

WOODEN CULTURAL HERITAGE: QUALITY OF CARE AND MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA'S NATIONAL MUSEUM, ORON IN AKWA-IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Care, management, as well as prevention against wane, loss or damage are paramount to National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). The technique of caring and preserving objects in the museum is basically preventive conservation to ensure longer lifespan. This method involves housekeeping and daily inspection of objects in the store and galleries to detect infection and deterioration. The study, therefore, examined types, functions and methods of conserving wooden objects, with a view to determining effects of conservation in Oron National Museum. The study observed more than 3,000 collections in the store, galleries and courtyard of which about 80% of the collections as wooden objects. It also takes cognisance of wooden objects in the museum as national treasure from ancient times as significant to the knowledge of tourists, researchers and coming generations. The study gives an overview of activities in Oron Museum, and highlights challenges faced by the museum. It concluded by imploring National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) to come to the aid of Oron museum by providing conservation laboratory, modern equipment and other facilities to ameliorate level of conservation.

Key Words: *Preventive conservation, Wooden objects, Cultural heritage, National museums Oron*

Introduction

Generally museums are responsible for the care of tangible and intangible natural or cultural heritage. The primary responsibility of museum is to protect and promote heritage as well as the human, physical and financial resources made available for that purpose (ICOM, 2006). The position of International Council for Museums (ICOM) in the 21st century context of museum is “an institution developed by modern society to stop as much as possible the deterioration and loss of objects treasured for their cultural

values” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1986; UNESCO, 1987). The basic function of the museum institution on any object it acquires is to conserve, maintain, and guarantee the safety of such object (UNESCO, 1982; 1987; Okpoko, 2006).

Nigerian museums were established for the purposes of collecting, preserving, educating, and exhibiting the cultural or natural heritage of the country for information and enjoyment of the public. According to Momin and Okpoko (1990) museums provide materials for research on aspects of man’s heritage and

development. National museums in Nigeria were initially established to safeguard the cultural heritage from theft, illegal exportation and religious fanatics, and destruction by environmental factors in the twenty-first century (Oyinloye, 2015). This makes museums in Nigeria to be set-up in an area where cultural heritage were predominantly present. For example the National Museum in Oron is designed to specifically preserve and protect about six hundred hardwood ancestor carvings (*Ekpui*) which were formerly assembled in a temporary building in 1947 (Fagg, 1963). The unique wooden ancestral male carvings were found in the geographical location of Oron town. After some years, a plan was drawn in 1958 and construction started and was completed. The museum was open to the public in 1959. Study on museums show that Oron National Museums was among the first five generations of Nigerian museums: Esie Museum-1945; Jos Museum -1952; Ile-Ife Museum-1956; Lagos Museum-1957; Oron Museum-1959 (Oyinloye, 2015). However, NCMM as a matter of policy is making sure there is a museum, or museum office in every State in Nigeria.

This study, therefore, gives an overview of the variety of wooden objects in Oron museum; using functionalism and historical particularism theories to analyse our data. The variety in terms of functions performed and historical background surrounding the objects; as well as the community where objects were carved before finding their ways into the museum. The study carefully described functions performed by objects, such as wooden face masks and headdresses, ancestral figures, door panels and house posts, stools, musical instruments, war implements, shrine and ceremonial

objects. This study focused on the aspects of preventive conservation of wooden cultural objects among other media in Oron museum. The study of preventive conservation of wooden objects in Oron museum throws more light on the creativity, skills, usefulness and ancient technology of the carvers who made these exquisite art pieces.

Description of Study Area

A field trip to Oron examined a museum sited at the bank of Oron Beach, which is situated at 1,004 area of Oron Idua Assang. Oron National Museum stands out unique because it is situated by the waterside. After viewing the exhibition in the gallery, the waterfront offers a serene atmosphere for comfort. It incorporates a museum kitchen that is a combination of relaxation and enjoyment. We observed the impact of nature on museum sited by the river side which reduces high temperature level in the galleries during the heat period, while the museum building shares boundary with Oron beach. We note the natural setting which allows cool breeze from the river into the museum complex day and night. The building consists of two rectangular exhibition galleries situated on the bank of the Cross River lagoon at about 4.05m above the water edge (O. Adeoye, personal communication, February 15th 2010).

