

■ NIGERIA

Conservation of Cultural Heritage in Nigeria: A Study on National Museum Esie

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Introduction

The National Museum in Esie is the first national museum established by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1945 as part of the effort to safeguard cultural heritage in the country. The museum was established in Esie because of several pieces of soapstone artefacts that were found in the community. This study investigates the situation around the first National Museum in Nigeria. The study was carried out to determine how collections in the store and gallery are faring under the conservation care of the museum. It should be pointed out that many scholars of note have written about the Esie soapstone figures but most failed to consider ways to improve the state of their conservation in the museum. These previous studies were engrossed in the search for the origins and makers of the artefacts. However, this study considers the conservation aspect of the museum as paramount and important.

In this study, apart from the texts of the leading authors on the subject matter, I will dwell mostly on my personal contact with the museum and observation of the objects over five museum visits. The method of investigation in this study is

physical observation of the objects in the store and gallery and walking around the environment. The study also gathered some data through unstructured interviews with some of the museum workers.

Study Location

Esie is located about 60km southwest of Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State of Nigeria. The town is situated about 7km to the right of the major highway leading from the state capital to Kabba-Lokoja (Figure 1), in an ecotone between the rain forest and the Guinea Savannah zone (Aremu 2010: 21). The site is on relatively low ground surrounded by four streams: Osin, Endu, Osu-Olo and Ayaoba (located east, south, north and west respectively).

Over 800 pieces of sculptural soapstone figures are stored and displayed in the gallery and store of the National Museum Esie in Irepodun Local Government Area of Kwara State. The soapstone figures were discovered by Mr. Ramsey (Church Missionary Society Inspector of Schools) and reported to the Government in 1933. In 1945 the very first Nigerian Museum was established at Esie as part of a strategy to preserve cultural heritage in Nigeria (Fagg 1963: 130). The National Museum at Esie contains interesting stone technology that needs proper conservation care and management to preserve it for posterity (Oyinloye 2010: 127).

Conservation at National Museum Esie

One of the essential obligations of the museum profession is to ensure proper conservation of both the existing and newly acquired collections. The museum ensures that reasonable collections are passed unto future generations in good and safe condition. To achieve this, special attention must be paid to the body of knowledge of preventive conservation techniques and environmental protection against natural and manmade causes of deterioration in the museum (Ambrose and Paine

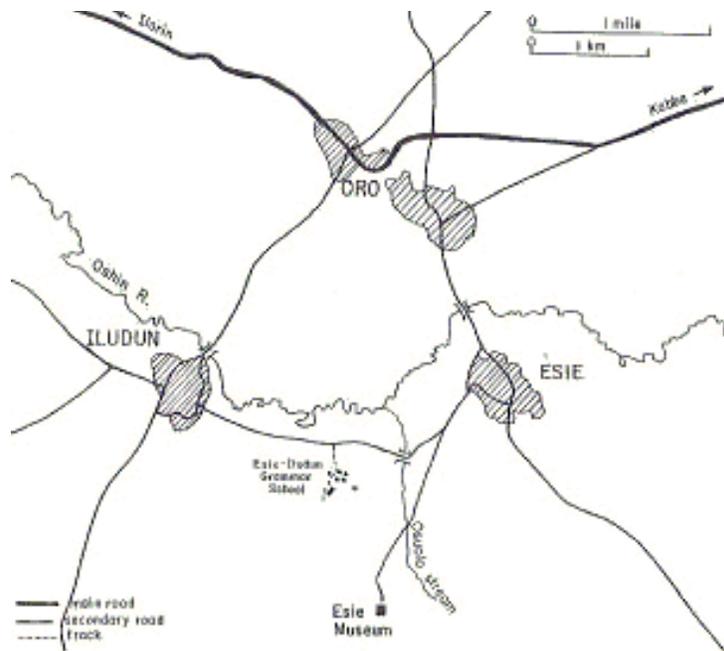


Figure 1: Map of Esie Town and Environs (Source: Stevens 1978).

