

Preserving The Archaeological Records In Nsukka Cultural Zone

Joshua Okenwa Uzuegbu

Abstract

Archaeological record within Nsukka cultural zone helps in throwing more light to the activities of the past inhabitants. A careful study of some records shows that they are on the verge of being lost to both human and natural activities. Therefore, preserving them have become imperative so as to have evidence of cultural achievement of the past, which will help to enrich the culture of the present people and also held in their future technological advancement.

Introduction

Archaeology is the scientific study of the material remains of the past inhabitants in order to reconstruct their ways of life and also fill any missing gap in the peoples history. These remains of the past inhabitants are referred to as the archaeological records, which in a wider perspective constitute the cultural property of the society. Shaw (1975:1) state that these archaeological records include the remains of people themselves, remains of dwellings, remains of people's rubbish, remains of fortifications, graves, remains of religious centres, tools, weapons, objects of adornment, domestic utensils." These records are made of the following materials – stone, bone, metal, baked clay, rock surfaces, organic materials among others.

However, these archaeological records having survived till date, need proper care to ensure their usefulness to humanity. Indeed, this is where the challenge lies, because they are continually faced by human and natural threats. These threats, though avoidable, become a clog in the wheel of cultural re-awakening and re-writing of Nsukka people. Nsukka cultural zone is bound to the North West by Kogi State, in the West by Anambra Rivers, and North East and East by Benue State. It lies between the savannah vegetation and rainforest belt of the south eastern Nigeria. Notable plants found in the zone include *Elacis guineansis* (palm tree), *Bamboo bombusear spp.*, *chrysophylum* (star apple), *treculia atricana* (African bread fruit), *pentaclethra mancrophylla* (oil bean tree) etc.

This paper therefore aims to identifying known and unknown archaeological records in the study area and to examine the nature of threat or danger facing them. Measures which should be adopted to ensure the longevity of these records are recommended. This study uses the following methodology – archaeological reconnaissance, oral interview and published materials to execute the research.

Archaeological Records within Nsukka Cultural Zone

Archaeological activities in the Nsukka zone started as early as 1960s with the establishment of History Department in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. By 1981, these activities increased in tempo with the establishment of Archaeology Department in the University. Both students and lecturers of the department go to the field to carry out research that led to the discovery of many archaeological sites. Among the many archaeological discoveries in the zone are Late Stone Age Sites, Iron Smelting sites, natural features of archaeological importance, shrines, museums and monuments etc.

Late Stone Age Sites

Notable among the discoveries is the late pre-historic site at Isi-Ugwu Obukpa rock shelter by Prof. D. D. Hartle in 1964. Discoveries from the site include stone tools and pottery which resembles the present pottery used in Nsukka area today (Hartle, 1978:12). Also Hartle excavated the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Agricultural Farm site in 1964 following the accidental discovery of two clay smoking pipes. The following findings were made – unfired pottery vessels, grinding stones, and post holes. All the findings were deposited with the Archaeology Museum of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The site according to Hartle (1980:16) is the earliest known pottery site in Igboland with the following dates:

80 – 100cm 4,505 \pm 130 BP (2555BC \pm 130)

100 – 120cm 3,410 \pm 115 BP (1460BC \pm 115).

Prof. V. E. Chikwendu in 1977 excavated the Ogboduaba late Stone Age burial chamber, which revealed the burial pattern of a noble person in Ogboduaba town (Chikwendu, 1979:44-49).

Iron Smelting Sites

In 1979, late Dr. F. N. Anozie made some discoveries of Iron smelting sites at Lejja and Umundu in Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State. The exercise exposed the types of furnaces used to include pit and cylindrical clay types. Samples of charcoal from Umudu site indicate that iron smelting in the town was going on between 1625 and 1925 (Anozie, 1979:124). Equally, he observed that two major sites were found at Lejja town, where many of the slag blocks could still be found. The two sites are located at the Dunoka village square and Nkwo market square, respectively.

