

RETHINKING THE SKULL: FROM RITUAL SYMBOLISM TO SCULPTURAL MATERIALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART

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Abstract

This study examines how animal skulls especially the cow skull that have long been associated with rituals, taboo, and fear can be reimagined as media for contemporary sculpture. Adopting a practice-based approach, the paper was organised in two phases: pre-studio activities, involving the collection, maceration, cleaning, and preparation of the cow skulls and individual parts of the skulls and studio activities, where assemblage, engraving, slicing/cutting, drilling, sandpapering and finishing techniques were employed. Three works out of the five works that were produced as follows- *Environmental Hazard*, *Termite Anthill while Awon Amuludun*, *Things Fall Apart*, and *Motherhood Passion* were analysed. These works demonstrate that, when transformed through careful processes, bones shed their connotations of fear and sacredness thereby becoming vehicles for new meanings. They articulate themes of cultural resilience, ecological awareness, and conceptual hybridity, while addressing the potential of up-cycling as a sustainable artistic strategy. By engaging with both traditional symbolism and contemporary experimentation, the study challenges entrenched perceptions of the skull and positions it as a potent material for innovation. The findings contribute to discussions on materiality, postcolonial identity, and creative resourcefulness in contemporary African art.

Keywords: Bone sculpture; Contemporary African art; Unconventional Materiality; Up-cycling; Ritual symbolism; Maceration

Introduction

During a visit to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin (Ekehuan Campus), one of the authors of this paper recalls an experience that shaped his early perception of the skull as a cultural object. Passing the Department of Theatre Arts during an induction ceremony, he encountered students in symbolic costumes of red, white, and black, with painted faces and palm

fronds, moving solemnly and rhythmically around a decorated white cow skull. At first, the scene evoked fear and raised questions of ritual or occult practice, but it was later understood as a theatrical performance celebrating African performance aesthetics.

This encounter prompted reflection on the persistent association of skulls with ritual, occultism, and fear in African societies. The skull whether human or animal has historically symbolized ancestral presence, spiritual potency, and communal memory (Jegade, 1991; Oloidi, 2010). Such meanings, though culturally significant, have reinforced its taboo status and limited its artistic exploration. This paper seeks to reframe these narratives by presenting the skull as an object of beauty, innovation, and aesthetic significance in contemporary sculpture. Using cow skulls as unconventional media, the study highlights their symbolic, environmental, and material value, in line with scholarship encouraging African artists to extend cultural materials into new expressive domains (Egonwa, 2012; Onipede, 2017).

The study employs a studio-based methodology structured into two phases: pre-studio and studio activities. The pre-studio stage involved sourcing, cleaning, and preserving bones, while the studio phase emphasized design, assemblage, engraving, and finishing. Through these processes, cow skulls were transformed into viable sculptural materials that challenge ritualistic taboos. By repositioning the skull as a medium of innovation and environmental consciousness, this study contributes to discourses on materiality in African sculpture and demonstrates its potential for new aesthetic and conceptual possibilities.

Literature Review

(a) . Animal and Human Skulls An Overview

The skull is a fundamental structure in vertebrates, serving to protect the brain and support feeding and sensory functions. Composed of multiple bones, it provides critical insights into evolutionary history, functional adaptation, and cultural symbolism.

The human skull consists of 22 bones, divided into cranial bones that encase the brain and facial bones that form the face and jaws (Standring, 2016). Its enlarged cranial vault, flat facial profile, and reduced jaws distinguish it from other primates, reflecting evolutionary adaptations for increased brain size, upright posture, and speech (Lieberman, 2011). Human skulls also exhibit

variations across sex, age, and ancestry, which makes them central to anthropology, medicine, and forensics (White et al., 2012).

By contrast, animal skulls demonstrate broader morphological diversity, shaped by diet and ecological niche. The cow skull, for instance, exemplifies herbivorous adaptation: it features a broad frontal bone, elongated nasal cavity for heightened smell, prominent orbits for wide vision, and a mandible with flat molars specialized for grinding vegetation (Kardong, 2019). Cows lack upper incisors, instead using a tough dental pad in conjunction with lower incisors for food processing. The parietal and temporal bones enclose the brain, while the occipital bone links the skull to the vertebral column, providing stability during grazing (Hall, 2015).