1993). According to this statement, museums must guard against any causes of deterioration.

In regard to stone sculptures there is little serious conservation work needed as is the case with bronze, wooden objects, leather and textile materials. Stone sculptures are special objects because this art form is rarely practiced in Nigerian art traditions. The major known stone sculpture tradition ever practiced in Nigeria is the Esie soapstones, which have no link to contemporary art practiced in Nigeria. Other stone works recorded in Nigeria are the Cross River monoliths, which are preserved in the courtyard of the Lagos and Oron National Museums. Esie is the second largest collection of stone sculptures (the largest collection is in Japan). Because of their rarity and the number of the stone figures in Esie, there is a need to conserve these collections better than is their current state in the museum. This study investigates the condition of the artefacts in the Esie National Museum from the conservation point of view in order to ensure the well-being of the collections for the future.

Concerns in the Conservation of Stone Artefacts

Granite and basalt are very hard; they are grey, pink or black in colour and are used for building structures. Granite is hard and nonporous but cannot withstand the effects of sulphuric fumes and automobile emissions (Alexander 1979). Sandstone and limestone are relatively porous and absorb soluble salts when they are buried in the ground. Experts in museum science have also pointed out that fluctuation of relative humidity can cause sandstone and limestone to crystallize. It has also been determined that soluble salts will make their way to the surface, thereby defacing ornamental detail and inscriptions on stone objects. According to Alexander (1979) the way to clean stone object is by immersion in distilled water or extraction with moist paper and vacuum transpiration. He further states that objects could be impregnated later with wax, resins or silicon ester.

Stone is one of the earliest records of man’s creative impulse available to the world today. Buildings and monuments are also erected

with natural stone and most of these have been exposed to decay (Okpoko 2006: 150). Atmosphere can cause stone to deteriorate because it contains many ingredients that are aggressive to, and active in, destroying minerals and rocks. The chemical attack on stone is caused by the solvent action of water and other acidic impurities contained in the atmosphere, including carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and sulphur trioxide (Okpoko 2006).

Rain water, dust, and temperature can also cause stone to decay or breakdown. Rain water has corrosive elements that can cause decay of stone. Dust particles react with acids that are contained in rainwater and when they blow across the stones they attack and corrode the stones. There is also a considerable change in temperature during day and night especially in tropical areas. Stone is a bad heat conductor and sharp changes in temperature cause a lot of changes to take place in stone (Lewin 1966).

Stone sculptures in museums are less affected by Nigeria's weather, except in the structural stone decoration on outside walls (Yakub personal communication 2006). It has been observed that deterioration of stone sculpture depends upon the geographical location of the environment. This study learned that there are some locations in Nigeria where stone works are exposed to salt water, which led to their gradual breakdown. This study learned that if there are metals inside stone, the metal can corrode and cause the stone to break. According to Alexander (1979), whenever metal in stone corrodes, the stone is enlarged by six times its normal volume and will break the stone object or structure.

In conserving stone artefacts, it may be difficult to notice deterioration, which is more obvious in metals, wood and other materials. Stone is hardly affected over a long time. According to Alexander (1979), deterioration in stone is caused by microorganisms that work on the stone, but are likely to start from inside. Yakub (personal communication 2006) explains that bacterial organisms may live inside stone objects for a very

long time doing damage. The damage is gradual and affects minute portions over a very long period of time before they manifest into larger portions of the object. By the time one can see the damage with the naked eye, the object would have broken down beyond repair. At this stage, the object may collapse or breakdown completely. For example, the object would have started to manifest 'sunburning' in the form of flaking or breaking down into a powder (Yakub personal communication 2006).

Collection Content in the National Museum Esie

Over 800 pieces of soapstone figures were discovered in Esie in 1933. Many of the figures were broken into pieces. As a result, the first National Museum started at the site of discovery. Today many of these stone figures are represented in most of Nigeria's national museums. A lot of scholarly research has investigated this art tradition's origin, its makers, and the date of the art. But this study observed that none of this research ever considered the danger of artefact deterioration simply because they are made of stone. However, it should be noted that all objects and materials have a lifespan within which they may lose their composition. By this token the study investigates the preventive aspects to conserve stone objects in the National Museum Esie.

