25 features a Nyàmkpè mask in



Figure 24: Ékpè stone with cap and bell at waist, Oron village, Isangele Sub-Division, Ndian Division, South West Cameroon. I. Miller photo, 2008.



Figure 26: Ékpè stone with cap, painted with the three primary colours of initiation. Tòkó, Tòkó Subdivision, Ndian Division, South West Cameroon. I. Miller photo, 2012.



Figure 27: Ékpè stone with top hat and bàsònkò. Ikot Ansa, Calabar Municipality I. Miller photo, 2008.



Figure 28: Ékpè member greets the capped stone in front of the lodge. Ikot Ansa, Calabar Municipality. I. Miller photo, 2008.

the hinterlands, where it may appear during the daytime. In this image the bell at the waist is not seen but a white sash hangs from the waist; the chest piece and body-suit are made of dyed and woven raffia, resulting in the three primary colours of red, black and white, like the Ékpè stone in figure 26. Two attendants block the path of the body-mask, to contain the 'wild forest spirit' that is prone to chase and sometimes beat irreverent non-initiates.

The use of capped Ékpè stones are also found in Calabar, where the hall of Ikot Ansa community (a.k.a. Nkonib in Kúò-Éjaghám) features a guardian stone with an 1800s-style British top hat, reflecting local pride in early contact with British merchants (figure 27).⁵⁸ Referred to in Calabar as 'London's finest', the top hat represents a titleholder — and is greeted as such by a living dance specialist (see figure 28) — as confirmed by the bàsònkò 'plumed-rod' at its summit, also seen on the guardian stone in Usaghadet (figure 24). This Kúò-Éjaghám ["Qua"] community has its own variations of Ékpè practice, distinct from the neighbouring Èfùts and Èfìks.

The earliest known reference to an Ékpè cap was written by pioneering Presbyterian missionary Hugh Goldie, who wrote the first dictionary of the Èfìk language. He referred to: "Mo'-bri, n. A sort of cap with cockade put on top of a stick or stone in front of the palaver house in great Egbo [Ékpè] ceremonies. It and esak [a cap] are said to be made in the country behind Èfut."⁵⁹ This reference seems to describe the Ékpè stone, cap and plumed-rod of Ikot Ansa in figure 27, while "the country behind Èfut" refers to Usaghadet in Cameroon, from where Ékpè culture was diffused into Calabar centuries ago.

While Goldie's dictionary is generally authoritative, Europeans who relied on wordlists failed to translate metaphysical and other abstract concepts and this problem was compounded whenever the concepts in question appeared to clash with Christian 'religion'.⁶⁰

Some of Goldie's errors were reproduced by later writers, both visitors and locals. In Ìbìbìò and Èfìk traditions of the Lower Cross region, Ìndèm is 'deity'. Yet Goldie wrote "N'-dem, n. Plural of Idem", confusing two unrelated terms.⁶¹ This was clarified by the custodian of traditional culture of Ùtìt Óbìò Clan, 'Òkúkú' (Dr) Ìmé Ùdóúsòrò Ìnyàng, who reported: "Ìdèm is not singular for Ìndèm. In Èfìk, 'mme Ìndèm' is plural of Ìndèm. In Ìbìbìò it is 'ofid Ìndèm', while the Èfìks call it 'ofri Ìndèm' (all Ìndèm). ìdèm 'body'; Ìndèm 'deity.' We have ìdèm Ékpè (body-mask of Ékpè), which is physical and seen, while Ìndèm is spiritual and unseen."⁶²

A generation after Hugh Goldie, P.A. Talbot repeated Goldie's error in the following:

58 Ikot Ansa is the Èfìk name, while Nkonib is the native Kúò name for this community.

59 (Goldie 1862/1964: 193). "E'sak, v., Esak ìnim, n. A cap covered with the red feathers of the parrot." (Goldie 1862/1964: 90).

60 Northcote Thomas was an honorable exception to this fieldwork style, and his nonconformity in this regard earned his dismissal by the Lugard regime in favor of more conventional — i.e., incomprehending — interpretations of 'native' patterns of thought. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northcote_W._Thomas>

61 (Goldie 1862/1964: 200). This error was later reproduced by E.U. Aye: "ìdèm, deity or god; ndem, gods" (Aye 1991, vii, also 49, 87). See also Lydia Cabrera (2020, 404 note 28).

62 (Dr. Ìmé Ùdóúsòrò Ìnyàng, personal communication, 2019).



Figure 29: Ékpè hall with cement figure representing a monolith. Biakwan village, Boki L.G.A., CRS. I. Miller photo, July 2010.

“The word for the collective body of dead members is Idemm; for instance, the Idemm Ekkpe connotes all the past members of the Ekkpe Society, and is generally represented among Eastern Ibibio by the tall, cut phallic stone, Itiatt Ekkpe, embedded in a small clay mound and often surmounted by a cap.”⁶³

By Eastern Ibibio, Talbot meant the Èfìks of Calabar, whose *ítiát* ‘stones’ are described below. Perhaps in the past, Èfìk Ékpè stones were capped, but the author found no evidence of this in the present. Instead, capped stones were found in Cameroon communities with Ékpè, in the Éjághám-speaking regions of Nigeria, and among the Kùò-Éjághám of Calabar.⁶⁴

In Ikot Ansa, the *etae* Mgbè (Ékpè stone) with top hat at the front of the lodge is referred to by local specialists as “Ékpó Dibó” (ghost of Dibó), while the *bàsònkò* ‘plumed rod’ represents the Nyàmkpè grade.⁶⁵ In figure 28, a dance specialist greets Ékpó Dibó while performing Nsibìdì related to Nyàmkpè while holding its characteristic whip.⁶⁶ The handkerchief represents the bunch of *òbòti* leaves held by the Nyàmkpè body-mask; they are held in the left hand to greet fellow members, or to ward off any negative influences as the mask points the bunch of leaves in all directions.⁶⁷

63 (Talbot 1923: 128)

64 Jordan Fenton also observed a distinction between Èfìk/Èfùt Ékpè stone treatment and that of Kùò [“Qua”] communities, where “The stone is adorned with a ‘cap’ and is firmly planted into the ground near the entrance of the lodge” (Fenton 2012, 66).

65 Jordan Fenton also reported a Kùò [“Qua”] lodge stone as “Ekpo Dibo, meaning ghost of Dibo” (Fenton 2012, 67).

66 The performer is Chief Emmanuel Bassey Edim ‘Bozo’ (1946-2020), an Ékpè Nsibìdì specialist from Kasuk Qua community. Thanks to Dr. Jordan Fenton.

67 “The bunch of *òbòti* leaves is called Afu Mgbè in the Kùò-Éjághám language” (Abu Edet 2021,

Another ‘guardian’ stone is found in Boki L.G.A., the northernmost region of Ékpè practice along the Cameroon border.⁶⁸ Figure 29 depicts the Ékpè hall of Biakwan village with the eldest Ékpè initiate in the village, held to be 105 years old at the time.⁶⁹ Another sign of heritage conservation, this elder sits upon a special three-legged chair (partially visible here) identical to that documented by Alfred Mansfeld in the Mamfe region a century earlier.⁷⁰ In front of the central pillar is a cement representation of a monolith, which locals call ‘buká-Mgbè’, or ‘stone of the leopard’.⁷¹ The entire set up, with pillar, rope, cement block, stone and calabashes on the floor are part of Dibó, a code for the Nyàmkpè body-mask.⁷² Normally, the statue would sport a red knitted cap, but at the time the Ìyám̀bà-Ribó, or lodge leader, was deceased and his position vacant. The Ìyám̀bà titleholder calls the Voice of Ékpè to authorize ritual action, therefore the missing cap indicated that the lodge may not function until this position is filled.

Equipped with this information, one may understand the social contexts of communities with Ékpè by observing their cultural stones. For example, the Ékpè stone in Okuni village is unpainted and without a cap (see figure 14), suggesting the demise of their Ìyám̀bà, thus a dormant lodge. In fact, Ékpè titleholders of Okuni reported a reduced membership, since youths are hesitant to join because local church pastors have been openly attacking the community’s heritage as ‘satanic’.⁷³

The innovative cement ‘monolith’ in Biakwan with outstretched arms is arguably reminiscent of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross, while the bulbous head recalls – to the author at least – the C3PO robot of the Star Wars franchise. Cement sculpture, a phenomenon documented since the early 20th century in the region, seems to be a symbol of modernity and progress for locals. D.R. Rosevear served with the Forestry Department in Nigeria from 1924-1954; in the Íkóm region he documented cement tombstones from 1929-1931, reporting that: “Tombstones of this type came into common fashion along the upper Cross River in the 1920s, though one seems to bear an earlier date, 1911.”⁷⁴ The tombstones are generally human figures with symbolic hairstyles for women, and gestures of power for men. In addition to tombstones, cement memorial statues of prominent figures have become popular throughout the region (figure 30).

personal communication).

68 Thanks to Mr. Louis Nkonyu of Ogoja, an educator at the Cross River National Park, for introducing the author to the Biakwan community of the Boki region.

69 The Biakwan Ékpè hall is called Ocham Mgbè, as per Éjághám language. In Biakwan, the Boki language is not used in Ékpè songs; Ékpè language is a mixture of both Èfìk and Éjághám, due to the influence of each source group at varying periods.

70 (Mansfeld 1908, 38).

71 “buká (N) any stone” in Boki (Bruns 1975, 63).

72 Jordan Fenton photographed a similar cement ‘guardian’ stone in an Ékpè hall in Bendeghe, Northern Etung L.G.A. (Fenton 2012, 93, figures 2-5).

73 Starting in 2010, Okuni heritage specialists created an annual “Òlùlùmò Day” event to promote their heritage, but after two years local church members attacked it as ‘satanic’, leading to its cancellation (Okim Nyambi Obaji Akpet, February 8, 2015.)

74 Rosevear (1984, 44). An analysis of similar gestures in funerary sculpture in coastal west Africa and the Americas is found in Thompson (1974, 1983), Thompson & Cornet (1981).



Figure 30: Cement tombstones with women's hairstyles. Alok Open Air Museum with monoliths in background, Ikom L.G.A., CRS. I. Miller photo, 2015.



Figure 31: Volcanic rock on an Ékpè lodge patio, Èfùt Ibonda, Ódúkpání L.G.A. I. Miller photo, 2010.

Returning to the use of volcanic rocks with columnar jointing as Ékpè stones, as seen in the Cameroon communities of Isangele (Usagaré/Usak-edet) (figure 24), in Mamfe (figures 15 & 16) and in Tòkò subdivision (figure 26), they are also present in the Calabar region, for example the Ékpè lodge of the Èfùt Ibonda community of Creek Town, along a tributary of the Calabar River (figure 31). Like most Ékpè lodges of the region, its patio has a miniature 'sacred forest' represented by a grove of 'Ékpè trees' (*Newbouldia laevis*). During annual ceremonies, the patio is cordoned off with a fence of fresh raffia leaves, while red, white and yellow strips of cloth are tied around a tree trunk, emulating those tied around the waist of an Ékpè body-mask. At the foot of the trees, an Ékpè stone is surrounded by empty bottles of gin and Fanta that had been emptied through pouring libations. Taken during the annual purification ceremony of the lodge and its members, this image shows a native bowl of woven palm leaves filled with edibles, presented to the ancestors of the community and its Ndèm 'guardian deity'. In this context, the volcanic rock acts as the *ísó* 'face' of the deity, as expressed in the Èfìk phrases *ísó Àbàsi* ('face of the sky god') or *ísó Ndèm* ('face of the land or water deity').⁷⁵

In the centre of Creek Town, the Ékpè hall of the Àdàk-Úkò Ward was once presided over by Eyo Honesty II, the protagonist of Rev. Hope Waddell's 1863 diary, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa*.⁷⁶ After arrival in Creek Town in 1846, Waddell built the first Presbyterian church in Nigeria, a stone's throw from this Ékpè hall. At the front of the Àdàk-Úkò Ékpè hall, which

⁷⁵ (Goldie 1862/1964, 137-138; Aye 1991, 58; Urua 2012, 141). Goldie wrote 'isù', while Aye and Urua wrote 'ísó'. This concept was the focus of Professor Thompson's study, *Face of the Gods* (1993.).

⁷⁶ The British name is Creek Town, while in Èfìk this community is called Èsìt èdèk (literally 'inside creek') as well as Óbiókò (literally, Óbiò 'town', ókò 'that': 'that town there').



Figure 32: Stone and canon at the Efe Ékpè Àdàk-Úkò, Creek Town, Ódúkpání L.G.A. I. Miller photo, 2018.

Waddell called "the 'Palaver House', or Town Hall ... were two upright pentagonal stones, 'pillars of remembrance', of basaltic appearance, which had been brought originally from the Camaroon country."⁷⁷ Waddell's report confirms the diffusion of Ékpè from present-day Cameroon to the Èfìks of Calabar.

A volcanic rock in the 'sacred grove' of this contemporary lodge patio is positioned to parallel an iron cannon facing the Calabar River, gifted by a European merchant who traded with locals like Eyo Honesty (figure 32). The three phenomena: church, cannon and ritual stone, represent the colonial process in a nutshell. The Presbyterian Church brought reform to Calabar society, in the 1840s a full-blown slave society, while the British imported arms into the region, now among the most militarized societies on the planet. Meanwhile, locals dug in their heels to maintain their heritage, since Ékpè practice confirms their status as owners of the land. Indeed, this is among the few regions of coastal African forest belt where local lands were not converted to European plantations. Many Ékpè lodges of Calabar seem to have existed on their current sites for hundreds of years, since the establishment of settlements by Èfìk-speaking migrants from Úrúán and Èfùt migrants from what is today Cameroon.

