

**A SYNTHESIS OF GBAGYI FEMALE FORMS AND THEIR SYMBOLS IN  
SCULPTURE****Doris Dauda****Abstract**

The Gbagyi people over the years have developed and sustained an enduring culture where the women carry the load on their shoulders; this has drawn the attention of various artists showing that the female forms remain an interesting theme for exploration in sculpture. Therefore, the problem of this study is the synthesis of Gbagyi female forms and their symbols in sculpture. Three objectives that led to the studio explorations were captured in this study. The first objective was to produce different representational postures of Gbagyi female forms in three-dimensional form, secondly; to create stylised sculptures of Gbagyi female forms and lastly, to synthesise the Gbagyi female forms and their symbols in sculpture. This study is justified because it has incorporated the Gbagyi traditional female forms with their material culture into abstract sculpture. The end of this study will give a new perspective to the Gbagyi female forms in abstract sculpture and will visually document the Gbagyi female forms and their cultural symbols in three dimensions as an act to further buttress the existing relationship between sculpture and culture. This research is rooted in the concept of “Natural Synthesis” fusing two or more forms, components, symbols and concepts into one piece. To the knowledge of the researcher, there is a gap in an attempt to synthesise Gbagyi female forms and their symbols into abstract sculpture while there appears to have been no attempt by sculptors to synthesise these forms in sculpture and documented.

**Keywords: Gbagyi, culture, sculpture and synthesis**

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**Introduction**

The evolution and civilization of man have shaped society over the centuries. Man has evolved into a complex species with diverse characteristics, philosophies and cultures within which all sorts of ideas, thoughts and opinions are always

interrogated. While the outcomes are recorded in literature or expressed in different art forms, this diversity is largely expressed in the ethnic configuration of Nigeria, which is made up of over 250 ethnic groups, each having a distinct culture, language and heritage (David, 2007).

Li and Karakowsky, (2001) opine that culture is the way of life that captures the world view of a group of people living in a geographical area; their behaviours, beliefs, values and symbols that they accept, generally, without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. The multiplicity of cultures and traditions has made it difficult to differentiate one ethnic group from another. It's for this reason that people usually look for something unique in different cultures and begin to identify them by it: as has been done to the Gbagyi, the Gbagyi who are regarded as one of the prominent heterogeneous societies in the Northern part of Nigeria. They have developed and sustained one of the ancient and enduring cultures in Nigeria, where women carry loads on their shoulders, which has marked them out culturally among other ethnic groups in Nigeria (Chigudu, 2008). Over the years, as people kept on seeing the

Gbagyi women carrying loads on their shoulder, they began to identify the Gbagyi with it and it became a National symbol for them. Over time, artists have paid little or no attention to other cultures practised by the Gbagyi. The unique culture of carrying loads on the shoulder by the Gbagyi females has drawn the attention of various Artists; Buhari Jerry, Nwankwo Chidimma, Agbo A. E, Seyi Ajayi, Kareem Olalekan H, Kelvin Verr among others, thereby showing that it remains an interesting field of study.

Tradition is made up of the elements of culture such as beliefs and customs, which are handed down from one generation to another in arts, either oral or written form (Michael, 2001). Material culture refers to the legacy of physical objects, resources, artefacts and spaces that people use to define their culture which could be both human-made and natural examples are, buildings, tools, goods and products, weapons, utensils, ornaments, arts, monuments, written records,

clothing and lots more. Various artists have been influenced by the different cultures in their communities, especially on the female theme; Lamidi, (b.1966), Buhari, (b.1958), Enwonwu, (1937 - 1992), Okoli, (b.1964), Okachi, (b.1964), Onabrakpeya, (b.1932), James, (b.1959), Whyte, (b.1968) and Alatise, (b.1975). This shows that the female theme remains an inspirational source to many artists.