Prof. E.E. Okafor in 1992 carried out archaeological exercise at Orba Iron Sites. Samples of charcoal from these sites were dated to between 200 – 1450 AD using the C¹⁴ dating method (Okafor and Philips 1992:252). This date is believed to be the earliest date of Iron smelting in Nigeria. Other Iron smelting sites in Nsukka zone both excavated and unexcavated are found in towns like Ede-Oballa, Aku, Ekwegbe, Obimo, Onyohor, Ozalla, Ukehe, Owerre-elu etc.

Natural Features

The study area is richly endowed with natural features which man has come to use for his sustainability. Notable among these features are Asho and Ajie springs both in Onuiyi and Edem-Ani, respectively. Apart from providing sources of water, the springs also act as objects of worship among the people. This is exemplified by a lot of sacrificial materials found in these places. The colonial administration constructed beautiful walkways at both springs to enhance the movement of people to and fro. Other important natural features

include Igikutu spring at Obimo, Aturi rock shelter at Onyohor, Adada River, Api Opi beach, Umunko cave etc.

Shrines and Groves

Shrines form important archaeological record of the people. Apart from being a centre of worship, they also have cultural, economic and political relevance. Some important shrines or deity in Nsukka zone include Adoro Alor, Efuru deity at Ukehe, Apii deity at Opi, Egbuji at Ochima. Also there is the Okpe Igarra I and II which were excavated by Hartle. Nsukka-Okpe Igarra I is a Hill top enclosure, while Okpe Igarra II is a shrine site. Materials found in the second site are pottery and shrine furniture. However, the site dates to about 17th century A.D (Hartle, 1980:61). Groves of ritual importance located within the study area include Ugwu Amoke grove in Aku, Odoegu masquerade grove in Ukehe, Adoro grove in Alor-Uno, etc.

Monumental Houses

There are magnificent houses which portray the life style of the wealthy and elites in the area. Worthy of mention is the famous Chief Nwodo's House at Ukehe. The house was declared a National monument in February 1991 by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). The compound consists of an entrance gate, shrine and the principals abode known as OBU-UCHUE. The walls of the compound according to Ogunsusi (2005:21) are impressively decorated not only with traditional patterns in black, but also with scores at beautiful rear enamel plates, mainly of Portuguese origin." There is also the one storey house of late Chief Ogbonna Ozioko of Onuiyi Nsukka. The house built in 1929 remains a masterpiece because of the beautiful archaeological designs and other features within the compound. These features include the "Obu" which is a separate building where meeting and traditional rituals were performed. Owere-Okpu village hall, Orba is also a stone house built in 1930s which served as the village hall until recently when it was converted to a Nursery/primary school.

Museums

Museums are principally established to acquire, preserve and exhibit cultural properties for enjoyment, enlightenment and research. Department of Archaeology and Tourism and the Institute of African Studies both of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka have museums that provide accommodation for archaeological materials recovered from field exercises within the zone. Objects found in the museums include pottery, stone tools, Iron slags, blooms, iron objects. Other ethno-archaeological objects include masquerades, drums, stools, gongs, guns, hoes, knives, cutlasses, currencies etc.

Nature of Threats to these Archaeological Records

Cultural heritage experts have observed that Nigerian antiquities are of higher demand during auction sales across Europe and America. Egunjiobi (1988:10) observed that "bronze, terracotta and stone objects produced in Nigeria are sought after because they are impervious to the heat and humidity that so readily destroys many other examples of African art." Consequently, archaeological materials from Nsukka zone in particular and Nigeria in general are usually stolen or looted and trafficked abroad. Looting of archaeological material has remained a challenge to the survival of our cultural heritage. For example, in the course

of carrying out her Christian evangelism, late Ngozi Ogbu the founder of Jehovah Messiah Alleluia Hosanna Mission of Alor town in Nsukka, secretly removed many artefacts particularly figures and figurines and statutes, and these were sold to some unscrupulous European art dealers. Equally, the rate at which important artefacts were looted after the destruction of Efuru deity at Ukehe left much to be desired. In a smaller scale, family and community shrines are usually raided and valuable objects stolen. This goes a long way in depleting the peoples cultural heritage and the message they carry.

