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IGBO DRAWING AND PAINTING:
TWO LITTLE KNOWN ART FORMS

by

Uche Okeke

The Igbo culture area, and I mean Igboland East of the Niger and West of the Cross River and also West of the great Niger waterway of South-Eastern Nigeria, is inhabited by a people whose dominant culture traits, complexes or patterns are indicative of unified but richly varied sub-cultures. This culture area exhibits some evidence of an ancient artistic culture transcending time and place and reflecting mastery of techniques that are unique for the ethnic people.

Art is life, not a means of embellishing existence. Igbo ethno-aesthetes attribute to the Earth goddess, Ala, the dual role of beauty-giving and moral-keeping. Art, which springs from mother nature, is seen as a social system or as a means of fostering the spiritual and physical well-being of the kindred communities. Igbo drawing and painting therefore provide deep insight into the art and life of the people and constitute in a deeply meaningful way the bare bones of their creativity.

Uli Drawing

In more recent years there has been a trend towards searching for the origins of traditional art forms. *Uli* drawing is an attempt to enhance the beauty of the human body, perhaps in the same way as the python is attractively stripped. There are fine examples in Igbo folk tales of riddles and songs of beautifully stripped and spotted beings: "Who is the maiden whose body was decorated with *uli* lines and who roams the forest? —The python!" The song of Onalu's mother in the tale, *ONALU*, is most expressive of the people's thinking in this matter:

"Come in beautiful Ogini!*

Kpaluanuma

It was you who gave me Egu Ona

*Ogini is of the squirrel family and very beautifully spotted. It has, so to say, *uli* decoration on it.

Kpalanuma

Months before Onalu's birth!

Kpalanuma

Onalu, my daughter

Kpalanuma

It is Ogini, the spotted, who will marry you!

Kpalanuma."

What, in fact, is *uli*? It is an art form together with the methods and materials for realising it. *Uli* stain is extracted from the pods of the following plants:

(a) *Uli Oba* or *Uli Nkpo*:** botanical name - *Rothmania whit fieldi*.

Tree - 40 feet high or a much branched shrub.

Fruit - February, November; Globose, up to three inches in diameter with 5 - 10 longitudinal ridges and crowned by the remains of the calyx.

(b) *Uli Nkilisi*: Botanical name - *Cremaspora triflora*

Plant - A fair sized shrub with rusty pubescent usually spreading and more or less straggling branches.

Fruit - Ellipsoid - ultimately glabrous - about 1 cm long-tipped with persistent calyx. This type is most effective when green.

(c) *Uli Ede Eji*: Botanical name - *Gardenia imperialis*

Tree - 60 feet high and 6 feet in girth. The colour of the bark ranges from grey to dark brown with orange flecks.

Fruit - Between April and August. Ellipsoid to nearly globose-up to 2.5 inches long-crowned by persistent calyx containing numerous seeds and bedded in fleshy pulp. This type is fastest in turning dark when exposed.

** I have used names common among the Igbo of Old Onitsha Province.

ULI DESIGN ELEMENTS:

Group I: Geometric Motifs

Group II: Animal/Vegetable Motifs

ntupo (point)



mpo-mpo



akpala or
akpala uli
(line)



agwolagwo
(snake and
snake or
coiled
snakes)



mbo agu
(leopard's
claw)
(triangle)



Ije nwa agwo or
ije agwo
(snake walk/move-
ment)



okwe or
ugbo okwe
(container for
seed game)
(square/rectangle)



okpa okuku
(chicken's leg)



omwa (the moon)
(circle)



isi nwoji and *okala*
isi nwoji
(Kola-head)



(d) *Uli Okorobian*: Botanical name - *Rothmania hispida*.

- Tree - 35 feet high or shrub with smooth bark and brownish or slash pale brown.
- Fruit - June to September. Elongated ellipsoid 2.5 to 4.5 inches long with five prominent grooved ridges surmounted by persistent calyx.

There are other types not mentioned here which are quite well known. *Uli Abuda* and *Uli Anu Mmadu* are some of these.

Ide uli or *Ise uli* is the process of drawing uli patterns on the body or as in some places on walls. The uli artist is usually a female person in Igbo society. She is an adept in manipulating uli design elements with the following tools:

- Nma Mwuili* - small forged and beaten out knife primarily for cutting open uli pod. It occurs frequently in uli designs.
- Okasa uli* - wooden vessel or receptacle for uli stain.
- Nkpisi uli* - quill feather or thin stick pointed at one end and used as drawing pen.

