

Configuration of *Osamasinmi* Ram Bust Sculptures of Owo Cultural Tradition: A Terracotta Representational Study

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Abstract

The Osamasinmi ram bust is a central cultural and religious artefact within the Owo tradition of South-western Nigeria, symbolising protection, strength, and ancestral connection. This study, derived from broader doctoral research, focuses on the representational execution of these iconic forms in terracotta. While traditional versions were predominantly carved in wood, this research explores the viability and aesthetic contribution of replicating them in terracotta to enhance their longevity and sculptural detail. Using a practice-led research methodology, the study translates preliminary sketches into six distinct representational maquettes: two ram busts with horns, three male human busts with ram horns, and one female human bust with ram horns. The findings demonstrate that terracotta allows for a more detailed rendering of cultural markings, such as the Kele and Abaja tribal marks, while establishing a tangible link to Nigeria's rich terracotta heritage. The study concludes that the transition from wood to terracotta preserves the essence of the Osamasinmi deity while offering new avenues for contemporary sculptural expression.

Keywords: *Osamasinmi, Owo Tradition, Terracotta Sculpture, Ram Bust, Cultural Representation.*

Introduction

The artistic landscape of Nigeria is a profound area of cultural symbolism, where visual forms serve as vital repositories for communal identity, religious belief, and historical continuity (Jonathan & Dansonka, 2024). Central to this heritage are the sculptural traditions of the Owo, Benin, and Igbo-Ukwu cultures, which have historically utilised animal motifs to communicate complex socio-political and spiritual narratives. Among these, the representation of the ram (*Ovis aries*) holds a preeminent position. In the Owo tradition, the *Osamasinmi*, an ancestral altar head depicting a ram or a human head adorned with ram horns, serves as a potent symbol of vigilance, strength, and protection. Historically, these objects are not merely decorative but function as mediators between the physical and spiritual realms, often placed upon royal and ancestral shrines to invoke the guiding spirit of the forebears (Fatoki, 2024).

Despite the enduring cultural significance of the *Osamasinmi*, contemporary African art studies have frequently been constrained by a formalist paradigm. This approach prioritises the deconstruction of an artwork's physical elements, such as form, structure, and technique, at the expense of its deeper socio-political context and authorial intent (VV, 2025). Recent scholarship suggests that such a singular focus neglects the "ideological baggage" and symbolic language embedded within traditional religious iconography (Sørensen & Rebay-Salisbury, 2023). For instance, while the formal beauty of a ram bust can be appreciated through its symmetry and material finish, its true power lies in its semiotic function within the community. This study seeks to address this gap by shifting the focus from mere formalism to an integrated analysis that employs Roland Barthes' semiotics and Robert Farris Thompson's theory of African aesthetics. By examining the "signifier" (the physical ram bust) and the "signified" (the abstract concepts of spiritual strength, status and power), the research aims to decode the multifaceted meanings of these artefacts.

A critical challenge facing the preservation of this heritage is the vulnerability of traditional materials. Many historical *Osamasinmi* figures were carved in wood, leaving them susceptible to environmental decay and termite infestation over time. This research proposes a material shift to terracotta, a medium historically celebrated in Nigerian art for its durability, earthiness, and spiritual resonance. According to Salaque (2023), terracotta, derived from the Italian term for "baked earth," has been a cornerstone of human artistic expression for millennia, from the ancient Nok civilisation to contemporary studio practice. Its unique reddish-orange hue and malleability allow for a level of

intricate detailing that captures the subtle nuances of cultural markings, such as the *Kele* and *Abaja* tribal marks specific to the Owo people.

