

Engaging the third Dimension: *Uli* transmutation to Modern Realities of Synthesis

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Abstract

Insufficient appraisal trails the harvest of the ‘Zarianists’ quest for the synthesis of tradition with new influences to post independence art in Nigeria. The oversight is unhealthy to the search for adequate historiography, deeper understanding and appreciation of the stylistic differentials in modern Nigerian art. The purpose of this paper is to report the transverse of traditionally sinuous two dimensional forms of Igbo *Uli* in transmutation to modern realities of volumes by the engagement of the third dimension. The study employed primary and secondary sources of information which included oral interviews, studio experiments with materials and forms, and library studies. It observed that the quest for synthesis of tradition with modern approaches have been met in the third dimension, a new platform that depicts *Uli*, traditionally a two dimensional art, that now transverses tradition and modernity. The study concluded that study and appraisal of the development of Nigerian art, in dire need of art historical and scholarly expositions, are crucial to national development. It calls for departure from ahistorical approaches to Nigerian art, and the continuation of the harvest of the pre independent indigenous quest for freedom of visual expression and celebration of culture in Nigeria.

Keywords: modern, Nsukka, relief, tradition, *Uli*sm.

Introduction

Modern Nigerian art, a product of contentious quest for a new consciousness of visual expression amidst suffocating influences of post-colonial Nigeria, requires up to date analysis of its journey through the revolution that culminated to independence in expression. The campaign for cultural relevance in art, which foreshadowed political independence of Nigeria, was dubbed “Natural Synthesis”, which Egonwa (2001, p. 52) insists was an evolutionary phase of the pioneering cultural advocacy of Kenneth Murray (1902-1971) and his students, notably Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994). However, the campaign was launched in the College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria in October 5 1958 by a few hearts that throbbed in unity against the suffocating influences of colonial western ideals in education that lacked local content for relevant development of cultural values. Azikiwe (1961: 23) refers to that kind of education as veneer of knowledge that did not indicate true academic scholarship, but belonged to “the superficialities of a decadent educational system.”

Through their platform that was promptly labeled “rebels”, The Zaria Art Society, their operational umbrella, succeeded in their quest for synthesis of traditional aesthetic idioms with the new exposure which they were meant to have by their “Natural Synthesis” paradigm. Although the numerical strength of their membership could be counted by the fingers - Prof. Uche Okeke (1933-2016), Simon Obiekezie

Okeke (1937-1969), Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932), Yussuf Grillo (b. 1934), Demas Nwoko (b. 1935), Ema O. Odita (b. 1936), F.N. Ekeada (b. 1936), E.O. Nwagbara, Ikpomwosa Omagie, William Olaosebikan, F.N. Ekeada (b. 1936), Oseloka O. Osadebe (b. 1935), Irein .S. Wangboje, (b. 1931-1998), E.O. Nwagbara (1934-1984), and Jimoh Akolo (b. 1935) (Egonwa; 2001: 52), their exploits continue to be harvested.

As students, the ‘Zarianists’ disbanded at the completion of their studies when they went their separate ways; but they did not abandon the pursuit of their dreams of actualization of cultural impetus in Nigerian art. The synthesis seed, sowed in fertile grounds, continues to be harvested in contemporary productions in fine and applied arts. However, it is regrettable that paucity of literature trails the development of modern Nigerian art as a result of apathy towards its historical perspectives which has also been roundly regretted by astute scholars, Oloidi (2001: VI) and Anatsui (2001: 1). The attitudinal change will place the genres of production in modern Nigerian art in their requisite historical perspectives and effect encyclopedic review of modern art in Nigeria. The trends of poor information processing and interpretation of art forms which has characterized the phases of Nigerian art as commented by Akatakpo (2001, p. 150) is being challenged in this discourse. This paper therefore finds it expedient to expound the traditional-modern transverse of what is now known as *Ulism* not only in its traditional two dimensions of length and width, but also in three dimensions by also engaging the third dimension of depth to form relief sculptures. It is also important to comment that the *Uli* dispersal as a modern aesthetic idiom as fertilized in the Nsukka School also germinated across the Nigerian aesthetic field and blossomed in other artists; the “foster parenthood” paradigm expounded by Echeta (2005, p. 99) or Egonwa’s (2016, p. 10) “Nsukka in diaspora (not necessarily outside Nigeria)” description.

