

**NIGERIA SCULPTURAL TRADITION AS VIABLE OPTION FOR TOURISM PROMOTION: AN ASSESSMENT OF ESIE MYSTERIOUS STONE SCULPTURES**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Esie stone sculptures are the largest collection of carved stone structures in Africa, and precisely in the world at large. Since its discovery in Esie community of Igbomina town, the stone sculptures pose a lot of complex questions defying answers. In view of this, the soapstone sculptures have continued to amass academic research and studies towards unravelling its makers. Howbeit, that art works especially sculptures known to be functional objects in African worldview either used for religious or court activities are found in a bush. Objects depicting varied cultural traits (tribal marks, hair style,) involved in human activities (playing musical instruments, dancers, farming, etc) and showing status quo (necklace, bracelet). Intriguing of all is the kingship setting of the sculptures explicitly displaying a community life which of a truth augurs well with the local myth surrounding the sculptures. Upon the ingenuity and authenticity of these stone sculptures rest the premise of this paper which is to bring to limelight the tourism potentials of the stone sculptures.*

**KEYWORDS:** Esie Museum, Tourism, Stone Sculpture, Soapstone Images,

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**INTRODUCTION**

Art is the product of creative human activity in which materials are shaped or selected to convey an idea, emotion, or visually interesting form. The word art can refer to visual arts including painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, decorative art, craft and other visual works that combine materials or forms (Chanda, 2009). As an expression of human creative prowess art is intricately interwoven into the cultural fabric of the African society. Art objects depict the picture of the society during which it was made by unveiling the prevalent circumstances that necessitated its creation. It entails both tangible and intangible expression of the human world. Tangible art includes objects made from wood, ivory, iron, stone while intangible art consists of folklore, music, dance, drama, etc.

In many cultures, art and craft are vital means of human perception of their world view. In Africa objects are not just created to be gazed upon rather for daily use in various aspects of life which transverse between the two worlds of men (known and unknown). Often these objects convey meanings far beyond their practical functions. Diakparomre (2010) opined

that it is possible to garner information about the artists that produced the objects and the attitude of the public for which they were produced from the art works. Traditional art has always reflected the values and realities of the artist's own time. Suffice the makers of art objects recreate themselves in their works. To understand and appreciate African works of art depends on the knowledge of meaning bestowed on the object especially by its makers and the society at large. In Nigeria tracing the origin of the makers of its sculptural tradition has been its greatest challenge especially of Esie stone sculptures. The makers of these unique stone sculpture has for ages been locked up in obscurity.

Esie stone sculpture comprises about 1000 soapstone objects carved both in human and animal forms. These sculptures represent men and women in various positions some seated on stools, kneeling or engaged with an activity. The figurines sometimes play musical instruments, hold machetes, or have their hands on their knees. Some sculptures are decorated with sophisticated hairstyle, dresses, tribal marks, necklaces and bracelets. They range in height from about ten centimetres to one metre yet no two of the stone images like exactly alike. These stone figurines depict a high complex civilization of human transaction analysing the diverse cultural features engraved on the objects. These features cut across other early civilization within Nigeria. Esie stone sculpture flourished in Nigeria between the 20th and 15th century A.D. The aesthetic quality of the sculpture suggests that the unknown makers belongs according to Hambolu (2010) an affluent society with developed high taste for sculptural products, a vestige of which survives today as the Esie soapstone sculptures. Of a truth these stone images stands out as one of the distinguished sculptural traditions of perhaps African lost civilization. Unearthing of these confirmed the ingenuity of African sculptures as viable means of tourism promotion in Nigeria. Suffice, Esie stone sculptures is one of the wonders of African ancient civilization which has not ceased to woo tourists. Given this background, this paper evaluates the tourism potentials of Esie stone sculptures portraying the cultural implication of reinstating the soapstone carving tradition using desktop research method.

## CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE

The word "art" comes from the Latin '*ars*', "a fitting together (keeble, 2009). This implies that art is a fusing of imageries to images solely an abstract conjunction. Art is the instrumental means of Imagination (keeble, 2009) made alive in the production of an object. It constitutes the transformation of tangible material into an object conceived as an idea. In transforming ideas art has shaped the world through technical constructions which were only physical manifestation of human imagination. In other words, art transcends mere expression and experience to divine act. It is a word that cuts across human endeavour. Ross (2009) stressed that the term art encompass an enormous range of forms and can be used for objects or experiences that range from the permanent to the transitory, from the utilitarian to the seemingly unnecessary. Further, she stated that it involves the creation of visual and performance modes that express the values and concerns of groups of people at different periods in time. From pre-historical times to date man had always reproduced his world through arts. The cave arts of the Palaeolithic times, the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing transcribed the activities of pre-historic era. Nonetheless the commencement of the

technology of the early men to this present day constitutes the potency of art as instrumental to human socio-cultural, political and economic survival.