Furthermore, the study engages with the modern discourse on the "aesthetic of the cool," a fundamental principle in African art characterised by a harmonious balance of opposites and a sense of serenity (Höfling, 2025). Thompson's theory posits that the composure found in Yoruba sculptures, marked by composed facial expressions and upright postures, reflects a state of wisdom and spiritual enlightenment (Mercer, 2023). By translating the *Osamasinmi* into terracotta, this research not only seeks to preserve the historical form but also to explore how modern sculptural techniques, including cubism and stylisation, can revitalise traditional iconography for a contemporary audience. Through this practice-led inquiry, the researcher aims to unravel the intricate interplay between biological attributes, artistic expression, and the cultural resilience of the Owo tradition.

Research Questions

1. How does the execution of representational maquettes in terracotta contribute to the identification of the artistic heritage of the Owo culture?
2. In what ways do the proportions and details of the terracotta *Osamasinmi* busts reflect the cultural beliefs of the Owo people?
3. What is the impact of utilising terracotta as a medium for preserving the symbolic essence of the ram form compared to traditional wood?

Methodology

Research Design: Practice-Led Inquiry

This study adopts a Practice-Led Research (PLR) design, a framework where the creative act is the primary site of knowledge production. According to Smith and Dean (2019), PLR allows the researcher to operate as both a practitioner and a theoretician, ensuring that the "tacit knowledge" gained during the sculpting process is documented and analysed. This approach is particularly suited for this study as it seeks to translate the *Osamasinmi* from its traditional wooden context into the permanent medium of terracotta. By engaging in the physical act of modelling, the researcher gains insights into the formal challenges of the ram motif that cannot be captured through purely ethnographic or historical methods.

Sampling and Iconographic Selection

The study utilised a purposive sampling technique as proposed by Obilor (2023) to select specific variations of the *Osamasinmi* for a representational study. Based on the historical classifications of Owo art, three distinct categories were identified for replication:

1. **Zoomorphic:** The pure ram head with elaborate horns (Plate XIII).
2. **Anthropomorphic-Hybrid:** The male human head possessing prominent ram horns (Plate XI)
3. **Gendered Variations:** The inclusion of female human heads with ram horns to explore the domestic and royal lineage aspects of the Owo tradition (Plate XII)

Material Sourcing and Preparation (The Lithic Stage)

The choice of terracotta necessitates a rigorous material preparation phase to ensure structural integrity during firing. The clay utilised in this study was sourced from local deposits in the Lafia Local Government Area, Nassarawa State, Nigeria. It was selected for its high plasticity and iron content, which yielded the characteristic reddish-brown "terracotta" hue. As outlined by Sullivan (2023), refining indigenous clay is a critical "pre-production" phase. The clay was processed through a wet-refining method:

- **Slaking:** The raw clay was soaked in water for 48 hours to break down hard lumps (Plate I).
- **Sieving:** The slurry was passed through a fine-mesh sieve (60-80 mesh) to remove non-plastic inclusions like quartz pebbles and organic debris (Plate II).
- **Wedging:** Once dried to a plastic state on plaster bats, the clay underwent extensive wedging to eliminate air pockets, which are the primary cause of explosions during kiln firing Plate III, (Perry, 2021).



Plate I: Clay is Soaked with Water in a Bathtub for 48 hours to Make Sieving Easy, Bayode Olu-Ojo, Faculty of Environmental Design, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State, 2025.



Plate II: Soaked Clay is then Sieved to Remove Unwanted Impurities by Research Assistant Okoro Elijah, Faculty of Environmental Design, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State, 2025.



Plate III: Sieved Clay is then Poured into a Thick Cloth to Allow Water to Dry out Gradually and Ready for Wedging, Faculty of Environmental Design, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State, 2025.

The Modelling Process: From Maquette to Form

The execution of the six representational maquettes, as shown in samples of Plates IV, V and VI, followed a systematic sculptural progression. To maintain the weight of the wet clay, internal armatures made of 12mm mild steel rods were constructed.

