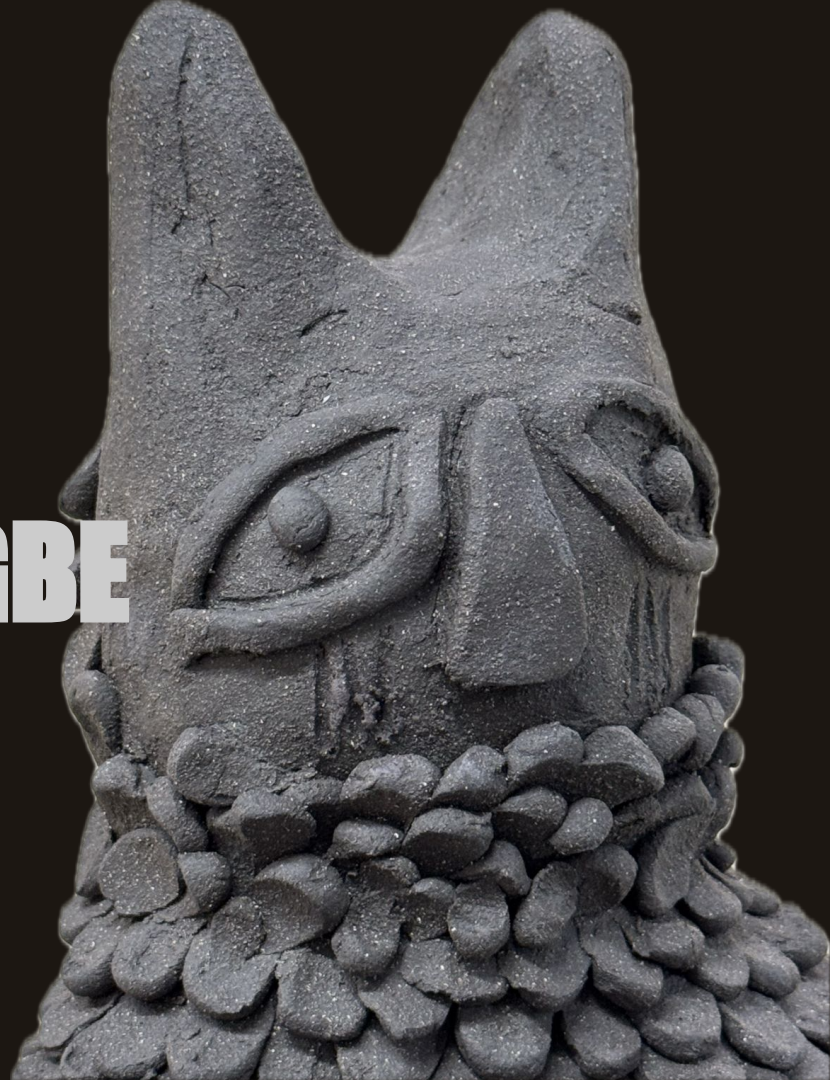


FREDA OSAYUKI IGIIOGBE

U n i t 9 p o r t f o l i o





→ Obia, chiefs
→ Why are the plaques only feathering men?



traditions → circle of life
ceremony → culture → identity → birth, adulthood, eldership, ancestors
rituals → worship → feasting



wood sculpture → statues
life → Mike Art Gallery

→ learning from family → Igbo

Transatlantic slave trade

African spirituality → Juju → obokun, Maniwa
→ sinners, devils, hell

religion → christianity → sheven

intergenerational knowledge → epigenetics → brauna

race

sociology → identity

storytelling → films → Ousmane Sembene

class → gender

hand building → sense of belonging

sculptures



way of life

metal → brass/bronze casting → Igbo market → Benin city



Satchi Gallery → fertility

body vessel clay exhibition

Black Women in Ceramics

Magdalene Odundo

→ Hadi Kwali
→ Bisila Noba
→ Phoebe Collings-James



3d printing → functional(?) → throwing(?)

