

CHAPTER 11:

AN INVENTION OF *ULI* TYPEFACE FOR VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

Uli, the heritage of the ancient Igbo people, which was a very popular form of art, served aesthetic and symbolic purposes. Uli drawing comprises of raw lines of various types, shapes of various nature and also numerous witty and sharp images, representing everyday life of the Igbo, from farms, cooking pots, plants, birds, animals, the sun, moon and kola nut. The Uli design motifs and patterns however were drawn on various surfaces like the human body, mud walls, wooden surfaces, textile, among others. Apart from beauty, Uli served symbolic purposes in the ancient Igbo. Utoh-Ezeajugh (2006) opines:

The fact that then design practices play important roles in a wide range of ceremonies dealing with rites of passage, healing, war, agriculture and many others, is an indication of the enormous potentials abounding in African body design traditions. (45)

Every line, shape and object of Uli motif drawn on surfaces has significance, relating to real life situations. These designs either suggests case joyous moments or mournful events. It could be marriage ceremony, child birth and naming, manhood initiation ceremony, burial of great warriors and gallant men, among others. Udemezue (2005)

This has gone a long way to project Uli motif as symbolic design that is suitable for passing on messages on on-going events.

The drawing and printing of Uli motif were prominent among women and girls of the olden days. They saw it as their duty to make decorations and drawing, where and when necessary. Uli Art was able to excel because of the level of interest women of those days had in it. Peck (2002), speaking on the role of women in Uli motif drawing hinted that

“Traditionally, the women of the Ibo people of Nigeria painted their bodies with patterns. They used dyes made from the seeds of Uli plants that temporarily stained the skin black.” Women were great promoters of Uli art since it served them daily purpose, ranging from social, religious and cultural matters. The materials used for Uli motif design were natural extracts from plants. This made the materials readily available. Speaking on the materials used in for Uli application Udemezue (2005) made it known that: “Originally the term Uli was the Igbo name for Indigo dye, which is extracted from different types of plants with Botanical names like *Rothmania Cuspica* and *Rothmania Ucelli*. In Igbo language they are called Uli Oba, Uli Edeji and Uli Okolobo.” To buttress this point, Utoh-Ezajugh (2006: 65) reiterates that:

Uli design is made from liquids extracted from seeds embedded in fleshy pulp in pods of some species of Uli plants, or the fruits from species of the Uli plant. These species are known by different names in different communities of Igbo land, but their function are basically the same.

These go a long way to explain how available the sources of Uli were. Uli plants grew in the compounds of every family and this made it very easy for the women to have access to necessary pigments for Uli drawing.

When the European explorers, as well as missionaries came to Nigeria with their culture and religion, the new religion, culture and lifestyle were adopted. Many women that were into Uli design were converted to Christians, and were tricked into believing that Uli was fetish, to that, they let go of it. Since there was no written tradition on Uli, it waned. Udemezue (2005) declares that "...The Christian women were forbade by their Priests from getting involved in the traditional art which now bears the label of being part of Idol worship." The British colonialists worsened the situation with their coming, because their new lifestyle and religion took the attention of vast majority of the women away from their precious Heritage. Many people were brainwashed by these strangers into believing that Uli art is Devilish while the young men and women of today, instead of reinventing Uli, imbibe the western Tattoo. It spreads like wild fire amongst the young men and women. In present times, women and girls are addicted to fashion and taste for modernism. Unlike in the olden days when Women were in the frontiers of Uli design.

Udemezue (2005) speaking in view of this, hints thus:

Among the present crop of young women and girls in Igbo communities the art is regarded as occultic, satanic and Pagan tradition. They associate this art with the shrine and shrine priests. This is sad indeed as this was not so in the past. It is disheartening that the young girls and women of today abandoned our heritage, beauty and aesthetics for another people's value, instead of harnessing our heritage to a new dimension.