From southern Úrúán, early Èfìk-speaking ancestors migrated down the Cross River to establish Creek Town. Until the second half of the twentieth century, during the capping of the Èfìk paramount ruler, the Obong of Calabar, it was the practice that a

⁷⁷ (Waddell 1863, 250).



Figure 33A: Úrúán elder prays at community stone, Ùsé Urúán, Akwa Ibom State. I. Miller Photo, 2008.



Figure 33B: Kaolin offering for stone, Ùsé Urúán, Akwa Ibom State. I. Miller Photo, 2008.



Figure 34: Community stone at Ùsé Urúán, Akwa Ibom State. I. Miller Photo, 2008.

representative of Urúán royalty was required to commemorate links between the two communities. To learn about Ékpè history, I accompanied a group of Èfìk Ékpè from Calabar to the village of Ùsé Úrúán on the Cross River. As the seat of the deity Àtákpò Inyang Úrúán, or 'Àtákpò the river deity of Úrúán', Ùsé is considered at the heart of Úrúán heritage. During our visit, elders instructed youths to clear brush from the roadside to reveal an upright volcanic rock. To inform the ancestors of this visit, elders then poured libations and marked the stone with kaolin (figures 33A & B). Afterwards, an Èfìk Ékpè titleholder from Creek Town poured libation to announce our presence and intentions to the spirits of the land (figure 34).

More volcanic Ékpè stones are found to the northeast of Calabar in Abiriba, a community of Ìgbò-speakers who were and are great traders. The group of Abiriba merchants who owns Ékpè received it from the Calabar region centuries ago, likely from the Èfìks, with whom they created trade networks extending as far as Douala, Cameroon.⁷⁸ While each of the seventeen villages of Abiriba community has their own Ékpè lodge, during important events, all gather as Abiriba-Umong or 'federal Ékpè'.⁷⁹ During a recent Ékpè funerary event, an Abiriba mask known as Inyàmkpè performed, saluting the volcanic rock in the village plaza in front of the Ékpè hall (figures 35 & 36). The columnar jointed rock indicates a source along the Cameroon border or beyond, where such rock is quarried. Crowning the monument, a white, red and black ski cap indicates that the cement pillar represents an upright Ékpè

78 The group called Abiriba-Bende traded in southwest Nigeria, while the group called Abiriba-Umong traded in the southeast. In Abiriba, *umong* means 'water' or 'maritime', a reference to both the Umon community of the Middle Cross region (from where Abiriba claims to have migrated centuries ago), as well as to the Èfìk term *mmong* 'water'. (Professor Mkpá Agu Mkpá, interview in Abiriba, 2015).

79 Interview with Chinedu Agwara in Abiriba, 2015.



Figure 35: Ékpè mask greets ritual stone. Amogodu community, Abiriba, Abia State. I. Miller photo, 2015.



Figure 36: òbó Ékpè 'house of Ékpè'. Amogodu community, Abiriba, I. Miller Photo, 2014.

stone, while the volcanic rock is its junior companion. Figure 36 shows the òbó Ékpè 'house of Ékpè' of Amogodu community, Abiriba, with volcanic rock at the base of the white pillar. As seen throughout the Cross River region, the hall features a central pillar, in this case adorned with wooden sculptures, accompanied by others peering out from the ground floor windows. A brass bell hangs from the ceiling on the top floor of the hall, while 'Ékpè trees' grow around the stairway to the left of the building. This review of anthropomorphic Ékpè stones demonstrates volcanic rock as a central feature of Ékpè culture throughout the Cross River region, apparently diffused from South West Cameroon where such rocks exist naturally.

3. OKWA COUNCIL STONES

Placed in circle formation as seats for lineage heads who meet in council, Okwa stones are another cultural practice of the Upper to Lower Cross regions of Nigeria. Examples are found from the Bakor region to Okuni, and south to the Kúòs ["Quas"] of Calabar, that is, fully within a region called "Ekoi" on colonial maps.⁸⁰ In Okuni, three Okwa stones are visible in front of the monoliths representing the founding hunter and his wife (figure 11A). Another section of Okuni features a six-foot-long rounded basalt stone, standing in front of the Ékpè hall of Efí group (figures 37A,B,C). Formerly laid down in the centre of the council stone circle, this Okwa monolith has recently been placed upright to protect it from damage.

Okwa stones are mentioned in the historical literature, including a series of folktales collected in the Íkóm region by Elphinstone Dayrell (1869-1917), District

80 An example is the "Cross River Area" map in Northcote (1914, frontispiece). "Ekoi" was an early Èfìk term for Èjáhám-speaking communities in Calabar and its hinterlands.



Figure 37A: Ékpè hall with Okwa monolith and iron staff, Efi Ward, Okuni village, Íkóm L.G.A. I. Miller Photo, 2015.

Commissioner of southern Nigeria.⁸¹ One tale depicts how, “The king and his head wife then arrived and sat on their stones in the middle of the square, all the people saluting them.”⁸²

Another reference comes from the Èkpàràbóng community near Íkóm, known on maps as “Akparabong”, where Philip Allison documented a single, “Small, faintly carved, conical stone, at the old meeting place of the Okwa Society.”⁸³ From Èkpàràbóng, novelist Oriri Ekom Oriri (1956-2020) wrote about the institutions of his grandparents, particularly the Ékpè society and Okwa council.⁸⁴ In Oriri’s novel *The Hunt*, Tita Odo was chosen to be the next paramount ruler:

“Tita Odo was carried shoulder high to *Okwa* shrine near the village square. Located between two tall kola trees was a five feet tall monolith called *Ndinda-Okwa*, which means ‘Coronation Stone’. The monolith was surrounded by eight smaller stones which represented the eight founding families of Ekparabong.

Mineni-Mgbe [Chief of Leopard Society] sat on his family stone. The traditional king maker, *Minen-Okwa*, also sat on his family stone next to *Mineni-Mgbe*. Five of the remaining six stones were occupied by designated family representatives. Tita Odo’s family stone was glaringly vacant. Nna Nenjom, the only woman among the kingmakers, was *Mineni-Bakani*, the chief of women in Ekparabong.

81 Dayrell was stationed in Okuni (1903-1906), after which the headquarters relocated to Íkóm (Fellows 1934, 38). Dayrell’s second book, “Ikóm Folk Stories from Southern Nigeria” has many Òlùlùmò stories with place names from this community. (Maurice Alobi Ojong, personal communication)

82 (Dayrell 1910, 17). In another tale, “When the king and queen arrived all the people stood up and greeted them, and they then sat down on their stones” (Dayrell 1910, 3).

83 (Allison 1968a, 43).

84 Oriri discusses the meaning of the community’s name and details of the novel in Miller & Oriri (2018).



Figure 37B: Maurice Alobi Ojong stands at Okwa monolith, Efi Ward, Okuni village, Íkóm L.G.A. I. Miller Photo, 2015.



Figure 37C: View of the Okwa monolith with circle of stones, Efi Ward, Okuni village, Íkóm L.G.A. I. Miller Photo, 2015.

Now in her seventies, she sat next to *Minen-Okwa*. Fresh fronds of the oil palm tree dangled from branches of the kola trees. More fronds covered the ground in front of the monolith. Everyone at Okwa shrine was solemn.”⁸⁵

Oriri’s narrative describes crowning a paramount ruler through several rites, with Okwa stones in the concluding stage:

“As the people watched in rapt exhilaration, *Minen Emang’s* [the Paramount Ruler’s] retinue continued past the centre of the square towards Okwa shrine. When they entered the shrine, the wooden gong reported the proceedings throughout the eight communities of Ekparabong.

Simultaneously, the [mystic] leopard started roaring continuously in the hall. *Minen-Okwa* adorned *Minen-Emang*, who sat in front of *Ndinda-Okwa* [‘Coronation Stone’], with a red hat. Attached to the hat were eight cowries, an eagle’s feather and strands of a leopard’s whiskers. With a royal spear in his left hand and a sceptre in his right, Tita Odo was complete, the new *Minen Emang* of Ekparabong.”⁸⁶

Oriri’s description of the Okwa stones evokes symbols related to the Bakor monoliths and Ékpè stones of the region: the use of an iron gong, red chief caps, feathers and the leopard. The novel concludes with the total loss of this heritage, now replaced by Christianity. But in reality, Cross River heritage continues in diminished

85 (Oriri 2010, 24-25).

86 (Oriri 2010, 29-30).

forms, while local expressions of Christianity have not fully replaced the royal traditions of the region. The uneasy, suspicious relationship between the two is expressed by heritage specialists attempting to continue lineage traditions as owners of the land, while church specialists try to obliterate royal lineage practices in an elusive quest for ‘modernity’, interpreted as literacy and white-collar jobs. The result is a class struggle between the fishing and farming communities on the one hand, and Church-educated government administrators on the other.

In the decade of 1960, historian Rosemary Harris referred to Okwa councils in the past of Íkóm urban: “law and order appears to have been maintained primarily by age-sets, which disciplined their own members . . . especially Ekpe and Okwa, in which wealthy men were dominant.”⁸⁷ Historian Ojong Echum Tangban documented that in the past, Éjàghám-speaking communities used three royal institutions, Mgbè (Ékpè), Ntúfàm (Village Head & Chiefs) and Okwa (council), to coordinate peace and order.⁸⁸ He wrote: “Mgbe society was responsible for enforcing legislations and verdicts passed by Ntufam and his council and Okwa court, respectively.”⁸⁹

The most detailed narratives about Okwa stones were presented in Okuni (Òlùlùmò), where ‘Ntúfàm’ Maurice Alobi Ojong reported that the Okwa council stones came through migration. From a royal family, Ojong presents his credentials to speak:

“I am from the Ojong Ebuka lineage in Efi group of Òlùlùmò. I am an offspring of a royal family, because my great-grandfather was an Okim Okwa (‘chief of the judgment stones’). To substantiate this, in Òlùlùmò land today, one can never pour libation without mentioning Ojong Ebuka. I am the eldest son of my late father, who was the Chief of Efi.⁹⁰

When our ancestors left Onughi and settled at Otumorofa, elderly community leaders, each from a royal family, had a stone in the playground. Each would sit on his stone, forming a circle, and whoever was to be tried was brought to them, so the Okwa stones became ‘judgment stones’. When they left Otumorofa [for our present location] they couldn’t leave those stones behind. How they were able to carry those stones from that distance to this place remains a mystery, because some were the size of the one still standing next to the Mgbè hall of Efi community.” (Figures 37A,B,C)

The migration story of carrying huge stones may not be verifiable, but recall that Bakor monoliths were transported from a river bank many kilometres away to their present locations.⁹¹ In any case, ‘Ntúfàm’ Ojong’s narrative confirms the

87 (Harris 1972, 123).

88 “The institutions included Otufam (chieftaincy), Okwa (judiciary) and Mgbe (executive).” (Tangban 2008: 63). Historian Sandy Onor also wrote about the Okwa judiciary (1994: 98-101).

89 (Tangban 2008: 73).

90 Maurice A. Ojong reported: “I refuse to take that title because of the proliferation of chieftaincy titles in our community, meaning that these titles have become devalued.”

91 The story of an important stone carried during migration was also told in the Akparabong clan, where

Okwa stones as local heritage. He continues:

“The Okwa stones are a symbol of autonomy for each community, because it would be unfair for one community to come and judge somebody from another, except such a judgment is all-embracing for all four communities. For example, if a sacrilege had occurred in Òlùlùmò land, all the Òlùlùmò communities will come together to render that judgment. If someone committed an offence like adultery, a seditious act, or killed somebody accidentally, they would be judged in Òlùlùmò by Okwa, ‘the council of chiefs.’”⁹²

The judgement stones were a warning to potential criminals. But in 1900, when British colonial forces reached Okuni they destroyed these symbols of autonomy. ‘Ntúfàm’ Ojong continues: “Unfortunately, British colonists intentionally shattered many Okwa stones when they bombed them in the early twentieth century, thinking that in this way they would destroy our leadership.” Local historian James Okongor wrote, “when the British Imperial forces captured Olulumo in 1904, they claimed that the Okwa Stones were destroyed.”⁹³ A colonial report by L. E. H. Fellows stated: “The first contact with [British] Government in these parts was in 1900. The area was visited by an Officer and troops who stopped at Okuni and destroyed the Okwa stones.”⁹⁴ The destruction of Okwa councils was followed by the imposition of a “Warrant Chief” who followed instructions of the British administration, while “the Executive power, which had been vested in the Okwa Society, was destroyed and its place taken up by the Native Court.”⁹⁵ Even so, in 1934 Fellows recognized pushback from the locals: “the people have recently been taking an interest in re-organisation and are starting to re-appoint the various [Okwa] officials.”⁹⁶ In 2018, ‘Ntúfàm’ Ojong reported that Okwa stones and other heritage survived only to suffer during the Biafra or Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970):

“Our cultural heritage really suffered damage as a result of the Civil War. But not for the love of God, there wouldn’t have even been Mgbè in Òlùlùmò today. The reason is that those who were carting away property were afraid of entering the

“a carved stone in the square called Ekpoti ... was brought from the first dwelling place The stone is carried from site to site from the place of first migration to here.” (Nicklin field notes, March 1978 in Balep village). Thanks to Jill Salmons.

