

**BEYOND ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ASSOCIATIONAL DISCOURSE-  
INTERROGATING THE MINIMALISM OF IKOM MONOLITHS AS CONCEPT  
AND FOUND OBJECT ART**

**Clement Emeka Akpang**

*School of Art & Design, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, Uk, LU1 3JU*

---

**ABSTRACT:** *Ikom Monoliths are a unique form of African visual creativity, which typifies a traditional art genre defined by minimalism aesthetics. These unique abstractionism, positions the Ikom Monoliths apart, in formal configuration and content, from other established traditional African art conventions. However, this unique aesthetic paradigm imbedded in the Ikom Monoliths, is under-researched. The main purport of this study was aimed art propounding a new perspective of investigating these creative stone carvings, which will bring to lime light their peculiar artistic visual qualities, and locate them within a creative conventional context. At the base of this study, the current discourse on Ikom Monoliths was surveyed, which indicated that, such discourse was drawn along anthropological lines of investigation, which incorporates various ambiguities. This is because, such anthropological discourse reduces these monoliths to mere artefacts and monuments, thereby depriving them of their artistic being. This study equally identified the discourse of aesthetic association, as another paradoxical mode of enquiry employed by most scholars in discussing Ikom Monoliths and pointed out that, the association/relation of the Ikom Monoliths with Western European monuments like Stonehenge, Menhirs, or Megaliths, was both problematic and misleading. This study rather employed an artistic methodology of investigation which focused on interrogating the visual artistic qualities of these stone carvings. The result of this intrinsic investigation, led to the submissions that, the Ikom Monoliths possesses conceptual minimalist qualities which set them apart as a peculiar aesthetic genre from other traditional African artworks, and further positing that the Ikom Monoliths are traditional Found Object. This findings therefore, underpins the fact that, the concept of Found Object transmutation in African art, predates its usage and appearance in Western European art cultures.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ikom Monoliths, Concept Art, Found Object, Discourse, Anthropology, Minimalism

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

Alok in Ikom and about thirty communities around the Ikom environs hold a large number of magnificent stone cravings called the ‘*Ikom Monoliths*’, which exhibits a high level of artistic qualities and creative awareness by the ancient civilisation that created them. Available literature and discourse on the Ikom Monoliths provide basic anthropological insights but with no in depth analysis or interrogation of the aesthetic and artistic qualities of the stone carvings. An earlier study by Ekpo Eyo submitted that, the Ikom Monoliths date as far back as 200AD (Eyo 1986). Majority of the monoliths are carved from hard stones (volcanic rock ‘basalt’), and a few from sandstone and limestone (de Jong 2010). The number of these magnificent stone cravings ranges from 400-450, distributed around several villages amongst the Ejagams of Northern Cross River; for details of the names of the villages where these monoliths are located, see (Acholonu 2005). These stone carvings are arranged in circles of about 30 with individual measurements ranging between 3 and 5 feet (Vesperini 2007). They

are hewn into phallus forms, creatively decorated with carvings of geometric and stylized human features and various kinds of facial marks (UNESCO 2007, Ibeabuchi 2012). These linear decorations on the body of the Ikom Monoliths, are complex symbolism (graphic system) in which cultural myths and traditional ideologies are codified into ideographs, then inscribed as surface finishes. This is underpinned in a recent study which posited that, “The Ikom monoliths bear a complex codified iconography and an ancient writing, communication and graphic system composed in a complex traditional design configuration” (UNESCO 2007) (see figure 1). This traditional graphic symbolism is linked to African traditional religion, as they are vehicles through which the gap between the natural and supernatural worlds are bridged and are modes through which deities and spirits are invoked. They (symbols and ideographs) are semiotic modes of communicates, conveying various messages and meanings in the traditional African system (tradition), and on the Ikom Monoliths, these ideographs are said to “represent symbols of leadership, of birth, feminism, fertility, war and peace” (Vespisrini 2007), and each individual carved stone with its accompanying symbolic configuration is believed to be “relics for ancestors and focal points for residential spirits” (Ibeabuchi 2012). Most scholars have even ascribed wider biblical associations to Ikom Monoliths. De Jonge has argued that, the Ikom Monoliths played a role in the Biblical flood of 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty and that their assemblage in circles relates to the Egyptian Sun god ‘Ra’ (De Jonge 2010).

While this studies are of great value, they all have adopted an anthropological methodology of enquiry over the years to formulate a discourse on Ikom Monoliths. This methodology has been driven by the motivation to ensuring the recognition of Ikom Monoliths worldwide as historic monuments. While this discourse is insightful, it is inadequate and equally incorporate some level of ambiguity which hinders a fuller understanding and appreciation of this ancient art tradition. This is because, the aesthetic and artistic configuration of the Ikom Monoliths has largely been under-researched by scholars. It is therefore pertinent that, the compelling visual form and unique abstract features of the Ikom stone carvings, requires a properly tailored and new artistic mode of investigation, with regards to critiquing its artistic attributes, content and context; a new investigation that will go beyond the current anthropological discourse, to ascribe to these monoliths, the deserved recognition as artworks. This study therefore proposes a fresh approach of interrogation which will go beyond the superficial surveying of the Ikom Monolith, but one that will provide an in-depth artistic enquiry and contextualisation of this monoliths in a conceptual and modern art context. This new line of enquiry is based on the fact that, as Nicolas Bourriaud opines in his theories of *Relational Aesthetics 1998*, artistic inventions of contemporary practice completely alters the historicism (perception) of past artistic traditions, further postulating that as a result of such alterations, there is no past, present or future in art as the three faces freely intermingle with one another. Bourriaud succinctly argued that, “A work of art inscribes itself in the dimension of the historical. If it produces energy, it will generate consequences as others will use its idiom, it will thus spur a genealogical investigation. This in turn places the work in a historical time frame in which case others will become the precursor of the present...a work of art changes the past” (Bourriad 2013). Modernist art, Post-colonial and even contemporary art conventions have generated so much aesthetic energies and consciousness which has occasioned a rethink and re-consideration of ancient artworks. For instance, African artworks once kept in ethnographic museums as antiquities in the West, during the modernist revolution became reconsidered as great artworks and