Africans are renowned creative genius as their works of art have continued to puzzle and amaze the western world. To this Ross (2009) attested that evidences of some of the very first human activity on earth have been traced to Africa, and many believe that humans first evolved in Africa millions of years ago. Some of the world's earliest art—in the form of charcoal drawings of animals on stone—has been found in Africa yet for centuries, African art has been termed primitive. This is because in Africa some figures were kept in dark shrines, only visible to a few persons, while others were covered with cloth, accoutrements, offerings, and surrounded by music and dancing. Such objects...lose meaning by being made accessible to the visual culture of the West (Hackett, 1994). To the Africans Art is created for life's sake, not for art's sake (Davidson 1969). The western inability to understand the Africans perspective of art used derogative terms to describe African Art ignoring the context in which the objects functions. Elayne (1991) vehemently stated that the West disparaged African sculptural pieces as heathen, fetish, and primitive amongst others, this they did to make African discard the pieces, but it is amazing that many of these same heathen and fetish pieces have been stolen by these same westerns with new shrines now built for them in their various museums and homes. Thus, Africa art comprises unique paintings, textile, architecture, sculpture, metal works etc incidentally termed primitive but work of genius deprived of their origin. The religious art works were designed to be used in vibrant performances and ceremonies involving music and dance and active engagement on the part of multiple participants. However, the extraction of any work of art from its original context poses serious challenges to scholars in all fields. The display of any religious objects as cultural artifacts or art works divorces them from their original context (Ross, 2009). Although not all African art works were designed to be displayed in the western museum yet these museums have salvaged the lives of these objects otherwise would have been lost to posterity.

### **Museum**

The museum is an institution saddled with responsibilities of preserving human relics for posterity. Museums can even be tools for self-expression and self-recognition – and they are used to create and represent identity (Weil, 2002). International Council of Museums (ICOM),described the museum in the following words: a permanent institution in the service of society and of its development; open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment, for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. Based on the responsibility of the museum most scholars describe it as a cultural institution. In Momin and Okpoko's (1990) view museums are institutions (publicly or privately owned) which collect, preserve and display objects (both natural and cultural) with the basic aim of entertaining, educating and providing materials for research on aspects of man's heritage and development. It is the sole duty of the museum to preserve the tangible evidence of man's history, creativity and the physical environment. Observably, the museum is an information centre educating the populace through its object collection. A museum collection consists of “selected material evidence of human activity or the natural environment, accompanied by associated

information.”(Codes of ethic of museum). Beyond words people identify themselves through the cultural heritage displayed in the museum.

The museum as it stands today, a temple where objects are displayed is a western invention imported into African soil for the conversation and preservation of historic relic for posterity. Such model museum of a truth is strange to Africa but the concept of a museum as a repertoire of knowledge is a well established fact in most African communities. According to Momin and Okpoko (1990) various cultural materials of ritual, religious and political importance were fashioned, conserved and preserved in temples or traditional shrines and in the palaces of kings and chiefs. These traditional museums (shrines) are living museums where objects are functional not gazed upon. Though the African museum preserves an object yet does not conserve the life of the object. This helps to keep the act of art alive as patronage is the life stream of African art. If not allowed to be destroyed by white ant the artisans would be out of job. Today, this constitutes one of the major reasons of decline in African art.

Nevertheless, the museum has kept the African art alive by conversation of the ancient artistic heritage of most African countries including Nigeria. This led to the establishment of western museums in Nigeria, the first of its kind is the Esie museum commissioned in 1945 as the first museum in Nigeria to house the 1500 soapstone sculpture found in the community. The success of the Esie museum led to establishment of museums in almost all parts of Nigeria. Most of these museums were necessitated in compliance to house Nigeria’s spectacular sculptural traditions accidentally found and unearthed through archaeological excavations. Notably amongst them is the Nok art, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, Owo, Benin, Esie, Yoruba, Ibibio etc.

The unique art works in the collection of Nigeria museums enjoys a high reputation among local residents, domestic and international. To cease been a place where ancient objects are kept the museum today work with the tourist industry in a number of ways: by launching cooperative ventures with other cultural institutions, establishing leisure venues and supporting local festivals. Esie museum practically is a visitor oriented cultural institution engaged in diverse programmes initiated to woo tourists.

### **Tourism**

Unique experience of all kinds had always been the key goal of travelling. The habit of travel is part of human nature and man has been exercising this right since antiquity. Tourism is an ancient phenomenon looking at historical activities of early men travelling from place to place. Travelling is an ancient activity but the word tourism is a recent nomenclature. In view of this, Beeton (2005) stated that Tourism, in the form of recreational travel and experience, has existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, arguably dating back to ancient Egyptian and Roman times, yet as an academic discipline it is among the most recent. In Goeldner, and Ritchie (2009) opinion the word tourism is related to the conception of the “Grand Tour”, introduced in the 17th century. The idea was that Europe’s aristocrats made a tour around the continent, especially to Italy and France, in order to see and experience other cultures and heritage for education and pleasure. Of a necessity attraction is the pillar of tourist motivation for tourism. Tourist attractions are of various kinds but chiefly natural and cultural. Those

seeking to experience the unique cultural traits of ancient cultures embodied in sculptural traditions patronize the museum. Thus, tourism through museum offers tourist the opportunity to consume experiences embedded in artistic traditional of extinct cultures. These artistic traditional encompasses both the makers and the function of the objects in the community. The sculptural tradition of Esie soapstone has continued to attract both domestic and international tourist to Esie museum and other museums in the country. Therefore, it is no gainsaying that the proliferation of museums in various parts of Nigeria in the last few decades has intensified tourist traffic at the museum. Today museums are cultural attractions luring cultural tourist to the country.

