

IGBO IDENTITY AND ULI DESIGN: AN EXPLORATION OF ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE AND EXPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

The paper "Igbo Identity and Uli Design: An Exploration of its Cultural Heritage and Expression" centers on an Indigenous art form traditionally created by women of the Igbo community, primarily in southeastern Nigeria. This artform, composed of abstract, symbolic animal and nature-inspired motifs, holds significant meaning that represents Igbo cosmology, social values, and cultural traditions. These traditional designs serve as motifs for various purposes, including communal identification, body art decoration, mural paintings, shrine decoration, traditional costumes, sacrifice, and worship. However, our tradition experienced a gradual decline, being replaced by Western-inspired art forms and cultural practices due to the advent of colonisation, missionary activities, globalisation, modernisation, Westernization, urbanisation, the spread of global culture, and the lack of adequate documentation across Igboland and Nigeria. The paper adopts cultural imperialism and expression theories, which form the theoretical framework for the paper, to achieve the aim and objectives of this study. The paper traces the origin of the Igbo people, provides an overview of Uli's traditional design, and discusses its importance to the Igbo people. The paper concludes that preserving Uli is not just about safeguarding a conventional art form; it is about affirming the cultural identity and resilience of the Igbo people in the face of global cultural pressures. With the proper support and recognition, Uli can continue to serve as a powerful expression of Igbo identity and cultural pride. The paper thus recommends establishing community-based programs involving local artists, elders, and cultural leaders to promote Uli practice in rural and urban areas, including workshops, festivals, and collaborative art projects.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Cultural expression, Igbo identity, and Uli design.

Introduction

Cultural heritage encompasses the tangible and intangible elements of a society's history, practices, beliefs, and artistic expression. Uli design represents an essential aspect of this heritage for the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. Historically used in body painting, identification, mural decoration, and spiritual rituals, Uli is an artistic language that conveys complex meanings about the Igbo worldview, values, and identity. Uli is a form of decoration and a visual representation of deeper cultural narratives that resonate with the Igbo community's philosophical and spiritual traditions. Despite its importance, the use of Uli has significantly declined, particularly with the advent of colonialism, modernization, and the introduction of Western modes of artistic expression.

Chukueggu (1998) states that culture is a learned and acquired style of behavior that is passed down from generation to generation. Chukueggu (2006) added that culture is the culmination of how individuals conduct their lives and interpret their place in the universe. The multi-ethnic difference in Nigeria, Chukueggu further explained, undoubtedly gave rise to various cultural traditions and practices that profoundly impacted people's behavioral patterns and distinguishable artistic traditions even among artists.

Therefore, Nigeria's diverse cultures aid in expressing national ideals and customs. Certain aspects of their cultural traditions are translated into symbols or motifs on products, making it simple for others to recognize them. This allows us to display our cultural traditions for the public to see and understand. The Igbo people's customs, rituals, and traditions in southeast Nigeria are known as the Igbo culture (Igbo: *Ọmenala ndị Igbo*). It comprises fresh ideas and age-old customs that have been incorporated into Igbo culture through outside influence or cultural progress. Through Uli, the epidermis is used as a transportable canvas to paint motifs and symbols that characterize one's beauty or story. As Carlson (2007) suggests, it was a visual

language unique to the Ejagham people of the Cross River region of southeast Nigeria. Usually connected to rituals in male-only secret societies like the Leopard Society, which served as "law enforcement", it was used for visual communication. Subsequently, the Leopard Society started to sell the association's privilege and the ability to use nsibidi to other ethnic groups, notably, the Igbo. In line with Carlson (2007), its name was changed to the Ekpe Society among the Igbo in the southeast, and its mission and structure were modified to become that of a men's secret society dedicated to the adoration of ancestors. Moreover, the Igbo have a strong belief in reincarnation and a life beyond death.