The body is primed or prepared in readiness for uli decoration by liberally treating it with *Uhie*, red camwood, in the same way as *edo*, yellow vegetable colour, serve as primer for the *ogalu* body decoration. As is obvious, names of Igbo design elements are derived from natural objects. The second group of elements are much more typical than the foregoing and a lot more dynamic or organic.

There are great many local animal and vegetable motifs which have become part of the uli artist's picture language.

It is the ordering of these design elements in space as broadly defined by traditional usage that challenges the ingenuity of individual Igbo designers. A delicate balance of the dynamic motif-symbols are generally effectively realised.

Uli has certain lyrical qualities which have inspired songs of outstanding beauty in the folk idiom. Asele, a mythical artist of high renown, is celebrated in songs: "Assele delu uli delu baa mmuo!" (Asele made uli drawings even to the land of the dead!) The nostalgia of a sister for her brother lost in an *uli* grove in *A Maiden's Cry* is well expressed and moving:

"My brother, pray come home!
Ude ndele muli
My brother, pray come home!
Ude ndele muli
My brother, come back from uli grove!
Ude ndele muli
My brother, come back without your bowl!
Ude ndele muli
My brother, pray come home!
Ude ndele muli."

Uli has been seen as a basic art form or in fact a basic creative inspiration or activity by a woman folk singer and the matron of the Enugu Ukwu Ijele Masquerade Dance Troupe (1972) better known as *Ijele Nwame*: "I traded without success
I then took to making *uli*
drawings and the gift
of songs came to me!"

Through the years, *uli* artists have devised design motifs for the different parts of the body they decorate. These are of course the *uli* elements we have already noted or a combination of these. Their choice of motifs shows clearly their sympathy with human body contours and their expertise in the use of *uli* drawing pen. The following are design motifs for different parts of the body:

- (a) Face - *Uli iku* motifs for the brows
Uli onu motifs for the mouth
Uli agba motifs for the jaws
- (b) Motifs for the arms
- (c) The Chest and Breasts - *Uli obi* motifs
- (d) The Belly - *Uli afo* motifs
- (e) Motifs for the lower limbs - the ankles and the feet.

It is well that other popular methods of decorating the human body be examined here. These forms of decoration are more closely related to *Uli* and are sometimes complementary to it.

Ogalu is made from *nsigbu mmuo*, a plant of the *cassia alata* family. It is capable of growing into a large tree. Its roots provide the soft creamy paste which when mixed with some quantity of raffia palm-wine and allowed to ferment overnight is most effective for this form of body decoration. *Ogalu* blisters the skin in spite of the palm-wine antidote, raising it in noticeable weals that lend prominence to the design.

Ogalu design is made up of concentric circles which tend to emphasize roundness of form of the female body. The breasts and the belly, for example, are thrown out in delicate and organically conceived concentric circles. *Uli* is often drawn over *ogalu* in which case the *uli* motifs are very economically dispersed.

Nkasi-Ani (Nkasi-Ala) comes from a tuberous plant. It is similar to *ogalu* in its effect on the skin and the way the circular motifs are utilised. *Nkasi-ani* body decoration clears up in about a month unlike *ogalu* which is permanent. The root paste is ground with *edo*, yellow pigment, and mixed with some quantity of raffia palm-wine or orange juice. This, like the *ogalu*, is never applied on the face for obvious reasons. There are among others *uli ogbu* which are made from certain larvae found on *ogbu* tree climbers.

Incised Body Ornamentation

Technically these forms relate to carving and are the preserve of certain male artists or professionals. *Dioka* from the *Umudioka* kindred are well established specialists of *ichi* facial scarification art. *Ichi* is a distinguishing mark for certain titled class in *Njikoka* Division and other centres in *Igboland*.

Mbibi and *Nki* are two other methods. *Mbidi* is incised with knife by the specialists on the youth, for example, girls, and *nki* design is achieved by means of pricking the skin with point of knife or pin and rubbing in of some dark vegetable stain.

It is not in the least surprising that *Igbo* drawing has not been documented in the past for these reasons:

- (i) Traditional *Igbo* culture is non-literate, rich in oral evidence.
- (ii) *Igbo* art belongs in essence to a traditionally evolutive culture. It continually regenerates and revitalises itself by absorbing and incorporating new ideas.

For the reason of its widespread occurrence in Igboland, *uli* symbols which were originally natural forms have been transformed into highly ritualised signs. Uli, to my mind, is the highest form of art drawing in the Igbo culture area and is doubtless the most basic and indeed the first gift of Ala, the genius of creativity and Mother Earth.

