

An archaeological overview of Nok terracotta sculptures

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to compile the academic research that has been conducted on the Nok excavations over the course of this year in order to present a comprehensive archaeological narrative about Nigerian civilization. Despite the fact that the centre of the Nok culture can be found in the middle of Nigeria, it is possible that the influence of Nok artefacts and cultural practices has spread beyond this region. There is a good chance that migration patterns, cultural exchanges, and trade networks were all factors that contributed to the widespread dissemination of Nok cultural elements to neighbouring regions. Research and mapping projects that are currently underway have the objective of documenting and analysing the distribution of Nok sites throughout central Nigeria and across the country. For the purpose of visualising the geographical footprint of the Nok Culture and gaining an understanding of the settlement patterns of this ancient civilization, geographic information systems (GIS) and spatial analysis techniques are utilised.

1 Introduction

Nok figures can be found from Kagara in the west. From southern Nigeria to Katsina Ala, Nigeria covers 76,800 square kilometres, or 8% of its land area. Mid-second millennium BC is when the Nok Culture began and evolved. The 9th to 4th centuries BC saw the rise of terracotta sculpture figurines and iron production. Until the late centuries BC, evidence decreases. The Nok terracotta sculptures reveal early Nigerian society, especially archaeologically. British archaeologist Bernard Fagg coined "Nok Culture" [1]. Terracotta anthropomorphic and zoomorphic sculptures appeared in the mid-20th century. Fortunately, open air tin mine alluvial deposits were found near Nok, a central Nigerian village. Fagg collected about 150 terracotta sculpture fragments. The author published a 1977 compilation that summarised Nok Culture age research and its terracotta figurine styles, functions, and interpretations [1]. Fagg's 1960s excavations in Taruga near Abuja revealed the Nok Culture's existence during iron metallurgy's early stages [1]. Angela Fagg Rackham, Fagg's daughter, and Nigerian archaeologist Joseph Jemkur studied the Nok Culture (1992, 2014). The excavation of pottery, iron, and stone artefacts along with the terracotta ones revealed more about the Nok complex than its art [2]. The Nok Culture was initially dated between 500 BCE and 200 CE by radiocarbon and thermoluminescence. Radiocarbon dates on charcoal from the interior of European Nok terracotta figurines showed a slightly earlier start and end (around 800-200 BCE) [3]. New Frankfurt project research will be presented in this presentation.

Medium-distance trade networks that would have supplied communities with stone tools and raw materials

were lacking in the Chad Basin [3]. Social specialisation and iron metallurgy demonstrate this. Iron metallurgy coincided with these advancements and may have led to improved agricultural tools, military strategies, and social hierarchy through the use of iron artefacts as status symbols. There is also evidence that zoomorphic clay figurines have more intrinsic artistic expression than earlier ones. Ritual attitudes or practices may have changed. Ultimately, mid-first millennium BCE locations in the Nigerian Chad Basin appear to show profound societal transformations with unmatched complexity [4].

The Tichitt tradition in the western Sahel, with its extensive settlements that were previously called 'chiefdoms' or West Africa's first extensive complex society, provides the best example of social complexity developing in West Africa. The Nok Culture distribution area in central Nigeria dates back to the middle of the first millennium BCE. The phases are nearly a thousand years older than those in the Chad Basin, and their geographical distance precludes any connection or impact [5, 6]. Except for the Kerma Culture in northern Sudan and the early Aksumite Empire in northern Ethiopia, sub-Saharan Africa has not seen social complexity like that seen in the Chad Basin since the first millennium BCE. In subsequent periods, African civilizations and their cultural origins emerged from archaic evidence of evolving complexity beyond familial or village-based farming communities or livestock keepers, according to Graham Connah (2001) [7]. After the Chad Basin observations showed the emergence of social complexity and the development of African kingdoms, our research focused on the "origin of complex societies in sub-Saharan Africa" [3, 4]. The Nok Culture in Central Nigeria, 100 km southwest of the

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Chad Basin, may be a close analogy due to its similar age. In the 1990s, research showed that calling the Nok Culture a "complex society" was unfounded. In addition to conjectures about a kingdom or temple's architectural design, Bernard Fagg's magnificent terracotta figurines and the objects that became popular in the global art market after his publications helped explain social complexity [8, 9]. Except for their sculptures and iron metallurgy skills, little was known about the Nok Culture. However, if we consider that the Nok terracotta sculptures, which are highly artistic, were not made by hunters and gatherers, early farming communities, or pastoralists, they came from a complex society. In this society, specialists created the sculptures, and a social institution regulated and upheld the intricate ritualistic realm for which they were intended. From an African perspective, 'art' is a vague term, and objects may not have been interpreted the same way by their creators. Thus, 'primitive art' is now considered "fundamental components of shrines, as symbols of royalty, as the focal points of ceremonies, celebrations, and dances, as agents and conduits of power, as representations of identity.

