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## **AN EXAMINATION OF ANTHROPOMORPHIC TERRACOTTA SCULPTURES FROM THE NOK CULTURE.**

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### **Introduction**

Art is one of the oldest professions and it has been a part of expression by different people and ethnic groups since the evolution of humans. Different ethnic groups around the world have their own kind of art, which has been used to express their culture, tradition, and belief system. Many of these ethnic groups have experimented with different materials, ranging from stone, marble, wood, bronze and terracotta among others. The Nok culture is one among the ethnic groups in Nigeria that have experimented and adopted terracotta as medium of artistic expression.

Sculpting in clay is one of the most common traditional materials used in the past, which dates back to the Palaeolithic era and the Stone Age. Terracotta according to Richard (2015) and Alok (2017) was one of the very first technologies conceived by mankind, predating the use of bronze and iron. Rajesh (2018) affirms this by stating that, terracotta was widely used in ancient art, notably in Chinese, Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Italian, and Etruscan art. Rathus (2010) observes that, “the prehistoric people also created sculptures called the Venuses by the archaeologist who first found them. It is considered as one of the oldest and the most famous of the prehistoric female figures”. A good example of such is the Venus of Willendorf, named after the site at which it was unearthed. This prehistoric and ethnic art is a source of inspiration as it revives the submerged memories, and awakens primordial records.

Nok culture is a culture, which provides evidence of an ancient civilisation in West Africa. The art works of the Nok people reflect what they do, what they think, how they live, what values they hold, what joy and sorrow they shared. Nok culture is named after the town, Nok, in the present day Kaduna State where the first finds or objects of art were excavated by archaeologists in 1929 and 1943. The discovery of Nok terracotta sculptures which is regarded as the oldest sculptural tradition in Nigeria brought global attention to the village as archaeologists, tourists and scholars paid visits to have a first-hand encounter with one of Nigeria’s best kept artefacts. Other art centres of Nigeria include Benin, Ife, Owo, Igbo-Ukwu and Esie.

Nok culture according to Mannel and Breunig (2014) is the first complex civilisation in West Africa existing from 900BC to about 200AD. Their terracotta sculptures are some of the most iconic

ancient objects from Africa. They are one of the first societies to have contributed to the origin, development and spread of West African Iron Age. Abdallah (2017) and Hirst (2018) describe Nok culture as a culture, which provides evidence of the earliest ancient civilization in Nigeria. It has a narrative character that shows the everyday lives of the people. In view of this therefore, the paper discusses the historical background of the Nok and analyses the anthropomorphic terracotta sculptures with a view to providing information not previously encountered.

### **The Study Area**

Nok is a village in Jaba Local Government Area in the southern part of Kaduna State, Nigeria. Nok village shares boundaries with Kwoi, Chori and Sambang communities. The people in the present-day Nok village speak the language called Ham otherwise known as Jaba in Hausa. Sani and Ibrahim (2015) state that, “the Ham is one of the major ethnic groups in Kaduna State Nigeria, and majority of them are Christians, estimated to be about 95% in number”. The Ham ethnic group, also referred to as Jaba, are the inhabitants of the present day Jaba Local Government Area of Kaduna State in northern Nigeria. Hayab (2017) also notes that, the Ham is not only confined to Jaba Local Government Area alone, but also found in large numbers in Kachia Local Government Area. They are also sparsely found in Jema’a and Kagarko Local Government Areas all of which share boundaries with Jaba Local Government Area.

According to Jemkur (1995), Breunig, (2014) and James in Hayab (2017) Nok village and its environs is surrounded by mountains and hills. It is from some of these hillsides that the deposits of the artefacts referred to as *Nok culture* were discovered, beginning from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is now over a century since the Ham people left the hills to settle on flat lands, but relics of life and existence are still visible all over the area. The Nok region is located in the Savannah belt. According to Neumann and Alena (2014), the region falls within the Guinea zone with an annual rainfall of 10,000 to 15,000mm. Due to the relatively high precipitation, the savannah here is known as a “Wet Savanna and forms a transition into the rainforest. Grasses in this region are perennial and can grow up to 4 in high.”