Apart from dangers posed by art raiders, there is also the problem posed by religious extremism. Extremist groups see these objects as evil or fetish materials that must be destroyed so as to deliver or liberate the people of evil forces. Ekechukwu (1990:181) observed that these “objects were variously described as graven images, idols, fetish or devilish. They were regarded as mere woods and therefore of no spiritual or aesthetic value to Africans.” Communities in the study zone organize Christian crusades, where objects, artefacts such as statues, figures and figurines, carving etc. are brought out willingly or forcefully to be publicly destroyed. It is observed that this practice has assumed an alarming dimension, therefore efforts should be made to enlighten these people on the need to preserve the heritage. These precious artefacts are better kept in the museums, instead of destroying them.

The study reveals that most artefacts recovered from field exercise by the staff and students of Archaeology and Tourism Department of University of Nigeria, Nsukka and kept at the museum are not properly cared for. The renovation work going on at the museum has resulted in moving the artefacts to other rooms which are ethically supposed not to house them. This apart from making such objects inaccessible to the public, will also expose them to unconducive environment capable of transmitting pathogenic agents.

Equally of note is the increase in the quest for infrastructural development especially within Nsukka town by both government and private persons. This is occasioned by the influx of Banks, private Schools, Churches and more importantly the clamour for the creation of Adada State with the proposed capital at Nsukka town. Therefore land acquisition and disposal is now on a higher scale, without a corresponding rescue archaeology that would retrieve artefacts faced by threat of imminent destruction. For instance, the adjoining lands leading to Asho spring that hitherto had a shrine and other archaeological features, have been regrettably sold by the villagers to private developers. This was done without any effort made to remove the artefacts and kept at the museum for posterity.

Farming activities in areas that are rich in archaeological materials is another challenge to the preservation of these records. Lands that were left fallow, have been encroached by farmers in their bid to cultivate crops and in the process destroying archaeological materials that may turn up. Isi-Ugwu Obukpa - rock shelter, Orba, Ede Oballa, Lejja archaeological sites have all fallen prey to careless land users.

Adverse climatic condition is another threat to the survival of archaeological records. Artefacts in the University Museums and those that are in various shrines, palaces of traditional rulers etc. fall into this category. Extreme weather fluctuation between high and low humidity lead to cracking of objects made of wood, cotton, hide and skin. Equally, direct sunshine on objects made of cotton, leads to its dis-colouration and brittleness. Objects like replicas of Eji-Onu Masquerade, Iga Masquerade Costume, musical drums, wooden gong etc. in the University Museums have adversely been affected by unstable weather conditions.

Monuments such as houses and statues of important people within the study zone are not in their best of shapes and forms. Lack of proper maintenance of these objects especially by their individual owners, communities and National Commission for Museums and Monuments in the case of those declared National monuments is a set back their survival. Late Ogbonna Ozioko's house at Onuiyi Nsukka, has not been adequately preserved by the owners. In their desperate attempt to renovate the house, more damages or defacement was done to it, leading to the removal of some essential features that made the house to be unique. Also, the house of late Igwe J.U. Nwodo (Ukehe House) which was declared a national monument in 1991 has lost its vital features due to improper maintenance carried out on it. Nwosu (2005:11) aptly puts it that "incorrect intervention can compromise the feature of an object by causing more damage to it."

Ways Of Preserving Archaeological Records

Preventing Vandalism through the Enforcement of Relevant Laws

Archaeological records are priceless materials that require utmost care and protection because any loss or damage to it, will result in erasing whatever it stands for. Therefore, one of the measures of ensuring their longevity is through the enforcement of already known International and National Laws as regards looting and trafficking in cultural properties. The first International legislation against illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property was made by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1970. The legislation known as 1970 Convention of UNESCO aimed specially to define what constitutes cultural property, ownership of such property, means of transferring it, prevention of illegal movement of the objects and the punishment stipulated for illegal traffickers. The second attempt aimed at fashioning out legislation against illegal movement and ownership of cultural properties was during the Unidroit Convention. This convention came into effect on 22nd July 1998 and it attempted to do away with some areas of opposition to the 1970 convention by both the exporting and importing countries (Abadam, 1999:14). Member countries such as Nigeria, who are signatories to this charter, are encouraged to enforce it to the letter.

