

**Uli: History, Essence and Prospects**  
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**Art in the Igbo Cosmos**

Art is a universal phenomenon and a multi-versal experience. From the beginning of time, all peoples had different means of responding to the mysteries and exigencies of being through the use of symbols and images. Before the introduction of formal education, these bodies of thought usually made their generational transitions through oral traditions. In other words, before Africans went to school to learn how to read and write, Africa had a sense of aesthetics. Before art became a branch of scholarship in the colonial schools, Africa's sons and daughters knew what art was; its essences informed the dynamics of mundane living. It was not as elitist as is the Western paradigm. It was a communal affair, if not in its production, then in its enjoyment. The artist and his work were thus communal assets, the way the cock that crowed in the distant private compound was at the service of the whole community.

In other words, both the artist and his work were effectively connected to the centre – the very soul – of society. Art was not the monopoly of anyone; the ability to create belonged to everyone. So was the capacity to appreciate and enjoy art. “*Ino ndu bu ikwa nka*” (living is an art), an Igbo adage, then remained very apt. The separation of art from society that characterizes post-independence Africa – including Nigeria and Igboland – is, thus, part of the fallout of the colonial project.

In pre-colonial Igboland, as in most traditional societies, there was a word for art – *nka*. Although, literally meaning “skill”, *nka* was also the word for art or artistry. It manifested in many ways, both in men and women, and commanded adequate appreciation among members of the community. When *nka* over-flowed its rational banks, it translated to *agwu* which, although may be defined as “creativity”, encodes highly extra-sensory awareness and spirituality, as can be found in vernacular medicine, witchcraft, shamanism, and herbalism, all of which could be classified as art in pristine times. Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, a major manifestation of *nka* was to be found in *uli*, a feminine, cosmetic art that was, until recently, very popular.

**What is Uli?**

Originally, the term, *uli* was the Igbo name for the indigo dye obtained from several species of plants identified with the following botanical names: *Rothmania Whitfieldi*, *Rothmania hispirole*, *Rothmania cuspidata*, and *Rothmania urcelli*. These species also have Igbo names as *Uli Oba*, *Uli Nkilisi*, *Uli Edeji* and *Uli Okolobo*<sup>1</sup>. Usually, the berries of these plants are extracted and ground and the dye is pressed out of the marsh with the fingers of the hand. Once extracted it is a

ready and workable medium for drawing on the human body. Usually, the dye is placed in a wooden receptacle or coconut shell from where the artist scoops it with the help of the *uli* knife (*mma nw'uli*) to make the intricate monochromatic drawings on the body. To ensure good registration, *ufie* (camwood dust or paste) may be used to prime the skin before the application of *uli*.

Scholars have speculated on the origin of *uli* among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria. The consensual opinion is that *uli* must have originated as a sign language, but the reason why it transformed into a means of body decoration and persisted in that state is not known. It is generally believed that the body variant predates the mural version. Classical *uli* monochromatic drawing on the body is very closely related to the Igbo murals rendered in the four traditional earth colours and both are also essentially a female tradition. Thus by extension, traditional paintings on walls came to be known also as *uli* painting, although the indigo dye does not form part of the palette in such painting. The *uli* palette was at once austere and rich, consisting in four colours: *nzu* (white), *edo* (yellow), *ufie* (red), and *oji* (black). Blue, obtained from washing blue – a commodity that came with the colonizers – latter joined the *uli* palette.

*Uli* is not just the plant, dye or pigment. It also stands for the drawing made on the body or wall with the dye or pigment; it is also the name of the entire art tradition in which the indigo dye or earth pigments were used in Igbo land. It should also be pointed out at this juncture that the word *uli* equally functioned as an aesthetic determinant among the Igbo. “*Ide uli*” was thus a general, metaphorical term for decoration or beautification of any kind. Any set of decorative patterns that harboured a level of intricacy was logically likened to *uli*. At times, such association may be made negatively, as in the case of likening a patch of burn or multiple knife-cuts on the skin to *uli* “design.” In the same vein, *kịtịkpa* (chicken pox/small pox) could also be associated with *uli* from a very negative standpoint; a person quarrelling with another could verbally, if metaphorically, summon *kịtịkpa* to “draw *uli* on the body of his/her adversary” (*kịtịkpa dee gi uli n'aru*). In some instances in the past, the negativisation of *uli* took a more comical, if fraudulent, turn, as revealed by Ezechinyelugo in Ikwemesi and Agbayi (2005):

