ULI: METAMORPHOSIS OF A TRADITION INTO CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS

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by

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Africa has been home to a multitude of societies with different cultural landscapes, social structures, and strongly defined aesthetic ideals. In the absence of the written word, Africa’s legacy consists of a vast mélange of complex symbols, patterns, and signs. These aesthetically abstract configurations and unique characters replaced linguistic symbols commonly used for recording the history of remarkable events, the deeds of great kings, celebrations, births and deaths, and extraordinary occurrences. Mary Nooter Robert in *Inscribing Identity: The Body*, suggests “symbols that replaced letters or characters represent the sounds of a language, a logographic system in which a single character represents a word” (Robert 2007:57). Therefore, Africa [Fig. 1] has contributed to the world a rich tradition of typography; from ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, to rock inscriptions found throughout the Sahara Desert, as well as rock paintings and drawings in the Tassili Plateau of the Atlas Mountains in the Fezzan (Stepan 2001: 13). In fact, the rich diversity of esoteric symbols throughout Africa has inspired both craftsmen and artists for centuries. They have refashioned the antiquated and unique into contemporary forms, which now appear etched on pottery, cast on bronze and precious metals, carved on wood, woven into textiles, stitched on cloth, or inscribed on the human body.
Needless to say, through continuous invention and transformation Africa and its people have experienced change. Archaeological findings testify to the fact that the continent was inhabited for thousands of years and that it is the product of developments spanning long periods of change attributed to invasions, political upheaval, foreign occupation and rule, sporadic migration, disease, climate and environmental change, and intense penetration by religious groups. Nonetheless, the people disclose an attitude based on the primacy of survival as a value. But more importantly, they have allowed their aesthetic ideals to remain unimpaired. Art is appreciated in Africa not only for its visual richness but for its functionality, especially the social and religious roles it plays in the lives of the living, and sometimes even the dead. In Africa art is for life’s sake, and if art did not contribute to the good of the community it wasn’t made (Welsh-Asante 1996: 15).

Southeastern Nigeria exemplifies all the above mentioned observations and more. It is home to the Igbo, one of the largest ethnic groups in southeastern Nigeria [Fig. 2]. In The Ekumeku Movement, Don C. Ohadike writes, “archaeological evidence shows today’s Igbo people and their ancestors have been settled in roughly the same geographical region of Nigeria for thousands of years. Yet, locating a common origin of the Igbo is futile because of migration, resettlement, and their synergy with different ethnic groups” (Ohadike 1991: 21). In fact, this intertwining brought about the integration of cultures, as well as blending dissimilar forms of communication which may
explain why Igbo dialects vary from region to region, as do cultural differences. Furthermore, the coalescence between Igbo and neighboring ethnic groups make it uncertain whether the Igbo were the initiators or the recipients of male/female organizations and associations, religious beliefs and practices, or graphic communication systems that convey deeply held values and cultural knowledge.

For the Igbo, *uli* or body painting was a relevant form of graphic communication. A woman’s skin was used as a portable canvas upon which symbols and designs were painted that defined a woman’s beauty. Plus, designs showed the inter-relationship between the individual and society; while demonstrating an *uli* artist’s creativity and skill. *Uli* symbols and patterns were also painted on the walls of dwellings, compounds, and communal shrines. In Igboland, *uli* was a feminine art form, and the design repertoire of the artist varied from village to village as did the compositional forms, designs, and motifs [Fig. 3]. However, *uli* was not a secret script. The symbols used by Igbo women artists represented things of physical importance, had aesthetic appeal, and were intended to beautify the female body or clay/mud walls—as beauty was equated with morality in Igbo culture.

On the other hand, the Igbo used a secret ideographic form of writing that relied on concentric circles, lozenges, spirals, stars, and numerous other abstract markings to build a complex script, which was called *nsibidi*. And unlike other writing systems the purpose of *nsibidi* was not to make information accessible,
but to convey esoteric messages and guard valuable knowledge within an elite male association (Carlson 2007: 146). It was a form of graphic communication indigenous to the *Ejagham* people of southeastern Nigeria in the Cross River region, and was typically associated with ritual in secret male organizations such as the Leopard Society that historically acted as a form of “law enforcement.” Eventually the Leopard Society began to sell the privilege to their association, as well as the right to use *nsibidi* to other ethnic groups—notably the Igbo. (Carlson 2007:146).

Among the southeastern Igbo it became known as the Ekpe Society; whereby the purpose and format was changed to that of a secret graded men’s group concerned with ancestral veneration. In Igbo culture the spirit world is the abode of ancestral spirits, as well as gods, deities, disembodied and malignant spirits (Uchendu 1965; 11). More importantly, the Igbo believe in life hereafter and reincarnation. Thus, it is during funeral ceremonies honoring deceased Ekpe members that *nsibidi* symbols were skillfully drawn on the chests of the highest ranking affiliates with *nzu* (white chalk)-- signifying purity, beauty and sanctity.

Along with displaying white *nsibidi* symbols on their chests, the elite members of the Ekpe Society wear wrappers of handsomely stitched-dyed cotton, indigo cloth called *ukara* [Fig. 4]. *Ukara* cloth displays a fluid vocabulary of chalk white geometric and abstract *nsibidi* signs and symbols known only to Ekpe members. So too, the cloth exemplified a wearer’s moral purity, as well as
deep respect for deceased members of the Society (Cole and Aniakor 1985: 59). One of the most common symbols found on the cloth is the image of a leopard [Fig. 5], that signifies multiple levels of meaning beyond the representation of the actual animal. It stands for the leopard spirit—the core essence of power within the secret society (Carlson 2007: 146).

Despite its ritual attributes, male nature, and secrecy, *nsibidi*, as *uli*, has a strong aesthetic essence that displays skilled workmanship. Although, in women's art forms there are usually no overt emphasis on secrecy or the mediation of power, since Igbo women generally distance themselves from the use of secret symbolism or script. However, Amanda Carlson in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* implies, “according to many myths about the origins of *nsibidi*, women had access to it before men. In these stories women’s perceived inability to keep secrets, resulted in their having to give *nsibidi* to men and relinquish their knowledge of the esoteric motifs” (Carlson 2007: 148). Aside from speculation, Igbo women are accredited with creating their own unique communicative chirography, *uli* [Fig. 6].

The art of *uli*, the painting of patterns and designs on the human body, dwellings, compound and communal shrine walls is limited to female artists. Patterns are typically curvilinear, asymmetrical, and in large part organic and anthropomorphic forms. Additionally, KaEgo Okadigwe Uche-Okeke in *The Rediscovery of Tradition: Uli and the Politics of Culture*, describes *uli* as being both the medium used and the technique of drawing designs. She further
describes the medium or dye as a substance extracted from the pods of such plants as *uli oba* or *uli nkpo*, with the botanical name *Rothmania whitfieldi*, or *uli okorobian*, (*Rothmania hispida*) (Uche-Okeke 2005: 25). However, when painting *uli* motifs on dwellings and shrine walls, women use colored earth and plant pigments. Equally important, Sarah Adams 2002 thesis, *Hand to Hand: Uli Body and Wall Painting and Artistic Identity in Southeastern Nigeria* confirms that, “*uli* body painting may predate wall painting, the hypothesis being that since the Igbo were nomadic before they became settled and agrarian, women must have originally painted on their bodies and then transferred the art to walls when they ultimately settled” (Adams 2002: 27).

This thesis will focus on the art of *uli* body and mural painting done by Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria. *Uli* is historically an ephemeral art form practiced predominantly by female Igbo artists, by which the body is used as a canvas for inscribing patterns and symbols which serve as a means of beautification. The motifs further enhance specific aspects of a woman’s character and physical strengths, which are looked for by a future husband as indications of potential financial success. *Uli* patterns and motifs are simplified or abstracted forms taken from nature or functional items used in everyday life. Designs are effortlessly created through the use of rhythmic curved lines; the exact placement of a dot; or the directness of a mark. Identical or stylistically similar designs are painted on the walls of dwellings, compound and communal shrines where motifs are generally larger in size. In this thesis, I attempt to
provide a comprehensive overview of *uli* body and mural painting, and how it represents the synthesis of Igbo culture. In addition, I will explore the metamorphosis of *uli* art, specifically how it has evolved through the skillful hands of contemporary Igbo artists, both male and female.
CHAPTER I

DESCRIPTION OF IGBO HISTORY, CULTURE AND ART

Knowledge and appreciation of *uli*, necessitates a thorough understanding of Igbo culture, traditions, religious beliefs, and how the Igbo view the world around them. To this day, the actual origin of the Igbo people remains somewhat of a mystery. One explanation for the uncertainty over their origins is that they did not develop a formal writing system until the eighteenth century. Mazi E. N. Njaka in *Igbo Political Culture*, notes, “…the Igbo have no written records, which makes it difficult to ascertain their origins, fully understand their philosophy, master the wealth of their culture, or fathom their religious beliefs” (Njaka 1974: 16). However, the Igbo have a culture, and they have a history—an unwritten history. Thus, oral narratives form the most important source for the study of Igbo pre-colonial history; along with parables, proverbs, and personal observations. Of course, conflicting versions and misconceptions of historical accounts are common in societies that primarily rely on oral communication (Harneit-Sievers 2006: 20). For this reason, factual information is dependent upon what Igbo scholars, art historians, ethnologists, and archaeologists have discovered, researched, and recorded.
Archaeological discoveries and records provide grounds to believe that the early Igbo first migrated from the Niger-Benue confluence and the territory between Awka and Orlu, approximately 4,000-5,000 years ago. From this area the people dispersed to the Nsukka-Udi highlands in the northeast and south (Willis 1997: 20). These first inhabitants were undoubtedly hunters and gatherers, since the agricultural revolution did not occur until the first millennium B.C. E. onward. On the basis of assumptions, Cole and Aniakor in Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos propose that, “…early on, the Igbo established themselves as agrarian and efficient at producing food. They most assuredly began trading with other ethnic groups, and established markets that perhaps even then rotated regionally from one day of the Igbo week to the next (the Igbo week has four days)” (Cole and Aniakor 1985: 1). Inevitably, this sedentary life resulted in the development of social institutions, craft specialization, the emergence of religious beliefs, and increased population.

