



Research Article

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Archaeology, History and the Monoliths Heritage: Nta Akwansisi in Perspective

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Abstract

Akwansisi monoliths study provides a convergence of history and archaeology – two complementary disciplines. This is especially so for Nta Akwansisi which has a definite tradition of carved and uncarved monoliths in anthropomorphic form commemorating past clan heads, the Ntoon Asiame or Ntoon Emang. Thirty-nine carved and uncarved monoliths in succession are named after previous clan heads from the duo communities of Etinghi-nta and Nnaborakpa. The duo communities represent the political and spiritual capitals of Nta kingdom and provide the kings of Nta in rotation thereby producing a dynasty which stretches back to antiquity. This heritage of stone carving which is fast facing extinction by human and ecological forces, has elicited the cupidity of scholars, researchers and visitors, each prying hard to establish a probable date for the stone culture, their carvers and also decipher other sign writings which appear on the monoliths. Relying on primary sources, preliminary examination attempts to establish that the present occupants, some of who claim autochthonous origins are fragments of an earlier civilization which flourished in prehistoric times. Nta kingdom commemorated their demise kings with a carved and uncarved monolith which stand in a particular burial site for the kings. A king list has been used to provide a relative date of 975 to 1050AD for the Akwansisi stones. The study recommends the methods of archaeology and other modern techniques to unravel the ambiguities surrounding this ancient heritage and also establish absolute dates for Akwansisi stones of Nta dynasty in the middle Cross River Region of Nigeria.

Keywords: *Nta Akwansisi, relative dating, absolute dating, archaeology, history, monoliths*

1. Introduction

In a cultural landscape of about 200 square km, in the middle Cross River region of Nigeria can be found an impressive column of stone carvings in anthropomorphic forms locally referred to as *Akwansisi* by the Nta, and *atal*, (generic names for stones), by other *Bakor* speaking people who occupy land stretching from Ikom Local Government Area to Ogoja Local Government Area respectively. The general culture area in question stretches from the middle Cross River to the

Benue valley and the Nigerian-Cameroun border. In historic times, this landscape was variously described as the cradle of the Bantu speaking groups, the semi Bantu (Greenberg: 1959) and now the Ejagham homeland, with a few other intrusive groups.

The language spoken by the monoliths bearing communities is *Bakor* which bear striking similarities with the larger *Etung* language spoken by the *Ejagham* peoples of the region.

Crabbot (1965), has described the Bakor language as Ekoid Bantu. The speakers include the Abanyom, Akajuk, Nta-Nselle, Nde, Nnam, Akparabong and Nkum-Ibil. These communities, some of which claim autochthonous origins, are the primary custodians of the premier civilization of stone carvings which are now degraded by a lot of factors including vandalization by farming activities, inter-communal warfare, theft, bush burning and unfavourable weather conditions.

Speculations and views of interested scholars on the monolith heritage have been so well articulated elsewhere by this same researcher. (LWATI volume 9, issue 2, June, 2012). The present paper focuses on Nta Akwansisi conjectured to be the cradle of the monolith heritage, where prototype monoliths were identified by Philip Allison (1968). Other objectives of this paper includes to establish a probable date for the stone carvings using Nta king list, report on the current state of the monoliths and also call attention to the urgent need for archaeological interests and methods in the sites as the need for conservation and protection of the culture zone and heritage sites has become imminent.

1.1 Research methods

The methodology of this research is primary investigation involving field work carried out in the monoliths cultural complex. Interviews, both individual and group were conducted to obtain information about the culture, and traditional patterns of states formation among the culture bearers. A few published works on the monoliths and cultural history of the region was also consulted.

1.2 Analysis results

This study was set out to investigate the cultural stones locally referred to as Akwansisi (memorials to clan heads). Results obtained from field investigation shows that, a premier stone culture used as memorials to tribal chieftains and ancestors was practiced by the monolith people in the dim past. A carved monolith was placed on the grave side of the clan head as ancestral memorial. The stone culture also expresses artistic design, ancient form of writing and other material objects used by the forbearers of the present occupants of the area. Ability to decipher the ancient writings which appear in the monoliths will shed more light on the culture history and the past of the monoliths people.