Materials and Methods

Taking inventory in the museum is the documentation of every object and material available in the collection. It is a way of articulating actual collections of a museum with detailed information available. We were informed that previous inventory of collections in Oron museum was taken in February 2010 by the team of curator and other workers (O. Adeoye,

personal communication, October 15th 2010). The statistics of the inventory shows that National Museum Oron housed over 3,000 collections in the store and galleries, comprising various media of cultural heritage production (Table 1). The table further shows that Oron Museum preserves about 200 pieces of collections for the National Museum, Port Harcourt and other institutions alike in the region. We observed that cultural objects documented in this museum cut across varieties of cultural art media. They include bronze/brass – 240 pieces; Iron/metal – 103 pieces; leather/animal skin – 36 pieces; textiles/wools – 73 pieces; terracotta 69 pieces; stone objects – 35pieces; manila objects – 34 pieces; ivory objects – 35 pieces; and other objects which are without distinctive features – 69 pieces.

We observed that the inventory of the cultural heritage taken in the Oron Museum revealed the state of health and

physical fitness of all cultural objects in the store and galleries of the museum. According to O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) through result of the inventory taken on the museum’s collections in 2010, the Management discovered a need to de-accession (remove from list) objects that were not originally Oron museum’s collections. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) mentions that the idea of de-accession was to eradicate the confusion created about the actual number of objects belonging to the Oron Museum. This simply means that the Management of Oron National Museum has taken decision not to document such cultural objects preserved for other museums in their day book again, so that the museum can have accurate total number of objects registered in the museum (O. Adeoye, personal communication, October 15th 2010).

Table 1: Results and Discussion

Medium	Objects in number	Percentage
Wooden objects	2,747	80% of total museum collection
Bronze/brass objects	240	7%
Iron/metal objects	103	3%
Leather/skin materials	36	1%
Textiles materials	71	2%
Terracotta objects	69	2%
Stone objects	35	1%
Manila objects	34	1%
Ivory objects	35	1%
Objects of other Media	69	2%
Total	<u>3,434</u>	100%
Objects from other museums	178	
Objects displayed in the museum courtyard	6	

Grand Total of cultural objects and materials from 2010 inventory – 3, 666

Table1 above is the graphic data of inventory taken in Oron National Museum in 2010 by the team of curator and workers

at conservation unit (Documentation Unit). We observed that wooden objects constitute about 80% of the total museum

cultural objects and materials. It is on this basis we analysed the data and findings in this study qualitatively. We observed there are over 3,000 collections (Table1) in the store and museum galleries. The inventory was conducted in order to know the actual collections of wooden and other materials in the museum. The essence of the exercise was to know how many of the materials can be exhibited and how many have to remain in the store. Basically, inventory gives the curator an idea of the volume of collections in the museum in order to know how to allocate space to all cultural objects in the museum. Note that as the objects and materials increase in the museum, the curator would be able to request for bigger space in the store and galleries. The outcome of collection's inventory may lead the curator and the workers in the museum to make certain changes to the positioning of the objects in the store. Inventory is to also help the conservator rearrange or repartition shelves, clean and also create free spaces in between two objects (O. Adeoye, personal communication, October 15th 2010).

Organisation of the Oron Museum Store

It was observed that preservation of objects in a museum store can be likened to bookkeeping in the library, especially in terms of documentary, shelving, numbering and other related activities. The curator, O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) argues that inventory of all collections is also for proper documentation and storage into the computer system. This activity is another step in the aspect of preventive conservation in the 21st century museum storage. The curator, Mr. Adeoye, mentioned that the purpose of inventory is to assess the number of objects in the

museum and also know their state of health.

