

IRON TECHNOLOGY AND POLITICAL POWER: EXAMPLES FROM THE IRON SMELTING BELT OF NSUKKA AREA, ENUGU STATE, SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Iron smelting and its technology in Nigeria, particularly in South-Eastern Nigeria, had long gone into oblivion. Most people seem not to recollect coherent information about it as people aver that the furnace walls and iron slag dotted across the zone grew out from the ground. What a crass show of ignorance! But pointers to the practice exist in so many areas in form of iron slag, broken pieces of tuyere and furnace walls, etc. One area in South-Eastern Nigeria that is replete with these clues even to an intimidating level is Nsukka area in Enugu State. The area, possibly due to its proximity to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka has been well researched on, archaeologically speaking, especially in the area of iron technology. However, one fascinating feature of this technology lies not only on the magnitude of these pointers but how its tangible aspects grade into the intangible cultural practices of the respective communities where they occur. Apart from the often touted military superiority of those who possessed iron over those who did not, our ethnographic research in Nsukka area shows that iron could be a symbol of power in another way. As we observed, some areas with large concentration of evidence of iron workings tend to produce kings of their communities and where it is otherwise, they anoint kings or title takers. Is this a coincidence? This paper attempts to bring out the state of archaeological research, the ways the past through the furnace walls and iron slag, live in the present and direct the future in Nsukka area. It also tries to explore avenues through which these could be harnessed to attract UNESCO attention so as to use the features for the benefit of mankind. It concludes by calling on the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC)/Culture ministry to redirect attention on those non-renewable national resources.

Key Words: Iron, Technology, Political power, Nsukka, Iron smelting belt, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of iron by African societies was perhaps the most important technological change that ever occurred to the continent. Although its origins remain uncertain and although its impact was variable in space and time, it nevertheless changed Africa for ever. It not only gave those who used it a technical advantage but also economic, ritual and political power. This was the power of metal and the people of Africa would never be the same again (Connah 2004:56).

The above statement holds true of Nsukka people and the role of iron reflects in every sector of their lives. Incidentally, communities or villages that harbor huge concentration of iron slag blocks are very influential politically. They either serve as king makers, prime ministers or reserve the sole authority to produce the kings of their communities.

In Igboland, under the traditional setting, primogeniture was the system of government. In most of these communities, those villages that harbor the slag are not the eldest. They probably got to such positions because of their knowledge of the technology of iron smelting. Between 2006 and the present, during excavations and field works in the Nsukka area, we observed that in three communities Obimo, Opi, Lejja where iron smelting took place in the past, they anoint their kings and even in the traditional governance, they equally take prominent positions. We then posed

some questions: If primogeniture is the system of government in Nsukka area, and in Opi, Imuhu in Idi-Opi is the eldest, how come Odinanso rather than Imuhu is the the king maker? In Lejja, Dunoka is not the eldest in Ejuona quarter let alone Lejja. Why is it that Lejja deemed it fit to reconstruct Otobo Dunoka with concentration of iron slag and you do not get that magnitude in any other square in the town? In the case of Obimo, '*Amaelugwu abughi Eze ma i ha na echi Eze*' - which means that they are not kings but no person is consecrated a king in Obimo except the Amaelugwu people give their consent; and it is their duty to crown the king.

Is it a coincidence that those communities where these slag are concentrated are bestowed with leadership? Could it be that the people attach a lot of importance to iron technology? In an attempt to provide answers to these questions, the role that iron played in the entire Nsukka iron smelting belt would be appreciated and placed in proper perspective.

DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

An explanation of the various concepts used in this paper will bring out clearly how they were used and enhance a better appreciation of the topic under study. First is the concept of **technology**. It is elusive to define the term technology but here, we see technology as 'the means of/through which human societies interact most directly with the natural environment: technology consists of the set of techniques and the body of information that provide ways to convert raw materials into tools, to procure and process food, to construct or locate shelter, and so on' (Sharer and Ashmore 1979:402). Technology is a broad concept that deals with a species' usage and knowledge of tools and crafts, and how it affects a species' ability to control and adapt to its environment'.

