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December 2008 Newsletter

Exploring Frontiers of Archaeology and Cultural Resource Management: Untold Stories of the Esie Stone Figurines

By J. O. Aleru and K. Adekola*

Abstract

The north central Yorubaland homeland of the Igbomina Yoruba, in the modern Kwara State of Nigeria, is endowed with abundant natural and cultural resources. The cultural landscape of the area is indeed very rich. However, the vast majority of these significant elements of cultural heritage remain unexamined. In fact, most of these resources are hardly known. For about seven decades since the first and best known elements of cultural heritage in the area were unearthed in the town of Esie, we have yet to substantially expand the repertoire of knowledge concerning the cultural history of the region. For several decades, a number of scholars have decried the inadequacy of information on the ancient political, social, economic and religious structures that existed in this region (Aremu 1991, 2006; Folorunso, 2006; Obayemi, 1982; Onabajo, 1988, 1994; Pogson, 1990; Aribidesi et al. 2005; Aleru, 2006). Yet, little research has been conducted to improve the situation. This article reports on the potential elements of natural and cultural heritage in the homeland of the Igbomina people, and of recent archaeological work undertaken by the authors within the region.

Introduction

Among the most prominent of known elements of cultural heritage in the homeland region of the Igbomina are 800 representational statues carved in steatite (or “soapstone”) found in the landscape surrounding the town of Esie in the modern Kwara State of Nigeria (Figs. 1-3). These figurines, ranging in size from 14 centimeters to over one meter in height, represent both men and women, often in positions seated on stools, kneeling, playing musical instruments, holding machetes, or with their hands placed upon their knees. The carved statues often include representations of elaborate hairstyles, necklaces, and bracelets. Thus far, researchers have only determined that these figurines predated the nineteenth century. They were no doubt viewed as significant elements of cultural heritage by generations later than the cultural actors who had created them.



Figure 1. Study area location within modern Kwara State, Nigeria.

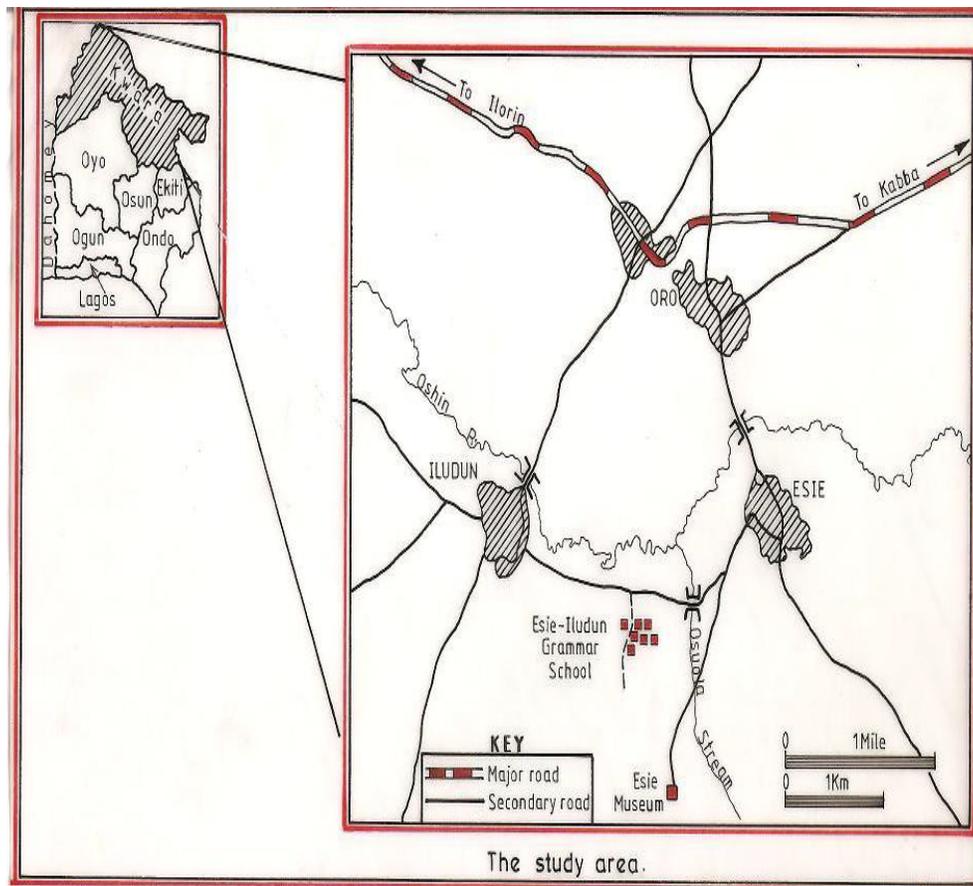


Figure 2. Study area within southwest Nigeria in closer scale, including Esie town and location of Esie Museum.



