

This article explores the religious significance of Nok artefacts, specifically the terracotta sculptures. It is intended to appear in an encyclopaedia entitled An Encyclopaedia of the Anthropology of Religion, which covers a range of concepts and terms relating to religion, philosophy, and spirituality as discussed through an anthropological lens. The encyclopaedia is intended for a broad audience from school aged children to lifelong learners. Although there are various artefacts dated to the Nok period, this article focuses solely on the terracotta sculptures due to its limited scope.

Nok Terracotta Sculptures



Figure 1 *Nok Terracotta Bust of a Woman, 500 BCE - 200 CE* (Barakat Gallery, 2025)

Introduction

Nok Culture refers to an ancient African civilization which occupied an area in what is now known as Nigeria. The Nok Culture was originally dated between 500 BCE and 200 CE by a process of radiocarbon and thermoluminescence dating of artefacts. However, radiocarbon dates on charcoal from the interior of some terracotta sculptures indicate a

slightly earlier start and end, approximately 800-200 BCE (Lei, 2024, p.1). The term “Nok Culture” was coined by British archeologist Bernard Fagg (Breunig and Rupp, 2016, p.238). In the middle of the 20th century, Fagg discovered a number of terracotta sculptures, much like the one depicted in figure 1, in the village of Nok which depicted anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. In the following years, approximately 150 fragments of the terracotta sculptures were excavated and in 1977 Fagg published the collection along with a date estimation of the Nok Culture and the hypothesized function and interpretations of the sculptures (2016, p.238). Other materials such as iron, pottery, and stone artefacts were also excavated. It is arguably the terracotta sculptures, however, that are most notable.

The refined level of artistic expression and uniqueness of the sculptures led to the hypothesis that the Nok Culture represents one of the earliest examples of complex societies in sub-Saharan Africa (2016, p.241). The terracotta sculptures depict three different types of beings: human, animal, and an anthropomorphic combination of the two (Boyi, 2025, p.11). It is believed they were created to fulfil social or religious purposes, and that many of the terracotta sculptures represent ancestors (2025, p.11). The terracotta sculptures have intrigued numerous scholars who have set out to interpret the figurines from various perspectives such as art (Chesi and Merzeder, 2006), (Visonà, 2001), archeology (Breunig, 2014), (Fagg, 1969), as well as philosophy, religion, and spirituality (Boyi, 2025).

Ritual use

Scholars suggest that the terracotta sculptures may have had religious significance (Baum, 2024, p.175). In relation to their proposed religious significance, some theories suggest they functioned as ritual objects. For example, they may have been used to encourage fertility of the land (2024, p.175). Some of the sculptures have been uncovered in or on top of graves, suggesting they may have been grave objects or used in funerary rites (2024, p.175). Fagg, as cited by Baum (2024, p.176) suggests that some sculptures may have been used in healing rituals, possibly to offer libations to appease the forces which have caused affliction. Sculptures were produced in various

sizes which indicate a range of purposes (Lei, 2024, p.3). Sizes range from figures of just a few inches tall to human-like figures approaching life size (2024, p.3). Smaller figures may have been used as charms or amulets, whilst larger figures may have been placed in spiritual environments or used in ceremonies. There are numerous theories debating their precise function, and whilst this remains uncertain, there is evidence to suggest that the sculptures certainly possessed a purpose.

The terracotta sculptures we see today have been reassembled from the shattered fragments which were discovered during excavations (Boyi, 2025, p.18). One might presume that the sculptures broke into pieces over time. Archeologists however suggest that the sculptures may have been deliberately shattered and buried in a ritualistic context (Breunig and Rupp, 2016, p.241). For example, the purposeful destruction could be to mark the end of their use as ritual objects (Männel and Breunig, 2016, p.327). Alternatively, they may have been broken and buried with the dead in order to accompany the deceased into the afterlife (Grinsell, 1961, p.476). Furthermore, some pieces have been found surrounded by large amounts of millet seeds, interpreted by some as a religious offering (Richard, 2013, p.10). Although scholars can only speculate about the sculptures' precise function, evidence indicates they were ritual objects, supporting the idea of spiritual practices in Nok culture.



