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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE CROSS RIVER MONOLITHS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Cross River monoliths refer essentially to a collection of historic stones embedded in a restricted area of Ejagham territory in the upper Cross River region of Nigeria. These monoliths, locally called *Akwanshi* clearly capture and exemplify the depth of a formidable artistic tradition that is unique, rich and sophisticated with hardly any parallel anywhere else in Africa. The monoliths, which are yet to have a comprehensive scholarly visitation and interrogation, have however enjoyed a measure of art-historical, archaeological and ethnographic investigation. What is clearly lacking thus far is the placement of these investigations in proper historical perspective. This paper would attempt to do so. To achieve our objective, we shall consult oral sources, depend on pristine published works and extant literature on the subject.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholarly research on the Cross River monoliths is becoming increasingly imperative. This is because of their timeless relevance and the fact that the monoliths, are unabatedly coming under the threat of extinction through ignorance, theft, bad government policies and woeful agricultural practices. Ivor Miller and Abu Edet, in a recent study of the Ejagham heritage and heritage sites in the upper Cross River region of Nigeria, identified a corrosive pentecostal wind blowing agale across the region and carrying with it, the misguided message that all manner of antiquities and inherited traditions are satanic and thus, should be destroyed and discontinued respectively. This new evangelism, fired by "zeal without knowledge" is undoubtedly posing a serious threat and actually destroying many antiquities and artefacts in the area, including the monoliths. Miller and Edet capture the situation thus:

Nigerian Pentecostal pastors incite local youths to accuse elder traditionalists of witchcraft and to attack any antiquities associated with tradition. In several cases *Ekpe* (*Ngbe*) halls have been burnt to the ground with all their irreplaceable ritual objects. Because inherited traditions are devalued, and the artisanal apprenticeship system has collapsed, very few artisans remain who can sculpt wood, forge iron, make cloths, masks and so on.

This in conjunction with the loss of both primary and secondary forests are culminating in the end of heritage in the entire region.¹

The duo of Miller and Edet are shocked and troubled that inspite of the Federal government Acts establishing the National Commission for Museum and Monuments and the accompany antiquity laws spelt out for example, in Decrees 77 and 79, criminalizing the destruction of antiquities, these practices are going on unabatedly in the Ejagham heartland. Accordingly, they have mounted a publicity blitz on this emergency to draw the attention of relevant government and institutional agencies to this menace. This approach to the present writer, represents one perspective on the matter. The other approach, certainly would be the acceleration of research on this area and the myriad of antiquities, especially the monoliths warehoused in its bosom, before all of this rich reservoir of history becomes extinct. Ignorance on the part of the indigenes of the area is also assailing the archaeological, ethnographic and historical relevance of the monoliths. This is because the monoliths are being tampered with, most unprofessionally and relocated from their original habitat to new locations in a manner that denudes them of their much needed contextual harmony and sanctity. The Nkarasi example, where monoliths were recently removed from their original habitat and placed by the Ikom-Calabar highway to

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¹ I. Miller and A. Edet, "Etara Mgbe Burial: Age Old Legacies attacked by Churches". Online Publication. Horizons H-Net Humans and Social Sciences. <https://www.networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/monoliths-destruction-part2.pdf>. p.1

attract tourists, is a graphic and painful illustration of the role of ignorance on the improper preservation of the monoliths. Indeed as early as 1968, Allison had noted this disturbing trend when he wrote that:

There is no guarantee, however, that the stones will remain as recorded in 1961-62. Even in 1903 Partridge found that some of the Alok stones had been moved between two of his visits. Early in 1960 three large stones and one small one were moved out into Alok market place from the bush behind the village. I was told that this had long been done for the convenience of motorist passing on the road, who in increasing numbers had been stopping to inspect and photograph the *Akwanshi*. About the same time, two of the large Njemitop stones had been moved out of the bush and set up beside the motor road, near the village school.²

Woeful agricultural practices are antithetical to the sustainable preservation of the monoliths. In an area where rudimentary agricultural practices are prevalent and bush burning is horrifyingly rife, many instances of monoliths roasting have inevitably occurred.³ Furthermore, a plethora of cases of outright theft of monoliths by antiquity poachers have been reported as monoliths are littered in a number of museums across the world.⁴ This, in addition to the removal of some of these monoliths by government agencies for display at various museums in Nigeria depletes their number and degrades their histo-archeological essence. This fact has been captured by a commentator in the following words:

Several *Akwanshi* have been acquired by the Department of antiquities and are now to be seen at the museums at Lagos, Jos and Oron. So far only one has been traced outside Nigeria. It was collected in 1910 from the "Cross River" and is now in the museum for *Volkerkunde*, Berlin. From the examination of a photograph, it appears to be from the Nta area.⁵

The foregoing scenario as highlighted, is undeniably reflective of a disturbing trend that elicits the urgent response of an exhaustive multi-disciplinary study of the monoliths, before their essence is compromised and/or completely destroyed. In this regard, this paper seeks to place the monoliths in proper historical perspective, as very little so far, appears to have been done to historicize the monoliths. Specifically, we intend to demonstrate that the practice of veneration of stones was an essential ingredient of the culture of Ejagham people in the Cross River region of Nigeria and that the monoliths represent the apogee of Ejagham civilization in the region.

THE CROSS RIVER MONOLITHS: THE JOURNEY SO FAR

In order to properly embark on this intellectual excursion, it is germane, even if briefly, to illuminate some of the findings thus far of researchers on the monoliths.

² P.Allison, *Cross River Monoliths*, (Lagos, Federal Department of Antiquities: 1968) p.23

³ I. Miller and A. Edet "Cross River Monoliths: In Critical Danger of Total Destruction". Online Publication. Horizons H.Net Humanities and Social Sciences, <https://www.networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/monoliths-destruction-nigeria.pdf>. pp.1-5.

⁴ I. Miller A. Edet "Cross River Monoliths: Destruction, Theft and International Sales", Online Publication. Horizons H-net Humanities and Social Sciences <https://www.networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/monoliths-destruction-nigeria.pdf>.

⁵ P. Allison, *Cross River Monoliths*, Op.cit p.24

⁶ C. Partridge, *Cross River Natives*, (London, Hutchinson and Co: 1905) p.170

These findings would undoubtedly aid us in the historical interpretation and reconstruction that we shall engage in shortly. The first report on the monoliths derived from the work of a British administrative officer, Charles Partridge. In his book, *Cross River Natives* (1905), he documented his findings of very peculiar and interesting stones on the left bank of the Aweyong Creek, between Cross River and the Bansara Creek. He specifically mentioned the occurrence of these stones in such places as Etiningnta (Itinta), Agba, Iseni (Abinti nsene) and Anop (Alok). He also indicated that he saw some in Okuni, near Ikom while a cluster of stones were also found in the village of Abuntak Isam in the Ekajuk village group of Ogoja district. Beyond this core area, he further reported findings of very crude variety of these stones among a few village groups of the Mbembe people of Osopong and Okom. It is particularly instructive to note that it was Partridge who also first drew attention to the relationship between the cicatrices on these stones and the tattoo marks he noticed among the indigenes, especially women of the area.⁶ P. A. Talbot, writing shortly after in his evergreen book, *In the Shadow of The Bush* (1912) took time to document the elaborate veneration of stones as objects of ritual and worship by Ejagham people. He also underscored the organic relationship between the tattoos found on the bodies of Ejagham people and the designs on some of these stones, going further to explain for the first time that these tattoos and designs were indeed, a form of indigenous writing called *Nsibidi*. However, it was not until 1926 in another book, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, vol II that he specifically and graphically documented the existence of the monoliths:

The finest stone circle seen by me is in the country of the Nuamm at Nyerekpong, a few miles north of Atamm... It is about twenty-five yards in diameter, but only eight monoliths, composed of a shelly limestone, are now left, one of which has fallen... The Nuamm stated that they only knew them under the name Etal, "The Stones"... They assured me that there are finer circles at Alok, a few miles to the east in which the stones are bigger as well as better carved. Another ring but of much smaller and uncut stones is to be found at Ogomogom...⁷