### **Historical background of Esie stone sculptures**

The origin of the Esie stone sculpture is no doubt wrapped in obscurity from the analysis of the cultural traits of the sculpture scholars dated its production between 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century AD (Babawale, 2010, Aleru and Adekola, 2008; Hambolu, 2010). The cultural traits of the sculpture distinguished Esie stone figurines from other stone sculptures. Signifying external trading relations with other centres or probably a settlement of carvers as Aribidesi (1995) asserted that that the figures were carved with woodworking tools. This implies that soapstone or steatite rock is a very soft stone that can be worked easily with wood working tools (Atherton 1980). Despite these assertion Aleru and Adekola (2008) noted that research conducted on how the carvings were shaped (flaking, abrading, pulverizing, and cutting)... has proven inconclusive. This does not rule out the fact that the findings from studies carried out in the area suggests according to Hambolu (1989) that the raw materials used for the production of the figurines were located in the vicinity of the present-day Esie town. Thus, the makers of Esie stone sculptures where ancient occupants of the area. While the decline of the soapstone sculptures production awaits further academic inquires the locales substituted this vacuum left by the demise of the stone makers with various myths.

To which Aleru and Adekola (2008) attested that since the stone figurines were first unearthed in the 1930s, numerous oral history and mythological accounts have been compiled about this enigmatic cultural heritage. Most of the stories concerned the origins of the figurines. Some accounts, however, attempted to unravel the mystery surrounding the identities of those who created the sculptures. Other stories tell us about how the stone figurines came to be found in the locations in which they were discovered over the past two centuries. The soapstone images were accidentally discovered by a hunter named Baragbon during an expedition around 1775. Confounded by the sight of stone images arranged in a circular position with one in the middle all engaged in different human activities is an unusual sight. The hunter alerted the community, in bid to unearth the origin of the stone images the gods were consulted. The community consulted an Ifa oracle who initiated the worship of the stone images. Thus, an altar was erected at the same spot where the stone images where found in-situ and there after worshipped. When discovered by Mr. H.G. Ramshaw of Church Missionary Society in 1933 by 1945 a museum was erected in place of the shrine at the same spot so as to retain its cultural significance to the community.

However, the mysterious appearance per se of the stone images in Esie community generated numerous myths each divulging the origin of the stone sculptures from its kingship setting.

One of such myth postulates that the stone images were rebellious settlers who were turned into stone images. This story has it that a group of people probably of Yoruba tribe entreated the ruler of the town known as Elesie of their intention to settle down in the town. However on getting to the community, the strangers later known to be rebellious were disappointed as their presence was not accorded welcome; this was because the community constituting majorly farmers had to farm. The strangers in anger decided to settle outside the community but their rebellious character became a threat to security of the Esie community. Their disregard towards the administration of the community angered the gods who turned them to stone images. This legend explains human activities engaged by the stone sculptures.

Another myth of this kind is the account of God's messenger to Esie community (Babawale, 2010). The story has it that God promised to send special gifts and favours through His messengers to the people of Esie but warned that on the said day no one must go out of the town. However, it was the king who disobeyed by going to farm to harvest okro which would go bad if not harvested daily. Unfortunately, rather than the promised gifts, the messenger of god inflicted a curse on the people which froze everyone in the various postures they had assumed at the time of the curse. Babawale (2010) stressed that with the inability of the local myth to determine the makers or purpose of the stone images established an indisputable fact about the origin of the statues which is that they were found in Esie and up till this moment about 300 years after their discovery, no one has come up with counter claims of ownership, therefore, the statues are rightfully as they are popularly called Esie soap sculptures.

However, apart from myths explaining the origin of the Esie stone sculptures academic scholars of various field, history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology etc using scientific mode of inquiry have also divulged into the origin of Esie stone sculptures yet to no avail. Aribidesi (1995) conducted an excavation in the north central Yorubaland, the homeland of Igbomina, a Yoruba subgroup of Kwara state, Nigeria between November 1994 and March 1995 and recovered the following materials, pottery, tobacco pipes, soapstone figurines, iron implements and porcelain. The excavated site is called *Pee*, some 18 km northwest of Esie. It is a further indication that soapstone sculptures may have been present at more than one location in Igbominaland in the past. This implies that soapstone images are not restricted to Esie community. This led to other series of excavation conducted within Esie community and its environs including other research works in an attempt at scientifically explaining the origins and incidence of the stone figurines (Aleru and Adekola (2008). They further stated that the most detailed of these scientific attempts at explaining the origins of stone figurines was conducted by Stevens (1978). He painstakingly documented every single object recovered by early excavators, and provided us with a comprehensive catalogue of the stone figurines.

