
**PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY AND CONSERVATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN
SOUTH EASTERN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Conservation of archaeological sites has become a global issue given that these sites are increasingly endangered by a number of challenges they face especially in Nigeria. In enlisting the public towards the conservation of archaeological sites, and also promoting archaeology as a discipline, public archaeology becomes very crucial. Data for this study were gathered using interviews, focused group discussions, field visitations, key informant interviews, and secondary data analysis. The study aims to examine challenges facing the conservation of sites, the state of public archaeology in these areas, and how public archaeology can enhance conservation efforts in the Nigerian example. Four sites located in two states in South-eastern Nigeria were understudied. They are Ajaani Ebenebe and ObuUmuonicha in Ebenebe, Anambra state; and the Iyi-Okoro-Aho Spring and Public Bath in Isuochi, Abia state. The study revealed that the principle of sacredness and functionalism are two key drivers of conservation, while the many challenges of conservation include erosion of traditional power, natural forces, perception and functionalism, location and security, Christianity and modernization, finance and manpower. Archaeology and the works of archaeologists are unpopular in the study areas. Public-oriented archaeology is key to bridging the gap, and also driving the conservation of sites across the country. This paper agrees with other scholars that archaeology, the works of archaeologists, and discussions on conservation should no longer remain in the academic domain.

Keywords: *Conservation, Archaeological sites, Public Archaeology*

Introduction:

Archaeology should no longer be restricted to the academic domain alone. Hence, the need for the establishment of public archaeology in the discipline of archaeology (Matsuda, 2004). Public archaeology, for Richardson and Almansa-Sanchez (2015), is both a disciplinary practice and a theoretical position that can be expressed through the democratization of archaeological investigations, through communication with and the involvement of the public. Public archaeology through critical discussions seeks to achieve an archaeology for the public (Ascherson, 2000). The development of public archaeology implies archaeologists should strive to be perceived as ‘messengers for and about archaeology’ (Mcmanamon, 2000). Though the terms ‘public archaeology’, ‘applied archaeology’, and ‘community archaeology’ may differ in their position, they share the same concern- a smooth archaeologist-community relationship (Odum et al, 2020).

An archaeological site can be defined as any area that possesses evidence of past human activities (Uzegbu, 2019). In many communities in Nigeria, some of these archaeological sites have been abandoned while some of these sites are integrated into the daily life of the extant society. Conservation entails looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance (ICOMOS, 1999). While preservation entails maintaining the original in an unchanged state, conservation embraces the elements of change and enhancement (Larkham, 1999).

Conservation of archaeological sites in Nigeria is still faced with a lot of challenges including ethnic and community clashes, the action of religious zealots, the increased development pace which is not commensurate with archaeological investigations and conservation measures, environmental changes, insecurity, inadequate funding, population pressure, poor government policies, and the activities of treasure hunters. Principal among these challenges is the lack of public knowledge about the relevance of these sites. Lack of public education implies that people do not recognize a site in the absence of professionals (Eze-Uzoamaka, 2004). The consequence of this is that the public ignorantly destroy many archaeological sites. Conservation efforts will not move forward in Nigeria if the idea of educating the public remains neglected. For effective conservation of archaeological sites, the responsibility cannot be left to the government and its agencies, rather the help and attention of the public are required for this to be achievable.

Aim and Objectives:

The aim of this study is to evaluate the contribution of public archaeology (sometimes referred to as community archaeology by some scholars such as Odum et al, (2020)) towards the conservation of archaeological sites in selected study areas in South-eastern Nigeria. The objectives of the research are:

- To examine the challenges of conservation of archaeological sites in the study areas
- To evaluate the state of public archaeology in the areas
- To evaluate the contribution of public archaeology to the conservation of archaeological sites in the study area.

Contribution of the study:

This research on the role of public archaeology in the conservation of archaeological sites in south-eastern Nigeria provides a lens for examining in a practical sense the challenges facing conservation of archaeological sites in Igbo land, and the contribution of public archaeology to the conservation of these sites. This study connects the dot between public archaeology and the conservation of archaeological sites. It further demonstrates the need for a public-oriented archaeology as advocated by many scholars.

