



Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

# MASQUERADES ON A METALLIC SCULPTURE ODYSSEY

**AN INAUGURAL LECTURE**

Series No. 03/24



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SCULPTURE ODYSSEY**

**An  
Inaugural Lecture**

By

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## **Protocols**

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My ex and current students extracted from all corners of  
the globe without whom I won't have a depository for  
the body of the knowledge that I have acquired

Members of the University Community and adjourning  
villages of Jama'a, Zangon Yalwa and Samaru

Gentlemen of the Press

My family

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

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## **The Foundation of Man and Creation Myths**

Across the globe and over time, every civilization has developed a creation story for itself in its attempts to establish an aboriginal identity for itself. Quite a good number of the civilizations choose to tie their own origins to other civilizations that they consider superior or more popular in terms of military or political superiority, feats in establishment of globally intimidating religions, or races based on skin colour. The story of creation and the origins of man appears to be the story without a beginning and no end, as it continues to be interrogated, challenged and rekindled endlessly by historians, anthropologists, archeologists, theologians and scientists. Sources of data for the origins of man have been divided into the sciences and arts, with each relying on the other whenever it gets to a point of confusion. Scholars have come to contend with all the theories of evolution such as the big bang theory and the sort. Inclusive also are attempts made in the aforementioned areas in the arts and humanities.

There appears to be a clear agreement between the three Abrahamic religions about the origins of man and his first abode in the Garden of Eden located in present day Yemen. There is an agreement of a supreme Deity, who created the first man called Adam and later his female companion know as Eve or Hauwa. The consensus story was that man was created from the soil of the earth.

To bring a Middle Eastern story down to Nigeria, before the advent of the Eastern religions, more than two hundred ethnic groups with distinct languages and a wide range of dialects were original and seemingly aboriginal to the

political space known as Nigeria. Each of them had their own creation story in their individual cosmology, which explained how the first man came into being and multiplied to either give birth to the rest of humanity or specifically their own ethnic group. The three seeming major ethnic groups in Nigeria will be chosen to drive home this analogy. The Yoruba claim to have been products of the mythical Oduduwa who descended from the sky and created the whole universe. The Igbo also claiming aboriginal rights, told the story of Abiama, who is the greatest of deities and principalities who is also known as the Great Deity (Chiukwu), of how he created animals before men and sent animals to wander into the earth to see if the soil was hard enough for humans to inhabit, before he now created humans and placed them on the earth. The Hausa fable is hinged on the arrival of Bayajiddah a prince from the East who came and slaughtered a terrible python at a well in Daura and married from the aboriginal population from whence the fourteen Hausa states were found.

The above are creation stories that the bringers of the Abrahamic religions met at their arrival to the soil of Nigerian aborigines, who had existed before the advent. This account, for it to blend and suit my narratives excludes the recent studies and claims by a good number of the ethnic groups, whose scholars appear to be confused about their aboriginal claims since it appears that every civilization that originates from the Middle East is deemed superior. Deliberately, I have chosen to exclude them from this Inaugural Lecture and rely more on the pre- Abrahamic religious beliefs, which do not in

any form manifest traits of weaker civilizations. This standpoint is reinforced by the established fact that we had Nok, Igbo Ukwu and Ife cultures and other civilizations that were backed by high metal smelting and casting technologies, that equaled and most times preceded the over celebrated Roman and Greek civilizations.

### **The Advent of Sculpture**

When man found himself on earth via the religious, anthropological or scientific creation story, he realized that one big ball of fire would rise from one end of the earth and disappear into the opposite side and the cycle continued. Man also realized that a little liquid from the male specie injected into the female specie gave birth to a new life via offsprings. A lot of seeming magical things were happening to man on his advent into earth. So, man thought that there must be some ethereal or supernatural beings who were in charge and controlling the affairs of earthlings. The nature of man, excluding the biological, is made up of both sociological and political instincts. The sociological component wanted to relate with these forces who were controlling the affairs of the earth, while the political instinct of man desired to control those forces. This point is what I shall describe as the actual era of spiritual enlightenment which I posit was earlier than the popular Era of Enlightenment as opined by renowned scholars. It was at this point that, man's ethereal creative instinct was born in the cave drawings and paintings found in different parts of the world.

Still unsatisfied by the spiritual and magical effects of the cave art, man explored further the creation of graven,

carved or modelled images of humans believing that the supernatural forces possessed human forms like us. This blameless assumption was the only option available to man since creativity naturally draws knowledge from the known to be able to fashion out and address the unknown. Man even allocated ministries to these principalities, to be in charge of basic human needs like fertility, rains, sunshine etc. As the humanoid race developed, other ministries were created to take care of man's secondary needs like wars, political and social authorities. All those images in moulded forms represented each of these principalities. Consequently, this was how man made the gods in his own image and sculpture was born.

This creative aspect of man's existence which started as man's attempt to have tactile relationships with the supernatural forces has over the centuries evolved to become ornamental, a measure of economic prowess and a measure of taste among the elites. Accordingly, sculptures that had hitherto resided in private and public shrines together with other spiritual corners of the society moved into public spaces and transformed to ornamental/decorative objects devoid of any spiritual significance. Today sculpture can be found in public parks, public and private buildings, roundabouts etc.

