



Akwansisi Cultural Heritage and the Creation of a National Identity: The Cross River Monoliths, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In a small region of the Central Cross River, culturally and linguistically designated 'Bakor', lie columns of stone carvings (monoliths), in human forms. These carvings are referred to locally as *Akwansisi* (stones of the departed), by the Nta and Nde groups and *Atal* (stones), by other Bakor speaking groups. This stone culture stretches to parts of the Benue valley, Boki, Obubra, Ogoja and the Nigerian Cameroun border. The culture zone is historically the homeland of the great Bantu or semi Bantu people of African history. Anthropological and other scholarly surveys by foreign observers and commentators have attributed the origins of the Cross River monoliths to the creative ingenuity of wandering Hamites or alien occupants who are today not within the culture zone. This paper attempts not only to ward off the lingering appendage of Hamitic and outside-in interpretation of internal developments, but to show evidently that the artistic and impressive columns of stone carvings are the handiwork of the ancestors of the present occupants of the region stretching back to antiquity. *Akwansisi* are a heritage of African arts and culture with historical, religious and social significance to the groups who inhabit the region; they are a symbol of Bakor identity. The paper also decries the abysmal neglect of the nation's cultural artifacts, antipathy for cultural heritage and the lack of a maintenance attitude even in this age of cultural tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Once the Cross River monoliths which are also locally called *Akwansisi* are mentioned, the picture that emerges are the Nkarasi and Alok (Nnam) stones casted about three kilometers apart along Ikom-Ogoja highway in Cross

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River State, Nigeria. It is important to note that while the afore mentioned forms a part of the culture zone, the main group of carvings lie within a culture complex (Bakor), in the central Cross River Region dotting the Boki, Obubra Ogoja to the Benue valley and the Nigeria-Cameroun border with Nta as the nucleus of the monolith culture. This culture zone has been designated by histo linguists as the early Bantu or semi-Bantu homeland.

Bakor is a linguistic term which has been used to designate the communities who speak a mutually intelligible dialect of a proto-language which Crabbot has described as Ekoid Bantu (Crabbot; 1965: 48). Simon Majuk (1995:34) described the Bakor as those northern Ejagham groups, who out of socio-political circumstances came together to form a cultural union by that name. The speakers include the Abanyom, Nde, Nta, Nsene and Nnam of Ikom and Akajuk, Nkumm and Nkim of Ogoja local government areas respectively. These communities have been the homeland of a heritage of stone carvings in human form which they claim are memorials to their ancestors. At Nta, where a definite tradition exists with a variety of carvings, thirty-nine carved and uncarved stones are named after their clan heads, the last of whom died in about 1900. Culturally, the Bakor, who occupy a contiguous territory within Ikom and Ogoja local government Areas of Cross River State, commemorate their dead chieftains (kings) with a carved stone with striking resemblance to the deceased. Until recently, ancestral reverence among the Bakor people was highly esteemed.

Views on the origins and carvings of the Cross River Monoliths.

The isolated occurrence of stones carved to represent human form on lands of the Bakor speaking peoples of Ikom and Ogoja local government areas and its vicinity presents something of an anomaly and has drawn wide speculations and conjectures. Charles Paltridge (1905), who first reported on *Akwansisi* stones noted that these stones are probably of no great antiquity but may be several centuries old. According to Paltridge;

They establish the fact that the former inhabitants of the country possessed artistic skills and knowledge which the present natives do not possess. The large prominent navels on some of those stones show that they were the work of people of the Negro race. This peculiarity is still very common in this district (Paltridge; 1905:227)

Amoury Talbot (1912), writing on the southern Ekoi (Ejagham) of Oban country noted that;

many shaped stones lie buried in the bush, and when discovered are objects of great veneration to the Ekoi who consider them to be of supernatural origin (in Allison, 1968:14)

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The Ekoi, in the literature are Ejaghams who dot the general region of the middle Cross River stretching to the lower region in the south. Culturally, they are believed to be Bakor cousins. Talbot believed *Akwansisi* stones to be the work of previous occupants of the country. He however admitted that his supposition is not supported by any current tradition. Mr. Pyke, supposedly a staff of the colonial office reported in 1910:

a row of juju figures four to five feet high
and carved out of stone in the village of old
Ntrigom (Allison, 1968:23).

N.A.C Weir (1929), writing on the Nta *Akwansisi* stated thus:

Akwansisi is a name applied to any collection
of stones or monoliths either owned by the entire
clan or the village or the family. The clan or village
Akwansisi are to be found in ... the play ground,
the family Akwansisi in the house of the head of the
family... each monolith and stone represents an
ancestor (Weir, 1929:)

