

Nok Terracotta Sculptures: A Reflection of Ancient Ideology and Philosophy Found in the Earlier and Recent Discovered Sculptures

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Abstract

Many ancient cultures around the world in the past have used art especially sculptures as a way of expressing their culture, tradition and belief system. In doing so they engaged in the used of variety of materials ranging from wood, stone, bronze, brass and terracotta among many others. However, terracotta was widely used in ancient arts especially in Chinese, Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian sculptures, and many more. In Africa and Nigeria in particular terracotta was also used in ancient cultures such as the Benin, Ife, Owo, Esie and the Nok culture. The Nok culture being the earliest culture is known for its terracotta sculpture tradition in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. The prehistoric Nok society is mainly known for its terracotta figurines (depicting three different kinds of creatures; humans, animals and combination of both known as anthropomorphic figures. It is important to note that, all forms of artistic expressions in the Nok culture are driven by ideas and philosophies. The paper adopted qualitative research method in carrying out the research using historical approaches to establish the background on Nok terracotta sculptures, while Descriptive approached was used to describe the terracotta sculptures. The paper therefore seeks to discuss the concept of ideology and philosophy, it also discusses the ideology and philosophy that accompany the Nok terracotta sculptures. The paper further identifies some of the recently discovered terracotta sculptures, and compared them with the already established ones' base on their ideology and philosophy. It concludes that there is no much differences and variation between the recently discovered terracotta sculptures with the already established ones

Keywords: *Terracotta, Ideology, Philosophy, Nok, Sculpture*

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Background to the Study

Art is a universal language of self-expression by humans in their cultural and natural environment, through the use of skills, materials and techniques to produce various works of self-satisfaction, utility and beauty or aesthetics. It is the use of imagination to express ideas or feelings particularly, in painting, drawing, poetry, ceramics, sculpture and graphics. It serves as a platform, where human beings express their experiences and values, through various forms of art and cultural activities (Ezenagu and Olatunji 2014). Art is deeply rooted in African culture, and it has become a tool of self-expression. Africans are known to have shaped the artistic world for centuries, especially in the area of visual art, with Nigeria at the fore front. Nigeria is the cradle of ancient civilization, it is a country that is rich in history, culture and tradition. It is a home to a diverse range of philosophical traditions that have shaped the people thinking, how they perceive the world and express themselves. In Nigeria, art objects are not just created to be looked upon, but rather, for daily use in various aspects of life, which transverse between the two worlds of man (known and unknown). Often, such objects convey meanings far beyond their practical functions. That is why, art plays significant roles both in the past and in the present cultures of people around the world; it has also shaped the human personality long before the arrival of technology and creativity. Abdallah (2017) seems to agree with the preceding statement by stating that, “the Nok culture is a good example of such, where their advanced civilization had gone beyond the search for food and immediate survival so much that, they had ample time for the manufacture of terracotta sculptures and iron smelting technology in their time” Art, which is an important aspect of culture, can be described as the display of the culture of a particular society. Culture is therefore, identified as the root of any given environment and society, and transcends society.

Samuel and Agada (2007), Abdallah (2017) and Hirst (2018), describe the Nok culture as a culture, which provides evidence of the earliest ancient civilization in Nigeria, through its unique terracotta sculptures that came to global knowledge. It is believed to be one of the earliest reminiscent of the ancient human settlement in Nigeria and is said to have inspired the growth of cultural activities in Nigeria. The Nok terracotta sculptures is a powerful expression of cultural identity and pride. This is because it reflects the unique history of the people culture, tradition and values of the diverse ethnic groups in the region. According to Samuel and Agada (2007) that the Nok culture, which is also called Nok figurines culture had artists who were highly skilled in terracotta production, iron smelting and stone implements. Her technological advanced position in Africa has severally raised scholarly enthusiasm. Breunig (2014) avers that, the Nok terracotta sculptures show three different kinds of creatures, humans; animals and a combination of both, called hybrid human-animal creatures or therianthropes produced by the Nok traditional artists. More so, the terracotta sculptures are depicted either on sitting, kneeling or standing positions. The author notes that, “most experts agree that the Nok people did not just create terracotta sculptures for art, to please or to enjoy, neither did pieces of art serve the artists fulfilment. It is believed that they had a different purpose; they were to fulfil a social or religious function.” But the author further remarks that, in the Nok culture they produced terracotta sculptures with anthropomorphic forms, in order to enhance their religious practice. Many of such terracotta sculptures depict or represent ancestors. That is why some of such figures are having human and animal features belong to

some other non-human sphere. A good example of such is a terracotta sculpture of a shamanic birdman (Plate1), it is a figure showing a bird with a human and animal characteristic.