When sculptors produce artworks in diverse forms using synthesis and abstract techniques, which serve certain functions in society, it brings transformation of the human mind and brings to life written history so that people can see, touch and feel their culture (Nimmer, 2017). Konkwo, (2016) opines that synthesis blends two or more cultural forms or ideas, which has influenced the concept of this study. This concept has great cultural, social and educational possibilities. Synthesis in sculpture is the fusion of two or more forms, symbols or elements into one piece of

artwork. Some sculptors that have successfully used abstraction and synthesis in their works are Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke, Geoffrey Yaweti, and Emodi Jide amongst others, they created sculptures that reflect different cultures in Nigeria fused into one piece, as has been carried out in this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There have been many attempts by Nigerian artists like Jerry Buhari, Nwankwo Chidimma, Agbo A. E and Kelvin Verr among many others, to create paintings and sculptures of Gbagyi female forms and their cultural symbols, but they have mostly been treated separately or independently of the other. Little or no attempt has been given to fusing the Gbagyi female form with its cultural symbols (hoe, bow and arrow, mortar and pestle, pot, motifs, facial scarification, grinding stone, firewood, calabash, hut and granaries) in sculpture, thereby creating a gap. Therefore, the problem of this study is to fill the gap by creating a synthesis of the

Gbagyi female form and its symbols in sculpture.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to sculpturally create a synthesis of the Gbagyi female form and its symbols, while the objectives are to:

- i. Produce different postures of representational forms of the Gbagyi female with loads on her shoulder.
- ii. Create stylized sculptures of the Gbagyi female with loads on her shoulder.
- iii. Synthesise the Gbagyi female form and its symbols in sculpture.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions were derived from the objectives.

### **Justification of the study**

This study is needful because it will incorporate the Gbagyi traditional female forms with its material culture into abstract sculpture and will create more awareness of

the cultural essence behind each of these symbols in sculpture.

### **Significance of the study**

The study is hoped to further buttress the existing relationship between sculpture and culture. The research will help to symbolize and project sculpture to Nigerian society as a discipline that has a huge positive impact on humanity.

### **Scope of the study**

- The study will be executed with the use of fiberglass as primary material.
- This study will be limited to the women who reside in the community of Karu - Abuja.

### **Conceptual Framework**

- This research is based on Ben Enwonwu's concept by Ogbechie, (2004).
- This study also benefited from Michael James' works by saatchiart.com, (2019).

### **Synthesis and Abstraction in Sculpture**

The transition in art over the years has made artists create simplified objects and figures (in stylisation, elongation, biomorphic, cubism, two and three-

dimensional, vast or small and could be made with diverse materials, surfaces and textures); artists creating it still focuses on the elements of art (lines, colours, forms and textures). Art has gone through a series of stages from prehistoric, Mesolithic, and Neolithic to the contemporary stage. Most sculptures before the 20th century were figural; this means that they resembled persons, animals or things that could be seen in the real world. Sculptures were used to commemorate events like battles, portray famous people or decorate the front buildings (Konkwo, 2016). Konkwo (2016), further observes that “abstract art is a nonrepresentational art; these can be traced back to Impressionism, Post-impressionism and Cubism” as all these helped in realizing the idea that art could be non-representative as modern abstract art was born early in the 20th century.

According to Makarov (1979), “synthesis is the uniting of different art forms

into an artistic whole that aesthetically organizes man’s material and spiritual environment”. The concept of artistic synthesis implies the creation of a qualitative new artistic phenomenon irreducible to the sum of its component parts. Konkwo, (2016) opines that, “synthesis and abstraction in arts plays an important role in achieving self-development and attitudinal change in individuals which is a prerequisite for real development”: be it mental, social, religious, scientific, and cultural, economics and technology. This trend in art helps the artist to realize his or her potentials as a participating and contributing member of the society by equipping him with tools and knowledge to create his own response to important issues of life. Makarov, (1979) further states that “the general principles of synthesis of arts were expressed with particular completeness in the works of such great 16th and 17th-century masters as Bramante (1444 - 1514), Raphael, Michael

Angelo (1475 - 1564), Pablo Picasso (1881 - 1973) and Bernini (1598 - 1680)". In abstraction, it is important that forms are represented, without losing its real content, as was carried out in this study. Various artistes

### Review of Related Works

The reviewed works have aided the researcher in understanding the visual and physical nature of the Gbagyi traditional

### “Gbagyi Woman”



**Fig.1:** Gbagyi Woman, 1989, Agbo A.E. 183 x 74cm, Sculpture Garden, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. Photograph: Doris Dauda, 2019.