transferred to art history museums (Danto 1988). Such changing trends in the artworld occasioned by contemporary practice, makes the current discourse on Ikom Monolith, problematic and inadequate, as it often roots the Monoliths to the primitive realm, failing to appreciate its creative (conceptual) aesthetic energies. Another problematic has been the adoption of theories of cross cultural contextualization of the Ikom Monoliths with monuments of Western European cultures by some authors in clandestine attempts to garner world recognition for the Ikom Monoliths, but this framed theories only subverts the artistic / conceptual qualities of the Ikom monoliths by drawing and dissolving their cultural peculiarities into European mainstreams. This line of enquiry is typical of the politics of western aesthetics hegemonies and construction of the 'Other'.

This study will conduct a brief contextual survey to critique the problematic (s) inherent in the current anthropological discourse and those emanating from the discourse of cross cultural contextualization (aesthetic association discourse) to underpin the need for this study. A critical artistic discourse of the Ikom Monoliths will be adopted to analyse the visual form of the Ikom Monoliths as concept art and an illustration of traditional African found object / installation. It will aim at answering the following questions: What unique features does the Ikom Monoliths exhibits which set them apart from other traditional African art forms? Are these monoliths mere artefacts and monuments as they have been described by various authors? Do the Ikom Monoliths possess the same features as Western European ancient monuments? This line of investigation will significantly provide a new view point through which the Ikom Monolith can be perceived and appreciated, and equally create a platform for the reconsideration of the concept of Found Object art, its origin, traditional context and Africa's contribution to such art genres.



Figure 1. The Ikom Monoliths



## THE PROBLEMATIC OF CURRENT DISCOURSE

Various scholars have framed theories in available literature adopting what may be termed discourse of aesthetic association which apply the logic of placing traditional African visual forms in parallel lines or associating them with those of established Western European cultures and believing that such associations can lead to the recognition of traditional African visual art and material culture globally. This accounts for why various topics are coined which places the Ikom Monoliths beside monuments of ancient Western/European traditions. One of such study is titled: '*Nigeria's Answer to Stonehenge: The Ikom Monoliths 2007*', here, Helen Vesperini's submissions shows the problematic in this discourse of association, whose exponents appallingly believes that the only way through which African art / material culture, ancient or contemporary can gain global recognition is by drawing them into European mainstreams. Vesperini therefore, uses the Stonehenge of the West as the yardstick and ideological base through which the Ikom Monoliths can be made to gain context, form and Western acceptability. This is particularly a colonial view point in which the 'Other' is considered incompetent and its cultural products and art only accepted if Western institutions approves of such objects as possessing qualities that define them as aesthetically potent and worthy of the dignity of art. Vesperini equally adopted derogatory views in her essay which aimed at discrediting and dismissing the creative qualities of the Ikom Monoliths. For Vesperini, these monoliths were not worth the hype accorded them, challenging even their inclusion in the World Monument Fund WMF, as well as demeaning the theories surrounding their creation as being 'unfounded' (Vesperini 2007). Her submissions have drawn criticism from Catherine Acholonu who in a response argued that, "Ms Vesperini's publication was a blatant caricature of the monuments, the people of Nigeria and by extension, the World Monument Fund that did the listing" (Acholonu 2013). Although most of Acholonu's criticism of Vesperini's submissions were centred on the fact that her findings used by Vesperini were not acknowledge, however the main concern which wasn't touched upon was the fact that, Vesperini made no attempt to investigate the aesthetic features of these unique stone carvings, but rather made colossal attempts at dismissing this ancient art creations and paradoxically employed the discourse of aesthetic association which is completely misleading. Firstly, the Ikom Monoliths are no Stonehenge. The Stonehenge of the West were born to a particular ancient culture (Western European) and to a different historical reference which is completely alien to Africa, indicating why the Ikom Monoliths cannot just get enfranchise as art or recognised worldwide by such inadequate exegesis and why such demeaning remarks which aimed art dismissing the artistic qualities of these stones carvings is problematic. Roger Fry had long emphasized why the rejection of traditional African art, or an attempted aesthetic categorization based simply on the European notion of the 'Other' which positions the 'Other' as being incompetent of creating sound art and whose product of visual culture can only be accepted based on the terms of the west just as the aesthetic of association adopted by Vesperin is faulty. Fry observed that, "it seems unfair to be forced to admit that certain nameless 'primitives' have possessed this power to create high art not only in a higher degree than we at this moment, but than we as a nation have ever possessed it...some of these things are great sculptures – greater than anything we produced even in the middle ages" (Fry 1920). Fry's proposition, enunciates the fact that, Africans have long engaged in the creation of high art which even predates that of Western European art cultures.

