CONSTRUING A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NORTHWESTERN NIGERIA TERRACOTTA SCULPTURES AND THOSE OF NOK

BY M. O. HAMBOLU

National Commission for Museums and Monuments - Nigeria
Map of sites mentioned in the presentation
INTRODUCTION

• Terracotta sculptures have been discovered from several culture areas of Nigeria the more prominent ones being Nok, Ife, Sokoto/Katsina (NW) and Calabar.
• Based on the present state of our knowledge, Nok is the oldest, with the Northwestern terracotta sites being their near contemporaries. Terracotta sculptures from Calabar area are older than those of Ife.
• In this presentation, because of the relative geographical contiguity and the chronological closeness between Nok and the Northwestern terracotta sculptures, an attempt is being made to compare the two sculptural traditions in terms of style, motifs, techniques of production, archaeological contexts, intra and inter site relationships and dates.
• It is believed that this long-term endeavour, would contribute towards an understanding of the nature of relationships among societies that flourished in the Nigerian region during the first millennium BC and first millennium AD.
ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH IN THE NOK CULTURE AREA

• Terracotta sculptures from the Nok region have been brought to the limelight through three principal means, namely, accidental discoveries, archaeological excavations and illegal diggings.

• In conducting this comparative analysis, we shall – though unfortunate – utilize all sources to enable us have large data to work with.

• While the ongoing archaeological work by Breunig’s team is increasing our understanding of the Nok sculptures and the societies that produced them, we shall also utilize the work of Boullier who analyzed about a thousand terracotta sculptures that were looted out of Nigeria to understand their styles, techniques of production and motifs etc.
SUMMARY OF NOK FINDINGS

• In addition to what is already known about Nok sculptures (Fagg, Fagg, Jemkur and Bitiyong), the on-going work by Breunig’s team is contributing immensely to a better understanding of associated materials, the context of their production and use.

• We are gaining more information about sites’ stratigraphy, associated pottery, stone artefacts, metals, burnt clay, archaeo-botanical remains and indeed terracotta sculptures also (Rupp and Breunig).

• Pooling of more dates has increased the certainty of the central cluster of dates for the Nok Culture.
NORTWESTERN NIGERIA TERRACOTTA SITES.

- Widespread at the Northwestern part of Nigeria are Terracotta sites that have been ravaged by illegal diggers. The sculptures are known to the art market world as Katsina/Sokoto terracottas.
- Recent efforts at making the best out of a bad situation by conducting archaeological surveys and scientific excavations have produced some modest results.
Summary of Activities and Research in the NW Nigeria Terracotta Sites

(On the heels, between, and amidst illegal excavations)

• **NCMM projects:** Preliminary surveys of illegal diggings were followed by excavations in the year 2000.

• **Patrick Darling:** Conducted *post hoc* research on the looting, including reviewing pictures of exported sculptures with illegal diggers.

• **Ahmadu Bello University:** Several seasons of field schools and individual archaeological research carried out.

• **Hambolu and Breunig:** Conducted surveys and excavations in 2005 and 2006.
Interim Reports

- Data and dates from Tsunkwui and from Tsauni Lamba where terracotta sculptures were recovered through archaeological excavations (2000 & 2005).
- Descriptions, pictures, retrieved sculptures & associated materials and deductions from ravaged sites like Gwarzo, Faskari, Tsauni Machika and Kwatarkwashi.
- Constructed panorama of northwestern Nigeria terracotta sculptures and associated cultural manifestations.
- Comparing NW data and interpretation with Nok terracotta sites (2003).
DATES FROM NORTHWEST SITES

• While a date of 3,337± 39 Bp obtained at one of the sites (Tsunkwui) led to a tentative belief that we might be dealing with the antecedents of the more sophisticated and more developed Nok terracotta sculptures, another date 1555±38 Bp from another site (Tsauni Lamba) has modified the initial assumption but confirms that the two artistic traditions were at least contemporaneous at some points in time.
PLANS

• Albeit, while more excavations are certainly called for and are being planned in collaboration with J.W Goethe Universität team, we can begin to attempt to compare the two seemingly disparate traditions.
ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

• The urge to attempt comparison with the well-known and better researched “Nok sculptural traditions” stems from the realization that there are striking similarities in the environmental contexts in which these materials have been discovered.

• The most productive sites have been associated with hills, hillocks or foot of such hills. The significance of this, though still being investigated, must not be underestimated.

• The sites are also generally remote from present day settlements, thus, those sites must have been some sort of enclaves.

• Not too much materials that could be said to indicate habitation sites have been recovered from both Nok and northwest. So not too far fetched to assert that those were sites away from day to day activity zones.
Linguistic evidence

• Though archaeologists are sometimes skeptical of linguistic data, a broad view of distribution of language families in Northern Nigeria in conjunction with early historical data suggests that the occupants of the two regions belong to the same group viz Benue-Congo, notwithstanding the fact that the present occupants of Northwestern Nigeria are Hausa speakers.
COMPARISON OF THE TERRACOTTA SCULPTURES

• The items listed below would form the basis of large-scale comparison of the two terracotta sculpture producing regions:

  o A Style
  o B Motifs
  o C Techniques
  o D Distribution
  o E Context
  o F Dates
Associated materials with terracotta finds

Metals
- Evidence of iron working not usually far from the terracotta sites.
- At both cluster of sites we have large quantities of bangles.
- It is fairly safe to say that terracotta sites are closely associated with iron workers, both smelters and smithers.

Pottery
- Not large quantity of domestic pottery.
- Limited variation in vessel types.
- All Iron age pottery.

Bones
- No large quantity of bones. Either human or animal.

Plant remains
- Cannot be compared, as such materials have not been recovered from the northwest. We however have exciting reports coming out of the work at Nok sites.
One of the well-known Nok pieces
Nok Terracotta Sculptures

Nok Head. NCMM collection.  Decorated Trunk. NCMM coll.
Nok Terracotta Sculptures & Objects

Breunig et al 2006

Breunig's Team Excavation
Northwestern Nigeria Terracotta

Multiple Heads

Single Head

In the custody of NCMM
Northwestern Nigeria Terracotta sculpture

In NCMM Custody
Northwest Terracotta sculpture in the international art market
Northwest terracotta in the international art market
Janus-headed male-female northwestern terracotta sculpture in the custody of NCMM
Two views of a terracotta human figure in the custody of NCMM
Two views of a stylized object from the Northwest in the custody of NCMM
A multi-faced object from the Northwest in the custody of NCMM
IMPRESSIONS

• The total impression one gets from the Northwestern Nigeria sites is that of basic similarity with Nok in terms of archeological content and context of the finds. What however differs is the artistic skill and range of representations.

• More investigation should throw further light on the purpose of the terracotta sculptures, the societies that produced them, and their relationship to other centres of artistic production during the Early Iron Age of Nigeria and indeed neighbouring countries like Niger and Burkina Faso.
Short Bibliography


• Hambolu, M.O. (2005) *Northwestern Nigerian Terracotta Sculptures; Antecedants of Nok?* in Nyame Akuma Dec 2005

APPRECIATION

• SAFA
• GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT
• NCMM