2. Nta Akwansisi: The Cradle of Monolith Heritage (?)

Akwansisi means the "dead in the ground", the term is used to describe, two categories of monoliths; the family *Akwansisi* and the clan or community *Akwansisi*. Nta monoliths (*Akwansisi* Nta), can be found in three communities viz Etinghinta, Nnaborakpa and Oyenghe. The ones at Njahn-odor Nta, which used to be Nta war camp is today bordering Nta-Nde eastern boundary. It is pertinent to differentiate briefly, between stones commemorating the demised kings and the family *Akwansisi* which were usually custodied by the heads of each family and transferred to a succeeding head when a current custodian dies. Monoliths commemorating previous kings of Nta kingdom stand along a path leading from Etinghinta to Nnaborakpa. Etinghinta and Nnaborakpa as noted earlier are duo capitals of Nta kingdom, political and spiritual, from early times. These two communities are one kilometer apart, take turns in producing the *ntoon a nta*, "who assume the title at a particular site among the *Akwansisi*, served them as priest, during their life time and were buried among them when they died" (32). Thirty-nine monoliths, twenty-four from Etinghinta and fifteen from Nnaborakpa commemorate past kings; their names are recounted during purification and appeasement rites which are conducted annually during the dry season, in early times. It was

an established tradition to commemorate a demised king with a carved or uncarved monolith at the site. Some of such monoliths were usually surrounded with miniatures to depict the deceased slaves or offsprings. Today, memory lapses and theft have decimated and sabotaged the number of stones and their names. Etinghinta and Nnaborakpa also had one monoliths each, named *Ebiabu*, capped with a human skull. *Ebiabu* was a visible symbol of a cult-group that carried out dead sentence imposed by tribal law. Once a victim was brought before the *Ebiabu* monolith, execution was immediately carried out (Eno, 1989), as all avenues for appeal are deemed to have been consummated. The two *Ebiabu*, in Etinghinta and Nna orakpa respectively, have been catered away by theft; the current efforts of our research partners (Factum Arte), have however identified Etinghinta *Ebiabu* at the Quai Branly museum, Paris. The names of previous Atoon Nta and their communities as commemorated by carved and uncarved monoliths, remembered by tradition includes:

1. Ntoon Ebiji Ekan	-	Etinghinta
2. Ntoon Mkponor Mgbosor	-	Nnaorakpa
3. Ntoon Enalak Nsidim	-	Etinghinta
4. Ntoon Essidim Nkanda	-	Nnaorakpa
5. Ntoon Obogor Okposu	-	Etinghinta
6. Ntoon Ogba Etebe	-	Nnaorakpa
7. Ntoon Asagha Ndoma	-	Etinghinta
8. Ntoon Nkoro Ebiji	-	Nnaorakpa
9. Ntoon Epelegwa Mkpiri	-	Etinghinta
10. Ntoon Akunjor Akanya	-	Nnaorakpa
11. Ntoon Njan Mkpiri	-	Etinghinta
12. Ntoon Akpuju Ntoon	-	Nnaorakpa
13. Ntoon Echie Ndimakanda	-	Etinghinta
14. Ntoon Ntum Osak	-	Nnaorakpa
15. Ntoon Nyebishie Ndim	-	Etinghinta
16. Ntoon Akong Osak	-	Nnaorakpa
17. Ntoon Ashebe Obeyeh	-	Etinghinta
18. Ntoon Ngbongbong	-	Nnaorakpa
19. Ndor Menta	-	Etinghinata
20. Ekon Mfah	-	Nnaorakpa
21. Ntoon Ebah Mfah	-	Etinghinta

** This numbering is not in order of succession, ends in c1900

Out of thirty-nine kings only twenty-one names of previous *Atoon*' a Nta are remembered as should be expected in a society with no tradition of writing. As eyewitnesses pass on without handing down traditions to specialized or professional custodians, memory lapses and missing gaps are some of the short coming of oral traditions. Be that as it may, it is pertinent to note that as the arrival of modern government checkmated head hunting, subsequent appointment to the traditional stool took on the *Emang*, emblem of office, a bifurcated brass bladed knife which symbolized the highest title holder in the land. Traditionally, the ceremonies associated with the appointment and coronation of Nta traditional kings involved head taking as the kings were by tradition supposed to rest their feet on two human skulls. These *Atoons* (plural form) were referred to as *Atoon asiane* (kings entitled to human heads taken in war).