colling → basketry → lost tradition/craft

→ Kouame Kakaha → lost women

materiality → metal, wood, mixed medium

My interest

sublime → universe, earth



figurative



Storytelling

This project is deeply rooted in research, with storytelling as its core focus. Growing up in a culturally rich yet dynamically evolving Nigerian family, I see my own story as one marked by depth and layers, with a unique blend of culture and traditions. I am particularly interested in exploring my childhood memories: the fears I had growing up, the challenges of adapting to a new culture, and my evolving sense of connection to my heritage. The primary aim of this project is to create a cohesive body of work that captures and communicates aspects of my identity and personal story, emphasising the nuances of cultural displacement and growth. Through both primary and secondary visual research, I investigate how other artists integrate identity and personal histories into their work, often with figurative and symbolic expressions that resonate with their cultural heritage. This exploration not only shapes my creative decisions but also pushes me to consider new ways to approach ceramics as a powerful vessel for storytelling. Having not returned to Nigeria since I was twelve, I found that many of my early memories felt frozen in time—often hazy and vague, shaped by the perspective of a child. This fragmented recollection pushed me to confront what I remembered and to deepen my understanding through archives. This process brought a sense of urgency and curiosity to my work, ultimately leading me to make the significant decision to return home to Nigeria. There, I hoped to immerse myself further in the cultural and spiritual traditions that inspire my work.

Fear

In this project, I am exploring fear and how the lessons we absorb in childhood shape our mental and emotional landscapes. Many of these fears linger, leaving me feeling exposed and vulnerable. My upbringing was heavily shaped by religion, particularly Christianity, as I grew up with my mother and maternal grandmother a devout Evangelist. Sundays were dedicated to church, where I was taught about God, sin, heaven, hell, and the devil. I was taught that other belief systems particularly traditional African practices were sinful, which created an internal conflict that I still grapple with today.

These teachings instilled a mix of reverence and fear in me as a child—I believed every mistake could condemn me to hell. As I grew older and we moved to the UK, our church attendance waned, which left me questioning the role of religion in our lives. Though I still consider myself a Christian, I find myself increasingly sceptical of institutionalised religion and the fear-based rhetoric often used to instil belief. One memory that stands out is a visit to a family friend's house when I was a child. The moment she saw a cat, she erupted into frantic prayers, desperately casting it away in the name of Jesus. That experience left a lasting imprint on me—despite knowing rationally that cats pose no threat, I can't shake the fear that was so intensely projected onto me. It spread through me like an infection, taking hold in ways I couldn't control. Even now, I find myself instinctively unsettled by their presence, a reminder of how deeply ingrained fears can shape our perceptions and reactions.

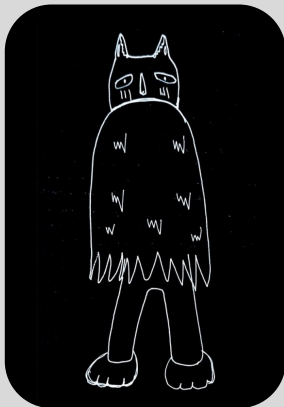
My understanding of spirituality also began to expand as I became more aware of how Christianity was introduced to West Africa through colonialism, often as a tool of control. My paternal grandmother, a spiritual woman who practised traditional African spirituality, had a shrine in her home filled with symbolic objects for prayers and rituals. Growing up, I was afraid of these practices due to Christian teachings that framed them as sinful, but as I learned more about the demonization of African spiritual traditions, I started to see the richness and complexity of these rituals.

As a child, I was both fascinated and terrified by the masquerades, or *Ekpo*, who represent ancestral spirits. Their performances, chasing people and offering blessings, left a lasting impression on me, further complicating my understanding of spirituality and tradition.

I focused deeply on the fear I once felt toward the masquerades, channeling that emotion into my creative process. Drawing from memory, I sketched the figure, allowing the fragmented and imperfect recollections of my childhood to guide the imagery.



Freda Igiogbe, Ekpo. 2024



Translating my sketch into a figurative sculpture, I choose vulcan black clay to emphasise the tactile, grounding quality of the piece. The figure features exaggerated eyes, a prominent nose, and layered, scale-like textures around its base, meant to symbolise the attire worn by the masked men. The pointed ears give it an ambiguous, almost totemic quality. Using coiling technique to build the figure, **I sought to demystify the character that had once terrified me.** By engaging with the memories that inspired the sculpture, I reframe the narrative—not as something to fear but as a reflection of cultural richness and ancestral connection. **This work became a dialogue with my younger self, a way of telling her, “This is part of your heritage; it is not something to fear.”**

Nick Cave's Soundsuits is a compelling example of reinterpreting ritual and costume into immersive, larger-than-life works that explore movement, identity, and cultural tradition. Cave's Soundsuits blur the boundaries between sculpture, performance, and community engagement, transforming wearable art into dynamic, participatory experiences. **This approach resonates deeply with my own ambitions to scale up my works and position them in public spaces, inviting a broader audience to engage with themes of memory, fear, and cultural heritage.**