Therefore, the highest-ranked affiliates have nsibidi symbols for purity, beauty, and holiness, expertly etched on their chests using *nzu* (white chalk) during burial rites honoring deceased Ekpe members. A society is considered traditional if its way of life has been maintained through time using enduring customs passed down from generation to generation. According to Ogbechie (2022), modern artists have copied Uli's motifs and aesthetics and adapted them into various mediums, frequently fusing them with other styles from Nigeria and Europe.

From the perspective of signs, symbols, and images, Uli art possesses all the organic qualities of myth and the limitless polysemy of an image. Because of their philosophical, social, and religious connections, as well as their crucial role in the entire Southern Igbo community, Uli traditional symbols are significant to the Igbo people. Regarding Southern Igbo, the Uli traditional symbols and motifs are disappearing; hence, the current generation is unaware of the advantages and meanings associated with these symbols and patterns. These have been linked to foreign religious ideas and Western civilization. Thus, the paper identifies Igbo cultural heritage, analyzing its historical context and potential for revival in the modern era through historical analysis and contemporary reintegration by the Zaria rebels.

Historical Origin of Igbo People

The Igbo are thought to have started as a people many thousand years ago in the region where the Benue River empties into the Niger River. The Igbo were involved in the slave trade, selling captives to European traders whom they captured in the interior. The Igbo people's decentralized political structure facilitated the British government's establishment of dominance over the area in the 19th century. Igboland was a fruitful place for Christian missionaries to spread their beliefs. Falola and Adebayo (2003) claim that the centralized chiefdoms of Nri, Aro Confederacy, Agbor, and Onitsha politically divided the Igbo before the 20th-century British colonial era.

Frederick Lugard first developed the Eze system of "warrant chiefs." During the missionaries' evangelizing efforts during the twentieth-century colonial era, the majority of the Igbo people converted to Christianity. Following decolonisation, the Igbo experienced a strong sense of ethnic identification. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) began when the predominantly Igbo part of Nigeria broke away from Nigeria and sought to form Biafra, a new sovereign nation, in response to ethnic tensions that arose after Nigeria gained its independence in 1960.

According to Forsythe (2006), millions of Biafran civilians starved to death when the Nigerian military erected a blockade around Biafra. The foreign media, which was advocating for humanitarian relief for Biafra, said that this action amounted to genocide. Nigeria ultimately overthrew Biafra and allowed it to rejoin the nation. The nonviolent fight for an independent Igbo state is being carried out by two sectarian groups founded after 1999: the Indigenous People of Biafra and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra. According to Adelson (2004), the Igbo ethnic identity emerged relatively recently amid the decolonisation process and the Nigerian Civil War. According to Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, Igbo identity should be between a "tribe" and a "nation" because the numerous Igbo-

speaking communities have historically been split and decentralised. The Igbo are occasionally referred to as a "stateless nation" since the Republic of Biafra was defeated in 1970. Igbo languages are found in the Volta-Niger phylum, perhaps in the same group as Yoruboid and Edoid. The Ekpeye and the remainder of the Igbo tribe differ the most. The proto-Igbo migration would have originated in the savannah to the north and migrated down the Niger, first settling near the delta, with a secondary Igbo proper center located in the Awka region to the north.

An Overview of Uli Design

The southeastern Nigerian Igbo people are known for their intricate traditional designs, also known as Uli (Uri). Though some have representational components, these designs are primarily abstract, with geometric shapes and linear lines. Typically, murals are painted on the exterior of buildings or as tattoos applied to the body. Designs are usually painted haphazardly and with asymmetry. Uli is not traditionally considered sacrosanct except for certain depictions connected with certain community rites and painted on shrine walls.

