

Archaeological Research in Akwa Ibom State: A Call for Attention

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Abstract

In discussing the cultural and historical development of a place, it is important to note that in a company of written records and oral traditions, the archaeological record plays a critical part in illuminating the past. Archaeological research in Nigeria dates back to the precolonial period, and over time, several discoveries have been made in different locations reflecting the history and culture of ancient Nigeria. However, when examining the archaeological discoveries and sites within the country, we observe the nonexistence of significant examples of archaeological evidence peculiar to Akwa Ibom State. This shows that the place of archaeology has been neglected over time, and an obvious void does exist. Why is this so in Akwa Ibom State? What factors led to the neglect or deficiency and how can these be tackled? This article brings this dearth to the fore and calls the attention of designated authorities, relevant institutions, stakeholders within the state, and archaeologists within the country to this all-important issue that lies unexplored. A response to this call will significantly improve the cultural and historical development and, in the long run, give global recognition to the state and country at large.

Keywords: Archaeological Research, Archaeological Record, Archaeologist, Stakeholders, Dearth, and Akwa Ibom State

Akwa Ibom State is one of the South Southern States in Nigeria located on latitude 4° 32' and 5° 31' N and longitude 7° 25' and 8° 25' E.¹ It is bordered by Cross River State to the East, Abia and Rivers States to the West, part of Abia State and Ebonyi State to the North, and the Atlantic Ocean to the South (Fig. 1). From its inception, the state has attained gradual developments in its social, economic, political, religious, historical, and cultural sectors. Still, when examining the records and achievements made by individual

sectors, we envisage the need for conscious improvements within the historical and cultural sectors of the state.

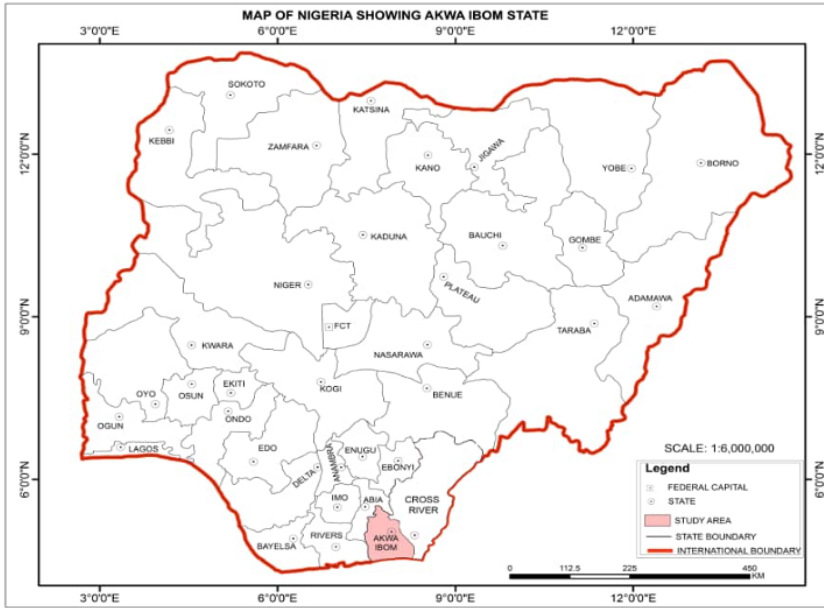


Fig 1. – Map of Nigeria Showing Akwa Ibom State

It is important to note that the development of the historical and cultural sectors in Akwa Ibom State depends largely on the inputs made by governmental bodies, stakeholders, and relevant tertiary institutions responsible for them. Although appreciable progress has been made over time, the historical and cultural development of Akwa Ibom State is deficient in its archaeological record, an important source of information that is needed for a better understanding of the past. By *archaeology*, we mean the study and preservation of material remains and material culture of past societies and their environments. Its objective is to reconstruct the past to understand and explain the historical conditions that governed people’s lives as they unfolded, both in their local settings and on a larger historical scale of prehistoric and historic societies, and to preserve the archaeological record in the landscape and museums for future study and use.²

