Nok Culture

The Nok Culture of sub-Saharan Africa is believed to be the earliest known civilization of Africa. Evidence of a Nok Culture was first discovered in 1928 during mine excavations led by Lt. Colonel J. Dent-Young, when a terra cotta monkey’s head was unearthed in the Nigerian village of Nok. Terra cotta human heads were later found. Some of these figures were decorated with bracelets, necklaces and skull caps and one individual clay figure wore a cape. These figures were exhibited in a museum in Jos. In 1942 another terra cotta figure was discovered and reported to an administrative officer called Bernard Fagg who was a trained archaeologist and had explored this culture in depth. Since this find during the Second World War over 400 examples of what is believed to be representation of Nok Culture has been found. When these clay pieces were assembled they were found to represent human heads and various animals. Because the place where these pieces were found had been disturbed, it is not possible to accurately date the finds, but other similar finds have been found on the plateau above Nok. By the use of thermo-luminescence testing as well as radio carbon dating it has been proved that the uncovered artifacts were made between 500 Years BC and 200 Years AD. Nok Culture it is believed existed from the end of the Stone Age till the beginning of the Iron Age in sub-Saharan Africa. It is believed that permanent communities existed at the sites where the pottery was found and that the inhabitants were farmers but also had the skills to manufacture goods.

Nok Culture is believed have come into being around 3000 Years BC. Many of the terra cotta sculptures depict humans and their sizes range from 6 inches to nearly the size of an average human being. They also represent fashions and hair styles of the period that they were made and seem to indicate that like today much time would have been spent shaping and designing one of the many hair styles depicted. The heads are formed in a variety of different shapes. Some are spherical while others are cylindrical or conical. Also the terra cotta figures take the shape of animals such as elephants, monkeys or snakes and sometimes are a fusion of animal and human forms. One of the statues is shaped like a sphinx which could possibly indicate links with Ancient Egypt. There are also penis sheaths which are another representation found in Egyptian art.

The people of the Nok Culture wore thick collars made of stone beads. From their ears and noses and lips dangled quartz cylinders. Cotton fabrics
were worn by the elite while the general populace went around in leather aprons, bark cloth with beads or basket ware ornaments covering their private parts. It is quite likely that body decoration would have been common place with a wide variety of ornaments been worn.

Firing these large terra cotta model would have required lots of skill and knowledge. The width of each clay piece would have to be uniform. Nok Culture was a highly structured society and was most probably aristocratic in nature. Labour was probably divided between the many artisan skills. The statues may have had religious undertones and could have formed the basis for religious shrines for some form of ritual or worship.

Archaeologists have revealed that the Nok people living in what is now central Nigeria were skilled and resourceful gardeners, who also were able to provide economic support to artists which could be seen as ancient form of Art’s Council Grant. Their agricultural skills further developed with the influx caused by the migrations of the Bantu people. They cultivated plantain, grains from the Near East and as pastoralists herded cattle, sheep and goats. The Nok people also used grind stones to turn grain into flour. Oil was extracted from certain plants and yams formed part of their diet. In the last 2000 years, pearl millet, sorghum, cow peas, ground nuts, guinea yams, (grown in the forest regions), okra, calabash, water melon, cotton and sesame were grown. During the first millennium plants from East Asia were introduced into Nok Culture. The yam, banana and coco yam originated from Malaysia and became part of the staple plants of this forest agricultural system. This indicated the international links that existed between Africa and the wider world. The manufacture of goods was a feature of their society. It is likely they used vertical looms to manufacture cotton as one of the statues found shows a figure wearing a cape, evidence that as a culture they had knowledge of textiles. The Nok culture possibly had one of the world’s earliest iron smelting industries. Remains of iron furnaces and iron slag heaps have been found and at a site discovered at Taruga, a number of items were found which seemed to indicate that this culture was quite advanced. Wrought iron objects, pottery and terra cotta pieces were uncovered. The Senegalese historian Professor Diop suggests the possibility of an iron smelting industry in this region as early as the 4th Millennium BC.
Classroom activities for Nok Culture

1. Create replicas of Nok Culture artwork.
2. Describe in detail the piece of artwork you have created.
3. Use Google and other search engines to find out further information on Nok Culture.
4. Working in small groups discuss the information downloaded. Work out what information is new. Choose a spokesperson to relay this new information to the rest of the class.
5. Would you consider Nok culture to be an advanced or primitive culture? Either writing on your own or discuss in small groups the reasons for your conclusions. This piece of writing could also be accompanied by an illustration.