The findings of these research works lay bare evidence which has been useful in extrapolating information from the stone images. The diverse cultural traits of different ethnic groups (Nupe, Igala, and Bariba) displayed on the stone images incorporating tribal marks, elaborate hairstyle, wearing of necklace and bracelets points to the likelihood that the region of Igbominaland has been a repository of different social groups and cultural entities over time is not peculiar (Aleru and Adekola, 2008). Essentially this evidence connotes cultural

and trading relations within the area. The influence of which attracts the settlement of people from different tribes each depicting its culture on carved stone images. Aleru and Adekola, (2008) attested to the above that the stone figurines were carved by some ancient peoples possibly living within the vicinity of present-day Esie. Of a truth Esie must have been an affluent community in the past incubating sculptural masterpiece which today has not ceased to marvel the world of art since its discovery. Unearthing of Esie stone sculptures and the establishment of the museum opened the flood gate of tourism in the community as tourists regularly visit the museum to admire the mythic tale of human made stones.

### **Nigeria sculptural traditions**

Nigeria has a rich culture of artistic heritage that dates back to more than two thousand years (Eyo, 1977). According to Fasuyi (1973) the early antiquities in Nigeria were breath-taking. Especially the master pieces from the ancient Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, Benin and Nok contributed immensely to the uplift of Nigeria as a proclaimed world cultural power with astonishing artistic traditions and rendition. It is then an established fact that Nigeria is endowed with many sculptural traditions which have for many centuries marvelled the world with their unique artistic paraphernalia. Most ancient cities of Nigeria are famous for its artistic paraphernalia which today is viewed in museums across the world. The origins of Nigeria artistic heritage have been a puzzle academic scholars across the globe are unable to unravel especially the Esie soap stone sculptures. These Nigeria art wonders portrays a civilization perhaps too sophisticated for the primitive per se African mind according to early European Scholars to conceive or apprehend. It is not surprising that in 1910, when the first Ife artifacts were discovered by German ethnologist, Leo Frobenius, he claimed he had found Atlantis. Frobenius assumed that a "superior" culture must have created the delicacy, symmetry, and vitality evident in the Ife pieces (Shaw 1978; Gillon 1988). Also Elayne (1991) attested that the naturalism of style and refinement of technique displayed in these sculptures from ancient Nigeria surprised people who believed that Africans were incapable of creating objects of similar quality to those created by the ancient Greeks or Romans. The unique and awe inspiring nature of Nigeria artistic heritage opened the flood gate of tourist and researchers visiting the museums where the objects are kept.

Nigeria sculptural tradition universally acclaimed unique where most times accidental discoveries unearthed through excavation. These art works of great repute are found to share similar cultural traits. To this Some art historians have detected similarities between the stylized human figures and the naturalistic animals of Nok and the undated stone sculptures of Esie,...But a more convincing suggestion is that the Nok style - the main features of which are a spherical or conical head, and eyes represented as segments of a sphere with the upper lid horizontal and the lower lid forming a segment of the circle - has many features in common with that of Ife (Gowling, 1983). The cultural uniformity of Nigeria art works points to trading relations and immigration which is a common feature of early ancient dwellers. With the findings of archaeological excavation and ethnographic exploration most Nigerian artistic traditions have been chronologically placed within a time context commensurate to the time when such art flourished in Nigeria. Following this chronology the Nok is the most ancient of Nigerian art. It is named after a small village in central Nigeria in the Zaria province where the first sculpture was found during tin mining operation in 1943 (Federal

Antiquity, 1976). The Nok culture believed to have thrived between 500BC -200 AD. Although the Nok terracotta head is unique, certain stylistic traits are found throughout the corpus of Nok art; triangular eyes and perforated pupils, noses, mouth and ears combine to depict men and women with bold, abstract features (NCMM, 2012) and embroiled on terracotta with elaborate bead work, bracelets, anklets, tassels and pendant (Federal Antiquity, 1976). Nok terracotta comprises mainly human effigies but occasionally representations of animals (in most cases snakes). Other similar terracotta has been found around the Nok environs of kagara in Kaduna and katsina Ala in Benue state. The absence of oral tradition to unravel the makers of the culture made scholars dependent on archaeological evidence.

The second stage of development in Nigerian art is known from Igbo-Ukwu, a small village near Awka in Anambra state. The Igbo-Ukwu famous bronze was accidentally stumbled upon in 1938. This led to the excavation of the said site only to discover a chief burial chamber, abandoned shrine and pit. It was noted that similar finds was made in 1922. The excavation unearthed bronzes, beads, pendant, anklets, ornaments, roped pot, pottery, ivory, remains of cloth and human bones. The Igbo-Ukwu art was dated to have flourished during the 9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. The bronzes found at Igbo-Ukwu are extraordinary. They are totally unlike any other examples found in West Africa and unlike those of Ife and Benin in both design and alloy. They have fine detailed decorations of tiny pellets, thin threads, spirals, insects, and animals in relief on vessels and personal ornaments.