When examining the archaeological discoveries made in different parts of Nigeria (for example, the Nok terracotta sculptures, Ife terracotta sculptures, Benin bronzes, Esie soapstone figurines, Igbo Ukwu bronzes, and the Cross River Monoliths), it is obvious that Nigeria has benefited from these discoveries. They have not only revealed the history and culture of ancient Nigeria but also underscored and reflected the relevance of archaeology and the need for its use as a source of information for reconstructing the country's past. However, the aforementioned archaeological discoveries also reveal the nonexistence of significant examples of archaeological evidence particular to Akwa Ibom State. This observation was highlighted in Derefaka's research within the South-South Region of Nigeria, when he stated that Akwa Ibom State had hardly any examples of significant archaeological evidence or archaeological research work.³ This shows that the place of archaeology has been neglected over time, and an obvious void does exist. Why is this so in Akwa Ibom State? What are the factors that led to this neglect, and how can it be addressed? This article aims to answer these questions, and to draw the attention of stakeholders, relevant tertiary institutions, various agencies of the state under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to the urgency in exploring this issue.

Background

Archaeological research in the South Southern region of Nigeria has been ongoing and extensive, especially in the Cross River Region, which is near Akwa Ibom State. In the Lower Cross River area, Ekpo⁴ reported a series of archaeological works in 1976 and 1980, which were specifically rescue excavations. The work concentrated on dozens of archaeological sites discovered in the course of urban development in parts of Calabar town and its environs. The excavations revealed archaeological resources like terracotta, pottery wares, polished stones, and glass beads showcasing the technological, artistic, and aesthetic level of the early people of this area.⁵ In the Upper Cross River region, specifically the Ikom and Ogoja Local Government Areas, archaeological and other studies have concentrated on over 300 monoliths, which are National Monuments. Various aspects of their significance,

including their date of about 200 A.D., and their artistic, aesthetic, historical, socio-cultural, and economic value have been brought to light.⁶

In Akwa Ibom State, Derefaka⁷ listed sites reported from archaeological research done by Ekpo and Nicklin⁸ on sites such as Enwang in Oron Local Government Area, Ikot Nsung and Ikono in Uyo Local Government Area, and Afagha Offiong in Etinan Local Government. However, these sites were identified as archaeological sites that required further investigation. More so, Uya⁹, Ekpo¹⁰, Eyo¹¹, and Eyefoki¹² highlighted the existence of cultural artifacts of the Akwa Ibom people, which were preserved as aspects of their historical memories. An example is the Ekpu carvings of the Oron people, which symbolize the presences of ancestors in the affairs of living progenies. These Ekpu carvings are described as some of the oldest and finest wood sculptures in Africa exhibiting the unique artistic achievement of the Oron people.¹³ Other cultural artifacts include the Isi-Ebikan ancestor face carvings of the Obolo (Andoni) and the well-decorated Nwommo buildings erected to immortalize members of the Ekong Society in Ibibio and Annang land.¹⁴ Another example is the Ekpo Mask, which was reported by Leuzinger to be in existence as early as 1710 A.D. and carved using various art forms for the religious purposes of the Ibibio and Annang people.¹⁵ Yet another example is the bronze stylized leopard skull (Ukiang) accidentally excavated in Oron in 1977 during road construction and dated to around 1624 A.D.; the cast metal sculpture was referred to as the grave of a prominent chief called Uya Oron.¹⁶ These examples make clear that most of the cultural artifacts are more ethnographic—art exhibits of the peoples' history. Moreover, there are museums in the state managed by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments at Uyo and Oron. These museums are, however, not archaeologically oriented but have holdings of items from Fine Arts and Ethnography (for example, the Ekpu figures of Oron and the artworks of the Ibibio).¹⁷

Having assessed the extent to which the Akwa Ibom area has been explored, it is obvious more archaeological research must be done to produce significant factual evidence and discoveries that will increase and complement our existing knowledge about the history of the Akwa Ibom area.

The Roles of Archaeology

The roles of archaeology in the development of a state are quite numerous, but only a few are stated below. However, it is important to note that when the relevance of a thing is unknown, its impact is often lost.

Educational Impact

Archaeology plays a vital role in the development of the state as a whole, but without archaeological research, various mysteries of the past remain unknown to present-day people. It is through archaeology that we derive important historical information about past humans from which we have no documents. This information ranges from the history of the evolution of significant cultural patterns, traditions, the emergence of states, migration patterns, arts and crafts, technologies, and more. From archaeology, we learn about who we were, who we are now, and gain new insight about how we can structure our future. The archaeological remains (i.e., factual evidence) derived from archaeological investigations feed museums, making them “memory banks” preserved for posterity. Through these exhibits, the general public and researchers learn about the existence of such history. More so, the results of archaeological investigations are published by archaeologists and other researchers for further dissemination of knowledge. These publications are used as historical documents for teaching students about the history of the state. The results and discoveries are also aired on other platforms of learning, such as the media (radio, television, and social), billboards, and pamphlets.