Purpose of the Study

The main aim of this study is to design and find models of lettering using *Uli* motifs

Nsukka Art School and the Reinvention of Uli

The art of Uli diminished considerably until the contemporary Nigerian Art era. In Nsukka art school, a group of artists revived Uli art and introduced it in the dimensions of Paintings, sculpture, prints, Ceramics and textiles. Thus an art movement was born – Uliism. It was believed that Uche Okeke was the father of Uliism, since he was the pioneer artist that spearheaded Uli art movement. He was subsequently followed by such artists like El-Anatsui, a Ghanaian, Chike Aniakor, Chuka Amaefuna, among others. Okoye (2006) buttressed this idea when he states that: “The revival of interest in Uli through contemporary art had begun with Uche Okeke in the 1960s, when Nigeria’s independence produced a growing sense of freedom from colonial restraints on cultural tradition.” This reveals that before Uliism was born, the colonial master in so many ways, held back the development of cultural tradition, including Uli art. As a painter, draughtsman and mosaic artist, he found it necessary to delve into the new art form, believing he would influence many artists. Ottenberg (2002) in his view on Uche Okeke’s contribution to Uliism adds:

It fully developed among teachers and students in the 1970s at the University in Nsukka and was linked to renewed interest in Igbo culture after the destructive Biafra war. Like other movements and styles all over the world, Uliism flourished in Nsukka School of art as the teachers spread the knowledge amongst the students. (30)

Jegede (2004) enumerates that “It is Nsukka-based. The members were artists who believe in the philosophy of Uli Art as a stylistic expression using its linear and spiral motifs in terms of forms and using themes that have socio-cultural advantages.”

The members of Uli movement include Obiora Udechukwu, Tayo Adenike, Chris Afuba, Chris Echeta, El-Anasui, Chika Okeke, Olu Oguibe, Victor Ecoma, Ndidi Dike, Krydz Ikwuemesi, Ozioma Onuzulike and many others. Many of these artists were taught by

Uche Okeke, the Pioneer Uli artist. Highlighting the contributions of Uche Okeke made to the growth of Uli Art, Ikwuemesi (2003) observes that: “In the early 1970s when he was appointed lecturer and acting head of Fine Arts departments at the University of Nigeria, he reviewed the entire course programme introducing new courses and research into Igbo art tradition.” This went a long way towards influencing many artists, such as: Obiora Udechukwu, Tayo Adenike, Bons Nwabani, Benjamin Njelita, and many others who were students under Okeke at that time. Thus, Uli has a lot of apostles who have theorized and utilized the Uli idiom, such that it has become doctrinal cleavage in contemporary Nigerian Art, thereby leading to the Emergence of Ulism as a movement. Utoh-Ezeajugh (2006 49). Obiora Udechukwu (Born 1946) contributed immensely towards the development of Ulism. Trained under Uche Okeke in Nsukka, he adopted Uli art and developed his own styles. Udechukwu studied art with and was much influenced by Uche Okeke, then head of the Fine and applied art department of University of Nigeria Nsukka, whose own creations relied heavily on drawing skills and whose content based largely on Igbo culture. Okeke and Udechukwu in Ottenberg (2002 36). Udechukwu’s style was subject to many influences, including the works of the poets, dramatists, the Biafra war, Nigerian Military, Economic situation, among others. Ottenberg (2002) in his view on the factors that influenced Udechukwu’s works of art maintains:

Udechukwu was particularly influenced by the Igbo poet Christopher Okigbo, killed in 1967 in the Biafra war... Some of his visual art has Okigbo’s poetic and lyrical qualities and complexities of interpretation, and at times there are close associations between his poetry and visual art.(38)

It is understandable that the works of Obiora Udechukwu which were influenced by poets and dramatists were in the form of poetic images which told marvelous stories but never divulged from his Ulistic styles.