92 Maurice A. Ojong, interview in Òlùlùmò, January 26, 2015.

93 Okongor (1982), citing this colonial report: NAE OGPROF 7/1/1 (File Ref. EE125/11), “Ikom District Annual Report for the year 1910” by Mr. Haig.

94 (Fellows 1934, 13). Thanks to Ute Röschenhaler, who shared this report with the author.

95 (Fellows 1934, 22-23).

96 (Fellows 1934, 23). Röschenhaler cited Fellows (2011: 74 note 23). Röschenhaler uncritically followed the report by Fellows (1934), which claimed that Okwa was an Arochukwu institution used for the slave trade, and diffused from there into Okuni and Íkóm. Colonial reports must be considered suspect till proven accurate, because British agents sought excuses to bombard the region into submission. Meanwhile, Okuni historian James Okongor reported Okwa councils as part of their centuries-old judicial system: “The basis of the ancient political and judicial system was the Okwa Society. The members were primarily responsible for all political and judicial activities. (Okongor 1982, 43). Okwa councils of Éjàghám-speakers are distinct from the Ùkwà warrior society of the Èfìks and Ibibios. In Ibibio, “ùkùà, *n.* sword-fighting; a dance depicting sword-fighting; the society which organizes the dance” (Urua et al. 2012, 307).



Fig. 38: Monument to an Okwa stone initiate, Etayip square, Íkóm urban, Íkóm L.G.A., Cross River State. I. Miller Photo, 2010.

Ékpè halls; that was what saved Mgbè. Every other property that has to do with our cultural heritage was moved or destroyed.”⁹⁷

In response, several community chiefs recently organized an Òlùlùmò Day to showcase their heritage. This idea was partly inspired by the efforts of Governor Donald Duke (1999-2007), whose administration promoted heritage tourism in Cross River State in the early twenty-first century. A professional journalist and chief from Okuni, Okim N.O. Akpet, recounts their activities:

“During Òlùlùmò Day we demonstrated how the chiefs dressed in traditional wrappers in those days, when they hung cloth over their shoulders and carried long staffs as they were moving. Each Chief would bring his own stool to the square. There used to be Okwa stones kept in the square that each chief sat upon to represent the various families, but all those artefacts have disappeared. During the Biafra-Nigeria war, there was a calculated attempt to steal all the artefacts and many of them were carried away, so we reverted to the traditional carved stools carried by a chief or their servants to the square, where libation

⁹⁷ Interview with Maurice A. Ojong in Òlùlùmò, December 6, 2018.

was poured before any discussion began.⁹⁸ Libation was poured by the Head Chief, who would invite all the ancestors, especially those of note, because our people believed that those ancestors, even though of late, were still alive in the spiritual world and were guiding the affairs of the living.”⁹⁹

Across the river from Okuni, Okwa stones no longer exist in Íkóm urban. The last paramount ruler invested at the Okwa monolith site in Íkóm urban is honoured with a cement statue in front of an Ékpè hall, as reported by local elder Mr. Columbus O. Agbor in 2012 (figure 38):

“The statue at Etayip Square memorializes H.H. Chief Emmanuel Nkang Abang, Okim Okwa II, of Íkóm.¹⁰⁰ He was crowned in 1956 as the only Okim Okwa of Íkóm. Since his death in 1963, nobody has come to fill this position. Okim ‘chief’; Okwa ‘the shrine where Íkóm people gather to crown their chief’. A non-indigene cannot enter this place, nor can a slave. This statue was made by the family of the chief.”

A colonial report documents that in 1915, the British appointed ‘Okim Okwa’ Nkang as Warrant Chief of Íkóm, likely the father of the memorialized ‘Okim Okwa II’.¹⁰¹ A marble slab below the statue reports that ‘Okim Okwa II’ “served in the postal and telegraph department [of] the United African Company and John Holt” and was “a member of the Eastern House of Chiefs.” As Warrant Chief, and therefore not a traditionalist, Nkang Abang is remembered through a cement statue that no one pours libation to.

But downriver from Íkóm urban, a rural community that Allison identified as the ‘Nkum tribe’ is situated far off the main road, where they continue a vibrant practice of ritual stones.

Not Éjaghám-speaking, Òwòm is one of five villages in the Nkum Iyala group. During my visit, palm wine libation was poured by Paramount Ruler H.R.H. Ogaba Joseph Okojo, who then instructed the monolith custodian to prepare the ancestral shrine. After placing a chief’s cap on the monolith, the custodian used two sticks to beat the wooden gong to inform the ancestors of the peaceful intentions of our visit (figure 13). He then led us up the hill to the temple of a protective deity. The temple is at upper left in figure 39A. On the temple porch was a circle of stones where chiefs sit to deliberate (figure 39B). While Éjaghám-speakers call these ‘okwa’ stones, the Nkum Iyala community has their own name for them, indicating a regional, not tribal, phenomenon.

To the south of Íkóm urban in the high forest, the Éjaghám-speaking community of Etara, in Southern Etung L.G.A., also used Okwa stones. ‘Ntúfàm’ Asam Egbe, the Íyámbà (chairman) of the Mgbè institution of Etara, reported:

⁹⁸ A photograph of two titled elders “with their stool-carriers” is seen in Forde (1964, frontispiece).

⁹⁹ Interview with Okim Nyambi Obaji Akpet, February 8, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ In 1934, a list of five “Okim Okwa of Ikom”, identified Nkang as the current Village Head. (Fellows 1934, 8). In 1915, Nkang, whose title was Okim Okwa, was appointed the Warrant Chief of Íkóm (Fellows 1934, 39).

¹⁰¹ (Fellows 1934, 39).



Fig. 39A: Monolith shrine and deity temple in Owòm village in Nkum Iyala, Íkóm L.G.A., Cross River State. I. Miller Photo, 2016.



Figure 39B: Circle of council stones at the patio of the community temple. Owom, Íkóm L.G.A., I. Miller photo, 2016.

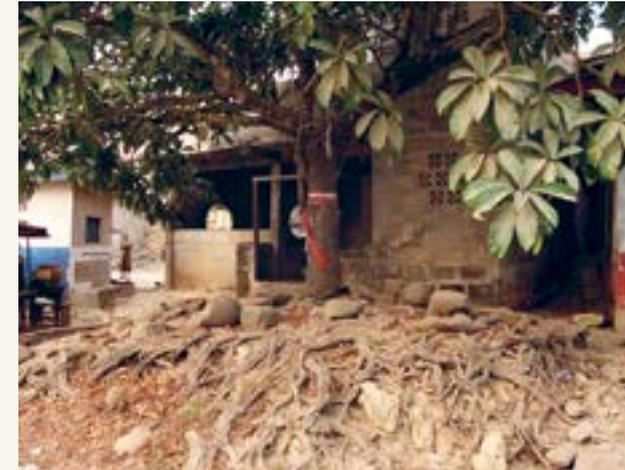


Figure 40: Okwa council stones in Ediba community. Abi L.G.A., Cross River State. I. Miller photo, 2010.



Figure 41: Ọ̀jòr community Ékpè hall, with a statue for a past leader who brought peace to the community (right), and the remnants of Okwa council stones (bottom). 2015.

“In Etara, the Okwa stones were laid in the palace of an Ntúfàm who was crowned there. The Ntúfàm’s palace used to have Okwa stones, staffs, and gongs. Before entering, a visitor was obliged to place their hands upon a stone at the entrance and greet the Ntúfàm. Upon entering, the visitor would clean their hands before the Ntúfàm, who would give them a blessing with his breath, because an Ntúfàm’s breath is considered to have protective power. But today the pastors are discriminating against that, saying when you offer your hands for Ntúfàm to give you a blessing, he is giving you a curse, which is totally false. Eventually, some church members sent a bulldozer to clear off all the sacred stones from the shrines in our centre square. These sacred stones belonged to the shrines of our societies called Okwa, Ikprampet, Obasinjom, Ekpri Okpa and Ebirambi with their deities.”¹⁰²

Such attacks against material heritage are illegal, according to the Federal acts that established the National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria, as well as Decrees 77 & 79, which later became Antiquity Laws against the buying, selling or the destruction of cultural properties. To inform local traditionalists about these laws, the author and Dr. Abu Edet published a report titled “Etara Mgbè Burial: age-old legacies attacked by churches”.¹⁰³

To the south in the Middle Cross region of Abi L.G.A., Ediba has a tradition of council stones, in spite of the bombardment of this community by British boats in 1895 and again in 1896.¹⁰⁴ Placed in circle formation, the council stones of Ediba are in active use, surrounding a tree symbolic of the community foundation

(Figure 40). In the same L.G.A., the nearby Igbo-Imabana community has a tradition of council stones, as do neighbouring Yakurr communities.¹⁰⁵

South of Yakurr, the historically related Ọ̀jòr community tenaciously maintains a heritage of Ékpè and Okwa council stones. The patio of the Ọ̀jòr Ékpè hall features a cement statue to honour a beloved chief who maintained peace in this community, as well as four Okwa stones, the remnants of a traditional council circle (figure 41).¹⁰⁶

Among the Kùò-Éjaghám communities of Calabar Municipality, the capping of the Ntòè or paramount ruler culminates as he is seated upon a coronation stone, which locals claim is a tradition that parallels the stone of Scone used for the coronation of Scottish monarchs. In a 1975 coronation, the Ntòè sits upon a stone covered with a leopard skin (or a civet cat skin representing a leopard), while his feet rest upon another stone covered in duiker skin (figure 42).

Throughout the Cross River region, a title can become a family name, for example, Mgbè or Okwa. In Kùò-Éjaghám communities, the Oqua royal family has produced several Ntòès. In 1938, Ika Ika Oqua II became the Ntòè of Big Qua Town, as documented by historian Chief E. Imona; a photograph from this occasion shows Oqua II seated upon the Coronation Stone with feet upon leopard skin.¹⁰⁷ In this process, delegates from Mba Akang of the Mamfe District of Cameroon participated to represent the point of migration of Kùò-Éjaghám people centuries ago.

The Okwa council stones of Kùò-Éjaghám communities are defunct. But a monolith is represented in the Big Qua Town community space by a pillar crowned with the sculpture of a human head (figures 43 A & B), as Dr. Abu Edet reports:

102 ‘Ntúfàm l’yambà’ Asam Egbe, interview with the author, 2015. For details on Ikprampet, Obasinjom, Ekpri Okpa, Ebirambi, cf. Röschenhaler (2011, 93, 194-95, 213, 304-305).

103 <http://www.crossriverheritageafricanandiaspora.com/2015/07/etara-mgbe-burial-age-old-legacies.html>

104 (Nair 1972, 243-244).

105 See figure Xb in Daryll Forde *Yakö Studies* (1964), between pages 112-13.

106 Also present in front of this Ékpè hall is a high pole with a crucifix on top, to signify that Christ is above all else in the community; a similar arrangement is seen in front of the Ékpè hall of nearby Ụ̀yàngà; these signs show the use of imported monotheism to abolish collective council practices.

107 (Imona 1957).



Figure 42: Coronation of the Ntòè, Big Qua Town, 1975. Archives of Chief Ekong Edim Imona, used with permission.



Figures 43 A & B: Okwa monolith, Big Qua plaza, I. Miller photo, 2010.

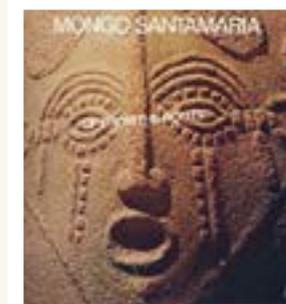


Figure 44A: Bakor Monolith on the LP cover of "Up from the Roots", by Cuban percussionist Mongo Santamaría, 1972.

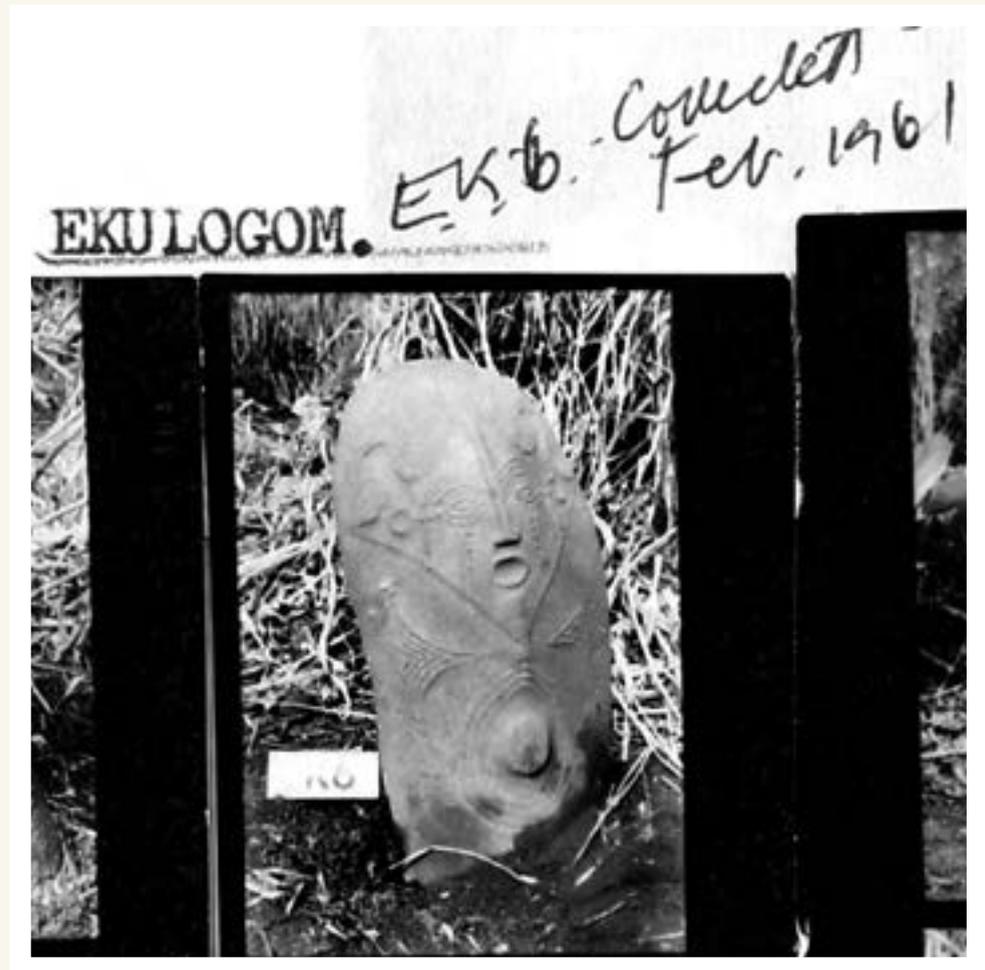


Figure 44B: Monolith as documented by Allison at the Ekulogom site, 1961. Bodleian Library.