Igbo-Ukwu
The ninth century bronze castings discovered at Igbo-Ukwu, located near the city of Awka in the Nigerian state of Anambra, identified the ancestors of present day Igbo as makers of the most inventive and technically accomplished bronzes ever made. Other remarkable finds at Igbo-Ukwu included decorative pottery, glass beads, and copper objects such as figural and animal head pendants. The exceptional style and surface embellishments appearing on the bronze and pottery vessels, suggested a gregarious system with a high degree of
social structure and religious practices. And even by contemporary standards 
Igbo-Ukwu art remains among the most technically advanced south of the 
Sahara (Cole and Aniakor 1984: 18).

In *Igbo-Ukwu: An Account of Archaeological Discoveries In Eastern 
Nigeria*, Thurstan Shaw comments, “the three discovered sites are associated 
with an extinct Igbo group the Nri, who maintained one site as a store-house for 
the keeping of sacred containers and regalia (abandoned without damage or 
interference); another was the burial chamber of a dignitary; the third was a 
disposal pit in which bronze castings, pottery, animal bones, and burnt material 
had been intentionally deposited” (Shaw 1970: 39). A majority of the ancient 
objects discovered at the sites disclosed a distinct style having skeuomorphic 
characteristics—whereby an object originally made of one material is translated 
into another [Fig. 7]. One may view Igbo-Ukwu as the apogee of Igbo art and 
culture, and as Shaw concluded, Igbo-Ukwu was not only a shrine but the burial 
place of an important dignitary; a socio-religious leader associated with title-
taking, or a ruling mediator who was given the name *Eze Nri*—“King of Nri” 
(Shaw 1977: 94).

Igbo Culture and Society

Today, the Igbo of Nigeria live mainly in The Anambra and Imo States to the 
east of the Niger River, although some live to the west in Bendel State. 
Neighboring ethnic groups include the Igala, Idoma, and Tiv to the north; to the
east in the Cross River area are the Mbembe, Ejagham and Yako, along with numerous small ethnic groups; to the south-east are the Ibibio and Efik; to the south are the Ogoni, Abua and Ijo; and to the west the Isoko, Urhobo, and other Edo-speaking peoples (Dictionary of Art, 1996: 109). The Igbo take hospitality very seriously. In fact, their spirit of friendship and hospitality is commonly demonstrated using such mundane expressions of welcome as – *nwa nna/nne nno/ibiala* (welcome my dear), an affectionate embrace, an embracingly firm handshake (Ekechi 2008: 137).

The Igbo are one of the three major ethnic groups of Nigeria, the two others being the Yoruba in the southwestern area and the Hausa/Fulani in northern Nigeria [Fig. 7]. According to Elizabeth A. Willis in her 1997 thesis entitled, *Uli Painting and Identity: Twentieth Century Developments In Art In the Igbo Speaking Region of Nigeria*, “…the Igbo speaking area is one of the most densely populated, not only in Nigeria, but in the whole of Africa” (Willis 1997: 10). The three distinct ethnic groups—Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa/Fulani—comprise the modern formation of Nigeria that dates from 1914 when the British protectorates of northern and southern Nigeria were joined. The country became independent on October 1, 1960, and in 1963, adopted a republican constitution changing its name to the Federal Republic of Nigeria.
Igbo Religious Beliefs and Practices

Victor C. Uchendu, author of The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, writes that the Igbo are a religious people. They believe in the supreme God Chukwu who is accepted as a good and powerful God who protects man from evils that prowl the earth. Chukwu keeps in touch with humans and their affairs through chi, a spiritual entity embodied in a person’s identity from before birth and journeys with him or her through life. It is also assumed chi represents man’s other self, his ego or spiritual double; or as Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart writes “…chi represents invisible forces or spirits within a person” (Achebe 2000: xxvii).

The Igbo have a resolved view of the universe, maintaining that power/energy is shared by all animate and inanimate objects and that this unseen flow of energy radiates from Chukwu. Furthermore, Nwando Achebe writes in Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings, “Igbo people identify two worlds—uwa, the human or physical/visible world, and ani mmo, the nonhuman or spiritual/invisible world. It is in ani mmo (spiritual/invisible world) that deceased ancestors are believed to dwell (in the land of spirits)” (Achebe 2005:27). And Mazi E.N. Njaka distends that, “ancestral spirits play an active part in the lives of the living. In truth, Igbo believe in reincarnation (iluo uwa), and that deceased ancestors may reincarnate and acquire a new chi, thus repeating the life-death-birth cycle” (Njaka 1974: 18, 31). An Igbo passage about life and
the land of ancestral spirit’s, is poetically expressed in Birago Diop’s poem,

*Spirits:*

Listen to things
more often than beings,
hear the voice of fire,
hear the voice of water.
Listen in the wind,
to the bush that is sighing:
this is the breathing of ancestors,
who have not gone away.
Who are not under earth,
but who are not really dead. (Diop 1975: 152-4)

Igbo Deities

The traditional Igbo religion includes an uncontested reverence centered on male and female deities. Although the minor gods are believed to protect the living, they were not normally ranked in importance. However, for the Igbo, the Earth Mother [variant names Ala, Ana, Ale, etc.], occupied the most honored position in their pantheon. The goddess Ana/Ala, whose body is the earth, is mistress to all lesser spirits who live in the Igbo world and is responsible for looking after and helping mankind, animals, as well as overseeing the course of nature. She is the source of great strength and considered a wise and merciful mother. By the same token, according to Igbo artist Uche Okeke, “...Ana/Ala symbolizes the creative forces of the Igbo society—and is the keeper of aesthetic ideals and the genius of creativity” (1982b’ 72 in Perani and Smith 1998: 189).
Masked Spirits

Too, among the Igbo are ubiquitous spirits that connect humans with the spirit world. For the Igbo, masks are used to represent an inanimate presence, which often reflect a duality of character much like the beauty and the beast dichotomy. Therefore, some masks may represent beneficent spirits, while others represent the more threatening aspects of power and control. On the other hand, masks are never portraits of individuals, nor do they refer to specific people who have lived. Further, the Igbo have several generic names for “masked spirit.” Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor write, “the most common, perhaps is *mmanwu*, prevalent in north-central areas and also found elsewhere. *Owu* is common in southern and western areas, *Ekpe* in the east, *mma* in Afikpo and Nsukka (with *Odo* and *Omabe* as generic subcategories), and *ogbodo* in the northeast (Cole and Aniakor 1984: 113) [Fig. 9].

The outstanding characteristic of many Igbo masks is that they are painted chalk white, and symbolize the spirits of ancestors or other supernatural beings. On the other hand, white on a mask may represent threatening spirits, or on other occasions friendly or helpful spirits. In Igboland, colors used, depend on a situation and social condition. Therefore, it is difficult to establish a symbolic meaning of the color white that is uniformly valid. Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock infer in *Emergent Themes and Methods in African Studies*, that, “masks are viewed as characters, as an authentic spectacle that is seen as the highest
art form in Igboland. They incorporate all the arts of the society to produce a total theatrical performance” (Falola and Paddock 2009: 308) [Fig. 10].

Igbo religion and society, like that of most African people, has gone through a period of transition. The Europeans and Christian missionaries emphasized change in addition to placing demands on Igbo inherent customs and traditions. However, Christianity did not necessarily eliminate Igbo spiritual beliefs centered on ancestor worship and the unseen flow of energy from *Chukwu*, nor Igbo fundamental values or aesthetic practices. Instead, in order to accept change, the Igbo accommodated Christian idealism to blend with traditional beliefs and practices. Conversely, they held true to their convictions and continued to maintain traditional beliefs, as characterized by the collective solidarity of people who share common beliefs and customs--united and joined together as one (Edeh1985: 150-151).

**Aspects of Belonging**

The Igbo have no centralized chieftaincy, hereditary aristocracy, or kingship customs, as can be found among the neighboring ethnic groups of the Yoruba or Hausa/Fulani. Instead, within their society the old and the new coexist, and one mitigates the other. Lineages or clans, though not actually political systems, constitute a social structure of extended family. Nwando Achebe defines the affiliate structure as follows, “they organize themselves in lineage groups--along lines of descent from father to son. Relationships are based on blood ties, and each person within a clan can trace his or her descent”
More importantly, Bell Hooks in *All About Love* asserts, “a commonly accepted assumption in a patriarchal culture [like that of the Igbo] is that love can be present in a situation where one group or individual dominates another … believing man can dominate women and children, yet still be loving” (Hooks 2000: 40).

In addition, Emmanuel Edeh writings about Igbo culture in *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, comments that:

> Accordingly the Igbo way of life emphasizes “closeness” but not “closedness.” There is a closeness in living because each person belongs to others and in turn, is belonged to by others. By adopting this life of “closeness” or “belongingness,” an Igbo becomes immersed in the culture’s spiritual substance, love; and by love he acquires a fulfillment as a person beyond mere individuality. This spiritual substance of culture was the intended legacy of the ancients, the founders of the Igbo culture (Edeh 1985: 105).

This sense of closeness generally entitles a person to belong to a social unit known as an *uno*, (or house), consisting of a man, his wife or wives, and their children (Achebe 2005: 105). So too, in *Igbo Pottery Traditions in the Light of Historical Antecedents and Present-day Realities*, Andrea Nicolls writes:

> There is a great distinction bestowed upon older brothers and sisters within an *uno* (house), and a marked differentiation is made between full and half siblings regardless of age or sex. Moreover, full siblings or children of the same mother known as “one eating unit,” refers to the situation in a polygamous household; where each wife cooks her own meals and eats with her own children apart from other wives in the compound who do the same with their children (Nicolls 1987: 6).