### **Awka Sculptural Practice**

History has been unkind to the Awka creatives, which dates back to the age of the Igbo Ukwu sculptures. The Awka creative and technological feats as posited by Dike (2013) were known from the Benue bend on the north down to the shores of the Atlantic to the South, then, as

far as to the Edo country of Benin and Yorubaland to the West and to the Annang and Ibibio country to the East. The Awka smiths who specialized in bronze and iron smithing and wood carving were itinerant craftsmen and the forebearers of metal technology in the aforementioned topography. While the Fulani traversed the west and some parts of East Africa to seek out adequate vegetation for their animals, the Awka artists roved the aforementioned areas offering their technological skills. Individual family members would travel out in turns to different areas, to practice their trade only to return after a year or two for their siblings to embark on the same journey. Noteworthy is to mention that some of the Awka artists got stuck in their host communities, because the hosts were not paying for their services or they were paying with beautiful maidens, which led to multiple wives and the artist will have to resort to farming to sustain his evergrowing family, and as a result got stuck and never returned home. Any metalwork was referred to the Awka. One legend had it that, when murder is committed, the Onitsha man would say “Achoba isi ochu, e jee n’Awka, maka na Awka pilu Egbe; nya kpulu mma” meaning: Whoever wishes to trace the origins of murder should go to Awka, because it is the same Awka that fashioned out the machete that also crafted the gun. A good number of the artefacts in Nigeria were named after the location of their first contact with modernity, e.g. Nok terracotta, Ife bronzes and Igbo Ukwu bronzes, the most ridiculous is the supposed art of Igbo Ukwu. The inhabitants of Igbo Ukwu were never known to be craftsmen nor artists. They relied on the peripatetic Awka artists for all their symbols of chieftaincy and nobility. Consequently, according to Boyi

(2019), the finds by Benard Shaw at the Alozie brothers sites in Igbo Ukwu gave the artefacts that were made by Awka artists an Igbo Ukwu nomenclature.



**Fig. 1.** Snail and Leopard, Igbo Ukwu, Nigeria, 9<sup>th</sup> Century.  
<https://www.thoughtco.com/igbo-ukwu-nigeria-site-171378>



**Fig. 2.** Roped Pot. Igbo Ukwu, Nigeria, 9<sup>th</sup> Century.  
<https://thingsnigeria.com/2018/05/08/igbo-ukwu-bronzes-stunning-art-and-unmatched-metallurgy/>



**Fig. 3.** Itchi Mask pendant Igbo Ukwu, Nigeria, 9<sup>th</sup> Century.  
<https://thingsnigeria.com/2018/05/08/igbo-ukwu-bronzes-stunning-art-and-unmatched-metallurgy/>

**Fig. 4.** Wild Hog, Igbo Ukwu, Nigeria, 9<sup>th</sup> Century.  
<https://thingsnigeria.com/2018/05/08/igbo-ukwu-bronzes-stunning-art-and-unmatched-metallurgy/>



I was therefore born as the second and last male child of an Awka engineer who migrated to Kano in the mid-1950s' to work with the Post and Telecommunications (P&T) Department.

The story which I will tell today centers around my ancestry, my contact with the Onitsha and Awka culture that I am maternally and paternally connected and *Kasar Arewa* that nurtured me to manifest the DNA of the Awka artist that came to Arewa, to be retrained for the full Awkaness to be manifest. My paternal grandmother, whom I loved so much because she always gave me succor to escape the hustle and bustle of my maternal home, Onitsha, where we had to take refuge after the demise of my father in 1974, was a very skilled scarecrow maker.

She was not popular for this skill, but I was continuously fascinated by how a contraption made by man could look so much like man himself, and even possess kinetic qualities to scare off birds and monkeys that Awka people inherited as a totem from their forebears.

This grandmother's skill became a source of continuous reminiscence to the point of near horror for me, such that, if I was not drawing or making toys or other contraptions for my friends, I would be restless. This seeming gift to create became manifest when I was admitted into the famous Christ the King College, Onitsha (CKC) in 1975 and failed and repeated Form 1. Notably, Technical Drawing was what was available at CKC instead of Fine Art. Again, I failed at Form 3, my mother who was a

Primary School teacher, was so scandalized that she withdrew me to go and repeat the same class at Uga Boys Secondary School, Uga which was set in the hinterlands of today's Anambra State. The secret behind my poor performance all this while was revealed at Uga Boys Secondary School: Fine Art, which was not offered at CKC Onitsha was just newly introduced at my new school, that was the point where my story changed, the presence of Art in my life gave a magical twist to my hitherto poor performance in school. I became one small champion, doing so well in most of the subjects that we were taught. At my final year, I was appointed the Social Prefect, which was not unconnected to my being the cartoonist for the school magazine.

At the insistence of my mother, I proceeded to the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu, to do Basic Studies, which was an acronym for Advanced Level GCE. One more time, Fine Art was not offered at A' levels, but at the Diploma level. CKC Onitsha repeated itself once more. I spent a better part of my time writing short comedy scripts for NTA Enugu's Saturday Variety Show and featuring with my friend and classmate Ejike Asiegbu that ended up becoming one of the pioneers of Nollywood. The two years elapsed with a not-too-good result.

