

# NOK TERRA-COTTA DISCOURSE: PERSPECTIVES OF THE CERAMIST AND THE SCULPTOR

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article recalls the memory of one of the most remarkable art traditions on the African continent that survived many years of practice in a material and technique which hitherto could have been attributed to sculpture but has lately attracted controversial argument between sculpture and ceramics over the area of production it belongs. The Nok terra-cotta art works comprised human and animal forms and were made by a people that existed in an area near the confluence of Niger and Benue Rivers in central Nigeria between 500 BC and 200 AD. These hundreds of existed art works are at the center of an intellectual discourse, seeking an answer to the question as to who made the art works, the sculptor or the ceramist. Evidence from scholars, availability of clay as material, production techniques and end use or the possibility of the figures been used as ritual objects are among the parameters used in the attempt to establish the actual area of production the figures situate.*

*Key words: Nok, terra-cotta, sculpture, ceramics, production*

## **Introduction**

The ownership of the Nok terra Cotta head has become a controversial issue between ceramics and sculpture. Some ceramics scholars have laid claim to its ownership, but before this became a topical issue, the world has known it to be a piece of sculpture and this is supported by abundant historical evidence. For instance, Gardner (1975:436), provides a clear photograph of the terra cotta head and writes the following.

Nok terra-cotta heads and figures of humans and animals suggest wooden or other clay prototypes, now lost. No. "Formative" prototypes are known. Volumes are full and surfaces smoothly modeled in these terra-cotta sculptures.

In its contribution, the African Encyclopedia (1974:372) clearly indicates that "They also produced very fine sculpture, usually of human forms in terra-cotta" making reference to the terra-cotta head.

As part of the activities to mark Nigeria's 50<sup>th</sup> Independence anniversary in 2010, a journal published under the caption "National Cultural and Historical Exhibition, the journey of our independence" in which very many Nigerian art and cultural relics were featured and written on, among them, of course were the Nok terra-cotta figures which are made up of both human head and animal forms. Eyo, (2010), gives an explicit account of the Nok culture in general, breaking it down to include the culture itself, the Nok terra-cotta sculpture, the Nok culture and farming and Nok culture and Iron production.

Eyo (2010), writing on the Nok Terra-Cotta sculptures has this to say,

As previously mentioned, one of the main components of the Nok culture was its ability to fashion objects out of clay. They made two types of pots, the domestic pots and the ceremonial or ritual sculptures.

Continuing his account on Nok culture, Eyo further writes "By far, the high point of Nok culture is the high fired clay sculpture of human and animals varying in size from approximately six inches to almost life size".

These are a few of the evidences that strengthen sculpture's stand point.

This paper puts forward, the argument between a ceramist and a sculptor on the making of the terra-cotta heads. The ceramist, on one hand claims that those objects are parts of pottery and the sculptor on the other hand claims that the figures are purely sculptural. This argument becomes more interesting and intellectual as none of the duo was alive when these relics were in production but both base their reasons on what they read from the pages of books and their own professional experiences.

## **The Nok Terra-Cotta Head**

### **Historical Background**

The Nok Terra-Cotta heads were unearthed in tin mining operations in Jos Plateau area where the Nok culture existed in central Nigeria about 300 by 100 miles North of the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue around 1928.

Eyo, (2010), quotes Vansena, (1984), as saying that the heads were made around 600BC. He also referred to Fagg (1977), as putting the date between 500BC to 200AD. Other writers, in the likes of Getlein (2002:435) rather puts it between 500BC and 200AD or around the time of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Honour and Fleming (2005) differ a little about the dating, they put it at 400BC.

### Descriptive iconography

These terra-cotta heads which were made when the Nok culture flourished in North central Nigeria, were made in clay and fired after the clay work had dried sufficiently.