The second concept is **power**. In an ordinary sense, power means influence but there are certain compelling circumstances that render this simple definition meaningless. Lukes in Hall (2003:101-102) wrote that power may be conceptualized as 'all forms of successful control by A over B that is, of A securing B's compliance'. Alkali (2003:15) equally, observed that power, according to Hans Morgenthau, is the acquisition and control of those things that could help in establishing hegemony over others. To him, it covers all social relationships which serve that end-from physical violence to those subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another. That is to say, it is the ability of an actor to obtain a desired response from a target against the latter's will, without the target itself effecting any change in the behavior of the actor (Alkali, 2003:16). Political power as used in this exercise relates to governance and is construed to mean control of society through laid down rules that have some duties and obligation attached to leadership positions.

The third concept in this study is **belt**. If we understand belt to mean 'an area with particular characteristics or where a particular group of people live' (Hornby 2000:94), then Nsukka area qualifies for such description. Virtually every community in the area practiced iron working in one form or the other and the profuse evidence of iron technology in nearly all the communities made us to refer to the area as an iron smelting belt.

THE SETTING OF THE STUDY: NSUKKA

The term Nsukka as used in this study refers to old Nsukka Senatorial Zone now Enugu North senatorial zone. This area is made up of Seven Local Government Areas viz: Nsukka, Igbo-Etiti, Igbo-Eze North, Igbo-Eze South, Udenu, Isi-Uzo, and Uzo-Uwani. Isi-Uzo was exercised from the constituency later and made part of Enugu East Senatorial Zone. The three communities that are the focus of this study are all found within Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu state. Incidentally, the three communities belong to one cultural grouping called Igbo 'Omabe' and acknowledge Lejja as the 'Onyishi Omabe' (head of the Omabe). 'Omabe' on its part is associated with iron worship as well as ancestral worship and regarded as the incarnate being of the society.

THE STATE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN NSUKKA AREA

The first cannon of the archaeological research on Nsukka area was fired by Donald Dean Hartle. According to Anozie (2002:13), Hartle carried out a survey over most of then Eastern Nigeria and found a number of archaeological sites'. Among his various discoveries that have relevance to our research area, are the Isi-Ugwu Obukpa Rockshelter and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Agricultural Farm. Though he did not find iron implements in the two sites, he was able to prove that early Stone Age people inhabited the Nsukka area, and from the pottery analysis, he also established cultural continuity among the people of the area. As Chikwendu (2002:29) rightly noted 'the

University farm site (excavated by Hartle) yielded pottery dated to about 2, 500 B.C. ... It is clear that human activity was already present in at about 3,000 B.C. in this area’.

Dr. F.N. Anozie and Professor V.E. Chikwendu were to continue from where Hartle stopped after the Nigerian civil war that ended in 1970. Anozie for instance, carried out major excavations at Lejja, Umundu, Ogbodo Abba etc. He not only widened our knowledge about iron technology in Nsukka area but through radio carbon dates and experiments demonstrated the smelting of iron by the inhabitants of the area. Report on these sites published in *West African Journal of Archaeology* Volume 9, 1979, speaks for itself. However, his findings were to stir up controversy on the types of furnace used. According to Anozie (1979:126), after examining all the artifacts found at the two Lejja sites, “we have come to the conclusion that the ancient iron smelters there used the pit or bowl furnace. The short clay wall through which the clay nozzle was passed before getting to the furnace was to protect the smelters from the excessive heat generated in the combustion chamber of the furnace”.

