

## **CREATING PLAY SCULPTURES USING THE GOURD FRUIT FORM**

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### **Abstract**

In recent times, perhaps due to aesthetic and technological advancement, it appears that fellow counterparts in other fields of the arts and sculptors appear to have outgrown the use of traditional materials and have ventured into using newer conventional materials like glass, plastic, synthetics, fabrics and laser light beams for their creations. This paper examines the impact of the transition on the younger generation as regards to their appreciation to Nigerian cultural elements. This offers ways in which sculptors can redirect their unconventional expressions to ensure that Nigeria's indigenous elements do not lose their value among young Nigerians.

**Keywords: Playground, Play Sculptures, Gourd Plant, Form, Expression**

### **Introduction**

Over the centuries, artists in general, have used various traditional media. Sculptors have used traditional media for expression such as clay, metal, wood and stone. Now there seem to be a digression. Could it be that the traditional materials have become obsolete? Or is it that it does not give sculptors the desired outcome of expression they needed for today's viewer? Newer or unconventional materials and styles of art are springing up but not without controversies. Questions such as: what makes a medium unconventional? Does it mean that the unconventional material was not available from the beginning, or is it the artist's approach in manipulating the material that makes it unconventional?

Are there issues regarding symbolism in a given society? What a society views as unconventional art, and how it is represented in a work of art come into play. That of course is determined by the information and the image a nation has about itself. This means that the society's value, customs and belief system of a nation affects the function or purpose of an art work. Change is occurring rapidly in every society. This may be due to foreign influence or other technologically developed countries in the world. These changes, as they affect other developing countries, may either be in favour of her citizens or not, especially the young ones. As much as change is inevitable as well as a welcomed idea, there is a need to checkmate this modern wave of change so as to avoid being over shadowed by it.

The gourd fruit (calabash) is a cultural symbol, a decorative item, local musical instrument and even used as kitchen utensil. Cultural figures of this kind are rear items to young Nigerians especially in the urban areas in Nigeria, but many people are not familiar with it. They are rather more familiar with the foreign objects they see around them, particularly in their school playgrounds where they play. The gourd fruit is also feared to be going extinct, as it is being threatened by western influence. Konan (1974), comments on calabash carving in Nigeria, and in northern Nigeria in particular, that in spite of these many ways in

which calabashes are currently used in northern Nigeria, it seems likely that fewer and fewer will be seen as the years go by. In Nigeria, as in other places where gourds have flourished, the arrival of Westerners brought containers made from metal, glass and plastics.

Today these containers seriously challenge the role of the calabash. Beire in Badaru and Ogunsina (2014) affirms that Nigeria's greatest contribution to the world culture so far has been its traditional art. The influence of this art has been so strong that it caused something like a cultural revolution in Europe. Iriwieri (2009) opines that Europeans appreciate indigenous craft objects using some items in their homes and buying others as presents for friends and relatives. Kashim (2013) states that crafts are symbols of Nigerian material culture and spiritual heritage. It is then apparent, that these opinions should be considered with high regard due to their cultural relevance.

### **The Functions of Sculpture**

The functions of sculpture among the people of the world over the years and till date cannot be over emphasized. It basically serves a monumental purpose. Public sculpture serves the purpose of improving the visual landscape of a place, improves a public's quality of life, and importantly, it enhances the artistic and cultural regeneration and identify a community. Obande (2015) opines that our environment is constantly changing in a bid to regenerate areas into well designed places to live. In the case of playground space design, Smith (2014) affirms that a playground design should be a reflection of the world surrounding us. A play sculpture is a combination of a sculpture and playground equipment. Laris (2016) states that play sculptures are a large-scale art designed to be both played on and interacted within. It provides different experiences than a traditional playground structure and fits well in a variety of locations. The aesthetic value of contemporary sculpture can change the face of an environment (town, cities, homes, schools, and recreational centres). It also creates positive forward thinking image for the area. Raptado (2008) posits that public art is made for the citizens and is located in his/ her environment.