(Fig.1) shows a realistic sculpture of a mother and child dressed in common African attire. The baby is strapped on her back with a wrapper, while on her left shoulder carries a

and artists have done works on the Gbagyi females carrying loads on their shoulders, but little has been done to synthesise it with their unique cultural symbols, thereby leaving room for more exploration.

female form and appearance and some characteristics of the subject matter. Lastly, it will direct the researcher towards achieving the aim and objectives of the study.

pot well supported by her left hand. This sculpture is a typical representation of Gbagyi's motherhood and her everyday struggle in Africa. This work is reviewed

because of its relevance to the developmental stage of this study, which has captured a Gbagyi woman in her representational form.

### “Anyanwu”



**Fig.2:** “Anyanwu”, Ben Enwonwu, 1956, Bronze, 210cm.

Source: <http://nigerianartdiglibrary.wordpress.com/crucified-gods-galore/>

(Fig.2) *Anyanwu* means “eye of the sun” which invokes the Igbo practice of saluting the rising sun as a way to honour *ChiUkwu*, the Great Spirit. This beautiful piece of art is an abstract and elongated display of the beauty of an African woman adorned with a beautiful protruding cap that looks like that of a queen, she also has a necklace, bracelet and earrings on and is tying a wrapper on her

chest that flows to the ground. The figure, with its lithe bronze torso arising as if from the earth, is considered the predominant expression of what Ogbechie describes as “the aspirations of the Nigerian nation and Enwonwo’s intercession for its survival and growth”. Another relevance found in the work is the elongation of his female form in composition, hence it has been adopted

## “African Arts Odyssey”



**Fig.3:** “African Art Odyssey”,  
Robbie Hood, 2014  
Source: veniceclayartists.com

The sculpture in (Fig.3) is a terracotta sculpture showing the fusion of a pot and head decorated with a rough texture of small beads around the pot. The pot is placed upside down to the ground. The head looks like that of a female because of the hairdo hanging on the head. The head has bulgy eyes that look almost as if it were sleeping or meditating. Synthesis can be found in this artistic expression, which has been captured in this study.

### Deduction from the Literature Review

During the analysis of these works, the researcher discovered that most of the

sculptors who produced the Gbagyi female form rendered them in realism. The reviewed works show that various artists have used the idea of synthesis to approach their works. The reviewed literature exposes that there is a gap in an attempt to synthesise the Gbagyi female form and its symbols in abstract sculpture, there appears to have been no attempt by sculptors to synthesise these forms. The reviewed literature also reveals that Gbagyi cultural symbols are all important.

## Research Methodology

This section provides the processes that are used in producing and achieving the sculptural forms. It involves the collection of data; preliminary sketches, preparation of materials, tools, techniques, procedures and pictures of the processes of the studio works. “Practice-based research is adopted in carrying out this study; this involves a research in which practice is the key method of enquiry and where a practice is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (Candy and Edmonds, 2016). Skain (2018) opines that creative practice is characterized not only by a focus on creating something new but also by the way that the making process itself leads to a transformation in the ideas, which in turn leads to new works.

## Sources and Instruments for Data

### Collection

The method and processes used for gathering information for this research are

divided into primary and secondary sources.

The researcher went to the field to photograph the Gbagyi females and their cultural symbols in their natural domain as primary data. While pictures or images from books and the internet are used as secondary sources. The observation method will be used for the analysis of the data by transforming these images into sketches and drawings, which were further translated into sculpture.

### Procedure for Data Analysis

The procedures or methods adopted for the research are discussed systematically for a better understanding of how the works have been executed. In the studio, the researcher observed and selected the appropriate data from the primary and secondary data collected and developed sketches from them. These sketches have aided the researcher in achieving the sculptures while the studio works were achieved through modelling and casting in fibreglass.