Figure 3. Examples of steatite statues uncovered in landscape surrounding Esie. Images by International Council of Museums, Redlist of endangered cultural heritage artifacts, <http://icom.museum/redlist/>

However, in addition to the remarkable cultural heritage represented by those figurines uncovered at Esie and other sites, features of the natural and cultural heritage of the homeland region of the Igbomina people also include:

- * The Owu falls, in Owa Onire and Owa Kajola, a natural resource that has acquired prominent cultural significance over time.
- * Iron and bronze working traditions in Obo Aiyegunle that have been dated to the ninth and sixteenth centuries A.D., respectively (Aremu 1991). In the environs of Idera, we also have evidence of another bronze industry site.
- * Human habitation sites in Owa Onire, with accompanying cultural features such as granaries and related material culture, dating to approximately the thirteenth century A.D. There is also evidence of substantial iron-working traditions in Owa Onire – likely one of the largest in the homeland region of the Igbomina (or “Igbominaland”).
- * Human habitation of Ila, dating to between 1442 and 1532 (Aribidesi et al. 2005).
- * A now extinct, but once vibrant, cloth-weaving and dyeing industry has been investigated in Oba-Isin (Aleru, 2006). Indeed, cotton spinning and weaving was a common

feature in ancient Igbominaland. May (1860), a British explorer who passed through Igbominaland in 1858, remarked that the region was famous for its cotton production.

* Ancient settlements all over Igbominaland with walling systems – defensive structures reminiscent of other nineteenth-century Yoruba towns and villages. This was a period marked by war and other civil disturbances that dictated a need for the construction of ramparts and ditches as protection against enemies. In most places, ancient gates to those past settlements are still visible. These cultural features are referred to as ‘agbara’ in the traditions of the local population. In Ajasse Ipo, Gbagede, one of the ancient towns of the Ila people, was also walled.

* Ancient bead making industries, such as in Pamo, for which there was a reference to ‘Okò Iyun’ or a bead farm, suggesting evidence of a possible bead production center (Aleru 2006).

* Potsherd pavements, reported in several places in Igbominaland, such as in Ahun, Oro and in Owu Isin. The pot sherd pavements in these places are constructed in a herringbone pattern, reflecting a stylistic tradition common in Ife and Osun northeast. The uses for which these patterned potsherd pavements were put are not known for certain. However, they constituted an important cultural item among the Igbomina and other Yoruba groups.

* Stone figurines similar in artistic styles and carving techniques with those uncovered in the vicinity of Esie, and found in Ijara, Owode Ofaro, and Igbaja.

* An ancient marketing centre (Igbo Ejimogun) located in Ikosin. It was reputed to be a centre where Igbomina chiefs and Obas met to discuss important matters affecting the communities.

These are just few of the many elements of cultural heritage located within Igbominaland. There are countless others yet to be unearthed. In the face of the ever-growing dangers of human activities (farming, road construction, building constructions, illegal acquisition of cultural materials and so on) and the forces of nature (most especially erosion) there is need for concerted efforts to unearth and thoroughly record these cultural features and artifacts now, or they might be destroyed forever.

Esie Stone Figurines: The Told Stories

The Esie stone figurines are the first and best known cultural heritage of the Igbomina people (Fig. 3). In fact, the stone figurines of Esie are the most celebrated of all known cultural

endowments bestowed on the Igbomina people. It is not unexpected since this is the largest collection of carved stone structures in Africa, and one of the largest in the world. The discovery led to the establishment of the first National Museum in Nigeria in Esie in 1945 (see Fig. 2 for location). Since the stone figurines were first unearthed in the 1930s, numerous oral history and mythological accounts have been compiled about this enigmatic cultural heritage. Most of the stories concerned the origins of the figurines. Some accounts, however, attempted to unravel the mystery surrounding the identities of those who created the sculptures. Other stories tell us about how the stone figurines came to be found in the locations in which they were discovered over the past two centuries. The prominent cultural heritage represented by these statues has been under assault. The museum in Esie has been the victim of repeated thefts and looting.