2 The Nok sculpture excavation process

The excavation history of Nok sculptures is fascinating and illuminates their discovery and study. Dent Young and Bernard Fagg discovered the Nok terra-cottas and educated local mining operations about their archaeological significance. Thus, a national museum was founded in Jos in 1952 to house Nok figures. Bernard Fagg led the first three Taruga archaeological expeditions between 1961 and 1968, unearthing terracotta figurines, iron tools, pottery, and smelting furnaces. The 1966–67 Kainji Dam construction revealed two additional locations near Yelwa village in Sokoto Province. Despite their lower quality, these sites produced Nok-style sculptures. Angela Fagg found Nok terra-cotta figurines, stone tools, and iron tools at Samun Dukiya. Additional excavations by J. F. Jemkur researched Nok sculptures at Old Zankan from 1982 to 1983, and Goethe University of Frankfurt studies since 2005 have advanced knowledge of their cultural significance. Thus far, excavations have not revealed a funerary context for the Nok statues. Some figures appear to be numerous Nok sculpture archaeological sites and excavations have illuminated the ancient Nok civilization's materials and methods. Bernard Fagg conducted three archaeological expeditions to Taruga from 1961 to 1968. Fagg found terra-cotta figurines, iron tools, pottery, and smelting furnaces during these expeditions. The website illuminated Nok artistic and technological achievements. Construction of the Kainji Dam in 1966-67 revealed two sites near Yelwa village in Sokoto Province. These sites made Nok-style figures, but of lower quality. These websites helped spread Nok artefacts in new locations and showed Nok artistic methods. Angela Fagg excavated Samun Dukiya, the only inhabited site in Nok at the time. She found terracotta figurines, stone tools, and iron tools during

excavation. The excavation yielded valuable archaeological findings and was a milestone in Nok culture research. J. briefly excavated Old Zankan. F. Jemkur 1982–1983. Jemkur found Nok fragments and an abandoned shrine during this excavation. This website provided valuable information on Nok sculpture ceremonial customs and cultural significance.

Nok sculptures have thin walls and are made from clay with abundant mica, granite, or quartz grains. Manufacturing techniques include coiling clay to shape the trunk, sculpting solid heads for the torso, and adding hair and beads. - Finally, ochre or mica schist is applied and burnished to achieve a polished and even texture. The Nok community coils their artefacts, which explains the circular striations. The artistic and cultural customs of the ancient Nok civilization can be learned from significant archaeological sites and excavations and Nok sculpture materials and techniques.

Early Nok began in the mid-2nd millennium BC. The Early Nok sites, the earliest human settlements in the primary research region, showed consistent growth and advancement until the first millennium BC. Radiocarbon dating of Puntun Dutse pottery at some sites extends to the 10th century BC, suggesting a major change between the Early and Middle Nok periods.

Middle Nok occurred between 900 and 400 BC. During this time, the Ido group produced pottery that resembled Puntun Dutse and Nok pottery. The shift from Early to Middle Nok was marked by terracotta figurine fragments found at Ido group sites. The Late Nok period lasted 400–1 BC. A few sites in and outside the primary study area date to the preceding centuries BC, marking the end of the Nok culture. As the Common Era approached, Nok terracotta and pottery disappeared from early AD sites, indicating their decline.