**Representational Stage**



**Plate I:** *Bminkoyi*, Doris Dauda, Pencil on Paper, 29.6 x 21cm, Photograph: Doris Dauda, 2020.

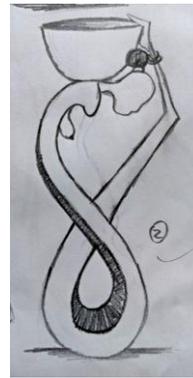


**Plate II:** *Obyi Nyinkwoza*, Doris Dauda, Pencil on Paper, 29.6cm x 21cm, 2020. Photograph: Doris Dauda, 2020.

**Exploration Stage 1**



**Plate III:** *Nyikwo Nubwoda*, Doris Dauda, Pencil on Paper, Ht. 29.6cm x 21cm, 2020. Photograph: Doris Dauda, 2020.



**Plate IV:** *Nyimwa-Nyinwa*, Doris Dauda, Pencil on Paper, 29.6cm x 21cm, 2020. Photograph: Doris Dauda, 2020.

**Exploration Stage 2**



**Plate V:** *Ohwe*, Doris Dauda, Pencil on Paper, 29.6cm x 21cm, 2020. Photograph: Doris Dauda, 2020.



**Plate VI:** *Zoknwukpa*, Doris Dauda, Pencil on Paper, 29.6cm x 21cm, Photograph: Doris Dauda, 2020.

### Procedure of Studio Works

The discussion, analysis and pictures of works produced at the end of the studio exploration using the modelling and casting techniques were documented herein.

re with steel rods, modelling in clay, mould making with Plaster of Paris, charging with fibreglass, finishing, mounting on base and patination.

### Catalogue of Works

Four works were produced in the representational stage, five, in stylized stage and seven works in the idealized stage. Sixteen works were produced and two works

The technique used for the studio exploration is modelling and casting which begins with the construction of an armatu

from each stage have been selected for discussion;

### Group I: Representational Stage

#### (objective 1)

The researcher produced the representational works at the first stage of the studio exploration, so that the researcher could be acquainted with the features of the traditional Gbagyi forms in three-dimensional.



**Plate VII:** *Obyi Nyinkwoza*, Doris Dauda, Fibre Glass, 90cm x 25cm, 2020. Photograph: Adeyemi Segun, 2021.



**Plate VIII:** *Bminkoyi*, Doris Dauda, Fibre Glass, 100cm x 30cm, 2020. Photograph: Adeyemi Segun, 2021.

(Plate VII) represents a female child.

The work is a three-dimensional view of a Gbagyi female form carrying a calabash on

her left shoulder, supported by both hands, mounted on a wooden base. The calabash contains a load tied in a net and visible in the calabash is a traditional spoon and a small calabash container used for carrying drinking water. She is adorned on a short gown that stops a little bit above her knees and is carrying a hairdo that is braided from her forehead to the back of her neck. Visible on her face are tribal marks, one on her forehead and the other on her right cheek. The older women teach the culture of carrying loads on the shoulder to little girls, thereby passing down the culture from one generation to another.

*Bminkoyi* in (Plate VIII) is also a realistic representation of a Gbagyi female form rendered in a three-dimensional view. One of the prominent features of the Gbagyi is the culture of carrying loads on the

shoulders of the women. The work shows a young lady, which explains the title” *Bminkoyi*“in Gbagyi. She can be seen carrying an empty bowl on her left shoulder supported by her left hand. She is putting on a sleeveless shirt and has one wrapper tied on her waist, flowing down below her knees and the other wrapper is wrapped on her right shoulder neatly knotted together around her left waist. Her hair is packed neatly behind and she has earrings and a hand bracelet on her right hand. The work is mounted on a wooden base.

**The Exploration (objective 2)**

The exploratory stage shows the stylized and elongated Gbagyi traditional Female forms.



**Plate IX:** *Nyimwa-Nyinwa*,  
Doris Dauda, Fibre  
Glass, 60cm x 30cm, 2020.  
Photograph: Adeyemi Segun, 2021.

*Nyimwa-Nyinwa* in (Plate IX) is an abstracted elongated figure that is twisted to form the shape number eight as the title of the work implies. Most women in Nigeria are said to be very curvy and their curves form the number eight shape. The woman is carrying a calabash on her shoulder and incised on the body of the work are motifs. This work was produced to celebrate the beauty of the Gbagyi womanhood.