Uli does not explicitly represent anything; its primary goal is to make a statement by decorating the structure or patron's body. According to Ottenberg (2002), women create practically all designs. They use dark dyes to decorate others in preparation for village occasions, such as weddings, title-taking ceremonies, and funerals, as well as for more casual attire. About eight days pass between designs. Igbo women employ the four primary pigments, black, white, yellow, and red, to create uli murals on the walls of compounds and homes. Ikwuemesi (2016) states that Uli art was previously common throughout most of Igboland, but by 1970, it had become less popular and was only practised by a small group of modern artists. According to Ogbachie (2002), some Nigerian painters still work in Uli, and others have begun painting traditional patterns on canvases. Additionally, modern artists have copied Uli motifs and

aesthetics, such as those of the Nsukka group, of which Uche Okeke and other artists inventively transformed the outmoded art form to comply with twentieth-century standards and adapted it into various media, frequently fusing it with different styles from Nigeria and Europe. The words "uli" come from the Igbo names for the plants (Uli Ede eji, Uli Nkilisi, Uli Abuba, Uli Nkpo, and Uli Aru nmadu) that are used to make the dye that is used to stain patterns.

Local folklore holds that the technique originated as a gift from Ala, the earth goddess, who bestowed artistic abilities upon women, as seen by the creation of Uli. According to Smith (2010), in the Igbo language, the act of creating Uli is referred to as writing (*ide uli*) or drawing (*ise Uli*), rather than painting. Grace (2020) states that women are endowed by the Earth Goddess, Ala/Ana, with the capacity to produce beauty and creativity. In Igbo culture, women resolve disagreements because they also elevate women to the position of moral conscience mediators.

Morality and beauty are synonymous; Nma, for instance, signifies goodness and beauty. Uli demonstrates this by having the woman who settled the dispute draw lines down the other's torso. Asele was the first Uli artist in the Igbo (Nimo) tradition. She excelled among all other artists due to her exceptional skill. She also reached the country of the spirits, where she created art, and became the greatest artist of all time due to the connections between life on Earth and life beyond. The author continues that Uli is not considered sacred, adding that the goal is to achieve a pleasant aesthetic and enhance the individual or structure's beauty. The term "visual art" (*ife nkili*) is used by the Igbo people to describe any artwork intended for leisurely viewing. A common expression among painters is "icho mma," which translates to "search for beauty" or "decorate." According to Igbo philosophy, living a good life entail reaching one's full potential and surpassing one's expectations. The motifs utilised represent every facet of Igbo

life. Uli demonstrates reverence and admiration for the natural world. Mother Earth, Ala/Ana, is the source of Uli's power. The serpent, tortoise, alligator, agama lizard, eagle, vulture, and leopard are some commonly displayed animals. The designs represent human traits and are in harmony with the deities. Additionally popular are plants; examples include yams, cassava leaves, seed pods, fruit blossoms, and the Kola nut, a symbol of welcome and peace seen in Plate 1.

Human people or commonplace things are examples of other symbols. Murals can be preserved for an extended period, although typically, the patterns are altered to provide spiritual renewal. Uli are ephemeral in nature and random in their inception and design. A deeper meaning or message is less important to these designs than the overall visual effect they produce. The decorations are usually not considered sacrosanct, even though they are often constructed to honour rites or placed on shrines (Adams, 2005). The features vary depending on whether the designs are on a wall or the body.

When used as body art, Uli designs are typically abstract and intended to draw attention to specific body features, such as the legs or neck. According to Smith (2010), many designs positioned differently across the body are perceived as a single work of art. The Uli designs, or uli aja, that are painted on walls more often feature human and animal shapes. The writer says, "Different designs or sections of the wall are often divided by a characteristic series of stippled white dots or into sections. "Uli" artists typically strive to create a well-balanced arrangement of forms that harmonise with the given space, incorporating a diversity of contrasts and crisp lines. The principal subjects of the drawings are the forms of the negative space left between the motifs with applied pigment. Smith states that distinct styles have emerged from numerous places in southern Nigeria. In Nri-Awka, for example, designs tend to be centered on thin tapering lines with motifs used infrequently. Still, in Arochukwu, designs are heavier and more

densely packed with motifs and nested designs, which occur more frequently. Among these regional variants, different Uli artists have distinctive and recognisable styles, and even in group design drawings, relative rank and talent are acknowledged. Smith (2010) notes that the major component of Uli consists of abstract motifs, or recurrent patterns, that are altered and used in other pieces.