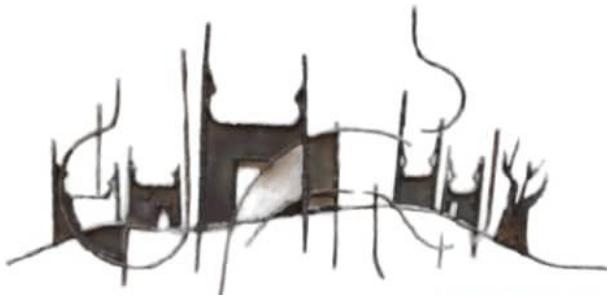
Finally, when the opportunity to study Fine and Applied Arts at the Federal College of Education, Pankshin appeared in 1985, I jumped at it. The Pankshin experience instigated a full creative and intellectual experience for me. Being the youngest male and also most extroverted

student in my class, I was coached by my lecturers to emerge as the best student in my class at the point of graduation. In my last days at Pankshin, I struck friendship with a young recently employed Drawing and Painting lecturer who took so much interest in my work such that two years later when he got employed at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, he encouraged and facilitated my admission into the Department of Fine Art. The young lecturer was Mr. Jacob Jari (now a Professor of Painting). He inducted me into the Zaria Art School, washed off my stiff NCE mentality and handed me over to Mr. Tonie Okpe, (also now a Professor), a sculptor who was using his Boys Quarter as a studio. In no time, I started my mentorship under Tonie Okpe who aside from his lecturing job, was both a practicing studio artist and involved in numberless sculpture commissions. This consistent contact with a young master in no time made me to start being in a hurry to graduate and move into the art market and start making serious money. This never happened, because as soon as I bagged a B.A. Fine Art specializing in sculpture, Tonie Okpe seized my bag, got me a postgraduate form to study for a Masters of Fine Art with specialization in Sculpture. I was also encouraged by him and Jacob Jari to apply for a lecturing position in the department which never came to fruition until after eight years when I was at the middle of my Ph.D in the Art History programme.

### **Sculptural Practice and Teaching**

My educational adventure to Zaria was not my first time of encountering the ancient city, as Zaria was on the route to Kano, my place of birth. However, it was at the point

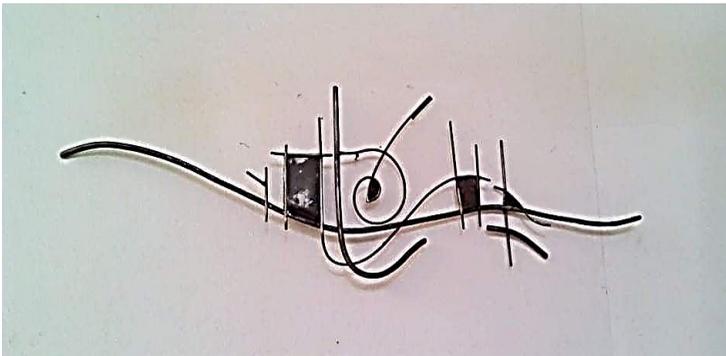
of my choice of a research topic for MFA in Sculpture, that it dawned on my artistic mind that the multitude of baobab trees that created the illusion of soldiers guarding the ancient city of Zaria was being depleted for use as firewood in an oil producing country. That was the major instigator of my research topic. While being a Christian who is enthusiastic about sister religions, I was particularly interested in sculptures that would not offend the religious sensibilities and religiosyncrasies of my host community. Thirdly, it was hoped that, having put all of the above into consideration, the production of these nature of sculptures was going to translate into sales, and financial rewards. At that juncture, I chose mild steel as my medium of expression because of its allure of strength and seeming rigidity. Whether expected financial gains came would be a story for my Valedictory Lecture.



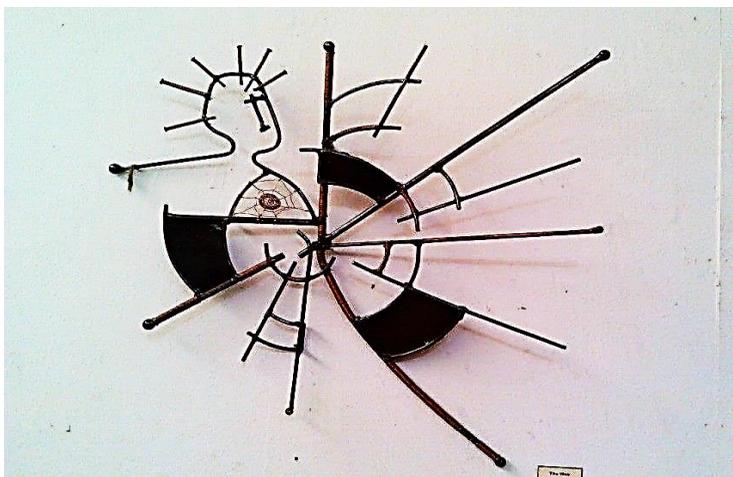
**Plate I.** Kofar Kuyambana Zazau.. Ken Okoli, Mildsteel. 70/108 cm, 2023



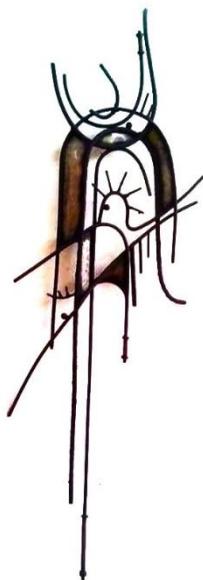
**Plate II.** Kusfa Zazzau. Ken Okoli. Oxidized Mildsteel, 103/93 cm  
2023