Nick Cave Soundsuits



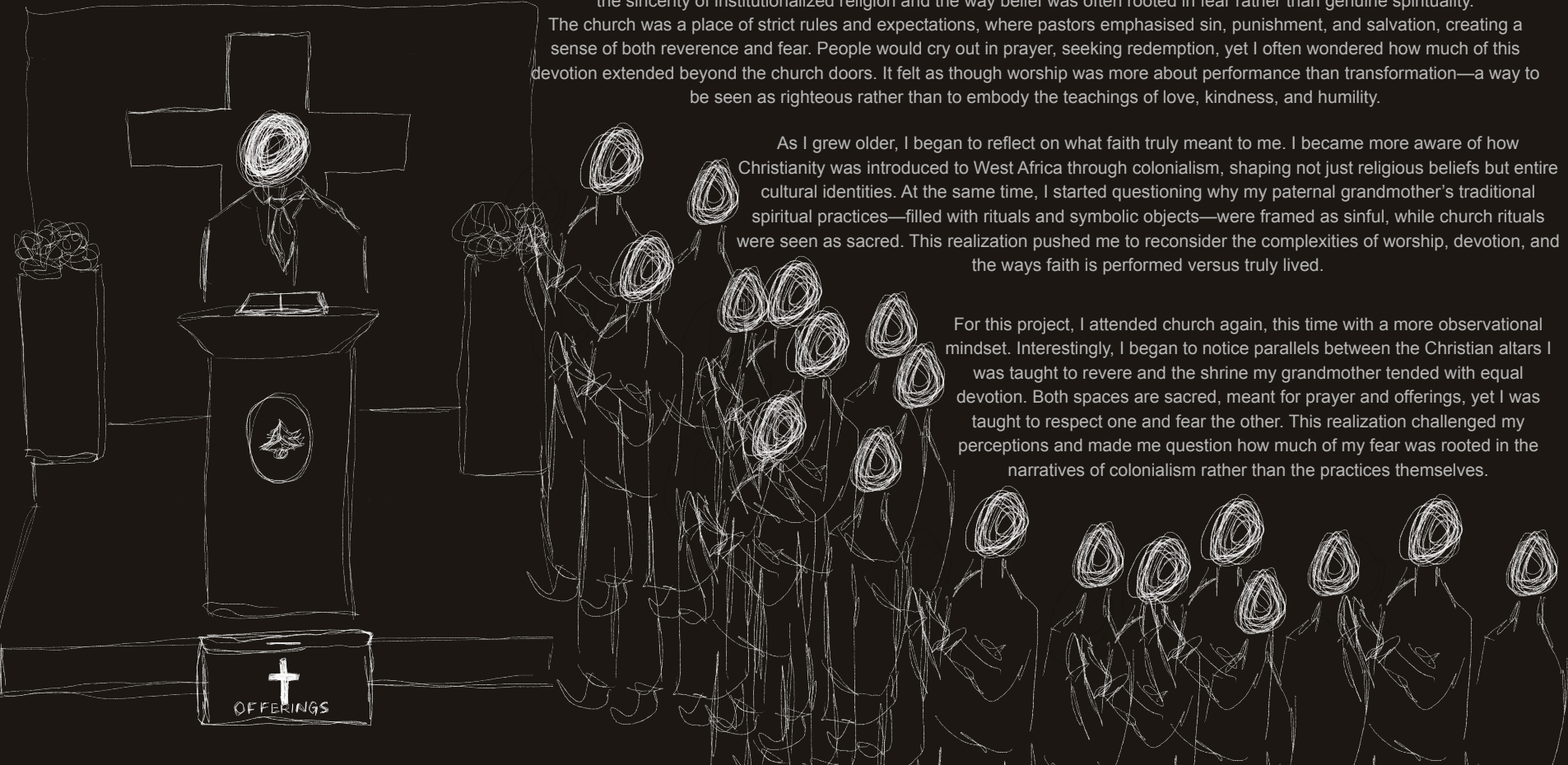
While Cave's practice is rooted in the celebration and critique of cultural identity through elaborate, vibrant costumes, **my work draws on personal and collective narratives, seeking to deconstruct myths and demystify fears associated with rituals.**