“The Ukwa (Okwa in Éjàghám) shrine of the Big Qua community where Qua civilization traces its origins, became a focal point. There were found many Ukwa stones surrounding a symbolic pole about 20 feet tall crowned by a symbolic human head, as well as terracotta ritual objects, known for their role in the politics and judicial matters of the community. Similarly, Otung Ukwa sites were identified in other Éjàghám communities. It was at such sites that the elders transmitted *nsibidi* knowledge.”¹⁰⁸

Throughout the Cross River region, traditional collective practices are generally stronger in rural farming and fishing communities, where federal and state institutions as well as mission schools have had less impact on social and cultural institutions and ideas.

108 (Edet 2017, 315). Rösenthaler published a photo of this pillar (2011 figure 2.7, 72).

4. TRANS-ATLANTIC CROSS RIVER STONE HERITAGE

We have reviewed how the centuries-old carved monoliths of the Bakor region are at the centre of a heritage cultural practice maintained by lineage leadership. Meanwhile, the majority of peoples of the Cross River region exhibit an ambiguous relationship with their local heritage, most notably those formally educated who are self-declared Christians and view this heritage as ‘satanic’.

But this story has another angle: from the 1600-1800s, hundreds of thousands of Cross Riverians were forcibly shipped to the Caribbean for plantation labour, making the ports of Calabar and nearby Cameroon the third most active embarkation region in the entire trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹⁰⁹ In the early 1800s in Havana, Cuba, Cross River people organized themselves to recreate the Ékpè ‘leopard’ society, known

109 (Lovejoy, 2017, 23).

there as the Abakuá society for mutual-aid. Abakuá presence is felt profoundly in Cuban popular music, for example Mongo Santamaría's 1953 recording "Abacua Ecu Sagare" expresses the phrase Ékue Usagaré, meaning "Ékpè from Usagaré"; as discussed above, Usagaré was the source of diffusion for the Ékpè 'leopard' society in Africa. From Havana, Mongo was cognoscente of Calabar heritage in Cuba; his 1972 LP recording "Up from the Roots" includes another Abakuá song, while the cover features a Bakor monolith (figure 44A). Photographed and collected by Philip Allison in February 1961 at the Ekulogom monolith site (figure 44B), this monolith was brought to the National Museum, Lagos, where it remains on display.¹¹⁰ Mongo's 1972 recording brings the impact of Cross River cultural stones to a full circle: the ritual stones that signify 'stability' and 'eternity' in the Cross River region have been maintained across time and space as an anchor for a trans-Atlantic identity.

Ritual stones of the Cross River region are central to Cuban Abakuá mythology, as documented by Lydia Cabrera in "The Sacred Language of the Abakuá." As discussed above, in the Èfik and Ìbìbìò languages of the Lower Cross region, stone is *ítíát*. In Cuba, this term entered Abakuá vocabulary, as in the ritual phrase: "Itia Oru ngomo Sese Eribó: The stone upon which the Sese Eribó [drum] was marked with chalk came from Oru territory."¹¹¹ The Abakuá society founders also used this term expansively, to identify urban spaces they inhabited, for example, they renamed Havana as 'Itia Núnkue', Matanzas as 'Itia Fondogá', and Cárdenas as 'Itia Kaníma Sené'.¹¹² In Calabar and its hinterlands, we have seen that possession of an Ékpè stone or *ítíát* Ékpè is a proclamation of the community's autonomy in matters pertaining to collective land. The enslaved did not carry stones from Calabar to Cuba, but Abakuá initiates expressed the idea of an *ítíát* Ékpè 'stone' to identify their group as an extension of a Calabar homeland.¹¹³

If enslaved people rarely owned property in Cuba, Cross River forced migrants there recreated the idea of a communal 'sacred forest' to the best of their ability. Through mutual-aid, several early Abakuá lodges owned property with a meeting hall and patio that effectively recreate the 'sacred groves' of Calabar Ékpè lodges. The earliest known example is in the town of Guanabacoa, where the lodge Erón Ntáti secured a collective property in the 1890s, donated by a member soon after their foundation in 1888.¹¹⁴ Because many Abakuá members worked along the wharves of Havana's bay as stevedores, they accumulated wealth used to benefit their collective. The Erón Ntáti lodge continues to function today on the same property, with trees and plants symbolic of the 'sacred groves' of Calabar (figures 45A,B,C).

110 Thanks to Ferdinand Saumarez Smith (2020 personal communication). A photograph of this monolith appeared in *Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art*, by Ekpo Eyo (1977/1990). The author photographed the same monolith in the National Museum, Lagos, 2009.

111 (Cabrera 2020, 50). Itia 'stone'; Oru 'place name'; ngomo 'chalk'; sese Eribó 'a drum'.

112 (Miller 2020a, 385).

113 Cf. "itia 'land'" in Manfredi (2020, 377).

114 (Miller 2009, 187; Castillo Baumí 2020 personal communication)

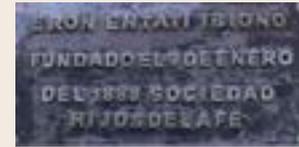


Figure 45C: Erón Ntáti lodge plaque: "Eron Entati Ibiono, founded January 9, 1888. Sons of Faith Society". Guanabacoa, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2020.



Figure 45A: Erón Ntáti lodge grounds, Guanabacoa, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2020.



Figure 45B: Erón Ntáti lodge, Guanabacoa, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2007.



Figure 46: Orú Abakuá lodge hall with patio and trees, Guanabacoa, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2017.



Figure 47: Orú Bibí lodge with patio and trees, Guanabacoa, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2020.

Several other lodges in Guanabacoa own collective property, like Orú Abakuá, established in 1877, as well as Orú Bibí, established in 1935 (figures 46 & 47).¹¹⁵ On the other side of Havana, the Ekerewá Momí lodge, established in 1863, owns property in Los Pocitos neighbourhood with a temple and 'sacred grove', as do several other lodges (figure 48 A,B,C).¹¹⁶ The process of recreating Calabar-style 'sacred groves' continues in the present, for example the India Abakuá lodge of Regla, founded in 1961, maintains its property in Regla (figure 49).¹¹⁷

115 (Miller 2009, 186-187).

116 (Miller 2009, 97).

117 (Miller 2020b).



Figure 48A: Ekerewá Momí lodge with patio and trees. Los Pocitos, Havana, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2003.



Figure 48B: Ekerewá Momí lodge, Los Pocitos, Havana, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2017.



Figure 48C: Ekerewá Momí meeting, Los Pocitos, Havana, Cuba. Miguel-Ángel Plasencia-Romero archives, 1990s.

Following Abakuá myths of ritual stones in Usagaré, several Cuban lodges were named after stones in Africa. In the 1840s in Havana, the lodge Orú Apapá akondomína méfe was established. The phrase Akondomína méfe means, “the stone altar of the Orú” (Orú being a community near Calabar).¹¹⁸ In 1840, the Eforisún Efo lodge was founded to evoke “Eforinsún: ‘Tribe that possessed a stone considered to be precious and worshiped as a Fundamento [ritual object].’”¹¹⁹ Cabrera further documented: “Isún: Stone. In the rivers of Eforisún land [i.e., ‘Usagaré’] there are some highly polished stones. ‘In memory of that precious stone of Eforisún, in Havana, members of the Eforí Ankomo lodge created a lodge called Isún Efor.’”¹²⁰ In Èfìk, ‘isun’ (i.e. *ísó*) is face, thus the stone functions as a ‘face’ of the ancestors, where one may communicate with them.¹²¹ These Cuban narratives from the 1800s contribute a historical perspective to the ritual monoliths of the Cross River region.¹²² Established in 1938, the lodge Isún Efo owns property in Los Pocitos, with a temple, patio and sacred grove (figure 50).¹²³

This brief review of Cuban Abakuá references to ritual stones highlights public aspects of a vast oral tradition brought from the Cross River region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As founders of a neo-African institution that has since expanded to become part of the national identity, Cross Riverians became pioneers of Caribbean communities, based upon the myths of ritual foundation stones in Africa.

118 (Miller 2009, 64; Miller 2020, 398).

119 (Miller 2009, 60; Cabrera 2020, 112).

120 (Cabrera 2020, 176).

121 (Manfredi 2020, 377).

122 Cuban Abakuá narratives have been documented in private manuscripts from the 1800s (cf. Miller 2017).

123 (Miller 2020, 396).



Figure 50: Isún Efo lodge and patio. Los Pocitos, Havana, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2019.



Figure 49: India Abakuá lodge, with patio and trees. Regla, Cuba. I. Miller photo, 2020.

CONCLUSIONS

Údúṅ ómù, údúṅ ómù, údúṅ ómù; èèṅòṅ òṅwì ònyí?

‘This country, this country, this country; is it not someone who owns it?’

Ékpè song (Ọrọ̀n language)¹²⁴

Professor Eskor Toyo, from a royal lineage in Ọrọ̀n, Akwa Ibom State, identified this song as emblematic of the struggle of his ancestors to defend their communal land in the face of European invasion. He stated:

“I call this song the ‘Ékpè anthem’, because after all the chiefs had come to decide something, the authority of the community was invoked. Those people who owned the community were members of Ékpè, which was the authority of the community. In the past in this region, all free men, that is non-slaves, owned the country. And to plant the authority as co-owner of the country, your father admitted you into Ékpè.”¹²⁵

By extension, the consecrated stones of Ékpè society represent the point of communication between the initiated living representatives of a lineage, the land under their jurisdiction, and their communion with the lineage ancestors, who support the efforts of the living to maintain their land and heritage. This relationship was noted by museum curator Violeta Ekpo, a Cross River cultural specialist who identified carved stone and wood representations of ancestors as a regional phenomenon:

“Another common denominator of cultural unity has been the strong veneration of ancestors, expressed in the artistic reproduction of their images in stone (the Akwanshi in the Íkóm area) or wood (like Oron Ekpu), as well as other forms of ancestral memorials (memorial sheds, shrines, etc.) Ancestral monoliths have been found on abandoned sites on the outskirts of villages in an area of over 300 square miles, among the Nta, Nselle, Nde, Abayom, Akajuk, etc. of Íkóm local government area, and today appear in Ogoja and Obubra areas as well.”¹²⁶

The carved monoliths of the Bakor region are the renowned symbols of a much larger phenomenon extending throughout the Cross River region, where initiated members of lineages that founded communities continue to control communal land as a means of defending their autonomy. Remarkably, the collective ability of enslaved people from the Cross River region who were forcibly migrated to Cuba, where they recreated their systems of governance in the Ékpè ‘leopard’ society,

resulted in a consciousness of ritual stones as a foundation of their heritage. This trans-Atlantic extension of West African heritage is evident today in Cuban lodges that maintain properties that recreate the ‘sacred groves’ of royal lineages of the Cross River region. Our research into the Bakor monoliths has enabled an expansive view of a centuries-old practice of community building based upon volcanic stones as representative of the stability and endurance of lineage solidarity. Despite the myriad obstacles presented by colonial administrations and modern institutions, the carved monoliths of Bakor and the culturally treated stones of the Ékpè society and other initiation groups remain as testaments to a perduring historical narrative, one that heralds lineage elders as responsible for the autonomy of their group into the future.

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124 (Miller & Òkón 2020, 96).

125 (Toyo 2011, personal communication)

126 (Ekpo 1990, 106).