Study Area:

South-eastern Nigeria is a political division comprising five states in Nigeria: Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Abia. These states are dominated by the Igbo-speaking people, with Christianity as the most influential religion, and agriculture as the dominant cultural occupation. Out of these five states, two communities Isuochi and Ebenebe located in two states Abia, and Anambra were chosen for this research.

- **Isuochi**

Isuochi is an autonomous community located in the Umunneochi local government area of Abia state. The land surface of the Isuochi environment lies between latitudes 6°17' and 7°12' South-South

and longitudes 6°52 and 7°54 East, and covers a total surface area of approximately 3,962 square kilometres (Abia Census Board, 1990). It is bounded in the east by Lokpa (Umuchieze) in Umunneochi local government, Awgunta and Achi in Enugu state. On the west boundary with Ibi stream as the border (Abia Census Board, 1990). Isuochi is a border town between Imo, Anambra and Enugu states. Isuochi is made up of nine communities: Umuelem, Ndiawa, Achara, Ihie, Lomara, Mbala, Amuda, Ngodo, and Umuaku, and each of these communities has villages that make them up.

- **Ebenebe**

Ebenebe is one of the ten communities in Awka North local government area of Anambra state. Ebenebe is located between 6°20'02"N and 7°07'045"E. It is bounded by Amansea (Ezu River) to the south and Mgbakwu (Odoli River) to the west, Ugbenu to the north and Agbaja (Enugu) to the east (Okafor, 2021). The rich soil of Ebenebe makes it one of the highest producers of agricultural commodities in Anambra state (Okafor, 2021). Ebenebe is made up of eight villages- Umuajana (the eldest), Obuno, Umuoye, Okpuno, Umuoji, Umuogbuefi, Uwani, and Umuaba.

Research Method

This study is exploratory in nature and thus qualitative in approach allowing a better understanding of complex concepts, social interactions, or cultural phenomena. The primary source of data was interviews, focus group discussions, field visitations, and key informant interviews. The secondary source of data was obtained from both published and unpublished scholarly works. A total of three sites and 30 informants were selected using a multi-stage purpose sampling technique. In the first place, two states were purposively selected from the five states in South-eastern Nigeria. They were Abia, and Anambra. In the second stage, one local government area was purposively selected from the two states making it two local governments- Umunneochi, and Awka-North, Abia, Anambra, respectively. In the last stage, one community was randomly selected from each of the local governments and twenty respondents were selected for each community. The data collected were analysed qualitatively.

Literature Review:

For generations, archaeology has been conducted for, and shared among, a small group of scholars, but now many archaeologists consider community engagement to be an important part of their work (Agbe-Davies, 2014). Owoseni (2018) asserts that the involvement of the public in responsible management and preservation of cultural heritage is not an addendum, a luxury or an afterthought but the foundation of tomorrow's archaeology. Public participation means more than just presenting archaeology to the public, it is now about reaching out to the members of the community and making them stakeholders in the archaeology discourse (Owoseni, 2018). Nomishan et al. (2021), point out that the poor involvement of communities in archaeological projects is a challenge to archaeological practice. In addition, Aremu (2014) notes that archaeological sites are continuously looted in Nigeria with antiquity dealers encouraging clandestine excavations, and in some cases, tourists take "guided tours" of "archaeological" excavations from where they purchase looted artefacts, which they take home illegally. The local people who do not know the importance of these sites often ignore these acts. This problem can best be solved by educating the people. Ekundayo (2015) in affirmation argues that one of the most important methods of protecting sites is through the use of public enlightenment policies.