These patterns' shapes are abstractly depicted, and the method used to create the pattern or some component of the natural world gives these patterns their names. The name of the isnwaogi pattern comes from the three-lobed nut, while the aswolago motif is inspired by the snake. These patterns, usually specific to individual villages, are supported by marriage and migration. Unlike the Nsibidi, a system of symbols developed by male secret societies in Igbo culture, these Uli motifs are named for what their designs resemble rather than being representational.

The paintings on them are usually more austere and abstract, with subtle color schemes created by skilled women. Still, Uli can also be painted on residential buildings as seen in the compound of a traditional artist Mgbadunwa Okanumme (Plate:2), symbolising riches and achievement or commemorating a momentous life event like marriage. Following the arrival of Christian missionaries, Uli became less common in Nigeria and was perceived as too strongly connected to Odinani culture and incompatible with Christianity, as stated by Ikwuemesi (2016). Missionaries often prevented women from engaging in traditional Uli art techniques, although they were frequently urged to continue Uli in alternative mediums. Students from Igboland were instructed to replicate Uli designs in needlework at the Christian marital training center, Mary Slessor Memorial School. After that, the school sold these designs. Additionally, Western observers replicated several Uli motifs on paper or paint. Approximately one hundred replica drawings may be found in the Pitt Rivers Museum's

archives, although Smith (2010) notes that the original painters' names are not given. Furthermore, the application of traditional methods has been hindered by modernisation. Murals are now applied using completely different techniques since conventional building materials have been replaced by cement. Despite the widespread remembrance of the method, Adams (2005) adds that many Uli artists who are still active now are elderly without apprentices. However, in the 1970s, modern Nigerian painters started using traditional Uli patterns.

Uli Traditional Design and its Importance to Igbo People

Extensively, cultures in Nigeria view conception, union, and death as the three most significant events in life, and Igbo culture is no different. The Igbo people are a group that cherishes harmony; they have customs around commemorating extraordinary events. Because life comprises distinct phases, societies can stimulate an understanding of patriotism and originality that is uniquely their own by creating ceremonial rites of passage. Igbo females ornament their bodies with Uli designs to suit the event. The Uli design characterized the figure of a woman, enhanced one's look, and highlighted a woman's class in terms of her beauty. Enlightening young women about betrothal was once a distinguished exercise in Igbo traditions, but it has lately become slightly prevalent. The drop is chiefly the result of challenges faced with education, contemporary metropolitan evolution, and the economy. Before this, young ladies would retreat from society and move into a room known as the "fattening room" as a component of an elaborate revolution that included the "consent to marriage." Preparing for betrothal took up much of this three-month-long or extended period of seclusion, which exemplified the advancement from adolescence to adulthood. At this time, a youthful lady acquired pedagogy for her forthcoming position as a wife. Precisely comprehending traditions and conventions was essential for these obligations, which comprised household commitments. Above all, there

is etiquette since, in Igbo culture, polite behavior is considered attractive. When the girls came out of seclusion, they were at their most stunning and visible to society, as Adams states in *Praise Her Beauty Well*. According to Adams (2002), "their hair was tenaciously styled, and their bodies were coated in elegant black line body art" for the traditional occurrence.

Wealthy families of prospective brides would frequently decorate their compound walls with Uli to commemorate the event even more. The Igbo culture commemorates unique events, with child naming among the most widely anticipated ones. It is usual to give a newborn a name shortly after delivery. A child is officially welcomed into the family (lineage) on this day. In *Culture and Customs of Nigeria*, Toyin Falola writes, "A child's name has significance among the Igbo, and among traditionalists, the oracle determined the link between a child and an ancestor by his or her physical traits or mannerisms, as stated by Falola (2001).