Oral Traditional Accounts

Traditional accounts situate the origins of the stone figurines within the realm of the supernatural. By such accounts, in a past time some visitors were angry with a disobedient people and so they were transformed into stone images by deployment of unknown forces. There are several versions of such a supernatural explanation for the origins of the stone statues. One version simply says that the earliest inhabitants of the place disobeyed a group of visitors. The visitors left in anger and were subsequently turned to stone images. Another version has it that the ruler of the people refused to obey the instruction of the visitors, who had instructed that he should not go to farm on a particular day. He was said to have disobeyed this directive. Subsequently, he lied in order to cover up his disobedience, and the visitors left in anger and thereafter unleashed terror on the people. Over time the people, their livestock and other possessions were turned into images of stone by unknown forces. One other version claims that the creations of the steatite figures occurred elsewhere and they were later transported to the site where they were eventually discovered.

Anthropological, Archaeological and Art History Research

Contrary to the stories of the supernatural explanation for the origins of the stone figurines, many attempts at scientifically explaining the origins and incidence of the stone figurines have been carried out by several authors, including: Milburn (1936), Daniel (1937), Clarke (1938) Stevens (1978), Murray (1951), Onabajo (1988, 1994), Pogonson (1990), Hambolu

(1989), Opadeji and Fatunsin (pers. comm.). The most detailed of these scientific attempts at explaining the origins of stone figurines was conducted by Stevens (1978). Stevens' work is by no means the most comprehensive work yet to be carried out on the figurines. He painstakingly documented every single object recovered by early excavators, and provided us with a comprehensive catalogue of the stone figurines. However, Stevens' (1978: 49) proposition that the stone figurines "were produced elsewhere, carried and deposited at their present site" can no longer be sustained in the face of unfolding evidence.

The accounts provided by these scholars seek to provide explanations for the origins of the stone figurines, looking further afield to collect information related to the cultural attributes evident on those statues. As far as these researchers are concerned, the stone figurines were carved by a people yet to be fully identified. The figurines represent works of art, items of the cultural repertoire of a people no longer extant. Their research has provided clues as to those past cultural actors who carved these remarkable statues. According to Pogonson (1990), the artistic style displayed on the objects and the cultural manifestations exhibited on them suggest they were carved by a group of the Yoruba people. Taking multiple factors of evidence into consideration, it has also been postulated that the figurines were carved in an area very close to the site on which they were found.

This proposition has led to other research (Hambolu 1989) that has shown that indeed the raw materials used for the production of the figurines were located in the vicinity of the present-day Esie town (see Fig. 2). Research has also been conducted on how the carvings were shaped (flaking, abrading, pulverizing, and cutting). This research effort, like many other aspects of investigations concerning the stone figurines, has proven inconclusive.

In discussing the enigma of the stone figurines, and the proposition that they were created by members of one subgroup of the Yoruba peoples, some investigators have questioned why some of the individual figurines appear to represent the cultural features of individuals of different ethnic heritage, such as the Nupe, Igala, and Bariba. However, the likelihood that the region of Igbominaland has been a repository of different social groups and cultural entities over time is not peculiar. The factors of time and geographical proximity make this an inevitable outcome of inter-group relations. So this school of thought admits that the stone figurines were carved by some ancient peoples possibly living within the vicinity of present-day Esie. Citing several lines

of evidence, they submit that the figurines must have been carved by people closely related both geographically and culturally to the present-day Yoruba people.

These oral history, mythological, and research accounts have been articulated and debated by different authors and in varied forms. However, there has not been a concerted effort at embarking on further research that could throw more light on the controversies surrounding the figurines.