THE CHURCH

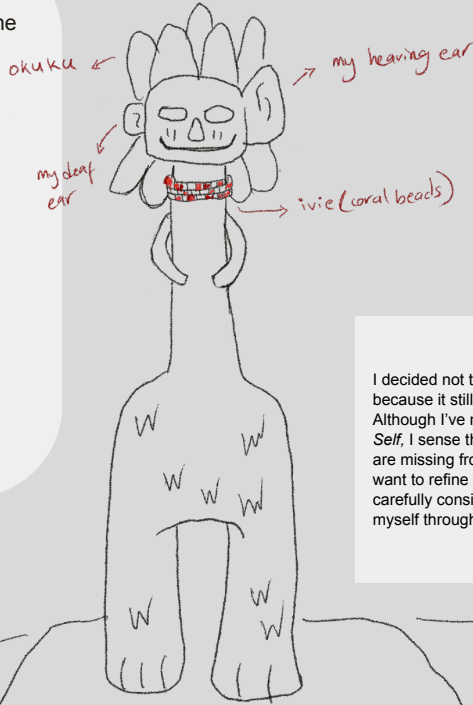
Growing up, church was a central part of life—Sundays were dedicated to worship, and I was surrounded by people who expressed deep devotion to their faith. I watched families attend church religiously, singing, praying, and speaking of righteousness, yet outside those walls, their actions often contradicted the values they preached. This contrast made me question the sincerity of institutionalized religion and the way belief was often rooted in fear rather than genuine spirituality. The church was a place of strict rules and expectations, where pastors emphasised sin, punishment, and salvation, creating a sense of both reverence and fear. People would cry out in prayer, seeking redemption, yet I often wondered how much of this devotion extended beyond the church doors. It felt as though worship was more about performance than transformation—a way to be seen as righteous rather than to embody the teachings of love, kindness, and humility.

As I grew older, I began to reflect on what faith truly meant to me. I became more aware of how Christianity was introduced to West Africa through colonialism, shaping not just religious beliefs but entire cultural identities. At the same time, I started questioning why my paternal grandmother's traditional spiritual practices—filled with rituals and symbolic objects—were framed as sinful, while church rituals were seen as sacred. This realization pushed me to reconsider the complexities of worship, devotion, and the ways faith is performed versus truly lived.

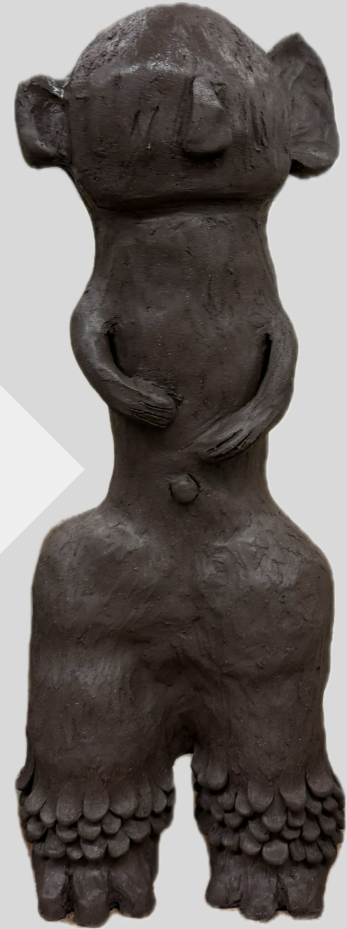
For this project, I attended church again, this time with a more observational mindset. Interestingly, I began to notice parallels between the Christian altars I was taught to revere and the shrine my grandmother tended with equal devotion. Both spaces are sacred, meant for prayer and offerings, yet I was taught to respect one and fear the other. This realization challenged my perceptions and made me question how much of my fear was rooted in the narratives of colonialism rather than the practices themselves.



This figure is my reinterpretation of the pastor at the altar but with myself embodied in the figure, titled *Embodied Self*. Standing tall, the figure exudes a strong presence, yet **its features carry a sense of ambiguity and introspection** as it lacks facial features like the eyes and mouth. Its uneven proportions, with one ear larger than the other is a representation of my disability, having one hearing ear and the other being profoundly deaf, and an elongated torso that flows into short, sturdy legs, create a monolithic, almost otherworldly form. **This piece blurs the boundaries between human and non-human, ancient and contemporary, evoking a sense of mystery.** It invites reflection on the themes of identity, nature, and existence. Below is my mother wearing the Ivie (coral beads) and Okuku (traditional headpiece).



