

# ASSESSMENT OF SILHOUETTE AND GESTURAL METAL SCULPTURES IN THE WORK OF PROF. KENNETH OKOLI: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## **Abstract**

This historical review examines the evolution and significance of silhouette and gestural metal sculptures by Professor Kenneth Okoli, a prominent figure in contemporary African sculpture. Prof. Ken's innovative approach to sculpture, particularly his mastery in using metal to create dynamic, expressive forms, has positioned him as a transformative artist in the field. This study traces the development of his unique style, exploring the historical and artistic influences that shaped his works. It delves into how his sculptures embody a fusion of traditional African aesthetics and modern sculptural techniques, with a focus on the expressive potential of silhouette and gestural forms. By analyzing the use of metal as a medium, the review highlights Prof. Ken's exploration of movement, abstraction, and how these elements serve to convey deeper cultural narratives and personal expression. The paper also situates Prof. Ken's work within the broader context of African and global sculpture movements, examining his contribution to contemporary art and his lasting influence on future generation of artists.

**Keywords:** welded metal sculpture, silhouette and gestural sculpture, mixed media, exploration.

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## **Introduction**

### **Background to the Study**

The contemporary era has seen significant experimentation in the execution of metal sculptures. Artists have developed new ideas, styles, and materials in exploring and creating metal sculptures. This evolution is reflected in the work of Sani (2019), who reported that the depiction of human figures in sculpture has given way to new subjects such as dreams, ideas, emotions, and explorations of form and space. Materials like plastic, chromium, and welded steel, as well as objects like boxes, broken automobile parts, and pieces of furniture, have been used in this new wave of sculpture. The 20th-century sculptor Auguste Rodin, whose work inspired a new generation of artists direct fresh-ideas in art forms that had previously relied on odd conventions. Although Rodin's successors, including contemporary artists such as Professor Ken whose stylistic of approach to metal sculpture is the focus of this paper, his works often deviates from realism to abstracts, with unique innovations.

Iron melting and forging technologies may have existed in West Africa among the Nok culture of Nigeria. According to Lamidi (2000), as early as the 6th century B.C., iron technology played a significant role in the development of powerful kingdoms in West Africa, particularly in the western Sudan and along the Guinea coast. Similarly, Fatunmbi (2016) reported that Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, is a significant deity believed to have introduced iron technology. The author concluded that iron smelting occurred in various parts of Nigeria before the arrival of Europeans. Iron objects, including tools such as hoes, traps, knives, arrows, spearheads, and musical instruments, have been discovered as evidence of iron working traditions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Records from Danjuma (2010), Duniya (2014), Muhammad (2015), Lamidi (2015), and other art scholars substantiate the idea behind this research. Notably, Professor Kenneth Okoli has created a substantial body of metal sculptures exhibited in Nigeria and abroad. However, available records indicate that no comprehensive documentation analysis has been conducted on the

contextual forms of his silhouette and gestural metal sculptures, which is the focus of this study. While, the **Objectives of the Study** are to:

1. examine the educational background of Professor Kenneth Okoli as a sculptor.
2. identify the stylistic approaches in his silhouette and gestural metal sculptures.
3. analyze the aesthetic meanings and contextual forms of his artworks.

### **Research Questions**

In line with these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Where did Professor Kenneth Okoli receive his training as a sculptor?
2. What makes his style unique compared to other sculptors?
3. How do aesthetic qualities influence the metal sculptures of Kenneth Okoli?

### **Review of Related Literature**

The review of related literature includes works from scholars such as Pollitt (2000), Cole (2009), Eleanor (2012), Elkins (2013), and Sani (2022), among others. The study examines various individual and group styles in contemporary metal sculpture across the globe, with a focus on the stylistic approaches and techniques employed in Okoli's silhouette and gestural sculptures. This research identifies welding techniques and other methods used by Okoli, addressing the gap in the literature concerning his work.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), as proposed by Davis (1989) and referenced in Sani (2021). The model focuses on understanding how individuals accept and use technology, and it is applied here to understand how visual artists, like sculptors, adopt and utilize new materials and techniques. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), as proposed by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen in the late 1970s, was used to predict the impact of an artist's works. According to Haagger (2019), the theory is effective in predicting the actions of artists, which allow the holistic study of Prof Ken's silhouette and gestural metal works.