This gathering of persons or extended family members is the *umunna*, and every individual is clearly located within a single *umunna*. It is the source of one’s strength and constitutes the core of an individual belonging to a specific
village/community—the source of his or her status as its indigene. In *Constructions of Belonging*, Alex Harneit-Sievers writes:

A typical Igbo village-group consists of a number of semi-autonomous communities with dwellings, as well as an area for public rituals and socioeconomic gatherings (e.g. markets). Further, each unit is segmented into *umunna* groups (patrilineages) which is a male line of descent from a founding ancestor (who the line is sometimes named after). . . . At the head of the *umunna* group is *opara* [a moral authority], the oldest ranking male who holds the lineage *Ofo* (Harneti-Sievers 2006: 27).

Generally, the eldest son who as head of the senior branch in larger lineages holds the lineage *Ofo*, a piece of wood taken from a special type of tree called *osisi-ofo* (the tree of *ofo*), which symbolizes power and authority. The *Ofo* is a staff of judgment that the *okpara* (male authority) holds in his hand when dealing with issues and problems within the extended family. As arbitrator, he aligns the staff with the visible as well as the unseen members of the clan (notable ancestors) when handling disputes within the *umunna* circle (Edeh 1985: 63). Furthermore, O. U. Kalu in *Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol*, comments, “*Ofo* is not only a means for social control, but, to a very large extent it is a spiritualized moral agent. It is believed that the holder is sacred and will adjudicate justly, with honesty, firmness and humanness as if the gods spoke through the holder of the sacred stick” (Kalu 1986: xii). Also in such situations, esteem for an individual grows in relation to the amount of wealth and power he may gain within the family or village/community in which he lives.
Negotiation and the Igbo Male

It must be said that one of the main attributes of the male in Igbo culture is his ability to negotiate, whether it is at social gatherings, at markets, association meetings, or even with ancestral spirits. Nothing prevents him from trying to move ahead, and with each adventure he gains confidence to attain his goal in life. Mazi E.N.Njaka appropriately mentions in *Igbo Political Culture*, a parable focusing on this idealism. The parable concerns a traveler stopped by a group of spirits who would not let the man pass unless he danced for them, however, he was warned that if he danced he would die. The traveler looked up and down, then turned to the spirits and asked if they were ready to witness his performance, telling them he would dance a few steps. Then, suddenly he announced that he was not prepared to dance after all, and began walking. Suddenly he changed his mind again, began to dance, then once more decided to walk. Thus, he deliberately refused to make up his mind whether he would dance or walk. In the end, he let the spirits busy themselves wondering whether he had in fact--danced or walked! (Njaka 1974: 67).

Igbo Women

Igbo women are an intrinsic part of a family, lineage and community; plus, they are wife, mother, farmer, trader, artist, and guardian of Igbo culture. Sylvia Leigh-Ross in *African Women*, identifies a woman's personality as, “... ambitious, courageous, self-reliant, hardworking and independent. These traits of good character heightened a moral force that is not only crucial for the maintenance of
a healthy body and soul, but also for the stability and progress of one’s group when married “(Leigh-Ross 1965: 337). Equally importantly, within the group/clan, Philomina E. Okeke-Ihejirika in Negotiating Power and Privilege, explains, “the ndi inyem (women “married” into an extended family, village, or town) could speak with a common voice in family or community matters. Similarly, the umuada (female members “born” into an extended family, village, or town) had significant influence among the male members within the clan to voice her viewpoint” (Okeke-Ihejirika 2001).

Present day marriage customs have somewhat changed since young Igbo women have moved from the local village/community environment to cities or urban centers, and experienced modernism and cultural differences regarding marriage. Influenced by modernism, women became unwilling to accept socio-cultural concepts centered on arranged marriages, polygamy, and abandonment. Therefore, they took the initiative to enroll and attend training centers or universities in order to attain employment and independence. This liberation made possible the meeting, interacting, and bonding with new people, and offered opportunities to marry outside the local village/community. Still, even when away from home, Igbo women as well as men retain their Igbo ethnic identity and strong home and community ties. The kinship of birth and family connections, along with a deep respect for elder’s, remains part of their heart-felt respect for Igbo culture and traditions.
Igbo Women as Farmers and Traders

Traditionally, a women’s economic welfare and that of her family depended in part on proceeds made from farming and trading. Normally farming activities for women revolved around the production of female crops like cocoyam, beans, maize, and later cassava. These so-called female crops made up a family’s staple diet. However, Nkiru Nzegwu in *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, notes:

In the post-colonial era Igbo women were ignored, especially regarding agricultural techniques that might have boosted their food production for expanded trade and capital gain. For example, the British introduced men to Western agricultural practices and equipment, but totally overlooked the competence of women as farmers (Nzegwu 1995: 38-39).

Although agriculture was considered the “Igbo staff of life,” trading at markets came in a close second. The marketplace was a woman-controlled sector held every four days, and women oversaw its running as well as regulating market prices. It was a woman’s domain where she traded a variety of items ranging from foodstuffs, to ready-made goods, to pottery, baskets, and so on. Plus, it was not merely a place for buying and selling goods, but a complex network where social contacts were formed and information was exchanged (Nwando Achebe 2005: 145). Moreover, Victor Uchendu in *The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria*, emphasizes, “women gifted in trade attained recognition and gained status in their communities (Uchendu 1965: 86).

Unfortunately, tradition holds that sons inherit their father’s land and daughters (women) did not. Therefore, although women were entitled to manage
their trading capital and profits made from farming and markets, they seldom if ever owned land. Access to farmland was linked to a woman’s close relationship to men, as wife or as daughter. On the other hand, antagonistic gender relations were avoided between males and females whenever possible, simply because the socio-political structure of the Igbo depended on the active participation of women in the community as being arbitrators. Their views were considered critical, and their shrewdness and ability to make authoritative decisions, were invaluable when dealing with family issues. Furthermore, their networking skills enabled women to mobilize quickly across cultural and religious boundaries, maintaining a harmonious gender relationship that was crucial to the well-being of Igbo society (Nzegwa1995; 446).

Colonialism (from about 1850 to 1960), marked the beginning of the end of traditional equality between the sexes in Igboland. It weakened a woman’s status in society, as well as excluding her from positions of power. This coercion resulted from a direct introduction of Western gender ideologies centered in social spheres and male supremacy. Moreover, young girls/women were often denied educational opportunities during colonial times as priorities went to males. Nonetheless, the situation has since taken a turn. Today women have strongly advanced in schooling even to the extent of having greater enrollment than men at some university campuses in Igbo regions. In fact, women took education as a source for building new careers, which in turn changed their economic and social status (Nwando Achebe 2005: 227). Education became the force behind
their movement into fields of art and crafts, business, education, and future political leadership (Simon Ottenberg, Power and Nationalism in Modern Africa 2008: 115).
CHAPTER II

ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTING

The twentieth century marked an energetic period of aesthetic change for the art of *uli*. While numerous traditional art practices remained familiar and unaltered in Igboland, particularly the making of facial masks, wood sculpture, pottery, and textile arts, *uli* body art became obsolescent and passé. However, the conscious efforts of contemporary Nigerian artists like Uche Okeke, inventively transformed the outmoded art form to comply with twentieth century standards. Several factors contributed to the transition. First, in the context of Nigeria obtaining its independence in 1960, there was not only a sense of political freedom but also a renewed interest in traditional art practices such as *uli*. Secondly, artists rediscovered the cultural and thematic importance of ethnology. Additionally, this renewed interest in *uli* recognized the inventiveness and skill of the traditional Igbo woman as “artist.”

Traditional Igbo women used their bodies and those of other women as a medium for their creative talent. *Uli* turned the body into a living sculpture and object of beauty. Plus, it showed a woman’s social rank within her village/community. Young girls and women learned the art of body painting by observing their mothers, grandmothers, or other women in the village/community.
in which they lived. Once a woman was proficient at *uli*, her skill was employed in social situations such as title taking, marriages, seasonal celebrations, and memorial services for the dead; even if the designs themselves rarely reflected the situation or occasion.

However, the imposition of Western and European values on Igbo cultural practices suppressed the art form. Missionaries and Western religious groups insisted that women not cover their bodies with black designs, but rather with cloth. They viewed *uli* as primitive and inappropriate. This led to a period of decline in *uli* practice, and the art form soon became antiquated. Therefore, transition was necessary for *uli* to sustain its historical importance within Igbo culture, and this was visualized by a new generation of artists interested in traditional Igbo art and the importance of ethnology.

**Principles of *Uli***

*Uli*, *uri*, and *urie* are dialect variations in the Igbo language that describe either body or wall/mural painting in a local village setting. However, in Igboland the art of applying *uli* to the body is not referred to as painting, since brushes are not used. Instead the phrase *ide uli* (to write *uli*) or *ise uli* (to draw *uli*) is more appropriate, but for consistency the art form will be cited as *uli* painting throughout this thesis (Nwokoye 1984: 8). Elizabeth Willis in *Uli Painting and Identity: Twentieth-century Developments in Art in the Igbo Speaking Region of Nigeria*, describes *uli* as, “the name given to a variety of trees and shrubs which bear seed pods that produce a colorless dye used by women artists as a medium
for painting on the body [Fig. 11]. The primary source for the liquid dye is from
the *Rothmania hispida* (*uli okorobian*) or *Rothmania whitfieldi* (*uli oba or uli
nkpo*), along with a variety of other small trees and shrubs found in most parts of
the Igbo speaking regions” (Willis 1997: 43). These trees and shrubs produce
various sized seed pods which flower and bear fruits at different times, making it
possible to find pods throughout the year. Therefore, *uli* is both the material and
technique of painting the body.

Once the pods were collected, women would grind them on a stone slab
or hard surface, bringing forth a fleshy pulp containing crushed seeds. The
mixture of pulp and seeds was then squeezed through cotton wool cloth
producing a light yellowish liquid, which is *uli*. When fresh seed pods were not
available, dried pods could be soaked in water and restored sufficiently to
provide quality dye (Willis 1997: 44). Although *uli* is primarily associated with
painting and decoration, the liquid extracted from the pods is known to have
medicinal qualities as well. For example, children were painted with *uli* to
prevent and treat symptoms of measles, and women often applied *uli* to painful
joints to ease aches and pains, or the liquid was rubbed on insect bites to
prevent infection (Willis 1997: 45).