We observed the storage room of Oron National Museum is large enough to accommodate her over 3,000 collections, including wooden and other objects enumerated in Table 1. To preserve the over 3,000 cultural objects recorded in the documentation unit of museum; the unit have to know and keep the data for other units to work with. The store is about 11,000 metres in length and 7,600 metres in breadth, which is considerably enough for its current total collections. There are adequate spaces in the store for workers to walk round the shelves freely; also there are various objects of different media in the store that are arranged on different shelves. The Curator mentions that the museum lends out objects in its collection to other museums and corporate bodies around in order to showcase in temporary exhibition. We observed the store is segmented into two rectangular shapes adjoined for easy walking around in the store. There is also an ante room, a section which is reserved for conservators and researchers to carry out their sorting out and write-ups (O. Adeoye, personal communication, October 15th 2010). We also observed that preventive conservation of cultural objects in the Oron museum store is organised according to forms and functions once performed by the objects (ritual, dance, religious, and so on) from their places of origin. This reminds one of the views of Bronislaw Manilowski which says all cultural traits are useful to the society within which they occurred. It also states that the function of any object is the part it plays in fulfilling human needs (Hendry, 1999). Such is the function of wooden objects in Oron museum which have served certain purposes or the other from their place of origin. However, the

sculptural wooden objects were arranged in the store in a way that gave easy access to them through location codes in alphabetical order/numbering on the shelves, just as it is in other Museum's store in Nigeria.

Records of Objects at the Documentation Unit

Record keeping and documentation of objects and materials in the museum is a great concern to the museum institution. Therefore, number of objects and materials in the documentation unit of National Museum Oron is put at 3,666 in number, from different materials of art production (see Table 1). We noticed that the objects are partly displayed in the two galleries of the museum, while the remaining ones are under preventive care in the single large store of the museum. It was also noted that every cultural object in the museum is well documented in the record book of the museum. Every object is recorded in the record book based on material of production and the background history from its source. It is noteworthy that record of every object in the store and galleries of the museum are in the care of the documentation unit. The unique history and speciality of each was studied and documented. Franz Boas (1858–1942) in his historical particularism theory emphasises the study of the specific cultural phenomena of things, places, people and their unique cultural traits (Hendry, 1999). There is a table on inventory of objects in Oron museum prepared in 2010 (see Table 1). The table gives us a descriptive analysis of categories of objects in the museum and also states their number. Wooden objects constitute about 80% of the museum objects. This shows the importance of wooden objects to the people in this area in the past civilization which reflects in

the contemporary time. It also shows the availability of wood as raw materials for carving different objects.

According to Adediran (2012) the requirements of a good documentation system in the museum are the (a) day book (b) accession register (c) catalogue cards and (d) ledger for the storage. Thus, documentation in the Oron Museum involves taking inventory of all objects contained therein. It helps to take stock of all collections in the stores, galleries and courtyards. The process may be done manually in the first place but must be transferred to the electronic format later.

- (a) We observed Day book is a record or book open for object on arrival into the museum. The detail of every object is entered into a day book as it was acquired, with as much information as possible. Note that every cultural heritage in the documentation unit of Oron museum is documented in the museum day book. It is in this book that one reads of all information about the objects in the museum. The Day book gives the unique historical background of every object as at the time they were being acquired by the museum. Furtherance to which Index number is given to every object recorded by the documentation unit, hence it is by the index number, one can search for any required object in the day book (O. Adeoye, personal communication, October 15th 2010).
- (b) O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) mentions that accessioning is the formal acceptance of acquisition into the museum collection. Therefore, every object meant to be preserved in the museum must be entered in the accession register.

According to Adediran (2012) accession register is kept in a safe place in the museum, preferably a fire-proof cabinet. The functions of accession register are to: (i) assign a unique number to each cultural object in the museum, (ii) describe object under preventive conservation, and (iii) give detailed history and provenance of cultural objects in the museum.

(c) O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) mentions that Catalogue card is a complete record of everything that is known about every object in the museum's collections. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) various types of useful information about an object is written on catalogue card, such as (i) name of museum (ii) object's identification number, (iii) name of object- classification, (iv) entry method (donation, fund, purchase or lender), (v) source of entry (donor, vendor or lender), (vi) date of entry, and (vii) history of object. Adediran (2012) stresses that cataloguing is to record the full scholarly information about an object. Note that, there may be a need for additional information which is contained in the objects' information file; they may include invoices, receipts, letters, newspaper cuttings, conservator's report, photographs, excavator's notes, and so on.