Considering these functions of sculpture, there is the need for sculptors in Nigeria to ensure that they constantly and continually employ traditional elements, like the gourd fruit forms in their creations. Jari (2011) opines that culture is simply the way of life of a particular group of people or a community who has elements that distinguish it from another. Stoddard (2014) states that the phrase it takes a village to train a child, has been attributed to several African societies who have similar proverbs to this effect. This idea fosters the premise that communities also have an impact in influencing the lives of children. A community often expresses its identity most clearly in the way they provide for play (Beckwith, 2015). Galston (2015) posits that an environmental sculptor plans a piece from the very beginning in relation to its surrounding. If these opinions are true, then the question to ask is: How are the playgrounds spread across schools and communities in Nigeria?

### **The Playground as a Learning Center**

A playground is an activity center, a specific place or area where children gather to play during leisure time (Beckwith, 2015). Children gather in a playground in order to play. When playing they are able to exercise their bodies, socialize, and equally learn from their environment. More time should be created for their leisure if the children are required to learn about their environment, be happy, and grow healthier and emotionally stable. People and children generally respond or relate easily with objects they are familiar with. Eyal (2015) states that people don't want something new, they want the familiar done differently. However, it appears as if the few playground equipment in Nigerian schools, homes and recreational centers in cities are imported from overseas. They mostly have on their designs, characterized by objects or elements that Nigerian children are not familiar with. While many schools in local communities generally do not have furnished play grounds, reasons could be financial constraint, ignorance or sheer negligence of the negative effect it has of the growth of a child. The questions that should be posed here are: How can it be made possible for Nigerian children to be able to learn about objects in their environment while they play? Should Nigerian sculptors not be encouraged to explore into the creation of play sculptures that are characterized by Nigeria's cultural elements, to become part and parcel of their play sculpture designs? Could the creation of such play sculptures be beneficial to Nigerian sculptors and the society at large?

Only few Nigerian sculptors have in the past produced play sculptures that are characterised by local features that could easily be recognized by Nigerians. These efforts made by these sculptors can perhaps be attributed to their yearning to localize the creation of play sculptures that are entirely different from that of the foreigners. Such sculptors include Salihu Sulaiman with a sculpture titled: *Giraffe* done in (1968), El Anatsui's sculpture titled: *Mask* (1981), Adedoyin Ogundipe (1988), with sculpture titled: *The Giant Foot*, and John Obande's *Play Hill* (2015). Despite the play creations by these Nigerian sculptors, it appears that there is still more that needs to be done.

### **The Nature of the Gourd**

The organic plant called gourd, also commonly called the calabash has a variety of inherent features, forms, and types. Armstrong (1996) states that the gourd family (cucumbitaceae) includes hundreds of species of vines bearing coiled, climbing tendrils and some of the most unusual fruits in the world. The total number of species may exceed 700, with at least 100 different genera known as "cucubits" to gourd lovers. The fruits of this exceedingly divers family come in an astounding array of shapes and sizes, from tiny, marbled-sizes "jumbie pumpkins" of the Caribbean islands to giant gourds over seven feet (214cm) long. Despite the fact that several craft works have been done with the calabash for both decorative and utilitarian purposes, the writer considers the works previously done with the calabash fruit family, as undermining the use of the medium and yet to be explored in other perspectives, because even though most

calabash craft works have been produced and patronized, artists that have ventured into working with it, indicate that the calabash still has inexhaustible potentials that are yet to be explored.

Another vital point to reckon with is the significant multiple meanings and purposes it serves within the African including Nigerian cultures. The use of calabash as a household item is very common among West African nations, as it symbolizes a lot of things in the household where it is so used. However, the functions of calabash exceed the utility role it plays in the home. It extends to a decorative piece as can be seen in calabash decoration which employs techniques of production like carving, painting, scraping, engraving, and pyro-engraving. Other uses are ritualistic and medicinal purposes. While discussing one of his calabash works, Tafida (2014) states that this particular piece of work is a bold variation and an experiment in the vast world of art, giving dynamism and opening a new door into a planet of myriad further possibilities.