Matsuda (2014) on the other hand, stressed two specific concepts of 'the public': the one associated with the state and its institutions, and the other with the people, and argues that there is a gap between these two different concepts of 'the public', and emphasizes that the concept of 'the public' in public

archaeology should be seen as an open and participatory realm, which assumes that the people, the very constituents of ‘the public’ have a say in deciding what is in the public interest. Matsuda (2004:69) also notes that public archaeology in the narrow sense would not confine archaeology to the public realm, but on the contrary, try to open archaeology up to the general public. Odum, et al, (2020), in their work, highlight that all the various models and approaches of public or community archaeology converge on one basic point – how archaeological investigations can benefit the public, particularly host communities, and gain more support from them. Manders, et al (2012) opine that public archaeology is essentially ‘archaeology for the people, by the people, and for the people’. They noted that raising awareness is the best possible way to preserve sites. Only when we understand and accept not only the richness, beauty and historical significance of our heritage but also how it is threatened, can we make judgments on how to treat it? Though much has been written on public archaeology and also on the conservation of sites, this paper seeks to connect the dots, examining how public archaeology can aid the conservation of sites in the Nigerian example.

Results and Discussion

In Ebenebe and also in Isuochi, there are many archaeological sites both explored and unexplored; identified, and unidentified. The argument among scholars has always been on what makes a site an archaeological site. Many scholars argue the designation of an archaeological site based on context (Mustakim, 2023), while others base their argument on use and formation (Daraojimba, 2023; Oji, 2023). The sites selected for this study may be described as non-investigated considering that no professional archaeological investigation has been carried out on them; however these sites house objects, materials, structures, and other pieces of evidence of use in the past. In addition to this, the possible age of the sites was also considered in the selection of the studied archaeological sites.

1. AJAANI EBENEBE

Ajaani Ebenebe is not considered a deity but a *dinaala* (culture) and is believed to have started after creation by Chukwu-(God). Ajaani is upheld to do the same thing as God; does not entertain sin, upholds the Ten Commandments, does not forbid Christians, and is generous in blessing its people. Ajaani has no image or statue, only its staff for its priest and this makes it indestructible even when the whites came to Ebenebe. In the entire area where Ajaani is located, no one especially if guilty can swear with sand in such a place. The calling of Ajaani’s attendant rotates only among three families. Women do not serve Ajaani and it has never chosen a child as its priest. The attendant of Ajaani is known as Ezeani. All deities in Ebenebe are believed to meet with Ajaani which gives the final order to kill or save a person.

The *Obu* of Ajaani Ebenebe is sacred and women who are in their period can neither enter it nor pass in front of the *obu*; for this reason, a separate path was created for such women. Women who are clean can however enter the *obu* and sweep it. The *obu* of Ajaani also functions as a court, and any matter deliberated and concluded inside the *Obu* cannot be altered by anyone including the *Igwe-king* or even white courts (modern courts). Police do not arrest anyone inside the *obu*. If a person is guilty, they are handed over to the police who must wait outside, and if the person is innocent they are asked to go. Whenever the people of Ebenebe want to have a meeting of truth, they come to the *obu* of Ajaani. Occult men and witches cannot enter Ajaani’s *sobu*, it destroys their power. Inside the *obu*, light bulbs are not permitted, and pictures are also not permitted.

The *obu* of Ajaani was first constructed with *oma* leaves, and later with mud, but has been rebuilt with cement. All items in the *obu* are sacred and have been preserved overtime. There are pottery items,

hides and skins, skulls of animals, bones and wooden objects. There is also a sacred stool in the obu which only the priest of Ajaani sits on when attending to the deity. Ajaani has two sacred forests in Ebenebe that no individual enters except its priest. According to the priest, these sacred forests are home to symbolic plants, animals, and objects which are unknown to the Ebenebe public.

2. OBU UMUONICHA, EBENEBE

ObuUmuonicha belongs to the Umuonicha people and is believed to be about one hundred years old. It is the first obu in the whole of Ebenebe and other obu's were modelled after it. The Obu was constructed for the deity OfoOnichaEbenebe, which is a general deity for the Ebenebe people. The Obu was first constructed with oma leaves gotten from *ofiammiri*, and later reconstructed with cement around 1953. The construction of the obu was made collectively by the *umunna*. The obu is decorated both inside and outside with heads of animals killed in the past including ram, goat, cow and antelopes. When an animal is killed in the past, no one including the elders ate the head of those animals. The heads are skinned and kept at the Obu. When the roof of the obu was changed to zinc, all the old deteriorated heads of animals were removed and buried while the good ones were left there. The image of the deity OfoOnicha was in the Obu before, but the image was burnt by an individual, a Christian zealot, and the image has not been carved again.