### **Research Methodology**

A qualitative mode of inquiry was adopted for this research, utilizing historical and descriptive approaches, as outlined by Osuala (2002). These approaches were employed to describe and analyze observed phenomena. According to Sambo (2012), qualitative research helps to understand the effects of social events or phenomena on individuals, groups, societies, or cultures.

### **Findings**

From the outcome of interviews and analysis carried out, the following are the major findings:



**Professor Kenneth Okoli**

In his curriculum vitae, Steven (2016) and Sani (2019) revealed that Prof. Kenneth Okoli, popularly known as "Ken Okoli," was born in Kano State on March 30, 1964, and hails from Awka, Anambra State. Kenneth Okoli attended Ezechima Primary School in Onitsha from 1971 to 1976, where he was exposed to art and engaged in numerous drawings and sketches for his peers. He began his secondary education at Uga Boys' Secondary School in Anambra State in 1977 and obtained the West African Examination Council (WAEC) certification in 1982. He

then proceeded to Pankshin, Jos, Plateau State, where he studied Fine Arts at the Federal College of Education, Pankshin, and earned the National Certificate in Education (NCE) between 1985 and 1988. Furthermore, Stephen (2016) reported that in 1991, Ken Okoli enrolled at the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in Zaria, where he pursued a Bachelor of Arts (B.A. Hons) in Fine Arts, specializing in sculpture, which he completed in 1994. Additionally, Samaila (2004) stated, "During his undergraduate years, Ken Okoli became the pioneer president of the Association of Fine Art Students (AFAS) following its split from the dual Association of Industrial Design and Fine Art Students (AIDFAS)." Ken Okoli later pursued a Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) in sculpture from 1996 to 1998 and further advanced his education in the field of Art History. He was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in 2007 from the same institution, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He currently teaches sculpture in the Department of Fine Arts at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and has held numerous solo exhibitions while also participating in several group exhibitions. According to the Exhibition Catalogue (2014), Ken has attended national and international workshops and conferences and is a Fellow of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Prof. Ken Okoli has also published in several prestigious national and international journals. He served as an art consultant for the states of Kaduna and Nasarawa for many years and has been awarded numerous sculptural commissions by various states in Nigeria, including Nasarawa, Kaduna, and Ebonyi states, to mention just a few. His academic career has earned him many notable positions, such as Head of Sculpture Section (HOS), Team Leader to the South African Automobile Competition with selected ABU, Zaria students, and was Head of the Department of Fine Arts (HOD), among others.

In a related development, Jari (2014) described Ken Okoli's metal sculptures and styles as follows: "His motifs are drawn from the northern Nigerian environment in which he has lived for much of his life. His mode of presentation evolved from the green environment within the northern context, presented in two-dimensional reliefs." Duniya (2014) added that Ken Okoli has been able to sculpturally articulate the physiology, characterization, and climatology of Zaria through his metal works. Further studies indicate that Okoli has expressed his years of critical observation, engagement, and experience through the use of materials such as mild steel rods, metal sheets, and copper wire, among others. Similarly, Jari (2014) noted, "Ken is known for his relief sculptures in metals, and in recent times, he has produced novel sculptural pieces in steel and copper wire." Furthermore, Danjuma (2014) observed that "Ken, as he is fondly called, is an Art Historian and Sculptor who is aware of world art trends; one can see this knowledge reflected in his sculptural style." Duniya (2014) further noted the influence of Okoli's experiences on his sculptures, stated thus Ken began landscape sculpture in 1996 and has since explored various aspects of the Northern landscape, particularly the Zaria landscape. This observation emphasizes how the artist's first experience in Zaria and his years of living there, both as a student and now as a teacher at his alma mater (Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria), are represented in his welded sculptures.

Supporting the above statement, Okoli (2014) said "Having lived in the north of Nigeria for about thirty years and watching the gradual disappearance of greenery, the role of the artist as a social commentator has become significant. My master's degree (MFA) research in 1998 focused on producing metal sculptures depicting the landscape of the Zaria environment. In conclusion, the artist said that most of baobab trees that inspired him to document in his landscape works have been cut down for firewood.