I decided not to fire this piece because it still feels incomplete. Although I've named it *Embodied Self*, I sense that certain elements are missing from the current form. I want to refine the details further and carefully consider how I present myself through figurative sculpture.



Freda Igiogbe, *Embodied Self*, 2024

OUSMANE SEMBÈNE 1977 film *Ceddo*



Ousmane Sembène's 1977 film *Ceddo* is a powerful historical drama that explores themes of resistance, religion, and cultural identity in pre-colonial West Africa. The film critiques the forced imposition of Islam and Christianity on traditional African societies while highlighting the struggle of the indigenous *Ceddo* people to preserve their way of life. The scene in *Ceddo* where people's heads are shaved and they are given Islamic names like Ibrahim and Ousmane deeply impacted me, as it powerfully illustrates the loss of identity and forced submission. Watching the blade strip away their hair, I felt the overwhelming sense of erasure—this was more than just a physical act; it was a symbolic destruction of individuality, heritage, and personal expression. In many African traditions, hair is tied to cultural pride and social status, so seeing it forcibly removed made me think of how oppression often begins with the stripping away of selfhood. Similarly, the forced renaming carries profound significance, as names hold deep cultural and spiritual meaning, and hearing them replaced with Islamic ones showed the assertion of a new religious and political order, further erasing traditional identity. It reminded me of how enslaved Africans were forcibly given European names, reinforcing their loss of autonomy. Sembène's portrayal of this moment made me reflect on how religious and political forces have historically shaped identity, sometimes through violence and coercion. This scene was not just about the past—it resonated with modern struggles, making me question how deeply colonial and religious influences continue to shape African identities today.

James Baldwin Go Tell It on the Mountain



Another major research was the book *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin. One of the central themes of the novel is religion, particularly Christianity and its role in the lives of Black families in America. The story takes place in a Pentecostal church, which plays a significant role in shaping the characters' lives, thoughts, and struggles. Religion serves as both a source of comfort and oppression for the characters, especially for John Grimes, the protagonist, as he wrestles with his faith. It examines the relationships between John and his father, Gabriel, who is a stern and emotionally distant figure. Gabriel's own troubled past and his rigid religious views affect his relationships, especially with his son, creating tension and struggles for John. Much like my upbringing, I find myself connecting with John's journey of self-discovery, his internal conflict over sin, salvation, and the weight of societal expectations. Baldwin's exploration of generational conflict within the family reflects larger themes of how trauma, shame, and cultural pressures are passed down, particularly within marginalized communities.

In many ways, Baldwin's portrayal of Christianity mirrors my own experience growing up in a religious household, where belief systems shaped my identity and self-worth. Like John, I wrestled with reconciling inherited beliefs with my own understanding of faith and spirituality. The struggle between salvation and sin in the novel reflects the oppressive duality I felt when navigating between two spiritual traditions. Baldwin's narrative also highlights how religion can simultaneously nurture and suppress, and this tension speaks to the generational traumas passed down through religious practices. For me, the tension between my Christian upbringing and my exposure to African traditional spirituality echoes Baldwin's portrayal of the internal conflict between faith and freedom, especially within the framework of colonial and cultural imposition.

SEYNI AWA CAMARA

Seyni Awa Camara's sculptures are deeply rooted in her Wolof heritage and personal spiritual experiences. Her works primarily feature humanoid figures and animals, many of which carry rich symbolism tied to Senegalese folklore, animistic practices, and her own life story. I first encountered Camara's work at the White Cube gallery in 2022, and was immediately captivated by their stoic expressions and surreal, frog-like children clinging to their forms. The raw, otherworldly presence of her work evoked a sense of familiarity and spirituality, as if meeting an ancestral spirit, echoing Michael Armitage's description of her art as "familiar yet totally otherworldly" (White Cube, 2022). Camara's work is often serve as "truth revealers", they are not just about representation but also about channeling spiritual energy and conveying divine messages. She sees her pieces as a way to express the sacred connection between humans, animals, and spirits. Camara's clay evokes an earthy, ancestral connection, tying her pieces to tradition. It inspires me to reflect on my own practice, particularly how I might balance tradition and personal stories to explore themes of identity and heritage in my work. By delving into the technical and thematic approaches, I hope to experiment with new techniques, like incorporating symbolic elements or imbuing my work with a similar sense of emotional depth and cultural significance.