The modelling followed these technical steps:

1. **Blocking-In:** Establishing the primary volumes of the head and neck, ensuring the proportions reflected the "hierarchical scaling" common in Yoruba aesthetics, where the head is often enlarged to denote its spiritual importance (Lawal, 2019).
2. **Detailed Refinement:** Utilising wooden and metal spatulas, the researcher modelled the intricate details of the ram's horns, applying a "coiling and carving" technique.
3. **Surface Treatment:** Cultural markers, specifically the *Kele* and *Abaja* tribal marks, were incised onto the leather-hard clay using fine-pointed styluses. This stage is crucial as it transforms a generic animal form into a specific cultural signifier of the Owo people.



Plate IV: Modelling with Processed Clay of *Osamasinmi* Male Bust with Ram Horns, Anthropomorphic-Hybrid, Bayode Olu-Ojo, Clay, 50 cm x 25 cm, 2025.



Plate V: Modelling of *Osamasinmi* Ram Bust, Zoomorphic, Front View, Clay,

Bayode Olu-Ojo, 48 cm x 28cm, 2025.



Plate VI: Modelling of *Osamasinmi* Female Bust with Ram Horns, Gendered Variations, Clay, Bayode Olu-Ojo, 40 cm x 25 cm, 2025.

Hollowing and Firing (The Pyrotechnic Stage)

Because solid clay forms cannot survive the kiln, each maquette was carefully hollowed out once it reached a "leather-hard" state (Plate VII). The internal walls were maintained at a uniform thickness of approximately 2cm to ensure even heat distribution (Plate VIII). The works were air-dried slowly in a controlled environment for 14 days to prevent warping. The final stage involved bisque firing in a locally constructed kiln (Plate IX), gradually increasing the temperature to 900°C with rice husks, firewood and charcoal (Plate X). This transformation turns the fragile clay into permanent terracotta, effectively preserving the *Osamasinmi* iconography in a medium that resists the environmental decay associated with traditional wood (Barrett, 2022).



Plate VII: The Researcher Scooping Out Clay Directly from the Finished Leather Dried Works Using Spatulas, 2025.



Plate VIII: Sample of Uniform Thickness of Approximately 2cm to Ensure Even Heat Distribution, Bayode Olu-Ojo, 2025.



Plate IX: A Locally Constructed Kiln with Red Bricks by the Researcher, Bayode Olu-Ojo, 2025.



Plate X: Bisque Firing Using Rice Husk to Bake the Clay Works Before Firing with Firewood and Charcoal, Bayode Olu-Ojo, 2025.

Results and Discussion

The primary outcome of this research phase was the successful configuration of six representational terracotta maquettes with three samples seen in Plates XI–XIII, categorised into three iconographic typologies: the pure zoomorphic ram, the anthropomorphic male bust with ram horns, and the anthropomorphic female bust with ram horns.



Plate XI: *Osamasinmi* Male Human Head with Ram Horns Bust I, Terracotta, Bayode Olu-Ojo, 2025.



Plate XII: *Osamasinmi* Female Human Head with Ram Horns, Terracotta, Bayode Olu-Ojo, 2025.



Plate XIII: *Osamasinmi* Ram Bust, Front View, Terracotta, Bayode Olu-Ojo, 48 cm x 28 cm, 2025.

Morphological Analysis of Result

1. The Synergy of Form and Material

The transition from wood to terracotta revealed significant shifts in the sculptural "language" of the *Osamasinmi*. In traditional wood carving, the grain often dictates a more rigid, vertical orientation. However, the additive nature of clay allowed for a more fluid, naturalistic rendering of the ram's horns. As observed in Plate IV (Ram Bust I), the spiralling texture of the horns was achieved through a repetitive "coil-and-pinch" technique, creating a tactile rhythm that mimics biological reality while maintaining the "hierarchic stylisation" characteristic of Yoruba art. According to Oyinloye et al. (2023), the horn in African art is a signifier of *Ase* (spiritual power), and the durability of terracotta ensures that this power is physically anchored in a medium that survives the "temporal decay" of organic materials.