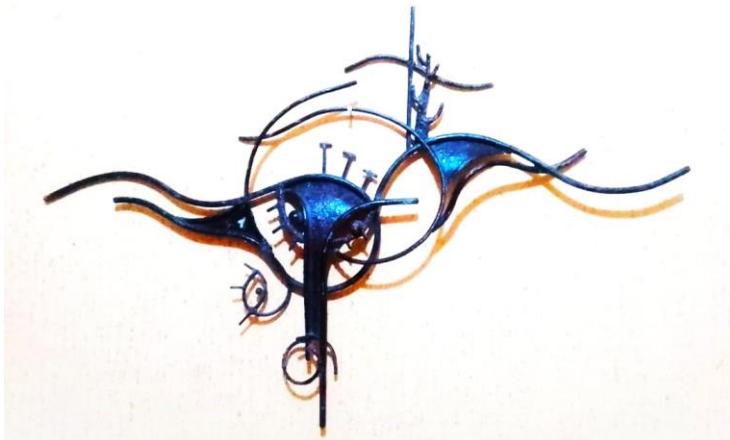
**Plate III.** Music Over the Zaria Landscape. Ken Okoli. Mild Steels.  
2013



**Plate IV.** The Web. Ken Okoli, Mildsteel and Copper wire. 60/58 cm  
2012



**Plate V.** The Fall and Rise. Ken Okoli,  
Mildsteel and Copper wire, 120/68 cm, 2012



**Plate VI.** We are Still Watching. Ken Okoli. Oxidized Mildsteel, 108/72 cm. 2013



**Plate VII.** Kano and Zaria. Ken Okoli. Patinated Mildsteel, 81/38 cm. 2013

I want also to remind us that at my Fiftieth Birthday Celebration (Fifty: Half of A Hundred Exhibition) I cried out once more about our dear baobab trees, and it appeared no one was listening. Thirty six years after my graduation from the Masterclass, I will proudly put up a sincere assessment of my three objectives for the adoption of the Zaria landscape as a research topic.

Firstly, I succeeded in my social commentary about the depletion of the baobab forest around the city of Zaria, because the worst has happened: the baobab trees have and sadly almost completely disappeared from the Zaria landscape. I cried out but no one listened. Secondly, I succeeded in the creation of Islamically tolerable relief sculptures, which was dominated by traditional Hausa architecture and landscape. These sculptures were well received by the few art enthusiasts who have had the opportunity of encountering the sculptures in the several exhibitions that I have participated in. The third component did not meet with the level of expected success. Sales and collection of these sculptures started dwindling at the onset of the security challenges in our side of the divide in Northern Nigeria, due to the exodus of the expatriate population from the North. What was left was a few collectors who still believed that our arts and architectural traditions should not be allowed to die. I slowly swallowed my revolutionary instincts and pride, then allowed human figures to gradually creep into my sculptural compositions. This is a pointer that gradually the beautiful, intricate and ornamental Hausa designs and architecture have been left by the elites to gradually become extinct. Most recent houses built within the city

or the whole metropolis are bereft of any traditional touch in terms of wall mural designs and architecture. Ten years ago, I instigated the Department of Fine Art to embark on what was dubbed a silent visibility project, which entailed students designing and producing Final Year Projects that extolled the activities of various departments, such that such sculptures could be placed in the exteriors of the various departments. It succeeded. A walking tour round the Samaru campus will give credence to this claim. Departments like Mass Communication, Theatre and Performing Arts, Biochemistry, the whole of Faculty of Life Sciences bought this silent initiative. Emboldened by the aforesaid, the “Samaru Project” was again instigated by me. The external wall of the house of Dakace Samaru was chosen for a low relief sculpture. This was achieved under the headship of Professor Gambo Duniya. However, the application of colours was not achieved because of lack of funds.



**Plate VIII.** Low Relief on the *Gidan Dakacen Samaru*. Initiated by Ken Okoli, designed, sponsored and executed by the Staff and Students of the Department of Fine Arts Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. 2017

We can proudly asseverate that, the artwork still stands today as one of the very few reminiscent of traditional Hausa wall decoration.

### **A Visit to Art History**

While I was patiently waiting to be employed by the Department of Fine Arts after a first degree in Sculpture from the same department, I enrolled for and acquired the Master of Fine Art degree in Sculpture. Restless in my quest to teach at the tertiary education level, I enrolled for the Ph.D programme in Art History. Also burning at the same epoch was the status of the Masters in Fine Art MFA, and its equivalence to a Ph.D. I became one of the first set of ‘decampees’ to the struggle and registered for a Ph.D in Art History. This sudden swing away from sculpture was informed by the absence of Ph.D programme in Sculpture in any Nigerian university as at the year 2002. This ambition took my attention to the Contributions of Female Artists to Modern Nigerian Arts, which I have a Ph.D to show for it.