Mural Painting and Decoration

This ream of Igbo art has for a long time been overlooked. In recent years some valuable work has been done in Nsukka by young artists, researchers and scholars. It is perhaps because of the impermanence of the mud walls and the crude nature of the pigments that no record of this ancient art form has been well kept. Painting in the Igbo country is very much associated with festivities and by the very nature of the people's dynamic concept of the living art must of necessity be ever changing.

Colour in Igbo Art

The range is reasonably wide for even the contemporary painter. The following pigments are available in the country in the form of earth colours or vegetable dyes. Traditional painters, mostly women, know how to collect their pigments and how to prepare and preserve them.

Primary Colours

- REDS AND BROWNS:
- (a) *Uhie* (Ufie), camwood, varying shades of red depending on the nature of woods compounded. This colour is produced by rubbing bits of wood against very smooth grinding stone with some drops of water added to it rather sparingly.
 - (b) *Aja-Nwammuo*, yellow ochre earth. Turns reddish brown when baked. Sold in small balls in local markets.
 - (c) *Aja Upa*, laterite, source of very rich browns reddish browns. Very well used and in good supply.

Reds and browns are particularly significant for certain rituals - funerary and title taking events. For the muralist, the consideration is perhaps more aesthetic than purely functional or ritualistic.

YELLOWS AND OCHRES:

- (a) *Edo*, yellow extracted by grinding and adding of water as in *uhie* is called anthocyanin. This compound is found in high plants. *Edo* belongs to this type of plant and is also known locally as *mwanyiooha*, literally 'white woman.'

The following are compounded to produce effective *edo* paste:

- (1) *edo* plant (yellow wood)
- (2) *egwu edo* (yellow tuber which looks like little cocoyam seed.)
- (3) *ozuakwali* or *utu mpikpo* (yellow edible fruit the size of an orange ball which grows from a wild creeping stem).

- (b) *Nchala*, ochre from sand stone. Has rich shades and is easily obtained.

Yellows and ochres are well used for decorative purposes and for ritual effects. They often go with black and white in decorating carved objects such as masks.

BLUES AND GREENS:

- (a) *Anuru* vegetable dye is the source of indigo. The leaves of this plant are usually ground with charcoal to produce blue-black.
- (b) *Akwukwo Ndu*, such as *okwe* tree leaves provide green (green leaves) colours. These colours are fugitive and are not particularly favoured by traditional designers.

Blues and greens are not commonly used by the mural artists. Indigo is rather employed as dye for certain class of woven materials worn by masqueraders and known in certain localities as *awolo nmaruru*.

WHITE: (a) *Aja Ocha*, white earth usually mined.

- (b) *Nzu*, white clay, fine grained and mostly pure white pigment. Well used for ritual purposes - precedes the presentation of the kola-nut.

White is significant in many ways in Igbo life and culture. It symbolises purity.

BLACKS AND BLACK-GREYS:

- (a) *Aja Ojii*, black clay is not truly black but shades of dark ashy grey.
- (b) *Unyi*, charcoal of yam vines is much favoured. It is said to be quite fast and could stay on a wall for some years.
- (c) *Anwuru*
(Anwulu)
Uko, soot deposited by cooking fire in the kitchen is the best source of black pigment. This type of black is finely powdered. It shines with such tremulous or faint diffused light that it is associated with the name of a mythical beauty, *Oji Kpalenu*.

Black is widely used in mural decoration and is the colour of all such ritual objects or carvings preserved above the fire-place.

It is impossible here to exhaust the range of local pigments that are available to the resourceful Igbo painter. *Ose* tree is a source of dull bronze colour.

The art of mural painting is most developed in those parts of Igboland where the walled compound is the tradition. Anambra, Njikoka, Nnewi to mention a few Divisions are outstanding examples. Uli motif/symbols are the basis of traditional Igbo art and painting is not an exception. The wall space is conveniently broken up by the designers for creative activities. Mural painting usually is accomplished through group effort. It is like uli art the preserve of women in Igbo ethnic society.

Drawing and painting are concerned with two dimensional space. Through the study of the uli form, I have arrived at the following conclusions:

- (a) Abstract design elements or organic motif/symbols are generally austere ordered on shrine walls. The colours here are muted with very occasional flash of light colour or white of *nsu*. The *uli* elements are powerful and dynamic and are able to dominate wide and open wall space. These shrine murals are more often than not the efforts of expert hands and constitute the gem of Igbo painting.

(b) More homely natural design motifs are stylised and rather profused. The colours are gay and relaxed and express youthful vigour or joy of life. The entire picture or wall space is filled out with repeated motifs. The general attitude here is that of playful activity on the part of the amateurs or youthful practitioners of this art form.

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