Philip Allison in two different studies elaborated on these stone cultures for the Federal Department of Antiquities. Apart from a brief ethnographic survey of the culture zone, Allison made a vivid description of the monoliths and their different styles of execution. A total of two hundred and ninety-five stones were recorded at thirty-nine sites on the lands of the Bakor speaking peoples. Today, it is doubtful how many stones have survived the neglect, loot and environmental hazards in the culture complex. The aforementioned has been the varying speculations and readings-out of what is in fact indigenous to Africa. Until recently, it was consistent with European visitors, missionaries, early anthropologists and colonial administrators to ascribe ingenious creations including African arts to the activities of foreigners of Hamitic or Greek origins. Indeed, African arts and culture have come to be casted in white centric spectacles thereby distorting the history and aesthetic value of African arts. Explorers took home African arts work out of curiosity to show to their people that they have been to the land of primitive people in the same vein, the missionaries “gathered African objects to deprive Africans of what they considered to be the focus of their worship and show Europeans that these were idols”. Not even the colonial masters or the anthropologists could help matters. To these, artifacts were a proof of backwardness of people to whom European civilization was imminent or still, they were ethnographic objects of primitive people (Eyo; 2010:16). It is little wonder therefore that early European visitors equated ancestral reverence with “idol worship” and cultural artifacts as “rows of juju” or clan “juju”. Understandably, unfamiliarity with African cultures which the European visitors wrote about and a deliberate or programmed cultural arrogance of the

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superiority of European cultures vis-à-vis other cultures are outstanding explanations for these distortions.

The implication of white centric view of indigenous development in Africa is not only disturbing but also distorting. Interestingly, in the culture zone of our concern, alternative views and evidences abound to show that *Akwansisi* are a cultural heritage and a symbol of Bakor national identity. Historically, the Bakor trace their origins to a common geographical culture complex-the Nta-Alok culture zone and the Nigerian Cameroun borderline. A contiguous territory, socio-cultural affinities, expressed in a common language and other cultural identities provided the basis for the formation in 1963 of a socio-cultural union as a platform for socio-political expression of the Bakor nationality (Majuk,1995)

Oral testimonies from the people corroborate archeological and other evidences on the origins of *Akwansisi*. Professor Bassey Andah's archeological survey of the region has indeed offered alternative view-points on the *Akwansisi* and their carvers. Andah noted that the *Akwansisi* people are agricultural communities with virile and elaborate socio-political system organized as a large kingdom either as those of Benin, Nri or the Yoruba who mustered creative energies to erect stone carvings. He indicated the average reign of the kings so venerated to anything between twenty five to thirty five years. By this alternative view, the dating of the *Akwansisi* will be anywhere around 200AD. (Erim & Jaja; 1990:31) This alternative hypothesis also finds substance in Professor Ekpo Eyo's trial trench around the general area, which yielded 1780 + 50 i.e around 200AD. Perhaps as confirmation of the average reign of African kings, the present *Ntoon* of the ancient Nta kingdom has been on the throne for onwards of thirty five years (1975-2011). More archeological work in this culture zone will shed more light on the rich antiquity of African arts.

From Njimetop (Nsene), Allison obtained information from a stone carver who showed him a stone he has carved and another he was working on (Allison; 1968:29). Etum Ogbah attributed the carvings to ancestors of the present occupants of the area who did this as an occupation. The materials for the carving are available in the area. The stones were got out of the surrounding Creeks and a stone tool locally referred to as *egeme*, identified as a basalt was used for the carving. At Alok (Nnam), Olando Akong corroborated Nta traditions on the carving which he stated were a responsibility of a particular age grade, *Angeptal*, (stone-makers) as proof of having attained adult status. The monoliths were either drawn from the bush or the creeks. This point can be considered as very important considering the place 'age grade' (young men born between a particular age bracket), occupies in the Bakor socio-cultural system. Until recently, the Nta still performed the *Esugu attah* or feet washing (rites of adulthood). These rites were usually accompanied with particular functions to the community. On the wide distribution of carved and uncarved stones in the vicinity of the culture complex, both primary and secondary migrations of groups, theft and warfare have been largely responsible. Within the culture zone, the Nta, who

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claim autochthonous origins have been the cradle of most primary or secondary migrations of the Akparabong, Nki (Iso-bendeghe-Boki), and most Akajuk groups to their present locale. These groups still remember their primary homeland (Nta) and would insist in carrying monoliths to their present abode.

The extent of the modification of the natural form of *Akwansisi* and the skill used in its conversion vary recognizably from one sub-group to the other. When closely observed, one can speak of Nta style, Nnam style or Akajuk styles respectively (Enor: 1989:46): The monoliths are carved with human features- eyes, nose, mouth, beard and tribal marks and sometimes navel and arms are shown. Decorations in the boulders take a number of different forms probably representing tribal marks, tattooing or body painting. Paltridge (1905), Talbot (1912), Weir (1929) all agree that markings similar to all these found in the monoliths have been used in the area in the time past.

Dating of Akwansisi Stones

Allison has conjectured a time span during which this culture flourished on the number of *Atoon* (kings) commemorated by *Akwansisi* stones. He noted that:

A succession of thirty-nine chiefs
each of whom held the title for an
average of about ten years and the
last of whom died about 1900 would
indicate that the line commenced about
the beginning of the 16th century (Allison; 1968:33).