Talbot went further to document the existence of monoliths in other parts of Ejagham territory including Mandak in Ekajuk, Etinta, Ndurakpe and Olulumo as well as Mfum and Agbokim in present day Ikom and Etung local government Areas respectively. Rosemary I. Harris wrote "A Note on sculptured stones in the mid Cross River Area of South-East Nigeria" in 1959. Her study was essentially a review of all that had been chronicled on the monoliths up to that time by Partridge, Talbot and N. A. C. Weir, a colonial administrator whose unpublished report on the "Atam Clan" included a sketch on the monoliths. She highlighted the issues of location, style and symbolism of the monoliths with her overall intention, clearly being the projection of the monoliths as a rare artistic product deserving of further scholarly interrogation.⁸ It would appear that the first arguably scholarly work dedicated completely to the monoliths is Philip Allison's *Cross River Monoliths*. Allison, a forest officer of British descent was commissioned by the National Commission for museums and monuments to carry out a research survey of the stones.

⁷ P. A. Talbot, *The People of Southern Nigerias*, vol.II (London, Frank Cass: 1926) pp.347-50.

⁸ R. Harris, "A Note on Sculptured Stones in the Mid Cross River Area of South-East Nigeria" *MAN*, vol LIX, 1959, pp.113-4.

Allison was categorical about the fact that the monoliths are a proud product of the forebears of the Ekoi who are also called the Ejagham and whose descendants still currently inhabit the area in which the monoliths are embedded. He posited that "The *Akwanshi* are a remarkably isolated phenomenon and comparatively few stone carvings from other parts of Africa bear little resemblance to them".⁹ He went further to attempt a socio-physical characterization of the monoliths thus:

With a few exceptions the stones are carved with human features and a variety of decorations. The form which the decorations take can mostly be related to tribal marks and body paintings known to have been used in the area until recently and there seems little reason to doubt that the carvings were executed by the ancestors of people still present in the area.¹⁰

In the estimation of the present writer, the most important contribution of Allison to research on the monoliths, besides the effort to clearly show that the monoliths were a product of the forebears of the indigenous people inhabiting the area, was the bold attempt to volunteer a chronological interpretation of the monoliths. Using the *Akwanshi* of the Nta, all numbering thirty nine (39) and reputed to represent all their chiefs until the arrival of the Europeans at about 1900, Allison estimated using a ten year reign periodisation, that the "dynasty" could have commenced about the sixteenth (16th) century.¹¹

Keith Nicklin spent lot of time, especially between 1972 and 1978, studying the monoliths from an ethnographic viewpoint. He tried painstakingly to show a relationship between the monoliths and the lives, culture and beliefs of the indigenous Ejagham people inhabiting the area.¹² Then came Ekpo Eyo, who in 1983 as Director-General of Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments, undertook test excavations at two sites, viz, Alok and Emangabe in Nnam clan. Generally, he was determined to clear the bush around the monoliths and expose the arrangements or alignments of the stones; study the interrelationship between contiguous stones; unravel the iconography; document by photographing in color each stone and group formations; make ethnographic enquiries within the communities; and finally, conduct test excavations at several sites for the purpose of determining absolute dates by radio carbon (C14) or other methods.¹³ As it turned out, Ekpo Eyo's best years of research on the monoliths were to come as Professor in the University of Maryland; a job he got upon retirement from the services of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. He organized and embarked on a series of field trips to the monoliths in the 1990's with students who investigated the monoliths from multi-dimensional perspectives. For instance, Amanda Carlson did extensive work on the monoliths from an art-historical viewpoint while Clark, Christa J. dug deeply into the "styles and symbolism of the Nnam carved Monoliths of Cross River State, Nigeria". For Ekpo Eyo, the scientific chronological placement of the monoliths to the period 200AD through radio carbon (C14) dating would remain his single greatest achievement in the research on the monoliths.¹⁴ The huge relevance of this date to the task of historical interpretation and reconstruction would be discussed

subsequently. The foregoing represents the major trends in research on the monoliths thus far. It is true that many scholars and teams of researchers have continually visited the monoliths but their findings have hardly been fresh as no particularly new grounds appear to have been broken just yet. Indeed, for the present writer, it is especially worrisome that so far, no insightful historical interpretation of the monoliths has been undertaken by a trained historian. The next section of this paper would attempt to address this yawning gap.