Professor E.E Okafor added new zeal to the state of archaeological research in Nsukka area. He surveyed the entire zone and his research interest was of course on metallurgy. His excavations in Nsukka area include: Opi, Owerre-Elu, Orba, Umundu; and Eha-Alumona, Nru, Isiakpu, Ede-Oballa and Eha-Ndiagu. His articles on Nsukka bloomery iron in *West African Journal of Archaeology* Volume 27 of 1997; *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, Metals and Towns*; coupled with Nigeria’s position paper on UNESCO ‘Iron Roads’ Project for Africa held at Abuja in 1995, had projected Nsukka area. He stands out as the person to use the “most modern scientific techniques to study the Nsukka bloomery iron working’ (Okafor 1995:75). As Okafor (1993:437) equally pointed out, “the three dates from Opi span the fifth to the second centuries BC, the two from Owerre-Elu fall in the tenth and the fourteenth centuries AD, and the six from Umundu and Orba cluster around the eighteenth century AD. These three groupings have therefore been referred to as the early, middle and late phases of iron- working in Nsukka Division”. However, Professor Okafor disagreed with Dr Anozie on the type of furnace used in iron smelting in the area. According to Okafor (1993:439), “no pit or bowl furnaces were found. What were thought to be bowl furnaces (Anozie 1979) were discovered to be pits into which slag was tapped”.

Other archaeologists who have contributed immensely to our understanding the iron working system in Nsukka area include: Dr. L. C Ekechukwu, who studied the iron smelting site at Idoha and Ukehe in Igbo Etiti Local Government Area; Late (Dr) John N. Ezike, who carried out a number of excavations at Aku; and Mr. E.I.Itanyi whose field works with students at Ekwegbe and Obimo were outstanding particularly during the 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 academic sessions.

Part of the preliminary report of these excavations has been presented at the conference of Archaeological Association of Nigeria at Iffe-Ijemu, Kogi state. Itanyi is of the opinion that the debate on the furnace types seemed unnecessary as the three types of furnace –dome, pit, and shaft-were simultaneously utilized in the culture area.

In 2008, a team of archaeologists from the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM) led by James Amejé came to the Nsukka area to conduct research particularly at Opi. Though wrongly timed (for they came during the rainy season) they were marveled at the extent of the in situ iron smelting relics they saw.



Plate I: Remains of Iron Smelting Relic at Odinanso Village Square, Opi

They were able to carry out two test pit excavations at Odinanso Opi. One of the researchers accompanied them between 4th June and 7th June, 2008. The excavations were a 2.5mx 2.5m pit- named Odinanso –Opi 2008 (Umuayigbo) and chief Ugwu George’s Compound, Umugwu Odinanso, Idi –Opi.



Plate II: The Excavated Furnace at Chief Ugwu George's Compound, Odinanso. Take note of Furnace walls, in situ tuyeres and slag blocks as indicated with the aid of an arrow.

Finally, Dr (Mrs) Pamela I Eze-Uzomaka has been working in the iron smelting sites of Lejja from 2006 to the present in liaison with African Archaeological Network. The first sets of excavations were carried out in 2007 and one of the furnaces excavated was a dome furnace. The result of the date published, show that iron smelting in the community is as old as 4005 ± 40 BP. (Eze-Uzomaka, 2009:41). The present researchers accompanied her to series of excavations. We were able to recover a tuyere and a bloom on top of slag at a depth of about 1.6metres.



Plate III: In situ Furnace walls and Recovered Tuyere at Lejja.

FURNACE WALLS AND IRON SLAG IN NSUKKA AREA

The iron smelting activities in Nsukka area was so profuse and unique that it had been suggested that the smelters there smelted like hell (Chami 2007: Personal Communication). The prodigy is best attested to by the scattered aggregate slag, broken furnace walls, that could still be seen *in situ*; and several cylindrical iron slag blocks and broken pieces of tuyere and numerous hematite ore as well as the hills where they were obtained. Okafor (1997) has described the various iron residues in Nsukka area enough and deserve no repetition here.