*Uli* body painting was intended to satisfy the human need for beauty.
Thus strict attention was drawn to certain parts of the body, and their
attractiveness was emphasized. Women artists often added charcoal (*unyi*) to
the liquid dye if it was very pale, allowing them to see more clearly the marks
they made on the body. The charcoal (unyi) was made from remnant yam tendrils, which are the tender shoots that spill out onto dirt mounds during the rainy season. The yam tendrils visible above ground suggest the invisible growth of the yam taking place beneath the earth surface (Adams 2002: 122). After the yams are harvested, the tendrils left on the ground were collected, rolled into bundles, set aside to dry, and burned to transform them into unyi (charcoal).

Preparing the skin before painting it with uli was an important part of the total aesthetic process. An uli artist always prepared her clients' bodies carefully. First, she used various razors and implements to shave off unwanted body hair prior to rubbing the body with powdered camwood (ufie). Ufie, which is dark red/purple in color, comes from the heartwood of a mature abosi or camwood tree (Baphia nitida or Baphia pubescens). The ufie (camwood powder), used as a primer, made the skin cool and smooth and prevented perspiration that could easily cause smudges as the dye was painted on the body (Willis 1997: 369).

Once the skin was prepared, women effortlessly drew simple decisive lines imitating nature or everyday functional items; while being mindful of the form and surface of the body on which she applied designs. Interestingly, the legs and neck were frequently emphasized because ideally they are supposed to be straight and strong so a woman can use this strength and straightness to bring wealth to her family (Adams 2002: 23) (Fig. 12). Body heat caused the dye to oxidize in approximately twelve to twenty-four hours, turning the dye a vivid blue/black color. The final step was to rub palm oil onto the skin making it soft.
and luminous. Unfortunately *uli* is evanescent, and the motifs last only four to eight days before they begin to fade and disappear on the skin.

Many different tools were used for drawing *uli* on the body, with lines being thin, rather than thick or bold. In the Anambra region, women used small blunt knives called *mmanwauli* made by local blacksmiths. These knives, approximately three to five inches long had a dull curved iron blade, and were not intended for cutting through the skin. Following the curves of the body, an artist could easily manipulate the knife to produce tapered lines that started out thin, then broadened in the middle, and finally tapered off (Willis 1997:45) [Fig. 13]. In other regions, women commonly used thin slivers cut from the pith of palm fronds, feathers, stems from various plants, or stamping devices made from plants or vegetables. For example, the Olokoro women cut or burned patterns on the cross section of palm wine fibers to make a variety of stamps which replicated hand-drawn designs. In the Nri-Awka area, small metal combs with between five to ten teeth were used for tracing a series of parallel lines on the body.

Whatever the tool, it was normally held between the thumb and first finger, and, by moving the whole wrist and arm--instead of the hand—the artist could produce a very thin line. It was also possible to use the blunt end of the *mmanwauli* (knife) to make small dots or markings, as well as broaden lines or shapes. This was done simply by covering the blunt end of the knife with cotton wool, which absorbed extra dye. In Uzuakoli, in Abia State, women often used
their thumbnail or nail of the forefinger to make patterns or to define other 
markings (Willis 1997: 369). Due to the fluidity of the dye, accidental drips may 
have occasionally occurred, but an experienced artist could quickly modify a 
pattern she was drawing on the body to accommodate for the drip. Therefore, 
the experienced *uli* artist was renowned for her sensitive eye, skill, concentration, 
and steady hand.

*Uli* on Clay/Mud Walls

Body *uli* was a private dialogue, the essence of oneness between artist 
and patron, and was color specific. In contrast, wall *uli* [Fig. 14] may be 
perceived as a communal activity using several colors for effect. It is a co-
operative between artists who work together sharing and negotiating through a 
running conversation (Adams 2007: 176). Yet, mural painting like body painting 
depends on thorough preparation. Several colors are used when painting walls, 
and of course patterns are larger and asymmetrically placed for added interest. 
Sarah Adams notes, “the process of wall *uli* was labor intensive and time 
consuming, and was the work of many capable hands. Further, the arduous 
process of preparing walls was an art in and of itself, and was an art few people 
in Nigeria today wish to master” (Adams 2007: 177).

*Uli aja* or wall *uli* is found on residential houses, compound and communal 
shrine walls. The murals are created during the dry season; and, because artists 
do not add binder to their pigments, they generally wash or wear off, returning to 
the earth during the subsequent rainy season (Adams 1997: 11). Therefore, it is
essential that the surface of a wall be properly repaired and resurfaced before painting can begin. A clear explanation of the process written by C. Krydz Ikwuemesi in *The Rediscovery of Tradition: Uli and the Politics of Culture*, focuses on the refurbishing and painting project on the walls of the *Iyi Azi* Shrine in Nri. *Iyi Azi* is a major deity in Nri and looked upon as both a guardian and a protector. The project was organized and directed by Obiora Udechukwu and Ikwuemesi in November, 2003. Ikwuemesi describes the project as follows:

The women [twelve] set to work the first day sizing the clay/mud walls. The size consisted of *aja upa* (laterite), a mud slip which they used to smooth the wall surfaces and cover old markings with the aid of *ntite* (rag made of rolled banana leaves). The *aja upa* not only smoothed and covered the old markings, but filled in cracks and crevices created by age, insects, and the weather.

Further burnishing was done with *mkpulu nkwo* (fine pebble), which when rubbed on the surfaces rendered them receptive to primer. This was followed up with a special red mud slip or primer, *aja nwa mmoo* ("sand of the spirits"), which created a textured background. Finally, the prepared walls were painted with decorative *uli*. Each of the women had their own artistic backgrounds, having been involved in the *uli* tradition as young women. They were of various ages; however the older women played the role of consultant and moral supporter. They occasionally helped with the painting, but generally the younger women were proficient with the use of color and the painting of designs on the restored walls. They shared commonalities in vision, style, and technique; thus it was a commune of ideas (Ikwuemesi 2005: 5-8).

The twelve women worked as a team preparing and painting the walls of the *Iyi Azi* Shrine. And, as Ikwuemesi implied, they were recognized for their proficiency in *uli*, and arrived at the project with approbation from the local community. On the other hand, no single woman could lay claim to the whole or
parts of the painting, although each was noted individually for her dexterity in *uli* art.

Although twelve women worked on the walls, two elderly women in the group were recognized as leaders and highly respected for their talent and skill as *uli* artists. One of the women, Mma Nwobu, was to lead the Nri women; she not only worked on the Iyi Azi Shrine in 2003, but led the resumed project in 2004. The other woman, Onwukwe Nwosu, is an experienced market trader at the Eke Market in Nri, and her skill in *uli* was developed long before she married into the Nri community. In the end however, all twelve women had a part in gathering and preparing the materials as well as painting the walls, and once the project was completed it belonged to the whole group.

Just as it is necessary to understand the process of how clay/mud walls are prepared, it is equally important to know where colored pigments are found and how they are made ready for painting the walls. Generally, pigments are found in river beds or eroded gullies diminished of topsoil caused by heavy rains and flooding. There, exposed soils can easily be dug and then ground into a pliable paste/slip which can be applied to prepared walls by the experienced artist. Women also find colored pigments for sale in local village/community markets.

*Uli Wall Colors*

Since ancient times, people have used color to express beauty. In Igboland, color also has symbolic meaning. Igbo women artist’s used specific
colors for painting clay/mud walls, which were shades of red, brown, yellow ochre, and of course, black and white. Black or charcoal (*unyi*) was produced by burning dried yam vines. It could also be obtained by wiping away charcoal that accumulated on the bottom of cooking pots that is called *anwuru*. *Unyi* is said to be quite permanent on walls, retaining its color for several years, and often large sections of walls were painted black to be further decorated with red, yellow, or white motifs (Willis 1997: 365). The color white (*nzu*), a fine grained white chalk found at a place called Edda, a village in Afikpo, is generally soaked in water, becoming a heavy white paste. *Nzu* is also described as kaolinite (a clay mineral), that is associated with birth, beginnings, and spirituality (Willis 1997: 365). The Igbo believe *nzu* has mystical or medicinal properties, which make it a consistent ingredient in self-made remedies. For example, women eat *nzu* to strengthen their bones and to ensure proper formation of a fetus (Adams 2003: 119). More importantly, white chalk represents brilliance, purity, beauty, and sanctity.

Yellow is derived from *nchala* (red sandstone). The sandstone is baked, turning yellow, and used on walls as an accent color to enhance the appearance of designs that are generally curvilinear or coiled. Also, *aja nwa mmuo* (yellow-ochre), an earth pigment, is frequently used to accent wall motifs. Finally, red (*aja upa*) or laterite is a rich brown or reddish earth pigment is used as a background color, or to add texture to walls (Willis 1997: 365). For many Igbo,
red is a deeply symbolic color that is associated with life, joy, and health, as well as signifying death, grief, and transience.

_Uli Pattern and Design_

_Uli_ symbols, whether on the body or surface of walls, are known by a variety of names, depending on the region in which they are used. One explanation for this diversity is that when women married and reestablished, they brought with them designs and patterns used in their home villages/communities to those of their new husbands. And, if a woman from another village saw and used a design, she would acknowledge the fact and call it by the name of its place of origin (Willis 1997: 349). Also, Ikwuemesi concedes that, “designs used by women do vary from region to region, and although the meaning of what the _uli_ artist draws depends on her personal interpretation, much depends on the iconographical codes of the village, since meanings and interpretations commonly vary from area to area” (Willis 1997: 249).

_Uli_ artists conceived their design motifs from the environment, and were generally influenced by forms and intricate patterns that existed in nature. Of course, it is quite possible that in any one village/community there may be hundreds, or possibly thousands of patterns [Figs. 15-16]. Yet, artists chose from a vast memorized collection, and very often unconsciously created new patterns when painting on either the body or on walls. Each pattern was generally named for the object it represented. For example, the kola nut head (_isi oji_), the cassava leaf (_akwukwo akpu_), the lizard (_ngwele_), the sun and the
moon (respectively anyanwu and onwa), or parallel lines might be drawn called (nchiwa). Still, various patterns or symbols represented bird forms, plant motifs, or functional items like bowls, household utensils, farm tools etc. Animal motifs were frequently represented, especially the leopard, which was usually decorated with white dots symbolizing strength, power, and bravery. Plus, artists also drew caricatures of the crocodile, which was often found taking up residency around homesteads or family compounds.