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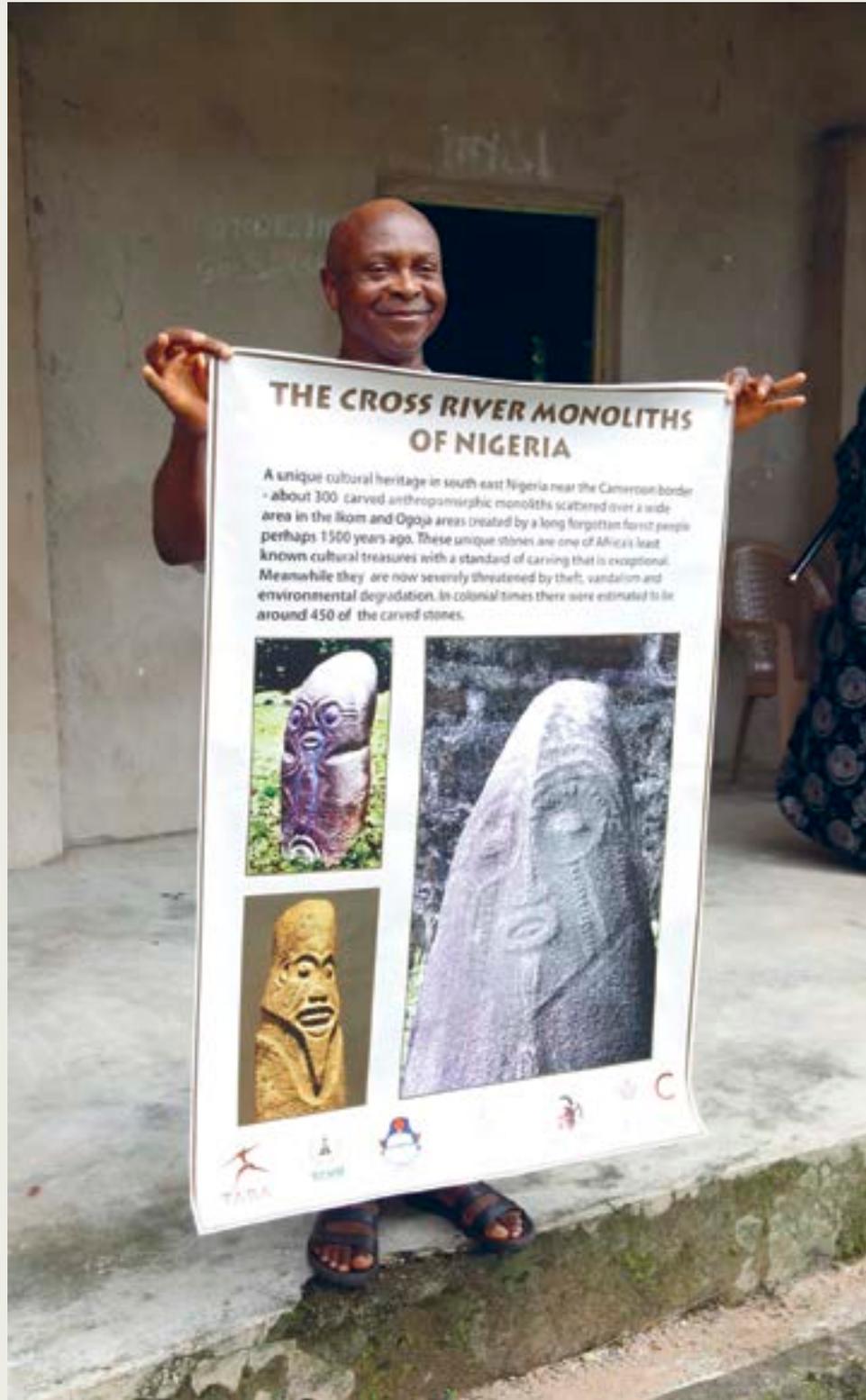


Figure 1: Abu Solomon Edet at Ntitogo. D. Coulson, 2016.

ABU SOLOMON EDET: A LIFE OF PRESERVATION

Interview by IVOR MILLER

Ivor Miller (IM): Please, when were you born, and what is your family background?

Abu Edet (AE): I was born in Ikpai Qua town in Calabar, into the family of Magistrate Solomon Edet and Ayi Solomon Edet. As a child, I had primary education at Big Qua Presbyterian school, and my secondary education at West African People's Institute also in Calabar.

The father of my paternal grandmother was a Scottish missionary. He settled in Owerri, Imo State, and then moved to Calabar where he served as a missionary. He was named Graham, and to keep that bond I named my third son Graham. We believe that it is very prestigious for one to have families from different places. Your parents, and grandparents, like my maternal grandmother came from Bayangi, in Mamfe, Cameroon, with a great culture. So, I'm a great man-o! (laughs)

My ancestors, both patrilineal and matrilineal are from the Qua ethnic group, that among ourselves is known as Akin, and our oral histories narrate that our first settlement was in Calabar, lower Cross River region, when we migrated from Mbakang (in Cameroon). The Qua river was the conduit where most of this movement took place, and we settled down with all the other Qua clans that presently constitute eighteen Qua clans. The pioneering groups in this migration were the Kasuk Qua, the Big Qua, and the Akim Qua Clans, while the rest followed. The name Qua is used to describe the Akin people. This name may have been derived from a foreign explorer and/or colonial map maker who named the Qua River.

Today in Qua communities, the Ndidem is the overall leader of all the Qua clans in Calabar. And we are particularly happy because this brings unity. And our common heritage is Mgbè [Ekpé]. As you are always telling me, Ivor: in Calabar Mgbè is god's gift, because it is a common heritage among the three ethnic groups in Calabar. That sounds interesting because among these ethnic groups – Èfik, Èfût, and the Qua people who co-exist in Calabar, Mgbè has really maintained peace. This is evident when we look at the Niger Delta, where there is no Mgbè culture, and the groups are frequently in conflict with each other; among them are the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Isoko and Urhobo, who have ethnic unrest, because they don't have the common institution that we have in Calabar for peace building and conflict resolution. All along Calabar has been very peaceful, and we settled here without violence against each other, despite poverty and hardship. We are very proud to come from the lower Cross River region and to have Mgbè as a common heritage. The greatest symbol is that during Mgbè lodge meetings we all as members drink Mgbè wine from one cup, a sign of unity and obligation to Mgbè fraternity, a sign that nobody intends to harm those in the Mgbè circle. Mgbè fraternity is a club for peace building and conflict resolution throughout the Cross River region and into the Cameroons where the Mgbè fraternity exists. Indeed, Mgbè is god's gift to the Cross Riverian.

IM: How does the Qua heritage of Calabar negotiate with Christianity, how do you manage both?

AE: We manage both, because when we were here enjoying our traditional religion, the colonial masters came, and the Qua people gave them land on the green hill, known as Government Hill, for settlement; it's all Qua land. So, they settled there and interacted with us, though for the sake

of indirect colonial rule, they selected an Èfík man as a ‘treaty King’ of Calabar, meaning he was the first person the colonial people would contact along Calabar River. Religion is a matter of faith, and where your faith lies, it works. We now believe in Christianity, established on the foundation of Jesus Christ being the son of God, and we accept Jesus Christ. We have heard of all the wonderful miracles performed by Him, and we have experienced these in our lives. But that has affected our culture because we couldn’t continue with some of the original culture that we were practicing. Because we totally believe in Christ, we were able to abandon the negative traditions like applying or inviting traditional spiritual issues into our lives, and so those aspects of our cultural traditions that were negative, we abandoned them. For example, Mgbè, enjoys its relationship with Nnim, but as it is, everybody is afraid of Nnim, because Nnim is a water spirit cult that is said to do more harm than good. Yet if you believe in it totally, it can do very great and good things, it can bring great good luck. So, people are sometimes confused between Christianity as a foreign religion and Nnim cultural practice. Before, Mgbè was closely associated with Nnim, now many of Qua community members have abandoned Nnim, because they believe it has a harmful practice. But having said that, when we are singing and dancing Mgbè music, we sometimes sing songs related with Nnim for example there is a song ‘*nyong dibo ayen ya dibo aya! . . . Ekpenyong dibo ayen ya dibo aya!*’ The song emphasises that the mythological Ekpenyong – a male water spirit Nnim that esoterically possesses Dibo masquerades during dexterity dance performance. Dibo masquerade is one of most prominent masquerades in Mgbè culture; it is seen as the central authority in all the grades of Mgbè. That is because we believe Mgbè and Nnim have very important roles in both fraternities. But some people don’t like to sing Mgbè songs related to Nnim, because they don’t want to relate with the Nnim water spirit for fear of being possessed by bad Nnim spirits. Today, we’ve lost part of this culture, so we do not practice our culture like it used to be.

IM: When did you become aware of the sacred stones of Qua culture?

AE: The stone culture of our people is part of our heritage that I enjoy researching. Stones are a very important aspect of Qua and Éjàghám culture (the Qua people are a sub-group of Éjàghám). When a settlement is established, the first thing that an Éjàghám community does is to plant a big stone in the ground to signify the tradition of establishing a community. The stone represents the community in war and peace, it becomes the symbol connecting the land, the environment and people, wherever they are established.

I was fortunate to be employed by the then National Department of Antiquity in Nigeria, now Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments. I worked with an ethnographer who was assigned to the Cross River region, southeast Nigeria. We found these interesting stones everywhere, both the ones I would call ‘dead’ ones and the ‘living’ ones. The living ones are those you find in Mgbè (Ékpè) halls, in community centres, and in shrines, representing the different aspects of the community’s daily life including hunters’ stones, fertility stones, farmers’ stones, esoteric club stones, used to identify the different gods recognised by either single families or the entire community. They are living because they are spiritually associated with the day-to-day traditional life of a community. But the Cross River Bakor monoliths, which I think are the ‘dead’ and oldest, carry a lot of engraved ideographic information, like Nsibidì communication, located close to a community to represent their ancestors. Many of our people today do not understand stone culture well. For example, before the war there used to be stones circling Oqua field [in Big Qua Town, Calabar] where elders sat down to

make decisions. Suddenly, most of those stones were stolen. Where are those stones? We can’t find them. Some people say they were broken into pieces and used to build houses immediately after the Nigerian civil war; others say they were stolen. So, I take particular interest in looking for replacement stones for all to cherish and enjoy. Because this is our culture and our identity. The stone is the seal when new settlements are established. When clan heads perform their coronation ceremonies, the stones play great role in establishing allegiance to the new clan heads, together with a prepared calabash that represents the community.

Recently I was consulted by the Kasuk Qua Clan Head to provide him with a stone with several diagonal sides that represents the numbers of royal families in his community; he is meant to sit on the stone during his coronation ceremony as sign of affinity and royalty with his community. Our culture had stones for Nnim, for Mgbè, for family heads, hunters’ group, stones for age sets [or ‘age-grades’]. When you visit a community leader’s house, there is always a stone in front of his palace; one pays obeisance by laying hands on the stone, and as a sign of loyalty and allegiance.

The significant value of stones in our culture developed my interest in the history of stone culture among our people, as well as throughout Nigeria – the megaliths of Nigeria. Wherever early Qua people settled, they used basalt stones particularly as either border demarcations, or for the identification of shrines for farmers, for hunters, for community protection, and more. I feel like I haven’t even started, because there’s an awful lot to worry about. I’m now retiring, to settle down to continue my studies. To develop my office, I acquired one of the huts in the craft centre of the Old Residency National Museum in Calabar, where I will go every day to put my stories down before I die.

IM: Abu, when did you first visit the monolith sites?

AE: I first visited the monolith sites in 1974 with Keith Nicklin, my friend and ‘brother’, a great man indeed. That’s the man I can’t forget because I learned a lot from him, and he supported me in my studies. He was my mentor.

IM: Why did Nicklin take you to see the monoliths?

AE: We saw the monoliths during his usual visits to communities to do his ethnographic studies. We started with ethnographic studies of the Cross River region of the south-east of Nigeria, and because of cultural migration and diffusion with other ethnic groups, he extended his studies into the Cameroons, and also into Igboland and the Niger Delta. For example, as you traverse the Cross River into Ikwo, the stone culture of Bakor seems to be extended there and in other communities in Ebonyi state, which also have monoliths, but not carved so well as our original Bakor monoliths. This requires further study, because it is evident that the Bakor first engraved communication in stones, which extended into fresco paintings among the middle and lower Cross River Region, such as those documented by Amaury Talbot in his 1912 study *In the Shadow of the Bush*. As a result of politics, research studies in the Cross River region have unfortunately not received enough attention, because the Éjàghám people, like all the people of the Cross River region are part of the minorities in Nigeria, where educational opportunities don’t exist as they do among the majority ethnic groups like the Igbo and the Yoruba. The majorities train their people and then conduct research about their people, and this is what we have lacked among the Éjàghám and other Cross River peoples. Now, in the 21st century, we are lamenting the lack of humanities research in the Cross River region.



Figure 3: Statue of Keith Nicklin at Oron Museum. I. Miller, 2010.

IM: How long did you work with Keith Nicklin?

AE: I worked with Keith Nicklin from 1973 to 1978, and thereafter we met again in the United Kingdom in 1981, where the relationship continued. Unfortunately, the man died too soon, so only a part of his research was published. But we continue to read his publications, we refer to them as the principal source of research in the Cross River region.

IM: When did you first meet Chief Akong, ‘Orlando’?

AE: I met Chief Akong in 1974 when Keith and I first visited Alok. He became my childhood friend from then, and we grew up together. We enjoyed studying the monoliths together, and Akong contributed a lot to the studies of these monoliths and their preservation. He enlightened his people about the need to protect these monoliths. Some have been stolen, some are broken, some have been exposed to fire numerous times, and are totally damaged. There is much to worry about regarding their preservation

and conservation, particularly site restoration and reclamation. My PhD work studied the area and recommended that some of those stones should be systematically removed from farming areas and protected in village squares, away from ethnic violence, theft, bush fire and disturbances due to farming activities. Many of the sites have been destroyed and the monoliths completely broken, destroying their historical orientation and context. Farm workers have brought a lot of destruction, and some of these sites are completely ruined. These destroyed sites and their stones could be studied, relocated, and then cement beacon stones used to replace and mark future archaeological survey and excavations. That’s my thinking.