Archeologists provide us with two main types of the terra-cotta heads with each types being named after the village where the discovery was made but both villages are located within the radius of 300 by 100 miles of the area where the culture existed. Eyo, (2010) quotes Fagg, (1945) as calling for a terra cotta head reportedly being used as scarecrow on a farm in Jamaa, and upon examination of the head, concluded that it was a part of a full human figure and having been found there he named the terra cotta head Jamaa, see plate 1, below.



**Plate 2: Raffin Kuru Head**

In the same circumstance the other head which seems to be featured more often was named Rafin Kura being named after the Rafin Kura village see plate 2, both have similar characteristics with just a little differential rendition of mostly the nose, the lips, the jaw bones and the coiffure. In the Jamaa rendition, the artist seem to be showing a hairstyle, giving the figure, if viewed from the front, three round projections with a round hole in each, apparently being made to prevent cracks during firing.



**Plate 2: Jamaa Head**

It is possible that the projections represent head tie, or coiffure. Contrary to this, the Rafin Kura head has no such projection rather; it has a massive round pile of the medium on the left ear region extending to the right ear, across the forehead. The noses showed significant difference, arising from the modeling of the nostrils.

The tip of the Rafin Kura nose seem to be smoothly beveled thereby concealing the nostrils but that of the Jamaa shows a deep depression of the tip of the nose which gives rise to two wide nostrils confronting the viewer. No words can better describe the head than what Eyo put together. He said,

The head possesses an open mouth and averted lips projecting out of the smooth temple and cheek bones. The pupils of the eyes are represented with pieced holes and enclosed within triangular or semi-circular sockets.

Above the eyes are segmented eyebrows and above these a globular open forehead adorned with a disc from which it appears something is broken off. The head wears an interesting cascaded hair style.

This statement described the Raffin Kura head but the mouth and the eyes in both heads are rendered in the same manner. Although there is no evidence, written or oral tradition, the Raffin Kura head seems to represent a male head while the Jamaa appears to represent that of a female.

### **Sculptures perspective**

Apart from the fact that many writers have called the Nok Terra-Cotta head a sculpture, from the professional angle, the following argument could be made to strengthen the sculptors stand point in the claim of ownership.

- i) No doubt, both ceramics and sculpture use clay as medium of expression, it is also right to say that the product is fired under high temperature either by open fire process or fired in an enclosure called kiln, but it could be argued that the historical evidence that the human forms were full figures and life size favours the sculptures claim because it is unusual for potters (ceramists) to produce full figure and life-size human forms.
- ii) Ceramics uses clay as main material for working and so does sculpture even though in many cases sculpture uses clay as a means to an end in modern times when sculpture materials abound. It is probable therefore that as early as 400BC or thereabout, such materials for sculpture as those seen and used today were not available, so the only medium of expression could have been clay.

This means that if the heads are made of clay it could be that other sculpture materials were not available so the only medium available to the sculptor was clay. It is therefore not proper to ascribe all clay works to ceramics, and therefore inappropriate that ceramics should claim the heads on grounds that they are made in clay and fired.

If potters did those figures, no doubt, they were doing sculpture works.

### **Perspective of the Ceramist**

One of the earliest widespread craft in Nigeria was pottery and it was practiced wherever clay was available.

According to Eluwa et al (1988), the earliest evidences of pottery in Nigeria were found in late Stone Age Rock Shelter on the Jos Plateau (dated to about 3000 B.C), at Eleru near Akure excavated by Professor Thurstamm Show

in 1965 and in the Ukpa Rock shelter near Afikpo, excavated by Professor D.D. Haytle in 1966". Eluwa further confirms that the people of Daima, situated to the south of Lake Chad made good pottery which was beautifully decorated as attested by the archeological evidence during the first millennium B.C. There are also fragments of the enormous pots known in the oral traditions of Borno as saopots, which were originally used for burial found there.