Plate 1. A Shamanic Birdman, Terracotta, 30cm

Source: pinterest.com/mckworichard/Nok

It is against this background that this paper therefore, seeks to define concepts that relate specifically to main issues contained in the paper, the paper discusses the ideology and philosophy that accompany the Nok terracotta sculptures, the paper also examines and makes comparison between the recently discovered terracotta sculptures with the earlier ones based on their ideology and philosophy.

Concept of Ideology and Philosophy

Ideology: The term ideology as used within the context of this paper refers to an organized collection or a set of ideas, beliefs or opinions, of an individual, which are also shared by a group, such as a social class, community or society. Such an ideology articulates the way societies look at things. These ideas or beliefs spring from commonly held beliefs, imposed on members of the society by a ruling or dominant class. The degree, at which an ideology is perpetuated, depends on the degree to which members of a society subscribe to it. Throughout history, works of art have been used to create or reinforce ideology in many cultures around the world, especially in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Philosophy: Philosophy in this context is the pursuit of wisdom, while art is the medium through which such wisdom is expressed. The Nok terracotta sculptures are not just about aesthetics, it is a means of communication, storytelling, and cultural expression about their life experiences. They serve as a visual representation of the Nok philosophy, thereby conveying their values, beliefs and worldview. Each symbol used by the Nok people in any piece of art carries a specific meaning and serves as a visual language to convey important messages. For example, some of the anthropomorphic figures produced by the Nok people, having human, animal and having both characteristics are not just for decorative elements, they reflect the Nok philosophical ideas and teachings. More so, spirituality is a fundamental aspect of the Nok philosophy, and it is intricately woven into the Nok art (terracotta sculptures). Many of the Nok terracotta sculptures are inspired by religious and spiritual

beliefs, reflecting the close relationship between the materials and the spiritual world. It is infused with a sense of the sacred. It serves as a bridge between the physical and metaphysical, inviting viewers to connect with the divine.

The Ideology and Philosophy that accompany the Nok Terracotta Sculptures

In different part of the world ancient cultures have used works art to create ideology in the past, especially in Africa and Nigeria inclusive. It is as a result of this development that, in the Nok culture, all forms of artistic expressions are driven by ideas and philosophy, that is why many of their terracotta sculptures are mostly created with different ideas and meanings. They propagate diverse philosophies into their artistic expeditions, some of their philosophies are based on beliefs, and they are either based on religion, culture or ethnic ideas, while some are driven by an individual or groups' perception of their human society, living and non-living. More so, part of their philosophies was to document certain events, happenings, and experiences of their time, or impressions about their social organization of that period. In order to achieve this, the people of then Nok culture delved into terracotta explorations; since that was the only way they could express their thoughts or record their activities through the available and adequate material (terracotta). Artists in the Nok culture have also used their artworks as a channel through which their personal impressions of the world around them are aired. These personal impressions and their phenomenon are regarded as the ideas and philosophies that propel the production of their artworks. They incorporate images of humans, animals and the combination of both, such images are of high aesthetic value which frequently contained social and religious information about the society. Such terracotta sculptures are called anthropomorphic figures. However, the word anthropomorphic as used within the context of this paper means human shaped, it is used to describe human characteristics to non-human beings. Anthropomorphic terracotta sculptures describe creatures that portray animals and partly shaped like humans. These are figures depicted to be having humans and animal's characteristics or representations, in a stylized manner, see (Plate 2)

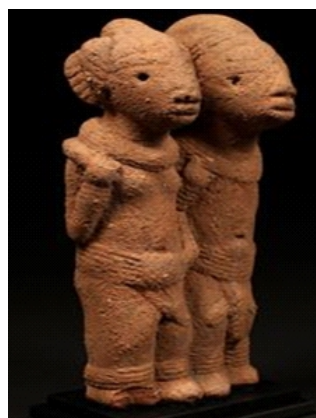


Plate 2: Male and Female Couple, Terracotta, 28cm, Akura Nok Site, National Museum, Kaduna

Source: Adamu Aliyu Isah, 2020.

The figures on (Plate 2) depict male and female couple. They are three-dimensional anthropomorphic terracotta sculptures from Akura village close to Nok, and 28cm in height. According to Agada and Boyi (2020) that, “anthropomorphic also means giving human traits or attributes to animals, objects or other non-human”. It could be seen as relating to ideas of an animal, gods, or an object.