The Untold Stories

New research questions and investigations need to be addressed. What were the other cultural manifestations of the civilization that produced the stone figurines? What was the socio-political organization like? What about the economic activities of the people? What was their religion like? There are so many new facets of evidence to be uncovered. The society that produced the figurines by all standards was an affluent civilization. What were the characteristic features of that civilization? These are some of the questions that readily come to mind.

The Role of Archaeology in Providing New Clues

One major issue facing archaeologists in West Africa and indeed all of Africa south of the Sahara is that those regions were severely impacted by the long histories of colonial domination (both internal and external). As a result, historical and archaeological investigations have often been deployed within the context of the formation of multiple social identities and national histories. Pre-colonial assessment of our area poses the problem of juxtaposing indigenous entities against foreign administrations. This poses a problem of identification. How do we categorize and represent each of these different social group identities over time?

In actual fact, we need to decolonize the archaeology of the Esie stone figurines and indeed that of the Igbominaland area. We should highlight the archaeology of the indigenous peoples in Igbominaland. We should highlight this with a focus a people who negotiated over time within several colonial entities. We must assess the impacts of the Old Oyo Empire on one hand and the Nupe people on the other hand. The legacies of the fall of Old Oyo Empire are still profoundly manifest in the everyday life of the local populations. Equally devastating was the

initial European contact and the onset of large-scale changes by the processes of European colonialism and domination.

It is highly likely that the society that produced the stone figurines was a very advanced, accomplished, stable, and potentially peaceful civilization. Such elaborate works of art are less likely to be produced in an unstable sociopolitical system. From the little information available on the cultural manifestations exhibited on the figurines, a centralized system of government with a possible strong religious backing, common in early political frameworks in Yorubaland, might have been in place. Also from available information, Igbominaland in the pre-colonial period was made up of several Igbomina polities. Some scholars referred to them as “mini states” (Obayemi 1982), while others referred to them as “chiefdoms” (Aribidesi et al. 2005). Obayemi (1977: 22-47) actually stated that there existed other “fairly well-defined mini-states such as Iwo, Owu, Oba ... in the Igbomina area” before and during the Ila period. These small-scale sociopolitical structures included, among others, Share, Ipo, Oke-Ode, Ile-Ire, Esisa, Irese, Iyangba, Oba-Isin, Oro, and Esie. Even though these political entities never developed into larger-scale political structures, they were by all practical purposes forces to be reckoned with within the regional geopolitical power structure of the Northern Yoruba. For example, they provided economic support for the Old Oyo Empire, an empire with which they shared both geographical and cultural affinities. Old Oyo’s attempt at incorporating Igbominaland into its political sphere of influence was intended to create frontier communities for the purposes of aiding political and economic strategies. More importantly, the military importance of Igbominaland to the Old Oyo was very vital, because of its strategic location between Old Oyo and their enemy, the Nupe.

New Archaeological Evidence

Recent archaeological investigations in the Esie environ were conducted in the period of March 16-28, 2008, by a group of researchers from the University of Ibadan. Findings from this fieldwork have started to shed new light on some of the controversies surrounding the stone figurines.

Reconnaissance Surveys

Reconnaissance surveys were carried out in Igbo ilowe, Ijan, Okodo and Igbo eji in Esie environ. At Igbo eji, what appears to be an extensive stone age period site was discovered. In

Okodo, several centers of past human activities were observed. At Igbo ilowe, reconnaissance in an area covering about 2.5 square kilometers yielded the remains of additional steatite sculptures. Among the other more prominent archaeological finds in this survey are: a fishing weight; a prehistoric-period worked stone implement, which would have been perceived in historic period cultures as a “thunderbolt” (*edun ara*); and several grinding stones, some of which were made of



Figure 4. Example of grindstones uncovered in 2008 survey.

granite or quartzite (Fig. 4). The thunderbolt artifact was originally part of a neolithic period assemblage, and its presence in the survey area corroborates earlier propositions that the region of Igbominaland was occupied in such prehistoric time periods (Fig. 5). This prehistoric artifact was very likely utilized in the historic periods as a “thunderbolt” reinterpreted as a religious emblem in the worship of the deity Sango within the Yoruba culture. Such reinterpretations of prehistoric artifacts constitutes a reuse phenomenon common all over the world and across numerous historic-period culture. Several uncompleted structures were also recovered.