Comparatively, the human skull emphasizes cranial capacity and cognitive function, whereas the animal skull emphasizes feeding and environmental specialization. Beyond their biological functions, skulls also carry deep cultural significance, frequently associated with ritual, symbolism, and art across societies (Hutson, 2010).

In this study, the anatomical parts of the cow skull including the cranium, eye sockets, nasal cavity, jawbones, and teeth are examined not solely as biological structures but as artistic resources. As a sculptor, the goal is to repurpose the skull beyond its traditional associations with ritual and symbolism, repositioning it as a medium of creative expression. This approach situates the cow skull within contemporary sculptural discourse, where natural forms and organic material are transformed to challenge cultural perceptions and extend the material possibilities of art practice.

(b). Unconventional Materials in Contemporary Sculpture

Contemporary sculpture has moved beyond the confines of traditional media such as stone, wood, clay, and metal to embracing unconventional materials that expand the vocabulary of form and meaning. The 20th century witnessed significant shifts as Dadaism, Surrealism, Pop Art, and Arte Povera that challenged material hierarchies thereby elevating found objects, industrial wastes, and organic matter as legitimate sculptural media (Chilvers, 2009). This openness to non-traditional resources has become a defining feature of global and African art, with artists like Sokari Douglas Camp and El Anatsui blending indigenous and industrial elements to explore new visual languages

(Jegade, 1991; Egonwa, 2012). In this context, unconventional materials become active agents of meaning rather than neutral supports.

(c). Up-cycling as a Creative Approach in Sculpture

Up-cycling, though modern in origin, refers to the transformation of waste materials into artworks of heightened aesthetic and symbolic value (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). Unlike recycling, which breaks materials down, up-cycling preserves their integrity, enhancing both function and meaning. McDonough and Braungart (2002) note that it “maintains the material’s integrity and value while elevating its purpose and appeal in new contexts.” In contemporary art, this approach extends beyond repurposing to convey ecological and conceptual significance (Sung et al., 2014).

As a sculptural methodology, up-cycling redefines waste as a site of innovation. Nnorom (2021) describes this as “creative resourcefulness,” where the histories of materials scratches, erosion, or logos become narrative elements. Spaid (2017) similarly emphasizes the role of ecological art in transforming discarded matter into cultural texts. Prominent examples include El Anatsui’s monumental bottle-cap tapestries (Oguibe, 1999; Goldstein, 2024), Vik Muniz’s landfill portraits in *Waste Land* (Simon, 2010; Architecture Digest, 2016), and Tony Cragg’s plastic assemblages that blur boundaries between the natural and industrial (Cragg, 1993; Sculpture Magazine, 2010).

(d). Symbolism and Materiality in Contemporary Sculpture

In contemporary sculpture, symbolism resides not only in form but in the cultural and historical resonance of materials themselves (Egonwa, 2012). Antliff and Leighten (2019) stress that media can communicate political and cultural meanings even before formal interpretation.

Artists such as Ai Weiwei, Anish Kapoor, and El Anatsui exemplify this material-symbolic dialogue. Weiwei’s use of reclaimed wood, porcelain, and bicycles challenges narratives of heritage and censorship (Smith, 2020). Kapoor’s reflective stainless steel and wax installations interrogate spirituality and perception (Moffett, 2013). El Anatsui’s monumental bottle-cap tapestries transform waste into commentaries on colonialism and global trade (Oguibe, 1999; Goldstein, 2024).

Methodology

This study employed a studio-based, practice-led research design (Gray & Malins, 2004; Sullivan, 2005). The process was structured into two phases: pre-studio activities and studio practice. As Oloidi (2010) notes, the pre-studio stage involves conceptualization and preparation of materials, while the studio phase emphasizes practical exploration and production.