My art historical experience and my mentorship under Professor Daniel Olaniyan Babalola and Professor Ahmed Rufai Saliu to a large expanded my critical thinking and had its resultant effects in my sculptural appreciation and criticism. It further widened my exposure to all the latent areas that sculpture research can explore. Having gotten the degree, I had to quickly run back to my beloved sculpture. Mention worthy is the fact that I had to pay back to Art History by teaching Women in African Arts and 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art, while a good number of staff from the Art History Section were undergoing Masters

and Doctoral programmes. I also supervised and graduated two Ph.D and two M.A. students in Art History.

### **The Nok Experience/Factor**

Recently, a friend asked me if I had surrendered to the fight for the conservation of the Zaria vegetative landscape in my sculptures. My answer was in the affirmative, but I conceitedly announced to him that I have moved southwards, to the land of Nok, after which the famous Nok sculptures were named. There is usually a tendency by man to ignore the intricacies of his immediate environment and rather dwell on the simplicities of others. This is justified by the Uhrobo proverb that, the bush rat has more fat and tastes better than the house rat. In one of my articles based on the African definition of physiognomic beauty, I was able to establish that fat women were more desirable to African aesthetics assessment. I established that inasmuch as beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, individual societies, to a large extent, have their own parameters for the definition of feminine beauty. On my first visit to South Africa in 2016, I could not help stopping myself from appreciating the seeming unique figure of the average Zulu woman. They had small shoulders and heavy hips, such that one wonders how they carry on with their daily physical activities. Interestingly, they are very comfortable with their physique. The fact remained that, the experience never left me until on my return to Nigeria when I encountered but not discovered the Ham women of Southern Kaduna.

These beautiful wonders of creation finally struck my sculptural emotive sensibilities. The drive to explore and represent this exquisite physiognomy in sculptural form became so much that, I had to move into the studio to produce the works that will be viewed for the first time in the exhibition that will follow this Inaugural Lecture. Boyi, (2019) reports that Nok Culture, is one of the oldest sculpture traditions in Black Africa. It takes a notably prominent position in the art of Africa which dates back to 1500 BC and disappeared under unknown circumstances around 500 AD. Its unearthing in 1928 exposed the sculptural tradition of a people thought to have inhabited only the southern divide of Kaduna State. Just recently (2005-2015) Professor Peter Breunig, a German archeologist from the Goethe University Frankfurt, which Jenkiur et al in Boyi, (2019) have relied on for most of their claims, discovered that the Nok culture stretches up to the extremes of Hausaland and Zarma of Niger Republic.

The terracotta sculptures were so named because, Nok village was where one of the initial finds were made. It is made up of basically terracotta pieces of human and animal figures. The rendition of the heads was peculiar and stylistically near cylindrical in shape including the unique spacing between the triangularly rendered eyes and the eye brows were the inimitable stylistic features of the art.



**Fig. 5.** Nok Female Terracotta Figure. circa 1600 BC.  
<http://nigeriansoul.weebly.com/blog/nok-culture>



**Fig. 6.** Seated Nok Terracotta Sculpture found on the Bauchi plateau of Nigeria 1000 BC.  
<https://traffickingculture.org/encyclopedia/case-studies/nok-terracottas/>



**Fig. 7.** Pottery head found at Nok, Nigeria. In the Jos Museum, Nigeria. Height: 21 cm.

Over my almost thirty years of rumination over the Zaria landscape, I realized that the Nok sculpture deserved a renaissance. It is also pertinent to note that, our ancestral sculptors of the Nok era did not represent the real physiognomy of the Nok females. Accepted that most African sculptures in the classical period were stylized, however, they still bore some distinct physiognomics of the peculiar character of the people that they were representing in three dimensional forms. It could have also been possible that the genetics of the Ham women have been tampered with by intermarriages and cross-fertilization with other cultures which might have resulted in their current physiognomy. Be it as it may, this intervention from a non-aboriginal, a college trained Twenty First century sculptor, a sculptor with a sculptural ancestry, a professor, a different hand, and a different perspective will update the Nok history and sculpture practice. I will emphatically state here that the Ham female figures were chosen as subjects and not objects of sculptural aesthetic formal exploration.

So, distinguished ladies and gentlemen of the Ivory Tower, my Inaugural Lecture audience, after One Thousand Five hundred and Twenty-Four years of the questionable stoppage of Nok Art, I present to you in bronze, brass and aluminum the Nok Renaissance.



**Plate IX.** Oblation. Ken Okoli. Bronze. 32/26 cm 2024



**Plate X.** Adam and Eve.  
Ken Okoli. Bronze,  
35/38 cm, 2021



**Plate XI.** Bride.  
Ken Okoli.  
Aluminum,  
60/25cm. 2023



**Plate XII.** Relaxation.  
Ken Okoli. Bronze,  
28/26 cm 2024



**Plate XIII.** Bride II, Ken Okoli. Bronze. 37/26 cm, 2023



**Plate XIV.**  
Remembering  
Yesterday, Ken  
Okoli. Bronze.  
2022



**Fig. 5.** Cross of Agades. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agadez\\_Cross](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agadez_Cross)