(d) O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) identifies Ledger as a book in which all cultural objects are regularly recorded, especially activities surrounding the object's movement in and out of the museum. Our

interaction with documentation unit revealed that over 3,000 objects and materials were documented by the above four means of documentation systems in the Oron Museum (see Table 1 for breakdown). According to the curator, Mr. Adeoye, all other collections kept in the store are not exhibited but preserved against deterioration and theft. It is noteworthy to mention here that, it is the duty of documentation unit to keep all records of collection in the museum's day book (Okpoko, 2006).

Preventive Conservation Measures in the Museum's Store

The concern of ICOM as early pointed out is to avoid loss of any collection at all cost. It is in this regard, that the preventive conservation on objects is put in place to ensure safety of collection from deterioration and theft. The curator, O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) mentions that, preventive conservation in the store starts with proper arrangement of cultural objects on the shelves. While another thing being done is to provide adequate breathing spaces for the objects in order to walk around freely during the daily routine check of collections in the store. We observed the museum workers, walked around the store to see if objects arranged on the shelves were manifesting any trait of deterioration or not. Hence, workers at the conservation unit ensure that the store is clean; windows are securely locked to prevent dust. They also ensure that all entrances to the store are blocked to prevent rats and rodents.

Display of Objects in the Museum

We observed exhibition of collections in Oron National Museum is displayed in the two galleries and courtyard of the

museum. Parts of what was sighted include wooden masks, wooden figures, wooden pillar post, drums, and traditional title-holder's staff. Other notable media of cultural objects are calabashes, ivories, bronzes, manilas, iron and metal objects. Another avenue in which Oron museum display its collections is in the courtyard or museum compound. This type of display is noticeable in other National Museums in Nigeria whereas stone objects are displayed in the open atmosphere of the courtyard. We also observed a display of *Ohaffia* house post (Plate 1) in the corridor or walkway between the store and the galleries. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) says the wooden house post is affixed to the museum ceiling in order to support the roof. This means that the house post is erected under use to serve its traditional purpose of supporting the roof from where it was made. We also observed other cultural objects displayed in the courtyard, mostly of the stone medium. Among other stone objects displayed in the courtyard are the Cross River monolith and the stone sculpture of the late ethnographer Keith Nicklin erected to serve as permanent exhibition.

It should be noted that Mr. Nicklin carried out major ethnographic survey in the southeast region of Nigeria which eventually formed most collections in the current Oron national museum (O. Adeoye, personal communication, October 15th 2010).

The study observed two galleries in Oron museum. The two galleries are divided by a raffia screen. The curator mentions that the two galleries cater for exhibition and displays of cultural objects in the museum. For instance, exhibition in Oron museum is presented in a large rectangular gallery (30 m by 50 m) which

displays the unique carved wooden objects from the Cross River region and other parts of Nigeria. Items displayed in the museum are skin-covered wooden masks, the *Ibibio-Ekpo* wooden mask, Calabar *Ekpe* wooden mask, *Ekpu* ancestral wooden figure, Annang-Ibibio funerary art. All these are included to make full use of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments' collections and results of the new ethnographic research in the Cross River region (Federal Department of Antiquities Services 1977). Object on display in Oron museum is primarily ethnographic in scope. In other words, they consist of objects that are familiar with the present generation which can easily tell their stories without missing words.

Caring for Objects in the Museum

The concept of conserving cultural object's physical health and keeping them away from deterioration is the primary function of workers in any museum. In this regard, preventive conservation or maintenance of the galleries and objects in the Oron museum starts with mopping of the floor, cleaning of the show glasses and display stands with soft clothing. We observed that the cleaners are trained on how to clean various gallery infrastructures without having to disrupt objects on display. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) says cleaning of objects on exhibition is carried out by technical officers who have technical skills on how to touch and clean wooden objects without damaging them. In respect to gallery management, windows are tightly closed to prevent dust from lodging in the intricate parts of wooden objects. The museum compound is swept on a daily basis, and the building structure is kept from cobwebs and other particles on weekly basis. Grasses in the

museum compound are cut regularly as soon as they grow up in order to prevent habitation of rodents and reptiles.