Fig 1:Homage to Christopher Okigbo, Obiora Udechukwu
Medium: Ink on Paper. Source: African Arts Volume 35, No2

This is the portrait of late Chris Okigbo. The lines and Uli forms are visible and distinct, even the typeface has traces of uli forms. This looks much like a book cover for poetic images or something of that sort. His usage of positive and negative spaces is quite remarkable as he provides rest points for the eyes in the work. This means that there is sufficient space in his work, which is an element of Uli design. The Nsukka art school revived the almost dead art tradition in so many ways, which Ottenberg (2002) reveals that, “ by placing Uli in modern social settings on sculptural surfaces and on paper, board and canvass, framed and hung on walls in homes, institutions and galleries, They helped revive it.” (37)

Uli Symbols and Communication

Uli motifs, apart from the ones painted on shrine walls are not generally sacred, but served so many functional purposes. So many clans in Igbo society are known for their own Uli styles. However, they served some communicative purposes. According to Utoh-

ezeajugh (2006), “the design process is described as Ide Uli (literarily to draw Uli)” (67). Nearly all the towns in Igbo province had Uli designers. However there were towns noted for “Ide Uli”. These towns include: Mbaise, Mbaitoli, Umuaka, Uturu, Abatete, Nri, Agulu, Nsukka, Enugu, Ezza, to mention but a few. Utoh-Ezeajugh (2006) speaking on the styles and functions of Uli, hints:

However, clans, villages or towns groups do sometimes develop styles within a style which can be recognized. For example, Uli Anya Mmiri (Uli for mourning) design which is drawn from under the eyes down to the cheeks, to give an impression of tears dropping from the eyes, is worn by a person who is bereaved in communities such as Umuaka, Mbaitoli and Mbaise in present day Imo state. (6)

People within the community understand with little efforts the communicative functions of Uli. The meaning to a particular design in a given community maybe of different interpretation to another clan.

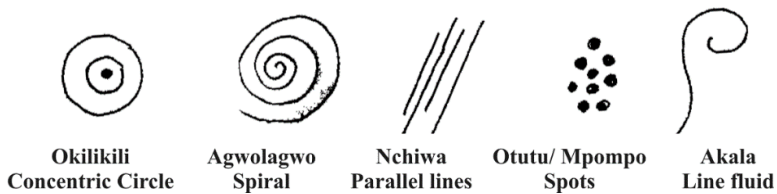


Figure 2 shows few selected illustrated Uli motifs from Utoh-Ezejugh (2006) which are basic Uli motifs

The illustrations above are distinctly rhythmic lines. Line, as we know is an element of design. The motifs are either used individually or composed to form a design as a whole. Apart from the basic Uli designs, which are made up of simple lines, there are more complicated uli motifs, which are more of shapes and objects that represents everyday Igbo life.

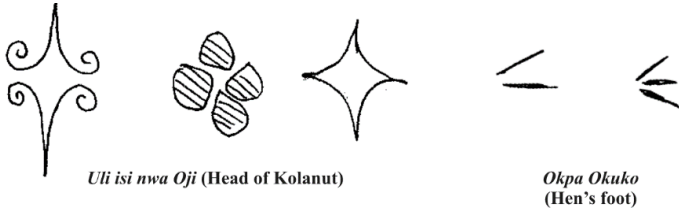


Fig 3: The illustration above show prominent Uli motifs such as *isi oji* and *okpa okuko*. Source: Utoli-Ezeajugh (2006)

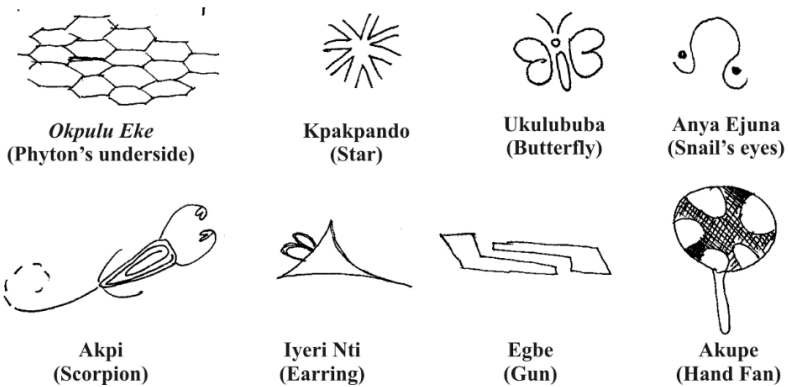


Figure 5: Culled from the National Museum of African Arts are few samples that also represent everyday *Igbo* activities.