**Fig 6.** Crosses of Agades. <https://symbolikon.com/downloads/cross-of-agadez-islam-symbol/>

## **Materiality**

Mild steel which superficially appears not malleable has been my basic medium of expression for over three decades. My studio explorations with this material have over time accorded me the ability to apply its use to my work in limitless forms. The recent choice of bronze, brass and aluminum for my recent works was drawn from the arrogance of my Awka ancestry and my exposure to the Zarma and Hausa brass work which were inherited from the Tuaregs. Becker and Nowak (2022) posits that artists from these traditions cast brass and bronze even before the arrival of the Europeans unto the soil of Nigeria. The Trans Saharan Trade had thrived before that dawn. Consequently, when I came to this realization that the son of a lion should not be eating grass, I changed the materiality of my studio explorations from steel to bronze, brass and aluminum which are superior metals. Cire Perdue also known as the lost wax method of casting metals has just been applied by me to cast sculptures in aluminum which is not a popular medium for cire perdue. It should also be of note that, the seeming silence of historians on the brass casting prowess of the Hausa and Zarma as a major historical feat dwarfs these Hausa artists in the histories of bronze and brass sculpture in Nigeria, giving high prominence to Ife, Bini and Igbo Ukwu bronzes. In my use of the age long cire perdue technique, I will not fail to mention the technical contributions of Mallam Aliyu Dosso, who is of Hausa ethnicity whom after retiring from the services of my department as a Technical Officer, was not too tired to guide me and my mentees through the technique and processes of cire perdue.

## **Mentoring and Accompanying Researches**

My academic interest in the culture and spirituality of our people within the confines of Nigeria manifested early during the course of my doctoral research on *The Contributions of Female Artists to Modern Nigerian Arts*, which I should have left for female art historians. I am of the supposition that after I visited the Austrian artist Suzzane Wenger, also known as *Adunni Oloorisa* in her Osogbo home and my tactile encounter with her sculptures at the Osun-Osogbo groves, my perception of African cultures, the science and technology completely changed. I now came to the realization that there were so many components of our culture that our sculptural research hadn't addressed. Consequently, at my attainment of the doctoral degree in Art History, Professor Jacob Jari and I saw the need to start a Ph.D programme in the studio areas of Painting and Sculpture since there was no university in Nigeria that was offering the two areas of specialization at doctoral level. Professor Jari painstakingly drew up the programme, which he passed on to me for my input, and in no time the programme took off and has been running ever since. Having established my interest in the culture of our aboriginal societies, Doctoral and Masters students whose research interests in sculpture stemmed from drawing from the local Nigeria cultures naturally gravitated towards my direction, to be supervised and mentored. I must inform that I also served in the supervisory teams of postgraduate students who chose other areas outside my area of primary interest. I have mentored, supervised and graduated more than twelve Ph.D candidates and a good number of masters degrees.

However, I must make a note of protest at this juncture that the University has been unable to employ any of these budding doctoral and master's students in sculpture. There are five lecturers in the Sculpture Section and all are Professors and would all have retired in the next thirteen years. Who do we hand over these body of knowledge and scholarship that we have been exposed to and acquired over these decades? Who will stand on this podium to deliver another Inaugural Lecture in Sculpture? How will it sound that the Zaria Art School being the premier art school in Nigeria and the space that has the highest collection of public sculptures in Black Africa will not be offering sculpture in the next thirteen years? If these young academics are not employed in the next five years, how long will it take to mentor them to maturity? Thus, started my academic journey through drawing out of the masquerade cults and cultures from indigenous Nigerian ethnic groups. In fact, one of my colleagues at that time believed that a few unfortunate events in the department was instigated by our delving into the study of African cults, symbols and ethereal scholarship. Masquerades amongst most Nigerian ethnic groups are cults which developed from indigenous ancestral worship and spiritism and which served as instruments for entertainment and social control. This scholarship was able to artistically infect a substantial number of my students and we were able to draw from the indigenous cultures of Nigeria to explore sculptural forms. It is pertinent to note that new sculptural forms and styles were derived from these cultures without tampering with their sacredness. Find below the efforts in this direction:



**Plate XIV.** Leche Anthony. Elebo of the Bassa Nge 2018



**Plate XV.** Ifeanyi Asogwa, Omabe of the Nsukka Igbo, 2018



**Plate XVI.** Ephraim Ugochukwu. Ijele of the North Eastern Igbo, 2017



**Plate XVII.** Adebola Adalumo, Ojingido of the Yoruba, 2023



**Plate XVIII.** Peter Anyebe, *Oglinya of the Idoma*, 2022



**Plate XIX.** Clement Adesanya, Ogboni Cult of the Yoruba, 2023

## **Automotive and Kinetic Adventure**

I had developed a hobby for tinkering with machines over the years and this has gradually developed into copying via reverse engineering and fabrication, which later matured into total design and fabrication of fully functional machines. This practice has translated into financial gains as well. The origin of this hobby can be traced back to my days at the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu, where I encountered the “Honomag Habinger”, a Suzuki mini SUV remodeled by Sculptor Okay Ikenegbu a young sculpture lecturer at the Department of Fine and Applied Art.

Consequently, when in 2015, I was approached by Professor Muhammad Dauda, the Head of Department of Mechanical Engineering, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria to Chaperone his students in the Shell Eco Marathon, it was of no surprise to me; I had built a reputation of fabricating and copying small machines for different funtions. Shell Eco Marathon is a platform for students from universities all over the world to design, build and race with energy efficient cars (go carts) to determine the competitor who would go the farthest distance, with the least amount of fuel within a specific time. Why would a non engineer be chosen for a job like this? I was later to learn that most of our Mechanical Engineering colleagues were not just interested in the project. Accordingly, armed with my non-conventional approach to most matters and thinking-outside-the-box mentality, I assembled a team of Technologists led by Engineer Jacob Ager and a handful of students, worked tirelessly and in six weeks, Abucar I was completed and test ran. The team

designed and built the Abucar II, which was flown to Rotterdam in the Netherlands for the competition but could not compete because the Consulate of the Netherlands in Nigeria did not grant visas to the team members.