However, not all motifs were representational. Many were examples of abstract pattern-making, where the most aesthetically appealing shapes were used again and again, and perhaps given a name. On the other hand, many of the favored patterns would be reserved for special occasions and named accordingly. For instance, girls leaving the fattening house (mgbede), about to be married, would be adorned with uli mgbede patterns. Then again, certain designs were invented and used because they enhanced a particular part of the body, and thereafter a pattern was called by the position on which it was applied on the body. But whatever the case, uli served as a decorative covering.

Equally important, women uli artists worked at their craft—not to receive wealth or fame—but to fulfill their position in life as a gifted artist with nka (skill). They accepted their talent as a gift from the Earth Mother, Ana/Ala, to be shared with others. Additionally, their artistic talent was appreciated and rewarded. And generally payment became a system of barter, an exchange of goods for services, or other appropriate forms of recompense.
Elements of *Uli* Wall Painting

Designs did not necessarily mirror the recognizable, the reason being that an *uli* artist fractured the shape of commonplace objects into simplified forms. There were no superficial preconceptions, just a natural spontaneity. In fact, Uche Okeke has said the best artist can reduce an image to its most essential features. Obiora Odechukwu believes that, “when an artist is able to capture the essence of a thing/object by stripping it of all unnecessary details and paraphernalia, the soul of the object has been captured” (Willis 1997: 288; Udechukwu 1980; 43).

Comparatively, Paul Klee (1879-1940), the Swiss-German painter, held the same philosophy about art and affirmed, “art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes visible … it emphasizes the character--the secret of an objects structure” (Grohmann 1967: 21). To Klee art was a language of signs and symbols, of shapes that are images of ideas as the shape of a letter is the image of a specific sound (Janson 1991: 733) [Fig. 17]. He sought clues to humanity’s deeper nature in common everyday objects and forms, and realized that simple shapes sum up a wealth of visual facts reflecting man and the environment.

By the same token, Klee’s unique works as do *uli* murals, lack perspective. Yet, Klee and *uli* artists used positive and negative space successfully. They skillfully put to use the concept that form is seen as occupied or positive space; and the void surrounding a form is perceived as being
negative. In the case of *uli*, positive and negative space was very much a key element of the total aesthetic composition.

The handsome appearance of wall *uli* was the textured surface called *akika*, which was created from the red, porous, ferruginous rock laterite--made into a soft slip or paste. The paste/compound was applied to walls using soft pads or rags made from decayed plantain stems or large coarse leaves. Another method of applying the slip to walls involved the fingertips in a rhythmic movement, creating arched angles, random markings, or concentric circles. These repeated movements left subtle indentations on the *akika*, adding to the overall richness of the mural. Artists also textured the background using dried reed strips, sticks, and even feathers for added interest. Once the slip/paste dried, *uli* designs and patterns were consciously painted on the walls. Frequently a wall was broken up into a series of panels, creating an active and colorful rhythm along a horizontal plane.

Stippled dots (*ntupo*), made with the fingers using *nzu* (white chalk), outlined large panels of color or accented designs, plus they set boundaries between the negative spaces on a wall. Fred T. Smith writes in *African Arts* that, “dots commonly represented roads or snake movement, and quite often suggested the progress of an individual through the cycle of life, thus, symbolizing the achievements of a successful person” (Smith 1986: 58). The marking of boundaries with continuous rows of *ntupo* (dots) was called *igbo onu* (hemming), while vertical lines could be drawn using *unyi* (black). Often whole
sections of a wall would be covered in black for added interest. Additionally, spirals (which were not true spirals but concentric circles) were frequently drawn on walls to represent curling yam tendrils or aquatic plants [Fig. 18].

The *uli* artist was highly respected in her community for her skill (*nka*), and was generally referred to as *omena* (one who creates works of art). Further, the Igbo have a saying — *o nwereanya nka karea nde ozo*—meaning the artist is both gifted and sees beauty more clearly than others (Adams 2003: 30). However, unlike Western artists who strive for personal recognition, Igbo artists have traditionally been at the service of a communal ideology.

This idealism is prevalent among women *uli* artisans, especially when artistic identity shifts from the professional to client. For example, an *uli* artist often entered the private space of a patron [her home], and was entrusted to enhance both the patron’s beauty and display her inherent qualities of strength and spirit. However, once the work was completed it was the patron who was praised and received all the attention, and not the artist. This situation can easily be compared to the relationship between a tattoo artist and his client who wears the tattoo artist’s work. Needless to say, the person wearing the tattoo became an advertisement. And although the artist never signed his work, it is admired, and in the end he achieves a certain level of recognition and fame from onlookers who proceed to solicit his skill.

This same situation holds true for muralists who often have to contend with neighbors, friends, and those who casually pass by when a shrine or
compound was being painted. Comments on patterns or where patterns should be placed are common practice made by curious spectators in a village/community (Adams 2002: 82). However, Sarah Adams notes that, “regardless of the numerous suggestions, the women preparing and painting the walls were firm; yet open to comments, but in the end they regarded themselves as author, creator, and inventor” (Adams 2002: 82). Thus, Chike Aniakor, educator, poet, author and artist, poetically describes the formal essence of *uli* as follows:

At its best, *uli* is the rhythmic temper of line like a melodic note plucked from the thumb piano (*ubo akwala*). In *uli*, the line dances, spirals into diverse shapes, elongates, attenuates, thickens, swells and slides, thins and fades out from a slick point, leaving an empty space that sustains it with mute echoes by which silence is part of sound. At once cursive, it creates taut boundaries which it simultaneously relieves with dotted textures; curls up and resolves into a blocked shape hemmed with a contrasting color boundary (Ottenberg 1997: 59).
CHAPTER III

ULI MARKS THE OCCASION

Birth, marriage, and burial are considered the three most notable happenings in most cultures, and Igboland is not an exception to this pattern. Igbo is a group society which emphasizes togetherness; celebrating an occasion is a part of their culture. Life is a series of stages or passages, and making these ritual Rites of Passage allows members of a community to develop a sense of loyalty and identity distinctly their own. To fit an occasion, Igbo women decorated their bodies with *uli*. *Uli* transfigured the body, enhanced an individual’s appearance, and drew attention to a woman’s status.

Title, Gender, and *Uli*

In most areas of Igboland there are male and female title-taking organizations. One example is the male *Ozo* title system. A male title holder is very respected and revered within an Igbo village/community, and recognized as a person who is trustworthy, and possesses wisdom and knowledge. Honored male *Ozo* members are entitled to own various types of objects that designate an individual’s social and political status. These objects may include a red cap with
an eagle feather, metal staff, fiber anklet, and a carved wooden stool; all objects symbolize material wealth, strength, purity, and moral integrity.

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.

In Nnobi, Anambra State, the highest grade title for women was *agba ekwe*, it conferred political power and authority. However, a woman had to be extremely wealthy before she could be initiated into the association. Ifi Amadiume in *Male, Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, writes:

In Nobi, if an Igbo woman is very prosperous, she is seen as being in the favor of the goddess *Idemili* and is then nominated to become an *ekwe*. An *ekwe* is one of the most powerful people in Igbo society. Being an Ekwe, includes a woman in the *inyam nnobi* women’s council, the highest court in the land in which leadership was based on achievement and personality. At the head of the council was the *agba ekwe*. She carried a staff of authority and had the final word in public gatherings and assemblies. She was favored by the goddess *Idemili*, and was the female deity’s manifestation on earth (Amadiume 1987: 66-67).
For the title taking ceremony, titled and title seeking women were decorated with *uli*, and generally wore elaborate hairstyles. Generally, coiffures mimicked *uli* patterns that adorned a woman’s body. For example, sections of hair would be tightly coiled to represent the sun or moon; or plaited (similar to the parallel lines drawn on the body using an *uli* comb); perhaps built up on armatures (Fig. 19); or caked with palm oil mixed with charcoal for added color and shine. The results were often both inventive and spectacular. Many coiffures were further embellished by the addition of combs, hairpins, and other metal or ivory ornament (Cole and Aniakor 1986: 39). Further, a titled woman usually wore ivory anklets, aka beads, or perhaps carried a leather fan—as would a male *Ozo* title-holder (Willis 1997: 92).

**Transition to Adulthood**

What was once an age old practice of preparing young women for marriage has, in recent years, fallen from popularity in Igboland. The decline is largely due to economic factors, modern urban developments, and education. In the past, the “consent to marriage” was build into an elaborate ritual whereby a young woman would retreat from society and enter into what was referred to as the “fattening room.” This period of seclusion, in preparation for marriage, lasted three months or longer, and marked the passage from adolescent to womanhood. During this period of time, a young woman was instructed on her soon to be role as wife and, later, mother. These responsibilities required a clear
understanding of traditions and customs, as well as domestic responsibilities. Most importantly manners, since in Igbo culture good manners constitute beauty.

In *Praise Her Beauty Well*, Sarah Adams notes, “…when the girls emerged from seclusion, they were present to the community at the height of their beauty. For the occasion, their bodies were covered in sumptuous garments of black line body art and their hair was meticulously styled” (Adams 2002: 13). *Uli* not only enhanced a young woman’s beauty but added visual power, confirming her qualification for marriage. Additionally, to further celebrate the occasion, it was often common for wealthy families of a future bride to have compound walls decorated with *uli*.