*Ndị gboo ndi b'ayi, okasi ndi Umudioka, ji kw'ya (uli) akpa ego n'osụ, nyaa n'akukụ imo wee gbagobe. Mgbe a, fa bulu ukpa fa, uli eju'ye, ufie eju'ye, fa ewee binie. Mbosị fa y'anata, anwukojue okukụ, chijụ akwa “George” bu ife fa gholitaa n'aghughọ. Maka n'ọ n'abụ fa lue n'osụ f'ewelụ uli m'obụ ufie fee mmadụ na nzuzo si ya n'oya ojii m'obụ oya ọzọ atug'ye. Onye y'efe uli m'obụ ufie fee, onye y'agwọ agwọ aputa kwue n'ya g'agwọ...Fa luzie mgbe a mebe mesja, fa ebukosikwa ife fa bu n'ife nine fa nakotalu fa – ego, okukụ, akwa – wee bulu nata.*

(Our people in the olden days, especially the people of Umudioka, used it (*uli*) to make money in distant lands, around the present Imo State upwards. At that time, they would travel with basketfuls of *uli* and *ufie*. On the day of their return, they would come with

plenty of chicken and “George” wrappers, which they collected from those people by artifice. Because when they got to distant places, they would organize and sprinkle *uli* or *ufie* on people’s skin secretly and tell the people that they had been infected by “the black disease”. When the person who would do the sprinkling did it, another would volunteer to heal the “disease”. If he liked, he would say that it would take five or six days to cure the disease...So when they finished with them, they would come home with so many things – money, chicken, cloth).<sup>2</sup>

Yet ironically, *uli* and *ufie* were believed to possess curative and therapeutic essences that were vital to healthy living. *Ufie* was particularly useful in the prevention of rashes, boils and sundry skin diseases and can still be found in some markets in the Igbo and Yoruba areas of Nigeria. Beyond its cosmetic and clinical possibilities, *uli* also served as dress or clothing among some Igbo women folk in pre-contact times. In some places it symbolized nubility among young maidens.

### **The *Uli* Mural Variant: Process and Aesthetics**

Although derived originally from body *uli*, the wall painting is bolder and more vigorous. It is rarely the exertion of one woman and often celebrates the central myth of the community. Although it thrives on freedom and spontaneity, there are general rules and principles.

The first stage involves the use of *Aja Oto* (mud slip) to cover the cracks and crevices created by age and insect. *Ntite*, made from shredded plantain stem or stalk, is also used to smoothen the walls, a process which can be likened to the sizing of canvas before painting. Subsequently, *Mkpulunkwo*, a fine pebble, is used for further smoothening.

Next, *aja nwa mmuoo*, a reddish brown earth pigment, is used in the manner of primer or size to produce a layer of ground on which *mgbuwa*, the initial layer of design, is established. The *aja nwa mmoo* background will alternate with the final *uli* painting and establish the different panels of design/painting. The primer is left for about 24 hours to dry properly. After this stage comes the final stage of the painting proper.

Painters in a typical *uli* mural may number between two to twenty depending on the situation or context. The exercise is usually an exemplar of cultural democracy in action. Some women would mark out the general outline of forms and motifs; others would brush in the shapes, while the most dexterous would pencil in the intricate details, usually with *mma nw’uli*. The eldest women, who had retired from active community service, could sit in during painting session to advise and critique and, at times, participate practically. *Uli* painting is a spontaneous process of exploration and experimentation. No two painters may contrive exactly the same design ideas and elements. Inspiration is derived from diverse experiences and so are the motifs, which draw from forms in nature and issues in existence. When the painting was a more communal one, and if the painters were many, they could consummate the painting exercise in song and dance, usually on the last day of painting.