An example of these dynamism and further possibilities are illustrated in this paper. Transforming an indigenous musical instrument, the long narrow cone gourd called *Shantu*, the gourd shaker called *Gora*, and the natural gourd spoon called *Ludayi* in Hausa language to produce play sculptures. These three gourds are all naturally and locally grown in the environment and are identified as some of Nigeria's cultural elements. The objective of using the three gourd fruits- *Shantu*, *Ludayi* and *Gora* is to utilize the inherent features of the gourd such as the hollow, bowl, ladle and flask which are unique and serves as natural forms that can be further blown up into large sizes on other media for play sculptures.

### **Processes of Preparing the Gourd Play Sculptures**

#### **Ludayi Slide I**

The gourd spoon-*Ludayi* does not only function as a local spoon but it also has inherent features that can be transformed into a slide for a play sculpture. In order to make a functional slide play sculpture, the bowl is placed upright on the base, while the stem or handle is diagonally lifted upright. This is because the stem, due to its curved nature is capable of functioning as a slide that flows into the bowl. At the back of the sculpture, another stem is attached to the tip of the middle stem and diagonally placed downwards to the base. Flat gourd pieces are fixed one over the other to serve as a climber or steer case that can be used like a ladder for climbing from the ground level up to the middle stem. While pieces of the stem are cut into a letter "C" like curved shape and glued on both edges of the ladder up to the middle slide to serve as a protective support and handle for a user. At the frontal part of the sculpture, a shorter stem serving as another slide is attached to the bowl leading downwards to the base which is meant to safely take a user to the ground level. The bowl is filled with sand for an added play adventure; the children can play inside the bowl, as it is natural for children to play with sand. The *Ludayi* slide is also left unpainted so as to reveal the beauty of its inherent orange color.



**Fig.1: Ludayi Slide I, Gourd, 38x33x13cm, 2016.  
(Front View) Deborah Maikarfi.**



**Fig.2: Ludayi Slide I, Gourd, 38x33x13cm, 2016  
(Back View) Deborah Maikarfi.**

### **Ludayi Slide II**

This Ludayi slide offers a more complex play experience than the one in figures 1 and 2. An additional *Ludayi* is attached to another one in descending order giving a double slide and a double bowl sand landing experience to the user before he/ she decides to slide to the ground level. Another play experience awaits the user as two other bowls beneath each *Ludayi* bowl are placed downwards, both gourds having two different textural effects on their surfaces. The front and the back opening serve as passages while they duck their way into the bowls and play the hide and seek game. Bright contrasting colours of red, green, blue and orange are painted over the *Ludayi* slide sculpture in order to attract the users and onlookers to the sculpture.



**Fig.3: Ludayi Slide II, Gourd, 50 x 15cm, 2016. Deborah Maikarfi  
Yanchi**

The *Shantu* maze titled *Yanchi* is a problem solving game. It is an assemblage of the parts of the long narrow cone gourd. Its interrelating parts are the cone, hollow and length of the gourd. It is vertically and horizontally placed to create a confusing network of passages with huddles at some end points by which the player is expected to experience some difficulty while trying to come up with a solution to find his or her way out of the maze. *Yanchi*, is a Hausa word for freedom.



**Fig.4: Yanchi, Gourd, 30 x 40cm, 2016. Deborah Maikarfi**  
**Hanchin Gora**

Figures 5 and 6 show a static sculpture created using the bottle gourd (Gora) as play sculpture. The whole object is painted with a white colour, and shades and tints of the rainbow colours were adorned in a dotted-linear pattern using a small round shape as the motif over the play sculpture to give a feel of the way a real shaker gourd would look like when adorned with beads as a musical instrument. Two spaces were cut open signifying the eyes of the bottle gourd or a dash board. A half and an upper part of the gourd flask were also cut off, leaving visibly the inner part of the gourd flax and inner passage of its long nose. Sand was filled almost reaching the inner hole so that a user can slide through into the long nose like a tunnel to the tip of the nose at the other end. Three small gourd bowls were placed beneath the base of the bottle gourd flask. This gives the flask part a lift from the ground level and cause the nose to be slanted diagonally downwards, the nose of the bottle gourd also touching the ground. The side of the bottle gourd is attached to a gourd spoon stem, flat pieces and “C” like shapes was also fixed as a climber and protector similar to the sculptures in figures 1, 2 and 3.



