

Challenges in Conserving Soapstones in the National Museum, Esie, Nigeria

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Abstract

Esie Museum in Kwara State is the oldest national museum in Nigeria and it is reputed to have the largest collection of soapstone images across Africa. The soapstone images and other materials in the museum stand out as a unique art tradition of Nigeria that must be preserved against deterioration or total breakdown so that ancient civilization would not be forgotten. In order to preserve these cultural objects, proper caring methods and techniques must be followed to guarantee the long lifespan of the collections. It is against this background that the study examines the essence of conservation of the soapstone images in the National Museum, Esie. It also examines National Museum, Esie's collections and the challenges of conservation. Data for this study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source draws from fieldwork which includes physical observation of the objects in the museum, oral interviews with the purposeful key informants, such as the curators and the conservators in the museum, as well as the traditional ruler of Esie community. The secondary sources were collected from existing literature, such as textbooks, journal articles and protagonists in the subject matter. Findings of the study reveal inadequate care and maintenance of the cultural heritage in this museum. Subsequently, the study suggests a need to improve the facilities and equipments at the museum, so as to guarantee the well-being of objects kept in the museum.

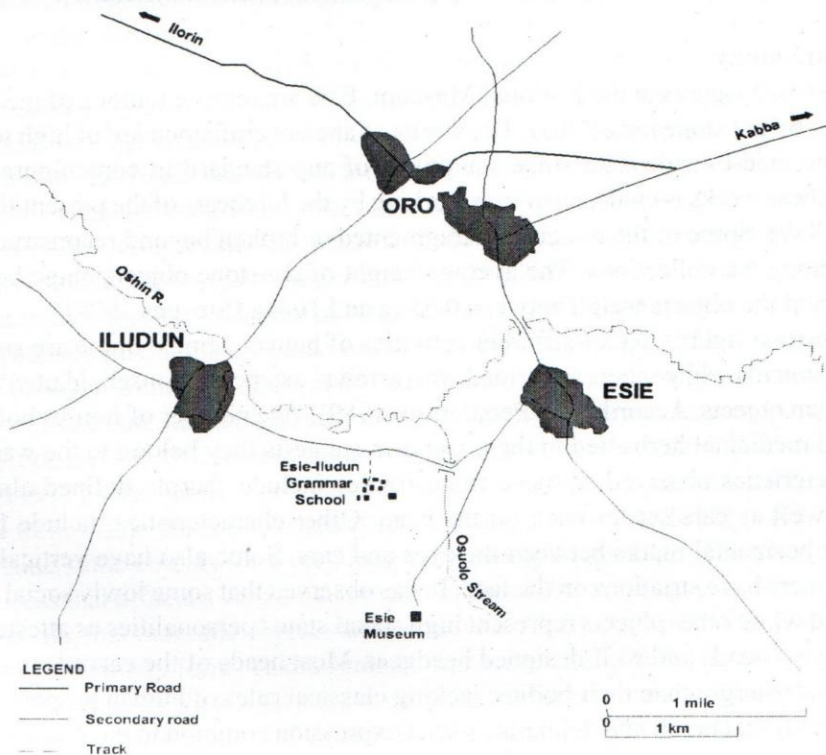
Introduction

The collection of cultural objects for preservation in Nigeria's museum started as a need to protect heritage from destruction by human and environmental factors. The enthusiasm of collecting and storing cultural objects in order to protect them from people who could destroy or steal them, characterized the early practice of conservation in Nigeria's national museums. It is on this basis that Esie Museum became the first national museum to be established by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1945 as part of its effort to safeguard cultural heritage in the country. In particular, the museum in Esie was established in Esie town because of several pieces of soapstone artifacts that were found in the community. Findings have shown that many scholars (*e.g.*, Adepegba

1982; Adewara 1997; Aigbeifo 1984; Aremu 2010; Fagg 1959; Falade 2014; Hambolu 2009; Izuakor 1998; Onabanjo 1988; Oziogu 2012; Pemberton 1989; Pogoso 1990; Stevens 1978) have written on different aspects of Esie soapstone figures. However, most of these studies were engrossed in the search for the origin and makers of the artefacts while the state of the museum infrastructure was neglected, including the maintenance of the museum and artefacts. It is against this background that this study considers the conservation aspect of the objects and museum environment as paramount if cultural objects are to be passed onto the next generation without their deterioration.

