

STONE SCULPTURE OF THE CROSS RIVER, NIGERIA

P.A. Allison, Frogham, England.

The use of stone as a building material or sculptural medium is so rare in Black Africa that theories of an exotic origin have often been advanced to account for its occurrence. Such theories have seldom survived serious examination but the rare and sporadic occurrence of stone sculpture in the continent continues to be something of a mystery.

The most used stone has been steatite which, when fresh, can be carved with the tools and techniques of the wood carver. The Nomoli and Pomtan of Sierra Leone and Guinea are carved from steatite, so also are the Mintadi of the Bakongo, the Bird Pillars and figurines of the Ruin Cultures of Rhodesia and the hundreds of figure carvings at the Yoruba village of Esie. Apart from a few anomalous pieces in the Sierra Leone/Guinea area and the shaped stones of Mali and Senegal, hardstone carvings are known only from Nigeria and Southern Ethiopia. These rare and widely separated occurrences cannot be explained by the lack of raw material elsewhere. Basalt, granite, quartz, limestone, sandstone and laterite have all been used, as well as steatite, as a medium for sculpture, and one or other of these materials occurs widely throughout the continent.

Ethnographical survey is of course incomplete and archaeological exploration has hardly begun in Tropical Africa. This is particularly true of the high forest areas of West Africa and the Congo whose people have been largely responsible for the creation of African art as we know it. Here, if anywhere, further evidence of stone sculpture may possibly be found.

The Guinea Coast cultures of the West African high forest have not only produced wood sculpture in great quantity but also works in terra cotta and bronze. It is not surprising therefore that stone sculpture in the greatest variety is also found in this area. In Nigeria, towards the eastern end of the Guinea Coast, stone sculpture is known from the Yoruba country to the west and from the Cross River to the east. The intervening area is occupied by the Binis and Ibos who are notably artistic and ingenious people, but the raw material for stone sculpture is lacking. At certain of the most easterly Yoruba markets flat stones are on sale, for use as food grinders, which are bought by travellers bound for the stoneless Benin and Ibo country.

The highly urbanised culture of the Yoruba differs profoundly from the small scale social and political organisation of the Cross River communities. Nevertheless the most outstanding artistic achievements of both cultures seem to have been inspired by a royal ancestor cult. The naturalistic terra cotta and brass sculptures of Ife, which have been dated with some confidence to the twelfth century (Willett 1967 and 1971), were certainly created as adornments to the royal ancestor cult of the *Oni* (King) of Ife, so also were the remarkable quartz stools and granite monoliths. The naturalism of the granite/gneiss *Idena* figure suggests a similar period and inspiration. At Esie, fifty-five miles (ninety kilometres) north of Ife but still in the high forest, are some eight hundred figure carvings in steatite. Their elaborate head dresses and other orna-

ments and the fact that they are mostly seated on stools suggests that these figures also depict royalty. The style is less realistic than the Ife sculpture and the date is probably considerably later.

East of the Yoruba country the granites and gneisses are overlaid by the deep sands and clays of the Benin and Ibo country which extend for nearly two hundred miles (three hundred kilometres) almost to the Cross River. Here the pre-Cambrian rocks of the Cameroun massif are covered with Cretaceous shales, sandstones and limestones but are exposed in the actual bed of the Cross Ri-

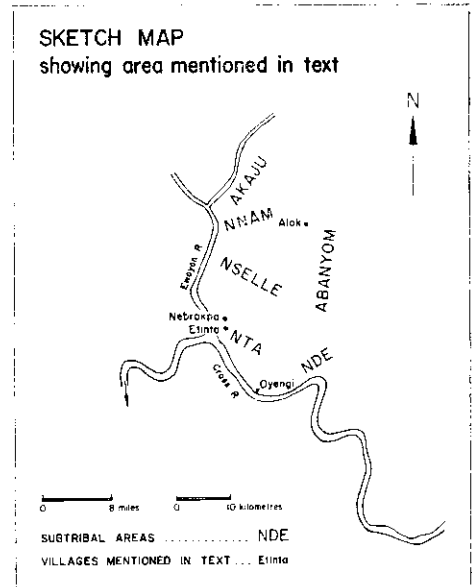
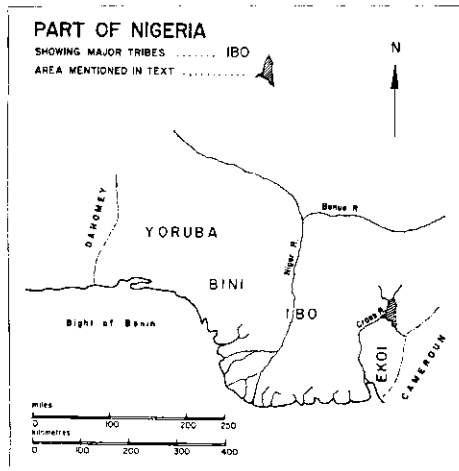