Hence, the Igbo people believe that their ancestors can reincarnate as newborns to intensify their presence. According to Willis's 1997 dates, titled women carry traditional leather fans, just like conventional Ozo-titled males did. Titled ladies also wear traditional coral hand (*Aka*) beads and other ivory ornaments as adornments. Because of this, ladies are dressed in Uli designs and groomed in various hairstyles that represent the sun, moon, or even a drawn parallel line on the body using a Uli comb during the customary title-taking. In the past, women's hair was styled in multiple layers, which produced a sparkling and typically artistically innovative look. The final passing of a deceased person in Igbo land signifies the climax of ceremonies. An Igbo person's past, family, gender, title, and link to the community are all reflected in the ceremonies held during their burial. To fulfill this specific customary ceremony, the deceased individual needs to have had a fruitful existence on this planet, a large family, grandchildren, and a highly esteemed community member. The deceased will become an ancestor who will be honored with tradition, according to Falola (2001). This type of burial is frequently performed,

especially for traditionalists, and is carried out during the person's primary or second burial. As a result, when someone dies in Igboland, particularly a traditional man, his body is brought to the *Onowu* by his family to undergo a complete cleansing and washing process, which is carried out four times. Falola (2001) adds that the procedure involves washing his clothes so they do not come into contact with the earth. After that, the *Onowu* and *Ndi-Iche* will carry their body to the shrine, where they will wear attractive clothing and sit on a stool. As per tradition, the deceased's family and relatives would give him their last respects. So, instead of publicly announcing his death, drumming and weeping will inform their forebears that a worthy successor will join them. This is why Uli patterns will be used to decorate the departed sisters, wives, or daughters.

Uli's Decline and Its Contemporary Reintegration in the 1970s

Christianity and Uli were not seen to be compatible after the brief arrival of Christian missionaries, which led to a decrease in Uli practice throughout Nigeria (Ikwuemesi, 2016). Uli was also strongly linked to the Old Native people's traditions (*Odinani*). The Igbo used art daily and accepted the traditional art that the artists created. Ikwuemesi (2016) added that traditional art practices survived pre-colonial periods and were mostly preserved with the people's consent. Uli was considered a woman's art during that period, but missionaries discouraged women from engaging in traditional Uli practices. This was due to a combination of factors, including British colonialism, missionaries' attitudes, and the civil war, which caused hardship and disruption throughout Nigeria and among the Igbo cultural traditions and values, ultimately turning Uli art into a skill that is now endangered. The study was exacerbated by the fact that women started dressing in clothing instead of Uli designs, which led to a drop in Uli artists. The advent of new, contemporary infrastructure types also contributed to the decline of wall painting. Still, our customs and culture were dynamic, which is why there was a decline.

Its elements and meaning have changed over time. Since traditional Uli has been expressed through the media, it has lost relevance to these challenges. Uli's practice is thus situated in an unexplored territory between the past and the present due to the unfortunate events that have befallen it.

Ikweemesi (2016) states that the change in Uli was attributed in the 1970s to contemporary Nigerian artists who started incorporating traditional Uli designs into their works and made a more significant attempt to preserve the Igbo cultural legacy. Uli's transformation into a modern art form was so arduous and complex. However, despite these challenges, Uli artists reinvented techniques to integrate Uli art into modern idealism, expression, and the realistic shape of the current art ideal. Nevertheless, the Nigeria College of Arts, Science, and Technology brought this to light. The Zaria Art Society was established to combine indigenous and European customs.

An Overview of Cultural Imperialism and Expression Theories as Relates to Uche Okeke

In the middle of the 20th century, the Cultural Imperialism Theory became increasingly popular, especially regarding the arts. It gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s as a criticism of Western cultural domination over developing countries during discussions on media, global impact, and cultural dominance. The theory is based on earlier political and philosophical theories about imperialism. However, it was strengthened by the work of scholars such as Herbert Schiller, who explained in his 1976 book "Communication and Cultural Domination" how powerful countries, especially the United States, use the media and the arts to impose their cultural values and influence on weaker countries. This idea connects media, globalization, and cross-cultural exchange to more general ideas about art. Cultural imperialism originated in critical communication studies and was intended to characterize the US and its expanding economic power globally. The globe, particularly in light of the Cold War, sprang out after

World War II and saw the US trying to force other nations to follow their different socioeconomic systems (Garcia, 2018). Garcia (2018) adds that the notion was also used to support the claim that the people who were the targets of cultural imperialism should have the freedom to create independent national media systems.