**Naming Ceremony**

All stages of Igbo life are marked by a special event, and one of the most celebrated occasions is naming a child. It is customary that a newborn be named soon after birth. This occasion marks the acceptance of a child into the family circle (lineage). Toyin Falola comments in *Culture and Customs of Nigeria*, “among the Igbo, a child’s name has meaning, and among traditionalists, the oracle determined the link between a child and an ancestor by his or hers’ physical traits or mannerisms (Falola 2001: 140). Igbo believe that ancestors can be reincarnated as new babies to further enhance their presence, and, if a child resembled or was believed to be a reincarnation of perhaps the grandfather, he received his name. Furthermore, it was important to give a child a
meaningful name since the good character and blessings associated with a significant person would follow a child through life.

This occasion may be compared to the Christian practice of Baptism, since it is during Baptism that a child is formally named, and in Western culture it is sanctioned that a Christian saint’s name be taken. Interestingly, as Christianity spread through Igboland most names have come to be preceded by Chi (god), as in Chidi (god is alive). For the Igbo, the dedication ceremony was a joyous occasion that brought fellowship and pride to a family, as well as community. It was also when the mother, grandmothers, and women within a family decorated their bodies with uli. More importantly, it was customary for a mother to take her child to market for the village/community women to admire. During the pleasant visit, women complimented and praised the new mother for giving birth to a healthy and beautiful child, as well as a time for giving gifts.

Funeral Rites and Uli

Ceremonies for the dead mark the last of life’s passages. For the Igbo, burial is a reflection of a person’s background, title, gender, and relationship within a family. To receive the most elaborate burial, one must live to an advanced age, have children, be regarded as having lived a good life, and be a prominent member of society. A final or second burial of such a person becomes an occasion both to mourn and to rejoice, as the deceased will become an honored ancestor (Falola 2001: 141). For example, when there was a death in Nibo, Awka South, Anambra State, the family took the corpse to the oto kwbu
(funeral compound), to be cleansed. There the body was washed four times; being careful never to let the washcloths touch the ground. The body was then taken to a shrine room, clothed in the finest garments, and placed on a stool in a sitting posture.

There the wife or wives, relatives, and friends of the deceased visit and pay their last respects. Usually there was considerable wailing and drumming, not to announce the death but to inform the ancestors that another worthy person will soon join them (Falola 2001: 141). It was customary on such an occasion that the wife or wives, daughters, and sisters of the deceased be decorated with *uli*. Often within a village, special patterns were chosen by the women that made a personal statement about the family members as holding position or titles. On the other hand, the women would often rely on the *uli* artist to select and paint motifs that best fit the occasion. However, at the present time a majority of the Igbo bury their dead following Western customs, yet, it is not uncommon for burials to still be practiced in the traditional Igbo manner.

**Gender and the Occasions for *Uli***

*Uli* is a female art form, yet, Igbo scholars and Western art historians question if Igbo men decorated their bodies with *uli* for special occasions. Opinions on this puzzling question differ. Unfortunately, there are no records or legends which identify or reference the exact origin of *uli*. And if there were recorded observations, they are merely scattered items. Further, traditions and customs greatly vary from region to region in Igboland, as do nearly all aspects of
Igbo life. Therefore, there is considerable variation for *uli*, which is seen on items such as masks, religious objects, pottery, wood carvings, etc.

An example of diversity, before British rule Owerri (Imo State), was made up of five villages: namely Umuororonjo, Amawom, Umuoyeche, Umuodu, and Umuoyima, all of which maintained distinct customs and traditions. And because Owerri’s history is based on migration and resettlement, differences are found in masking practices, cuisine, dialects, and aesthetics (Ekechi 1984: 1). In a personal interview with Emeritus Professor of History, Dr. Felix Ekechi, I asked the question: What is your definition of *uli*, and are *uli* motifs painted on men in Owerri? His answer was as follows, “in my village ([Uratta] Owerri, (Imo State)), *uli* is pronounced *uri*. If you were to ask a local what is *uli*, they would not be able to answer your question. Because *uri*, *u-* *r-* *i* is the word used for describing the art of body painting. And, “no,” men are not decorated/painted with *uri/* *uli*” (Ekechi 2009: June).

In contrast, the early European Bishop G. T. Basden, who lived for seventeen years among the Igbo, wrote about his fascination with the art of *uli* in *Among the Ibos [Igbo] of Nigeria*, that, “…when in the town of Nibo, Awka South, Anambra State, men might bear this cosmetic but only women were the artists…it was the women and young girls who sat together engrossed in the art of painting the body, using a stain that was pressed from a plant into a wooden bowl and applied to the skin with a small curved iron tool” (Basden 1983: 181).
Yet another scholar, Obianuju Umeji, in *Igbo Art Corpus: Women’s Contribution*, comments that, “[in the Awka (Oka), Anambra State] men adapted *uli* motifs for facial decoration but they would not use the dyes as did the women: for they might appear like women” (Umeji 1993: 96). Umeji further notes that men resorted to *ichi*, their own form of body marking. In *Visual Documentation of Uli: Designs and Their Adaptation to Textile Prints*, Okwuosa J. Nwokoye defines *ichi* as follows:

*Ichi* is a form of body adornment that is executed by cutting parts of the body and covering the wounded surface with some mixture of vegetable matter and soot. Consequently when a wound heals, a scar is formed, thus making the adornment permanent on the body. There are various forms of scarification ranging from *egbugbu*, to *nki*. The significance of *ichi* in Igboland is purely as a sign of success and high social attainment of men, especially *Ozo* title holders. Patterns may once have had meanings or names, but these specifics are now lost (Nwokoye 1984: 6).

According to Elizabeth Willis, the simple *ichi* scarification makings on the foreheads of *Ozo* title holder’s, clearly resembled *uli* parallel lines etched and painted on clay walls. She observed, “[in Nuri (Anambra State)] a male *Ozo* title-taker would not only display *ichi* markings on the forehead, but he would be decorated with *uli* during a period of ritual seclusion known as *izu iteghete* [Fig. 20]; whereas for a period of seven weeks (the Igbo week has four days), the male candidate prepared for the last stages before being accepted into the titled *Ozo* society” (Willis 1997: 90). At this time, the act of body painting was done in private by the title taker’s wife or wives, or other women in the lineage.
Throughout this thesis I have stressed the fact that *uli* painting was learned by young girls and women to paint onto other women, on dwellings, compound or communal shrine walls. Moreover, it is clearly apparent that regional customs and practices differ within Igboland, as do scholarly opinions. More importantly, Sarah Adams writes, “though we have reference that men wore *uli* body painting, we do not yet have firm evidence that men actually painted *uli* on their own or other people’s bodies” (Adams 2002: 41). Therefore, without oral histories, or written records documenting the exact origin or creator of *uli*, much of what is summarized about the painting of men with *uli* is speculative.
CHAPTER IV

METAMORPHOSIS OF AN ART FORM

In pre-colonial times *uli* was a woman’s art, and there was a society that readily accepted the art form. There were no problems with understanding or acceptance in that era. In addition, traditional art flourished in pre-colonial times and was largely sustained by the generality of the people, who demanded art for everyday use and who were receptive to the kind of culture-specific art that the traditional artist produced (Aderonke Adesola Adesanya 2008: 386). However, British colonialism, missionary attitudes, unrest, and civil war not only caused distress and change throughout Nigeria, but caused *uli* to become an endangered “skill.” And as mentioned throughout this thesis, the problem was compounded by the decline of traditional *uli* artists when women began to cover their bodies with cloth, instead of covering their bodies with *uli*. Wall painting also began to disappear as a result of changing building structures.

Yet another reason for this retrogression is that cultures and traditions are never static; they shift with time, changing their meaning and characteristics. And of course, traditional *uli* had more or less lost its meaning due to the nature of the media used for expression—being the body or clay walls. Needless to
say, the fate that had befallen *uli* placed it in an uncharted area between the past and the present. Simon Ottenberg clearly addresses the issue as follows:

> Whether past time is conceived of as short or long, it contrasts with the rapidly changing present in Nigeria, which has gone from colonialism, to massive oil production and rapid development … the past is seen as an anchor of stable indigenous cultures, in contrast to an ever-changing present and an uncertain future, even if, in fact, the past went through numerous changes (Ottenberg 1997: 252).

Fortunately, a renewed interest and strong direction bolstered the unique art form of *uli* to resurface and regain its legacy.

The metamorphosis of *uli* can be accredited to the intelligent and gifted Nigerian artists, who put forth great efforts to preserve the art form so deeply rooted in Igbo culture. However, transforming *uli* into twentieth century modernism proved to be a challenge. The artists had to reinvent ways of making art that reflected and complied with contemporary idealism and conformed to modern day art standards. Not the least important, the artist’s had to assert their ability to manage, control, and appropriate new techniques, while yet assimilating the indigenous methods and media associated with *uli*. The solution and methodology was therefore to study an art form indigenous to their ethnicity, like *uli*, and create an aesthetically formal style based on that art.

Uche Okeke, founder of the Nsukka artists, was in part responsible for the transformation of the art form. Okeke was born at Nimo, Njikoka Division, in the present Anambra State, also the birthplace of his father Isaac Okonkwo Chukwuka Okeke. Nimo is in a highly populated area of central Igboland, not far from the large Niger River trading and educational center of Onitsha. The family
was eventually to move to Kafanchan, a railway junction town in northern Nigeria, where his father was a skilled cabinetmaker and furniture designer, and later joined the Nigerian Railway as a carpenter. Okeke was first introduced to *uli* when a child growing up in Kafanchan, and he writes of his experience as follows:

As far as I can recollect, my enchantment with *uli* began in the forties with a folk song. The song, entitled “A Maiden’s Lament,” was for a brother who disappeared in the woods while searching for the fruit of the *uli* shrub. The words to this simple song captured by childhood imagination. And of course, both at home and at school I was well exposed to creative art activities, and encourages to draw and make handcrafted objects with paper, fiber, elephant grass stems, or bamboo (Okeke 2002: 91-92).

However it was during his studies at Zaria (Ahmadu Bello University), that he thoughtfully began collecting Igbo folklore and tales. Especially traditional stories that involved the tortoise trickster, *mbe*; the earth deity, *Ana/Ala*, and her counterpart *Chukwu*; the moon, *onwa*; the mythic founder of the Anambra Igbo area, *eri*; and of course the water spirit, *mamiwata*. These mythological and heroic folklore characters were to inspire drawings of imaginary curiosities and ambiguous humans that resembled animals, or animals that often resembled distorted humans [Fig. 21].