O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) mentions that every object in the gallery was first treated against pests and other forms of destructive agents before it is displayed in the gallery. Moreover, any wooden object that would be exhibited in the gallery has to be certified physically fit to withstand gallery atmosphere before it is displayed. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) mentions that exhibition officer goes on a regular monitoring to ensure all objects are in perfect shape until the exhibition is dismantled. The essence of this is to see if any object on exhibition will manifest deterioration or attack by pests. The gallery attendants are as well saddled with the responsibility of monitoring visitor or

viewer of exhibition so that they do not touch objects on display.

Analysing Some Selected Wooden Objects

In this study, we discussed some selected wooden objects that represent the varieties of wooden cultural objects hosted by Oron National Museum (see Table 2). Our choice of these objects for the study was because they possessed unique beauty and history. They also have performed specific social and cultural functions at their various places of origin. For example, *Ekpu* is an ancestral wooden figure that played significant roles in the history of the Oron people. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th 2010) says the carving of *Ekpu* figure was associated with the belief that the dead ancestor has roles to play in the life of a living person. The image represents the dead who is supposed to carry out all needed support for the living (see plate: 4).

Table 2: Selected wooden objects discussed in the study

Title	Medium of production	Origin of objects
Ohaffia house post	Wooden post	Igbo Obu in Abia State
Oyumana	Carved wooden-skin covered mask	Boki town-Cross River State
Nwa ekpo	Painted wooden figure	Abak in Akwa Ibom State
Ekpu	Wooden figure	Oron in Akwa Ibom State
Ebieke	Painted wooden figure	Oron in Akwa Ibom State



Plate: 1
Title: *Ohaffia* house post
Medium: carved wooden post in relief form
Place of origin: Igbo Obu hall, Abia State
Dimension: 2.39 m height and 0.76 m circumference

In plate: 1 is a large and tall carved house post that was acquired by the museum from Igbo Obu hall of the Ohaffia. The house post is 2.39m in height and 0.76m in circumference. In Igbo land, a house post is used in the decoration of the entrance to the palace of a prominent Chief. We observed the wooden post is carved with intricate designs which represent certain cultural values of the people of the land. This particular house post (plate: 1) was acquired by K.C. Murray for National Antiquity Services (O. Adeoye, personal communication, February 15th 2010.). A careful study of the post suggests the possibility of the object being carved from single of Iroko-African teak wood. The natural colour of the house post is brown, which is synonymous with African teak wood. The post is carved with similar motifs and symbols of common decoration found among Igbo people. We observed the post is carved in low-relief technique on three

dimensional objects. *Obu* house post in the Oron Museum does not have too many deep cuttings or pronounced designs. However, we could recognize the carved pattern on the wood as spider or scorpion motif that is not as conspicuously depicted. However, documentation record in Oron museum shows that this giant house post was collected from Abia State in Nigeria (Oron Museum day book).



Plate: 2
Title: *Oyumana* (Skin-covered mask)
Medium: carved wooden mask covered with antelope leather
Place of origin: Boki town, Cross Rivers State
Dimension: 0.22 m height and 0.36 m in circumference

In plate: 2 we have a skin covered Janus-faced head mask called *Oyumana*. It is 0.22m in height and 0.36m in circumference. O. Adeoye (personal communication, February 15th 2010) informed us that the mask was carved by Bissong Otu of Ntamante in 1903. It was purchased by the museum from Mr. Nkuya Ochang of Oshie Nkuya village in 1994 amongst the Boki tribe of Ikom division. The mask was last used for masquerade cultural function at dance performance in 1972 (O. Adeoye,

personal communication, February 15th 2010). C. N. Akpan (personal communication, September 16th, 2014) also noted that *Oyumana* might have been carved from the species of *Oko* tree which are durable.