Geographical Location/Scope of Study

The scope of the study covers over 800 pieces of soapstones discovered in Esie community in the early 20th century as well as other ethnographic objects kept in the store of the museum. The Esie community is an Igbomina ethnic cultural people of the Yoruba tribe located in the Irepodun Local Government Area, about 60km southwest of Ilorin, the capital city of Kwara State in Nigeria. It is about 128km north of Ile-Ife, the cradle city of the Yoruba people. The town is situated about 7km to the right of the major highway leading from Ilorin, the State capital, to Kabba-Lokoja (Figure 1). It is an ecotone between the rainforest and the guinea savanna zone (Aremu 2010:21). The site is located on relatively low ground surrounded by five streams Osin, Ajenje, Endu, Osu-Olo and Aya-oba. These streams serve as major sources of water for the inhabitants of Esie town.



Discovery of the Soapstones and Establishment of the Museum

Esie National Museum is a community-based museum, which is endowed with over 1500 pieces of soapstone and other objects. These are kept partly in the ethnographic store while others are displayed in the museum gallery. According to Pemberton (1989), the first European to take note of Esie stone images was the German ethnographer, Leo Frobenius, who collected three heads carved in the Esie style from neighbouring Offa town in 1912. However, the discovery of the site of the Esie soapstone images was reported to the government in 1933 by H.G. Ramshaw, an inspector of schools with the Church Missionary Society (Pemberton 1989). By 1945 the very first Nigerian museum started in Esie as part of the strategy of the Federal Government to preserve cultural heritage in Nigeria (Fagg 1963; Falade 2014).

The museum is located at the spot where the soapstones were discovered and excavated in 1933. The etymology of Esie soapstone figures is embedded in myths and mystery. According to Oziogu (2012), the origin of these objects is bewildering and nobody knows how these stone figures came about until the present time. However, inhabitants of the town offered a few explanations. The most popular among these explanations is that the stone figures were rebellious settlers who were turned into stones by an angry god of the land (Babalola, personal communication, 2014). Recently the elites from Esie town constituted a committee that started a yearly Esie monument festival with the aim of promoting awareness and repositioning values embedded in the soapstone figures as well as the museum housing them. The festival is held on the museum grounds and includes lecture/seminars, cultural songs and dances, traditional foods and a fashion parade. The grand finale is always graced by principal government officials.

Ethnographic study

The soapstone figures at the National Museum, Esie are representations of men and women presided over by the stone king (Oba). The works of ancient craftsmen are of high technical skill that can stand side-by-side with stone sculptures of any standard in contemporary time. The existence of these works is evidence of iron working by the forebears of the present Esie indigenes (Onabanjo 1989). Some of the images are fragmented or broken beyond reconstructions, which are found among the collections. The average height of the stone objects range between 14cm and 120cm, and the objects weigh between 0.55kg and 104kg (Stevens 1978).

The soapstone figures depict different activities of human beings. Some are shown playing musical instruments while others are armed with arrows, machetes, household utensils as well as other utilitarian objects. According to Pemberton (1989), "the number of figures holding arrows, cutlasses and medicinal herbs tied to the upper arm suggests they belong to the warrior group". Major characteristics observed of these stone figures include sharply defined almond-shaped eyeballs, as well as ears set far back on the head. Other characteristics include facial marks, usually three horizontal marks between the eyes and ears. Some also have vertical lines on the chin, while others have striations on the face. It was observed that some lowly social figures were less decorated while other objects represent high social status personalities as attested to by their rich attire, heavy beads and well-designed headgear. Most heads of the carved stone figures are disproportionately larger than their bodies; lacking classical rules of human proportion. This was seen as the traditional belief and deliberate visual expression common in the sculptural traditions

of Yoruba art. However, this may be intended to reflect the importance of the head (*ori*) according to the Yoruba perception of the head.

Despite the common attributes, no two soapstone figures look exactly alike. There are differences in their facial features, coiffures and dresses. It is evident from the foregoing that the Esie National Museum contains interesting ancient stone technologies and Oyinloye (2010) has called for its proper management, care and conservation for posterity.

