THE CROSS RIVER MONOLITHS OF NIGERIA
The university of Calabar, whose motto is synonymous with knowledge for service, was established in 1975 with the mission to produce high quality graduates and scholars in focal areas of learning with theoretical, practical and entrepreneurial skills for the world of work in a conducive environment through quality research and teaching. Located at the old city of Calabar in Cross River State of Nigeria, the University of Calabar has continued to aspire to be a centre of excellence producing globally competitive graduates and contributing significantly to development through research.

**ABU**

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria- Nigeria was established in 1962 by the then Government of Northern Region of Nigeria. The University was taken over by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1975. The University has 13 Faculties and 82 Departments in the areas of Humanities, Sciences, Technology and Medicine. The University has attained the highest international ideals of scholarship and has provided learning of a standard required and expected of a university of the highest standing while reflecting the needs, the traditions, the social and intellectual heritage of the society in which it is located.

**TARA - TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART**

TARA is a Nairobi-based, non-governmental organisation committed to recording the rich rock art heritage of the African continent, to making this information widely accessible and, to the extent possible, safeguarding those sites most threatened by humans and nature. To achieve its mission, TARA works closely with communities where rock art is found as well as with national and international heritage bodies including the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and smaller specialist organisations.

**Factum Foundation**

The Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Conservation is a not-for-profit organisation, founded in 2009 in Madrid. It works alongside its sister company, Factum Arte: a multi-disciplinary workshop in Madrid dedicated to digital mediation in contemporary art and the production of facsimiles. The Foundation was established to demonstrate the importance of documenting, recreating and disseminating the world’s cultural heritage.

**Front cover image:** *Landscape: View east from Ikom area towards the Cross River and Cameroon border. Inset: Detail showing one of the forest monoliths (See page 5)*

**Back cover image:** *Dr. Solomon Abu Edet below a huge forest tree at Agba.*

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Above: Alok monolith, & Clockwise - Monoliths at Bornina, Agba and Ntolshi

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Introduction

The Monolith sites were designed by forbears of the present occupants about 1500 years ago, in order to make life possible and meaningful in the high rain forest of the middle and upper Cross River region. The orientations of the monolith positions are simple, functional and spiritual, providing the context for communal living of the people at that time. Because the monolith culture developed for ancestral memorials, it was known as “Akwanshi” or ‘dead ones in the ground’. It appears to have emerged mainly in the Middle Cross River region with the exploitation of available basalt and limestone rocks which lent themselves to this form of sculpture. The carved monoliths are exclusively found in this region at the south east of Nigeria. The main monolith producers inhabited the region occupied today by the northern Ejagham-speaking people, among whom are Nta, Nde, Nselle, Nnam, Ekajuk, Nkim and Nkum sub-ethnic groups, which in the 1960s collectively became identified as Bakor people. Today the Bakor settlements are referred to as the “monolith people,” located over an expanse of 100 kilometers between Ikom and Ogoja local government areas. In the known 35 monolith site locations about three hundred and fifty (295) monoliths were identified in 1968 by Philip Allison. In 1976, Ekpo Eyo conducted a test excavation. The stone reliefs of the monoliths, carved out of basalt and limestone, have tremendous historical and symbolic importance, related to the living Nsibidi (Nsibiri in Ejagham) ‘coded sign’ culture of the entire region. Since they were first surveyed, the monolith reliefs have been fragile contexts and threatened with theft and destruction. Although the main concentrations of these monoliths are found in the Ikom and Ogoja region. Despite the growing international awareness of the value of rock art, within Nigeria there is a lack of respect and understanding about the value of rock art protection.
Left to right: Monolith from Nnaborakpa (now in an international collection); decorated monolith at Agba and anthropomorphic stone at Alok still used in ceremonies.

Map of Nigeria showing Cross River State
Source: Modified from the Administrative Map of Cross River State
A meeting with the Bako community leaders took place at Edor town (Akumabal Abanyom Community Hall) on October 15th 2016. We had engagements to explain the aim and purpose of the research, using illustrative posters produced by Dr. Coulson to promote the significance of preservation and protection of the monoliths and the need for collaboration with the local communities. The outcome was cordial and the community leaders agreed to remain in partnership with us in order to benefit from the preservation and historical study of their heritage which they realized was already in danger.