It is therefore, a great disservice to Africa and her art if studies are not conducted which are directed at interrogating African art forms as distinct genius products of a creatively endowed civilisation, but only through such problematic comparison as evident in the writings of Vesprinin who even went further to stipulate that, “the stones are intriguing rather than awe-inspiring” (Vespirini 2007). Such a statement is imbued with deep colonial undertone a mentality of oppression and suppression of the ‘Other’ which Vesperini adopts to exhibit European superiority aimed at undermining the art practice of a traditional culture considered inferior. Art is critiqued in terms of form, content and meaning, but neither of these qualities that define art are employed in the interrogation of the Ikom Monoliths by Vesperini but her submissions are coloured with subjugating views of orientalism.

This problematic line of enquiry is also adopted by various world organisations and researchers who conducted studies on the Ikom Monolith. In a study by UNESCO titled: ‘*Alok Ikom Stone Monoliths 2007*’, the report posited that, “The Ikom monoliths with their geometric inscriptions could be compared to the rock Arts of Tanzania...Ikom monoliths are West Africa's answer to United Kingdom's Stonehenge” (UNESCO 2007), while De Jonge in his essay; ‘*The Ikom Monoliths and the Flood 2010*’ compares and associates the Ikom Monoliths to the upright stones erected during prehistoric Europe. He opined that, “A special feature of these menhirs is their beautiful decoration. Most of the stones are carved with the shape of a stylized face on top, combined with a variety of geometric figures. They usually show a high complexity of design. They are all different, and a lot of them are beautifully inscribed mostly with unknown symbols, which are often difficult to comprehend” (De Jonge 2010). The problematic lies herein in these faulty comparisons and associations.

The Stonehenge constructed some 5000 years ago from bluestones thought to have come from the Preseli Mountains, are great English heritage whose construction remains a mystery (See Figure 1). Some theories hold that, there were used for healing purposes, while others, believe that, the Giant Dance as the Stonehenge are equally known, may have been used as giant astronomical observations (BBC 2005). The Stonehenge are unique constructions of giant stones arranged in circular form and should have served the ancients who erected them some specific purpose as tombstones with each stone marking the remains of ancient people (Parker 2013). While Aaron Sharp has suggested that the reason for the Stonehenge monument must have been to provide warmth and warm water during and immediately after the ice age (Sharp, 2013). The aporia of theories on the mysteries behind the Stonehenge, indicates the possible differentia elements between these magnificent English heritage and those of other cultures.



Figure 2. The Stonehenge at Wiltshire UK

Drawing from the existing theories regarding the possible rationale behind the creation of the Stonehenge at Wiltshire, it is apparent that any comparison or association as has been the case, beyond the circular orientation (arrangement) of the Stonehenge to the Ikom Monoliths is faulty and problematic. These two ancient creations cannot be discussed or categorised as being the same, as the Ikom Monoliths do not share in the postulated theories surrounding the Stonehenge nor are they similar in formal configuration. The Stonehenge (constructions) are basically an assemblage of giant stones into their magnificent configuration, while the Ikom Monoliths are not constructions, but are installations of carved stones. Thus, the methodology or discourse of aesthetic association adopted by many scholars, ends up drawing the Ikom Monoliths into European monuments; a navigation which leads the Ikom Monoliths into the loss of identity and degradation of their unique artistic and visual qualities.

Menhirs is another common place form/term used to describe the Ikom Monoliths in this methodology of inquiry as evident in the submissions of De Jonge. Such an association I will say, is simply a strategy of art disenfranchisement which tends to devalue the Ikom Monoliths by reducing them to the status of mere artefacts and monuments. This is because, the Breton word Menhir means 'tall stone' but the Ikom Monoliths are artistic creations beyond such description. Writing on *Britany Megaliths* which holds the largest concentration of Menhirs in the world, Samuel Lewis observed that, conflicting theories have emerged over the years as to why the stones were made, and that they are very tall and stand some 100 metres apart from each other. Borrowing a leaf from folklore, he posited that the Menhirs are said to "have healing properties or powers of fertility" (Lewis 2009, p9). He went further to categorise the Britany Menhirs into three groups; those standing "Menhir", those arranged in a series "Alignment" and those built in the form of tables "Dolmen" (Lewis 2009, p8) (see



figure 3-5). It is most probable from Lewis's account, that an association with regards the superstitious and magical powers, and connection to traditional custom may be possible with the Ikom Monoliths, but the formal configuration, arrangements, aesthetic qualities and myths completely differs which makes it impossible to discuss or investigate the Ikom Monoliths by simply invoking the characteristics or terminologies associated with either Menhirs, Megaliths or Stonehenge as is problematically the case in available literature sources and submissions surveyed earlier in this study.