A fragment of a broken tuyère was also found in the 2008 survey. There is no evidence of firing inside the hollow of the tuyère. It would appear that it was used in the polishing of beads. The stone sculptures were also carved in steatite. Littering the landscape of this area are several outcroppings of steatite (Fig. 6). A steatite figurine with the head severed was also discovered in the survey. A farmer who had worked in the survey area for over ten years also



Figure 5. Prehistoric worked lithic artifact uncovered in 2008 survey.

reported to the team that the implements of *Opon ayo*, a game common among the Yoruba people, were often made of steatite and used by current occupants of the area. Apart from the stone sculptures, five refuse mounds were identified; two of these had been excavated by a previous archaeologist, Onabajó. The whole landscape was littered with pottery sherds of diverse sizes and decorations. Pieces of terra cotta were also collected in the survey.



Figure 6. Outcroppings of steatite in ground surface of 2008 survey area.

Excavations

A test unit measuring one by two meters was placed into a mound near where Onabajo excavated a trench in the 1980s. This 2008 excavation unit yielded few cultural materials. The sterile layer was reached at 90 centimeters below the ground surface of the mound. We then decided to place another test unit on one of the refuse mounds (Refuse Mound 3) that had not been excavated before. This new excavation unit was two by two meters in size. The sterile layer was reached at a depth of 2.20 meters below the ground surface.

We are currently engaged in analyzing the excavated material from these 2008 test units. Materials excavated from Refuse Mound 3 included cowry shells, beads, iron objects (e.g., fragments of a knife and traps), animal and fish bones, and numerous fragments of pottery. The decorations on the pottery are similar to those from other parts of Igbominaland. We also collected a large number of fragments of the *Isawuru* oyster species.

Tentatively, we interpret the material culture of these excavations as indicative of occupants who subsisted by hunting and fishing activities. It is not yet certain what the grinding stones were used for. The people may have engaged in the *ayo* game in their leisure time. Charcoal samples for dating were collected from the excavation unit, and we anticipate that these may provide information about the time-depth of human occupation in the area.

From all lines of evidence, especially the quantity of partly-worked and un-worked pieces, it would also appear that this area was also a major center for the production of stone figurines similar to those found in the vicinity of Esie. The laterite hill in the vicinity provides clues as to the possibility of steatite mining in the area. The soapstones as evidenced in Ijan are embedded within laterite. Hollows left by the extraction or mining of soapstone are manifest in the laterite hill located within the 2008 survey area. That hill thus could have provided a ready supply of raw material for individuals creating steatite figurines. Further analyses and fieldwork are needed for more concrete conclusions to be made in relation to the excavated materials.

Discussion and Conclusion

We look at the Esie stone figurines in the context of Igbomina cultural heritage. How much do we know about the Igbomina cultural heritage? For us to start talking about a basis for a vibrant social and economic future for our area we need to refocus our priorities. We need

alternative narratives (stories) and collective action. This is more so, because all over the world the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples have long histories of dissipating in the face of the impacts of different distant peoples, societies and cultures. The quantum amount of what is original to the indigenous people or what is “pure,” is determined by the indigenous communities themselves. In extant societies this may pose a variety of challenges; for extinct societies we look to the remains of cultural materials to speak for the heritage of those ancestors. The material remains that archaeologists might collect and study can entirely change our view of a society and impact the integrity and continuity of its perceived heritage. The artifacts of a people are an integral part of the whole culture of that population, with culture existing as a cognitive system that people learn, transmit, and share. Such cultural worldviews provide a basis for the self identification of a people in the past and present.

We also need to understand that the process of sociopolitical formation of the Igbomina people is rooted in mythical ideology. As pointed out by this author and others (Aribidesi et al. 2005: 142), “ideologies are beliefs created and manipulated by certain social groups, most notably the ruling elites of chiefdoms and states, to establish and maintain the legitimacy of their position in communities.” Such belief systems entail public performances that recount religious theology and social narratives (Johnson and Earle 2000: 259). “The elites assert special status with respect to the gods and the universe, and that makes the elites essential in the ritual practice on which the continuity and fertility of the community depend” (Johnson and Earle 2000). In addition, Aribidesi et al. (2005: 142) further state that various “Yoruba traditions identify Ile-Ife or Ife as the place of creation, and legends associated the ancient city with Oduduwa, the first Oba and founder of the Yoruba people. Among the Yoruba, the descendants of the sons of Oduduwa take precedence over other lineages, and reckoning descent from Oduduwa was necessary to validate a ruler’s claim to the right to wear an ‘*ade*’, or beaded crown” (Johnson, 1921).