Proper Care and Maintenance of Figures inside the Esie Museum

The Esie soapstone figures is one of the major known stone sculptures in Nigeria. Other Nigerian stone sculptures include the Oranmiyan stone monolith in Ile-Ife and the Ikom stone monoliths in Cross Rivers State. Due to the rare nature and magnitude of the stone artefacts in Esie, there is a need to improve on the conservation of this collection. One of the essential obligations of museums is to ensure proper conservation of both the existing and newly acquired collections. Observation has proved that people believe that since the objects are made of stone, then they cannot breakdown easily. However, research has proved that there is no material, of either organic or inorganic nature, that can last forever without deterioration. As a matter of fact stone artifacts start to decompose from within the object itself. This form of deterioration is termed as a biological form of deterioration. Nevertheless, museums ought to ensure that collections are passed onto future generations in good and safe condition. To achieve this, Ambrose and Paine (1993) assert that special attention must be paid to the body of knowledge of preventative conservation techniques and environmental protection against natural and human-made causes of deterioration in the museum.

To forestall the causes of deterioration, it is expedient to understand the structural content of the object. Soapstone, otherwise known as steatite or soap rock, is a type of metamorphic rock that is very rich in magnesium. It is produced by chemical changes that occur as a result of heat and pressure influx of fluids but without melting. Stone sculpture is one of the earliest records of people's creative impulse available to the world today. However, atmospheric conditions such as rain, water, dust, and temperature can cause stone to decay as they contain many ingredients that are aggressive and active in destroying minerals as well as rocks. The chemical attack on stone is usually caused by the solvent action of water and other acidic impurities contained within it, for example carbon dioxide, sulphurdioxide and sulphurtrioxide (Okpoko 2006).

Yakub (personal communication, 2009) mentions that, in conserving stone artifacts, it may be difficult to notice signs of deterioration that one can easily detect in metals, wood and other cultural objects. Deterioration in stone is not easily noticed for a long period of time. According to Alexander (1979), deterioration in stones is caused by micro-organisms that usually start the destruction from inside the rock. Yakub (personal communication, 2009) explains that bacteria may live inside stone objects for a very long time, doing the damage. The damage is usually in gradual process that affects a very small portion of the object and begins to affect larger portions of the object. By this time, the object starts to manifest 'sun-burning' in the form of flaking or dissolving into a powdery form (Yakub personal communication, 2009). By this time, it may be too late to rescue and restore the object back to its physical form or nature. Therefore, it is pertinent that museums must guard against all causes of deterioration on stone artifacts such as we have in

the Esie Museum. Conservation of soapstone figures in the Esie Museum as we observed, demands checks and balances. The conservator is expected to take care of the objects according to the challenges faced by stone figures in this museum.

It should be noted that application of methods to conserve the stone figures from breaking down may require the use of chemicals for fumigation as preservative, and also to get rid of agents of deterioration in the museum stores and gallery. According to Sibul (2010:5), conservation is a process of dynamic management of change to prolong the life cycle of the concerned objects. Sibul (2010) stresses a need to protect objects from damaging effects of human activity, environmental and natural phenomena. In line with this author's ideology on conservation, it is observed that conservation can either be adequate or inadequate depending on the quality of the facilities and amount of funding for the running of the museum. Thus, the provision of necessary facilities and equipment must be available to the museum to achieve the end result. It must also be stressed here that conservation can either be acceptable or not, depending on the nature of the materials and environment where objects are conserved. This means that it is not only the object that needs care, but also the environment where the objects are preserved in order to drive away agents of deterioration (Feilden 1979).

Challenges of Care and Maintenance of Objects at the Museum

Conservation challenges at the Esie National Museum are basically facilities and equipment. The most basic preventive conservation facilities are unavailable to care for the stone figures. Contrary to the general belief that the Esie National Museum houses only stone objects, there are objects of organic material kept in the ethnographic store of the museum. These materials are kept alongside broken pieces of stone artifacts in the museum store. Odekunle (personal communication, 2009) states that the materials were acquired from the present Esie indigenes, unlike the stone figures that were excavated from the earth. These other objects were either purchased by museum or donated to the museum authority.

The museum in Esie needs a modern structure to store and to conserve its 27 pieces of different organic materials properly. In addition, a conservation laboratory for analysis and treatment of these organic and inorganic stone figures is needed. An electronic camera (available in European and American museums) to detect the internal structure of materials would go a long way to meet the challenges of proper care and maintenance of objects being advocated by ICOM in the 21st century. The museum also needs potent chemicals to eradicate pests in the museum. Most materials, equipment and structures of the museum are obsolete and need replacement. The museum also needs an additional modern gallery to display objects in an aesthetic manner that would attract visitors. The open roof style of the store could be substituted with a state-of-the-art store that would preserve the figures in an enclosed room that prevents objects from uncontrollable dust infiltration.