GRAYSON PERRY- OUR MOTHER

The 2-meter-tall figure of the anthropomorphic mother, carrying a baby in one arm, a house on her shoulder, and shoes hanging from her neck, made a strong emotional impact on me. It evokes elements of votive or devotional religious icons, particularly those associated with maternal figures, like the Virgin Mary in Christian imagery. The work draws on the visual language of Catholic and medieval statues of saints—often designed as objects of worship—while subverting this traditional iconography to comment on modern motherhood, societal expectations, and the complexities of gender roles. It also calls to mind ancient fertility figures, such as the Venus of Willendorf, which symbolized abundance and the essence of motherhood.

What strikes me about Perry's piece is how he combines these historical and religious references with contemporary social critique, creating a work that challenges both the idealized notions of motherhood and its reality. As I research this sculpture, I'm inspired by the way Perry infuses his work with both historical and cultural depth, making it not only a personal reflection but also a commentary on broader societal issues.

This piece has inspired me to experiment with similar techniques in my own work, such as exploring the emotional and cultural significance of my subjects, much like Perry does, and create pieces that resonate on a personal level while also engaging with larger, universal ideas.



Grayson Perry, Our Mother 2009

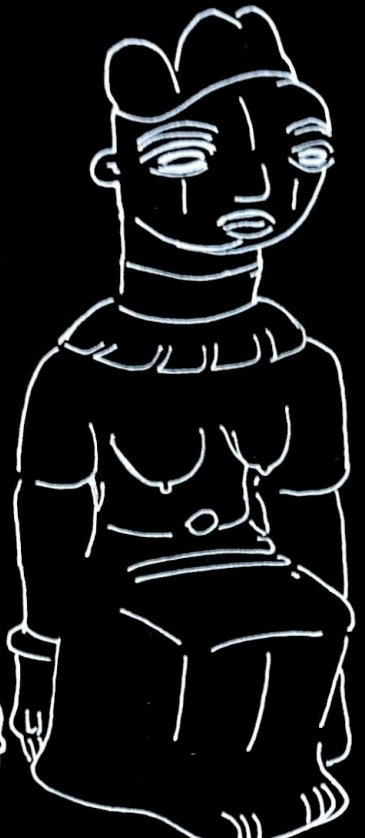
EXPERIMENTATION - GLAZE + TEMPERATURE



I experimented with metallic glazes to mimic the appearance of bronze-casted pieces, but I **found myself more drawn to the raw, unrefined texture of Vulcan black clay**. The rough surface carries a sense of history and tactility that resonates with the themes of memory, heritage, and spirituality in my work. To push this further, I adjusted the firing temperature to see how dark I could make the clay without it bloating, **aiming to achieve a deep, almost charcoal-like finish**. This darker tone enhances the haunting and totemic quality of my sculptures, reinforcing their connection to ancestral traditions and ritual objects. Additionally, I explored different extruded surface textures, adding depth and variation that are both visual and tactile. Moving forward, I want to continue refining these techniques, **considering how surface treatment can further emphasise storytelling and emotional impact within my sculptures**.



Helmet mask (Agba)



AZUMA (d. 1951) seated female figure



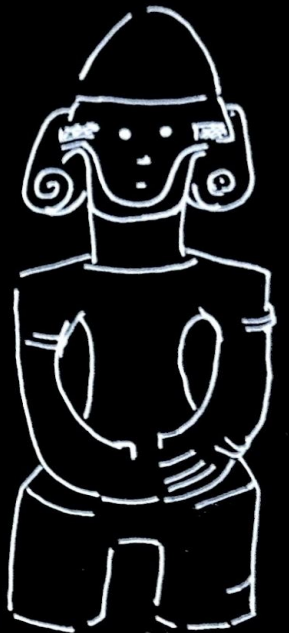
"Kam" meaning grandmother.



Male figure with the head of a chamba mask.



Aku-Ma (Mask)



Male figure (Wipong)



Ekwajy



Helmet mask (Aku Wasenki)



The costume of Mask of the Genius Akuma, depicted by a Juhma artist.



Mask (Akirang?)

WEARABLE PIECES - MASK



1.



2.