Figure 3. Menhir



Figure 4. Menhir Alignment

Figure 5. European Megaliths

What I have set out to achieve in the opening stages of this paper is to bring to the fore the fact that comparing or associating the Ikom Monoliths holistically to the Stonehenge, Menhir or even Megaliths of Western European cultures as the sine qua non for their recognition is problematic. The reasons for such observation is that, firstly the ancient traditions that created these heritages, differ in their beliefs and customs, secondly the mysteries and folklore which could have given birth to these heritages equally differ in great deal. Thirdly, the visual form of all these Western monuments for which there are literary attempts to draw



the Ikom Monoliths into differ significantly. The Stonehenge, Megaliths and Menhirs were all born to particular Western references in ancient history, completely foreign to the ancient civilisation of the Ejagam people that created the Ikom Monoliths. The point made here is that, adopting a strictly anthropological or archaeological methodology of investigation maybe informative but insufficient, while the commonly adopted theory which I call discourse of aesthetic association in current literature is faulty and misleading. This is so because, the Ikom Monoliths cannot be understood simply by invoking the characteristics of, or associating them with Western European monuments like Stonehenge, Menhirs and Megaliths at Britany or those in any other part of the world.

The ideal methodology of enquiry that will enable fuller understanding of the uniqueness of the Ikom Monoliths will be an investigation which is tailored to interrogate the visual form of this ancient creations, exploring their abstract minimalist artistic qualities as a unique aesthetic genre within the creative convention of traditional African abstractionism. Furthermore I propose a theory which will interrogates these monoliths as Found Object art in an African traditional context. If this is done, an artistically informed submission will be reached that will enable proper understanding and appreciation of the Ikom Monoliths as genius works of art, not just as monuments or historical sites for mere global recognition.

### **MINIMALISM OF IKOM MONOLITHS AS CONCEPT ART**

In an essay titled *'African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow'*, Sidney Kasfir observed that, in the western construction of the 'Other' as a means of separating the West from the rest and showing western superiority over Africa, Western scholars have created fictions about African art to discredit its artistic quality, by creating pictures of African art with a 'mythic steady-state universe of canonical art'. Such scholars according to Kasfir (1992, p. 43) denotes that, "African art has a timeless past, that in the long interlude before colonialism, forms remained more or less static over centuries". Many people have taken to this view of African art as a single still canon of art without creative aesthetic variations. Very often than not, discourses that have been dedicated to African art especially adopting the western ideology of the 'Other', focus on accrediting art that comes from the continent only on the basis of their ritual uses in traditional societies. Such a theory is based on Author Danto's 'Content Definition of Art' with his articulated theory of pot and basket people in Africa. This accounts for why in museum exhibitions, it is commonplace to find African traditional artworks often with additional information to prove their authenticity as art with such tags like; 'used for ritual or religious purposes in traditional Africa' or 'may have been used for ritual ceremonies in some 5000 years ago' etc. this overarching reliance on religious function as the sine qua non for enfranchising artworks from the African continent has often led to a complete disregard for the artistic qualities or aesthetic trends associated with African traditional art. This is why it is appalling to see artworks from Africa which should be appreciated as art, often reduced to the status of artefact by most scholars. Artefact meaning a functional object which lacks the quality of art but exist as craft (Danto 1982). Many scholars have used this term artefact in describing the Ikom Monoliths, which further stresses the problematic in such submissions as well as in other discourse which tends to simply enfranchise African art based on their religious usage. Rosalind Hackett has bemoaned such move and ritual emphasis as she argued that, "promising titles of museum exhibitions and



catalogues often prove disappointing as they seem more concern with promoting ‘exoticism’ and ‘otherness’ of African art by emphasizing its religious aspect, or they seem satisfied with underdeveloped observations regarding its symbolic, ancestral, and/or ritual function, rather to explore the fascinating conceptual fields of art and religion in the African context” (Hackett 1994, p.294). While investigations into religious function (content) of the African traditional art, is very important and has been key to earlier leading Western/Indigenous studies on African art studies, it is apparent that, dwelling on such anthropological emphasis on their religious functions as key to exploring and enfranchising them as art, completely disregards the artistic and aesthetic qualities of such visual forms as well as the creative conceptual tendencies they exhibit. This line of enquiry which overshadows the artistic qualities of traditional African art must have been the reason for many western scholars referring to African art as a mono-styled art tradition. This is the case with the current discourse surrounding the Ikom Monolith which has been rigorously pursued with an anthropological mind set and thus lacking in critique of their artistic and conceptual form. This problematized gap, lies at the base of this study.

Africa from prehistory had long developed an intrinsic way of looking at things, of perceiving and interpreting the universe philosophically. Backed by religious and cultural ideologies, many abstract symbolism and creative codes for traditional African artistic expression have been developed over centuries past. Traditional African art showcases a heightened level of creative production vehemently tied to religious beliefs and visual forms which are shaped by /reference such belief and philosophical canons. This abstractionism rooted in traditional religion and myths, defines the power and uniqueness of traditional African art which Danto draws upon in his distinction between art and artefacts, he observed that, “What makes African artworks different from those of Greece are the hidden things they embody or make objective, giving them a presence in the lives of men and women. The works have a power artefacts could not possibly have because of the spiritual content they embody. An artefact is shaped by its function, but the shape of an artwork is given by its content. The forms of African art are powerful because the ideas they express are ideas about power, or perhaps what they express are the powers themselves” (Danto 1982, p14). This abstractionism; none-mimetic representation of reality, abstract interpretation of forms and association of such abstract forms to religious content and concepts and the immortalization of life through such abstract concepts as the link between the past and the present, the present and the future, and the linkage between the real and the metaphysical world sets African art apart from the rest of the world. Traditional African art is thus defined by the qualities of abstraction (were form is reduced to the main features in an intrinsic non-mimetic representation of the subject thereby invoking only the very essence of the objectified), or stylization (were subjects especially as it relates to the supernatural are stylized/idealized using such stylized forms to placate resident spirits for the benefit of the society). Mask and ancestral figures which often seems like the prototype of traditional African art in the West, were/are produced to reflect these traditional philosophies and religious belief systems. (See figures 5 & 6).