Modern *Uli* Harvest: the Vanguard of Nsukka School

The primary reason for Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the late Owelle of Onitsha and Governor General of the Federation of Nigeria to root for the establishment of the University of Nigeria was for the sovereignty of the African in spirit and in truth. Far back in May 18, 1955 at the floor of the Eastern House of Assembly in his seconding of a motion moved by the then Honourable Minister of Education on the establishment of a university in the Eastern Region of the country, Azikiwe (1962, p. 280) had a clear picture of the kind of education he envisaged: “not only be cultural...also be vocational in its objective and Nigerian in its content.” The establishment of the University of Nigeria at Nsukka in 1959 is the result of that move.

When therefore Prof. Uche Okeke was invited in December 1970, after the ruins of the civil war in Nigeria, to head the Fine Arts department at Nsukka where the university was eventually sited, the ‘restoration of the dignity of man’, being the mantra of that premier university in Nigeria, was to take a new turn that affected art in Nigeria. Not only did Okeke originate the nomenclature of fine and applied arts at Nsukka (Egonwa, 2016), the struggle which he began at Zaria for synthesis of African tradition with western artistic current through the “Natural Synthesis” paradigm saw opportunity to blossom in tandem with the university mantra. The university logo bearing the mantra, “To Restore the Dignity of Man”, is arguably so for the historic time of the university’s establishment in Nigeria, just coming from the ruins of colonialism and the

euphoria of freedom. And so, *Uli*, the art corpus of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, from where late Okeke hailed, marked by expressive spontaneity, began to be imparted to the teeming students mixed with modern vim.

It is also crucial to point out that late Okeke did not achieve this onerous task of resonating *Uli* forms into modern art in Nigeria all by self, but had colleagues and scholars of the same spirit who were there at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka who effectively watered the *Uli* cultivation “as an ideological and philosophical language of Nsukka School” (Oloidi, 2016, p. 2). Professors Chike Aniakor, late Chuka Amaefuna, Obiora Udechukwu, who was one of the first to be “*Uli*-circumcised”, Benjo Igwilo, El Anatsui, whose interest in Ghanaian Kente tradition met a willing African spirit, among many others who were there to see *Uli* genre grow and bear fruits.