**Fig. 5: Hanchin Gora, Gourd, 42x36x25cm, 2016.**  
**2016. (Front view) Deborah Maikarfi**



**Fig.6: Hanchin Gora, Gourd, 42x36x25cm,**  
**(Back view) Deborah Maikarfi**

### Jirgin Shantu

A number of foreign play designs are inspired from fairy tale stories and they are characterized by objects that appear unreal to the physical world. *Jirgin Shantu* was designed from the long narrow cone gourd called *Shantu*. It is a musical instrument mostly played in the northern part of Nigeria. This creates a fantasy of an airplane. The fusion of a local musical instrument with an airplane to serve as a play sculpture is made possible. It has a staircase made from the handle of the spoon gourd where a user is expected to climb up into the plane and play the make belief game of a pilot taking off into the sky with passengers seated by the windows inside the tunnel of the *Shantu*. A slide was placed at the opposite side of the *Shantu* plane to serve as an exit to the ground level.



**Fig.7: Jirgin Shantu, Gourd, 46x26cm, 2016. Deborah Maikarfi Hippo**

This gourd sculpture is made with an idea of a moveable play sculpture. It looks like a hippopotamus head half way sank into a river. Although no engine was used to enable it move backwards and forward, the rhythmic movement was made possible by first filling sand and stones into the flask of the bottle gourd so as to have weight, and being that it is naturally round, with the slightest move it will move on its own. A flat gourd is placed to serves as a seat where the user will seat then either place his feet over or on the two spoon gourds which also serves as the eyes of the Hippo to establish a balanced position. The long nose is meant to give the Hippo a safe landing when sliding forward to the ground.



**Fig. 8: Hippo Gourd, 43x25cm, 2016. (Front View) Deborah Maikarfi**





**Fig. 9: Hippo, Gourd, 43x25cm, 2016. (Side View) Deborah Maikarfi Lilo**

A swing is a play form that mainly invites a user to engage in handling balance, rhythm and timing control while swinging forward and away. Figure 10 shows one way the bottle gourd form can be used to create a swing. *Lilo* is mostly covered and the form scarcely tempered with. Therefore could protect the user from the tropical sun while swinging.



**Fig.10: Lilo, Gourd, 52x53cm, 2016. (Front view) Deborah Maikarfi Calabash Rainbow**



**Fig.11: Lilo, Gourd, 52x53cm, 2016 (Side view) Deborah Maikarfi**

This abstract bottle and spoon gourd play sculpture resembles an alien spaceship. It was created by using several curved handles of the spoon gourd, which was painted using the tints and shades of the colours of the rainbow, and placed over a big brown gourd flask. The handles serve as climbers, while the open round holes are to serve as openings to go under the gourd flasks for more play space and shelter or as passages to the other end of the structure. The smooth texture of the surface of the play sculpture is to ensure that a child's skin is not bruised while playing.





**Fig.12: Calabash Rainbow, Gourd, 66x23cm, 2016. Deborah Maikarfi**  
**Conclusion**

Nigerian sculptors should see themselves as agents of change, as reflectors of the society in which they live in. And to see this wave of change as an opportunity to retain, sustain and at the same time revolutionize the way in which the Nigerian society should see itself. Through the works of art in various mediums, to help especially young Nigerians not to lose their cultural identity by localizing play form creations with indigenous forms and themes that reflect Nigeria's cultural image. According to Olorukooba in Ada (2006) innovations are required in all areas of Nigerian society, if actually the country needs progress and urged researchers to consider it as one of the serious challenges of their time so as to move the nation forward in the face of modern development. It will contribute to the educational, cultural and socio-economic development of our society.

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