Our contemporary people do not understand the worth and the value of these cultural monuments. They have continued to set fire yearly as a farming method, despite our several visits to land, right from 1974. Some communities are engaged in stealing the monoliths, because government is slow in responding to their problems; some argue that they steal them, sell them, and use the money to establish schools and health centre in their communities. Also, the politicians are not interested in this research, so there is no follow up; every governor that comes in, will want to have his own agenda, and abandon these monoliths and issues regarding preservation and historical studies of cultural properties. So, there is no continuity at all in the lives of Nigerians. Nothing regarding our heritage is taken seriously. I don’t mince words because this is just what is happening.

IM: Tell us how did you meet Nicklin in the first place? Who introduced you?

AE: My uncle was working with the Department of Antiquities, and was posted to drive Nicklin during his ethnographic fieldwork. I was in school, and when we met, I developed interest in what he was doing. And then I got employed in the Department of Antiquities and he said “Come, let’s work together.” I had a very short training on Museum Techniques, at the Jos Museum School for nine



Figure 4: Carved wood sculpture of a Bakor monolith, Oron Museum. K. Nicklin.



Figure 5: Bakor monolith displayed at the Oron Museum. K. Nicklin.

months, and later joined Keith when he was redeveloping the Oron Museum, which was destroyed during the Nigerian civil war, that is how we started. Keith was an anthropologist, a vibrant and brilliant young man, a product of Cambridge University, United Kingdom, who came into Nigeria immediately after the war, and was posted to the war-torn Southeast region to conduct ethnographic research. My decision to conduct research was informed by many years of experience as an ethnographic assistant to Keith Nicklin prior to becoming an archaeologist.

IM: Tell us, what is the value of the Bakor monoliths and other sacred stones for your people?

AE: The monolith circles serve as an enlightenment to their communities; the monoliths portray a harmonious and progressive family and community system among the Bakor people of the upper Cross River Region. The monoliths attracted me due to the absence of adequate knowledge about their functions. Even today, study of the monoliths has hardly advanced beyond the stage of ‘representing ancestors’ or *akwanshi* - meaning “the ancestors in the ground”. Beyond the need for research on the monoliths themselves, they can act as a conduit to rediscover the ancient monolith people and their advanced socio-cultural way of life, in welding harmonious families and communities in the past.

The value of Bakor monoliths is that they represent family heads. A monolith was carved to represent the head of a family and placed in the field with other monoliths. And in some sites like Etinghi Nta, you find other monoliths in and around the bigger one, indicating the other members of the family who constitute that particular family. In this arrangement, I believe that these early peoples were showing some elements of democracy in their actions.

Related archaeological excavation and dating of charcoal and so on indicated that some monoliths were created a thousand five hundred years ago, but I feel those monoliths are older than that.

The monolith circles give very clear indications of how families were formed, came together, were identified, and how family members should love each other, by producing these monoliths, and locating them in and around a particular site where they go and celebrate and appease their dead. Where they go to ask for help and where they go to appreciate our ancestors.

In addition to the devastation in that region as a result of farming and fire, there has also been very serious theft for the international art market through Cameroon. There are also studios in Cameroon where new monoliths are carved to make money with them. So, we have not even started serious studies for the evaluation and valuation of the Cross River monoliths.

It is my belief that we must restore some of these sites. Our previous years of research with Factum and TARA have given us a fair idea of how many monoliths we have in each site. You were there Ivor, my mentor, a good man, you saw me on my way to the Cross River monolith sites and asked, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to the sites I used to study to document fire devastation of the monoliths." You said: "Ah let's go," and out of our excitement, we made a great publication to enlighten and inform the world about these great works by the Éjághám-speaking people. The monoliths are burning, breaking, and disintegrating, and great research is required. Now that we have a fair idea of the number of monolith sites, which are around 30 sites involving around 215 carved monoliths and many more uncarved and smaller fragments, we must now rescue these sites, and make them better placed for heritage tourism.



Figure 6: Abu Solomon Edet and the Bakor monoliths project team at Alok. F. Saumarez Smith, 2016.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BAKOR MONOLITHS

DAVID COULSON

Executive Chairman, Trust for African Rock Art

Figure 1: Monolith at Old Nkrigom. D. Coulson, 2016.

Next pages:

Figure 2: Monolith at Nkrasi II. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 3: Monolith at Nkrasi II. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 4: Monolith at Alok. D. Coulson, 2016.

Figure 5: Monolith at Era. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 6: Monolith at Old Nkrigom. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 7: Monolith at Etinghi Nta. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 8: Monolith at Etinghi Nta. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 9: Monolith at Nna Orokpa. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 10: Monolith at Egunonkor. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 11: Monolith at Ekeleboghor. D. Coulson, 2019.

Figure 12: Monolith at Old Nkrigom. D. Coulson, 2016.

Figure 13: Monolith at Old Nkrigom. D. Coulson, 2016.

Figure 14: Monolith at Agba. D. Coulson, 2016.

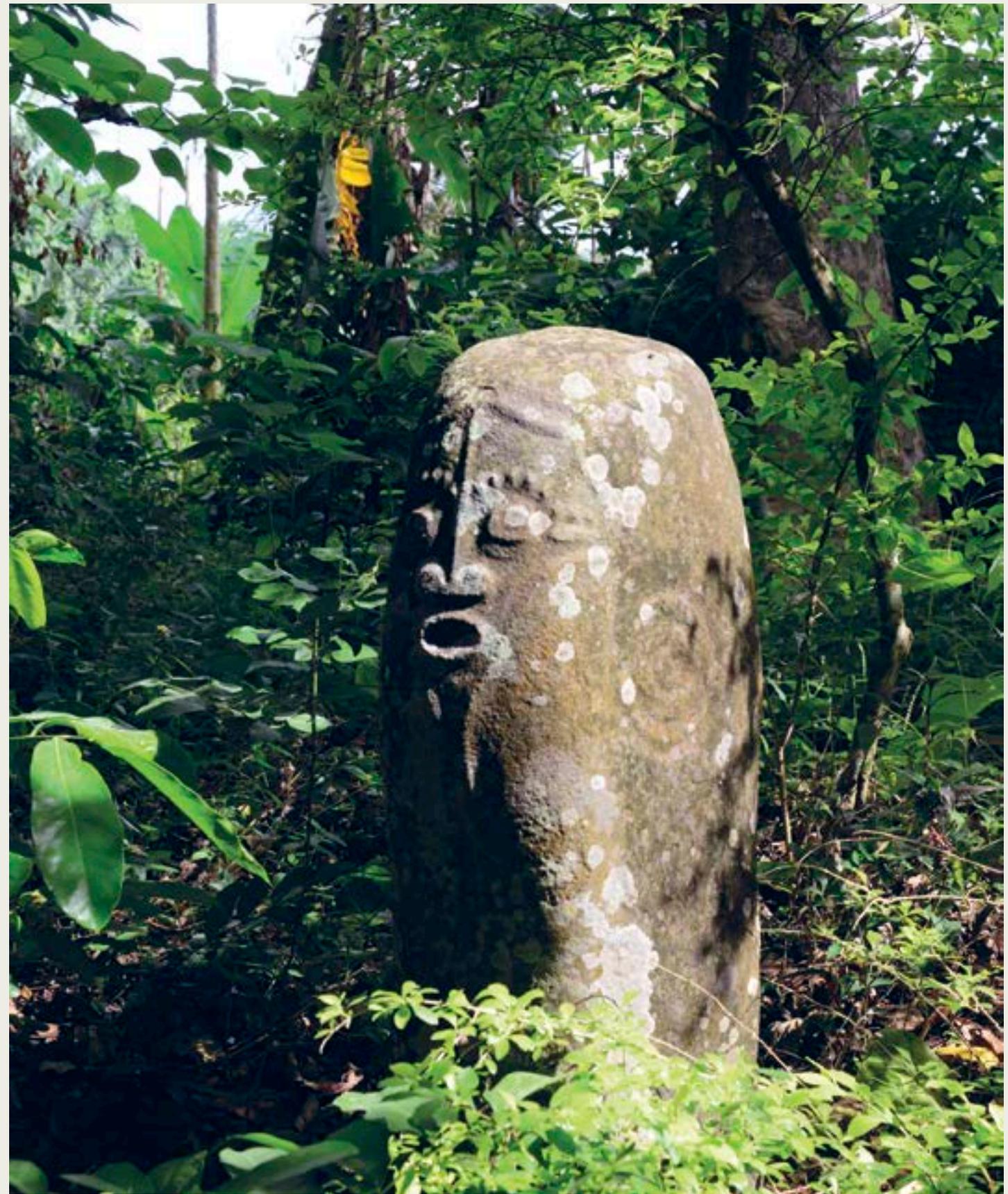
Figure 15: Monolith at Agba. D. Coulson, 2016.

Figure 16: Monolith at Agba. D. Coulson, 2016.

Figure 17: Monolith at Old Nkrigom. D. Coulson, 2016.

In 2015, the Trust for African Rock Art (TARA), the organisation which I founded in the early 1990s, held a Rock Art Conservation Conference in Morocco where one of the speakers was Dr Abu Solomon Edet of the University of Calabar in Nigeria's Cross River State. In delivering his paper, Dr Edet spoke eloquently about the so-called Cross River/Ikom Monoliths, located in the Bakor forest north of Ikom, and of his struggle to record and protect them. Many of these anthropomorphic monoliths had disappeared, apparently during the Biafran Civil War, and even since then others had found their way into the hands of international collectors. On the strength of Abu's talk one of the sponsors of the conference, the Prince Claus Fund of Amsterdam (PCF), agreed to support a project on these monoliths which I personally had been intrigued by for many years.

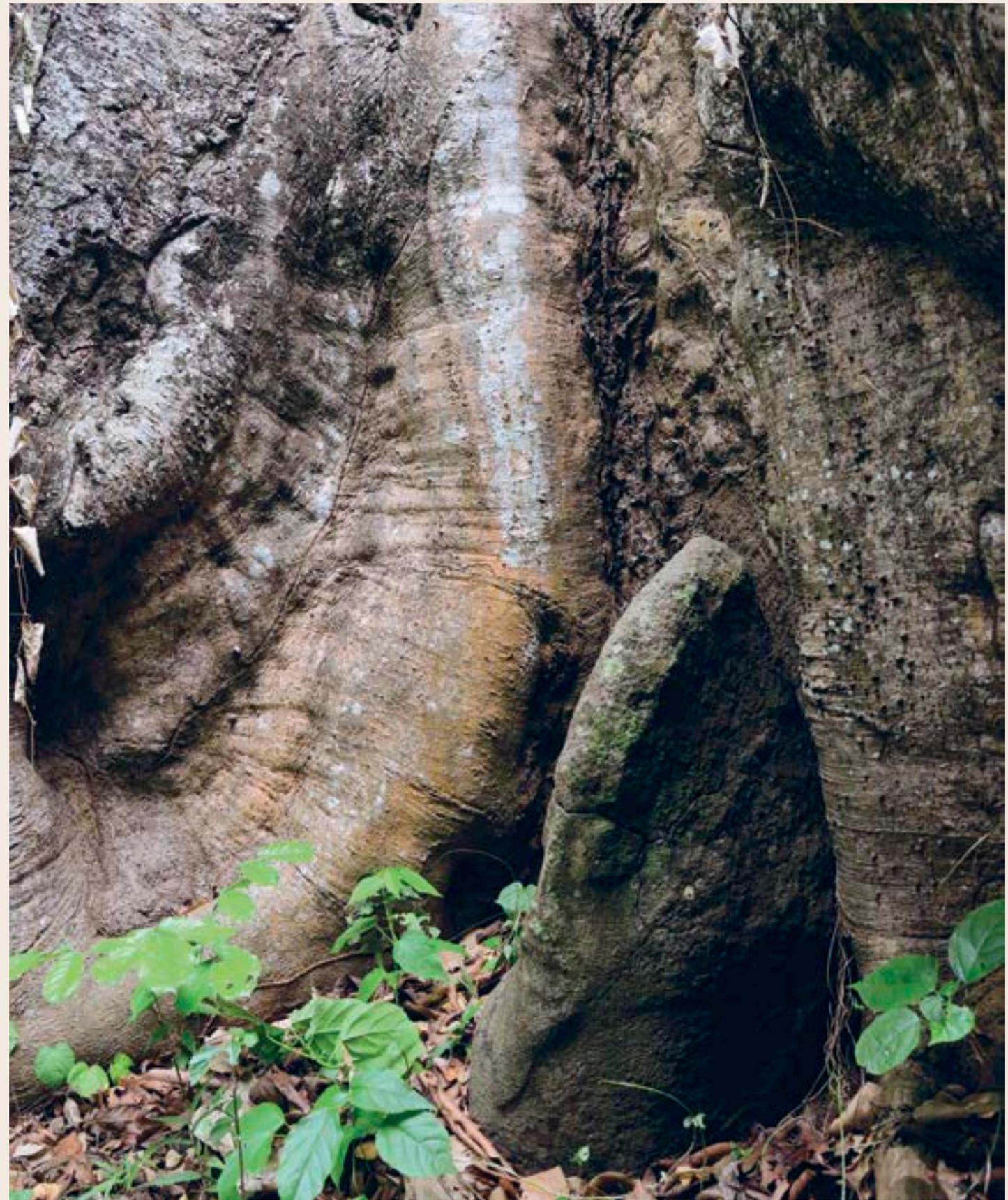
Our first expedition to see the monoliths was in 2016 where I was joined by two experts in 3D recording from the Factum Foundation, whose founder was already a friend of mine and had jumped at the opportunity of sending his experts in to record this phenomenon. Guided by Dr Edet, who had been working in Bakor on and off for years, our first field expedition took the form of a familiarisation trip when we met with the community leaders who took us to see their monoliths and share some of their knowledge and stories. On this trip we met with a number of traditional chiefs, in particular Chief Sylvanus "Orlando" Akong who had attended a rock art conference which TARA had organized in Nairobi 10 years previously. Chief Akong made a tremendous impression on us, was greatly respected by the whole community, and guided us on our subsequent visits to the region. The following pages contain a selection of photographs of some of the most remarkable examples of monoliths documented on those trips.