Fig. 64
A: Part of Nigeria showing tribal areas;
B: Sketch map of Cross river area mentioned in the text.

ver and its tributaries. It is from these various rocks, more especially from the water worn basalt boulders, that the Cross River monoliths have been fashioned. Where suitable rocks occur in West Africa, natural boulders and rock splinters have often been set up as cult objects. Instances of this in the Cross River country have been recorded by Talbot (1912 and 1926) and by Harris (1965), but except for half a dozen cases in the Yoruba country, the carving of hard stone to represent the human form is confined to a small area of less than four hundred square miles (some nine hundred square kilometres) on the right bank of the middle Cross River. The area lies in a wide angle formed by the Cross River and one of its confluents, the Ewayon. Here, during 1961 and 1962, the author recorded two hundred and ninety-five stones which were shaped with varying degrees of elaboration to represent the human form Allison, 1968). Collections of small, shaped stones, usually of cylindrical or ellipsoid form, were found at certain present, and former, occupation sites in the area but consideration of these is outside the scope of this article.

The sculptured stones occur at twenty-six main sites, on land occupied by six formerly independent groups, which can best be considered as Ekoï sub-tribes. There are also nine other sites at which a total of sixteen stones are found in ones and twos. These stand on the periphery of the main area and seem to be

derived from the main groups by imitation and, in at least one case, by theft. The largest groups number up to thirty-one individual stones which have, in one or two cases, been set up in a complete circle. Elsewhere, the arrangement suggests that a circular setting was the final aim.

The most numerous groups, composed of sculptures showing the greatest skill and originality, are found on the lands of the Nta (fifty stones), Nselle (ninety) and Nnam (ninety-four). There are also twenty-two stones at three sites on Abanyom land and nineteen stones at three sites on Akaju land, but here the workmanship is inferior and the style is derivative. The Nta, Nnam and the best of the Nselle stones are carved in basalt. The Abanyom and Akaju stones are carved from a shelly limestone, some limestone carvings were also found at villages formerly occupied by Nselle. Both basalt and limestone tend to occur in boulders of roughly columnar form which have often been selected as

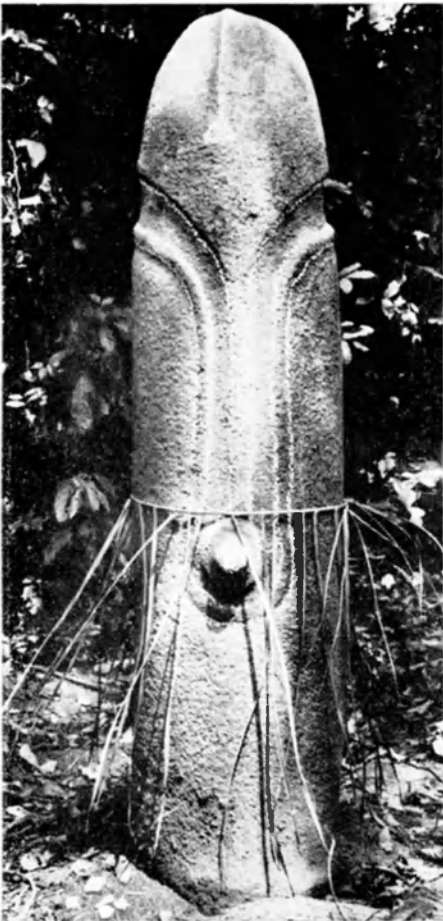


Fig. 65
The phallic pillar of Oyengi stands 59" (150 cms) out of the ground. The coronal groove connects with the protuberant navel. The stone has been decorated with palm leaves and kaolin.