The Ife art is an amalgamation of various art works such as brass/bronzes, terracotta stone sculpture which depicted human, animal and other representations all with similar characteristics. The brass head commonly taken to be bronze depicts the picture of dead kings of Ife kingdom with each wearing crowns and necklaces. Ife art first gained world-wide attention in 1910 after a German ethnographer, Leo Frobenius, discovered some extraordinary terracotta sculptures in a sacred grove in Ife. Through excavation carried out in the area more terracotta sculptures and bronze heads were uncovered. The art flourished between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and came to an end before the sixteen century (Antiquity Federal, 1976).

Owo is a renowned centre of art, in eastern Yoruba land and lies halfway between Ife and Benin. Located amidst tow famous art centres Owo is said to be a link between the two centres and its art works shows a lot of diffusion of both centres. The 1971 discovery of some terracotta at Owo seems to suggest that Owo forms the bridge between the art of Ife and the art of Benin. This is attested with the influence of both cultural traits made evidence in Owo arts. Yet Owo art had its unique features as most of the terracotta and brass heads carry headgear and some faces carry vertical parallel incisions with mouth gouged out and eyes made in the form of holes. This art flourished around 15<sup>th</sup> century AD following radiocarbon tests indicated it thrived around 1350 AD (Federal Antiquity, 1976).

Benin art appears to be prominent amongst all other art works of Nigeria. This art comprises court art produced for the Oba of Benin which consists of a large range of animal heads, figurines, plaques, busts and other art objects made from bronze, ivory, brass, terracotta, and

wood. Benin art flourished between 15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries AD and declined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century following the punitive expedition of the 1897 by the Portuguese. Though amongst other historic art centres in Nigeria Benin art still thrives to date as it constitute large number of tourist souvenir. In addition, bronze sculptures were found in other parts of Nigeria though in small quantity yet are a pointer to the fact that Nigerian ancient artisans were men with renowned skill in craftsmanship (casting and carving).

### **Nigeria Stone Carving**

Carving is an age long tradition of most cultures in Nigeria. Such art includes wood and stone carving. This act is facilitated with the presence of raw materials located around or within the community. It is an established fact that people of the forest regions are good wood carvers with availability of diverse wood within the area likewise stone carving is unique to areas where the suitable stone for craft is available. Therefore, Stone carving is the oldest known work of representational art. This is an ancient activity that involves shaping of rough natural stone by using subtractive techniques of sculpture.

Nigeria stone image tradition chiefly covers the Esie soapstone sculptures and the Ikom monoliths or Akwanshi of Cross River state. In view of this Jefferson (1974) reports that about 295 of Akwanshi stones have been found within an area of 563,3 square km inhabited by the Ekoi people along the bank of the cross river while some have been discovered in the suburb of Ilorin (NCMM, 2012). Though both stone traditions are unique nonetheless the soapstone figures of Esie are largest collection of stone carvings still in Black Africa found in groves outside the town of Esie. The stone images are called soapstone because if water touches any of them, it will foam and become slippery. Soapstone (also known as steatite or soap rock) is a talc-schist, which is a type of metamorphic rock. It is largely composed of the mineral talc and is thus rich in magnesium. It is produced by dynamothermal metamorphism and metasomatism, which occurs in the areas where tectonic plates are subducted, changing rocks by heat and pressure, with influx of fluids, but without melting. It has been a medium for carving for thousands of years. The presence of the stone type in Igbomina town postulates that the carvers did not at least import the sculptures rather it was made within the environment. The purpose definitely is not aesthetic as art is not created for beauty in Africa rather utilitarian purposes. It is not surprising that on discovery the people of Esie venerated the sculptures by erecting a shrine for their worship before Inspector for Oro Area of the Church Missionary Society, Mr. H.G. Ramshaw informed the public of the presence of the stone figures in the area (NCMM, 2012). Not to distort the traditional place of the stone sculpture in the life of the Esie people led to the establishment of Esie community museum in 1945 by the colonial government to house about 1,500 soap stone images. The museum was built to replace the shrine at the same spot where the sculptures were found in-situ. Being the largest African stone sculpture collection it attracts most scholars and tourist from across the globe.