However, these researchers were drawn to a common denominator among the various iron smelting communities in the Nsukka zone. In each of the communities, particularly Lejja, Opi and Obimo, which form the focus

of this discussion, some heaps of iron slag blocks, were usually arranged in unique sitting positions and at specific village squares in antiquity. The practice still obtains as the slag have not been removed and even where they have been tampered with, remnants of the original arrangement still survive to the present. It is in these village squares that town meetings that are of crucial importance take place. This is true with Lejja. The same was observed at Obimo and Opi respectively. Moreover, in the three communities just as in other parts of Nsukka area, one is confronted with and intimidated by evidence of iron working in the past.

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: IRON AS A SYMBOL OF POLITICAL POWER

Contemporary societies are known to be fluid, yet the fluidity had failed to erode the in-built mechanisms and sanctity ordered by the people's past. Using the archaeological sites of Lejja, Opi and Obimo, we hold that in most of the village squares which are regarded as the central meeting points, there is concentration of iron slag. Why is it that the concentrations of slag are used as seats? It could be that the people attach a lot of importance to iron technology and iron.

Take for instance, 'Arua' a symbol of authority in Nsukka; is fashioned from iron. It (Arua) also indicates male patriarch. All the people who lay claim to an 'arua' share one male ancestry. Also, people from the village squares where there are concentration of iron slag also appoint/ anoint kings and chiefs in their various areas. This also led us to take a considerable view on the role of iron in society. Thus, iron has military, religious and political powers.

The military importance of iron had been demonstrated beyond the scope of this paper. However, in the study area, Lejja and Opi were said to be great warriors in the past. Whosoever has the knowledge of iron technology becomes very powerful as it is used for defense, and military might equates with political power. They torment their enemies with iron implements such as points, spears, and guns etc. Chief Ezeugwu Robert, the incumbent traditional prime minister of Opi, who hails from Odinanso, Idi-Opi agrees with the view and noted that the people of Opi were able to expand extensively through wars or military conquest up to Neke, Ugwuogo Nike, among others. These military exploits earned Opi the appellation *Opi-nato Emeleginyi Ogwugwu* (Opi -nato is attached to Opi's name because Opi is made up of three quarters; Idi, Ogbaozara and Ibeku. The three quarters sacked Ogwugwu community and occupied their homeland and this was made possible by their use of iron implements.

In addition, for somebody to assume full political office, one of the paraphernalia must be an iron implement. In the religious circle, the chief priest of every deity in Nsukka area has an iron staff of office which they use to invoke the powers of the deities they worship. This is called '*Oji mma*'. Even in the social setting, particularly in terms of theatre, the entire traditional masquerade called 'Omabe', regarded as an embodiment of the fulfilled ancestors, have iron objects- rod, knives, short metal bells-etc. as part of their costume. In music, metal objects are equally prominent. For instance, '*ivome*' and '*ogene*' are used as siren to announce the arrival of men of power and to inform or conscientize the public that something important is coming.

Having seen the importance of iron and its technology, we then examine its role in political power. From our discussion, we have used 'Arua,' rod, and 'Oji-maa' to bring out how they are linked with power. But why has this role continued to date without the concerned sections in these communities breaking the order? These practices were inherited from the progenitors of these communities and have refused to change.

In most cases, some rituals were made by the ancestors of such community to confer power, authority and respect on those villages; making their positions irrevocable as a show of respect for the knowledge of iron technology. The ground rule is ingrained in the minds of the people as a means of living and any reasonable person from other side who violates the ancestors would automatically bear the consequences. These could be in form of mysterious sickness, death and any other vices that the ancestors wish to visit the offender with. Having seen this catch hold of people in past, the people out of the fear of the possible out come, are cowed to obedience.

For instance, in Lejja, at Ugwu Dunoka, “Otobo Ugwu Dunoka” (village square of Ugwu Dunoka) is designed like the ancient Greek amphi theatre.



Plate IV: The Cylindrical Iron Blocks at Otobo Ugwu Dunoka, Lejja.