THE CROSS RIVER MONOLITHS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The monoliths clearly represent a critical aspect of Ejagham civilization at its zenith in the Cross River region of Nigeria. Research findings as reflected in the foregoing analysis, point to the fact that the monoliths are a product of the forebears of the Ekoi who are more appropriately called the Ejagham. Ejagham civilization has been shown to be associated with a strong stone culture, the peak of the artistic fire of which is best reflected in the monoliths embedded in the Nta/Nnam forest complex area; an area which incidentally, has since been identified as part of the core area of origin of the Ejagham people. Talbot, amongst several other scholars, attested to the fact of the central and fundamental significance of stone veneration amongst the Ejagham when he mentioned the fact that upon migrating to any new settlement, the first thing done by all Ejagham groups was the erection of an altar of stones. As he put it:

On starting a new town, a meeting is called, and after the site for the Egbo (*Mgbe*) house has been agreed on each family is apportioned its share of the new bush... As already mentioned, the first ceremony of all is the choosing of the site for the Egbo (*Mgbe*) house. On this a little hut is erected, called "Ekpa Ntan" (the house without walls), and some *Nimm* stones laid where the *Etai Mgbe* (Leopard stone) will be raised later.¹⁵

Talbot maintains further that:

Perhaps the most important part of the whole structure is "Etai Mgbe", the long, cut stone usually found standing before the second pillar. When this stone is first erected in a new town, every chief has to bring food in a calabash, and palmwine in an earthenware pot. A part is offered in sacrifice, and the rest eaten. The stone is often transformed by rude painting into the rough semblance of a human being. A cap is made to fit the upper end, and iron in some form is always present either in bars twisted round the stone, or laid below it.¹⁶

We must at this juncture, acknowledge the skepticism of some early writers who in spite of the corpus of palpable evidence linking the Ejagham people to the stone culture epitomized in the Cross River monoliths, still exhibited a deep doubt as to their provenance. What is particularly interesting is that in spite of this skepticism, they still proceeded, wittingly or unwittingly, to show the relationship between the Ejagham and the art forms on the monoliths.

⁹P. Allison, *Cross River Monoliths*, *Op.cit* p.34

¹⁰*Ibid*, p.35

¹¹*Ibid*, P.33

¹²Keith Niklin, "Cross River Studies", *African Arts*, vol.XVIII, No.1 (November, 1984) pp.23-26.

¹³Ekpo Eyo, "The Cross River Stone Monoliths", Proposal Report to the Dapper Foundation in Paris, 1990. p.3.

¹⁴*Ibid*, p.2

¹⁵P. A. Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, (London, Heinemann: 1912) p.262

¹⁶*Ibid*, p.265.

This skepticism therefore, to the present writer, reflects a stubborn bewilderment on the part of these early writers, that the Ejagham at that time and even earlier, could be architects of such an extraordinarily dexterous and sophisticated architectural and artistic culture. One of these skeptics noted thus:

Many such stones lie buried in the bush, and when discovered are objects of great reverence to the Ekoi. Even those who have been educated in government schools insist that all such stones are the work of *Obassi* (God) alone, and that no man has carved them. Yet they are clearly cut, not split by fire, and show the presence of some old race to whom stone shaping was well known. No legend of such a race can be found, although this is, after all, natural, as the Ekoi themselves only arrived to take possession of the country a few hundred years ago.¹⁷

It is indeed interesting that this same genre of early researchers spent valuable pages of their work showing the undeniable relationship between the monoliths and the indigenous inhabitants of the areas in which the monoliths were found. Partridge, for example, recorded thus:

The interesting stones (hereafter described) in certain towns on the left bank of the Aweyong, carved to represent human beings from the abdomen upwards, show cicatrices, which however, vary considerably. Two of the Agba stones show a raised weal running from the root of the nose to the top of the forehead, which is also occasionally seen on living natives of the Cross River. A careful survey of all such marks within the district, accompanied by photographs or drawings, would probably yield very interesting results, which might perhaps throw light upon the descent and history of the different tribes.¹⁸

It has since been categorically established that these iconographic cicatrices are clearly *Nsibidi* signs, which origin is indisputably Ejagham. *Nsibidi* is an ancient form of writing which explodes the myth ingrained in the widely held view that Africa was a continent without a tradition of writing. The origin of *Nsibidi* amongst the Ejagham was chronicled over a century ago in the following words:

At the present day a greater variety of signs seem to exist among the Ekoi of the interior than amid any other tribe. The script is certainly of considerable antiquity, and is to a large extent pictographic, but has become highly conventionalized in the course of years. The Ekoi explanation of the name *Nsibidi*, or more properly *Nchibidi*, is that it is derived from the verb, "Nchibbi", "to turn" and this has taken to itself the meaning of agility of mind, and therefore of cunning or double meaning.¹⁹

Many years later, R. Farris Thompson, was so enamored of *Nsibidi* as a highly pictorial form of writing that developed independent of Western, Arabic and Latin contributors and could not help but remark accordingly thus:

The ideographs of the Ejagham people... explode the myth of Africa as a continent without a tradition of writing. The Ejagham developed a unique form of ideographic writing, signs representing ideas and called *Nsibidi*, signs embodying many powers including the essence of all that is valiant, just and ordered.²⁰

Finally Chinua Achebe in his book, **There was A Country**, made the same point even more graphically, when he established that:

Nnokwa is a little known ancient village that played a vital role in Igbo cosmology and in the development of its civilization. The townsfolk were particularly noted for their role in the transmission of the knowledge of *Nsibidi*, an ancient writing first invented by the Ejagham (Ekoi) people of South-Eastern Nigeria, and then adopted and used widely by their close neighbors- the Igbo, Efik, Anang and Ibibio. The very existence of this alphabet, dating back to the 1700s without any Latin or Arabic antecedent, is a rebuke to all those who have claimed over the centuries that Africa has no history, no writing and no civilization.²¹

It is important to make the point that the fact of the Nta/Nnam forest complex area warehousing the most sophisticated forms of the monoliths is historically explicable. In this regard, it should be noted that many Ejagham groups migrated and fanned out to the east, west and south of the original homeland of all Ejagham people in the Nigeria/Cameroun border and areas lying astride it. The Nta/Nnam forest complex area is an integral component of this original homeland. Records show that while many of these groups moved out in search of new opportunities, those within the Nta/Nnam forest complex area, remained in the main, autochthonous.²² For example, the Quas migrated from Mbakang in present day South-West Cameroun to their current abode(s) in Calabar, Odukpani, Akpabuyo and Bakassi. Many of the groups in present Akamkpa Local government Area migrated from the Etung forest and areas astride the Nigeria/Cameroun border while most of the Ejagham groups in Ogoja Local government Area migrated from Nsan Arghati and such other locations proximate to the Nigeria/Cameroun border.

The situation is the same with the Ejagham groups within present-day Etung and Ikom Local government Areas who traversed a myriad of locations to their current settlements.²³ Meanwhile as already stated the groups within the Nta/Nnam forest complex area, to the contrary, did not engage in these migratory adventures.²⁴ The implication of this fact is very clear. They did not abandon their monoliths which were configured at the height of the artistic era. Other Ejagham groups did not enjoy this privilege because they moved from one far flung location to another and in the process, must have regrettably abandoned their own pristine monoliths in their former abodes. This should explain why Talbot found and reported on a number of monoliths in different stages of abandon in the Ejagham forest. The choice left to these migratory groups therefore, on arrival at their new settlement(s), was the sustenance of the prevalent stone

¹⁷ Ibid, p.172.

¹⁸ C. Partridge, *Cross River Natives*, Op.cit pp.170-1.

¹⁹ P. A. Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, Op.cit p.305

²⁰ R. F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, (New York, Random House: 1983) p.227

²¹ C. Achebe, *There Was A Country* (USA: Penguin Group: 2013) p.192

²² S. O. Onor, *The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region of Nigeria* (Markudi; Aboki Publishers: 2016) pp.31-62