Inspired by Nick Cave's wearable pieces, I decided to create my own **life-sized masks to place on top of my sculptures**, each featuring different expressions and faces. This approach reinforced my decision to **scale up my sculptures to accommodate interchangeable masks**. While I experimented with various designs, I wanted them to maintain a cohesive aesthetic, so I incorporated the recurring scale-like pattern across them. With the first mask, I noticed significant shrinkage, making it too tight and uncomfortable to wear. To address this, I made the second one with an open back, allowing for a better fit and can be secured with a leather string. Additionally, **I glazed the interior where the face would rest to create a smoother, more comfortable surface, ensuring that if people wanted to interact with the piece**, they could wear it without discomfort. This adjustment not only improved functionality but also reinforced the interactive element of my work, encouraging the audience to engage physically with the mask. By allowing people to wear and experience the piece firsthand, **I aim to blur the line between observer and participant, fostering a deeper connection to themes of identity and ritual.**

KARA WALKER - FONSI AMERICANUS



Kara Walker Fons Americanus Tate Modern 2019 (detail). Photo: © Tate (Matt Greenwood)

Walker's *Fons Americanus* actively challenges historical amnesia by spotlighting the uncomfortable truths of violence against the African diaspora—a theme that resonates deeply with my practice. Like Walker, **I strive to engage with narratives that are often overlooked, using art as a means to explore the intersection of personal and collective memory.** Walker's piece, which reclaims and recontextualizes the grandiose aesthetic of traditional imperial monuments, inspires me to think critically about how I can employ materiality, form, and storytelling in my own work to question dominant historical narratives and honor marginalized voices. My interest in figurative sculpture as a storytelling vessel parallels Walker's ability to weave complex historical narratives into her monumental figures. For instance, her use of cascading water to symbolize the transatlantic slave trade aligns with my attempts to use clay to embody personal experiences. **Walker's ability to layer symbolic references, from mythological figures to colonial architecture, pushes me to think about how I can incorporate similarly nuanced elements into my own work.** Her approach demonstrates the power of combining visual grandeur with narrative depth to confront uncomfortable histories, and this inspires me to further refine my practice as a means of challenging the erasure of marginalized stories, much like she does so effectively in *Fons Americanus*.



Visit to the British Museum- The Sainsbury Galleries

I spent an hour sitting in front of the plaques, observing and reflecting. This was, I believe, my first visit to the Sainsbury Gallery and also the first time I paid close attention to the plaques. Each piece held layers of meaning and complexity. While they speak to the violent history of their acquisition, my primary focus was on the craftsmanship. Every plaque seemed to carry a thought-provoking depth. I found myself trying to interpret the stories embedded in each one: “Why is the oba dressed in a military gear?” “Why are the Oba and his Chiefs dressed in celebratory attire?” “What’s happening here?” “Why is he holding a book?” “What message is he trying to convey?” I also realized how much detail I had initially overlooked, like the smaller faces around the edges of the plaques. I had to re-examine each piece closely and carefully to catch these subtler elements. As I examined the plaques more closely, I noticed details I had previously overlooked, such as the smaller faces surrounding the edges. These subtleties encouraged me to revisit each plaque with fresh eyes, realizing how much richness and complexity could be captured in seemingly minor elements. This experience made me rethink my approach to detail in my sculptures—how even the smallest components can hold symbolic weight and contribute to the larger narrative.



Going back home to Nigeria - Visit to the Igun Market



The Igun Market is a hub for metal artisans who have been practicing the art of bronze and brass casting for centuries. I was fortunate enough to have a guild show me how they cast their bronzes. The process of creating these bronzes involves the **lost-wax casting method**, where a wax model of the intended object is made, covered with clay, and then heated to remove the wax, leaving behind a mold. Molten metal is then poured into the mold to create the final piece. This technique has been passed down through generations in the Igun Market.

My research for this unit took me back to Nigeria, where I realized that much of what I discussed in tutorials was rooted in memories from my childhood or stories passed down to me. While this aligns with traditional oral learning methods and the themes of this unit, I felt the need to dive deeper and gain a more concrete understanding of the story I wanted to tell, now from the perspective of my adult self.

This brings me to the next part of my journey: the shrine. As I explored Christianity's impact on my upbringing, it felt essential to also address the other side of my spiritual heritage—African traditional spirituality. My goal was to reconnect with my grandmother's shrine, only to discover that it had been removed. This absence reinforced the reality of cultural loss, yet my visit to my aunt's shrine, which she learned to build from my grandmother, became a moment of resilience and continuity. She guided me through the elements that make up her sacred space, reminding me that even in the face of erasure, fragments of these traditions still endure.