Figure 6. Dogon wooden female ancestral figure



Figure 7. Traditional African mask

However, the Ikom Monoliths on the other hand, showcases strikingly new aesthetic features, a new dimension to the collective body of traditional African art which will be discussed in the next paragraph. During prehistoric or in traditional African art-space, four forms of art stood out; mask, ancestral figures / shrine or temple sculptures, pottery and body or wall painting. Ancestral figures were carved out of wood or stone and bear the form of heavily abstracted human or animal figures which often had large heads the seat of intelligence as interpreted by Africans, long torsos, and very small limbs and legs etc. (see figure 6 above). While mask were often stylized carvings of human or animal forms, sometimes non-objective ensembles which often represented ancestral spirits and various placated gods (see figure 7 above). Body and wall painting on the other hand was basically the inscription of codified traditional ideographs on the walls of shrines and the human body very often during various initiation rites and traditional festivities. Through abstract formal configuration, traditional ideologies and religious beliefs (content) are locked into ancestral figures and mask. Meaning is carved or modelled into these forms (ancestral figure/mask) mirroring Africa's conceptions and traditional philosophies. On rare occasions, scarifications and ideographs are used for surface finish and to add more meaning to either a mask or ancestral figure as commissioning cult or society demands.

It is in the variation in formal configuration and the semiotic mode of conveying metaphoric meanings were the point of difference and new perspective of traditional African art which is evident in the Ikom Monoliths lies. The Ikom Monoliths are carved in a unique reverse traditional abstractionism bearing conceptual minimalist features. The artistic emphasis on the Ikom Monoliths unlike other traditional African artworks is not placed on achieving an overarching abstracted resemblance of the human form or those of animals, but its forms are minimalized to the barest minimum as can be seen in the formal configuration of the simple conical or phallus shape of the Monoliths. The abstract features of large heads, long torsos, small limbs and legs, projection of the naval as the seat of progeny which distinctly defines traditional African artworks are all neglected in this monoliths for a minimalist creative approach. Emphasis is placed on the head while the rest of the body tapers into the base of the phallus' shaped monolith, with limbs and legs suggested. The reasons for the adoption of such minimalist approach by the ancient Ejagam carvers are not known. While in traditional African artworks, content (ideologies and beliefs) are carved or modelled into forms in accordance with laid down traditional canons of abstraction and proportion, in the case of the Ikom Monoliths, the same abstract system is not followed rather these relics of ancestors are slightly carved but mainly engraved with various traditional ideographs and symbols used to suggest superfluous features, and in such minimalism engravings, lies the content (meanings)

of their form (see figure 8 below).



Figure 8. The Ikom Monoliths showcasing abstract aesthetic minimalism



The content is both in the form and the ideographs as opposed to other traditional artworks were the abstracted forms embody the content and spiritual meaning, in the case of the Ikom Monoliths as evident in their formal configuration, engravings of ideographs provide the potent holding for spiritual and philosophical metaphors. Perhaps the ancient people of Ejagam who created these monoliths, aimed at ascribing more meaning and power to these carvings through the inclusion of ideographs not mainly as surface finish but as the core features of these carved stones. This dialectical inference is made because, it is observed that, deeper meanings and higher artistic powers are attained through the juxtaposition of visual form and ideographs, and that artworks which incorporate symbols and ideographs are superficial in form, content and meaning to those without ideographs and symbols ascribed on them (Akpang 2013).

The main feature of the human form which predominantly appears on the Ikom monoliths are suggestions of the human face. Some are slightly carved as very low reliefs, while others are inscribed engravings which are elaborated with various ideographs and African symbols to suggest the other features of the body. This technique of incorporating traditional African graphic system into sculpture exhibits a creative merger between traditional carving and African curvilinear painting and drawing which in prehistoric time was mainly done on human body and shrine walls, often used to relate codified myths, oral tradition, spiritual authority and religious messages. This painting with ideographs is lifted from its traditional creative context and incorporated into carving to create these monoliths which represent various ancestors and emphasizes the spiritual, social and political affluence of such ancestors in the society through such abstract symbolization (See figure 9). This unique feature of aesthetic minimalism of the Ikom Monoliths sets it apart as a conceptual aesthetic art genre within the collective body of traditional African art – apart just in form rather than content from all other traditional African artworks. The differentia elements in the Ikom Monoliths lies in the heavy presence and use of symbols and ideographs engraved to inscribe meaning to form as opposed to carved abstract forms often used as the semiotic mode of meaning inscription on ancestral figures and masks. These ideographs gives it more meaning and suggest that the makers must have advanced in writing as well, not just in traditional African graphic art. Professor Acholonu has observed in her essay that, “The stone monoliths of Alok Ikom bear a form of writing and a complex system of codified information...the geometric images on the monoliths suggest that their makers possessed more than a basic knowledge of mathematics, not only because they are geometric, but also because of the obvious implication that there were computations and numbers on the layout of the stones” (Acholonu, 2005).