The Nok people according to Samuel and Agada (2007) were highly skilled in terracotta production, iron smelting and stone implements. Their technological advanced position in Africa raised scholarly enthusiasm. Their striking craftsmanship and intricate use of miniature terracotta of human and animal’s forms are things to marvel at. The Nok terracotta sculptures produced by this people bear an in-print of history through the manner in which they represent their subject, the ornamentation and the general presentations of an organized and civilized society. They excelled in terracotta sculpture exploration and this enabled them to employ a great variety of styles and ideas in their art, just like the Greek, thereby creating terracotta sculptures that were outstanding compared to other sculptures. More so, many of the well-known terracotta figures were made from local clay and traditionally baked. This process of production is responsible for the preservation of Nok artefacts for many years before they were discovered.

### **Concepts of Terracotta, Sculpture and Anthropomorphic Trait**

**Terracotta:** Terracotta according to Griffen (2018) and Amber (2018), is an Italian word which simply means “baked earth”. It is mostly and commonly used to describe a type of sculpture, unglazed ceramic art or decorative architecture, made from a coarse, porous clay which is noted for its versatility, cheapness and durability. Terracotta is usually made from a family of coarse, porous type of clay. This is first shaped or sculpted, then fired to a high hard form. In the ancient world, it was left to harden in the sun and later, fired at about 1000°C in special ovens, known as Kilns. Once it is fired, the clay assumes a brownish orange colour, ranging from earthly ochre to red.

Prathyaksha (2016) adds that, “terracotta refers to a high grade of weathered or aged clay, when mixed with sand or with pulverized fired clay, can be moulded and fired at high temperature to a hardness and compactness obtainable with brick”. Terracotta clay varies in colours depending on the geographical location where it is found and also depending on the type. They range from red, brown to white. Prathyaksha further stresses that clay can be considered as one of the oldest building materials in the history of man after terracotta was and is being used for all conceivable purposes due to its abundance and universal supply. Terracotta objects are far simpler and cheaper to create, replicate and decorate, than stone or bronze objects; even moulds can be re-used.

**Sculpture:** Sculpture is an artistic form in which hard or plastic materials are worked into three-dimensional art objects. The designs for the sculptures may be embodied in free- standing objects, in reliefs or surfaces. According to William in Lamidi (2018), the early sculptures were created specifically for the purpose of ensuring fertility, good hunting, sanctuary of the soil and worshipping the gods. The artists were creating inherently aesthetically pleasing objects, with functionality in mind. Sculpture is versatile in nature and can be created with different materials such as clay, cement, wood, paper, plastic and metal etc. depending on the design and the purpose of its creation.

**Anthropomorphic Traits:** The word anthropomorphic means human shape; it is used to describe human characteristics to non-human beings. It is mostly used in reference to deities, which are usually given the form of humans. Anthropomorphic also means giving human traits or attributes to animals, objects, or other non-humans. It could be seen as relating to an idea of an animal, a god, or an object that has characteristics like that of a human being. Some of the Nok terracotta sculptures are anthropomorphic and therianthropomorphic in nature, which describes creatures that portray animals and partly shaped like humans.

### **Anthropomorphic Terracotta Sculptures of Nok**

Many works of art in ancient times were represented in anthropomorphic form. One of such is the oldest known ivory called Lowenmensch, in Germany, it is a human-shaped ivory figurine with the head of a lion or lioness, which is about 32,000 years old (Anthropomorphic, Wikipedia, 2019). Zimmermann (2014) also asserts that, Nok culture also produced well-known figurines of humans and animals, and such images and figures are of high aesthetic value, which frequently contained social and religious information about the society in which they originated. These anthropomorphic terracotta sculptures will also help to interpret the behaviour of the people of Nok in the past as either secular or religious. The author further gives reasons why images of humans and animals were created or incorporated into the Nok culture by stating that they were created to appease the ancestors or super natural powers for aid, healing practices, offerings in the hope of economic success, magic as a weapon against enemies, transitional rites between youth and adulthood or between life and death.

Breunig (2014) observes that, “most experts agree that the Nok people did not just create terracotta sculptures for art sake, to please or to enjoy, neither did pieces of art serve the artists fulfilment.” It is believed that they had a different purpose for producing these objects which is most likely to fulfil a social or religious function which is evident on how these sculptures were produced. More so, some of the terracotta sculptures portrayed people and they were found or discovered at burial sites in some places.