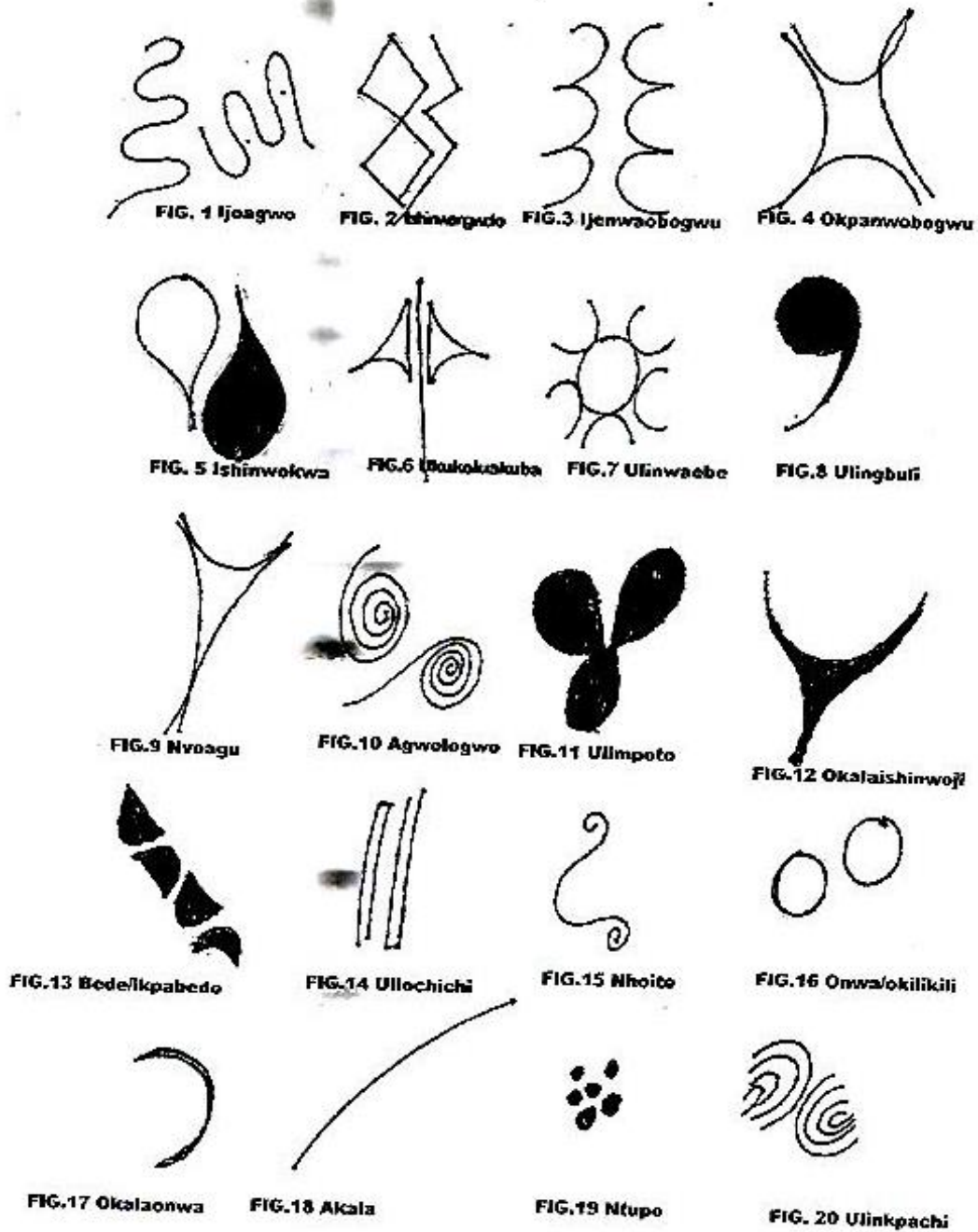
What is now known as *Ulist* is the result of the *Uli* transverse of tradition and modern ethos in Nigerian art circle, while the Nsukka academic environment where the experiment was carried out acquired the nomenclature and designation of The Nsukka School. Ultimately, *Uli* seed has dispersed in modern sensibilities across the nation’s artistic field, even so, still bearing fruits and exploring forms in Fine and Applied Arts. The essence is to imbue local content, of *Uli* forms, into new approaches in not only media and subject matter, but also in content. Echeta (2005, p. 99) calls that “a dynasty of possibilities.”

Igbo-*Uli* Motifs as Symbols

Traditionally, *Uli* motifs, for Awka-Igbo, were images of everyday occupation and experience of an Igbo woman, derived from both organic and inorganic forms. (Igboamazu, p. 27). The organic forms included images of reptiles such as snakes-*ijeagwo* (figure 1), lizards-*ishinwangwele* (Figure 2), images of birds such as ducks *ijenwobogwu* (figure 3)- *okpanwo obogwu* (figure 4), , guinea pig-*ishi-nw’okwa/ishi-nnunu* (figure 5); insects such as butterfly-*ukukoloabuba* (figure 6) and the beetle-*ulinwaebe* (figure 7). The tadpole, *ngbuli*, also attracted a design (figure 8). The leopard’s claws had a place in design named *nvo-agu* (figure 9).

Images from plant life abound: the *agwolagwo* (figure 10) from yam tendrils, *npoto* (figure 11) from kola nut, *okalaishinwoji* (figure 12) derived from leaves; and other inorganic forms such as *bede* or *ikpa bede* (figure 13), *uli ochichi* (figure 14), *nho ite* (figure 15). The moon, *onwa* also called *okilili* and (figure 16) *okala-onwa*, crescent (figure 17) were effectively captured in design. *Akala* (figure 18), line formed the major visual vocabulary with variable renditions in size and type, while *ntupo*, dot (figure 19) formed another major element in design. *Uli nkpachi* (figure 20)

The motifs were symbols which carried meanings in Igbo world as tools of visual communication in the past, their iconographic relevance being lost as a result of apathy to the tradition given rise by colonialism and modernization that underpins it. But *Uli* remains Igbo without doubts with art forms originating from the Igbo bearing the insignia of *Uli* tradition, such as seen in Igbo-Ukwu finds..