This method of dating the *Akwansisi* may not be considered reliable especially when we consider that the average reign of an African king is between twenty-five to thirty-five years. The *Akwansisi* stones may be as old as 200AD as corroborated by archaeological and oral testimonies. As stated earlier, a trial trench around the general area yielded 1780+50 or 200AD.

Akwansisi in the Context of Nigerian Arts

The *Akwansisi* carvings are scattered over a culture complex and bear testimony to the creative ingenuity of African peoples of Bakor ancestry. Geographically, they are thousands of miles apart and bear little resemblance to the stone works of the Yoruba, the Nomoli of Sierra Leone or the Mintadi stone sculptures of the Congo, nevertheless, they add to the impressive array of Nigeria arts and antiquity. Allison noted that “the carving of stones of phallic forms to which human features have been added seems to have evolved in isolation in widely separated localities throughout the world”. This assertion lends credence to claims of independent (autochthonous) origins of Nta. In Ethiopia, Corsica, the Caribbean and the Pacific are also

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found this treatment in human form with some resemblance in some respect to the Cross River *Akwansisi* (Allison; 1968:34-35). The Oron carvings also revered memorials are of wood not stones and closer geographically to the *Akwansisi* culture zone.

Types of Akwansisi

It is pertinent to indicate that two types of *Akwansisi* exist among the Bakor, the clan or village *Akwansisi* and the family *Akwansisi*. By far, the most important are the family *Akwansisi* usually held by the family head and highly revered. On the event of death, they are moved to the successor. The family *Akwansisi* can be matrilineal or patrilineal. The family head offers prayers to them periodically on behalf of the family, there is hardly a family compound in Bakor without a heap of small uncarved stones representing their family ancestors.

Significance of Akwansisi

The Cross River Monoliths are very significant phenomenon in African history and culture. They express the religious and national identity of the Bakor people. *Akwansisi* provide relative chronology which can assist in the reconstruction of the culture history of the Nta and by extension Bakor people. Nta *Akwansisi* provides a king list with thirty-nine kings in succession. For the preliterate societies of Africa like the Bakor, relative chronology can be a starting point for a historical reconstruction of the region until the methods of archaeology are introduced.

Stones of the departed express the Bakor religious attachment to their ancestors. A number of carved and uncarved stones bear the names of clan heads or family heads. These names are repeated at the annual ceremony for *Akwansisi* usually in the dry season. Thus, far from being clan *juju* or “row of *juju* figures”, commemorating a deceased clan head with a monolith is ancestral reverence common to the Bakor people. The Bakor, who believe in *Osowo nobo*, (Heavenly father) or (Almighty God), also maintain a strong attachment to the departed ancestors who it is believed are intermediaries between the living and the dead. During the dry season, annual ceremonies are held for the *Akwansisi*. They are attended by the older and younger people presided over by the *Ntoon Asiane* (clan head). Prayers are offered, food and drink are given and appeals are made for the clan. Women with difficult birth receive blessings from ancestors, and so on. It is believed that *Akwansisi* dispels misfortune, ushers in prosperity to the entire community; fertility and productivity is also obtained. The rains are ushered in and in times of emergency, warfare for instance, only prayers and drinks are offered at the site to ensure victory (Enor; 1989:52). The importance of the Cross River monoliths can also be measured in the aesthetic value which they command. Public buildings, parks, museums and road junctions are decorated with these carvings. Unfortunately, these impressive stone

monuments and highly rated antiquities have been abysmally neglected and abandoned to the dictates of weather and ecological conditions. It is doubtful if the culture zone can still boast of the number of stones captured by Philip Allison. Climatic conditions, deforestation and looting no doubt could have affected these artifacts. The neglect of the nation's artifacts is symptomatic of a general cultural amnesia. A people, who exhibit lackadaisical attitude to their cultural heritage will soon be carried away by the currents of alien culture and their history distorted to fit into alien cultural pattern.

CONCLUSION

The preservation and conservation of Nigerian cultural heritage cannot be over emphasized and call for urgent government attention. Apart from the aesthetic value of the artifacts, Nigerian arts works are a telling commentary on the past of the various Nigerian peoples and a contribution to the creative ingenuity of the African past. This fact has been attested to by the many looting of African arts work to foreign museums by Europeans. Professor Eyo recounts the visit of Frobenius to Ile-Ife in 1910, and the disappearance of *Olokun* sculptures which did not convince Europeans that Africans could produce works of arts equal to those of Europeans (Eyo; 2010:23). The first step on the part of government is to make contacts with foreign museums where looted Nigerian arts work have been found.

It is rather unfortunate that forest reserves have not included those culture zones and homes of antiquities. It is therefore necessary and urgent for Nigerian authorities to designate known cultural complex as government reserves while also paying compensation to the communities for the reserves. Such reserves should have a local overseer preferably a staff of the national museum. Government should also commence urgent rehabilitation and environmental conservation of the sites of those monoliths and methods of archeology applied to the sites to shed more light on the culture history of the country's rich past.

Essentially, laws checkmating the looting and sales of antiquities should be strictly enforced. It is hoped that in this era of cultural tourism the conservation and preservation of our cultural artifacts could earn the country a haven for cultural destination and other advantages.

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