### **Analysis of Selected Silhouette and Gestural Metal Sculptures**

The title of this work, "*Gidan Sarki*", is a Hausa term literally means "Emir's Palace." The relief landscape was created in 1996 and measures 115cm width and 33cm height. *Gidan Sarki* in

Plate I depicts a palace set in the savannah, symbolizing the supremacy of the Hausa monarch. Regarding the technique used, the artist states, “The linear sculpture of the landscape was created directly with mild steel rods through the art of welding, representing an imaginary African monarch’s palace” (Okoli, 1998). He further explained that the monumental size of the building towers over the tranquil landscape, emphasizing the supremacy of the African monarch.



**Plate I: “Gidan Sarki,” Ken Okoli, Mild Steel, 115cm Width x 33cm Height, 1996, Collection of the Artist, Photography by the Researcher**

The decorative elements incorporate northern motifs from traditional African architecture. The work can be viewed from different angles, offering an interesting perspective. The artist’s long stay in the northern part of Nigeria, particularly in Samaru and Zaria, likely influenced the creation of this work. One consistent feature in Prof. Ken’s landscape compositions is the presence of baobab trees. These trees appear in many of his sculptures, capturing their distinctive form and topography. Since his postgraduate days, the baobab has been both a subject matter and a central part of his artistic innovation. The rising sun is depicted with a single iron rod in a circular shape, while the interplay of light and shade adds vibrancy to the piece. A cross-cross technique represents the various building forms, and the systematic arrangement of elements reflects the artist's creativity and professionalism.

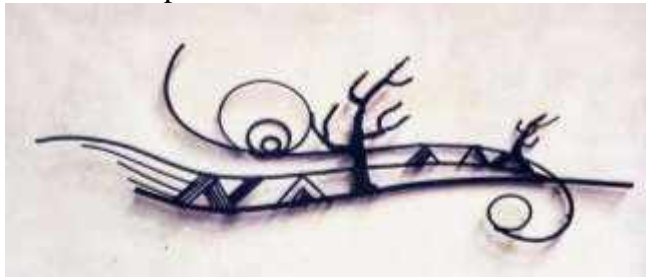
The work titled “*Tudun Wada*” in Plate II, executed in mild steel and coated with oxide. The relief sculpture measures 58cm width and 19cm height and was done in 1997. *Tudun Wada* is a slightly hilly landscape that inspired the artist. The sculpture was constructed using a flat surface and arranged different metals and iron rods. The entire composition captured the traditional architectural buildings; arranged them side by side yet creating perspective and balance on the flat surface resulting in an asymmetrical composition.



**Plate II: “Tudun Wada,” Ken Okoli, Mild Steel, 58cm Width x 19cm Height, 1997, Collection of the Artist, Photography by the Researcher**

The narrative of this piece demonstrates the need to create sculptures that reflect the immediate surroundings and environment. The sculpture communicates the settlement of Zaria and its environs, offering a glimpse into the past when *Tudun Wada* was a significant place. But for now, modern architecture design has overtaking the traditional structures. The artist deliberately omitted baobab trees from this piece, perhaps reflecting a studio experiment during his master's degree period. The piece successfully captures the essence of traditional African architecture using welding techniques, resulting in an elegant and sophisticated sculpture.

The relief sculpture is titled “*Whirlwind on Makarfi*” in Plate III; it was created with mild steel and coated with oxide to prevent corrosion. It was done in 1997 the size of work is 79cm width and 30cm height. Unity is achieved by the use of cursive lines that crisscross each other in harmonious pattern.



**Plate III: “Whirlwind on Makarfi,” Ken Okoli, Mild Steel, 79cm Width x 30cm Height, 1997, Collection of the Artist, Photography by the Researcher**

The title *Makarfi* is a town along the new Kano road, which may have inspired Prof. Ken’s work. As he explains thus, the work is reminiscent of a Sahara oasis, which acted as a source of inspiration. The artist modeled the trees to bend under the pressure of the whirlwind, while combining Hausa motifs with lines to enhance the composition. The piece features two baobab trees positioned proportionally within the composition. A close observation revealed that the two baobab trees are swaying to the strong Sahara wind. The moon-like shape is created using rods positioned behind the large baobab tree. The artist employs abstract African patterns, using a zig-zag motif to represent traditional mud buildings. Prof. Ken’s landscape sculptures possess a narrative quality and sculptural eloquence, giving them painterly feels. The work demonstrates the artist’s skill in manipulating iron-rods to create a dense yet sensuous landscape.