Through the heavy use of ideographs, the makers of these monoliths conjure up meanings and spiritual powers of the represented ancestors, expressing also social, moral, political and religious philosophies. This minimalist expressive approach to traditional African abstraction, expresses a high spiritual content in simple visual form. Status of the ancestors are codified into ideographs then engraved onto the stones, same is done with messages of blessings, of fertility, of protection etc., all inscribed as ideographs unlike in other traditional African art where the action or contra-posture of the ancestral figure, gods or features of mask, expresses the content and messages. This minimalist conceptual form expresses even more spiritual content as its artistic creative sizzle, because through minimalist conceptuality, it is perceived that more content is derived because the gods inscribe meaning into the simple codified form. In the words of Andre Gide, “art is a collaboration between the artists and God, and the less

the artist does the better” (Gide quoted in Wells 1999). This conceptual minimalism shown on the Ikom Monoliths sets them apart as a unique aesthetic genre from other traditional African art conventions, which goes a long way to vehemently debunk the views by certain



Figure 9. Ikom Monoliths showing the dense use of traditional symbolism and ideographs

Western scholars that traditional African art was mono-styled or unchanging.

The artistic features of the Ikom Monoliths indicate the fact that prehistoric Africans had within African abstract philosophy of art creation, developed variations of abstraction styles in which like the modernists artists, minimalism is adopted to stripe objects and forms of their superfluous features, and find realism in the abstract expression of the essence of a thing, a concept or an event. The elaborate use of creatively crafted symbols and iconography in the creation of these monoliths, makes it possible that, while form is minimally manipulated, the potency and power of artworks are retained. Conclusively, it is therefore misleading for any scholar to refer to these creations as either Stonehenge, Menhirs, Megaliths or Alignments and or even as artefacts since the Ikom Monoliths exhibit heighten artistic and aesthetic qualities of an art advanced civilisation beyond what is stipulated in art history and world monument records. These stones show a high level of civilization in aesthetic awareness, ancient writing and even construction techniques.

## **IKOM MONOLITHS AS TRADITIONAL FOUND OBJECTS**

The transmutation of found object and discarded materials into works of art currently dominates contemporary African art practice. This art convention has subsequently stirred up a corresponding discourse on found object art in modern Africa. The current discourse on found object art in Africa as I have elucidated in an earlier study, incorporates various problematic (s) which has surfaced in three levels of ambiguities; Problem of contextualization, Problem of definition and the problem of categorisation (Akpang 2013). These ambiguities surrounding the discourse on African found object has particularly surfaced because scholars have been drawn into the temptation of treating this art genre as a recent artistic endeavour, and the pitfall of trying to contextualise it in parallel creative context with Western modern art. My earlier study had suggested that to create a discourse which will investigate found object transmutation into art in Africa to differentiate it from Western European art culture, a thorough investigation into its historiography in the continent was eminent and an ideal point of departure in establishing its traditional peculiarities (Akpang, 2013). The Ikom Monoliths provide a visual platform which could lead insightfully into the historiography of found object in traditional African art-space. In a recent study, Ibeabuchi posited that, "According to oral history, it is the ancestors of Ekoi people that put the stones where they are. Their ancestors are believed to have gotten the stones out of the river where the water made them smooth as they are but their ancestors only cut the faces with stones and irons..." (Ibeabuchi 2012). This and other African artworks derived through this process of 'finding', forms the basis upon which the Ikom Monoliths are looked at in this study as 'Found Object' in an African contextual art sense.

The Ikom Monoliths shows why the current discourse on the genre of found object art in Africa which treats this art convention as a recent artistic endeavour, and a mimicking of European art conventions is problematic. From the dating of the Ikom Monoliths, it is apparent that the ideology and concept of found object has long existed/practiced in African art, long before its usage in Western cultures. The entire gamut of African art in prehistoric times was built around the principle and philosophy of 'finding'. Africans believed in the existence of life after death and the fact that life doesn't just end with itself, that a thing can become another thing; that things can be made out of a thing which can in turn reference some other thing. This concept is fuelled by African traditional religion which is sturdily tied to traditional ideologies and nature, in which case, objects are seen as semiotic codes which holds and express the concept of immortality. This explains why naturally found objects and other object types, form the bulk of accumulative sculptures which embellished African traditional shrines and temples (Ajibade 2013, Aniakor 2013). This concept of finding has been the core of traditional African visual practice and constitutes the creative and ideological paradigm from whence the great stone carvings known as the Ikom Monoliths emerged. Because of the quality of hardness, stones symbolize immortality in Africa and making sculptures out of them ensured the continuous existence of the immortalized gods or ancestors. Using hard stones, was giving visual proof to the traditional religious belief in Africa of life after and the continuous existence of dead kings and ancestors. Stones embodied the ideology of immortality and within them assured the worshipping and reliant community. Natural objects for traditional Africans didn't just exist as objects but they are seen as reference objects which represent ancestral spirits and gods. The act of finding itself wasn't considered accidental in traditional African context. Rather, finding objects are



avenues of contact were it is believed that the spiritual world is communicating with the mundane world.