Although the creative and artistic drawings sometimes appeared humorous because of their grotesqueness, it was a humor otherwise rarely found in his later work. Simon Ottenberg comments, “…by choosing tales of his time, Okeke was stating that Igbo culture was not dead but active and could no longer be ignored in contemporary art” (Ottenberg 1997: 41). The imaginative pen and
ink drawings of Okeke’s were exhibited at Mbari Ibadan Cultural Center, and received favorable attention, as well as inspired his fellow colleagues.

Okeke’s mother, Monica Mgboye Okeke was an accomplished *uli* artist, learning *uli* design when a young girl. When visiting Kafanchen, Okeke and his mother often had lengthy discussions about the art, and Okeke writes of her talent, “using charcoal and paper she used *uli* motifs and symbols to make pictures. I observed carefully her concentration, and effective utilization of a two-dimensional format, and how she skillfully created *uli* elements (patterns) which were both bold and sparing” (Ottenberg 2002: 95). Further, Okeke’s curiosity about *uli* prompted him to ask his mother how artists managed accidental drips of the dye when painting on the body—she answered, “The drips were instantly chased up and anchored appropriately. That was the test of the master *uli* artist” (Okeke 2002: 95).

**Uche Okeke and Reinvention**

Uche Okeke entered the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology (now Ahmadu Bello University) in late December, 1957. In 1958, Okeke, as well as Simon Okeke, Demas Nwoko and numerous others formed the Zaria Art Society, which held a major role in the “synthesis of art” at Zaria--the men were later to become known as the “Zaria Rebels.” The Art Society was formed at a critical time in the history of the Art Department of the Nigerian College of Art, Science, and Technology, Zaria (Ahmadu Bello University). Although change was inevitable at this time, modifications in the teaching
program differed significantly from traditional aesthetic practices previously taught at the school. The changes required the instructors to impose a British philosophical theory of aesthetics, as well as to introduce European and Western techniques, methods, and media: the majority of teachers then at the University were European and generally unfamiliar with the various traditional and regional Igbo practices.

Understandably, a large part of the art students at Zaria came from southern Nigeria. Therefore, living and studying in a cultural and geographic setting that differed from that of their homelands was an adventure of sorts. In fact, the students were unsettled and concerned about the College transferring from Ibadan in the southwest, to Zaria in the far north. And the relocation of the art school presented a cultural issue, which centered on producing art in a predominantly Islamic town and region. As it turned out, the real issue centered on the teaching of European “formalism” and Western art traditions, when in fact, the student’s would have preferred an opportunity to explore, reclaim, and assert their artistic and cultural heritage. This dilemma generated tension between the students and instructors at Zaria (Okeke-Agulu 2006: 27).

At this point, under Okeke’s direction, the Art Society members approached the teaching staff and discussed a program that would focus on nationalistic art, which drew upon the work of contemporary Nigerian writers and artists, as well as Igbo folklore and cultural practices. The aesthetic program, called Natural Synthesis, was based on the importance of preserving artistic
traditions through documentation and study, while employing and experimenting with the technical expertise learned from art classes taught at Zaria. The challenge for the new artists was how to create works that married elements of European and Western media and methods with traditional Igbo art and culture. Of course, the Society’s ideas and suggestions were recognized as valid, and the process of synthesis was set in motion. However, it would take several years before the proposal gained momentum and fully materialize.

At the same time, in 1960, Nigeria was to obtain its independence and there was a sense of political freedom from British rule. The artists hoped independence was not only political, but that it was also to be a cultural and artistic independence. Now more than ever, they approached their work with ideological motivation, grounded on ideas of artistic freedom. Needless to say, change did not come until the years after they graduated--1960 or later. Only then did they have an opportunity to fully embrace their cultural backgrounds and stylistic uniqueness.

Although the ten members majored in painting, their careers were diverse after leaving Zaria; E. O. Nwagbara and F.N. Ekeadam became graphics and commercial designers. Yussuf Grillo embraced his Yoruba art traditions, and mastered the geometric and angular forms distinctive to the Yoruba woodcarving tradition. Bruce Onobrakpeya took Urhobo folklore to another level, and articulated it in printmaking. Simon Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Jimoh Akolo
became well-known professional Nigerian artists, while the others pursued teaching or academic careers (Ottenberg 1997: 35).

