



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

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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.

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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 \(pp. xx\)](#) 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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