Despite the teething setbacks, the Shell Eco Marathon Team Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, as we are known, have built several cars and participated in the same competitions in South Africa and even won the Team Spirit Prize in 2017. Currently, the team will be participating in this year's edition in France, which will



**Plate XX.** Members of the Shell Eco Marathon Team Ahmadu Bello University Zaria at the Zwartskop Raceway, Pretoria South Africa with Abucar IV, 2017

I am proud also to reveal that, we have been able to extract an M.A. Industrial Design under my supervision in the area of car body design by Sunday Jonathan titled *Design and Styling of a Micro Car Body using Fabric on Metal Bulk*



**Plate XXI.** Abucar II. Bult by Shell Eco Marathon Team Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, 2016.

My Chaperoning the team availed me the opportunity to bring to bear most importantly my sculptural abilities and secondly, my design and fabrication abilities. The success of the programme is reflected in the confidence that the activities of the team built in the individual student members after graduation. Feedback reaching us at the Shell Chair office reads that former student members are doing well and highly recommended in their places of employment. Engr. Aminu was recently employed at the Nigerian National Center for Automotive Design and Development majorly based on his participation in Shell Eco Marathon Team, Ahmadu Bello University. More importantly, the self-employed ones are even doing better,

Engrs. Jafar Ismail and Mustafa Odege have individually set up private garages, where old vehicles are refurbished and resold. They also have in their employment other class and team mates of theirs in their work shops.

Recently, out of my individual effort, I designed and built a futuristic concept Reverse Tricycle under the Brand name Magudu X, which will be unveiled after this lecture. This project at inception got the blessings of the Department of Mechanical Engineering who offered a workspace and also gave access to heavy technical equipment to my team that was made up of the original Shell Eco Marathon technical team.

### **Public Sculptures**

As mentioned earlier in this lecture, the events that followed my being handed over to Professor Tonie Okpe by Professor Jacob Jari was a non-stop life of mentorship which in my sincere opinion is sought, I would rather say that it has been a period of apprenticeship. This will be further buttressed by my consistent acknowledgement of these two erudite giants of the Ivory Tower in most of my treatises. With benefit of hindsight, my apprenticeship with Professor Okpe did not completely come free of charge to me after the “hand-over ceremony” by Professor Jari. It was cemented by “Studioratism” by both the “Oga” and “apprentice”. Each time Professor Okpe came to the shared studio to work: I was always there doing one thing or the other and he would give me one aspect of the sculpture projects that he was engaged to do for him. Gradually, what would have been an ordinary student-teacher relationship metamorphosed into Oga-

Apprentice, then elder brother-junior, friends and finally colleagues.

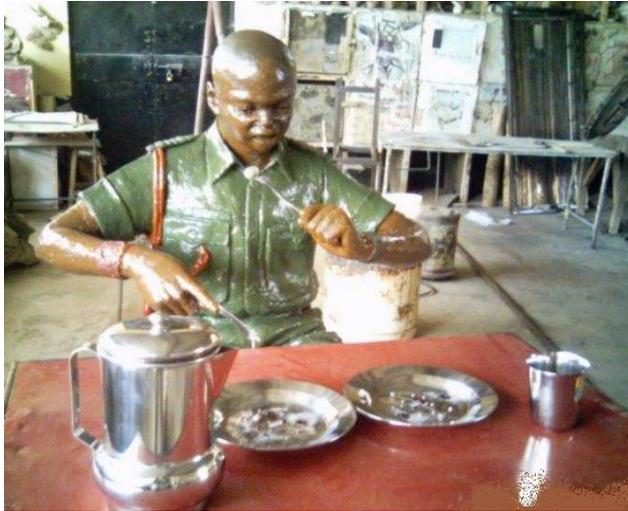
As aforesaid, having trained in the totality of the Zaria Art School sculpture experience and in the private studio of Professor Okpe, I was thus empowered and emboldened to face the world of sculpture commissions with all the intricacies of the financial aspect. The Nigerian Army if critically observed has been consistently one of the major patrons of sculpture in Nigeria. (A doctoral student of mine Bonaventure Iwu who retired recently as a Master Warrant Officer is on the concluding part of his research in this area). I have been enjoying the munificence of the Nigerian Army which consistently engages my professionalism in populating the barrack landscape with sculptures.

I have also been opportune to produce sculptures in other public spaces which space and time would not permit me to mention here. Sculptures have evolved to lose their spiritual functions and have become mostly ornamental and decorative, if not, any visitor, staff or student of Ahmadu Bello University in prehistoric times would have had to bow in submission to the Ahmadu Bello University monument at the Main Gate, which I was detailed to reproduce after it was ill-advisedly demolished. Such persons may also prostrate before “Aspiration” my undergraduate Sculpture project at the main entrance of the Senate Building.