Fig. 66
An Akwanshi from the Etinta group, 42" (107 cms) high. Here the phallic pillar has been adorned with human features. One of the very few stones in which the navel is not represented.

a starting point for the sculptures. The limestone is probably easier to work but shows a rough finish and weathers badly. The Nta and Nselle refer to their stones as *Akwanshi*, which has been translated as 'the buried dead'. By the Nnam and others they are referred to merely



Fig. 67

The essentially phallic appearance of the Etinta sculptures is more obvious when they are viewed from the rear. The nearest stone is 61" (155 cms) high. The Etinta group stands in a grove of forest trees which has never been cleared for farming.

as *Atal*, meaning 'stones', or *Alaptal*, 'long stones'. The three main styles of sculpture are fairly distinct. The *Akwanshi* of the Nta can be recognised by the cylindrical form of the figure and by a definite groove which separates the head from the body. The Nnam have selected massive boulders and covered them with profuse and well executed surface decoration. The Nselle tend towards the Nta style but occasionally produce carvings of individual originality. I met one Nselle man who had made some inexpert attempts at stone carving but the art is virtually dead. For reasons which will be touched on later, the traditional way of life has vanished and with it the art of stone carving, which was probably always an esoteric activity whose secrets were known only to a few. I was assured, quite seriously, by one informant that the *Akwanshi* grew out of the ground like trees.



Fig. 68
This well-sculptured head from the Etinta group surmounts a pillar 44" (122 cms) high. The surface of the stone is defaced by lichen growth.

A particularly hard stone, called *Egeme*, was said to have been used in the shaping of the *Akwanshi*. The worked surface of the stones has a pitted appearance which suggests that the form has been achieved by pecking or chipping with a hammer stone. Only a few of the Nta stones have been given fully sculptured heads, elsewhere it is only the protuberant navel that stands out from the surface, and nose, lips and some other features appear in low relief. Much of the decoration consists of engraved lines which might have been made by continuous rubbing rather than chipping. One of the former age-grade companies of the Nnam was called *Anepeptal*, 'the stone makers'. They were said to have been responsible for setting up the stones and this extremely laborious work was probably carried out by a team of workers under the direction of a master sculptor.

In an attempt to explain the function and origins of the *Akwanshi* it is necessary to give some account of the people whose ancestors created them. There are six main communities inhabiting the area in question, this includes the Nde who have not been mentioned before as they have carved no stones of any significance. They are all considered to be sub-tribes of the Ekoi, a Bantu-speaking people who sparsely inhabit the forest country southwards of the bend in the Cross River and eastwards into the Cameroun Republic. The People of the *Akwanshi*, as we may refer to them, speak distinct but related forms of an Ekoid-Bantu language (Crabb, 1965). In pre-colonial days they were divided into two warring factions who still regard each other with hostility. The affairs



Fig. 69

The sculptural quality has been lost and more attention is being paid to surface decoration. These two stones from the Etinta group measure 51" (150 cms), on the left, and 62" (158 cms) on the right.



Fig. 70

This Nselle stone, 57" (94 cms), has been reduced to a simplified formula. The neck groove has become a shallow outline to the jaw which extends in the form of a twisted beard to a large, decorated umbilicus. The lines on the cheeks may represent tribal marks. The pitting of the surface is clearly seen, this probably indicates the way in which the form has been achieved, by hammering it with another stone.

of each community were directed by the elders under whom the young men were organised in age-grade companies. There were also *Ntoon* or priest chiefs, whose function was mainly religious and ceremonial. The extent of the *Ntoon's* authority varied, sometimes it was acknowledged by a single village, sometimes by the whole of the sub-tribe.



Fig. 71

A fallen and broken Akwanshi at the site of an abandoned Nselle village. One of a large group of 22 individuals, it measures 72" (185 cms) overall. Now in the National Museum, Lagos.

When the first British administrators arrived in the area, at the beginning of the century, the Nta and Nselle, supported by the Abanyom, were under attack from the Nde from the south and the Nnam from the north. The Nnam, in their turn, were under pressure from their northern neighbours the Akaju. The Abanyom admit to being newcomers to the area, whether or not the Nde and Nnam were invaders, they were aggressive and expanding communities. Several groups of carvings in the Nselle style stand on land now occupied by the Nnam, an Nta group stands on land occupied by the Nde, and a Nnam group on land occupied by the Akaju. Such changes of ownership illustrate the advances and retreats of these little wars.