A studio-based approach was considered most appropriate because the research sought not only to theorize but also to demonstrate, through practice, how skulls could be reimagined beyond their ritual and taboo associations. By integrating material preparation with experimental studio processes, the study ensured that both technical execution and conceptual framing directly informed the creative outcomes.

Pre-Studio Activities

The pre-studio phase involved ideation, selection of cow skulls and parts, and maceration processes. Maceration which is the cleaning and preservation of bones was crucial for transforming raw skulls into workable materials. It entails removing soft tissues without damaging the bone structure, thereby preparing them for creative application (Christian et al., 2021).

The boiling method was adopted, following Claire (2017), for its efficiency in artistic contexts. The process combined natural decomposition, boiling, and chemical treatments. Fresh skulls from the abattoir were first stored for partial decomposition, then boiled to loosen tissues, sterilize, and degrease, with detergent added to neutralize odour. Residual ligaments were manually removed, after which the skulls were scrubbed, rinsed, and treated with mild hydrogen peroxide to sanitize and preserve coloration (Savitri et al., 2023). A final ethanol rinse accelerated drying and disinfection before the bones were air-dried in a ventilated space.

This systematic preparation rendered the skulls safe, durable, and odour-free, ready for studio experimentation. Symbolically, the process also cleansed the material of ritual and taboo associations, repositioning it as a viable medium for contemporary sculptural production.

Studio Production Processes

The studio production process involved the modeling techniques adopted in the study, which include carving of the cow skulls through slicing/cutting, engraving, drilling, sandpapering, and assemblage.

Materials and Tools Used During the Study

The combination of materials, tools, and equipment supported both the technical manipulation of the bone medium and the conceptual aims and objectives of the study. Each action involving collecting, cleaning, cutting, and assembling was treated as a symbolic act of transformation, redefining the skull from an object of fear into a medium of resilience and innovation within contemporary African sculpture. Cow skull bones formed the core material, while detergent, hydrogen peroxide, ethanol, and water were used for cleaning and whitening. Firewood and large pots enabled boiling, and Araldite gum, binding wire, metal rods, as well as bolts and nuts were applied to stabilize the components during assemblage.

Both manual and power tools were utilized. Power tools included an arc welder, grinding and drilling machines, and a cordless drill, paired with accessories such as cutting discs, hole saws, and drill bits for slicing, shaping, engraving, and perforating bone surfaces. Manual tools were reserved for fine finishing and precision tasks where mechanical tools were unsuitable.

Figure 1



Title: Awon Amuludun (The Entertainers)

Artist: Osiboye Oluwaseun Opeyemi

Medium: Cow Lower Jaw Bone (Mandible)

Size: 36 x10 x11cm

Year of production: 2024

Description and Analysis

Awon Amuludun (translated as “The Entertainers”) is a bone sculpture in the round produced in 2024, measuring approximately 36 cm in height, 10 cm in breadth, and 11 cm in length. Sculpted entirely from cow mandibles (lower jawbones), the piece features three stylized standing figures: two male drummers and one female dancer carved, sliced, and finely sanded to achieve a smooth finish. The figures are mounted on a high black pedestal, which enhances their visual prominence and contrasts with the white bone surfaces, emphasizing their celebratory and entertainment essence.

The composition is arranged rhythmically: the dancer leads in front while the two drummers follow behind. Despite their simplified forms, the figures convey motion and communal energy, capturing

the vibrant atmosphere of cultural festivities. Traditionally, drumming and dancing play integral roles in communal entertainment and social cohesion. In contemporary society, however, entertainment has expanded beyond these traditional expressions to include sporting activities such as football, basketball, and swimming, as well as the global film industries (e.g., Nollywood, Hollywood, and Bollywood) and digital platforms like social media.

Symbolically, the work celebrates the enduring relevance of entertainment as a means of cultural expression and communal bonding. By transforming bone a material often associated with death into dynamic forms that embody vitality and rhythm, the artist creates a powerful paradox. The sculpture thus bridges tradition and modernity, reaffirming the role of art in sustaining cultural identity and collective joy in contemporary African contexts.