According to Aribidesi et al (2005), “Scholars who relied on oral and written tradition of Ile-Ife origin and dynastic theory believed that princes who were children of Oduduwa of Ile-Ife were pioneers of state formation and cultural innovation in Yorubaland. Johnson (1921) lists Ila as one of the kingdoms established by Ile-Ife princes. Others are: Olowu of Owu, the Alaketu of Ketu, the founder of Benin people, Onisabe of Sabe, Olupopo of Popo and Oranyan of Old Oyo (Johnson, 1921: 7-8).” “This classification has inspired the descriptions of the Yoruba as Omo

Oodua (offspring, or those under the umbrella of Oduduwa” (Obayemi, 1976: 209).

Nevertheless, the theory of Ile-Ife princes as pioneers of state formation in southwestern Nigeria has run counter to some oral data, and linguistic and archaeological evidence, which suggest that numerous “centers of population” in the form of villages, small states and even kingdoms, were in existence before the migration of so-called Ife princes (Obayemi, 1976; Pemberton and Afolayan 1996: 11; Aribidesi et al. 2005: 142; Aleru, 2006).

It is in the light of this that we look at archaeology as an attempt to understand the relationship between material culture and ideational culture of ancient societies. Achieving the goals of archaeology as a scientific discipline demands that we use archaeology at explicating our complex interaction both with the material world and our culturally construed, social world. The success of achieving this depends on our ability to uncover the dimensions of material objects which gives us insights into what the technological social and cultural aspects of materials uncovered by the archaeologists can reveal about past societies. It is only then that we can begin to harvest the thought patterns and behavior of people who no longer exist. Indeed archaeology can yield new information relevant to understanding something about the thought and behavior of the indigenous people who created the materials.

Challenges for the Future

We need to refocus our priorities. We should formulate a program of action that will launch us into doing things we have not done before. First, we need to scientifically scrutinize the authenticity of claims of oral traditions. Secondly and more importantly we should as a matter of urgency and policy pursue vigorously the identification of cultural resources within the Igbomina geographical area. We should have a compressive inventory of these cultural entities. This point is very important because these resources are on a daily basis undergoing tremendous destruction from both natural and human agencies. A case in point of one human activity in our area is the incessant and uncontrolled bush burning. There is also a recent development of cutting down trees and shrubs to make charcoal as fuel for cooking. We thus burn away our forest with impunity. Most part of Igbominaland used to be thickly forested. Today the forests are virtually non-existent. Our rivers, streams and other water resources are polluted on a daily basis. In the fragile ecosystem we have at our disposal our concern should be for the maintenance and conservation of both our natural and archaeological resources. We have

observed shrinkage in these resources due to processes of desiccation accentuated and promoted by human and natural factors. By our actions and inactions we are gradually but steadily transforming our environment into a progressively unproductive enclave.

We may not have control over natural factors but we do have control over human factors. The consequences of ignoring control efforts are not immediately manifest. They become apparent in many decades and some times centuries to come. We should not bequeath to generations yet unborn a legacy of destruction. We should also focus on what responsibilities archaeologists have towards different stakeholders. The stakeholders are legion: administrators, archivists, anthropologists, antiquarians, architects, art, historians, biologists, zoologists, building surveyors, chemists, conservators, craftsman, curators, ecologists, entomologists, engineers of different specializations, economic historians, geographers, geologists, hydrologists, landscape architects, legislators, mineralogists, museologists, petrologists, property managers, surveyors, seismologists, sociologists, town planner,s estate valuers etc. There should be a unified effort between and among the various stakeholders.

This article calls for a sober reflection of what we have done and what we have not done to better the state of knowledge of the cultural heritage of Northern Yorubaland. The appeal is for a reflection that would reinvigorate and inspire us into action; an action that would translate into bestowing on generations yet unborn an enduring and sustainable cultural legacy that would augur well for a brilliant and vibrant social and economic future.

Note

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