To buttress its fame Hambolu (2007) acknowledged Esie as a prominent stone sculpture centre where over 1000 soapstones sculpture were discovered about 1775 by Esies people. These soap stone artworks are carvings presided over by a king and they represent the largest

collection of stone carvings in the whole of Africa. Most of these soapstone figures have lost either heads or limbs due to the crude manner or unscientific excavation of the sculpture initially. Like Nok art, Esie stone sculpture lacks oral tradition to elucidate the makers of objects in essence only archaeological findings and myths attempts to delve into the origin of the stone sculpture. In bid to determine the origin of Esie sculpture most scholars extrapolated that the cultural trait of the sculpture especially the facial marks along with its unique hair styles cuts across Nigeria to places Ghana, Egypt and Sudan. In view of this some of the sculptures appear to resemble Ife work, and it is interesting to note that Ife also has a tradition of soap stone carving (Federal Antiquity, 1976). To this, Pogson (1990) opined that the artistic style displayed on the objects and the cultural manifestations exhibited on them suggest they were carved by a group of the Yoruba people. Scholarly debate over the makers of Esie sculpture is as a result of the gap created with the absence of oral tradition. Archaeological excavation could only explain the makers through analogy by comparing the cultural trait with that of art works within and around its environs. Thus, without corresponding oral tradition the makers of Esie sculpture remains an academic puzzle. It is not strange that these sculptures have attracted wide scholarly interest. Thermoluminescent dating of the terracotta associated with Esie soapstone sculptures gave a date of 1100AD (Stevens, 1978). Following the recent excavation conducted in the area by National Commission for Museums and Monument revealed that Oko-Odo, the former settlement of Esie people was occupied at least in AD998-1020 (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century AD). The occupation of Esie was however in AD 1644-1661 (17<sup>th</sup> century AD) (NCMM, 2012).

Furthermore, the Esie sculpture is nothing compared to Ikom Monoliths. The art of stone carving has been a special occupation of the Ekoi people in Ikom of Cross River State. The Ikom Monoliths are a group of stone sculptures found in small area around Ikom in Cross River State of Nigeria, inhabited by Ekoi people who live in scattered villages. The stone monoliths are known variously as Akwanshi or Atal or Alaptal. All Akwanshi have eyes, nose, mouth, cheek/facial marks beard and navel portrayed as well as ears, hands, arms, breasts and geometric decorations (some of which represent tribal marks). Though the carving ends at the navel, but the beard is an indication that they are all male. These carved monoliths which occur in groups numbering about 350 stones located about 35 sites are evenly distributed within seven main clans of Cross River State namely; Abanyom; Akaju ; Akpanobong ; Nde ; Nnam in the Ejagham tribe; Nselle, and Nta. Each stone figure is between 2ft and 4ft high and the largest being 6ft. They are conical in shape. Akwanshi is said to refer to a collection of stones or monoliths either owned by the entire clan, village or the family. According to oral tradition the stones were placed at their current position by the ancestors of the Ekoi people. 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 depicted faces on the stones, each face representing one of their dead chiefs whose names are not known. Akin to the Esie soapstone images, the Akwanshi have baffled experts since their first discovery in 1903. The stone images having been found on the surface of the earth necessitates that their origin can only be ascertained through oral tradition and scientific dating. This according to the works of Late Prof. Ekpo (NCMM, 2012) who made an in-depth research on the monoliths for over thirty years dated the monoliths around 200AD.

### **Esie Museum Sculpture: A Premise for tourism promotion**

Tourism is a composite of activities, services and industries that deliver a travel experience, transport, accommodations, eating and drinking establishment, shops, entertainment, activity facilities and other hospitality services available for individuals or group that are travelling away from home (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2009). Observably, the tourism industry is service oriented. The main trust of the industry is to meet the varied needs of tourist through memorable experiences. It offers opportunity for experience through its services which cuts across all other sectors of the economy. Invariably, tourism is a complex phenomenon which has a profound influence over the entire human world. Today most nations of the world are developing their tourism potentials to broaden their economic prowess through tourist expenditure which is injected into various sectors.

The industry thrives on the need of people to experience something different from their daily lives. Tourists are pleasure seeking travellers. Travelling for tourist is stirred by the desire to visit new places and experience significant cultural and natural terrains. To, expound their cultural horizon of perceiving the beauty and the richness of the world. Tourists motive to travel diversified tourism under different guises like we have today as Religious tourism, Cultural tourism, Eco-tourism, Adventure tourism, Business tourism, Health tourism etc. In view of this, sculptural tradition is amongst the heritage products that have marvelled the world for decades especially African art. Most of that which constitutes this tradition is gradually going extinct following the decline of its production in communities where its makers cannot be identified as in the case of Esie stone sculptures. In this case tourism involving the travelling of tourists to experience outstanding cultural traits has in a great measure resuscitated Esie stone sculptures by opening the destination to tourists and researchers flocking to the site. This prompted further the maintenance, preservation and increased awareness of the stone sculptures. Thereby the people of Esie community take pride in the history and civilization of the makers of the stone sculpture. The Esie museum is the sole repertoire of these stone sculptures and it constitutes one of Nigeria tourist attractions promoting tourism. As an attraction tourism advocates the preservation of the stone sculptures by generating fund for its conservation and at the same time lures tourists to these cultural centres. Without audience appraisal the stone sculpture loses much of its efficacy as renowned relics. This necessitates the display of Esie stone sculpture in the museum for easy access. The assemblage of Nigeria's sculptural tradition displayed in museums has become an avenue through which the conscious tourist starts to grasp a basic understanding of its past termed living culture. Therefore, tourism is a powerful, cultural tool and the museum as a cultural institution offers tourist experience in cultural heritage.