One of the theories that serves as the theoretical foundation for this paper is the cultural empirical theory, which is based on the idea that smaller cultures are defined by the influence and acculturation of marginally more significant cultures. The impact and domination of Western religion and cultural civilization over smaller African cultures is a glaring example. This paper focuses on how some Indigenous people in Igbo land have become less interested in their culture due to a lack of exposure as the younger generation, due to the dominance or impact of Western civilization and religious belief.

In this paper, Mastanduno (2008) defines cultural imperialism as the behavior of influential people or nations attempting to expand and uphold authority or influence over weaker people or nations to clarify what it implies. However, since art deals with moods, emotions, and conveying feelings, the expression theory is accepted for this paper. Expression theory was a theory that both Rabin George Collingwood and Leo Tolstoy studied. According to Collingwood, art is a means of communication and emotional expression that can evoke genuine feelings in viewers and forge close bonds with them. According to Lowenfield and Britain (2006), self-identification with the costs conveyed and the artistic material used to illustrate it is not necessary for expression. According to Tolstoy, expression theory can convey powerful emotions and experiences to the audience. When considering Leo Tolstoy's expression theory, Khatchadourian (1965) asserts that one can understand that an artwork is an artist's representation of their sentiments and emotions. Still, the choice of visual elements in a particular artwork conveys the Uche experience.

Uche Okeke

In 1958, Uche Okeke, a teenage artist, founded the Zaria Art Society and was instrumental in elevating traditional art and resurrecting creative forms to new heights. Born in 1933 to Isaac Okonkwo and Monica Mgboye Okeke (*née* Okoye) in Nimo, Njikoka Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria, a well-liked region in central Igboland, close to the Onitsha people's center of study and a commerce hub along the River Nimo. The family of Isaac Okonkwo was to relocate to Kafanchan, in the northern region of Nigeria. Later, Okeke followed in his father's footsteps and became a carpenter for the Nigerian Railway. His father was a talented furniture designer and cabinetmaker. About his early years spent growing up in Kafanxhan, Okeke writes the following about his exposure to Uli art:

I remember becoming enthralled with Uli in the 1940s because of a folk ballad. "A Maiden's Lament," the song's title, was dedicated to a brother who disappeared in the forest while searching for berries in the Uli bush. This simple song's words captivated the imagination of a child. In addition, I was exposed to a wide range of artistic pursuits both at home and at school, which encouraged me to draw and make things by hand out of materials like paper, fiber, bamboo, or stems of elephant grass (Okeke and Agulu, 2006).

His interest in Art started in secondary school when he collected Igbo folktales and wrote poems, according to Emu (2007). His creative pen and ink paintings attracted positive attention when displayed at the Mbari Ibadan Cultural Centre. In 1958, the Zaria Art Society was founded by Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grillo, the late Simon Okeke, Jimoh Akolo, Oseloka Osadebe, and Solomon Wangboje, who were later called the "Zaria Rebels." The society aimed to reintroduce art into various media, introducing European and Western techniques, methods, and media, according to Ottenberg (1997). The tension between scholars and instructors at Zaria University resulted from the realization that their real

crisis was teaching European "Formalism" and Western Art traditions. Under Okeke's supervision, the fellows of the Art Society examined an aesthetic program called Natural Synthesis, which aimed to integrate Western and European techniques and aspects of traditional Igbo art and culture, according to Okeke and Agulu (2006). Ottenberg (1997) noted that, during Nigeria's impending independence in 1960, artists anticipated that independence would encompass not only political but also cultural and artistic aspects. They approached their work with an ideological drive based on concepts of artistic freedom more than ever before.