**Plate XXII.** Aspiration. Ken Okoli, 2.8 m. Concrete, Main Entrance, Ahmadu Bello University Senate Building. 1994

In the three years that I served as Consultant to Kaduna State on Abuja Carnival, I was able to raise a team that built one of the most admirable floats but was consistently beaten by Nasarawa State, because we usually applied the ‘fire brigade’ approach by making funds available only thirty six hours before the event, while our major competitors would have at least three months to prepare.



**Plat XXIV.** Feeding Cadet. Ken Okoli. Life Size, Fiberglass, Refectory of the Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna. 2006



**Plate XXIII.** Mascot of the 4<sup>th</sup> Demo Battalion, Ken Okoli. Life Size. Fiberglass, Nigerian Army Cantonment, Jaji. 2020



Plate XXV. Nasarawa. Ken Okoli.  
5.2m. Concrete Doma Road  
Roundabout, Lafia. 2011

Plate XXVI. Boy Soldier.  
Ken Okoli. 1 ½ Life size  
Concrete Nigerian Military  
School, Zaria. 2007



**Plate XXVII.** Centre of Learning-Kaduna Stat float. Ken Okoli. 13.4/4m, Trailer, Fabric and Wood Abuja Abuja Carnival, 2009



**Plate XXVIII.** Ahmadu Bello University Monument, Main Gate. Samaru Campus, Original Produced 1985, Remodeled by Ken Okoli, 2022. Concrete 3.3/4.1m



**Plate XXIX.** GT Bank, Relief Sculpture, 2021, executed by Ken Okoli. Ahmadu Bello University, Samaru, Zaria. Fiberglass on Concrete base 2 /8m

## **Propositions**

The theory of Natural Synthesis as propounded by the Zaria Art Society still vibrates in my ears. It insists that there is no better place for an artist to draw his artistic inspirations if not his immediate locality. This, I have done in my sculptural journey and encourage upcoming sculptors to imbibe the same.

At different epochs of my academic adventure, I have struck the relevance of sculpture to Landscape design in Architecture, a course that I designed and thought for two years. I have also taught Introduction to Technical

Theatre, in the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts. My sculptural intervention in the Shell Eco Marathon project in the Faculty of Engineering, though powered by my extra-technical skills stands out as another interdisciplinary feat in my gadfly journey in the academics. Drawing from the aforementioned, it recommended that the interdisciplinary approach should be consistently encouraged for greater academic output.

### **Conclusions**

In this lecture, I humbly submitted my contention about the inexhaustible debate about the origins of man, that has not gotten to any conclusion. I raised also the spiritual advent of sculpture and man's socio-political ambition to create gods in his own image and probably control them through the creation of their images in sculpture. I identified with my Awka sculptural ancestry, which I migrated to Zaria to fully accomplish. Mentioned also was my contact with my scarecrow making grandmother. The aforementioned formed the driving force into my artistic adventure and tutelage to tertiary education level. My academic and sculptural apprenticeship under my guru, Professor Tonie Okpe, to a large degree informed my sculptural practice and mentoring of my students in general. The supposed mysticism of our Indigenous masquerade cults were not demystified but aspects of their practice were pinched for sculptural exploration by students under my mentorship. My sculptural odyssey, took me through the baobab depleted Zaria landscape down to Ham land, where the fascination for the peculiar physiognomy of the females caught my attention. I also stated that the spirit of the style of the classical Nok

sculpture could not allow me to rest. I had to bring back those spirits and a renaissance of Nok sculptures has been established.

Pertinent of mention, was the materiality and medium of my sculptural explorations, which dwelt in metals of varying richness. I surpassed terracotta as the medium of the Nok sculpture and upgraded it to bronze, brass and aluminum. I registered researches that drew from Nigerian masquerade practice to establish an extension of the spirit of Natural Synthesis as propounded by the Zaria Art Society in the contemporary sculpture lexicon.

The indigenous Nigerian automotive sector will not also forget our impact in raising graduates of Mechanical Engineering and Fine Art students in the area of the design, building and racing with cars produced by our students. The interdisciplinary nature of car design that Nigerian Engineers appear to have been shying away from was “demystified” by the Fine Art members of the team, who designed and built the car bodies and interiors.

My engagement in the production of sculpture for public spaces and building of Festival floats did not only enrich my sculptural practice, it most importantly enhanced my students’ experience. I will not fail to mention that just as I was a studio hand in Professor Tonie Okpe’s studio, I in turn engaged my students (undergraduate and postgraduate) in all my public sculptures which translated to both hands on, field knowledge and financial gains for them. It accorded them the hope that their choice of sculpture as a field of study was not wrong. Every public

sculpture bears the image and the spirit of the artist that made it. I thank Nigeria for helping me distribute my sculptural “virus” all through our land. At an epoch of my academic journey, my restless interloping into other specialization areas was high but sculpture still called me back home. I might not be a Chinua Achebe, but like Cyprain Ekwensi who in modern times wrote classical fiction of the Fulani (Passport of Mallam Ilya, Burning Grass etc) have I not sculpted a contemporary history of the people of Kaduna State?

The most favorite adage of the current Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria to people who reside in different parts of the country other than their places of origin is “*Onye fee ani, ani agozie nya*” meaning; if you worship the land, the land will bless you. I have worshipped the land of Zaria, and she has blessed me.

**Thank you.**

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