

Igbo Art: A Reflection of the Igbo's Visual Culture

David Osa-Egonwa

Abstract—Visual culture is the expression of the norms and social behavior of a society in visual images. A reflection simply shows you how you look when you stand before a mirror, a clear water or stream. The mirror does not alter, improve or distort your original appearance, neither does it show you a caricature of what stands before it, this is the case with visual images created by a tribe or society. The 'uli' is hand drawn body design done on Igbo women and speaks of a culture of body adornment which is a practice that is appreciated by that tribe. The use of pattern of the gliding python snake 'ije eke' or 'ijeagwo' for wall painting speaks of the Igbo culture as one that appreciates wall paintings based on these patterns. Modern life came and brought a lot of change to the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria. Change cloaked in the garment of Westernization has influenced the culture of the Igbos. This has resulted in a problem which is a break in the cultural practice that has also affected art produced by the Igbos. Before the colonial masters arrived and changed the established culture practiced by the Igbos, visual images were created that retained the culture of this people. To bring this point to limelight, this paper has adopted a historical method. A large number of works produced during pre and post-colonial era which range from sculptural pieces, paintings and other artifacts, just to mention a few, were studied carefully and it was discovered that the visual images hold the culture or aspects of the culture of the Igbos in their renditions and can rightly serve as a mirror of the Igbo visual culture.

Keywords—Artistic renditions, historical method, Igbo visual culture, changes.

I. INTRODUCTION

BEFORE going into detail, let us first define visual culture; it simply is the expression of the norms and social behavior of a society in visual images. Creation as we know it embodies traits and qualities that point to a supreme being (God). Science has made discoveries about creation which amazes mankind because the creator's keen attention to detail, making everything perfectly and in an orderly fashion. This tells us that the creator must be an orderly personality and also commands great power. Man is obviously the most prolific of creation and we can see from historic records until now that man has evolved from a cave man to a modern man, who once lived in small settlements then moved into villages or clans, towns, cities and into countries and continents having diversified norms and social behaviors or simply put culture. Man, in his primitive stage or during the Stone Age, created art that served different purposes, for example, cave paintings were created for hunting and for record purposes. Cave paintings created for hunting purposes were used for target practice. The desired animal to be hunted would be drawn on the cave wall and an arrow would be thrown towards it. Throwing the arrow towards the drawing of the animal to be

hunted, served as a confidence booster that programs their minds to attain a successful kill. This target practice is done severally until mastery is attained. The saying that practice makes perfect was well known at this period. This was the culture of man during the stone age. The Egyptian era which dates back about nineteen hundred years before our time, was remarkable for their style of art production. Art as we learnt it from our western counterparts, is art created from what is in the environment that surrounds us which of course we call realism. Egyptian artists, create art that comes from their imagination or what they think and believe it should look like as opposed to copying exactly what the eye sees. This was the norm of the Egyptian artist to produce drawings and paintings according to what belongs to a person or a scene. This is why murals depicts a leader or prominent figure larger than his subjects including his wife. Gombrich [1] Hieroglyphs also accompany murals and itemizes the individual's titles and achievements. This is part of culture for the Egyptian artist. It is also part of the culture to pass this skill down to down to the upcoming generation of artists as it was passed down to him from his predecessors. In his book, [1] mentioned that the hieroglyphs helped researchers and artists to deduce these revelations from the Egyptian artworks. So, art created by a society actually reflects the culture of that society, just as God's personality is reflected or mirrored in his creations; especially mankind, who some believe are created in his image and likeness.



Fig. 1 Ikenga with surface designs

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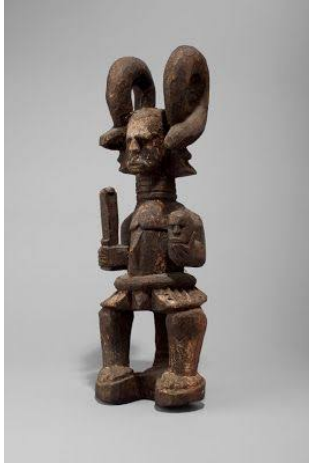


Fig. 2 Small-sized Ikenga without surface decorations

II. IGBO VISUAL IMAGES AND CULTURE

As has been mentioned before culture comprises of our ideals, beliefs and social nomenclature. This paper will now try to elicit this in detail through Igbo visual images. The Igbo are found in the eastern and Niger Delta region of Nigeria and boasts of a lot of art productions that range from sculptural pieces, paintings and textiles, just to mention a few. This paper will focus on a few of these works and try to prove that these artifacts are reflections of Igbo visual culture. The Ikenga, a few Igbo masks, paintings and one or two Igbo Mmawu will be used to bring light to the topic of this paper. The Ikenga is a sculptural piece that comes in different sizes. Its size is affected or influenced by the matron. The Ikenga is considered an Igbo man's god of fortune or power of the right hand. What this means is that the Igbo man believes that the right hand represents a man's source of power, economic success and physical prowess [8]. The word "Ikenga" means place of strength. So, a well-placed person in society will have an Ikenga that is elaborately designed. In other words, a man's