The *uli* artists were highly respected group of women in Igbo society, and they usually informally taught the art to their daughters and others who, in turn, passed it on to posterity. This helped to ensure continuity for this art tradition. The artists were usually invited to paint the walls of shrines and other public places during the celebration of very important festivals in the community. Individuals also hired them to decorate their body in preparation for such festivals. In some villages, private compounds were often painted as a form of decoration or as a tribute to a deity. Understandably, on the body it could be either purely aesthetic or functional or both. But on the wall or other public places, it is both decorative and ritualistic.

Some paintings by *uli* women classicists embody qualities, which can equal those of 21<sup>st</sup> century post-modern artists, especially in their ability to economize creative means and to deconstruct elements and cue up to their essences and symbolism in a marvel of sustained abstraction. One striking characteristic of *uli* painting is its directness of execution and the vigour and intricacy of its linear and spatial configurations. It is also a highly exploratory art that requires no preliminary sketches.

*Uli* may not be a codified sign language like *nsibidi* of the Ibibio also of eastern Nigeria or the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt, but it is an ideogram in its own right, one which tended to capture through its abstract and minimalist tendencies the worldview of its exponents, the Igbo, de-fragmenting cosmology to mere symbols and signs which were far from being trite communicative alphabets or words but elegant carriers of aesthetic and cultural values as well as history and identity.

### ***Uli* in the Throes of the Cultural Turn**

The *uli* art tradition is as endangered as many other traditional art forms in much of Africa. The colonial project prided itself on the fact that it “pacified” Africa, but the cultural conflict engendered in the process has gradually sterilized and castrated the continent. The onslaught of the imported religions, especially the post-modern, totalitarian brand of Christianity that has arisen from the ruins of the failure of socio-political institutions in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, as well as the whirlwind of Westernisation, have taken a great toll on otherwise useful and positive cultural practices. It would be unusual, for instance, to find a woman (young or old) wearing *uli* design on her body. The same goes for *uli* murals. Shrines are a thing of the past; the new gods of the continent do not inhabit mud houses, and Nigeria’s modern architects have not explored convincingly the adaptation of traditional elements into contemporary design. Otherwise, *uli* is full of promise as a resource base for modern painting, sculpture and interior decoration. Some of these possibilities have been explored and exploited by the Nsukka artists over the last 30 years in painting, drawing, textile/fashion design, furniture design, sculpture, graphic design.

The introduction of *uli* into the elitist ivory tower of high art in Nigeria can be traced back to the efforts of Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu, all painters and theoreticians in varying degrees. At the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970, Uche Okeke and Chike Aniakor were among the faculty that arrived University of Nigeria at Nsukka to breathe a new lease of life into the war-battered institution. Udechukwu on his part was among the teeming students who returned to the university with renewed hope at this time. But all three shared one commonality: they had all been at Zaria at various times before the civil war. Uche Okeke had studied there in the 1950s; Chike Aniakor studied there in the 1960s; Obiora Udechukwu was enrolled there as a student in 1966, but could not continue his studies due to the pogroms in northern Nigeria at the onset of the civil war; hence his reappearance at Nsukka at the end of the war.

The presence of the trio at Nsukka in the 1970s and their general interest in *uli* as a creative idiom sparked off endless waves of experimentation in the studios at the University of Nigeria and also created a remarkably new departure in the history of Nigerian art. Other faculty and students at Nsukka at the time also spread the *uli* gospel through their work: Chuka Amaefuna (in mixed media painting); Osita Njelita (in graphic design), Benjo Igwilo (in ceramics); Bons Nwabiani (in painting and visual communication), C.S. Okeke (in textile design); El Anatsui, the world renowned Ghana-born, Nigeria-based sculptor (in sculpture).

It is not that *uli* was formally injected into the art curriculum at Nsukka in those days. But there seemed to have existed some kind of unvoiced consensus among these creative minds to continually seek new challenges at the frontier of their genres by cleverly adapting the lyricism and symbolism of the *uli* pictograms to contemporary artistic demands. For these artists and many others, *uli* became a datum for artistic enquiry into matter, for creative sorties and for the coming to terms with the realities of the socio-political ecology in Nigeria and elsewhere. The success of this pioneering effort is, perhaps, best measured with the level of followership and acceptance which it attracted in the two or three decade in the post-war era.