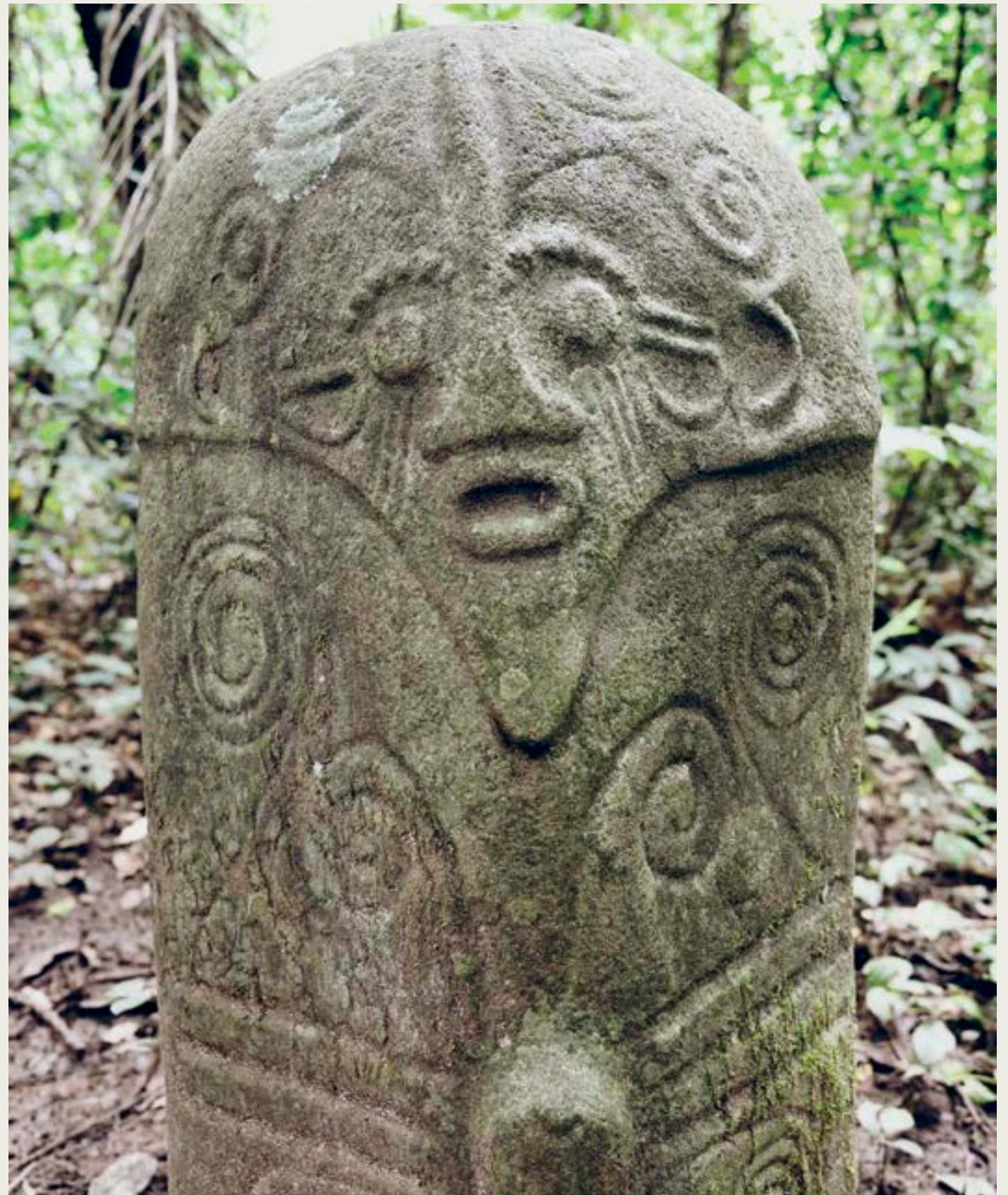
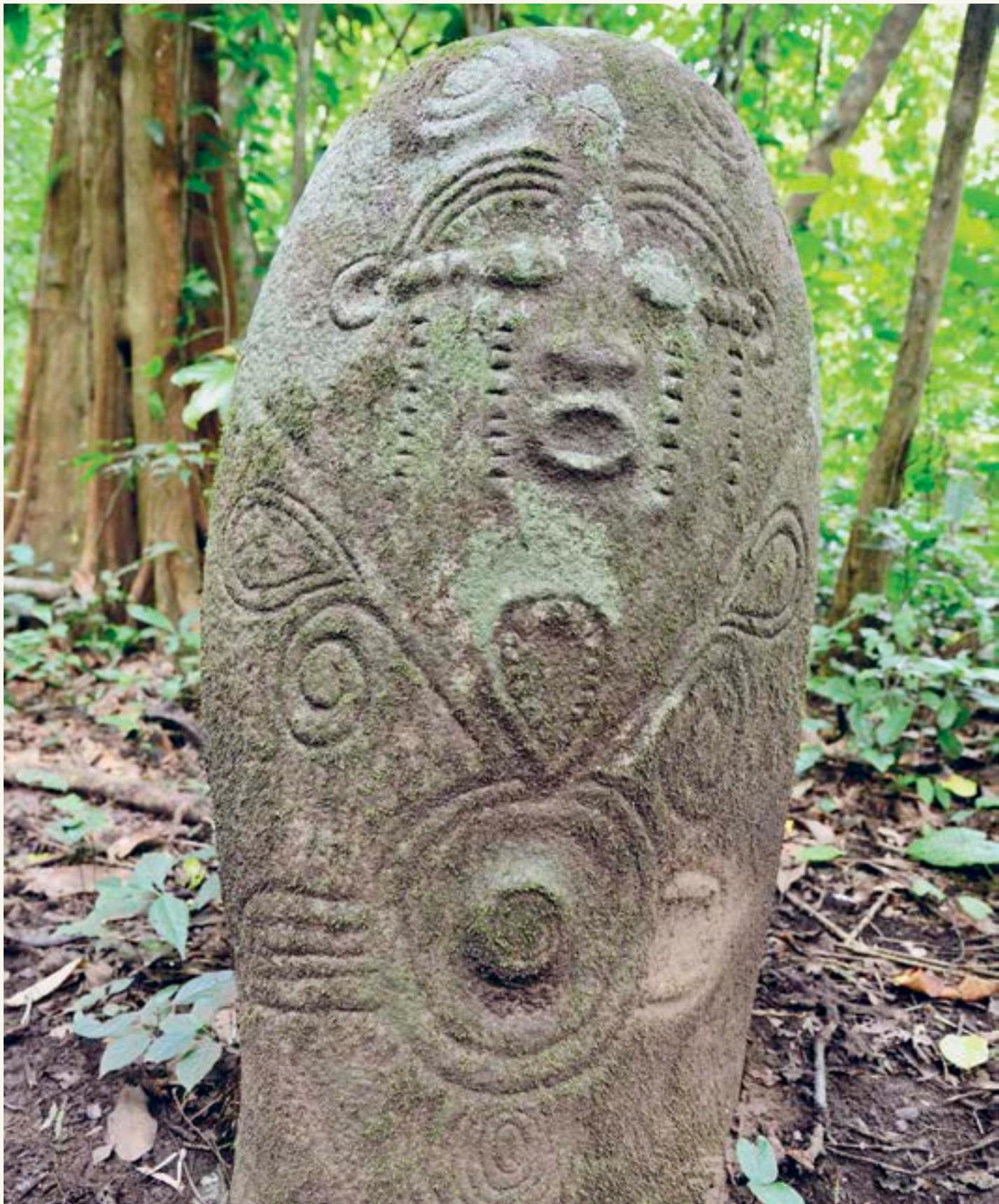