Field work commenced immediately after the meeting. Selected sites from the six sub-ethnic groups were covered within 10 days of intensive research. The monoliths and sites describe the treasures known by the natives as ‘Atal or akwanshi meaning ‘stones of the dead one in the ground’ that were once erected in circles and concentric formations. The present occupants of the area are eight sub-ethnic groups known today as Bakor, including the Nde, the Nselle, the Nta, the Nnam, the Ekajuk, the Abanyom, the Nkim and the Nkum.
HIGH RESOLUTION CAMERAS
High resolution cameras were also used to photograph, document, evaluate and assess monolith conditions and sites preservation in-situ. Great success was achieved with vivid illustrations and revealing research that will enhance further research on the art history, future rescue conservation work on the damage monolith and sites, and aid archaeological excavations in the second phase of the project. I-pad and phone cameras of high dynamic range (HRD) were also in use to simplify sites and detailed monolith surface documentation.

PHOTOGRAMMETRY / Mapping
Making 3D measurements
It was possible to create 3 dimensional photographic measurements of selected monoliths based on their deteriorated conditions and/or involvement in incidence of theft and/or violent destruction. The high resolution cameras were used to measure their heights, widths and depths and to produce effects that enhance illusion of depth for every monolith documented. This will help in the study of deterioration, conservation, forensic examination, documentation and registration of the monoliths.

USE OF DRONE
The use of a drone – unmanned aerial aircraft vehicles (UAVs)
The method comprised one drone craft that revealed considerable aerial insight into monoliths location in-situ, sites identification and geographical connection with adjacent villages, other monolith sites and features. The high tech methods included reconnaissance survey using drone technology to video and photograph aerial footages of monoliths and sites, geographic features, adjacent farmlands and villages. Drone was lunched specifically to identify the true monolith circles and possible extensions, and to study both the archeology and environmental conditions of sites, future tourism path construction, facility locations and interactive maps for tourism excursions. Information

*Using a quadrocopter drone (foreground) at Alok*
about preserved or destroyed sites will be derived from drone aerial analysis. And ground photographic documentation of the various sites will be compared with sky images acquired by drone overfly.

**CARTOGRAPHY**

Production of site maps  
To solve the perplexing mystery of monolith and sites, it required using vivid map illustrations to explain numerous sites that once stood in the sharps of the forest. Exposing them required GPS instrument to locate monoliths and map sites.  

10 new reconnaissance survey and mapping were made. Kunkunda Nnam newly recovered, is a single site containing more than 10 monoliths in broken conditions located in a mixed-crop farmland. At Ntitogo Nnam site, described by Allison (1964) as Ntetakor, the lower buried section of a monolith was also identified in-situ. And a 3D forensic documentation was taken to assist in the assessment of the missing top which has been found at American Metropolitan Museum NY. What does monolith sites mappings tell us about the monolith world? There is need to explore what life was like in the ancient world from broad monolith cultural trends to daily habits. No place in Africa has enjoyed ancestral carved religions monoliths and sacred place or groove like the Cross River region.

**SEARCH AND RESEARCH**

The archaeology of stone culture in ancient Cross River region, the atal akwanshi of the Cross River Region, from its construction by those long forgotten until its recovery had only one purpose. What was it? How did one of history’s most significant artifacts serve the people of the middle Cross River region? How did Geometry of circles relate to their site orientation and use, leading to the acclaimed book by Philip Allison (1964)? Today more is revealed about the world of ancient middle Cross River region and the origins of ancestral traditional religion. Constructing a history of Bakor region is a monumental task. Bakor’s story takes place in countless sites developed over the millennia and each of the site’s historical puzzle pieces carries with it myriad interpretation and yet to be debated.
Sites

ALOK
This is what you might call a museum site and the entry point and information centre for any visitor coming to the area. The stones are in a supervised/maintained enclosure surrounded by a wall close to the village of Alok. Meanwhile the village Chief, Sylvanus Akong, lives close by, a fount of information on the monolith culture. He is also a highly respected leader in the whole region. The site contains some remarkable monoliths and ceremonies are held here periodically whereby the stones are painted as a means of empowering them. Once forest this is now open grassland.