A woman can enter the Obu when summoned but not when her menstrual period. Women do not sweep the inside of the obu and this has remained unchanged over the years. Women only sweep the area outside the obu. The Obu has a head who is always a man. The obu serves as a courtroom for the people in the past and even till present, and any judgment passed in the obu cannot be altered or re-appealed for even by the *igwe* of Ebenebe or White courts. The Obu is known for honesty, and any dishonesty is punished by the deity itself. If an individual refuses to obey the judgment, the individual is punished by the village. No *Ofor* is used in the administration of justice in the obu. The obu also serves as a meeting point where deliberations of importance are carried out with all honesty.



Figure 1: Outside view of ObuUmuonicha



Figure 2: Inside view of ObuUmuonicha



Figure 3: Inside view of ObuUmuonicha
Source: Research Fieldwork, 2021

3. IYI-OKORO-AHO SPRING AND PUBLIC BATH

Iyi-okoro-ahois located inUmuelem. It was believed to have been discovered by a man many years ago during a bat-hunting expedition in Umuelem. Umuelem is known for bat hunting, with a bat colony located in the place. The water of this spring is very refreshing and served the people. Water in this spring flows from a rock outcrop with a single outlet (though it was not so before). Also, a public bath was constructed near the spring, although it has been abandoned due to the drying up of the spring and also due to modernization. In the far past, people bathed in the public bath in groups, age or sexnothwitsatanding (male or female). The materials used in constructing the bath are unknown to the present society, and this suggests that the public baths must have been constructed and used a very long time ago.Who made it is still unknown. The site is surrounded by stone and stone outcrops which may have been used in the washing of legs as done by the present society in the area.



Figure 4: IyiOkoro-aho spring

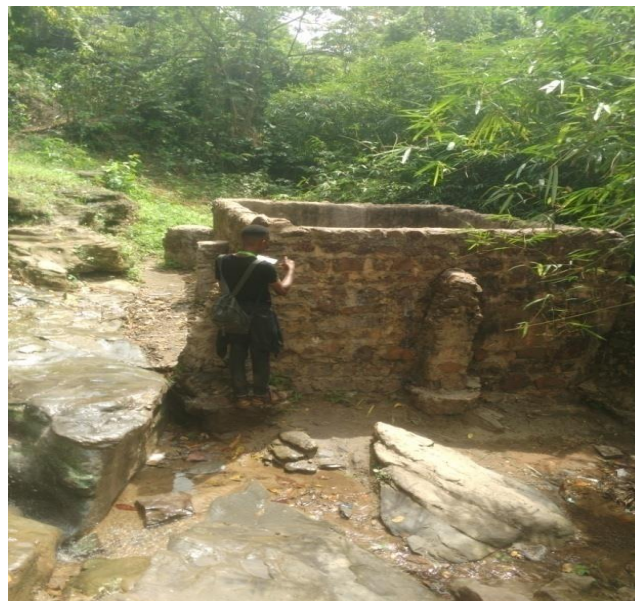


Plate 5: IyiOkoro-aho public bath

Challenges of Conservation in These Sites

- **Natural forces**

Conservation efforts are faced with environmental challenges in the sites under study. In Isuochi, erosion is one of the major environmental factors affecting the conservation of sites increasing inaccessibility and migration to unaffected areas. In Ebenebe, materials inside the obu are decaying as a result of environmental changes. This has resulted in some of them being discarded and buried.

- **Perception and functionalism**

Perception has to do with how locals think about or view the sites, while functionalism in this context has to do with the relevance of the site to the people. ObuUmuonicha and AjaaniEbenebe both in Ebenebe are seen by the locals as sacred sites and also relevant to the extant culture. This has helped in their conservation overtime. No effort is being made towards the conservation Iyi-okoro-aho spring because the bath is of no significant value to the locals. Locals often consider the economic, religious, social or historical values of sites in conservation dissemination.

- **Location and security**

This issue is peculiar to the sites in Isuochi. The site is located far from residential areas and the roads leading to them are not motorable. The security issues in the area are also discouraging most people from visiting these sites. These issues are impeding conservation.