The Ikom Monoliths are Found Object. There are stones carvings which symbolizes immortality and on them are inscribed content and meanings through the creative process of carving and engraving with the initial creative work done by the rivers where the stones are found. The dislocation of these stones from their original source and the subsequent inscription of meaning and content onto them using ideographs through carving, transforms the found stone into an embodiment of content and by such dislocated transfiguration the stones attain their status as art objects with aesthetic and spiritual powers. This form of transfiguration of the found, the commonplace into works of art has been the contextual framework upon which the Found Object of Western European art conventions like those of the Cubist, Dadaist and the Readymade, found their potency as modernist art forms. The Ikom Monoliths here, illustrates the fact that, Africans had long practiced this concept of the found object which clearly predates modernist's usage in western art history. Stressing the fact then that, by studying the traditional concept of found object in Africa in this case the Ikom Monoliths, it will show that African found object differ from those of the west which makes what is practiced in contemporary African art-space not just mimicry of modernist art convention by modern African artists, but rather a creatively unconscious tapping into an ancient art style which defines the core of art in Africa.

This theory is underpinned by the nature of temple sculptures in traditional African shrines. Majority of the of the sculptures in traditional shrines are found objects some are left as they are, while others are either minimally or majorly manipulated while sacrifices are made on them over time which provides accumulated surface textures. This accumulation of found objects and temple sculptures in shrines, and the surface textures created by debris of sacrifices offered by different generations of worshipers, transforms various traditional African shrines into installation spaces and even in most cases, the entire society space into outdoor installations. Sir Hume Goldie encountered this objects in shrines and communal spaces placated as gods during their exploration of the interiors of the Creek Town in Calabar Cross River, in 1847, and noted that, "Objects of worship fill the country. Every large tree and every remarkable spot in their noble river is supposed to be the residence of an *Idem*, to which people of the locality pay their worship, the rites being prayer, offering and sacrifice...only two objects of worship are represented in any form. That which is found at any house at our coming called *Ekpenyong*, was a section of a particular kind of tree inserted into the ground...Ibok, the other, was a diminutive image of the human form rudely cut out of wood" (Goldie 1890, p.43-4). Beyond the fact that the Ikom Monoliths are Found Object, studies have shown that, the monoliths equally showcases excellent characteristic of installation art through which the installed stone carvings create new meanings. This points to the fact that it is most probable that the ancient carvers had a great understanding of the effects of form in space and the meanings formal arrangement across space can create. Although oral tradition has not provided any acceptable theory as to why these stones are installed in this manner (circular forms) across all the sites where these monoliths are located, de Jonge has suggested that such an assemblage makes some references to the Egyptian sun god 'Ra'.

The quintessence of my study has been to bring to lime light the fact that the Ikom Monoliths are artworks which exhibit abstract aesthetic minimalism, and deserves more artistic recognition beyond the anthropological discourse of identification as world monuments or the shallow discourses of aesthetic association which inundates the artistic qualities of this ancient civilisation into European mainstreams, reducing the Ikom Monoliths to mere artefacts devoid of the qualities to define or elevate them to the status of art.

## CONCLUSION

Nicolas Bourriaud's theories of the timelessness of art, makes it impossible to continuously look at ancient art practices especially those with great aesthetic energies as being firmly rooted in the past, because such ancient art conventions frequently mirror in contemporary art-space. This view point formed the basis upon which this study proposed a new perspective of interrogating the Ikom Monoliths in order to correct the ambiguities inherent in current literary discourses. With the view that "there is no past, present or future in art but rather they all intermingle with each other" (Bourriaud 2013), the Ikom Monoliths were interrogated using an artistic methodology which located such stone carvings in creative contemporary and even modernist contexts. This made it possible to bring to the fore, the variant aesthetic qualities possessed by the Ikom Monolith which until now has been under-researched.

This study has shown that the current discourse on the Ikom Monoliths which has often adopted an anthropological/archaeological methodology of investigation is insightful and informative, but still inadequate as it is lacking in artistic critique to bring to lime light the aesthetic qualities and creative energies of the Ikom Monoliths for proper appreciation of the creative endeavours of the civilization that created them. Furthermore, the emerging discourse which uses what for the purpose of this study I have described as 'Aesthetics of Association', a discourse which involves associating the Ikom Monoliths with Western European monuments believing that by invoking European forms, Ikom Monoliths can gain recognition or be enfranchised as either art or artefacts, is revealed in this study to be couched in a colonial undertone; that of European construction of the 'Other' and particularly problematic and misleading. Reasons being that, it is virtually impossible to simply enfranchise a visual article from Africa as art by simply associating it with, or invoking European forms. Such an attempt evident in literature sources surveyed, draws African art and visual traditions (Ikom Monoliths inclusive) into European mainstreams where they simply loss their identity under European aesthetic hegemony, and are reduced to either the status of artefact or at best as copies of Western art traditions.