The study also observed, contrary to people's belief that the National Museum Esie houses only stone objects, that there are other objects in the museum. The study discovered many other objects of organic materials in the ethnographic store of the National Museum Esie. These materials are preserved alongside broken pieces of the stone artefacts in the only store of the museum. There are 27 non-stone artefacts in the collection that were recorded by this study. These recorded items include:

- 2 pieces of *Igba Oya's* (Sango's wife) calabashes
- 1 piece of *Odo Sango* (Sango's mortal and

- pestle)
- 4 pieces of *Epa* mask (Headdress from Igbomina people)
- 1 piece of *Ogun* statue (*Ogun's* image, god of iron)
- 3 pieces of *Sapona* statue (carved figure of *Sapona* deity)
- 6 pieces of *Ere-Ibeji* (carved twin figure)
- 4 pieces of *Ilu-Ode* (hunter's drums)
- 4 pieces of *Ilekun* (door panels)
- 2 pieces of *Opo-Imulero* (pillar post)

The enumerated items were sighted at the course of our investigation in the only store of the museum. According to Odekunle (personal communication 2009), these aforementioned ethnographic materials were acquired for safekeeping in the museum by the present Esie indigenes. He stressed that the mode of acquisition is different from the excavated soapstone figures.

The study observed that the National Museum Esie does not have a conservation laboratory for treating and cleaning artefacts. The conservation work in the museum is being carried out in one corner of the store. The conservation unit is provided merely with a table and shelf that contain a few chemicals and other materials. There were some newly bought chemicals for an important and anticipated conservation exercise. The study also learned that some remedial work was carried out after the visit of the former Minister of Culture and Tourism, Prince Adetokunbo Kayode (SAN), in 2008. The honourable minister challenged the museum's workers to put some of the broken pieces of the stone artefacts in the store together to make whole objects. The exercise was given a trial because the public have also complained of being tired of viewing the same old exhibition every year in the museum. In this regard, some of the pieces used for the remedial conservation experiment are still kept in the store under observation (Adewoye personal communication 2009). However, many other broken pieces could not be matched with other fragments. According to Hambolu (2010: 18), the broken pieces of the Esie soapstones were caused by destruction

of the objects on religious grounds. However, the major museum collections in the National Museum of Esie were acquired through archaeological work on the site within the museum compound. Other ethnographic materials in the store were acquired through donation and purchase from the owners (Odekunle personal communication 2009).

Condition of the Store and Gallery of the Museum

The study's general assessment of the soapstone figures is based on their physical appearance with the naked eye because there is no microscope to examine their internal structure. The stone figures and other materials show no outward signs of defect or deterioration. The study learned that the exhibition has been on for a very long time, in what can be termed a 'life exhibition'. This means that the collections on display are stationery and have been unchanged for as long as the existence of the museum.

The condition of the store and gallery is no longer adequate for the collections. Most of the objects kept in the store are dusty and unkempt. This can be attributed to the open-roof architectural design of the gallery and museum store. This design has contributed greatly to the proliferation of dusty air and exposure of the collections to natural light. This could cause havoc for wooden and leather objects in the store. The study observed that dusty air and dirt are more pronounced on the objects during *harmattan*, which is the bush-burning period around the museum compound. It should be noted that the atmospheric environment contained a reasonable amount of viral bacteria that could act directly and indirectly on the sculpture and other material objects causing them to breakdown partially or completely.