Figure 2



Title: Things Fall Apart
Artist: Osiboye Oluwaseun Opeyemi
Medium: Bone
Size: 61cm x 122cm
Year of production: 2024

Description and Analysis

“Things Fall Apart” is a high-relief sculpture (Fig: 2) measuring approximately 61 cm by 122 cm, inspired by Chinua Achebe’s classic novel. The high-relief sculptural artwork reinterprets the novel’s central theme, the disintegration of Igbo society under colonial influence through form and material. Constructed primarily from cow skulls (cranium, jawbones (mandible and maxilla), teeth (premolars and molars), and other bone fragments, the sculpture represents a fabric-like surface that has been torn apart. This bone “fabric” is achieved by engraving and arranging flat sliced bones, while gaps and ruptures in the surface are created using sliced bone rings, symbolizing dent and disintegration created by the colonial imposition.

The most striking feature in the composition is the zipper element made from cow jawbones, teeth, and a skull fragment (cranium), positioned to unify the torn fabric but rendered dysfunctional. The zipper, fastened with bolts washers and nuts, contrasts sharply with the rest of the composition, which is joined organically with Araldite gum. This juxtaposition of industrial and organic bonding methods symbolizes the clash between indigenous cohesion and colonial imposition.

Through these symbolic gestures, the work visualizes the collapse of traditional structures. Bones here function as both literal material and metaphor, representing cultural memory, mortality, and the fragile bonds that colonial forces sought to manipulate. “Things Fall Apart” thus transforms a literary narrative into a sculptural meditation on identity, disruption, and resilience.

Figure 3



Title: Motherhood Passion
Artist: Osiboye Oluwaseun Opeyemi
Medium: Camel and Cow Jaw Bone
Size: 46 cm × 26 cm × 17 cm.
Year of production: 2024

Description and Analysis

Motherhood Passion (Fig: 3), produced in 2024, is a freestanding sculpture in the round measuring approximately 46 cm × 26 cm × 17 cm. It was constructed from camel and cow bones primarily camel's lower jawbones with teeth and cow lower jawbones, some with and others without teeth combined with camel bone offcuts to enrich the tactile feeling of the surface. Executed in a representational style, the work explores themes of maternal love, care, and devotion.

The piece was developed through a direct modelling technique that retained the natural properties of the bones while reshaping their physical structure. The elements were assembled using slicing,

carving, and bonding with bolts, nuts, and Araldite adhesive to form a cohesive three-dimensional composition. A black-painted wooden base provides contrast to the bones' off-white tones and anchors the sculpture through a central screw fitting for stability.

Formally, the camel jawbone constitutes the dominant structure, symbolising the mother in a stylised seated posture. A smaller cow jawbone, positioned on her lap, represents the child, while additional sliced elements refine and support the composition. This spatial arrangement foregrounds intimacy, protection, and continuity. Conceptually, the work frames motherhood as the foundation of early leadership and emotional development. The maternal figure embodies empathy, guidance, and resilience, presenting nurturing as a model for societal values and leadership ideals. Through its material transformation, *Motherhood Passion* elevates discarded organic matter into a cultural metaphor for care and enduring strength.

Conclusion

This study repositions animal skulls and bones, materials traditionally associated with taboo, ritual, and fear as dynamic media for contemporary African sculpture. Through a systematic process that began with the maceration and preparation of bones and extended into careful studio experimentation, the research demonstrates how unconventional materials can acquire new symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural meanings.

The three studio works *Awon Amuludun*, *Things Fall Apart* and *Motherhood Passion* collectively highlight how bone, stripped of its former connotations, can be reinterpreted to express themes of joy, coexistence, leadership and cultural resilience. This transformation affirms that materiality itself can be a critical site of innovation, allowing African artists to challenge inherited perceptions, expand their sculptural vocabulary, and contribute to broader conversations on sustainability and cultural reinvention in contemporary art.

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