Figure 2 *Nok sculpture of a seated man, 100 BCE - 300 CE (Barakat Gallery, 2025)*

Positions

The sculptures themselves provide many clues as to their meaning and function, such as the position or attire of the figure. Figure 2 depicts a seated man adorned in a number of ornamental items such as armbands, bracelets, anklets, a large collar, and what appears to be a headdress. This indicates a form of ceremonial dressing which suggests that the Nok were a ritualistic society, and that the function of the sculpture may have been ritualistic rather than profane. The elongated head of the figure could be a symbolic abstraction to indicate that the subject is a man of revered status or spiritual power. The figure could perhaps be depicting a chief, an ancestor, or a shaman. His seated position is likely of significance. Nok sculptures provide the oldest depictions of seated humans in sub-Saharan Africa (de Grunne, 2016, p.5), and this position is represented in nearly half of Nok sculptures (2016, p.7). This particular depiction of the head resting on the knee is used only for figures depicting men, whereas women are depicted with a straight posture (2016, p.7). It is interesting to note this gender divide as it illustrates that the positions of the figures are symbolic and meaningful rather than

arbitrary. In certain African art styles, the seated position is an uncommon one and thus indicates power and prestige (2016, p.9). Due to the prevalence of this position in Nok sculptures, however, it is more likely a representation of ancestors, of which there are presumably numerous. The seated position is an inactive one so it would be a logical representation of the deceased.



Figure 3 *Nok Terracotta Jar Depicting Siamese Twins*, 500 BCE - 200 CE (Barakat Gallery, 2025)

Figure 3 shows a terracotta jar featuring a Janus figure, meaning a figure with two heads or bodies facing opposite directions (Sydow, 1932, p.14). The Janus motif is a familiar one in African sculptures (1932, p.14), which has elicited a number of varying interpretations. It has been suggested that the abstract figure could represent “dream-like clairvoyance and waking conscious thought” (1932, p.26). In other words, it could represent one head peering into the supernatural realm, the forgotten past and the unknown future, whilst the other head remains grounded in the present. Further to

the natural and supernatural, the duality of the figure could represent various binaries such as light and dark, female and male, or living and dead. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the Janus motif may serve a religious function, used to represent deities or ancestors in order to receive libations for fertility, good health, or prosperity (Boyi, 2025, p.16).

Anthropomorphism

Many of the terracotta sculptures are anthropomorphic figures. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics onto non-human things such as animals, objects, or deities (Westh, 2013). It is a tendency exhibited in religions worldwide (2013). Anthropologist Stewart Guthrie famously argued that religion *is* anthropomorphism (Guthrie, 2020, p.48). He suggests that the tendency to anthropomorphize is an evolved cognitive strategy intended to resolve uncertainty (2020, p.48). For example, to misinterpret a shadow as a predator is inconsequential, but to misinterpret a predator as merely a shadow could be fatal. Consequently, it is always better to perceive a living being where there is none, than vice versa. This predisposition results in our interpretation of the world being highly personified (2020, p.49). As such, Guthrie suggests that anthropomorphism is at the root of religion. He states that “we may thus describe religion substantively as a relatively systematized and shared attribution of personhood to nonhuman things and events” (2020, p.49). Simply put, religion is a structured system which is the result of our shared tendency to project human-like characteristics onto non-human things.

The projection of human-like qualities onto the sculptures is obvious and direct, as the sculptures typically depict human beings. Some scholars suggest that the humanistic figures are intended to portray ancestors, and that they were made with anthropomorphic forms in order to strengthen religious practice (Boyi, 2025, p.11). The possible depiction of once living, real people in the sculptures may assign a sense of power and agency to the figures that may not be so profound in other art objects. Anthropologist Alfred Gell famously argued that art objects possess a form of social agency and that art objects used in religious contexts are especially personified (1998,

p.96). Gell (1998, p.6) defines art as a “system of action”. As such, he views art objects as active agents in social processes rather than passive pawns to be interpreted by others. Gell (1998, p.222) suggests that the essence of a person can exist in objects, perpetuating the individual’s influence and agency long after their death. In the case of the terracotta sculptures, the figures may possess the essence of ancestors, allowing their continued presence to instigate change by receiving libations, facilitating ritual practices, or offering guidance, spiritual wisdom, and protection. Overall, the anthropomorphized nature of the sculptures is a strong indication that they possessed a purpose far beyond aesthetic, one that was likely spiritual or religious. The idea that the sculptures have agency is further supported by the notable impact the artefacts have made in the world of art and academia, and their continued influence on those who study and admire them.

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