Samuel and Agada (2007) affirm that, “these are some of the common ideology and identity that makes the Nok people to stand out among other cultures”. This ideology and identity is reflected in their way of life. The Nok, like other people, have their culture, the sum-total of their socially standardized way of life and their culture is based on the process of learning, not biologically inherited. The ideology constitutes the vibrant force that enabled the Nok people define all they do or need to do for objective existence. The authors further note that, there were well defined ideas of nature of human life existence, social relations, as well as, man himself. It is on the basis of these well-defined ideas that cosmic phenomena are interpreted. Man in the Nok world was never conceptualised as an individual person, but essentially as a part of the community, in spite of his unique characteristic or behaviour. This ideology's neither socialism or welfares, it is an ideology which embodied the indigenous Nok principles of live and let's live, collecting, sharing, common concern for one another, sense of belonging, social justice, economic progress and viability for all. The Nok philosophy emphasize the importance of community, ancestral knowledge, and respect for the elders. These values are reflected in these arts of theirs (terracotta sculptures), which is often portrays scenes of communal activities, family life and cultural ceremonies. Through their artworks the Nok artists celebrate and preserve their cultural heritage, ensuring that it is passed down to future generations. The Nok philosophy has left an indelible mark in the sand of time through their terracotta sculptures produced by the Nok people in the past. Its influence can be seen in the symbolism, spirituality, and cultural identity expressed through their artworks.

Analysis on the Recently Discovered Nok Terracotta Sculptures with the Already Established Ones base on their Ideology and Philosophy.

The Nok culture being the earliest known culture for its terracotta sculpture tradition in the whole of sub- Sahara Africa, has received global attention, because of their unique styles of art. As a result of this many scholars and authorities, such as Fagg (1990), Ekpo (1990), Jemkur (1992), Banjoko (2009) and Aliyu (2014) among others, have written on the earlier discovered terracotta sculptures. In view of this, therefore, this paper compares the ideologies and philosophical basis on the recently discovered Nok terracotta sculptures, with the earlier ones. This is to determine if the ideologies and philosophies that accompany the terracotta sculptures from the earlier to the recent ones are the same or if there is any difference or variation.

In the Nok culture, it is a well-known fact that all their artworks and other forms of artistic expressions were accompany or driven by ideology and philosophy, which emanated from them as an individual or collectively as a group or society. Such ideas and philosophy come from their culture, tradition and belief system. It is as a result of this development that many of their terracotta sculptures (whether earlier or recent) were mostly created with different ideas

and meanings. They incorporate diverse philosophies into their artistic work, some of which were based on beliefs, and they were religious and cultural, while some were driven by an individual or group perception of their human society, living and non-living. This was confirmed by Abubarkar (O.I, 2020) and Samuel (O.I, 2020) stating that, the ideology of the Nok culture was for them not to be forgotten, they wanted to leave something behind so that they can be remembered for, when they are gone. They did not want their history to be lost forever. In order to ensure that their ideas and philosophy is actualize, the people of then Nok culture delved into terracotta explorations; since that was the only way they could express their thoughts or record their experiences through the availability of terracotta material (clay). Thus, the terracotta sculptures were the only means of expression at that material time. That is why the artists in the Nok culture used these terracotta sculptures as a channel through which their personal impressions of the world around them were made known. These personal impressions and their phenomenon are regarded as the ideas and philosophies that propel the production of their artworks. Ideas, therefore, stand as the inevitable point of emotion and conception for all artistic endeavours as observed by the writer.

According to scholars, the likes of Aliyu (O.I, 2020), Mangut (O.I, 2020), and Hambolu (O.I, 2020), affirms that, the Nok culture has a philosophy which has religious connotation or inclination. This can be seen in the terracotta sculptures that were earlier and recently discovered. The ideas and philosophy of the Nok culture were portrayed significantly in the terracotta sculptures the people produced, which carry deep revelation about the society and what took place at that time. Zimmersmann (2014) also notes that, in the Nok culture, when the people are sometimes faced with many challenges or situations in the course of time or in life, and when such situations happen, the people tend to feel that if they cannot achieve their desired results by their own personal effort alone, they rely on super natural powers. It is as a result of this, that the Nok culture produced terracotta sculptures with anthropomorphic forms, in order to enhance their religious practice. Many of such terracotta sculptures depict or represent ancestors. That is why; the makers of such terracotta sculptures depict beings with related or personified supernatural powers. Some of such figures have human and animal features that belong to some other non-human sphere. Thus; the figures are representations of ancestors of super natural beings from the biotic or a biotic sphere. A few of such terracotta sculptures with these characteristics were also found from the earlier and the recently discovered Nok sculptures. The images on Plate 3 A, and Plate 3 B is a good example. Plate 3 A, is from an earlier discovery, showing a bird with human and animal characteristic, it depicts a bird with human head wearing a cap on its head without a mouth, while Plate 3B is from a recent discovering showing a man face with apish.