Of the Igbo-Ukwu objects, Aniakor (p.307) affirms that “the stylistic and iconographic rendering of the Igbo-Ukwu objects places them firmly within the ambit of Igbo art and related institutions.”

Uli Forms and the Third Dimension

The *Uli*, traditionally a two dimensional form characterized by linear definitions of forms, has also transmuted to volumes by appropriating the third dimension of depth

in the hands of sculptors who were affected by *Uli*. The sculptors received the “*Uli* circumcision”, referred to by Echeta (2005, p. 99). In achieving this, *Uli* idiom transverse the elements of form, and actively unites them as members of one family of form. The assertion of Ocvirk, Stinson, Wig, Bone and Cayton (2006, p. 10) that although the elements of form have intrinsic appeal but are made more appealing in their relationship with one another proves in the relief sculptures of Cliff Nwanna, Obi Igboamazu, Chijioke Onuora, and Emma Okeke, ‘*Uli*-circumcised’ modern Nigerian sculptors as could be observed in *The Retreat*, *Our Laurels*, *Uli Akpulu Akpu*, *Many Faces*, and *Celebration*.



Plate 1: *The Retreat*, Obi Igboamazu, fiber glass, 3ft x 2ft, 2009
Photo by the author

In *The Retreat* (plate 1), which is a commentary on the political upheaval of pre independent Nigeria through the indirect method, *Uli* motifs employ to represent active withdrawal, Igbo movement from the northern volatile side to the east, safe heaven during the pogrom of 1966. The artist’s application of *ntupo* motifs of various sizes of bas and intaglio reliefs, to represent the volatile side during the events that culminated to the civil war in Nigeria, is significant in creating volumes on the medium. On the other hand, *onwa*, *okala-onwa*, *ishi-nwoji*, *okala-ishi-nwoji* and *akala* motifs constitute a juxtaposition of forms which transit the plane to show movement to ‘safe heaven’ eastwards underpinned by the ‘rising sun’ which bestrides the composition in relief and intaglio linear demonstrations.



Plate 2



Plate 3

Plates 2 and 3 (variations):*Our Laurels**Aroma of no reckonings**Even of prodigies**But the dews of great recordings**Are the eulogies of national heroes?**Of vain glory?*

Igboamazu, Obi, 3ft 6ins X 2f 6ins, wood (iroko), 2011

Photo by Onyebuchi Nwaaba

Our laurels is a composition which addresses Okoli's [2011, p. 124] observation that the rebirth of a New Nigeria is dependent upon a fundamental change on the public perception of corrupt individuals who parade ill-gotten wealth as villains rather than "heroes obsequiously patronized with chieftaincy titles and esteemed positions in the society." *Our Laurels*..... (Plates 2 and 3) pose profound doubt about the integrity of national honours which are often awarded to Nigerian 'leaders' by every successive government in Nigeria. It lends a voice to a rejection of such award by one of the most outstanding Nigerian novelists now late, Professor Chinua Achebe, who was appointed for national honours by Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo-led Federal Government for want of credibility of such an award and their recipients, among other reasons. The panel has emphasis on the accolades and mouths on the heads of the 'leaders' to suggest avarice, wherein their strength lies, over national resource. The more of the 'national cake' one is able to grab in self enrichment however illegally, the more he is positioned for a national award! Although the eyeballs of the figures are depicted visibly, they portray myopic-syndrome, except for the second portrait that appears to be adorned with more laurels but whose empty gaze also underscores his bemused mind and apathy towards the nurture of national resource. These contrasts with the figures' elaborate lips which suggest their avaricious disposition towards national resource. Nigerian leaders are blind towards the folly in abundant riches illegally acquired in the midst of poverty-stricken majority who have no access to the 'national cake'. These attributes are effectively rendered in *Uli* motifs of *ntupo*, *akala*, *bede*, *okala onwa*, and *okilikili*.