In using historical particularism theory to uncover the unique history of the skin-covered mask; Julien, 2000 and Owezarek, 2006 mention that, skin-covered masks were popular among Ekoi people of Anyang, Boki, Ejagham, Kemko, and Yako in Cross Rivers State. Also, they are best known for large skin-covered masks which have two or even three faces. There are smaller headpieces which represent a head or the entire body structure (Owezarek, 2006). The unique skin-covered heads represent other arts in Ibibio region. Here, carved wooden masks are covered with animal skin. It was observed that two types are made: a cap and a helmet mask. The cap mask is mounted on a basketry pedestal and worn on top of the head. It is usually naturalistic representation of women and animal heads. The helmet mask, on the other hand, covers the entire head and rests on the shoulder of the wearer (Federal Department of Antiquities Services, 1977).

A close look on *Oyumana* (skin-covered mask) in plate 2 showed weathering effects possibly because of the length of time it was carved. We observed the leather covering the carved wooden mask was already torn, while the wood also chopped off at the centre region of the head. We also noticed evidence of some level of internal rupture in the wooden mask. O. Adeoye (personal communication, February 15th, 2010) informed that action was already being taken to stop further deterioration through chemical treatment. He added that the torn

leather and decayed wooden objects are better left uncorrected in order to retain their original identities which are in line with conservation theory. Moreover, what the rule of conservation says is not to utter any form of on the object in order not to give it another meaning. We observed that mask is one of the fragile and delicate objects in Oron Museum. Therefore, suggest it should be preserved in a glass showcase in the store.



Plate: 3
Title: *Nwa-ekpo*
Medium: carved painted wooden figure
Place of origin: Utu Etim Ekpo, Abak Division in Akwa Ibom State
Dimension: 0.53 m height and 0.38 m circumference

Plate 3 is a painted wooden female figure called *Nwa Ekpo* standing on a long rectangular platform with hair plaited in five big ball hairstyles. B. Abassi (personal communication, September 17th, 2014) mentioned that wooden figure of this nature are usually carved from *Mba* (*Funtimia eiastica*) or *Okwe* (*Ricinodendron heudelotti*). The carved figure measures 0.53m in height and 0.38m in circumference. We noticed the figure wears a very big necklace on its

neck and bangles on both hands, which are stretched forward. It has a long navel and on its waist are three circular rows of beads. It also wears long coiled type of manila on both legs. The body is generally painted with ochre colour and decorated with black marks all over. The bangles, necklace, lips and hair bond all appear in red. The wooden figure depicts the picture of an Ibibio girl from the fattening room. According to O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 20th, 2010) the object symbolises a maiden about to be married to her suitor. It typifies the physical appeal of a beautiful maid in waiting to meet her husband. There are red colour painting of *nsibidi* design made on her face, palm, waist and legs. The design is common among Calabar women especially when young females are preparing for wedding. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 20th, 2010) informed us that the figure was carved by Akpan Akpan Chukwu of Utu Etim Ekpo, Abak Division in Akwa Ibom State.

We noticed the condition of the object is stable and fit for storage, which is why it is still being preserved in the Oron museum store. It does not show any area of dent or decay. The painted wooden figure shows fresh and vibrant nature in the colour combination. We also noticed it does not exhibit trait of decay and insect attacking any area. It is suitable for preventive conservation in the Oron museum.



Plate: 4
Title: *Ekpu* figure
Medium: carved wooden figure
Place of origin: Oron town, Akwa Ibom State
Dimension: 0.29 m in height and 0.23 m in circumference

This is one of the original *Ekpu* ancestral figures (Plate 4) that is under preventive conservation in Oron museum store. We observed, it has a very tiny mouth, long and big beard and carries two wooden staffs in its two hands. It is 0.29m in height and 0.23m in circumference. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 20th, 2010) mentions it is of Oron origin in Akwa Ibom State. *Ekpu* figure signifies the spiritual role of the ancestor in the life of a person or community. The carving of *Ekpu* figure shows the confidence reposed in the ancestor (Nicklin, 1999).