- **Erosion of traditional power**

Conservation is becoming more problematic in Isuochi because of the weakening of the traditional stool. The creation of autonomous communities in Isuochi has created a divide in the communal life of Isuochi people and this is also affecting conservation.

.Christianity and Modernization

The influence of Christianity and modernization on the conservation of sites is profound. The iyi-okoro-aho spring and bath are facing abandonment because of modernization which has also erased its functionalism. Christianity is pushing disassociation from heathen activities and areas.

The State Of Archaeology in the Study Areas

Archaeology is not a popular concept among locals in these communities. In the cases observed, the word 'archaeology' is familiar to a few with most of them not having a knowledge of what the word means. A good number of people familiar with the discipline are majorly students who attested that they got to know about the discipline through general studies courses offered in tertiary institutions. Most people on explanation classify archaeologists as miners, while some understand them as people who work in museums.

Archaeological research across these areas is still very low. In Isuochi, and also in Ebenebe, there are yet no recorded archaeological explorations in the area. The fragment of archaeological investigations conducted in these areas is majorly by students seeking information for their assignments and project works which often are not extensive and engaging. Most archaeological works carried out by student researchers are not designed in such a way as to engage the locals. There are no local media platforms promoting archaeology using languages familiar to the people. Some of the published historical and ethnographic works on some of these study areas such as Isuochi are mostly in English, and largely for the academic sphere, which further eliminates the familiarization of the discipline. There are also no museums in these communities which further increases their ignorance of the field of archaeology.

Discussion

Conservation of sites is not a recent phenomenon but an ongoing activity among several cultures and communities in Nigeria. Sites of cultural and historical relevance to communities are often conserved

as symbols of identity, pride, education, and exhibition of lifestyle. Conservation in many of these societies is possible through local institutions and structures peculiar to a community. In most cases, sites that are used by the extant locals for one or more functions such as religious, social, economic, or administrative often receive more attention. To encourage the clamour for conservation of sites by the locals, then sites must be designed to become functional to the lifestyle of the locals.

The principle of sacredness and functionalism stands out as two key factors driving the conservation of archaeological sites in many societies in Nigeria. These two principles distinguished sites receiving conservation attention from those which are not. Objects, places, and items which form part of the people's spiritual life are often designated sacred or holy and receive preferential attention. Ebenebe for example, was a community immersed in the worship of deities. These produced sacred places which have remained largely unaltered in the face of modernization. Functionalism on the other hand is used in the context of the use of the site to the present inhabitants. Sites which meet these two criteria are often more protected than others.

The focus of public archaeology is the engagement of the public in what the archaeologist does and also equipping them with the right information they need. Public archaeology does not advocate for the exclusion of experts and archaeologists in archaeological conservation, but a balancing and integration of the knowledge of the professionals with the ideas, system, and willingness of the public. In essence, it is about engaging the public in the investigation, and management of archaeological sites. Conservation is not a recent phenomenon in societies, but an ongoing age-long trend which archaeologists and conservation experts can tap into. Raising awareness is the best possible way to preserve sites.

Considering the complex problems surmounting the practice of archaeology in Nigeria such as funding, limited manpower, the vast land mass of the country, diversity in terms of ethnicity, transportation and security challenges. It has become imperative to use the locals as a more effective means of publicizing, conserving sites and partly funding conservation. To achieve this, then the public must be brought into the corridors of the discipline, and this is effectively captured in the sub-discipline of public archaeology. Public archaeology anchors on engagement and enlightenment, and there are some key considerations in such discussion including illiteracy level, trust issues, customs and traditions, religious views, and language. Conservation must become a mainstream conversation, and archaeological sites should be projected as cherished communal properties.

Conclusion

Archaeology is largely unfamiliar as a course of study and choice of career across Nigeria. In addition to this, archaeological sites in Nigeria are still facing several dynamic and potential challenges. As messengers of and for the people, archaeologists have a new role which is devising innovative ways to include the Nigerian public for whom the archaeologists work for, to ensure a smooth relationship and support for the discipline.

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