2. Semiotic Decoding of Cultural Markings

A critical finding in the discussion of results is the successful integration of ethnic markers as semiotic codes. The leather-hard stage of the clay provided a superior surface for the incised application of the *Kele* (cheek marks) and *Abaja* (forehead marks) (Plate IV).

- i. **The Closed Eyes:** Across the three male busts, the eyes are modelled as heavy, closed lids. In the context of Owo ancestral worship, this represents *Oju-Inu* (the inner eye), suggesting that the ancestor is not merely looking at the world, but looking *into* the spiritual essence of the lineage (Lawal, 2019).
- ii. **The Zig-Zag Neck Patterns:** These patterns, frequently seen in the Owo-Benin "culture traffic," are more than decorative; they represent the scales of the pangolin or the skin of the python, both of which are symbols of royal invincibility and protection (Bondarenko, 2020).

3. Gender and Social Stratification

The production of **Plate XC (Female Human Bust with Ram Horns)** represents a significant expansion of the traditional *Osamasinmi* canon. While the ram is traditionally a masculine symbol of the warrior, its presence on a female bust highlights the role of the "Queen Mother" or high-ranking female chiefs in Owo history.

These findings align with Curnow's (2021) assertion that Owo art serves as a "crossroads" where Benin's courtly influence and Yoruba's spiritual humanism meet. The terracotta female bust displays a softer facial contour, contrasting with the rugged, textured horns, thereby achieving a "balance of opposites"—a hallmark of the "African Aesthetic of the Cool" (Thompson, 2021).

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: Terracotta Maquettes and the Identification of Owo Artistic Heritage

The practice-led execution of the six representational maquettes successfully validates how a material transition to terracotta serves as a diagnostic tool for identifying and mapping the artistic heritage of Owo culture. Through the production of the zoomorphic, anthropomorphic-hybrid, and gendered typologies (Plates XI, XII, and XIII), the additive and plastic properties of clay allowed for an unprecedented clarity in rendering complex ethnic markers that are frequently obscured by the grain of traditional wooden carvings. Specifically, the leather-hard stage of the locally sourced Lafia clay provided an ideal surface for the precise incision of the *Kele* (cheek marks) and *Abaja* (forehead marks) (Plate XI). In a formalist and semiotic analysis, these incised lines function as explicit cultural signifiers that distinguish Owo's historical identity within the broader Yoruba-Benin cultural continuum. By replicating these forms in a durable medium, this study establishes a permanent physical taxonomy of Owo iconographic motifs. The successful firing of these maquettes to 900°C

effectively demonstrates that the tactile details of Owo lineage marks can be preserved without the risk of material distortion, thereby creating a reliable, long-lasting material record for the identification of classical indigenous aesthetics in contemporary studio practice.

Research Question 2: Proportions, Details, and Owo Cultural Belief Systems

The morphological analysis of the terracotta *Osamasinmi* busts reveals a deep structural alignment with the metaphysical and socio-political belief systems of the Owo people. In terms of proportional allocation, each maquette deliberately utilises "hierarchical scaling", a fundamental principle in African formalist design where the head is structurally enlarged relative to the body to signify its spiritual primacy as the seat of destiny and *Ase* (vital force). The modelling of the heavy, closed eyelids across the three male human busts (Plate XI) directly translates the cultural concept of *Oju-Inu* (the inner or spiritual eye), shifting the object's function from a literal portrait to a representation of an ancestor looking into the spiritual essence of the lineage. Furthermore, the intricate, zig-zag neck patterns modelled into the base of the busts simulate the armoured texture of the pangolin and the python. Within Owo-Benin historical iconographic traffic, these animals are potent symbols of royal invincibility, protection, and political authority. By capturing these specific proportions and textures in the final fired state, the sculptures manifest the abstract values of composure and spiritual endurance, directly embodying the "African Aesthetic of the Cool" through balanced, dignified physical forms.