Economic Growth

Through archaeological investigations, different types of discoveries are made. The immovable types, such as historical buildings, monuments, and archaeological sites, are conserved in situ as tourist sites, while movable artifacts are preserved at museums. The existence of these museums and tourist sites helps to generate revenue, thereby contributing to the economy of the state. Other sectors, like hospitality, generate funds indirectly from the influx of visitors—both indigenes and non-indigenes from within and outside the state and country.

Community Value

Through archaeology, many communities have gained state, national, and global recognition because significant discoveries made from archaeological investigations have put them on the archaeological map of the world. For example, the Cross River Monoliths are known all over the world as a valuable cultural heritage site. This has not only brought about recognition but has also united communities with a common heritage. Furthermore, some museums have been established within such communities because of the artifacts discovered during archaeological investigations. Through this, the history attached to the artifact and the community is promoted, and its cultural and ethnic identity is preserved. An example is the Oron Museum with exhibits of the Ekpu Sculptures of the Oron people. Besides factual evidence, there is intangible cultural knowledge that has been passed on, for example, information about language, mode of dressing, music and dance, traditional delicacies, and more. The existence of such a unique heritage preserved over time goes further to give these communities a sense of belonging. The presence of the museums and tourist sites further attracts certain developments to the community, such as the construction of access roads and provision of social amenities.

Factors

Absence of Archaeological Research

The lack of archaeological research executed within the Akwa Ibom area exposes the fact is that this region's cultural heritage lies fertile, untapped, and unknown to the world. Further, the window of opportunity to discover this heritage and reflect on our past is closing. A large number of potential archaeological sites and valuable archaeological resources are being lost in the course of urban development and farming activities, which are continuously executed without any archaeological impact study on the area. These activities have caused the loss of important archaeological data that should be exhibited and preserved at museums for posterity. When there are no significant archaeological resources on display in a museums, the purpose of the museum's existence is defeated. The nonexistence of significant

archaeological resources on display in museums has led to lost revenue that should be generated from tourist visits. The absence of archaeological research has made us miss the opportunity of being placed on the archaeological map of Nigeria and the world at large.

Unawareness of the Relevance of Archaeology

This is another major reason for the neglect of potential archaeological sites and resources existent within the landscape of Akwa Ibom. Naturally, when a society is unaware of its cultural endowment, neglect is inevitable, and valuable resources are lost. Ignorance of the relevance of archaeology to both the state government and the layman has caused the loss of valuable archaeological and cultural resources that would have revealed our cultural identity to the wider public. Although the natural environment plays a part in the deteriorating state of some cultural materials beneath the ground, its effect can be stalled if quickly discovered and salvaged. However, human activities pose major threats to archaeological resources and sites; with activities such as farming and infrastructural developments, there is continuous destruction of these potential archaeological sites or archaeological resources, both consciously and accidentally. On the other hand, when there is considerable awareness, a conscious effort to salvage archaeological resources can emerge. Ignorance has made the public unaware of the existence or relevance of museums and tourist sites, places that should serve as memory banks for the history of the state, as do the National Museum and Monument Sites in neighboring Cross River State. The acknowledgment of the relevance of these places and the influx of visitors to them have not only given the state economic value but also global recognition.

Nonexistence of Departments of Archaeology in Tertiary Institutions

Archaeology is taught as a single course in history departments of the state universities, and it is limited in its scope. Although archaeology is viewed as a source for historical reconstruction, the practical tenets of the discipline—which involve systematic fieldwork—are unknown to the students. This gives students a

narrow perception of and incomplete information about the discipline. The lack of archaeology departments results in limited knowledge, absence of archaeological research, and nonexistence of significant examples of archaeological resources and sites within the state.

The Dearth of Expertise

The dearth of expertise has played a major role in the longtime absence of archaeological research and the absence of significant examples of archaeological resources. Where there are no experts or professionals in a field of study, neglect is inevitable. In particular, the absence of indigenous archaeologists within the state has become a major constraint.