Alok monoliths

EMANGABE
This is another walled site, once forest but now grassland which is “maintained” and contains some very expressive carved faces. In addition to the site itself there are a few monoliths actually in the village of Emangabe including a group of stones which, as at Alok, are regularly painted as part of a ritual(s).

Emangabe monoliths and Chief Akong
Nnaborakpa
The site is close to the village of the same name and consists of a small, densely forested copse where a number of remarkable monoliths are located. Before we were admitted to the forest we were asked to wait while the village elder went in to talk to the spirits and make offerings of palm wine. Some of the stones we saw, all of which were impressive, were lying down where they had at some stage fallen. Others had been destroyed by fire, which rages at the end of every dry season and if the stones have fallen they are even more likely to be cracked and destroyed by the fire.

NTIGOGO
This site is not that far from Alok and Emangabe but there is no forest remaining, just Yam and Cassava plantations. As a result most of the monoliths here are fallen and we needed several helpers with machetes to clear the undergrowth sufficiently to find and record the engravings.
NLUL
This is a similar site to the Ntigogo site. Most of the monoliths here are also lying flat below the undergrowth here and thus hard to find, and many have been badly cracked or destroyed by fire. We were shown one truly extraordinary piece, a decorated head with exceptional workmanship.

NIKRIGOM
This was one of the two most impressive forest sites which illustrated the former environment of all these sites. We also saw here how the monoliths are frequently arranged in circles, like at Stonehenge in Britain. Many of the monoliths were covered or partly covered with moss. We saw how many monoliths had been broken or cut in two by thieves leaving just the base behind. In the same area we were shown where the head of a monolith had been dropped by thieves about half a kilometre from the site it came from. We found one very large monolith which had fallen and was lying on its face so about 10 of our local team using ropes and pulleys struggled for well over an hour before they were able to raise it enough to see the carving on the face. Although the forest at Nikrigom is officially protected there were signs of serious logging just next to the main site.

*Exceptional carved head at Nlul found in plantation, Right hand image by: Factum Arte*

*Middle and Bottom, Monoliths recorded at Nikrigom Forest site*
Monolith probably weighing a ton or more in forest at Agba
NTOLSHI
This is a site with many monoliths but the site has apparently been neglected and mainly forgotten for many years in that almost all the stones are lying down, and as a result hard to find. Our local helpers cleared away the undergrowth with machetes so we could see them. Sometimes they had to lift the smaller stones as they were lying on their faces, so to speak. At Nikrigom, although quite a few of the monoliths were lying down, a number had been standing giving the impression that the site was still respected if not used.

Monolith found lying forgotten on the forest floor at Ntolshi

Agba
This is another major forest site, and as at Nikrigom many of the stones are still standing. This was where we saw some of the most remarkable monoliths of all. Perhaps there was also a connection between the reluctance of the local community here to allow us to visit the site, and the impression that this was an extraordinary, little known site which is no doubt still used for rituals and ceremonies. We got the feeling that the whole community cared deeply about their stones. Perhaps they were afraid that publicity might lead to the sort of theft that has taken place at some of the other sites.

Detail of monolith recorded at Nikrigom
Large monolith at Agba
EDAMKONO

Once a forest site like the others the forest itself has been cleared to make way for Yam and Cassava plantations, so the monoliths are now more vulnerable than ever to fire, damage from farm implements and general neglect. Now they are just a nuisance and in the way. All the stones we recorded here were lying down and we were aware that many must be buried, invisible under the soil.
This is a village where at some time in the recent past the elders gathered some of the smaller monoliths that were lying in the original sites near the village and assembled them in the centre of the village. The impression we got was that on the one hand this was a way of bringing the power of the stones into the centre of the community while on the other it also enabled the elders to keep an eye on them and make sure they were not stolen!

Dr. Solomon Abu Edet with members of the Agba Community next to a large monolith

BORNINA
This is a village where at some time in the recent past the elders gathered some of the smaller monoliths that were lying in the original sites near the village and assembled them in the centre of the village. The impression we got was that on the one hand this was a way of bringing the power of the stones into the centre of the community while on the other it also enabled the elders to keep an eye on them and make sure they were not stolen!