Museums and tourism especially cultural tourism are in pursuit of increasing visitors (tourists) cultural accessibility and understanding of sculptural traditions to ensue memorable experience without which tourism loses its grip of pleasure seeking tourists. As a cultural institution in the service of the public the museums have certain potential to attract visitors being in possession of awe inspiring tangible and intangible heritage objects. Rightly, Esie museum offers unique opportunity for consuming and experiencing its stone sculptural heritage to a variety of tourists meeting their different needs and expectations unlike the responsibility of museum in the past basically preservation and conservation of its collection.

To this Neil and Kotler's (2002) stated that earlier the museum's prime responsibility was to its collections, rather than to the visitors, but during the last years the focus has shifted from collections care to visitor service. The new conception is that a museum should not be a store house but more like a workshop and even that its "main function is to provide appealing and memorable museum experiences. The Esie museum trills its visitors with over 1000 awe inspiring soapstone sculpture of mysterious origin.

The soapstone sculpture discovered in 1933 lures both tourist and academic researchers to Esie. This unique find has turned the small community into a famous destination acclaimed to be the highest collection of African stone sculpture. Esie community is not only known for its stone sculpture but also acknowledged as the first museum commissioned in Nigeria in 1945. Not minding Esie been a pioneer museum in Nigeria, it is assumed that the unresolved mysteries of the Esie soapstone statues reinforces the unique point that they represent an indispensable link to key epochs in the history of mankind. This attests to its cultural traits which cut across other African state civilization. Thus, Even before the establishment of the museum, on the discovery of the soapstone sculptures researchers has not ceased in visiting the community in bid to unravel its mysterious origin. The annual festival of the Esie sculpture is another tourism attraction wooing tourist to Esie. The annual Esie Monumental Festival primarily ensures the preservation, protection and projection of all Esie cultural heritages for the economic benefit of the people. The festival arose from the myth surrounding the origin of the soapstone according to the people that it was punishment bestowed on the former occupant of the community as a result of the Oba's disobedience of the gods. The worship of the stone sculpture along with annual festival was initiated in other to appease the gods.

The festival itself incorporates a lot of other activities like the Egungun (masquerade) display which is also unique. The community location within the grove made hunting a profession that hunting game is part of the festival where hunters have a competition and bring their games to the palace of the Elesie. Whoever had the biggest game would be given a prize. In addition to the above, is the place of songs, poetry, and music during the festival. Attached to the myth of the stone carvings is lots of poetry seeking to narrate their origin. Also the praise songs of the stone sculptures along with traditional music does not just provide entertainment but actually tell a lot of history and how the people regard the stone carvings.

Hence, it is worthy of note that art works especially Esie stone sculpture serves as a catalyst in promoting cultural presentation and integration of the economic life of the society through...tourism exchange and mass publicity of the creative genius of Nigerians (NCMM, 2012). The peculiarity of this stone sculpture thrilling the globe with its myths of origin and cultural features cannot be over emphasised. Nonetheless Nigeria amalgamation of art works are found in numerous museums around the globe termed master pieces of ancient civilization. These today make up African cultural heritage the back born of tourism which has turned most sites into tourist attractions. The significant of these for tourism is that they can act as a catalyst for a destination and in some case become the major reason for a visit to the destination especially in cases where outstanding exhibits are on show (Holloway and

Taylor, 2006) as is the case with Esie museum possession and display of the largest stone sculpture in Africa.

### **Cultural implication of reinstating Esie soapstone carving tradition**

Esie stone sculptures represent art of ancient Nigeria. The peculiarities of these stone images further popularized the ingenuity of Nigeria Art. These stone sculptures constitute Nigeria cultural attraction which has for decades thrilled the world with the cultural features of its makers. Although the makers of this world class stone sculptures remains unknown yet the raw materials used in carving the sculptures are abundant within Esie and its environs which implies the tradition is not dead perhaps quiescent. Thus the fact that Esie was put on global cultural map and reckoning by the soapstone sculptures dictates that the tradition be sustained (Babawale, 2010). It is therefore, paramount that such a culture should be revitalized so as to preserve the cultural significance and longevity of the stone sculptures. This is in avoidance of future eventuality of looting which is currently a menace besetting Nigeria cultural objects. Such illicit act is not strange in Nigeria museums where the lives of cultural objects are constantly threatened by looters despite the fact that repatriation of stolen objects is not visible. In view of this it is necessary to establish stone carving industry in Esie to carry on with the ancient tradition. Since the Esie museum houses the soapstone images instituting a stone carving workshop within the museum will reinstate the cultural efficacy of Esie stone carving tradition. This will help the museum to fulfil its responsibility to the community as Dike (1982) noted that the establishment of museums in various parts of the country served as repositories for disappearing works of art, without which 'variable records of the history and traditions of the people will be lost'. He further stated that a great deal of valuable historical conclusions can be drawn from the study of a people's art and art treasures apart from their many other functions are available sources of a nation's history. To this Egonwa (1993) and Nsugbe (1961) opined that cultural artifacts are muter bearers of a people's history and mirror through which cultures could be understood. This illuminates the cultural tie between the soapstone images and the historical background of Esie community. The cultural features of the stone sculptures also points to the cultural affiliation of Esie community and its environs which expatiates the cultural trends of Nigeria sculptural tradition.