After graduation, the artists embraced their cultural heritage and individuality with distinct pride. In 1967, the civil war forced Igbo artists to reflect profoundly and worry about their futures. Okeke temporarily moved to Germany to advance his education and subsequently organised an exhibition of contemporary works created by well-known Nigerian artists and traditional Igbo arts and crafts. Some of Okeke's works include *Bird in Flight* (1971), *Anupama* (1971), *The Moon of Ekeama* (1970), and *Maniwata* (1981). (1971), the *Moon of Ekeama* (1970). Ikwuemesi (2005) states that in 1971, *Nza the Smart* was depicted in Plate 3 (1958). Professor Uche Okeke was named head of the Fine and Applied Arts Department at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. The three artists and others present during the 1970s served as the foundation for the eventual development of the Nsukka School. After incorporating the Uli cultural legacy into educational practices, Igbo traditional art saw a powerful progressive influence and underwent an artistic reintegration. Uli, a traditional Nigerian art form, has evolved from being primarily body-based to being painted on various surfaces and mediums. Contemporary artists have adapted Uli into various forms, including textiles, sculptures, glass, cement, fibre, mosaic, and ceramics. Ottenberger (1997) states that despite the shift, male and female Nsukka artists have improved their communication with the West and become part of a global network of artisans. However, Chinwe Cynthia Uwatse, Marcia Kure, Ndidi Dike, and Ada were among the Nsukka artists.



Plate: 1

Artist: Uche Okeke

Title: *Nza the Smart*

Medium: Pen and Ink on Paper

Size: 25cm X 29cm

Year: 1958

"*Nza the Smart*" incorporates rich Igbo folklore. In Igbo culture, the diminutive bird *Nza* is frequently utilised in proverbs and tales to symbolise traits like cunning, conceit, and occasionally humour. The saying "When the *Nza* finishes eating, it challenges its Chi" is significantly associated with the bird and addresses issues of overconfidence. This cultural context provides a crucial prism through which to view the artwork's theme. *Nza the Smart* is an abstract doubled-figure, approximately 25 by 29 cm, created in 1958 using pen and ink. To execute, the Masquerade bends in a contrapposto stance and raises his head acrobatically to the left. Therefore, Okeke utilises Uli's signature curved, rhythmic lines to depict "Nza the Smart."

Through a dynamic composition or expressive outlines, the abstracted or stylised image of the bird highlights its cunning or agility.

It was portrayed as a web-like structure composed of five Uli patterns, and it also featured a triangle reflected on its abdomen. Okeke uses the image of the *Nza* to examine matters of human behavior, particularly the tension between the intelligence, pride, wisdom, and egotism of different persons. The title "*Nza the Smart*" suggests an emotional narrative, possibly one that mirrors a moral one in the artwork. Okeke delivers a rich emotional narrative that connects with individual and social experiences through expressive lines, traditional Igbo patterns, and cultural symbolism. Based on the claims made by Lowenfield and Britain (2006), it makes sense that Uche was able to convey his feelings and emotions through *Nza the Smart* when exploring the traditional Uli design made with Ink on paper, which can serve as cultural identification for the Igbo people.

Conclusion

A transformation occurred in 1958 with the formation of the Zaria Art Society, led by Uche Okeke and other artists, including Jimoh Bola Akolo, Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grill, Simon Okeke, Solomon Wangboje, and Bruce Onobrakpey. Inspired by the idea that art should be organic and spontaneous, they coined the term "natural synthesis," a creation intended to showcase the rich creative heritage of the artist's culture. This idea inspired Uche Okeke, who began teaching at the University of Nigeria in 1970, to introduce and develop Uli as a new art form at Nsukka. Chike Aniakor, El Anatsui, Obiora Udechukwu, Ada Udechukwu, Chinwe Uwatse, and numerous other Nsukka artists also embodied the essence of Uli. However, the paper concludes that Uli design is a crucial element of Igbo cultural heritage, representing artistic expression and deeper philosophical meanings. Although Uli has faced significant challenges due to colonialism, modernization, Westernization, and globalization, efforts to

revive and preserve this art form are gaining momentum. By integrating Uli into educational programs, supporting contemporary artists, and fostering community-based initiatives, it is possible to ensure that Uli remains a vital and dynamic part of Igbo identity. Preserving Uli is not just about safeguarding a traditional art form; it is about affirming the cultural identity and resilience of the Igbo people in the face of global cultural pressures. With the proper support and recognition, Uli can continue to serve as a powerful expression of Igbo identity and cultural pride.