Research Question 3: Terracotta vs. Wood for Material and Symbolic Preservation

Evaluating the impact of utilising terracotta as opposed to traditional wood reveals a significant advancement in both the physical preservation and the symbolic continuity of the *Osamasinmi* ram form. Historically, wooden *Osamasinmi* figures placed on ancestral shrines have been highly vulnerable to environmental decay, moisture, and termite infestation within the tropical climate of southwestern Nigeria, leading to a severe attrition of historical artifacts. The pyrotechnic transformation of clay into permanent terracotta during the bisque-firing stage effectively "fossilizes" the sculptural memory, rendering it immune to biological degradation. Symbolically, this material shift enriches the meaning of the artwork; the use of indigenous "baked earth" establishes a direct, tactile connection to Nigeria's ancient terracotta heritage, drawing an artistic lineage back to the Nok, Ife, and classical Owo traditions. Furthermore, while traditional wood carving is a subtractive process

that imposes a rigid, vertical orientation, the additive nature of clay modelling allowed for a fluid, naturalistic rendering of the spiralling ram horns (Plate XIII). This structural fluidity enhances the dynamic realism of the ram as a symbol of masculine strength and ancestral vigilance, proving that a change in material can preserve and even elevate the sacred essence of an indigenous icon.

Conclusion

The study successfully achieved the configuration of *Osamasinmi* ram bust sculptures through a transition from traditional wood to the more durable and versatile medium of terracotta. This shift is not merely a material change but a strategic preservation of Owo's cultural heritage. Through practice-led research, the investigation demonstrated that terracotta allows for a "naturalistic interpretation" and superior detailing of indigenous signifiers, such as the *Kele* and *Abaja* marks, which are central to Owo identity.

The research concludes that the *Osamasinmi* remains a vital cultural symbol, capable of evolving within contemporary development frameworks. By utilising the "aesthetic of the cool" (Thompson, 2021) and semiotic modelling, the study proved that traditional religious icons can be revitalised as modern aesthetic objects without losing their spiritual or historical essence. Ultimately, this work reaffirms that the creative arts are not peripheral but are central to the preservation of national memory and the promotion of social cohesion in a globalised world. As Nigeria seeks to diversify its economy, the integration of such indigenous creative knowledge into the formal sector is no longer optional but essential for sustainable development.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, material experiments, and iconographic results derived from this practice-led study, the following three recommendations are proposed:

1. Tertiary institutions in Nigeria should urgently overhaul the Fine and Applied Arts (FAA) curriculum to bridge the gap between Western formalist art histories and indigenous technical traditions. Studio-based courses should move beyond theoretical appreciation and explicitly incorporate traditional material processing methods, such as the wet-refining, hollowing, and open-kiln bisque-firing techniques utilised in this study. Encouraging students to engage in practice-led research with local clay deposits will foster indigenous technical innovations, cultivate sustainable studio practices, and ensure that classical sculptural traditions like the

Owo *Osamasinmi* are preserved through active creative production rather than passive museum curation.

2. To mitigate the high costs of production and technical barriers faced by contemporary sculptors working in durable media, the Federal Ministry of Innovation, Science and Technology, in collaboration with cultural agencies, should establish standardised material-processing hubs and community kilns in historical artistic centers like Owo. Providing local artists, researchers, and craftsmen with access to industrial clay-refining equipment and controlled firing facilities will drastically reduce structural failures during production. This institutional support is essential for transitioning delicate indigenous motifs from vulnerable organic materials into permanent terracotta, facilitating the large-scale creation of durable public monuments and cultural artifacts.
3. The Nigerian Copyright Commission (NCC) and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Creative Economy should establish a centralised, 3D digital archiving framework to document and protect contemporary re-adaptations of indigenous iconographies. By utilising high-resolution 3D scanning to archive terracotta assemblages and maquettes, the government can protect contemporary artists from unauthorised commercial reproduction while opening up global market access. This digital preservation strategy will safeguard intellectual property, preserve the national cultural capital against piracy, and allow contemporary Nigerian sculptural innovations to be projected into international academic and economic spaces.

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