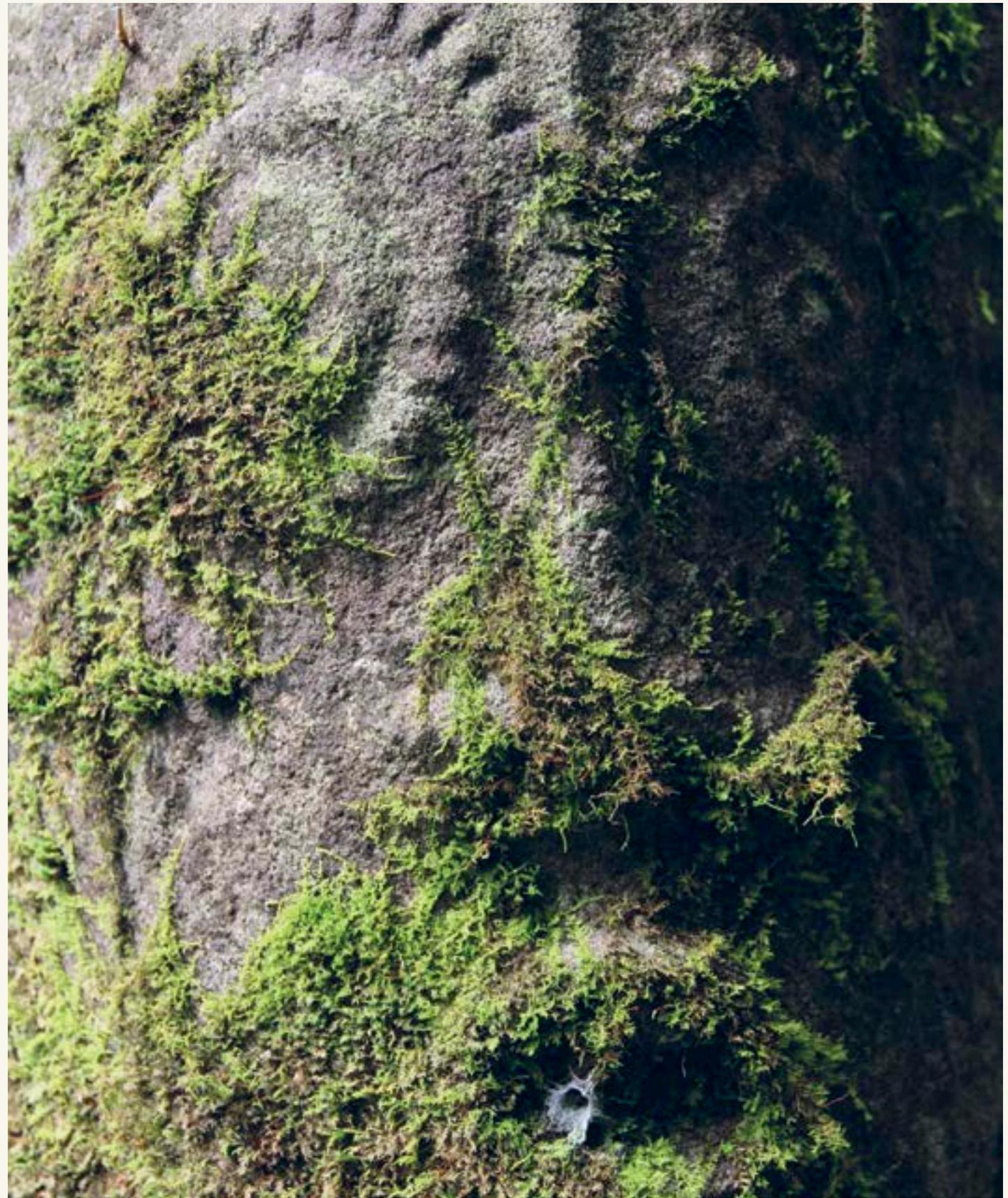












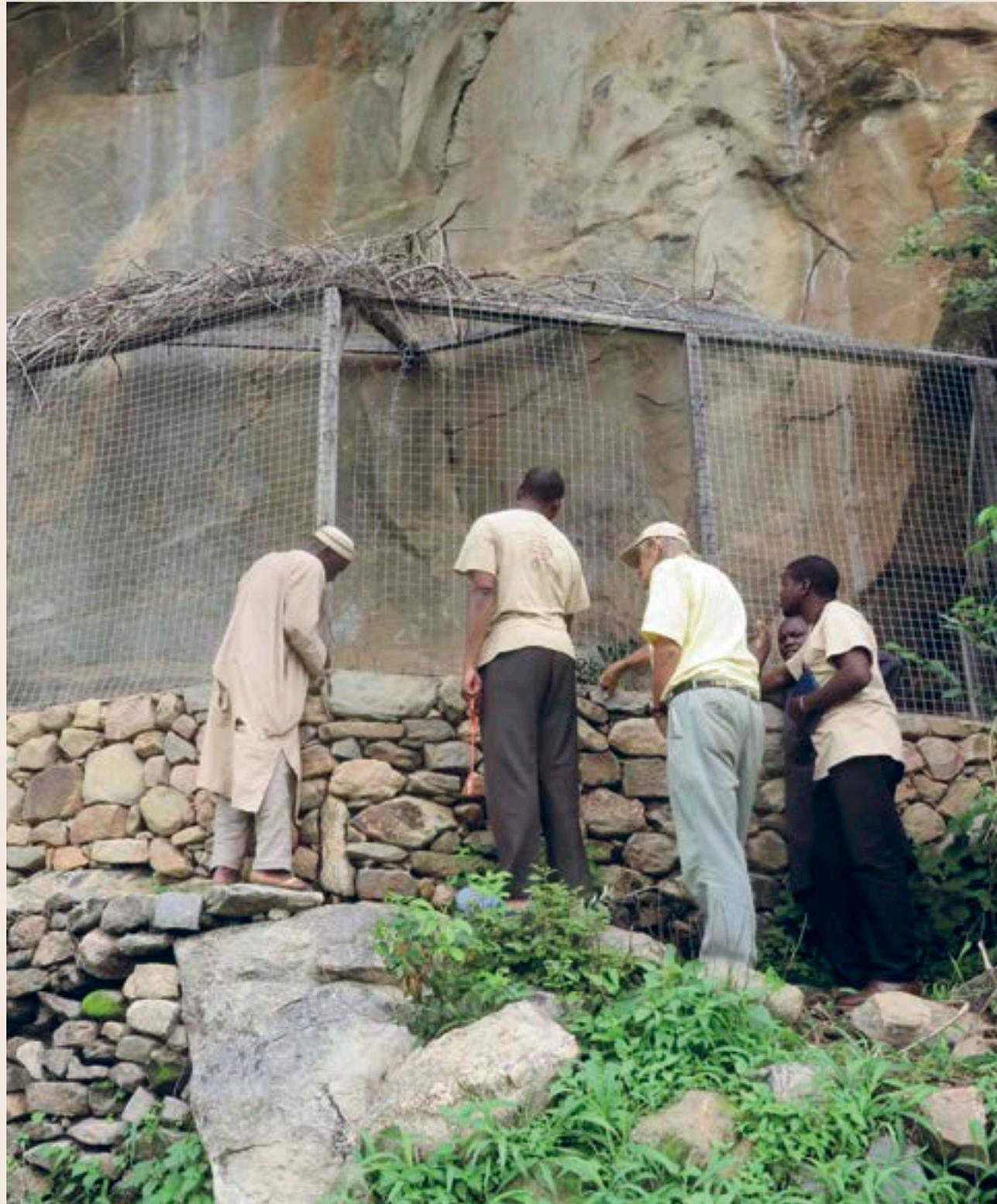


Figure 1: Cage at the Geji rock art site at Birnin Kudu, Jigawa State, Nigeria. T. Little, 2019.

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN CONSERVING THE BAKOR MONOLITHS

TERRY LITTLE¹

Trust for African Rock Art & Ahmadu Bello University

LOVING YOUR HERITAGE

People who know, love, and benefit from their heritage are naturally in the frontline to preserve and protect it. Since first working with communities in Kenya in 2007 to preserve and protect rock art heritage, this has been my motto, based on observations that walls, fences, and other barriers often have little impact in deterring vandalism or destruction of rock art sites. On the contrary, my impression is that these physical barriers, in addition to their often-ugly appearance, also disturb or interfere with any spiritual or cultural link that communities might have with this ancient heritage (fig.1). Without that link, communities have less incentive to care for the heritage, which therefore becomes more vulnerable to damage.

Rock art, often found in remote, exterior environments without adequate protection, is one of the most vulnerable and at-risk object types within cultural heritage. Under ideal conditions, physical and cultural conservation take place under careful supervision by people with suitable expertise to guide informed decisions. When that conservation expertise is not easily available or accessible, then it is pragmatic to seek practical, preventive alternatives. Engaging communities is, of course, a form of preventive conservation. Just like preventive medicine, arresting degradation before it begins is essential both as a means of avoiding sometimes irreparable damage to precious heritage as well as a cost-effective approach to avoid expensive restorative conservation.

Rock art sites often fall outside of an established system of managed care. They are frequently isolated and difficult to access and challenging to regularly monitor and maintain. This is particularly true in the Bakor region in southeast Nigeria where over 300 monoliths in over 30 known sites are widely dispersed in all types of environments. Only two of the sites are under direct tutelage of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). In view of this, the best option is to look for low-tech, low-cost alternatives which require modest investments of toil and treasure.

¹ Terry Little, advisor to Trust for African Rock Art and Adjunct Senior Lecturer at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaira, Nigeria, is the manager of the project, "Preservation of Nigeria's Rock Art Heritage: From Cross River to Jigawa and Bauchi", funded by the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, and he has led other community-focused rock art projects in Chad, Kenya, Malawi, Niger, Uganda, Tanzania.



Figure 2: Yam plantation at Alap Atal monolith site. T. Little, 2019.

CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

A factor which makes conservation of rock art different from other types of heritage – e.g., museum collections, monuments – is the connection between physical and cultural conservation practices. This is especially true around Bakor where some of the sites are still actively used for cultural practices. While this use – e.g. painting, dousing with libations, affixing feathers and hats – certainly impacts on the physical condition of the heritage, the use is also what keeps the heritage alive in the minds of the communities and motivates them to respect and safeguard them.

At the same time, it is likely that the monoliths are occasionally considered by communities as obstacles to economic development. Many of the known monolith sites have been subsumed by farmland for the cultivation of cassava, yam, and cocoa, and the practice of slash and burn farming has caused extensive damage to the monoliths and their environments (figs. 2-3). Addressing that challenge is complex and an invitation to conflict with those dependent on the income their farming generates. Communities should never be put in a position of choosing between heritage conservation and putting food on their tables.

We have seen that the threats to the monoliths are numerous and some of them are quite severe. More efforts should be undertaken to engage communities and to understand what viable options there are to the destructive farming and forestry practices which are the current economic activities vital to people's lives. The institutional partners currently involved in the conservation and valorization of the Bakor monoliths have been exploring ways to protect the tangible and intangible values of the sites sustainably (fig. 4).

THE VALUES OF THE MONOLITHS

What are the values of the Bakor monoliths? Apart from the limited cultural use of a few of the sites, how do communities benefit from the monoliths? How can the monoliths be used? I believe that we should always be looking at ways to enable the heritage in our care to be used – culturally, socially, educationally, economically. But, when talking of using heritage, we must of course consider its sustainability, because present exploitation should avert exhausting its future use.

Bakor monoliths (and, often, imitations) have been – and still are – for sale for decades. A simple internet search reveals the many options. See Ferdinand Saumarez Smith's article (pp. 21-35) for more details on the complicated monolith marketplace (fig. 5). These are not the economic benefits one hopes to witness regarding the sale of any heritage which is precious to the communities whence it comes.

What is the other "market value" of the rock art? Revenue from visits to the sites by tourists could serve to improve the lives of neighboring communities. However, assumptions on this option must be based on reality.



Figure 3: Monolith at Alap Atal surrounded by yam cultivation. T. Little, 2019.



Figure 4: Community discussion at Etinghi Nta. T. Little, 2019.

Figure 5: Monoliths for sale listed on the Artkhade website. Artkhade, 2018.



Despite the overwhelming natural beauty, with little promotion or infrastructure, the short- or medium-term potential for rock art tourism in this corner of Nigeria appears limited. Tourism-generated income cannot be realistically expected to motivate preservation of these sites. While Cross River State and the city of Calabar (*The People's Paradise*) enjoyed about a decade of cultural vibrance during the governorship tenure of Donald Duke (1999-2007), very little has been done since that time to build on the momentum which was created. Governor Duke was responsible for creating the roundabout on Murtala Muhammed Way with six monumental monoliths inspired by the Bakor originals, as one of the ways to valorize culture in and promote tourism to that corner of the state (fig.6).

Consider the international tourism market. It is not easy to travel to Nigeria. Flights are expensive and the protocols of getting a tourist visa are time-consuming and unfriendly. After my first hellish arrival at Lagos International Airport in 1993,



Figure 6: Roundabout in Calabar with monumental Bakor monoliths in cement. T. Little, 2019.

the situation has not improved much. While the opening of a new terminal offers some hope, Murtala Muhammed 1 Airport still ranks as the worst international airport in the world on my list. Once you've escaped the hassles of immigration and customs, you are then faced with getting to Calabar, the gateway city to Cross River State and the monoliths, for which there are currently 1 or 2 flights per day and here you confront the perdition of the domestic terminals – once you actually figure out the one from which your flight departs.

Calabar is a lovely city, but you are still a four-hour drive from the city of Ikom – assuming you have a private car to take you there. The most accessible monolith site is still 30 minutes from Ikom. All of this to say that a visit to the monoliths requires fortitude and an enormous investment of time and money. We're talking about a tiny percentage of travelers whose passion for rock art will convince them to make that journey.

A successful tourism product would require branding to create a respected institutional identity and long-term promotion. Marketing is not part of the expertise of any of the current partners and would require partnerships with a tourism or related organizations with the interests and capacities to build a brand, invest in the necessary infrastructures – transportation, accommodations, food, gateways, parking, signage, promotion – as well as in human resources in areas such as guiding and hospitality/service.

I recently read an article that outlines the supposed benefits of community museums in Nigeria which the Ministry of Information and Culture was proposing. Edo State Governor, Godwin Obaseki, unveiled Phase One of the Edo Museum of West African Arts (EMOWAA) in Benin City and stated, "If we have a million people coming into the state or into Benin City for culture and tourism every year, and each one spends \$1000, can you imagine the amount of money that will come



Figure 7: The village of Nkrasi, where monoliths have been moved to from their original site. T. Little, 2019.

into the state? Not from crude oil or the Federation Accounts Allocation Committee (FAAC), but from culture and tourism". While I applaud this optimistic view of the economic benefits of culture and tourism, I fear that the prediction of over 2,500 wildly extravagant visitors per day creates false expectations which will eventually leave communities feeling deceived.

Promoting the tourism destination domestically would seem to be a reasonable option. The annual Carnival Calabar which took place until it was disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 demonstrated the allure of Cross River State to Nigerians from across the country. However, the challenges of getting to the rock art sites from Calabar and enjoying a quality visit remain the same.

WHAT OTHER CONSERVATION OPTIONS

The project team discussed the issue of relocation of monoliths which should, according to sound archaeological practice, be done only as a last resort. When reviewing which sites might benefit from this, we will need to further document the sites, study where to relocate them, to what use, how to do it, and at what cost (fig.7).

The monoliths have been listed on Nigeria's Tentative List for UNESCO World Heritage status. For that nomination to move forward, the sites will need a comprehensive management plan and this project is laying the groundwork for that. Most of the sites, however, are located on private property and this issue will require more action from the state and national bodies responsible for heritage and delicate negotiations with local leaders and property owners.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The success or achievement of almost any objective linked to conservation depends on the quality of human interaction. Certainly, when dealing with heritage such as archaeological sites which may not be found directly within the walls of a museum, you will almost always have to engage with local communities.

Creating a better understanding of the importance and fragility of the heritage and promoting traditional respect and reverence for them by the local communities is crucial. This quickly became apparent during the project during discussions with the community leaders who clearly appreciated our visit and the information we were able to share with them. In addition to the documentation work and training activities, a lot of the team's time has been devoted to discussions with the communities about their sites and the importance of managing them, including controlling access and discouraging damaging activities.

"Although people have been trying to destroy these monoliths and keep us away from it, these monoliths are used to remember our ancestors and we thank you and hope that through this visit you will promote our name and heritage. Although we are said to be custodians of these monoliths, we are requesting and appealing that we be provided with aids to further help us protect and preserve the monoliths."

Chief from Egononkor



Figure 8: Installation of a permanent exhibition at the Alok Open Air Museum. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.

The open air museum in Alok was created and is managed by the NCMM. In 2022, thanks to the support of the Factum Foundation and funding from the Carène Foundation, the tiny Alok Museum was upgraded with a display and information about the known history of the monoliths (figs. 8-9). This space could, in itself, represent a resource of immediate value: a community gateway, a gathering place, a destination for intrepid travelers, and a place that offers programs with schools and with elders. But this would require investing more resources – human and physical – and supporting the host community to make the endeavor long-lasting.

Apart from the experience gained by all members of the partner institutions participating in the project to date, training has not been a component. Rather, every opportunity was used to encourage both participants and facilitators to learn from each other, compare notes, discuss, and come to a common understanding. The community has a treasure of knowledge about their own heritage and are therefore well placed to suggest local strategies and mechanisms that work better than those that are imposed from outside.

“Africa’s rock art is the common heritage of all Africans, and of all people. It is a cultural gift from our ancestors that can bring diverse people together - with pride and a common commitment to share it and preserve it. Yet, today, Africa’s rock art is severely threatened... A lack of resources, combined with a lack of official interest, has left too many rock art sites unguarded against vandals and thieves... We must save this cultural heritage before it is too late. Two initiatives are especially critical. Educating our children and engaging local communities.”

Kofi Annan, Secretary-General United Nations (2005)



Figure 9: Installation team from the NCMM and Alok village. F. Saumarez Smith, 2022.



Figure 10: Egunonkor community with the longest monolith in the region. F. Saumarez Smith, 2019.

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Last but not least, to David Coulson and Terry Little of the Trust for African Rock Art, thank you for introducing Factum to the Bakor region and for the many wonderful experiences over the past six years. We appreciate you.

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