The following slides contain graphic images of the shrine, which I would like to preface with a trigger warning due to their detailed nature. These images are not just representations but reflections of my thoughts and the complex feelings I've had about this space, as it has become central to my exploration of cultural and spiritual identity.

THE SHRINE



UHUWANE
MUM

ORUWANE

UHUWANE

EAGLE



The mami was present from the moment of her birth, as she is considered the ruler of the sea within the mami spirit. Her mother gave her plenty of Fanta to cleanse the mami influence. In the mami spirit tradition, those born with it are believed to bring great blessings. The shrine dedicated to the mami is placed at the highest point in the room, symbolizing its significance. The mami is deeply connected to wealth, and after performing the ritual involving mami water, her prosperity began to flourish.



MAMI WATER (goddess of the sea)

Cowries are an important part of the rituals, I noticed they were imbedded in every aspect of the shrine. They signify money and wealth.

The bells on the right are used to call the mani water. The white shells behind the bells are brought from the depth of a river and are meant to signify good luck (orhue).



ISHANGO (god of thunder)

Ishango, the god of thunder, is a powerful force of justice and protection. He wields a large cutlass, which he uses to strike down wrongdoers and fight against enemies. As a warrior deity, he goes to battle on behalf of his followers, defending them from harm.

Ishango is also associated with discipline, symbolised by the cane used to punish those who act unjustly. Ritual offerings play a significant role in appeasing him, with the type of blood used— from a goat, chicken, or another animal—determined by the oracle's guidance.



The color red is sacred to Ishango, representing his fierce energy and relentless pursuit of justice.

Followers perform various rituals to seek his protection, shielding themselves and their families from harm. While Ishango safeguards his devotees, it is believed that those with bad intentions may still face his punishment.

Orunmila (god of kernel)

It is a practice used to reveal the future, where palm kernels are cast onto the ground and interpreted to uncover a person's destiny—past, present, and future. It is guided by a spiritual deity that provides direction in life, advising on what actions to take and what to avoid. Those who worship Orunmila are given specific titles, similar to how believers in a church may hold roles like deacons.



This system is comparable to Ifá divination, where native doctors serve a role similar to bishops in a church, delivering prophecies and guidance. They are deeply connected to Orunmila, acting as spiritual intermediaries, much like prophets.

OGUN (god of iron)

Ogun is a fearless and unstoppable force, often depicted as a warrior covered in iron, wielding a machete. He is meant to protect you and fight for you. He represents **perseverance, determination, and discipline**—qualities needed to overcome obstacles.



Ogun is known for his fiery and aggressive nature but also his deep sense of justice. If angered, he can be destructive, but when honored and respected, he grants strength, success, and protection.

Reflection

In the future, I envision expanding my practice by delving deeper into the cultural and spiritual traditions that have shaped my identity. A significant part of this journey involves returning to Nigeria, where I recently had the chance to reconnect with these traditions. I learned a great deal from this experience, but upon returning, I found myself feeling stuck and overwhelmed. The wealth of knowledge I gained left me at a crossroads, unsure of how to proceed. It feels like a full-circle moment, as I find myself back at the starting point of the project, grappling with how to integrate all that I've learned into my work. For Unit 10, my goal is to find a way forward by striking a balance between the knowledge I've gained and the direction I want my practice to take. I want to use this time to reflect on how I can translate my personal and cultural experiences into art with more clarity and focus.

In addition to deepening my understanding, I also aim to make my work more accessible and impactful. I want my art to extend beyond private spaces and enter the public realm—whether through gallery exhibitions or public installations. By placing my work in these spaces, I hope to create connections with a wider audience and spark important conversations about culture, identity, and shared human experiences.

As I look to scale up the work I've done so far, I plan to focus on increasing the physical and emotional presence of my sculptures. Creating larger works will allow me to engage viewers on a more visceral level, making the cultural and emotional depth of my practice more tangible. Drawing from the work of artists like Nick Cave, I am also interested in incorporating elements of movement or sound to further enhance the dynamic nature of my sculptures. While my current sculptures evoke a somber emotion through their static forms and wide, hollow eyes, I'm hoping to explore ways of making them more interactive and immersive. Ultimately, my goal is to create art that bridges personal memory, cultural heritage, and public space, while finding a balance between these aspects in my ongoing practice.