This study went further to look at the Ikom Monoliths more intrinsically to study its visual characteristics. Findings from such investigation leads to the realisation that, the Ikom Monoliths beyond their branding by most scholars as artefacts and monuments, are a collective body of creatively thought and created conceptual art forms. These monoliths exhibit a high level of minimalist aesthetics which are a great variation from the established traditional African art conventions. This study established that, the dense and conceptual use of ideographs on the Ikom Monoliths is the aesthetic feature which sets them apart as a different artistic genre in traditional African abstractionism, and that the incorporation of these symbols and ideographs on these stone carvings, accord them greater artistic powers,

meaning and content. This variation in the visual configuration of the Ikom Monoliths from all other established art forms well known in Africa indicates that, various aesthetic and artistic genres had existed in the continent as opposed to the submission by some Western scholars that traditional African art had an unchanging monotonous canonical style. This study has also brought to the lime light the fact that, the concept of found object transmutation into works of art had long existed in African art tradition, long before it was ever recorded in European modernist art histories. This study posited therefore that, through historiographical studies, it will be observed that the entire gamut of traditional African art which the Ikom Monoliths exemplifies, was configured through the ideology and philosophy of 'finding' and this found object art in Africa predates and differs from the found object in the West, underpinning why there is urgent need for scholarly re-contestation of the theories around the concept of Found Object especially as it regards modern African art practice.

Conclusively, suffice to say that, Ikom Monoliths are not just monuments or artefacts, as most scholars have described them, they are not Stonehenge, Megaliths, or Menhirs like those of Western European cultures, rather they are a unique form of traditional African abstract art which exhibit a high level of creative ingenuity and should be appreciated as such. This great ancient creation of African heritage should not be allowed to lose its identity, artistic qualities, content and meaning by simply being drawn into European art mainstreams. This submission is made because, the conceptual framework, and reference to historical civilisation that gave birth to the Ikom Monoliths, differ very much from the Menhirs, Stonehenge and Megaliths of Western European cultures.

## REFERENCES

- Acholonu, C. (2013). 'Catherine Acholonu Replies Helen Vesperini's "Ikom Monoliths, Nigeria's Answer to Stonehenge"' Jungle Journalist. [Online] Available at: <http://junglejournalist.wordpress.com/2013/02/06/catherine-acholonu-replies-helen-vesperinis-on-ikom-monoliths-nigerias-answer-to-stonehenge/> Accessed on: 12<sup>th</sup> January 2014
- Acholonu, C. (2005). *The Gram Code of African Adam*. Abuja: CARC publications
- Ajibade, B. (2013) 'Views on the Concept of Found Object in African Art'. Interviewed by Clement Akpang, Audio, 2 September
- Akpang, C. E. (2013). Found Object, Recycled Art, Readymade or Junk Art? Ambiguity in Modern African Art. *Arts and Design Studies*, 12(1), 41-48.
- Akpang, C. E. (2013). Traditionalism in Contemporary Art: Re-contextualizing African Ideographs through Hybrid Aesthetics. *Arts and Design Studies*, 11, 25-36.
- Allison, P. (1969) Cross River Monoliths. Dept. of Antiquities Federal Republic of Nigeria
- Aniakor, C. (2013) 'Views on the Concept of Found Object in African Art'. Interviewed by Clement Akpang, Audio, 16 September
- BBC (2005) Stonehenge. BBC [Online] Available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/wiltshire/moonraking/landscape\\_stonehenge.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/wiltshire/moonraking/landscape_stonehenge.shtml)
- Bourriaud, N (1998) *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon France: Les presses du reel
- Bourriaud, N. (2013) Relational Aesthetics and Artist as Semionauts. BAAD Lectures. [Online] Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya5gk7ws8MA>
- Danto, A. C. (1988). *ART/artifact*. J. L. Thompson (Ed.). "The" Center for African Art.



- De Jonge, R. M. (2010) The Ikom Monoliths and the Flood. Available at: <http://www.barry.warmkessel.com/IKOM-4.html>
- Hackett, R. I. J. (1994) 'Art and Religion in Africa: Some Observations and Reflections' *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 24, Fasc. 4 (Nov., 1994), pp. 294-308, Published by: BRILL
- Kasfir, S. L. (1992) *African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow*. African Arts. Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 40-97. Published by UCLA
- Lewis, S. (2009) *Guide to the Menirs and other Megaliths of Central Britany*. France: Nezer Books
- Nicklin, K. (1975) The Rape of Nigeria's Antiquities. *African Arts* Vol. 8, No. 3, pp.86-88. Published by: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center
- Parker, M. (2013) *Secretes of the Stonehenge Skeletons*. Channel4. [Online] Available at: <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/secrets-of-the-stonehenge-skeletons>
- Sharp, A. (2013) Stonehenge's Secret Revealed at last: Ice Age Man was drawn nearby pools which never froze over. *MailOnline*. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2467237/Stonehenges-secret-revealed-Ice-Age-man-drawn-pools-near-famous-site-froze-over.html#ixzz2p3Hwnf47> MailOnline
- UNESCO (2007) 'Alok Ikom Monoliths' *UNESCO* [Online], Available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5173/> Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013
- Vesperini, H. (2007) Nigeria's Answer to Stonehenge: the Ikom Monoliths. [Online] AFP. Available at: <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/AlegM%iogC4ZUtLRgQYeVoQJFpcmWar> Accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2013.
- Wells, W. W. (1999) 'The Relationship of Art and Religion: Art as Theology'. *Burning Coal*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.burningcoal.com/ArtReligion/ArtR109.html> Accessed on: 6th January 2014.