Lack of Interest for Cultural Heritage within the State

In discussing culture, it is important to note that it is of two types: the tangible and intangible. In a bid to showcase certain cultures, we sometimes emphasize the relevance of some aspects at the expense of others—this is the case in Akwa Ibom State. Here, attention is focused on the intangible aspects of culture such as festivals, attire, dances, songs, arts, and food while ignoring the tangible aspects (archaeological resources), which are also key contributors to the historical and cultural development of the state. These archaeological resources are the cultural legacies left behind that link the past with the present. Although this might be done unwittingly because of ignorance, lack of interest for the discovery, recovery, and preservation of this cultural heritage for posterity spells doom for the history and culture of ancient Akwa Ibom State if not taken into cognizance.

Unavailability of Funds

Sufficient funds are required to successfully execute and undertake archaeological research. Funds are needed for the smooth execution of every step of the research, which includes logistics, community engagements, consultations, and result publications. Where funds are unavailable or insufficient, the archaeological research yields little or no results.

Proposed Measures

Extensive Archaeological Research

For significant discoveries to be made, for histories to be recorded, for museums to be fed with significant artifacts, and for the cultural identity of the state to be known and promoted to the wider public, deliberate archaeological investigations will need to be undertaken within the state. Undertaking archaeological research within the state will not only break new ground for Nigerian Archaeology but also highlight the rich cultural heritage of Akwa Ibom State. Through research, archaeology will be formally introduced to the relevant institutions within the state and the general public, which will sustain its practice in Akwa Ibom State. To actualize this, we need to engage the collaborative efforts of archaeologists, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, the relevant tertiary institutions, and cultural agencies to explore the state. There should also be a law enacted to enforce an archaeological impact study to precede any infrastructural development within the state, to rescue any archaeological resources and sites that may be under threat. Furthermore, adequate funds should be allocated to undertake every aspect of the research, including pre-field exercises, community engagements, logistics, procurement of field equipment, fieldwork, post-field analysis, and resulting publications.

Institutional Efforts

The relevant tertiary institutions within the state need to broaden the scope of archaeological studies to include the practical tenets and introduce more archaeological courses where possible. This will involve the recruitment of trained indigenous and non-indigenous archaeologists to teach the new courses and practical aspects of the discipline. Through this action, independent departments of archaeology will develop within the universities. Moreover, the institutions can win grants or scholarships to sponsor indigenous students, museum staff, and others to take courses in archaeology within or outside the country to improve their knowledge about the discipline.

Extensive Public Awareness

The first step towards effective awareness is to engage the services of an archaeologist to educate those saddled with the

responsibility of developing the historical and cultural sector of the state. These include the museums, the ministry of culture and tourism, and other culturally inclined agencies or parastatals. Through organized seminars and training, the staff will be equipped with basic information about archaeology as a discipline, its relevance, and its benefits to the development of the state and country at large. With this enlightenment, they will in turn be able to create awareness and educate the general public on the relevance of archaeology for the development of the state. Public awareness can be achieved through community campaign programs, the use of radio, virtual, and social media, and advertisements on billboards, banners, posters, flyers, and pamphlets.

Revitalization of the Existing Museums

The effective functioning of any museum within a particular place largely depends on the research undertaken there. In Akwa Ibom State, for the existing museums to function effectively in their capacities, we need to revitalize every aspect of the museum, including refurbishing the structure where necessary and undertaking archaeological research that will produce factual evidence on the history and culture of the state. The objects recovered through this research will be exhibited at museums, which in turn serve as memory banks and tourist destinations. In revitalizing the museums, there should be series of organized interactive sessions and seminars attended by archaeologists and various stakeholders and representatives of relevant state institutions to discuss the preservation and promotion of the cultural history and heritage of the state. This action will go a long way in spurring the state's interest in the preservation of cultural heritage. It will also contribute to the development of the state both educationally, by exposing the cultural heritage of Akwa Ibom State, and economically, through the revenue generated by museums and tourist sites.

Conclusion

The place and relevance of archaeology in the development of the historical and cultural sectors of Akwa Ibom State cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, to unravel the rich history that exists and to showcase its cultural identity globally, the state government

needs to pay adequate attention to this all-important issue and engage the combined efforts of archaeologists, stakeholders, and relevant institutions responsible for these sectors. A response to this call will greatly improve the cultural and historical sectors within the state in the long run.

Notes

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