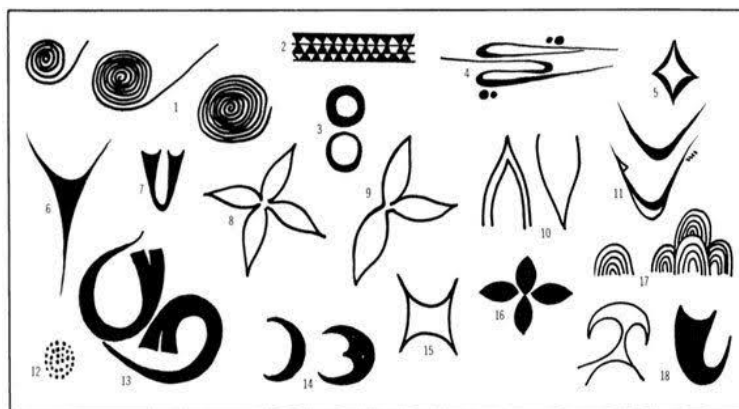
socio-economic status determines the level of aesthetics possessed by this art piece. So larger examples provide enough surface area for body designs while the smaller ones do not give room for any designs. It is placed in shrines (personal Shrines) and worshipped with sacrifices. "Through these sacrifices, it is hoped or believed that the owner's right hand will enable him to be successful in his endeavour" [8].

According to [8], there are three main types of ikenga. We have the *ikenga madu* (a fully developed human figure with horns, seated on a stool), there are the sub-types of warrior, title holder and community ikenga. Second type of ikenga is *ikenga alusi* (cylinder with horns), *ntu aga* (small and simple found in different shapes).

Igbo paintings, range from body, wall and door paintings. Uli is the most dominant symbols used to produce paintings both on body paintings and wall murals. According to Onwuakpa [5]:

Igbo Uli art is a popular creative idiom in south-eastern Nigeria. It serves as decorative, ritual and cosmetic art. It does not exhibit any paradox because it has been considered as art that is aesthetically pleasing. Uli art is practiced purely by the womenfolk on human body and mud wall and based on linear configurations. The intention of uli painting is not to create an illusionistic representation of reality. However, it is dependent on both conceptual and perceptual, which results in abstract and non-figurative representations. *Uli* women painters have produced a voluminous body of work widely distributed throughout Igbo land.

Uli motifs are derived from nature but are not a direct imitation of nature rather they are abstracted. Rectangle (*okwe*), triangle (triangle), concentric coil (*agwolowo*), snake's movement (*ijeagwo*), orange (*oloma* or *olome*), moon (*onwa*), rhythmic patterns of the rat (*agwaogini*) just to mention a few make up some of the kinds of uli motifs.



ULI MOTIFS: 1. AKARAKAJAKURAKU (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 MKPIN'ABO (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).

Fig. 3 Uli motif types [9]

Wall paintings in ancient Igbo land were carried out principally by women. These women paint on the walls of shrines belonging to deities of their community. Udechukwu [3] notes that painting is also referred to as *ulija* (*aja* means wall) and is carried on by the same women who are responsible for *uli* drawings. The paintings on shrine walls are done to pay tribute to the deity. Every aspect of Igbo life is reflected in the motifs used for wall paintings. Festivals create an avenue for wall paintings serving both as a religious and aesthetic purpose. The Igbo's believe that these wall paintings serve as a link between the dead and the living and also serve as a means to communicate with their ancestors. Wall paintings are also done on private buildings when a member of the family that owns the building takes a title. The motif used for this wall painting is different from that used on shrine wall. The motifs are associated with the title. The *uli* plays an important role not only on walls but also on Igbo women. It is used to beautify their bodies for different situations like marriage, and other ceremonies. In Igbo land apart from men taking titles, women also take titles and *uli* plays an important role when these women take titles. According to Sandra [6]:

Igbo women had their own titled societies, and there is no evidence of discrimination against women in the Igbo culture with regards to title taking. On the other hand, the primary way for a woman to improve her social standing was to prove her self-worth, titles were not freely given. Additionally, in traditional Igbo culture, a woman was judged on her accomplishments and not those of her husband. Therefore, a titled woman was distinguished from other women and highly respected, and those who showed leadership potential could often hold public office. More importantly, title taking safeguarded women against destitution and guaranteed them some sense of security.