The concentration of slag blocks in this square is greater than that of any other one in Lejja. Incidentally, this square is where all the political decisions in Lejja are taken. The square is an epitome of traditional parliamentary democratic consensus building. Be that as it may, the village (Dunoka) which harbors the slag blocks is the only village that produces the ‘Eze’ (king) of Lejja. There are some shrines in the square interlaced with iron slag blocks which no other Lejja person can touch and go scotch free. Such shrines include ‘Oshuru’ (the war shrine) and ‘Odegwoo’ (shrine associated with fertility).

What makes one curious about the position of Dunoka is that in Lejja, all the villages trace their descent to “Ugwoke Ugwuinyi”. If primogeniture as a system of government has been and is still in vogue in Lejja, Dunoka would not have occupied such position if not for the knowledge of iron technology and other factors like strategic security considerations. This is because, even among the Ohanaram sub-group of Ejuona quarter to which it belongs, Amaebo Lejja is senior by age to Dunoka. Granted that evidence of smelting abound in Amaebo, the level of smelting relics therein can not compare with that of Dunoka.

In Obimo, ‘Amaelugwu’ village occupies a unique position. They are the king makers. No king is ordained and acknowledged king or recognized except the ceremony to authenticate the position was conducted by ‘Amaelugwu’ people. In the early 1990s, this raised a controversy between them and the incumbent Chief of the town, Chief Spencer Ugwoke. The bone of contention was that the Chief wanted to take the title of ‘Eze Ezikeanyi’ (king of Obimo). The people reasoned that except he comes to them for permission, his desires would never be met. As crises

ensued, they burnt the vehicle of the Chief and to date; the Chief never took the title. Interestingly, ‘Amaelugwu’ village has large concentration of iron slag blocks and other relics of smelting in abundance than any other village in Obimo.

In Opi town, Imuhu village is regarded as the eldest and at present the Chief of the town, Chief R. I Ikeoha is from this village. Surprisingly, in the political hierarchy of Opi, the traditional prime minister called Isi-iwu is produced by Odinanso village. That position is presently occupied by Ezeugwu Robert. To further appreciate the position of Odinanso, the meaning of Isi-iwu would be helpful. Isi-iwu in the local parlance refers to a council of titled men which is twelve in number. It constitutes the executive organ of the community.

In Odinanso village, the village square has the same pattern or something similar in arrangement to that of Amaelugwu Obimo and Lejja. Bearing in mind the importance of kola nut in Igboland, the Odinanso people in the person of the prime minister, or any other person from there, is accorded a big respect in Opi as it is their preserve to break kola nut in all gathering of the entire Opi people. He equally shares same. In fact, Odinanso is regarded as the political nerve centre of Opi.



**Plate V: Iron Slag Blocks at Odinanso Village Square, Idi
–Opi**

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the link between the relics of iron technology and political power. The people so treasure these relics and their positions and would resist any attempt to vitiate the unique role they play in the traditional setting. Ezeugwu Robert, prime minister of Opi, recounts with pride all the prestige, the central place reserved for his Odinanso village when he noted that all political decision in Opi must be spearheaded by Isi-iwu Opi and for any age grade to be recognized or adjudged a functional entity, a person from Odinanso must be there. The same goes with any title taking ceremony. The Isi-iwu also, has a metal gong which is used to alert or inform people about important events in the community. The iron slag blocks in the village squares serve as pavilion where people seat to take decision just as people go to the stadium to seat and watch proceedings of events. But the iron slag and the furnace walls are in danger as we observed some people uprooting, excavating and carting away these relics to construct a road at Opi. The fact that they are part of our patrimony and non-renewable national resource places them in the class of endangered World Heritage. As World heritage, all effort should be geared towards more publicity and further research on Nsukka area so that it could catch the attention of UNESCO. Then will the processes of declaring it a world heritage site be vigorously pursued. In sum the people of Nsukka area were productive/ industrious as exemplified by the abundance of iron relics. Where these people or the off springs of these iron workers are living is pitiable and there is urgent need for help. We therefore call on the National Commission for Museum and Monuments to re-direct their attention in the area and see where they can be of help. The Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation and the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation should also wake up from their slumber and determine how best to package the industrial sites of Nsukka area for tourism.

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