The investigation also discovered that certain areas of the ethnographic store are blown open by the wind causing a fraction of the gallery wall to crack. The crack has led to flaking of the asbestos in the gallery hall. This should be corrected before

further irreparable damage is done to the building. The study discovered that part of the disadvantage of the open-roof gallery is the tendency to flood during the rainy season. The administration, gallery and store building has an open-roof central courtyard that allows water to lodge within the building. Although there is an underground outlet for water, these outlets can be blocked or filled especially when rain is heavy. Our investigation discovered that the affects of flooding is being moderated by a raised pavement or brick wall to keep damp from the store but the problem has not been eradicated entirely (Odekunle personal communication 2009). The study suggests that the only way to solve damp and lodging of water in the centre of the administration, gallery, and store building is to have a newly constructed and well-ventilated 21st century museum edifice for proper conservation.

Problems of Storage in the Esie Museum

At present, the National Museum in Esie has just one store for the storage of all collections displayed in the exhibition gallery. The study observed that collections in the store of the museum vary in medium and materials of execution. In this regard, they need to be conserved with different methods and in different stores in order to sustain their lifespan and durability. The study also observed that most of the objects in the store are arranged on wooden shelves, while the ones in the gallery are displayed on traditional props (Figure 2).

The store is overcrowded with many broken pieces of artefacts and further attempts should be made to restore the figures. There are many figures on the store's bare floor, which causes difficulty in the passage of workers in the store. This study fears deterioration caused by ultra-violet light in the store if artefacts are exposed over time. It is better to follow the conservation rules, which state that objects of organic or inorganic material should be conserved against natural light or sunlight. The gallery and store should be protected against dust and excessive light. The store and gallery should be illuminated

with good lighting systems and ventilation and air-conditioning in order to prolong the life of the soapstone figures and other objects in the museum.

The study also noted that many of the conservation equipment and materials are obsolete and need replacing. If the museum is to realise its full potential, and if it is to achieve conservation standards, the authority must buy trolleys for carrying heavy objects, ladders for climbing high shelves, and it must buy more shelves and repair spoiled shelves, purchase preservative/treatment chemicals, a refrigerator for storing chemicals and to freeze bacteria in wooden objects. The management should also build a conservation laboratory where problems with artefacts can be diagnosed and treated appropriately.

Method of Object Conservation at the Esie Museum

I interacted with the conservators to know how collections in the museum are being treated in the National Museum of Esie. According to Adewoye (personal communication 2009), the conservators occasionally use different types of soft brushes to dust off dirt on the objects. She also stated that major conservation work at the National Museum Esie is focused on dust because of the open-roof architectural design of the gallery and store. She lamented that this form of architectural design has also introduced excessive light, insects, rats, rodents etc, that freely enter the gallery and store. According to Adewoye (personal communication 2009), apart from the brushing of the collection surfaces, there is a weekly inspection and routine check on collections in the store by the team of curator and conservators. At this time, there are two conservators in charge of care and maintenance of the collections in the museum. Adewoye (personal communication 2009) mentioned that the weekly collection routine check-up is due to the fact that the Esie Museum houses mainly stone objects. In other museums, where there are different kinds of material collections, the conservation routine check-up is everyday



Figure 2: Cross-section of the images arranged on props in the gallery.

in order to detect infections in objects rapidly.

Adewoye (personal communication 2009) further stressed that the conservators make daily check-ups in the collections in the gallery in order to detect traces of deterioration. According to her, whenever an infection is detected, certain treatments are recommended and administered to stop further action of bacteria. At times, there may be a need for stone objects to be given a deep cleaning. The conservator uses volatile chemicals, such as alcohol and ethanol, in order to get a good result. The idea behind the choice of alcohol and ethanol is their tendency to dry fast, and to disperse into the air without disturbing the environment.

Problems of Improper Conservation at the Esie Museum

Having gone through the gallery, store,

administrative block and the environment, I noticed inadequacies in the conservation methods of the museum and summarise them as follows:

- *Dust\air.* Exposure of the objects in the gallery and store to excessive dust constitute a major hazard that could endanger their life span.
- *Heat.* The objects are also exposed to excessive heat during the daytime from the roofing system of the store and gallery.
- *Rain and light.* Because of the museum's architectural style, the gallery and store are exposed to rain water and sunlight.
- *Invasion.* Termite invasion is imminent to the museum collections because of the nature of the environment. The museum environment is prone to termites, because of the soil type and location of the museum. Though termites pose no threat to stone artefacts, they can be attracted to the few

wooden objects in the store and shelves on which the objects are preserved.