Plate 3A: A Bird with a Human face and a Cap

Source: [pinterest.com/mckworichard/Nok](https://www.pinterest.com/mckworichard/Nok)



Plate 3B: Male face with Apish, Terracotta, 11cm

These sculptures form part of the people's art, embody salient messages, which were influenced by their cultural, environmental, social and religious views as well as the philosophy of the artists, group of artists, or particular segment of the society. The writer also observed that in the Nok culture, every work of art produced had an idea and philosophy that accompanied or propelled it. Some of such ideas could be driven from certain situations and issues happening around, or as a result of personal feelings of the artists as the case may be. It is the view of the writer that, artists never work in a void; rather, they try to represent what they observe around them. Nok in the past, especially their artists drew inspiration or derived the themes of their works from their immediate environment, which included socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. That is why the terracotta sculptures, whether the recent or earlier ones, in many occasions depict figures and objects with different actions and posture. For example, the Jainus figures have also been found among the Nok culture, depicting figures in different action and posture. The figure in Plate 4 A depicts a two-faced person one male and one female duality and it is from an earlier discovery, while Plate 4 B is from a recent discovery also showing a two-faced person in duality representing humans in a naturalistic style. It is belief to be a common phenomenon in many African cultures. Fagg in Abdallah (2014) further narrates that, "... the Janus has religious function. They are used as gods or spirit figures or deities, ancestors for the benefit of the living receiving libations for fertility, good health, procreation, and accession of all the regular activities of life."



Plate 4 A: Two Faced Figure,
Terracotta, 3



Plate 4 B: Janus of a Figure,
Sitting back to back 30cm,

Source: pinterest.com/mckworichard/Nok

Source: pinterest.com/mckworichard/Nok

It is also interesting to note that, the terracotta sculptures from the different Nok surrounding areas, whether from the earlier to the recent ones, were not created for art's sake, or to please or to enjoy, neither did the pieces of art serve the artist's fulfilments. It is believed that the makers had a different purpose for producing the objects, which was to fulfil social and religious functions, which is evident as the reason for why the terracotta sculptures were produced. However, religious belief, as observed by the writer, was one of the main reasons for creating works of art in the Nok culture. The culture is the reflection of a particular period and of the people at that time, who produced terracotta sculptures that talked about the sophisticated thinking and creativity of the past. Abubakar (I.O, 2020) asserts that, many of the terracotta sculptures displayed issues that the people had around them and about the people of this part of the world and the artistic capability or creativity of the producers of the terracotta sculptures. From the recently discovered terracotta sculptures by the Nok Project Team as explained by the team of experts and others that the terracotta sculptures reflect the ideas and philosophy of the makers who used them as medium or channel of expression in their time. Aribido (I.O, 2020), Dauda (I.O, 2020) and Adamu (I.O, 2020) further confirmed this by saying that, "the terracotta sculptures from Nok culture were produced based on religious actions. More so, according to some of the informants from the communities where the terracotta sculptures were discovered affirm that, the cultural objects were rituals objects. Even experts confirmed their connections. The first image on Plate (5 A) shows one of the several finds of piles, of broken Nok terracotta sculpture at the Utak Kamuan Garaje Kagoro site, which was excavated in 2020. The next image on plate (5 B) also shows terracotta sculpture in their fragmented stage; it was excavated at Ifana in 2020.



Plate 5A: Several Piles of broken Fragments Terracotta Sculpture at Utak Kamuan Garaje Kagoro
Source: Victor Sarko 2020



Plate 5B: Collection of Fragments Nok Terracotta Sculpture National Museum, Kaduna.
Source: Victor Sarko, 2020

Aribido (O.I 2020) narrates that, some stones from some of the Nok sites are mysterious stone paving. A close look shows that some of the stones are directly underneath the terracotta. According to Rupp (2014), stones play an important role in the Nok culture, besides, they appear only in pits or as parts of paving, but are part of apparently ritual settings as at the site of Utak Kamuan Garage Kagoro in Kaura Local Government of Kaduna State.

According Jemkur (1992), Breunig (2014), Aribido (I.O 2020) and Ekpo (1990) revealed that, no terracotta sculpture was found intact or completely. The research revealed that they were all discovered or found in fragments, and they were later reassembled to what they are today, in the collection. It implies that, fragmentation did not happen in the ground, the terracotta sculptures were shattered and broken, before they were put in the ground. Thus, there is no doubt that, the breakage occurs intentionally and systematically. Breunig (2017) opines that, the phenomenon of shattered sculpture is not only limited to the Nok culture alone, but archaeologists found prehistoric figures idols, statues and sculptures almost everywhere, primarily in fragments. Also, many scientists who conducted research in this area, considered this destruction as an art of religious significance.