Recommendations

These recommendations are given in light of the information found in this paper:

1. The paper suggests that incorporating Uli and other indigenous art forms into Nigerian school curricula can enhance cultural awareness and pride among young people, promoting their understanding of their heritage.
2. Nigerian artists blending Uli into their work should be supported by art institutions, galleries, and cultural organizations to raise cultural attention and promote its appreciation locally and globally.
3. Establish community-based programs involving local artists, elders, and cultural leaders to promote Uli practice in rural and urban areas, including workshops, festivals, and collaborative art projects.

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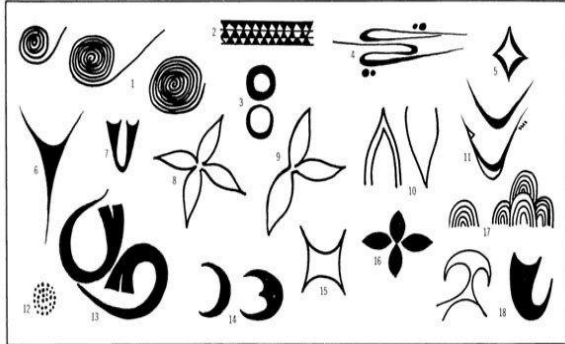
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Picture Gallery



ULI MOTIFS. 1. AKARAKA/IKURAKU (SPIRAL). 2. ODIGBOMGO (VISUALLY RELATED TO A SUNBURST). 3. ONWA (MOON). 4. EHA ALUMONA. 5. AKA INO (LOZENGE). 6. ISI OJI (HEAD OF A KOLA NUT). 7. OGENE MKPINABO (DOUBLE GONG). 8. ABUBA AKPU (CASSAVA LEAVES). 9. ABUBA AKPU. 10. MBO OKUKO (NAILS OF A HEN). 11. ULI NSEWA OR NKO. 12. OTUTU (DOTS). 13. IJE EKE (MOVEMENT PATTERN OF A PYTHON). 14. OKALA ONWA (CRESCENT). 15. OKE UNELE (PLANTAIN). 16. ISI OJI (HEAD OF A KOLA NUT). 17. AKIKA (HAIRSTYLES OR FEATHERS). 18. ODU EKE (TAIL OF A PYTHON).

Plate: 1

Title: Uli Motifs

Source: Chka Aniakor

Year: 1986

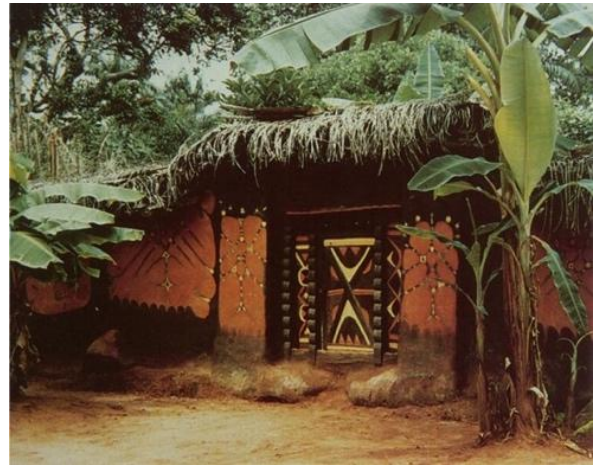


Plate: 2

Title: Uli artist (Mgbadunwa Compound)

Source: Liz Willis

Medium: Photography

Year: 1986