Of a necessity stone carving workshop will not resuscitate Esie stone carving tradition but on the other hand serve as tourist souvenir which will invariably create employment opportunities for local artisans. The success of such cultural innovation will preserve the historical landmark of ancient Nigeria heritage.

### **CONCLUSION**

Travelling to sites with cultural and natural significance seeking new experience is not a new phenomenon. The early European explorers especially the Portuguese in seeking new experience discovered Africa but where were amazed at the level of civilization which was reflected in their artistic tradition. Today, Nigeria is historically endowed with varied arts and crafts which are widely admired in museums across the globe. Arts and crafts such as the stylized Nok terracotta sculptures, Igbo-Ukwu bronze Ife terracotta, brass, Owo terracotta

animals, Benin bronzes, Tsoede bronzes, Ikom monoliths and Esie soapstone images all represent the Nigeria sculptural tradition known globally. According to Babawale (2010) it is a well established fact attested by scholar, anthropologists, ethnographers, archaeologists...that art has undoubtedly been Nigeria's most important asset, for it is through her fine sculptures, whether in wood, ivory, bronze, terracotta (fired clay) or stone that Nigeria's culture first became internationally recognized and famous. These works of art have not only served to show that Nigeria has a rich cultural heritage that can compare favourably with that of any other country of the world, but dating back several hundreds of years as many of them do, they also reveal vital aspects of her history.

The amalgamation of art works that make up Nigeria' art works constitute an embodiment of its traditional worldview transformed into objects which expresses values, attitudes, beliefs, norms etc. beyond this sphere they serve aesthetic purposes like western art viewed for its art sake. For this reason, the study of these art works provides a way of learning about the history of its makers and its function in the prevalent context of its production. Essentially, the study of Esie stone sculptures elucidated its cultural affiliation with other cultures within West Africa pointing to a highly multifarious civilisation which must have emanated from contacts with other centres of civilisation in Africa. Of a truth, the advanced artistry skill of the perhaps untutored Africans of Esie community vividly advocates that the objects were produced by highly developed ancient African community.

Today, these stone sculpture educate and marvel tourist (domestic and international) and academic scholar across the globe with its mysterious origin which has so far defied all scientific research into its origin. Although the soapstone images were not restricted to Esie community in Igbomina town with archaeological evidence in other areas like Ijara and Ofaru, both in Igbomina town near Esie proved that the soapstone sculpture is a tradition that once flourished around Igbomina and its environs. The decline of the industry and its makers remains a conundrum for academic scholars. Initially on discovery, the stone sculptures were kept in a traditional museum (shrine) hidden from common men as emblems of the gods following the community myth of its origin. Thereby venerated to appease the angry gods and abate their wrath. Hedged with divineness such legendary works of art were deprived of their place in artistic world. Erecting a modern museum did not just showcase its glamour but publicized its unique cultural traits which has not ceased in attracting tourists to Esie community.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations emanated from this study:

1. Esie museum despite its long period of establishment as a pioneer museum is still in need of a better environment. Locating the museum in grove where the soap stone sculptures were found in-situ has its own cultural significance yet according to (Holloway and Taylor, 2006) museums not sited close to major centre of population or with poor accessibility generally find it difficult to attract tourists in large number. Thus, for Esie museum to attract mammoth crowd of tourist its current location far from town needs to be extended into the city or entire relocation of the museum to an accessible location close to town.

2. Observably, the road leading to the museum has collapsed, while the current site is surrounded by thick forest. Artisans, tourists, and researchers accessibility to the museum is impeded by the above fact. Therefore, the state government needs to assist in enhancing accessibility by reconstructing and maintaining roads leading to such an outstanding temple of art with the largest stone sculpture in Africa.
3. A museum of its kind needs to be adequately staffed especially security officers so as to curtail the high rate of artefact theft currently depriving the country of its cultural heritage leaving our museum displaying a prototype of its original heritage. As repatriation of stolen art objects are not forth coming.
4. Museums are non-profit making institution therefore they need to be adequately funded so as meet up with their operational service. The Esie museum is part of the sponsors of the Esie monumental festival and lack of fund has dwindled public participation of this remarkable event due low media publicity which is dependent on funds.
5. The establishment of cultural workshop within Nigeria museums to serve as an avenue whereby local artisans would be trained in different indigenous skills which will go a long way in preserving the traditional craft of the community.

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