The antiquity of the Nok culture which continued the beautiful fired clay works called terra cotta and iron-smelting works classified the area as one of the earliest centre of civilization in West Africa. Nok culture has evidence which shows that pottery existed in Nigeria as early as between 300 BC and 200 AD Ekpo and Eillet, [1982:15]. According to Ali (2002:61), the high level of creative excellence exhibited by the works from the various sites is an indication that before that date the potters had already acquired the fundamental knowledge and techniques needed for ceramics productions. Note must also be taken that the earliest evidence of how iron smelting in Nigeria has been found in the Nok area. Spears and axes have been excavated at Nok and iron smelting furnaces have been found at Taruga in the same area (Eluwa 1988). The knowledge of iron –smelting must have been probably achieved from the firing of pottery wares. Firing of pottery wares requires gradual application of heat to the wares.

Ceramics are wares partly or wholly from clay. It is shaped in ordinary temperature and unless forcibly deformed it keeps this shape and after heating (firing) to a sufficient maturing temperature, the shape is permanently retained Peters [2001:5]. The Nok terra cotta head of an elephant, Nok male and female heads and other Nok terra cottas or pottery wares were fired to a sufficient maturing temperatures and that is why the shapes are permanently retained. The first furnace or kiln built in Nok was likely a device that could fire a low temperature pottery ware before advancing to high temperature firing furnace. The continuous experiment with the pottery furnace or kiln could have likely given rise to the melting of metal piece which later became a big and expanded iron smelting business along with pottery making endeavours.

The evidence of Nok pottery tradition near the Jos plateau region of Nigeria is a simple prove that their pottery practice went beyond practicing ordinary pots to figures and figuring's. The Nok terra cotta head became an evidence of the oldest known terra cotta figure south of the Sahara and further became an indicator of the period of pottery practice in Nigeria. Eluwa considered the sophistication of Nok pottery (terra cottas) as having led some scholars to believe that an older, but yet undiscovered tradition must have preceded Nok terracotta or pottery art.

The Nok terracotta figures are pure works of the potters or ceramists when assessed in the light of what ceramics or pot stands for then and today.. It takes an expert potter or ceramist to fire clay wares to such a high temperature that such wares could be retained for over two thousand years till date. The preparation of the clay body and the management of heat application are indeed the works of expert potters.

The sizes of the wares which were probably gotten from full figures make no difference from what is happening in the world of ceramics today where life sizes of Jesus, Mary and others for religious worship are practiced except that they are glazed for more aesthetics. The essences of large out-door ceramics figures or wares are for aesthetic and the ability to last for a long period of time just like the Nok terra cotta. An example of large ceramics ware is a ceramics pot titled "large calabash" 2015 with the size of 178cm (5 fit 10 inches) high by Ogbosu Dominic and supervised by Dr. Edem Peters at the University of Port Harcourt (ceramics unit, Department of Fine Arts and Design).

Ceramics product has the capacity to be built to any designed size with the advent of new technology in kiln construction where large works could be fired at site of producing without lifting them. A tall ceramics ware of 5m (16ft) high was produced at the international ceramics festival in Aberystwith in 2009 by a team of potters from China (collirs 2013:107).

The perspective view of Nok terra cottas by the ceramist which some people sometimes refer to as sculptures is improper and could hardly be proven. The period of Nok terra cotta production in Nok was when pottery technology was blossoming there and pottery materials and techniques were applied. Perhaps there was a sculptor who assisted in the production, but works must have been overseen by a potter while working together.

## Conclusion

Since the present generation of people was not there then as witnesses and no detailed record on this issue except the evidences which tilt in favour of pottery or ceramics, the old wares should be seen as ceramics sculptures.

This suggestion if preferred, should in case there were contributory ideas and handling of the terra cotta by both the potter or ceramist and sculptor. It is also safer to refer to them as ceramics sculpture to accommodate the two areas considering the fact that today ceramists or potters still produce ceramics sculptures and the sculptors still work with clay as a medium and send them to ceramists for firing.

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