An Overview of the Museum Content

My personal observation and assessment of the physical structure of the collection generally suggests that they are stable and without any form of decomposition. The stone images examined in the museum shows no sign of deterioration. It was also observed that the exhibition in the

gallery has been on for a very long time, in what seems to be a permanent exhibition. This means that the collection have not changed position for many years. It should be noted that surface structure of most stone artifacts kept in the store are dusty and unkempt. This situation is caused by the open roof type of architectural design of the store and gallery of the museum. This type of building style has contributed greatly to the proliferation of dusty air and ultra violet light in the store and gallery. This type of preservation and care might cause internal rupture of some wood and leather materials in the ethnographic store. The negative impact of the dusty air and dirt becomes more pronounced on the objects during the harmattan season because of harsh weather. It should be noted that the atmospheric environment contains a considerable amount of viral bacteria to the extent that Kissel (1999), predicts that they could act directly or indirectly on the sculptures and other material objects eventually breaking down the stone figures partially or completely. It should be noted that the standard principle of a museum is to prevent dusty air by using window blinds and shutters, but where there is an open roof (as in the case of Esie museum), excessive ultra-violet rays may cause damage to wooden objects as well as stone artifacts over time.

As a result of different collections in the store that vary in terms of material media, there is a need to conserve the content in the store with appropriate methods and techniques. It was observed that most of the objects kept in the store were arranged on wooden shelves, while the ones in the gallery were displayed using the indigenous style of display grooves. The study observed that exposure of objects in the museum to heat and dust constitutes a major hazard that could endanger object life spans. The study also observed that the museum's store is overcrowded with broken pieces of artifacts that need restoration with their broken halves. In this regard, there is a need for a specialist in stone sculpture restoration who could match most of the broken pieces together to become a whole. According to Odekunle (personal communication, 2009), the museum conservator performs daily routine check-ups on the collections in order to detect any trace of deterioration. Apart from this exercise, the conservator also uses volatile chemicals such as alcohol and ethanol to clean stone artifacts. The conservator stresses that at times, there may be a need for stone objects to be given deep cleansing in order to get good results. Alexander (1979) suggests the cleaning of stone objects by immersion in distilled water or extraction with moist paper and vacuum transpiration as better and effective. He stresses that such objects can be coated with wax, resins or silicon ester in order to preserve them in good condition.

The study further observed that there are conservation needs in the National Museum Esie. According to Odekunle (personal communication, 2009) the conservation needs at the Esie museum are as follow: modern exhibition gallery and well-equipped stores; a conservation laboratory for proper diagnosis and treatment practices; air conditioners to stabilize the objects in the store and gallery; good lighting system in the gallery and museum environment; a stand-by electricity generating system in times of power failure to maintain electrical appliance functionality; museum furniture, such as tables, stools, ladders, iron shelves, metal drawers, boxes as well as safe containers for good storage and conservation care.

Summary, Discussion and Conclusion

The study observes that soapstone figures and other cultural objects in the Esie National Museum have not received adequate care and maintenance. The study upholds the view that better conservation care can help to salvage the situation. It is expected that the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) will intervene in the current situation of the first national museum in Nigeria and protect our nation's heritage for future generations. Apart from work to be done on the rehabilitation of the road that leads to the museum, there is also the need for the museum to be given a general facelift. It should be noted that Esie Museum is located far away from the heart of the town; hence, a good access road would bring the museum closer to art connoisseurs and the general populace. There is also the need for operational vehicles to convey visitors from the town to the museum site. There is a need for adequate funding by government and the agency responsible for museums management to boost conservation activities.

As a public learning institution, there is a need for increased educational tours and art exchange programmes that would arouse the interest of schools as well as art lovers in and around the state. There is an urgent need for the Federal and State Government, as well as stakeholders in technology, to help conserve and preserve the contents in the National Museum of Esie. The need to follow the conservation rules of protecting objects of organic and inorganic materials from natural light or sunlight cannot be over stated. It is better to revamp the standard of conservation in Esie museum to the care and maintenance obtainable in the Lagos National Museum as well as other museums in the country.

Finally, the museum gallery and store should be protected against proliferation of dust as well as ultraviolet light that is capable of damaging collections. The gallery should be illuminated with a good lighting system as well as ventilated with air conditioners in order to sustain and prolong the lifespan of the contents of the museums. The National Commission for Museum and Monuments should expand the scope of exhibition in Esie museum with borrowed objects from other museums in order to boost tourism and also educate visitors.

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