Fig 6: shows ogene, okala isioji and onwa. Source: Ezeajughi (2006)

The Ogene is used by the village criers and dancers respectively for announcements and entertainment. Kolanut as we know is what the Igbo man used on a daily basis to receive visitors, to consult the deity (Igba Afa) and also to grace occasions. It is a symbol of peace and unity and is still used today by Ndi Igbo. Onwa, is a celestial body graced by the Igbo associated with folktales drama and plays. Every motif drawn and painted by the artists has a relationship with life situations.

Uli and Typography

Uli is a pure graphic from which is made up of simple lines and from which serves communicative, aesthetic and in some occasion, ritual purposes. Typography, on the other hand according to Knight (2008) is the art and process of arranging type for a variety of media purposes and is made up of several parts. On the other hand typography is not just about text. Njelita (2010) believes that, “typography is the totality of the arrangement of types, illustrations and other visual elements in an orderly manner for communicative purposes.” Muster (2010) Agrees to that when he opines that, “even historically typography has always been more than putting text on paper.” The similarity between Uli and types is communication, while the difference is that Uli is more of icon and signs while types are texts which send messages in form of words. Here, efforts will be made to merge similarities and differences between uli and types together in order to achieve results.

Classification & Types

Typefaces we see every day in Ads, documents, the media etc are classified into various classes. The basic classification is Roman type, Gothic, Block or San serif, script type and Ornament type. However, Pastille (2010) classified types into nine. They are: Old Style, Transitional, Modern, Slab Serif, San Serif, Gothic handwritten, Handwritten, Decorative/Novelty, Ornamental, Old style, transitional, modern I believe are Roman types while slab

serif, san serif are both the Block types. Hornby (2000) defines Decorative as something that makes something look more beautiful and Ornamental as a thing to add beauty to something. Therefore, Decorative and Ornamental fonts are the same. He simply subdivided the original type classes.

Figures 5-9 are classes of Typefaces for layout designs



Fig. 7 Roman Type



Fig. 8 San Serif Type



Fig.9 Script Type



Fig. 10 Gothic Type



Fig. 11 Decorative Type

Combination of Uli and San Serif Type For a new Result

The typefaces below are under experiments by researcher. Here there is conscious efforts towards creating a typeface named Uli slim San serif, by the by merging of Uli forms and sanserif typeface. The typefaces, when completed, could be used for calligraphic writing, graphic designs and typesetting, among others.



ULI SAN SERIF CAPS

Fig 12. shows the result of an experiment by the researcher in combining Sanserif typeface and Uli forms (Upper Case). Courtesy: Onwuekwe, 2011



ULI SAN SERIF LOWER CASE

Fig 13. shows the result of an experiment by the researcher in combining Sanserif typeface and Uli forms (Lower Case), Onwuekwe 2011

Conclusion

Uli design is the heritage of Ndi Igbo, modern trends and western culture put it almost to the background. The knowledge was transmitted orally, until when Nsukka Art School formed Ulism, a movement that took Uli to modern dimensions, spearheaded by Uche Okeke, El-Anatsui, Chike Aniakor and others. Through them Uli was able to take modern turn and appeared in paintings, drawings, Sculpture, textile and prints. Here the researcher arrived at combining Uli with types to form designs suitable for casual wears, with the Polo shirts as medium. This helps to bring Uli further to the forefront particularly to the people of today. Moreover, the people of the western world yearn and demand for such form of art, which is new and strange to them. If such styles of wears are harnessed and mass produced for sale both home and overseas at cheap prices, it will not only educate and promote the Igbo Uli heritage, it also has economic value. It will result in sustainable cultural and economic development of Nigeria.

Questions

List the uli communicative iconographies you know

What are the main characteristics of Ulism?

List the various classes of type faces

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