In these small independent communities, each of which cannot have numbered more than a few thousands, raiding was the normal occupation of the men whose status depended on the taking of heads from the enemy. The pacification of the country by the British administrators destroyed a way of life which could not survive under modern conditions. Two generations later it is almost impossible to reconstruct the vanished culture which gave rise to the carving of these remarkable stone sculptures. Amongst the Nta, traditions are better preserved than elsewhere, and it is amongst the Nta *Akwanshi* that are found the sculptures of the greatest originality of style and skill in execution.

The *Ntoon* (priest chiefs) of the Nta were traditionally selected in turn from certain kindreds in the two villages of Etinta and Nebrokpa. In a grove of forest trees which separated the two villages stand two groups of stones which were set up as memorials to these chiefs. In 1962, my informants produced a list of names which, though not always consistent, numbered about forty individuals, the last of whom was said to have died at the beginning of the century.

Fig. 72

Another example of the decorative profusion of the Nnam stones, it stands 47" (119 cms) out of the ground. It was acquired by the Nigerian Museums and when removed it was found to measure 72" (185 cms) long.



Twenty-four of the names were attached to carved *Akwanshi*, the remainder referred to uncarved stones and piles of boulders.

The finest sculptures are arranged in a wide arc near the site of the former village of Etinta, which is now abandoned. Much care has been taken to achieve the regular cylindrical form of the *Akwanshi* and in three of these the column is surmounted by a well-sculptured human head. The columnar form of the body is otherwise almost unadorned except for a protuberant navel which is an almost universal feature in all the carved stones. This sculptural quality is gradually lost in the remaining Etinta stones, decoration becomes more profuse and certain features such as arms and hands appear in low relief. The *Akwanshi* of Nebrokpa and four other Nta village sites have the basic Nta characteristics but are generally of undistinguished workmanship. Near the small riverside village of Oyengi however are five stones which may give a clue to the inspiration and development of the *Akwanshi* as a whole. Three of these are of unmistakably phallic form, they are also adorned with a protuberant navel and one has been provided with two large, circular eyes. After examining the Oyengi stones, it is obvious that the realistically sculptured heads of the Etinta memorials are adornments which have been added to a phallic pillar.

The development of these sculptures and their subsequent deterioration can be traced through the various forms taken by the Nta *Akwanshi*. The phallic pillar was elaborated by the addition of a well-sculptured head and three of these simple columns, surmounted by a human head, were produced. Then the sculptural quality of the head was lost and surface decoration increased. The



Fig. 75

The scroll and spiral decoration of these massive boulders is typical of the Nta style, so also is the ovate beard. The nearest stone stands 48" (122 cms) high



Fig. 74

A good example of the restrained and well-handled surface decoration on some of the Nnam stones, 35" (84 cms) high. Now in Jos Museum. All the sculptures illustrated are carved from basalt.

phallic corona which had become the neck of the figure, dwindled into a jaw line, sometimes extending into a beard which eventually connected with the almost universal navel protuberance. The style of the Nselle, Abanyom and Akaju stones approximates to this simplified, or perhaps degenerate, stage of the Nta sculpture. However the Nselle work is often well executed and occasionally shows some originality. The protuberant navel nearly always survives,

indeed, I found a certain number of stones which consisted merely of a columnar form adorned with a protuberant navel. These were assumed to be unfinished carvings and were not included in the total.

The ninety-four stones at eight sites on Nnam land are in a rather different category. Little attempt has been made to achieve the columnar form, and the neck ring survives only as a frame to the face, sometimes ending in a pointed beard. The vigour and ingenuity of the surface decoration continues unabated and there is no sign of deterioration or even any traceable development. There is some suggestion that the Nnam set up groups of *Akwanshi* to mark their expansion from the parent settlement of Alok. In fact none of the Nnam groups are more than three miles (five kilometres) from Alok, but this only serves to illustrate the scale of the wars and conquests of these diminutive states.

The Ekoi and their neighbours are artistic people. They carve figures from cylindrical logs of wood which retain this cylindrical form in the same way as the *Akwanshi* retain the original form of the columnar boulders. Their wooden masks are covered with real skin and provided with carved cane teeth to heighten the naturalistic effect. In former times they adorned their bodies with elaborate painted designs and cicatrization, and it is recorded that the senior men cultivated long beards to which were sometimes attached carved bone ornaments and little bells. Such ornamental features suggest origins for the engraved decorations on the stones, which may well have indicated the status and attributes of the person portrayed. The Ekoi also used a form of picture writing known as *Nsidibi*. A *Nsidibi* symbol in the form of a hoop, which represented the former *manilla* currency and indicated wealth, can certainly be recognised on certain stones.