Plate 4: Onuora, C. N., *Uli Akpulu Akpu 1*, concrete, 20ft x 6ft, 1987
Photo by Chijioke Onuora

What Igboamazu achieves in *The Retreat* in the spatial definition in *Uli* idioms, Onuora, Chijioke also undertakes, this time on a larger format of perimeter fence, *aja ngwulu* in his *Uli Akpulu Akpu 1* and *Uli Okpukpu* (plates 4 and 5 respectively), by direct modeling in concrete. The breaking of the surface area into shapes that are interesting by themselves and in their relationships with one another by weaving them with *Uli* symbols: *akala* of various sizes and



Plate 5: Onuora, C. N., *Uli Okpukpu 2*, concrete, 1991.
Photo by Uneke Okike

directions, *okilikili* and *bede*, is remarkable in the exploitation of the third dimension of depth for effect. The seeming lack of perspective in *Uli* idiom actively relies in the balance of negative and positive spaces for sound draughts man ship in *Uli Akpulu Akpu* and *Uli Okpukpu*, modeled *Uli* forms. Also, the strength of great spatial economy that Igbo-*Uli* embodies significantly displays here, where the sculptor created boundaries that unite spaces and volumes for great visual appeal.



Plate 6: Nwanna, C. E., *Different Faces* 4ft X 1ft 4ins, 2009.
Photo by the artist

That also goes for Nwanna's *Different Faces* (plate 6) where reliefs and intaglios combine to display *uli-ochichi*, *akala*, lines of several types to show varieties of human faces, and a compactness that derives from wood carving tradition. Facial expressions in emotions are everyday human experience which Nwanna captures using Igbo-*Uli* symbols for expression in wood.

In *The Celebration* (plate 7), Okeke organizes *nvo nw'agu*, *uli ochichi* and *akala* motifs into assorted display of jubilating human forms. That *Uli*, hitherto a two dimensional expression of length and width, could transmute into three dimensions, the transverse of the dimension of depth in the appropriation of volume, is a great harvest of sorts. The 'circumcision' that caused this ingenuous skill must also owe to bequeathed sense of design, blood-flowing peculiarity, an "*Igbo ness*" described by Nzewi (2002, p. 371) in describing the unique qualities of Igbo music. However, it is sad that a lot of the meanings of *Uli* symbols have been lost, a pointer that visual forms, like spoken language, can go extinct as a result of failure to onward transmit their symbolic content to successive generations.



Plate 7: Okeke E. S. A., *Celebration*, 2011. Photo by Yessco

Conclusions

Modern Nigerian art still unfolds. For the great time depth and number of her traditional ‘tributaries’, ancient groups that constitute Nigeria, the clime to which they flow in synthesis as a modern experience, new artistic developments are still envisaged. The catalyst of synthesis is still at work in Nigeria, even in Africa at large. The onus lies in expectancy and reaps of the harvests, even of the ‘Zarianists’ quest for “true academic scholarship” in the expression of Azikiwe, earlier referred. It is incumbent upon artists and scholars to do the needful, the harvest of dutiful investments of tradition into the ethos of modernity. As fresh grounds emerge, appraisals are required as a basic requirement of historiography.

Consequently, this discourse dwelt upon the engagement of the third dimension of *Uli* symbols, traditionally a two dimensional expression of Igbo people, southeast Nigeria, practice formally consigned to the female gender. The relief works of four sculptors, males, affected by *Uli*sm harnessed in Nsukka-Ezekwe C. Nwanna, Chijioke Onuora, Obi Igboamazu and Anayo E. S. Okeke, speak volumes of tradition, change, and modern frontiers of sculptural expressions. It seems that *Uli*’s extra aesthetic and phonon logical qualities which transformed as a form of communication for the Igbo women of southeast Nigeria (Sanders; 2005) relives in modern platform of three dimensions of relief for expression of the sculptors’ prerogatives. In the words of Okeke (“Ijele Uli) in Oloidi (2016, p. 5) “the brevity of statement and masterly control of space” as outstanding characteristics of Igbo-*Uli*, profoundly display in the works. The study found the works a crucial development of modern Nigerian art and a genre of note that presents a stylistic differentia developed from a culture of signs and symbols. Since art historical approaches guarantee a deeper understanding and appreciation of art, the study is apt in the need to survey and review modern Nigeria art and shrink the gaping gap between studio practice and historiography for national development. It calls for departure from ahistorical approaches to Nigerian art, and the continuation of the harvest of the pre independent indigenous quest for freedom of visual expression and celebration of culture in Nigeria.

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