This diagram shows the Nok culture's 1500-year progression from the mid-2nd millennium BC to the first centuries AD. Archaeological evidence like pottery styles, terracotta figurines, and other cultural materials can help explain the Nok civilization's evolution. These findings illuminate Nok culture's geographical footprint. The Nok Culture, an ancient Nigerian civilization, is mostly located in the centre. Analysis of archaeological evidence summarises the Nok Culture's geographical footprint. Nok Culture is centred in central Nigeria, near Nok, where the first terracotta sculptures were found. The area under consideration has many Nok sites, including settlements, burial grounds, and ceremonial sites. A prominent study area with many Nok sites has been found by archaeological surveys and excavations. The spatial arrangement and unique characteristics of Nok cultural sites are studied in this region, which includes parts of central Nigeria. The distribution of Nok sites in central Nigeria shows the Nok Culture's widespread influence. Excavated, looted, and recently unearthed sites help define the Nok civilization. Although Nok culture is centred in central Nigeria, its artefacts and practices may have spread beyond this region. Trade, cultural exchanges, and migration likely spread Nok culture to neighbouring areas. Researchers and mappers are studying the spatial arrangement of Nok sites in central Nigeria and elsewhere. GIS and spatial

analysis show the Nok Culture's settlement patterns and footprint.

3 Exploration of Nok sculpture as art

The Nok sculptures depict symbolic people and masks, possibly related to social class, religion, or culture. The sculptures' faces convey narratives and symbolism, enhancing Nok art's storyline. Featuring animals and abstractions, Nok sculptures blend nature and imagination. These animal representations may symbolise natural elements or have spiritual meanings. Nok art depicts abstract forms that suggest creative interpretations of the environment and convey symbolic messages. Nok sculptures' size and use indicate a range of goals, from personal decoration to ceremonial roles. The significance of these sculptures in different contexts can be seen in their size and use. Nok sculptures have many forms, allowing multiple symbolism interpretations. Cultural, mythological, and historical themes are depicted in the intricate designs. Understanding the symbolism in Nok art helps us understand the culture's artistic legacy. The sculpture at the High Museum of Art resembles other Nok works. The next passage summarises the High sculpture's many elements and analyses similar examples.

A cap with regular, thumb-sized indentations on the forehead and slightly above the ears is the most common hairstyle. There is no hair on the forehead, but rectangular locks can be seen from the posterior to the cranial base. Four locks or braids protrude triangularly from the side of the head before each ear, hiding the ears from the front. The figure's left ear has a tassel, but the right does not. Cleveland's 600 BCE–250 CE head resembles the coiffure in question. The Cleveland head exhibits a replication of various elements, including the cap's regular indentations, the triangular braids adorning both sides of the head, and the line of rectangular locks located at the posterior of the neck. Significant distinctions can be observed in the dimensions and surface quality of the cap indentations, which exhibit greater size and feature a centrally incised circle. Additionally, the degree of preserved intricacy on the hair itself is noteworthy. The presence of an elongated and indistinct clay line remains uncertain.

For agriculturalists residing in proximity to rivers, they had a strong affinity for beads, and their female population adorned themselves with lip and ear plugs made of polished quartz. Their domestic pottery exhibited a solid, weighty, and coarse texture, yet it was skillfully fired. Undoubtedly, the terra-cotta sculpture is the most significant aspect of the culture.

The Nok sculptures exhibit a range of scales, encompassing human and animal figures that are a few inches tall, as well as human figures that approach life-size proportions. The human heads were subjected to a highly imaginative treatment, characterised by a significant level of stylization that required the distortion of shapes and proportions. This artistic approach resulted in a notable degree of liveliness and vigour. One notable technique involved representing the head as either a

cylindrical or conical shape, positioned at a sharp angle relative to a vertical cylinder that symbolises the neck. Typically, the limbs and trunk were regarded in a more straightforward manner, as cylindrical structures. Typically, intricate beadwork embellishments were incorporated, such as thick bead rolls encircling the neck, bracelets, anklets, and elaborate tassels and pendants. Simultaneously, certain details were rendered in a naturalistic manner, emulating nature. For instance, the lips in one piece or the nose in another. Overall, the animal sculptures exhibit a notably higher degree of naturalism compared to the human figures. The majority of Nok sculpture pieces were stumbled upon, primarily during the process of tin-mining. The artefacts were typically transported from the riverside settlements to the water and integrated into the river's gravel bed. The Katsina Ala site appears to have served as a sacred grove, while the location of one of the Nok villages has been identified in Taruga, near Abuja. The Nok culture likely had a broader geographical reach than currently documented, and it likely persisted for a significant period beyond the second century A.D.