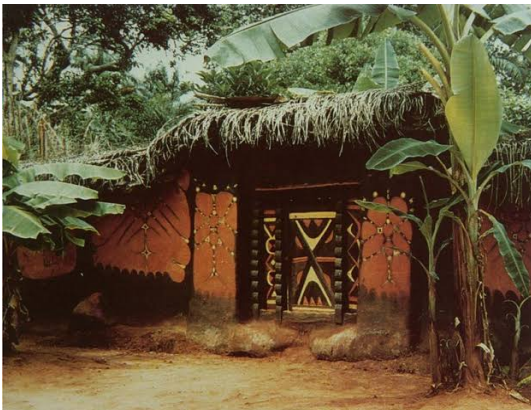


Fig. 4 *Uli* wall painting

The individual seeking the title will be decorated with *uli* and will also put on elaborate hair styles, ivory anklets, aka beads and also carried a fan. Sandra also added that "In Nnobi, Anambra State, the highest title for women was "*agbaekwe*", it conferred political power and authority". *Uli* plays a role in the life of a lady who is about to get married. First before

anything, she goes into seclusion for three months or more and there she learns all she needs to be effective in her soon to be life as a wife and mother. When she emerges, she comes out more beautiful and her beauty is heightened with *uli* motifs done all over her body enhancing her appeal and qualifying her for marriage. Painting the compound walls of the parents of the bride with *uli* is done in celebration of the event. Naming ceremonies, which marks the arrival of a new family member and his/her acceptance into that family brings joy to all and is celebrated with the *uli*. Sandra [6] adds:



Fig. 5 *Uli* design on mud wall

For the Igbo, the dedication ceremony is a joyous occasion that brings fellowship and pride to the family and their community. It is a time when both mother, grandmothers, and women within the family decorates their bodies with *uli*. More importantly, it is customary for a mother to take her child to market for the village/community women to admire. During the pleasant visit, women compliments and praise the new mother for giving birth to a healthy and beautiful child. Gifts also accompany these pleasantries.

Funeral rites are not left out and the Igbo celebrate the passing of an individual who has lived to a good age and good life, have children and prominence in society. A final or second burial of such an individual becomes an occasion both to mourn and to rejoice, as the deceased will become a honored ancestor. In the southern part of Awka and Nibo in Anambra state, the body is taken to a location called "*otokwubu*" by the family to be cleansed about four times without allowing his clothes to touch the ground. Then, the body is taken to a shrine room and clothed in the best attire and placed on a sitting position on a stool. The wife or wives, as the case may be, along with relatives and friends, pay their final respects. After this, the females in the family, which constitute the wife or wives and daughters of the deceased, decorate their bodies with *uli*. The patterns used are personal to them or an artist is employed to select patterns that associate with the burial rites or ceremony. *Uli* as we have seen was a cultural practice in the pre-colonial era by women only for decorating walls of buildings and the female body. It was like the painting medium for beautification of buildings.

Okpa Oworoworo is a masquerade that belongs to the

Afikpo people of Ebonyi state. This masquerade is a showcase of the culture of the Afikpo people. *Omume* title is associated with this *Mmawu*. *Omume* title is given to a man for his achievements in life. This title is used to separate him from others, and as such, he is accorded high respect in the society by all. There is however a process the said individual goes through before the title is conferred on him. This paper is not going to talk on that. According to Ugo [2]:

Okpa Oworoworo is the essence of Afikpo pristine culture. The awesome height is symbolic of the pedestal importance implicit in the masquerade. It is an embodiment of the ancestral symbol of political, social and cultural authority of the community. The repository of all that is held sacred, mystical, magical and supernatural in Afikpo culture. The magnitude of the *Omume* title thus finds an echo in the sacred and grandeur of *Okpa Oworoworo*.

It is the culture of the Afikpo people for the *Okpa Oworoworo* to sit in front of the *Omume* title holders house. He is the king of Afikpo masquerades and sitting in front of the *Omume* title holders' frontage or house is a yearly act that renews the *Omume* title and all that accompanies it. The title holder also has a special stool he sits on which belongs to him and him alone. No other person can sit on that chair. This is one of the cultural practices of the *Omume* title holders. He also possess a bell which serves to answer oral greetings as he is not expected to talk when he is standing. Ugo [2]:

He carries a bell and horse-tail about with him. The bell is to announce his approach and clear the way. The horse-tail he offers in place of his hand for a hand shake. He might not sit directly on the ground; a special chair "*Ekweke*" is made for him, neither does he respond orally to a greeting while standing. He acknowledges greetings by ringing a bell.

In the Nri-awka region, the foremost Igbo-ukwu head piece was discovered in a burial chamber with wood-paneled walls with the dead seated on a stool. Surrounded by bronze vessels, 100,000 glass and carnelian beads, ivory canaries and a head crown were found. A bronze leopard skull and a bronze, kilt for a fly whisk depicting a horseman [4]. These items points to traditional symbols of royalty in sub-Saharan region of Africa [7]. Other items discovered in this chamber includes an equestrian figure with *Ichi* (forehead cultural markings representing eagle wings). All these discoveries points to Nri kingdom where myth tells us that the *Eri* king was ordered by god to cut off the heads of all the eldest sons and daughters and plant them like seeds. So, a revelation of what the culture of a certain society looks like their practices, beliefs can be deciphered from the art they produce, it is like these works mirror the cultures' societies they come from.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper has used a few works created by the Igbos, going back in history, and a lot has been found. Although some things are not still clear, like actual origin but with what has been discussed, the point has been made that art can be a reflection of a society's culture and after years pass, the

culture from where those works originated can still be conceived from these works. Archeologists were the ones that found Egyptian historical works and with tenacious study of these works they gathered the information they wanted. In the same manner, this is what has been done in this study. So far, this paper has been able to prove that point.

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