In Nigeria, the fight against transfer of cultural properties started in 1953 with the enactment of Antiquities Ordinance No. 17 of 1953 by the colonial administration. Subsequently, other legislations followed. These include The Antiquities (Export permits) Regulation of 1957; the Antiquities (Amendment) Decree of 1966; The Antiquities (Prohibited Transfer) Decree No. 9, 1974 and finally the Decree 77 of 1979 which established the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. This latest Decree, empowers the NCMM to provide care for all cultural property in Nigeria and also prescribe adequate punishment for violators. For instance, it prescribed a fine of two thousand naira or a jail term of three years for illicit trade in cultural property. Also persons caught destroying cultural properties faces jail term of six months without any option of fine. These punishment are rather too lenient in achieving its aim. Therefore I suggest an amendment to this section of the Decree to ten times the market price of the stolen or vandalized object or a jail term of ten years imprisonment or both.

Findings from the study area indicate that there has been reported and unreported cases of raids, trafficking and destruction of archaeological objects, especially in shrines and

homes of their custodians without relevant authorities such as NCMM, Local Art Council and Police carrying out proper investigations. The widely publicized destruction and looting of artefacts in both Adoro Alor Shrine and Efuru deity at Ukehe were never investigated properly by the police. Till present, those objects have never been recovered and this may remain the case if concrete steps are not taken to find them.

Incorporation of Existing Traditional Preservation Methods and Values into Modern Methods

It has been observed that the use of traditional means of preservation and the values placed on these objects by the people for many generations, made it possible for them to have survived this long period. Therefore, incorporating these preservation methods and values with the modern methods will surely give a desirable result. For instance, the use of hot drinks, salt and blood from sacrificed animals, which are occasionally applied to artefacts while performing rituals by the local chief priest help to preserve these objects. Therefore in conserving these objects, there must be a meeting point between the modern and traditional methods of conservations. This is because an abrupt change from traditional to the modern method will definitely have an adverse effect like cracking of the object.

In raising the value of archaeological objects among the people of the zone, a sustained cultural awareness must be maintained by Museums, and Archaeology and Tourism Department of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This should be done in collaboration with traditional rulers and various town unions, who are the custodian of these artefacts.

Objects and Site Documentation

A proper objects and site documentation within Nsukka zone has become an issue that must be given the attention it deserves. This arises from the dangers posed by both infrastructural development and the nefarious activities of looters. Some known Iron smelting sites in Aku, Ede-Oballa and Umundu have been destroyed in the course of road constructions. Likewise, many other unknown sites have been lost to developmental quests.

The time has therefore come to have proper records of cultural heritage in Nsukka Zone. Towards this end, NCMM in conjunction with town unions and traditional rulers in the zone must sit down to draw up a workable documentation method for both known and unknown archaeological sites and objects. This will not only help to preserve them, but will also act as data bank for research purposes. Luckily, the current Director-General of NCMM, Mallam Yusuf Abdallah Usman, is an advocate of proper object documentation. He observed that Nigeria is not sure about the number of her antiquities outside the country (Abadallah, 2010:81).

Prompt Rescue Operations

This is another method aimed at salvaging and preserving artefacts that face imminent danger arising from developmental or natural causes. Urban expansion has become an index for assessing a growing society, therefore proper planning and care for both discovered and undiscovered archaeological materials must be considered while carrying out such exercise. Okpoko (1989:44) rightly observed that many “developmental projects have been going on in various parts of Nigeria without any rescue operation.” In Nsukka cultural zone, the value of land has appreciated highly following the agitation for the creation of Adada State, without a corresponding increase in rescue archaeological research. Therefore,

the need for rescue operations to be carried out before or during infrastructural development cannot be over emphasized. The zone is richly endowed with important Late Stone Age and Iron-smelting sites, therefore proper archaeological rescue operations must be encouraged so as not to destroy any vital data that would lead to new discoveries.

Conclusion

Nsukka cultural zone has notable archaeological materials which are recognized both locally and internationally. It is evident from the study that these materials face numerous threats to their survival. Such threats if not checked, will lead to loss of vital aspects of the people's identity.

Therefore the safeguarding of such valuable record has numerous advantages not only for the people within the zone, but for humanity at large.

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