The examination of contemporary art styles in West Africa indicates that a significant number of these styles can be traced back to the Nok culture, or at the very least, to a sculptural tradition that is unique in its ancient origins. Certain Nok terra-cottas exhibit distinctive attributes associated with wood-carving, while numerous diminutive and fragile stone adze heads, well-suited for wood carving, have been unearthed in the same deposits. This indicates that the Nok people may have possessed adeptness in wood carving as well. Naturally, this also suggests the potential existence of other modern or even preexisting civilizations engaged in woodcarving, whose sculptures have not endured, yet potentially making a greater impact on the evolution of subsequent artistic styles than Nok. Regardless of any potential loss to the archaeological record, it is evident that a tradition of terracotta sculpture had already been established during the Nok era. This tradition likely continued into later periods and is most notably represented by the terra-cotta sculptures found in Ife [10]. The sculptures of Ife exhibit a strong emphasis on naturalism, while also incorporating conventional and stylized elements. Heads can be conical or cylindrical, while the eyes and ears are typically treated in a conventional manner [11]. The treatment of the human trunk and limbs in the Nok sculptures bears a striking resemblance to the treatment of these anatomical features. Additionally, the Ife sculptures exhibit a plethora of ornamental beadwork that is organised in a manner reminiscent of the Nok figurines. This includes the utilisation of substantial bead rolls to create collars around the neck, bracelets, and anklets, as well as intricate pendants and tassels.

4 Conclusion

The terra-cotta sculptures found in Ife exhibit a notable resemblance to the refined renditions found in Nok, characterised by a notable focus on the naturalistic depiction of the head. These are the sole two cultures we

are aware of, spanning the entirety of Africa, that created terra-cotta sculptures depicting fully formed human figures of nearly life-sized proportions. The terra-cotta sculptures found in various regions of West Africa are predominantly of diminutive proportions, with only the head depicted, if they come close to life size. Hence, there is minimal cause for scepticism regarding the origins of Ife art, which can be traced back to the Nok tradition of terra-cotta sculpture. Once the art of Ife gained recognition within the art community, primarily in 1910 through the contributions of German anthropologist Frobenius, and notably in 1938 with the unearthing of seventeen life-size brass heads in Wunmonije Compounds, the Nok culture remained largely unexplored. The art world as a whole struggled to explain the significance of these significant artworks in a realistic manner, which was in stark contrast to the typical style of African art. However, they bore a superficial resemblance to the Greek and Egyptian traditions that had paved the way for modern European art. Art critics may propose that the creation of these artworks can be attributed to either a European explorer who ventured into Africa or to the influence of early traders on the coast, who imparted knowledge to the Ifes. Frobenius held the belief that the ancient civilizations were of Greek origin, and he believed that the Guinea Coast was the disappeared landmass of Atlantis. He believed that the Greeks had colonised the continent in the Thirteenth Century B.C., but lost contact with it approximately five centuries later. The Ife heads in sculpture deviate significantly from the Greek/European tradition, which relies on meticulous measurement and precise proportion. The cranial morphology of Ife is traditional, as is the manner in which the eyes and ears are adorned. The 1938 finds revealed a distinct African character in the upper half of a figure depicting an Oni, also known as the King of Ife. The size of the head was significantly magnified compared to the rest of the body, accounting for approximately 25% of the estimated total height of the figure. According to Greek and European customs, the head would be positioned at a height that is one-seventh or less of the total height. The observation was initially made by William Fagg, a scholar affiliated with the British Museum. This assertion was subsequently corroborated by the unearthing of complete brass sculptures in 1957 at Ita Yemoo, located on the Ilesha Road in Ife. The observed proportions exhibited similarity, aligning with the proportions observed in Yoruba twin-figures. These proportions unequivocally demonstrate the African origin of the sculptors, as well as the subjects. However, we must still question whether the evidence is sufficiently conclusive and affirmative to assert that no influence from Egypt or Europe played a role in the naturalistic nature of the art. Currently, this research cannot provide a definitive answer, but it does possess multiple pieces of evidence of diverse nature that enable individuals to develop a hypothesis. Ife exhibits robust cultural customs that can be traced back to a preexisting population during the era of Oduduwa, who is commonly attributed with the creation of the world.

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