While (Plate X) is a representation of the features of Gbagyi traditional female



**Plate X:** *Nyikwo Nubwoda*,  
Doris Dauda, Fibre Glass, 120cm x 25cm,  
2020. Photograph: Adeyemi Segun, 2021.

forms. The work is an elongated abstract sculpture of a pregnant woman carrying a pot on her right shoulder and supported by her right hand. The pot has motifs and designs on it while, from her waist down looks to have some texture created with lines. The work looks nude and her left hand looks like a torso. The work displays elegance and beauty.

**Exploratory Stage 2 (Sketches)**

This stage shows the idealized synthesis of the traditional Gbagyi female forms with its cultural symbols.



**Plate XI:** *Ohwe*, Doris Dauda, Fibre Glass, 60cm x 20cm, 2020. Photograph: Adeyemi Segun, 2021.

(Plate XI) is an abstract sculpture of a Gbagyi woman-carrying firewood fused with other cultural symbols of the Gbagyi. These symbols are bow and arrow, which represent hunting, pot, which represents pottery, mortar and pestle, which represents carving and hoe, which represents farming. *Ohwe* in Gbagyi means heritage, these cultural symbols are cultures that have been passed down from one generation to another. Textural effects on the work have been varied in different places. One could see a display of some of the identified features like beadwork and a traditional calabash spoon on her waist.



**Plate XII:** *Zoknwukpa*, Doris Dauda, Fibre Glass, 90cm x 15cm, 2020. Photograph: Adeyemi Segun, 2021.

(Plate XII) is also an abstracted sculpture and typical representation of a traditional ladle made from the calabash plant used by the Gbagyi to take their special delicacy known as *zshepho* a combination of corn or millet and potash. Inside the ladle are some textures and on the handle is the Gbagyi female form carrying a basket on her shoulder. She has a hairdo and some motifs designed on her front and back. The Gbagyi female form has been synthesised with the spoon.

## Summary

This research was able to merge the Gbagyi female forms with its cultural symbols in sculpture. Several related literature and related works were reviewed. Sixteen works were produced in the studio using fibreglass, ranging from the representational to the stylized and the idealized stage. The works produced were all catalogued and analysed.

## Findings

The researcher was able to unravel several findings during the research:

1. The research discovered some key visual elements (such as line, shape, texture and colour) embedded in the traditional Gbagyi female form and its environment, which has brought out the beauty that is inherent in the Gbagyi culture and translated into sculpture. Achieving objective one of the study, examples of such works can be found in plates IX and X.

2. The researcher further discovered that the Gbagyi traditional female form can be distorted by abstracting the forms and yet retain its cultural and aesthetic essence. Abstracting the traditional female form takes a deep sense of creativity and understanding of how to create unity and harmony in forms. Achieving objective two of the study, examples of such works can be found in plates XI and XII.
3. The study shows that synthesis can be achieved on the traditional Gbagyi female form and its cultural symbols in sculpture. Synthesis gives room for more exploration and does not have limitations. This study shows the possibility of fusing human forms with objects and symbols. Achieving objective three of the study. Examples of such works can be found in plates XIII and XIV.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concludes that culture cannot exist without art because art helps culture to live. The works produced are evidence of the attempt to solve the problems posed by the research and the researcher is aware of other attempts to create the traditional female Gbagyi in realistic forms, but this study offers a different approach to the traditional female form by abstracting and fusing it with its cultural symbols.

### **Recommendation**

Karu as one of the fast-developing cosmopolitan cities in Abuja Municipal Area Council is gradually losing its culture. Therefore, the Gbagyi people should preserve this knowledge system and more exploration can be carried out on other Gbagyi cultural symbols away from the Female form to ensure that the core knowledge and values are passed on from

generation to generation, to be good stewards of their cultural heritage.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This study established a:

1. Fusion of the Gbagyi female form carrying the loads on her shoulder with three transformative stages of studio creation (representational, stylization and idealization).
2. Novel style in sculpture termed “Femality Symbolic of Gbagyi Sculptures” a concept that means a synthesis of the Gbagyi female forms and its cultural symbols.
3. Synthesis of the Gbagyi female forms and its cultural symbols such as hoe, huts, pots, motifs, calabash, mortar and pestle, grinding stone and firewood in creating a personal visual expression in sculpture (Gbagyi stylistic sculpture).

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