The arrival of European administrators at the beginning of the 20th century, discouraged the warrior occupation of heads taking and this had a telling effect on the kingship institution of traditional Nta kingdom. Modern kings lost the sacrosanctity and the traditional trappings of the priest kings who did not leave their compound. Charles Patridge (1905), vividly noted an encounter with one *Ntoon Asiane*; (See Enor, 2007). Worse still, the art of carving a monolith as memorial on the graveside of deceased *Ntoon* lapsed into modernity. In any case, the *emang* emblem is no less important as the *Asiane*, all possessed the same authority and influence.

In order of the foregoing therefore, in what sense can one speak of Nta dynasty and the cradle of the monoliths cultural heritage especially when all the Bakor speaking communities are adorned with monoliths distributed all over their surrounding environments? The attempt to answer this

proposition may invite a brief examination of the symbiosis of history and archaeology, this will constitute the subtitle of the next segment.

3. History, Archaeology and the Monoliths, Dating Akwansisi Nta

The twin disciplines of history and archaeology may have to interact to produce a dependable and transmittable answers to the *Akwansisi* puzzle in the area of dating which is very pertinent for our cultural historical reconstruction of the region under study.

In the monolith cultural complex, only Nta can speak of a king list commemorated by *Akwansisi* stones (stones of the departed kings) in a particular grove where the kings were coronated and buried when they died. In other Bakor groups, "named stones occur for clubs and societies but not general". They also apply the generic names for stones 'atal'. The "variety of styles to be found among Nta stones", as observed by Allison, "and the fact that traditions concerning them are better preserved than elsewhere, suggest that these carvings may be the prototype from which of other group derive" (36). As plausible as Allison's inference may seem, can it be said to be a definitive basis for ascribing to Nta as the cradle of the monolith culture? In the aspect of dating, Allison conjectured the 16th century as probable date for the carving. He based his argument on ten years as average reign of a king whom he assumed ascended the throne at old age.

Using Nta king list, with an average age of between 30-35 years for African kings, Frank Enor and Abu Edet (2019), have attempted a relative dating of Nta monoliths which approximated to 975AD-1050AD. This method of dating antiquities of this nature maybe fairly reliable for African traditional societies without a written tradition. Until the methods of archeology are introduced to establish absolute dates for Akwansisi, preliminary investigation would rest on Nta, with Etinghinta and Nnaorakpa burial sites as a cradle of kingship institution and the monolith heritage of the Bakor people. Furthermore, Nta is mentioned by many groups in the region as their primary dispersal point of origins. Also, the communities of Etinghinta and Nnaorakpa claim autochthonous origin.

If we go by the saying that history starts when men began to write, it would be assumed that Africa did not have a history because much of what has come down as African history is a reconstruction deriving strength from inter-disciplines, one of which is archaeology. In this sense therefore, history becomes a 'midwife' that bring to bear the result of prehistoric developments from archaeology, historical linguistics, ethnography, social anthropology and so on, thereby solidifying the congruence of history and other ancillary disciplines. As pertaining to the monoliths, we also discover that the art of writing was not a European prerogative as sign writings, *nsibidi*, can be seen on some monoliths thereby reinforcing the urgency of archaeological and other methods to help shed lights on the dim past of African people.