Three small monoliths recorded at Bornina village
Presently the monoliths are confronted with several environmental and social challenges, including air pollution, acid rain, heavy rainfall, hotter seasons, harmattan dust and gradual forest depletion. There are equally threats from bush fire, greater demands for farmland, threats of theft and illegal trafficking, vandalism and destruction due to ethnic conflicts, village expansion and growth in population, threats by Christian religious fanatics, overzealous youth and corrupt local government officials. This work therefore recommends a plan of action for rock art conservation and sites management against degradation and human destruction. The persistent fire disaster of some old sites and the discovery of new ones which became highly vulnerable to fire were documented recently by Drs. Ivor Miller and Abu Edet, as shown in photographs earlier directed to TARA and PCF, and as illustrated on the poster on page 17.

The University of Calabar, Department of History and International Studies and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, being anxious about the situation, have been seeking avenues to rescue the monoliths from persistent deterioration.
Our research counterparts are:

i. The Trust for African Rock Art (TARA), headed by David Coulson, based in Nairobi, Kenya who has contributed in the field of preservation and study of rock art throughout the world and is presently working to help save the threatened rock art of the Sahara.

ii. The Prince Claus Fund (PCF) for Culture and Development in the Netherlands, a funding body that assists in Cultural Emergency Response (CER) programmes around disaster prone areas of the world. Following our website publications on the monolith rock art fire destructions, (Ivor Miller and Abu Edet 2015), TARA and PCF decided to partner with us to rescue the monoliths from further destruction and conduct enlightenment programmes among the local communities.

**Rescue Work**

My approach to the conservation problem of the Cross River monoliths is interdisciplinary. The underlying aim is to preserve the surface carved decoration of the monoliths in-situ. The basis for this is through archaeological survey of sites/test excavations, video and photographic documentation of the rock arts; documentation of deterioration and destruction; preservation and conservation of the broken monoliths; sites preservation and development. Using previous Cross River monoliths deterioration data, we can draw inferences about how to stabilize sites as well as about how to discourage farming and hunting games using fire and introduction of awareness and poverty alleviation programme. Other ideas about site conservation strategy to be discussed by the team have consequences for conservation goals. One such idea is that of increasing tree population by systematic tree planting in and around the sites. As a result of the survey, and subsequent studies of deterioration, the rate of the deterioration of these stone reliefs suggested that immediate attention of restoration and conservation are required. My studies also concluded that conservation with continuous research and investigation could provide an ample assistance to stabilize and restore the monoliths: attaching broken stone piece using synthetic resin and injecting synthetic resin into the cracks. Problems such as purchasing the restoration materials and training local communities are a few of them. If we start, we will then be able to determine the extent of the project and general planning of the conservation and restoration of the monoliths and what will constitute post research work, including monitoring and evaluation..
Four of the local Bakor clan leaders who are customarily addressed as “Your Majesties”

Village meeting at Agba with Chief Akong
The Cross River Monoliths are one of Africa’s least known and least celebrated cultural treasures. This is a heritage of global importance, which, as a result of political and environmental factors has for a long time remained under the world’s radar.

Nigeria’s art treasures have long been celebrated and examples of these have been shown in the World’s great museums, but although a few stolen monoliths have made their way to major museums this heritage and tradition has never been officially showcased. Even in the National Museum of Nigeria there is no example of these monoliths and no printed information or photographs.

Our hope is that this and subsequent projects will throw a lot more light on this heritage which will lead to a lot more local and international interest in the monoliths. This in turn will hopefully lead to more Nigerian Government investment in the development of this region which should encourage and facilitate tourism. Better roads are badly needed as well as small, well-run hotels with proper tourist facilities. It is time that Cross River State should start benefitting from the growing interest in cultural tourism.

The Future

The old residency museum in Calabar overlooking the river
Map of Cross River Monolith Sites

Legend
- Archaeological (Monolith) Site
- Town/Village
- Major Road
- Minor Road
- River/Stream
- Major River

Project team in Calabar