In fact, from the study of the recently discovered terracotta sculptures in comparison to the earlier ones, it is established that, the sculptures had religious inclination or connotations, according to Abu (O.I, 2020), Anyebe (O.I, 2020) and Mangut (O.I, 2020). That was why some of the terracotta sculptures were depicted in human, animals and anthropomorphic in form. Animals depicted in Nok terracotta sculpture for religious purposes include tick, lizard, elephant, and snake in anthropomorphic forms. However, snakes featured quite often in their art. Breunig (2014) adds that, snakes have high ritual significance, and they are popular religious symbols of rebirth in traditional Africa. The images on Plate (6A) is from an earlier discovery depicting a bird with human and animal characteristics, showing a bird with human features while Plate (6B) is from a recent discovering showing a terracotta figure of a double-headed lizard on top of an upturned ceramic vessel, with small legs horse-shoe-shaped stretching upwards, that is on an inverted pot.



Plate 6 A: A Bird with a Beak,
Terracotta, Height 5.8cm, 2013,
Source: Gungu Zachary, 2020

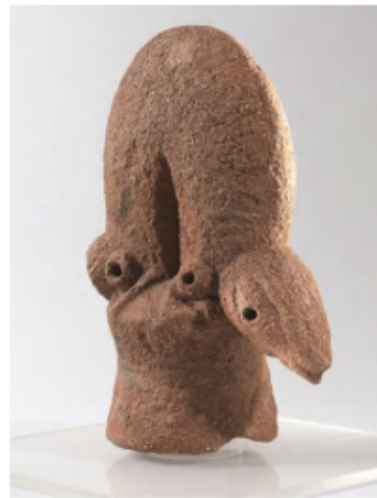


Plate 6 B: Double Headed Lizard,
Terracotta, 37cm, 2007, Nok Site of
Ungwa Kura National Museum,
Kaduna,
Source: Victor Sarko 2020

One of the reasons images of human and animal forms were created, or incorporated into the Nok art, is because, they were created in order to appease the ancestors or supernatural powers. Others are healing practices, offering in the hope of economic success, transitional rites of youth into adulthood or between life and death, among others. The physical appearance of the recently discovered terracotta sculptures as compared with the earlier ones shows clearly that, they were subject to strict stylistic rules, and the rules can be traced to their material composition. It was also as a result of the uniqueness, availability and composition of the clay, that the terracotta sculpture production was centrally organized. Beck (2014) agrees with the preceding statement by stating that, “the uniform style of Nok terracotta sculptures suggests that, their production was governed by stringently followed rules”. It was as a result of this development, that all terracotta sculptures from Nok culture, whether the recent or the earlier ones, have a uniform style.

According to Labija and Adewumi (2016), some artists derived their inspirations from plants, others from animals, humans, their background, folktales, cognitive discussions, available materials social dynamics and many more. In the case of the Nok cultures, as observed by the writer, many experts in the area of specialty have authoritatively confirmed that the uniqueness and the quality of the clay were largely responsible for terracotta explorations in the past. Amanda (2008) supports this view by saying that, “the attendant philosophy of an artwork is sometimes imbedded in its material; consequently, the material of an artwork is as significant as the work and its philosophy”. Duniya and Adewunni (2016) seem to agree with the preceding statements by stating that, “the material in which an artist uses, shares in the philosophical responsibility of the work”. More so, artists get inspired through the materials they encounter, as such the artist might not derive philosophical satisfaction, if such

inspiration was portrayed in another material. In the same vein, Spinkim (1983) is of the opinion that, “the difference between art and philosophy is basically in the subject matter and the medium of expression”. Philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, while art is the medium through which such wisdom is expressed.

Conclusion and Recommendation

From the foregoing discussions made so far, it is obvious that the recent and earlier discovered terracotta sculptures provided us with new historical and cultural information on Nok origin, development, and traditions, for example the terracotta sculptures have further proven their connections with ritual and religious. The study further recommends that, the recently and earlier discovered terracotta sculptures depict humans, animals and anthropomorphic, no terracotta sculptures have the same size, posture ornaments, dress and hairstyles. More so, no terracotta sculptures were discovered or found intact or complete, they were all found in fragments and were later reassembled to their original forms. However, there is a slight variation between the recent and the earlier ones in their forms and styles

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