“*Hayin Dogo at Sunset*” in Plate IV was executed in mild steel and coated with oxide, the work measures 52cm width and 18cm height. It was completed in 1997. *Hayin Dogo* is a section of Samaru bordering the railway track leading to Gusau, the capital city of Zamfara State. In the past, trains carried cotton from Gusau to textile industries in the eastern and southern parts of Nigeria. The relief landscape sculpture captured a complete sunset going down the scene, behind the traditional African buildings, giving a vivid illustration of how architectural structures were, before, the advent of modern structures in Samaru. The sculptor emphasizes the fading presence of traditional buildings because of the impact of modernization.



**Plate IV: “Hayin Dogo at Sunset,” Ken Okoli, Mild Steel, 52cm Width x 18cm Height, 1997, Collection of the Artist, Photography by the Researcher**

The omission of human figures and baobab trees in this composition was deliberate by the artist that highlights two principles. Firstly, from Islamic perspective and secondly it has to do with studio experimentation. Religion has played vital role in the life of Prof. Ken Okoli. On the other hand, studio practicing had shaped the practice of his experimentations. Prof. Ken used a cutting technique, rather than welding, to produce the work. Metal sheets were cut with iron cutters after series of sketches were made on the metal surface with white chalk. This method is similar to his

other works. One of such works is the “*Kofar Gaya*”, which share a common theme of traditional narrative of architectural design and the use of similar production techniques.

“*Kofar Gaya*” in Plate V, measuring 93cm width and 28cm height the simplicity of the work makes the onlooker to easily understand the artist’s message about the remote areas in the Northern Nigeria, particularly the Samaru-Zaria region. Prof. Ken’s exploration of elongation and stylization, which began in 1996, is evident in this work, where the buildings were elongated at the top. Through the use of mass and space, Ken’s sculpture exemplifies the successful treatment of metal as a medium, making his work distinct from that of his contemporaries.



Plate V: “*Kofar Gaya*,” Ken Okoli, Mild Steel, 93cm Width x 28cm Height, 1998, Collection of the Artist, Photography by the Researcher

This analysis underscores the artist's unique approach to metal sculpture, which blends abstraction with stories, creating works that resonate with the cultural and architectural history of Northern Nigeria.

### Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, the study finds that sculptural exploration at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries have shifted towards conceptual art. In this era, the artist's ideas have become the most significant aspect of artistic trends. Consequently, metal sculptures have become more popular than other forms of sculpture, which were traditionally rooted in modeling and casting, especially in materials like bronze and other related alloys. Sculptures made from stone, wood, plaster of Paris, and terra cotta are gradually being replaced by metal in terms of material use.

Prof. Ken uses the electric arc welder, which is the most powerful and economical option in this region compared to other contemporary welding methods like TIG (Tungsten Inert Gas), MIG (Metal Inert Gas) to mention just a few.

His works address significant issues like desertification through his relief landscape sculptures, serving as social commentary. Again, some of his works has been analyzed have a highly political content, socio-cultural background and spiritual issues.

### Recommendations

The research works of Prof. Ken Okoli’s silhouette and gestural metal sculptures, the study offers the following recommendations:

1. **Further Research:** Scholars are encouraged to explore other categories of Ken's work. This could be promoted within art history programs at Nigerian institutions of higher learning.
2. **Collaboration with Government Bodies:** Artists and scholars should work with relevant government agencies to facilitate more exhibitions and workshops that feature Prof. Ken as a metal sculptor. This will not only enhance his exposure but also provide a platform for emerging sculptors.

3. **Investigating Collaborative Works:** Further research into Prof. Kenneth Okoli's collaborative sculptures could reveal insights into the nature and implications of works produced in such collaborative efforts.

### Contributions to Knowledge

This study has established that:

1. **Revealing Prof. Ken's Art:** The review highlights Prof. Ken Okoli's artwork, particularly his metal sculptures, and connects his work with the local environment. His creations serve as a valuable resource for younger artists.
2. **Modern and Conventional Techniques:** The study has found that the styles and techniques in Ken's metal sculptures incorporate both conventional and modern methods, making his work accessible and accepted in society. This research contributes to the existing literature on his contributions to sculpture.
3. **Contribution to Metal Sculpture:** Prof. Ken Okoli has significantly contributed to the documentation and development of metal sculpture, particularly in Northern Nigeria, and his influence extends globally.

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