Zimmersmann (2014) further notes that, in the Nok culture, the people are sometimes faced with many situations in the course of time or in life, and when such situations happen the people tended to feel if they could not achieve their desired results by their own personal effort, they would rely on super natural powers. It is as a result of this development that the Nok people produced terracotta sculptures with anthropomorphic forms in order to enhance their religious practise. Many of such terracotta sculptures depict or represent ancestors. That is why the producer or makers of these terracotta sculptures depicted beings with related or personified supernatural powers. Some of such figures are having partly human and partly animal features belonging to some other non-human sphere.

Breunig (2014) also confirms that, the human figures from the Nok people are usually represented in a stylised manner, whereas the animals were singled out and given special treatment in a very complex way. Example of such works is the Shamanic Birdman with elaborate hairstyle, a bird with a human face with a cap. The author further affirms that, the Nok people practiced totems, where a person or a group has a special mystical relationship to a totem. In the Nok culture the ancestors or totem are venerated in religious rites, which are often organised by the representative clan or settlement. The ritual itself however, tends to be performed by elders of the group. Both human ancestors and the totemic animals are subject of artistic representation.

Interestingly, therianthropes are figments of the imagination. They are said to have descended from a spiritual realm, where partly human and partly animal forms can transform into animals or where the boundaries between humans and animals is abolished. The Nok terracotta sculptures are depicted either in sitting, kneeling or standing positions, depicting multidimensions proportions.

Gillion, (2009) and Breunig, (2014) observe that, the Nok people made terracotta representations of animals in their art and most of the animals are ticks, snakes, and lizards all in anthropomorphic form and in a naturalistic style. Ticks are however, unusual subjects to the Nok artists, while snakes feature quite often even in the prehistoric era. In Ife and Benin, snakes are also depicted in their art. The depiction of snakes was very important to the people of Nok Culture, and when we go into ethnographic literature, one will see that the mixture of man and animals also occurred widely in African rock art and in the art of the European Ice Age. This practise shows an indication of their worldview and ritual practice, which is ascribed to as "shamanism". The term Shamanism refers to one entering the supernatural realm in a state of trance. In the past, the people of the then Nok Culture tended to obtain, for instance, the power to heal members of the community that have fallen ill through this practise.



**1; A Shamanic Birdman, Terracotta, 30cm, 900BC - 200AD, Jema'a, Nok Area. Source: [pinterest.com/nokworichard/No](https://pinterest.com/nokworichard/No)**

**Plate 1** is a terracotta sculpture of a shamanic birdman from Nok culture; it is about 30cm in height. The figure depicts a bird with human and animal characteristics. The terracotta sculpture shows a bird with a human feature, having eyes, nose and instead of a mouth, what one can see is the beak of a bird. The eyebrows and the eyelids are connected, while the middle of the eyes has a dark hole, same with the nose. The functions of the holes were to allow air pass through for easy firing. The figure has a remarkable hairstyle hanging on both sides of the head, thereby covering the ears from being seen. It is also depicted with a cap on its head. The figure is shown with a thick short neck and with a layer of decorative beads round its neck and both legs. The legs look very short and thick; they have four well-detailed hooves like those of an animal. The two legs of the figure appear to be resting on an upturned vessel; part of the vessel is broken as can be seen. An unknown object is decorated with a groove which is placed on the left shoulder. In traditional African art, the head is usually bigger than the entire body. This has been the practice from time immemorial. This figure is however, entirely different from other terracotta sculptures of the Nok culture, where the body is bigger than the head.



**Plate II: A Human Head with an Elaborate Hair Style and a Beak, Terracotta, 17.5cm, Pangwari, Nok Area, Source; [pinterest.com/nokworichard/Nok/](https://pinterest.com/nokworichard/Nok/)**

Plate II shows another anthropomorphic terracotta sculpture from Nok culture depicting a figure with human and animal characteristics. The figure is about 17.5cm in height, and depicted in abstract form showing man and bird as one. The eyes are very expressive with big ears and it has a distinctive hairstyle on the upper portion of the head, which appears human, while the lower part of the face or lower jaw is shown having a large beak.