3.1 The Current State of Nta Monoliths

Nta monoliths like others in the monolith confederation have suffered from neglect, degradation, theft, unfavourable weather conditions, farming, bush burning activities and inter ethnic warfare. What used to be a sacred grove and burial grounds for departed kings of Nta kingdom is today an open vegetation of nearby farmland of host communities. Economic necessities and shrinking forest resources coupled with population growth have all combined to desecrate what used to be the burial grounds for the kings. Between 1968 when Philip Allison did a comprehensive but not total identification and documentation of monoliths sites and now, Nta has lost a good number of 'ancestors' to theft, fire, unfavourable weather conditions, vandalism by farming activities, deliberate sales to pacify hunger and above all neglect by the present generation who see monoliths as relics of the past. The last viewpoint is accentuated by the common fact of modernity and Christianity which ascribe cultural remains, artifacts and some arts works as satanic, animist, witchcrafty and the like. Ironically, the same antiquities which these culture bearers have been white-washed to abandon are highly sought for, paid for and marketed by agents of the same race that introduced the Christian religion into other "dark" areas of the global space.

Out of thirty-nine monoliths named after previous kings, about twenty dynasty monoliths have been lost to one or the other factor stated above. This is to be expected as the culture zone is

proximate to an international eastern border of Nigeria. Organized traffickers reputed for buying antiquities find willing collaborators among the loafing miscreants in monoliths communities. These jobless and indolent youths in monolith communities are the chain through which the traffickers loot away monoliths and other antiquities to other climes. Misfortunate plights have always greeted the many victims who have taken part in negotiating away monoliths from their communities. Outright blindness as in Egunokor, accidents and untimely deaths in Nta, derangements and destitution are the gory tales often told of youths who indulged in organizing and selling monoliths.

Recently, the efforts of Factum Arte, our research collaborates have led to discovery of *Ebiabu* and other monoliths from Etinghinta site, on display at the Quai Branly museum, Paris, Brussels and on so on. This discovery corroborates earlier information obtained from the monoliths communities during the first phase of field work in the zone. Stolen monoliths from Cross River, Nigeria are distributed all over foreign lands with little or no efforts or query at restitution or repatriation by government functionaries.

Diversification of the economy through tourism has remained a laudable orchestra on the lips of Nigerian government functionaries. In practice however, the rural communities who by and large are the custodians of veritable heritage cultures and other tour sites are wallowing in neglect and poverty amidst plenty; access roads to the communities are unthinkable luxuries. Given this background, it takes the effort of committed and well-meaning voluntary organizations to drum down awareness of the need to protect and conserve heritage sites. Cultural properties in other climes are unique properties which not only spin income but define the very essence of a peoples culture and traditions, their cosmology and level of civilization. The monolith heritage is one of such properties which have been neglected in Nigeria.

4. What is to be done

Government neglect of its rich cultural heritage may not deter the researcher from applying his tools to recreate the past in the eye of the present for the future. The task of prying into the noble gyrations of forbearers need a lot of sacrifice in time and finances. This research is therefore calling attention of well-meaning individuals, non-governmental organizations, research institutions interested in breaking new grounds to collaborate in this modest efforts to thinker into the world of ancestors in generation past if only to benefit from their wisdom and apply same to our world. A lot more questions from this culture zone is begging for answers: who carved these monoliths? What was the cosmology of the carvers; in view of the sign writing in some of the monoliths, can it still be correct to say as has been said that Africa did not have a form of writing?... the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few... together we can extend the frontier of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to report on primary investigation of Nta monoliths in the middle region of the Cross River, Nigeria. Monoliths abound in this culture zone which is about 200 square km, covering precisely two local government areas. Nta monoliths have a definite tradition of a succession of carved and uncarved monoliths in human form and named after previous kings who were thirty-nine in number to c1900 AD. A relative dating formula has established that this culture flourished in c975-1050AD using Nta king list. Archaeological methods can establish absolute dates for this dynasty. The monolith heritage is fast facing extinction. Individuals and institutions interested in conservation should lend a helping hand; research institutions and foundations can also extend grants and fellowship to encourage, promote and extend the frontiers of knowledge into the past for the benefit of generations yet unborn.

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