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

culture, even as the original artistic fire that produced the earlier versions had apparently waned over time. Chronology has since been aptly described as the “backbone of history”, as events need necessarily to be placed in a time scale, as a matter of critical imperative in the task of historical reconstruction.²⁵ This is in order to enable the historian show the gains or losses, progress or retrogression as well as change and continuity and the attendant factors occasioning these trends over a period of time, all of which indeed constitute the very essence of historical knowledge. Accordingly, we are glad to state that the Cross River monoliths have undoubtedly aided the chronological reconstruction of the past of the Ejagham people in the Cross River region of Nigeria. The point has already been made that the first bold attempt to chronologically interrogate the monoliths was made by Allison. He, it was who having counted the number of monoliths at Nta, totaling thirty nine (39) and having identified each of these monoliths through oral sources, as representing a past King, attempted to date the origin or age of the settlement using a ten (10) year average mean of reign for each King, with a base year of 1900 signifying the possible date of death of the last surviving King before the advent of Europeans in to the area. Using these parameters, he posited that the settlement would have “commenced about the beginning of the Sixteenth century”.²⁶ Allison’s judgment has been dismissed as speculative and entirely lacking in scientific exactitude by Ekpo Eyo. From the point of view of historical research, it also falls short of the standardized and generally acceptable regnal chronology mean for Africa of 13.5 years as average duration of reign for African Kings.²⁷ It is infact in this regard, that Ekpo Eyo’s unprecedented efforts of using the C14 technique to date the monoliths is particularly gratifying. Through this process of radio carbon dating, the monoliths are placed at 200AD. This remains the most dependable date thus far.

The date, 200AD, has proven to be critically significant in the annals of Nigerian history in general and that of the Ejagham people in particular. Little wonder, Nicklin, writing in 1984 in the wake of the radio carbon dating of the monoliths by Ekpo Eyo, remarked as follows:

In Calabar, during my latest trip to the Cross River last winter, I read in the Nigerian Daily Times (Jan.2, 1984) that recent archaeological discoveries at Ikom announced by Ekpo Eyo at the Pan African Congress held in Jos in December indicate that they may soon be a need to re-write the pre-history of Nigeria. Test excavations carried out by Dr. Eyo at the sites of Alok and Emmangabe, near Ikom, were reported to have already begun to yield results... the Ikom stone figures date back to around 200AD; i.e. some 1780 years ago. This was indeed thrilling reading for a Cross River nationalist like me, for AD 200 has frequently been cited as the terminal date Africa’s first Iron Age culture, that is Nok. Further verification of this date from archaeological materials to be excavated from other sites in the area of distribution of the Cross River monoliths is eagerly awaited.²⁸

The year, 200AD is also strikingly remarkable because many scholars refer to it as the time of the coming of age of the historic Bantu revolution. For the Ejagham in particular, the dating of the monoliths to 200AD was exponentially important.

Firstly, oral tradition collected from all Ejagham groups unanimously point to the Nigeria/Cameroun border and areas lying immediately astride it including Etung, Ikom and the Nta/Nnam forest complex as the original homeland of all Ejagham people. The date 200AD ascribed to the monoliths, therefore clearly validates these oral sources since the date alludes to a long period of habitation of this area by the Ejagham people whose forebears were undeniably, the architects of the artistic civilization epitomized in the monoliths. Secondly, historical linguists consolidate this position, for as Watters has argued:

From the distribution of the three Ekoid languages of which Ejagham is one, the simplest hypothesis would appear to be that Proto Ekoid was spoken in the vicinity of present day Ikom in Nigeria.²⁹

Watters position, *inter alia*, is anchored on the unparalleled diversity of Ejagham “language groups” within the vicinity of the Ikom area. This diversity enjoys credence in a strong linguistic principle which uploads that “the homeland (that is, place of origin) of a language group is that area which has the greatest linguistic diversity in the total area of the group”.³⁰ The Ejagham ancestral homeland, the geo-political confines of which have been defined above, evokes broader historical meaning when viewed against the widely held position that the Nigeria/Cameroun border area is the cradle of the Bantu phenomenon. In this regard, it is critically significant to note that the Ejagham language has since been identified by linguists as a “true” Bantu language. This is so because its prefixes alternate between singular and plural forms; a fundamental characteristic shared by all Bantu languages.³¹ These facts give credence to the assertion by most scholars that the Ejagham are of Bantu stock and that the Ejagham civilization was either the nucleus of the Bantu phenomenon or at least, one of the nuclei from which the Bantu evolved. Furthermore, scholars have since associated the monoliths with a strong technological revolution predicated on iron-workings. Indeed, archaeologists interested in the matter have shown ample evidence of iron making sites in a number of locations which fall within the Nta/Nnam forest complex in modern day Ikom local government area. In the light of this evidence, historians posit that the use of iron by early Ejagham peoples in furtherance of their civilization, went beyond the production of monoliths to other levels of creative and resourceful engagements. Erim articulated this position in the following words:

The material remains of the carved stones indicate the existence of a virile people whose culture was iron based. Indeed their ancestors had craft industries which were highly developed in skill and artistry. These crafts represent high points in economics whose base was iron technology.³²

²⁹J. Watters “A phonology and Morphology of Ejagham... With Notes on Dialect Variation, Excerpts from M.A. Dissertation in a letter to O.E. Tangban, A History of the Etung People of the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria”, University of Calabar, 1982. p.14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹S. E. Majuk, “The System of Slavery in Bakor, South-Eastern Nigeria, 1850-1960” Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, (vol.3, No.12, 2015) p.51

³²E. O. Erim, “The Early History of the Peoples of the Upper Cross River Region”, *History and Culture of the Upper Cross River* (Enugu, Harris Publishers: 1990) p.39.

³³B. W. Andah “Pre-history of the Upper Cross River People”, *History and Culture of the Upper Cross River, Ibid*, p.27.

²⁸K. Nicklin, “Cross River Studies”, *Op.cit*, p.25

Historians are also of the view that with an iron technology base and the explosion in creative skills and other forms of industry, came an agricultural revolution that was inevitable in order to contain the demands of increasing population. This was the scenario that typified the life and society of early Ejagham peoples, the narrative of which has attracted enormous commentary from many scholars including Andah who noted that:

The early settlers were farmers, who produced agricultural surplus capable of supporting settlements that were populated to the extent that each settlement had a population of diverse occupations... Fishing and hunting were of major economic importance in the early history of the Ejagham peoples.³³

It is pertinent to note that, two major factors propelled the historic Bantu migrations across Africa, viz, a strong iron culture and a flourishing agricultural revolution. These two factors, as can be obviously seen, were dominant in the life of early Ejagham peoples, whose civilization has been undoubtedly shown to be an integral part of the Bantu phenomenon. Armed with the knowledge of iron workings and agricultural techniques, the Bantu easily tore across Africa, settling in far flung corners of the continent with little resistance and challenges. We hold that the Bantu revolution clearly had Ejagham roots. Put differently, we submit that the Ejagham civilization was an integral part of the historic Bantu story which took root in the Nigeria/Cameroun border which clearly, is also the homeland of early Ejagham peoples. In the wake of the Bantu migrations to far flung locations across Africa, some groups amongst them remained in the original homeland and today answer to be name, Ejagham.³⁴

Conclusion

This paper concerned itself with the task of placing the monoliths in proper historical perspective. We started by showing that in spite of the admittedly commendable scholarly work done so far on the monoliths, very little, if anything at all, has been done to historicize this clearly phenomenal artifact in the Cross River region of Nigeria. Accordingly, we set out to demonstrate that the monoliths are a creation of Ejagham people and that the signs and symbols on the monoliths, are clearly a reflection of Ejagham culture as epitomized in the tattoos identified on the bodies of contemporary indigenous occupants of the area. The signs and symbols on the monoliths also captured *Nsibidi* – a highly sophisticated and pictorial form of writing developed by the Ejagham and standing in proud defiance of the myth that Africa was a continent without a tradition of writing.

The date, 200AD yielded by the monoliths on account of radio carbon dating, clearly established the convergence between the Ejagham civilization and the Bantu revolution as the latter is also reputed by many scholars to have come of age at the same period. This is in addition to the fact that the Bantu, like the Ejagham, both lay claim to the Nigeria/Cameroun border as their original homeland in the same way as the Ejagham language is credited by linguists as truly Bantu. All of these facts and the interpretations derivable there from, have served to enrich our knowledge, not just of the monoliths, but of the history of the Ejagham people in particular and that of the Cross River region at large. It is hoped that as more research is undertaken on the monoliths, especially at this time when these

artifacts are critically endangered as already highlighted, new vistas and horizons would be opened to enable scholars unravel the healthy complexities that characterize the rich history of this truly important part of the African continent.

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³⁴E.O. Erim, “*The Early History of the Peoples of the Upper Cross River Region*”, *Op.cit*, p.38.