The eyes are triangular and appear to look downwards. The eye brows are connected giving the impression that they were formed from a single piece of round clay. The middle of the eyes is hallowed out to form a dark hole in the face whereas the triangles or half circles frame the eyes. The nose of the figure is flat and broad and the ears are quite exaggerated. The terracotta figure has a head gear which looks like a bun at the back of the head and a horn-like shape in front of the head. The top knot is a style of hair twisted to form buns. It also has about five layers of lines round the head as part of Nok adornment. There is a crack on the side of the head, which can be seen and the cracks runs from the ears to part of the forehead and towards the back of the head meaning this piece might have undergone fusion.



**Plate III: A Terracotta Head Like a Horse, Terracotta, 35cm, 900 BC -200AD, Jema'a Nok, Source: <http://2a.Pinterest.Com//12face76secgyya> Nok-Terracotta.**

The figure in Plate III is another therianthropic terracotta sculpture from Jema'a. It possesses human and animal features. The figure is 35cm in height and was produced between 900BC - 200AD. The figure has an oblong shape of the head with two projections on its head and having the resemblance of a horse as an animal and a bun or hairstyle in between the two projections. The projection on the left side of the head is bigger and higher than the one at the right hand side. Both sides of the head show a hairstyle, which runs down from the ears by the eyes.

The face of the figure is quite expressive; the figure's eye sockets are triangular in nature with well-defined eyebrows, which show a resemblance to a horse. The shapes of the eyes were incised into the clay and the middle of the eyes has a dark hole. The treatment of the nose is different from those of other Nok terracotta sculptures. There is something in between the eyes that looks like a protrusion on the face. The nose is wider and broader, making it look like the nose of an animal with close resemblance to a horse. The mouth is shown open with thick lips. The figure is decorated with beads round its neck and on its left short arm that is broken. The figure is resting on a pedestal made up of wood with an iron at the middle to give it balance.



**Plate IV: A Bird with a Human Face and a cap, Terracotta, 35cm, CA 500BC-500AD, Nok, Source: <http://arthade.com/en/object/U1432/nok figure> –**

The figure in Plate IV is a bird with a human face wearing a cap on its head. It is a terracotta sculpture of a bird with an anthropomorphic/zoomorphic form from. It may be regarded as zoomorphic having more of animal form than that of a human. It is dated between 500BC-5000AD and is about 35cm in height. The sculpture is produced from terracotta (baked-clay) using the subtractive technique of modelling. The sculpture depicts a bird with a human face with pierced eyes, nose and mouth. The figure is depicted sitting on an upturned ceramic vessel, with a cap on the head. The terracotta figure has a triangular eye. The middle of the eyes has a dark hole, so also the nostril of the broad nose. The figure has a long neck with layers of decoration of beads around the neck. The feather and the tail of the figure appear very short with incised horizontal lines on them depicting a bird like image. It has short thick legs, wearing rings of decorated beads on them.

The terracotta sculpture is depicted having a relaxed and balanced sitting posture. This figure looks different from other terracotta sculptures from the Nok culture in terms of proportion, where prominence is not given to the head compared to other parts of the body.

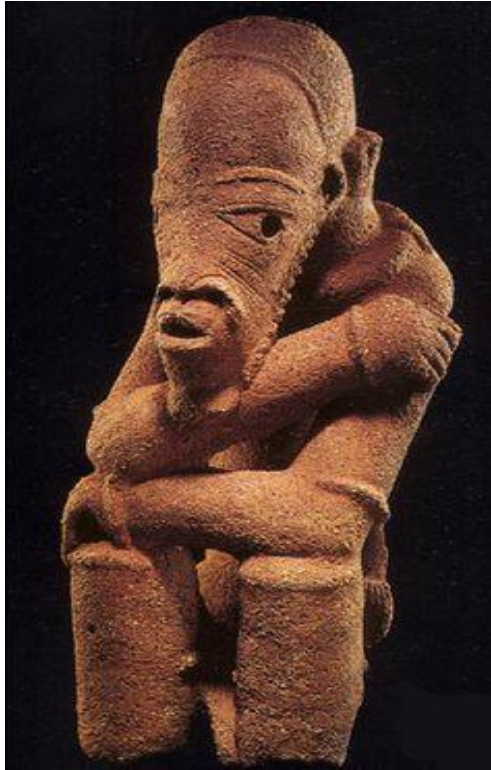




**Plate V: Terracotta Figure with Chin Resting on its Knee in Three Different Position, Terracotta, 38cm, 500BC-500AD, Nok village, Source: <http://www.nigeriagallery.com/Nigeria/State-Nigeria/Kaduna/Ancient-Nok/Kaduna/htm>**