Beyond these neo-classicists, several generations of students and artists associated with Nsukka have exploited the *uli* symbology in various ways. Such eminent Nigerian artists as Tayo Adenaike, Ndidi Dike, Chinwe Uwatse, Olu Oguibe, Sylvester Ogbechie, Ray Obeta, Chika Okeke, C. Krydz Ikwemesi, Ozioma Onuzulike, among many others, have prolonged the life of *uli* through their works, writing, and other creative and academic enterprises. The *uli* idiom, thus, remains the most triumphant and successful exemplar of a practical return to history by any group of artists in Nigeria. Not only is the *uli* movement widely acclaimed in Nigeria, it has also received many accolades in the United States and parts of Europe. One of *uli*'s greatest moments of glory is, perhaps, its 1997 major showing at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC., championed and curated by Emeritus Prof. Simon Ottenberg, a long standing scholar of Igbo culture and aesthetics.

But *uli* seems to have run its course in the lonesome corridors of high art, just as its classical-parent paradigm in the villages shrink from the jaundiced but conquering gaze of Eurocentricism and Americanisation coupled with the blizzard of Pentecostalist nihilism. If the idiom must continue to survive, its exponents and theoreticians must look beyond the narrow confines of high art and open up new vistas for *uli* in the domain of craft and product design. It is this concern that originally gave rise to the “Rediscovery of Tradition” Project initiated by Pendulum Centre for Culture and Development in association with C. Krydz Ikwemesi. The project aims not to resurrect *uli* in its ancient state, but to re-varnish it and re-inscribe it in the centre of our society through the wider and more accessible channels of utilitarian products so as to give it a fresh purpose and meaning in a rapidly changing world.

### **Conclusion**

One can then conclude that the trouble with *uli* is not an isolated case. It is natural for empires to rise and fall; styles and traditions will wax and wane. After all, Africa is not the only place where traditional art and customs once existed. Tradition is a pan-human phenomenon, especially in its characterisation as a set of canonical principles defining the life and *Weltanschauung* of a people which is normally passed on from one generation to another. In that sense, tradition becomes vital to identity formation. If lost, identity is also lost as a matter of logic.

Yet because of the fleeting nature of time and history, it is never possible to hold on to any tradition in its original state. The dynamics of any culture depends on its ability to re-invent itself in the face of change and challenges without losing its own soul. This is achieved not by living the present as an end in itself – when, in fact, the present does not exist in reality – but by cultivating it as a mere bridge between the past and the future, which are the only concrete poles of existence.

Traditional institutions die in Africa and Nigeria, not because they have lost all place in the workings of society but because the meaning of acculturation and modernization has taken a most irrational turn. Rather than re-invent themselves in response to the challenges of modernity and globalisation, African cultures seem to seek a *tabula rasa* on which they can claim a new but impossible birth. The situation engenders a crossroads that is further re-enforced by the failure of social and political institutions in post-independence Africa, as it shores up politics as the most important spheres of the society at the expense of others, including the cultural heritage. The resulting tragedy is all-encompassing and only puts a final seal on the obituary of the society concerned. If well articulated, a re-invention (*not a rebirth*) of *uli* and, indeed, many discarded cultural experiences – what the elder Nigerian statesman and artist Demas Nwoko has tagged “a recourse to the culture option” – may be one promising way of ameliorating the prevailing anomie.

**Notes.**

1. These botanic names are taken from Obiora Udechukwu (1990).d Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh (2006) identifies some of these species differently: *Uli Nkilisi* (*Remaspora triflora*), *Uli Ede Eji* (*Gardenia imperialis*). Names of *uli* plants in Igbo may also vary according to geographical area or dialect, but generally there are three or four species *uli* among the Igbo.
2. See C. Krydz Ikwuemesi and Emeka Agbaya (eds), 2005. *The Rediscovery of Tradition: Uli and the Politics of Culture*. Lagos: Pendulum Centre for Culture and Development, p. 111-122.