The portrayal of a protuberant umbilicus is not unusual in African figure sculpture. The umbilicus is a significant feature in the human body, and umbilical hernia is a not an uncommon condition in Africa. It is interesting to observe that among the stone pillars found at Toundidaro, in the Republic of Mali, some had been carved with a swollen umbilicus and very much resembled the Oyengi stones (Maës, 1924). Certain of the phallic pillars of southern Ethiopia have been adorned with human features (Azaïs and Chambard, 1931), and the monoliths of Filitosa in Corsica show somewhat similar features (Grosjean, 1966). The development of a phallic pillar into a human form appears in a number of apparently unrelated contexts, but seldom has this process been so plainly illustrated as in the *Akwanshi* of the Nta.

From the more coherent traditions of the Yoruba and Bini of western Nigeria it has been possible to base an approximate chronology on remembered king lists which can, in some cases, be checked against recorded history. At first sight such an opportunity is offered by the stones commemorating the forty *Ntoon* of the Nta. Seniority was a traditional qualification for their selection so that each may not have occupied the post for more than an average of about ten years. The memorials to the founder of the dynasty and his immediate successor consist of a roughly shaped pillar and an uncarved stone. The art of stone carving may therefore have been developed during the four or five centuries covered by the dynasty. It is doubtful however whether it is possible to base a valid chronology on these vague and half forgotten traditions.

An early officer of the British administration, Charles Partridge, was the first to publish an account of the *Akwanshi* (Partridge, 1905). He records that he was told by people of Alok that the stones represented their former chiefs whose names were now forgotten, and that no one knew how to carve stone anymore. They also admitted that their fathers had made human sacrifices to

these memorials to their past chiefs. Sixty years later I was freely given the names of the *Ntoons* for whom the Nta *Akwanshi* were set up, and it is difficult to believe that the elders of Alok were as ignorant of all matters connected with the stones as they wanted Partridge to think they were. The accession and funerals of chiefs and many other important ceremonial occasions were accompanied by human sacrifice and the taking of heads. The British administration had early made it plain that such activities would not be tolerated, and the elders of Alok may well have considered that it was safer to refer to all such matters — including the art of stone carving — as having been practised only in the remote and forgotten past. Only a complete archaeological and ethnographical investigation might now make it possible to reconstruct the small scale but vital cultures which once produced these remarkable stone sculptures.

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Riassunto: Le stèle antropomorfe scolpite su pietra dura sono conosciute solamente in due località dell'Africa Nera, ambedue in Nigeria. A ovest, vi sono una mezza dozzina di sculture in granito nella regione di Yoruba. A est, sulla riva destra del fiume Cross, si trova una piccola distesa dove 295 sculture sono state catalogate dall'Autore nel 1961/62. Esse sono ricavate da rocce di basalto e arenaria e misurano fino a 182 cm. di altezza. Si trovano in 26 siti diversi, su terreni della tribù Ekoi, di lingua Bantu. Ora più nessuno scolpisce la pietra nella regione. Malgrado la limitatezza della documentazione sembra che le sculture conosciute col nome di *Akwanshi* rappresentino capi-sacerdoti (*Ntoon*) di diversi gruppi. Probabilmente le sculture sono state eseguite dagli antenati degli odierni abitanti, durante i 4 o 5 secoli che precedono l'inizio dell'attuale secolo, quando gli inglesi cominciarono a controllare la regione. Tale approssimazione di date manca tuttavia di una soddisfacente conferma.

Resumé: Les stèles sculptées en pierre sont connues dans deux localités en Nigérie. A l'ouest, il y a une demi-douzaine de sculptures en granite dans le pays Yoruba. A l'est, sur la rive droite de la rivière Cross, deuxcentquatrevingtquinze sculptures ont été cataloguées par l'auteur en 1961/62. Elles sont en basalte et grès et mesurent jusqu'à 183 cms. en hauteur. On les trouve dans vingt six sites sur les territoires de la tribu Ekoi, qui parle une langue Bantu. Dans la région, plus personne ne taille la pierre; il paraît que les sculptures, connues comme *Akwanshi*, représentent des prêtres-chefs (*Ntoon*); Probablement elles ont été exécutées par les ancêtres des habitants d'aujourd'hui, pendant quatre ou cinq siècles, Jusqu'au début de ce siècle, quand les anglais ont commencé à contrôler la région.

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