Plate V shows an anthropomorphic terracotta sculpture from Nok culture in three different views. The terracotta is dated between 500BC-500AD and it is about 38cm in height. This terracotta sculpture remains one of the most remarkable and unique works from the Nok culture because the figure has a complex hairstyle or headdress, which makes it outstanding. The figure is shown to have a round shape of head with an oblong face, while the eyes are positioned in triangle with holes in their middle and in the nose. The mouth of the figure looks thick with well-defined and parted lips. The nose is flat and broad with holes in them. The ears are not seen because the hairstyle running on both sides of the head covers them.

The chin is resting on the knee, while the left leg is resting on the floor of the platform as seen in the side view. Also the right hand of the figure is bent toward the shoulder, while the left hand is stretched to the left thigh of the figure, which is partially broken. The terracotta figure is highly adorned with beads around the neck, head, waist, ankle, wrist and upper arms. There is a slight projection around the lower part of the jaw looking like a beard. The hairstyle depicted is a bun on the head supported with beads.



**Plate VI: Nok Terracotta, Seated Male Figure: Terracotta, 53cm, 500BC-200AD, Nok,**  
**Source;**<http://www.nigeriagalleria/Nigeria/State-Nigeria/Kaduna/Ancient-Nok/Kaduna/htm>

**Plate VI** shows a terracotta sculpture that has close resemblance to a man and monkey. It is about 53cm in height. The facial expression or appearance of the figure is monkey-like in nature. The figure is depicted sitting with the chin of the figure resting on the right hand. Its right hand is also bent towards the left shoulder and the elbow of the right hand is shown resting on the left hand. It is obvious that the figure is depicted with a beard and shaped like a human being. It has short ears and the nose is flat and broad, while the mouth is open. The figure is shown to have a very rough texture and the triangular eyes and eyebrows are not well defined and detailed compared to other terracotta sculptures from the Nok Culture. The eyes and mouth have holes in them like the other Nok art pieces. From every indication, this is one of the terracotta from Nok culture that is not heavily adorned or decorated.



**Plate VII: Nok Terracotta Figure of a Ram Head, Terracotta, 25cm, Source: <http://2a.Pinterest.Com//12face76secgyya> Nok-Terracotta.**

**Plate VII** shows an anthropomorphic terracotta sculpture from Nok culture depicting human and animal features combined. The shape of the head and ears is like that of an animal with a resemblance of a ram. It has the facial features of a human being. The head has an oval shape, which is one of the three basic geometric forms in which Nok artists created the human head. This is one terracotta figure from the Nok culture that stands out because of its uniqueness, style and treatment of the human facial expression. The eyes, mouth, eyebrows, ears and the moustache look very expressive.

This figure from the Nok culture is highly stylized. The eyebrows, instead of being separated from the eyes, are joined together. The ears are short and stand erect like that of an animal, and they are not placed where the human ears are naturally placed. The triangular shape of the eyes is well defined and the mouth looks very thick like that of a human. The middle of the eye socket is hallowed out to form a dark hole in the face depicting the pupils; the same thing is done on the nose to project the nostrils. The authors observe unlike other terracotta, the nose of this one is flat. The figure is shown on a pedestal.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing discussions made so far it is obvious that terracotta was used in the past by the people of the then Nok Culture who created or moulded anthropomorphic sculptures in their time, where humans and animals are incorporated into their art. Such figures are of high aesthetic value, which carries religious connotations. This study has further revealed that terracotta was one of the very first technologies conceived by humans, which predates the use of bronze and iron. It was also widely used in ancient art by different societies and civilizations, notably in Chinese, Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Italian, and Etruscan art. The Nok culture is a culture, which provides us with evidence of ancient civilization through its unique terracotta sculptures that were made for thousands of years. The paper further reveals that animals illustrated in Nok art include snakes, and lizards. They are said to have descended from a spiritual realm, where the boundaries between humans and animals are abolished.

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