- *Environmental hazard.* There is an additional threat to the gallery by a particular mango tree that has grown in the museum compound. If, in the future, there is a strong wind and the tree falls, it may cause damage to part of the gallery. In short, the nearness of the big tree to the gallery constitutes a future threat to the building.
- *Rack/Shelves.* The high racks being used in the store is not ideal for storing the stone objects because of their weight. It is inadvisable for heavy objects like stone figures to be arranged on a high rack\shelf. It is advisable to store them on low racks and shelves, so that they do not ruin the racks causing them to collapse in the future. The study also discovered a case of decayed wood and iron shelf on which objects are stored. The weight of the objects may pull down this particular shelf in the near future if the objects are not rearranged.

Conservation Needs in the National Museum Esie

The study discovered that there are some pressing needs for equipment and materials in order to gain ideal conservation of the collections. For example the museum needs more:

- Exhibition galleries to showcase the objects
- Ethnographic stores for better preservation
- Conservation laboratory to diagnose objects for treatment
- Conservation equipment/materials for conservation practice
- Air conditioner to keep objects in cool condition
- Fire equipment
- Good lighting system in the gallery and store and to correct excessive natural light
- Tables, stools, ladders to enhance operational value of conservation

- Iron shelving to protect storage against insects/termites
- Metal drawer, boxes and containers for good storage

Conclusion and Recommendation

Going through the gallery and store of the National Museum Esie, one would easily notice the neglect and abandonment of cultural values of the national heritage. Such abandonment causes pain and sadness in regard to the manner public property is being treated in Nigeria. The Nigerian Government and people hardly notice the values embedded in natural and cultural heritage. The problem from the beginning has been in providing the care and maintenance needed to achieve the optimum potentiality of these natural gifts. Meanwhile the heritage that we fail to appreciate are being taken abroad, repackaged and sold back to us at exorbitant prices. Most of Nigeria's ancient works of art held in Europe and American countries are well preserved and given adequate care/monitoring. It is when this happens that we realise the beauty and value of our ancient art traditions. The case of the Esie soapstone figures and other materials in the National Museum is not an exception, which is the reason the writer of this paper seeks to address management culture. The content of the National Museum Esie is more than being neglected. The museum is also marginalised among its contemporary peers. We are in the era of technological advancement in the world but nothing seems to change or advance in this particular museum. The museum building is the original mud structure, a structure that can be destroyed by termites. The nature of exhibition and preservation has been unchanged for so long. This situation does not reckon with UNESCO's 21st century standard for conservation.

There is a need to change the gallery exhibition so that people can acquire new knowledge from these collections. Let the national Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) expand the scope of exhibition in the museum. They can

bring other collections, preserved in the store of the museum, to further educate visitors to this museum. The NCMM should also collaborate with foreign expertise or specialists in stone figure conservation, so that they can organise training and workshops for staff in order to restore many of the broken pieces. This type of training is being enjoyed in the National Museum Lagos and it should be extended to other museums in the country.

Alas! The NCMM must rise to the conservation problem and needs of the National Museum Esie. Help redeem the image of the first Nigerian National Museum from its comatose state, so that these objects will not die a physical and spiritual death. It is in the keeping of these objects that the efforts of our forebears and of their ancient technologies can be revisited from time to time.

Bibilography

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Appendix: List of Informants

S/N	Full Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Place of Interview	Date
1.	Mr. Odekunle E.O.	40	M	Curator	Esie, Kwara State	21-12-2009
2.	Mrs. Adewoye M.	35+	F	Conservator	Esie, Kwara State	21-12-2009
3.	Mr. Tihamiyu Yakub	40	M	Conservator	Lagos Museum	2006-2010