We tried to compare this *ekpu* figure (Plate 4) with others preserved in the Oron Museum. It was noticed that the *Ekpu* figures were carved in different sizes from a single log of wood. The one in the picture is not as bulky and heavy as other preserved in the store. The colour is greyish, while others are dark brown in colour. The carved figure showed traces of warp but no decay was noticed except that the legs did not show definite finger shapes. It is actually different from the replica displayed for viewers in the museum gallery. This object is one of the few in the custody of National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) which has been given conservation treatment against termite and other pests.



Plate: 5
Title: *Ebieke*
Medium: painted wooden figure
Place of origin: Oron town, Akwa Ibom State
Dimension: 0.36 m in height and 0.19 m in circumference

In plate: 5 is a large wooden face mask with exaggerated facial marks, locally called *Ebieke*. It is 0.36m in height and 0.19m in circumference. We observed the

figure carefully and discovered it has a male human head wearing a red cap between two dark horns on the forehead, long bulging eyeballs, serrated upper eyelids, long big nose and puffy cheeks with three tribal marks on each. It also has large ears and mouth carved to the right side of the face and broken beak. We noticed that the wooden figure is a composite object; it has raffia strands attached to the main figure behind. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th, 2010) asserted that this object is used to commemorate new yam festival celebrations among the Ibibio in a dance and performance. We noticed that some areas of the painted dark colour were faded, while some still retained dark paint as if coated with lacquer. The object must have been treated with indigenous type of wood vanish because of the glossy effect of the figure. O. Adeoye (personal communication, October 15th, 2010) informed us that the object was purchased from Mr. Orukak Eduno through the curator, in 2009. We observed the object showed no deformity or decay. The condition of the object is good for storage in the store and has remained stable under preventive conservation.

Conclusion

The essence of establishing museum is to understand language of the people of Oron region, especially their socio-cultural and technological attainment in the time past. This is evident in carving of *ekpu* ancestral figures and other wood carvings. We are able to understand the belief of Oron people which is embedded in the ancestral wooden figures. We acknowledged the ability of the carvers to know exert durable wood type appropriate to last long as 300 yards back and beyond. It is interesting to note that most of the

cultural objects sighted in the museum have been a source of inspiration to many contemporary artists who are adopting the style of Oron carvings in their works. In respect to this and other benefits, preservation of cultural objects in the museum has made museum institution a viable place of research for knowledge and useful information from the past that can help to reconstruct the missing link of our history.

To carry out research on the quality of care and management on cultural heritage in the National Museum Oron, 2,747 wooden objects were examined in February to October 2010. The number constituted about 80% of the total number of over 3,434 cultural heritages in the 2010 inventory (see Table 1). Thereafter, 5 samples were randomly selected for detailed description in this study because they represent different categories of forms and functions in the socio-cultural setting of the past civilisation in Oron. These selected wooden objects also represent various aspects of human endeavours amongst the Oron people in the historical past. These objects are representations of wooden mask, wooden door panels, wooden house posts, wooden-base drums, wooden divination bowls, wooden head dress, wooden staff, and ancestral figures that had performed one function or the other in past societies of Nigeria. These objects were considered because of the artistic and aesthetic information that can be derived from them. These objects as well speak for the socio-cultural attainment of the geographical locations and ethnic communities where they emanated from.

The study observed that though Oron museum is not as big as some national museums, but it hosts significant objects in the southeast and other parts of Nigeria.

The present mode of conservation practice is the conventional preventive method generally used in all national museums in the country. Therefore, it is suggested that the NCMM set up a committee of museum workers to identify other areas of needs in museum to enhance an improved services of care and maintenance of the cultural objects preserved in the museum.

It is equally imperative to provide Oron museum with modern conservation equipment, such as X-radiography camera that is able to detect internal rupture in a cultural object. Modern conservation laboratory is also required to conveniently diagnose objects and treat them appropriately. There should be more cabinets and shelves to accommodate objects that would be acquired in future. All these among other equipment and facilities will improve the level of conservation practice in Oron Museum.

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