Okeke continued to paint, but had been introduced to the novels of Chinua Achebe by one of his art instructors at Zaria. Chinua Achebe’s famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), deepened Okeke’s understanding of Igbo culture. The novel inspired Okeke to compose the poem “I Will Not Go to Kpaaza.” In fact, the first time it was published it was called “Early Enochs,” because Enoch in the poem is also the same Enoch in Achebe’s novel, who was the overzealous Christian convert who tears off the mask of one of nine sacred *egwugwu* masqueraders. More importantly, Kpaaza was a sacred spring near Okeke’s home at Nimo, which Christian convert’s threatened to destroy through fishing:

```
I’ll not go to Kpaaza                fish for troubles

I will not go                       in ancient spring

I will not go to fish in her spring in sacred spring.

my fathers did not go                 Kpaaza, they said, must go
they did not go to her               to nourish and sustain

secluded spring                  Christian converts body and soul

they did not kill her fish          with sacred fish of sacred spring

But early Enochs said            I will not go to Kpaaza

they must go to Kpaaza            I will not go

they must kill fish---          to fish in her peaceful water

my fathers did not go.
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Okeke drew his poetry from his deep interest in Igbo culture—allowing him to integrate past and present knowledge. He also realized that *uli*, like poetry, was painted according to some pattern of recurrence that suggests images [Fig. 23]. This realization prompted him to incorporate the sweeping linear qualities of *uli* into his work, moving away from rigidity toward fluidity. Likewise, he continued to associate *uli* with Igbo traditions and beliefs which had captured his imagination as a child, and which continued to pique his interest as an adult.

In the first half of 1967, with the threat of a civil war, Okeke's life and art took a radically altered direction. Of course, all the Igbo artists were affected by the war, and it was to compel deep introspection and concern for their futures, as well as leaving a lasting impression on their lives and their work (Ottenberg 1997: 66). At this time, Okeke took up temporary residence and study in Germany. He held his most important show entitled, *Kunst und Kunsthandwerk aus Biafra* (Arts and Craft from Biafra), in Cologne. With the help and assistance of friends and colleagues, he gathered together a collection of traditional Igbo arts and crafts, as well as contemporary art works produced by established Nigerian artists. The exhibition was quite large, with some 440 objects, of which 297 were contemporary works, and approximately 143 were traditional arts and craft items (Ottenberg 1997: 67).

At the conclusion of the Biafra Nigeria Civil War in early January 1970, Okeke left Germany for home. At Nsukka, in 1971, he was to head the
Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria. In, *Rediscovery of Tradition*, C. Krydz Ikwuemesi affirms:

...by the time he came to Nsukka, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu were already there as teacher and student, respectively. Like him, they had a Zaria background. Aniakor was a Zaria graduate, and Udechukwu had spent two years as a student at Zaria before the civil war began. However, like most Igbo during the war, Udechukwu also relocated to the east, and later transferred to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1970. The three artists and a few others who happened to be at Nsukka in the 1970’s, became the nucleus of what was to blossom into the Nsukka School in subsequent years (Ikwuemesi 2005: 86-87).

Thus began the “Uli Period” for Okeke [Fig. 22], Aniakor [Fig. 23-24], Udechukwu [Fig. 25], and numerous others. More importantly, Okeke’s idea of integrating *uli* into an academic setting was both successful and readily accepted by students. The cultural legacy of *uli* was synthesized, which inaugurated an aesthetic revival that placed Igbo art strongly into a modernist mode.

Transition and Change

A transition had taken place, *uli*, traditionally used on a malleable surface, being the body, was now to be painted on canvas, paper, cardboard, or fabric. Furthermore, the medium used was no longer plant and earth pigments, but pen and ink, gouache, oil and acrylic paint. The artists had successfully transformed traditional *uli* into a richer variety of media which included fiber, metal, glass, mosaic, cement, and sculpture. Of course as in all spheres of life, change requires adjustment. And to fully appreciate the complexities that challenged the contemporary Nigerian artists, who at first were primarily male, it is necessary to
understand how the artist’s fared in the transition from traditionalism to modernity.

In *Power and Nationalism in Modern Africa*, Adérónké Adésalá Adésànyà writes, “it was within the period of development of new attitudes that the contemporary Igbo artist emerged, and was to begin a venturesome and productive creative exploration. The introduction and mastery of Western theory, methods, and new mediums was set in motion; it now appeared that the terrain was indeed clear for creative harvests and success” (Adésànyà 2008: 386). Yet, the artists were in need of gaining Western acceptance and connecting with prospective clients, since sponsorship on a local level was generally difficult for the Nigerian contemporary artist. They also hoped to parallel or excel the works of established European and Western artists.

Therefore, to attain success and momentum the energized artists began to live abroad and seek out new sources for exposure and art training. Adésànyà confirms:

Through Western training in art schools they acquired a cosmopolitan and international visibility, and by virtue of the patronage of museum and gallery owners, their works were shown in museums and galleries within and outside Nigeria. The exposure enabled them to build local and international clientele and also get international recognition (Adésànyà 2008: 394).

Indeed, not only did they widen their options, but they also expanded their horizons for new opportunities.

Of course, the arrival and acceptance of African contemporary art brought leadership and mentorship from the already experienced and established
Nigerian artists like Okeke, Udechukwu, Chinua Achebe, and others. The masters were now involved in training the next generation of artists, who were encouraged to move forward, while intensifying the already heterogeneous representation of Nigerian contemporary art. In fact, Simon Ottenberg in *New Traditions from Nigeria,* states, “by the mid-1990s there were approximately some two thousand individuals trained in contemporary art in Nigeria, either full or part-time, an impressive number compared to earlier times. Therefore, it is obvious a third or fourth generation of artists are now to begin, if not already have begun, making a mark in the montage of 21st century art” (Ottenberg 1997: 103).

**Gender and Contemporary Art**

What could be considered the third contemporary Nigerian art period beginning in the 1980’s and continuing to the present, found the male and female Nsukka artists’ increasing their contact with the West (Ottenberg 1997: 9). And in recent years, many have relocated to the United States as well as to European countries, where they have joined a worldwide community of artists and craftsmen. Further, they have continued to experiment with indigenous designs and styles, while broadening their interest in other arts associated with poetry, literature, music, drama, and dance. Yet, at the present, *ulì* motifs continue to exist across diverse means of expression; as Nigerian artists reinforce their relationships to one another and to the public. Equally important, contemporary Nigerian artists realized that traditional Igbo artists were respected in the past;
they aspire to hold this position in the present, and anticipate continued recognition and success in the future.

Most modern day explanations of Igbo art typically have ignored the opinions and the inventive role of women in the creation of a new contemporary art movement focused on *uli*. The important role women artists play in today’s creative works such as painting, pottery, literature, and certain textiles in which Nigerian women predominate, has been ignored, or worse yet not acknowledged. Of course, such oversights are very possibly intentional, since gender bias exists in modern Nigerian society, whereby women artists have not always been accepted, however favorably society may have regarded traditional *uli* artists in the past. Yet, it is important to realize that if males had not taken an interest in *uli*, it probably would have disappeared temporarily, rather than prosper as it has today. Thus it is a case of males rescuing a disappearing female art form and placing it in a different artistic context.

Of course, by the time women came along to actively study art, men had over three decades of a head start; especially among Nsukka artists, males made up the majority of students and faculty in Nigerian universities. These gender attitudes and practices are slowly giving way as young contemporary female *uli* artists are now gradually emerging. For example, four impressive female Nsukka artists Ndidi Dike, Chinwe Uwatse, Ada Udechukwu, and Marcia Kure are now active. Dike is a sculptor, mixed media painter, and fiber artist;
Uwatse is a painter and textile artist; Ada Udechukwu is a textile, pen and ink on paper artist and poet; and Kure is a painter.

Ndidi Dike attended the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she studied Music Education, and later entered into the B.A. Fine & Applied Arts program. Dike majored in painting, focusing on exploring how different media could be incorporated into a traditional painterly style. She also taught herself to sculpt, and took wood sculpture to another level by employing *uli* designs in wood panels. Not only does Ndidi include *uli* patterns in wood panels, but often attaches *akuaba* figures (fertility dolls of the Akan (Asante) Tribe, Ghana). Dike is also accomplished using the power-saw, and her sculptures have been compared to that of the renowned Nsukka based Ghanaian artist, El Anatsui.

Furthermore, she has extended her style by introducing the application of paint to sculptured relief panels [Fig. 26], displaying an uncanny ability to marry paint with sculpture by letting the natural colors of the wood highlight the focus of the work. So too, her paintings and fiber art display the beauty of line, so prevalent in traditional *uli* wall painting, while at the same time she consciously brings into focus awareness of positive and negative space as part of the composition.

Dike’s philosophy centers on her belief that every individual possesses a supreme gift within them, an innate energy—some people call it talent—but she perceives it as a sense of direction to create. At the present, Ndidi has had ten
solo exhibitions between 1986 and 2002, and 57 group exhibitions between 1986 and 2005. She has exhibited her works both nationally and internationally, and as a full-time artist, commutes between Owerri (where she sculpts) and Lagos (where she exhibits).

Chinwe Uwatse

It has been written that when Chinwe Uwatse takes her brush in hand, she recreates an ancient tradition of Nigerian women in modern form, “uli.” Uwatse uses a brush and transparent washes of brilliant watercolor to create lines, shapes and motifs that echo ancient uli forms [Fig. 27]. Chinwe studied art at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and proudly acknowledges that Obiora Udechukwu was her academic adviser, and that she was greatly influenced at Nsukka by the works and program lectures of Chike Aniakor, the late Chike Amaefuna and El Anatsui. Her philosophy about her art is based on the theory that ideas flow and are nurtured by the environment in which an artist lives.

In Crossing Boundaries: Gender Transmogrification of African Art History, Nkiru Nzegwu observes:

since 1982, Uwatse has had five solo exhibitions and has been featured in fourteen group exhibitions. Unlike Dike who integrates multiple media, Uwatse moves confidently between painting in acrylic and painting in watercolor. Further, her works are commonly dictated by the technical qualities of her medium as they are by the formal elements of uli designs. Although the professional paths of Dike and Uwatse differ, they both possess a visible national profile (Nzegwu 2000: 16).
Ada Udechukwu

Ada Udechukwu attended the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, majoring in English and literature, earning her B.A. degree in 1981. As a student, she wrote poetry and numerous short stories, some of which were published in *The Muse: Literary Journal of the English Association at Nsukka*. She was to become the associate editor of the departmental magazine during the academic year, 1979-80. Also at this time, she began to draw and paint, and to experiment with pen and ink [Fig. 28]. Many of her pen and ink drawings illustrated her poems and writings, which even then, displayed curvilinear elements, line, space, and simplification of images that assimilated traditional *uli* motifs.

Ada’s husband, Obiora Udechukwu, was to encourage her to experiment with textile art, such as fabric painting, batik, appliqué, and tie-and-dye. Thus began her career as a textile artist. Her first major artistic exposure occurred in 1984 during an exhibition of fabric art at the Ana Gallery of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Nsukka, (a joint show with Mary Ezewuzie). The two then exhibited with other artists in the same year at the National Gallery of Crafts and Design in Lagos (Ottenberg 1997: 206).

Ada continued to experiment with textile art [Fig. 29], which inspired her to design loose fitting garments which she embellished with *uli* motifs. She discusses her philosophy about her textile art as follows:

My approach to fashion designing *per se* is essentially two-fold in that I create contemporary designs which involve working with a basically fitted style of clothing, as well as creating designs that make use of a more fundamental and traditional response to clothing. Thus … the artist
recreates body *uli* on the human form with his or her modern “skin.” And the loose nature of the garments allows the designs on the cloth to dance about as the wearer moves. (Ottenberg 1997: 208)

Although her textile art is an important part of her career, Udechukwu has continued to express herself through her writings and poetry, which emulate feelings about her life. In her book of poetry entitled *Woman, me*, she writes expressively of her art:

“*You came to me.*”

A splash

of color

on my palms implanted

with brush strokes fanning out

from radiating core,

you came to me [1993] (Ottenberg 1997: 221).

Marcia Kure

Finally, there is Marcia Kure who graduated with a B.A. in painting from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1994. Kure has attended art residency programs in Germany and the United States, and taken part in many solo and group exhibitions, as well as showing her work in her home country, Kano, Nigeria. Kure has been exposed to a wide variety of intra-Nigerian cultures and influences, and has been inspired by African cave paintings, woven and printed textiles, and body painting practiced by the Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria.
In fact, her paintings of anthropomorphic female forms display curvilinear elements and lines that mimic the rhythmic spontaneity of *uli*. Further, Kure’s style employs simple forms and minimal use of color—she generally works with watercolor, ink and kola-nut pigment—rendering both strength and liberation to her work [Fig. 30]. Her work, as a whole, is possibly best explained by Kure herself as follows, “cloth, texture, connection, disconnection, unveil, deconstruct, rip apart, rearrange, heritage, history and myth—all elements that deal with issues of [female] gender and identity.” (Galerie-Hermann 2009: 1).

The four above mentioned Nigerian female artists, in terms of creative output, have pushed toward new frontiers, extending conventional *uli* into contemporary consciousness and intellect. Additionally, it is clear that the complex relationships between male and female artists from Nsukka, as well as positions and opinions, have greatly created diversity while successfully integrating the past with the present.
Throughout this thesis, the issue of what is *uli* and what is its relationship to women has been discussed. Prior to contemporary interest and stylistic experimentations by Nigerian new-classicists, traditional *uli* was accredited to Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria. The traditional women painters used a dye for painting on the bodies of other women, which was extracted from the pods of such plants as *uli oba* or *uli nkpo*. The dye slowly turned black in reaction to body heat, and blackened further overnight on the brown shades of a woman’s skin, exemplifying both her beauty and strength. The patterns and designs used by an artist came from an extensive repertoire conceived from her environment, and she was especially inspired by objects and forms that exist in nature. Indeed, the traditional *uli* painter’s signature was made visible by her sensitive eye, deft steady hand, and creative designs that adorned a woman’s body. Unfortunately, *uli* is an ephemeral art staying on the skin for a short time, perhaps four to eight days before the stain fades or washes away.

On walls, the normally minuscule patterns and symbols that women painters used for decorating the body, were expanded in size to accommodate mud or clay surfaces. Customarily, the walls of dwellings, compound or communal shrines were divided into vertical sections, with each section being
decorated by an accomplished female uli artist. The artist used earth pigments to paint creative motifs composed of lines, spirals, dots, or concentric circles. Generally, her color palette included black, white, red/reddish brown, and yellow ochre. Clearly, whether painted on the body or walls, uli exhibited a kind of metaphorical beauty, an expression of female aesthetics.

Historically, uli could be found throughout southeastern Nigeria, but, by the mid twentieth century, the tradition had almost disappeared. The reason for its decline can be attributed to European and Western influence, increasing secularization due to British colonialism, independence in 1960 from British rule, and the disruptive course of the Biafra/Nigeria Civil War, 1967 to 1970. Its passing was further compounded by Christian missionaries who disapproved of nakedness, thus, encouraging women to cover their bodies with cloth. As women began to wear Western style clothing, body decoration was limited to the face, arms, or feet. In addition, commercial cosmetics became available and preferred by young educated women who were not interested in decorating their bodies with a dye; or for that matter, learning an art that did not provide financial security. As for wall painting, it began to wane as a result of urban renewal and changing building materials. People began to move into homes built of cement or concrete blocks, which were not suitable for mural art.

Fortunately in 1958, a metamorphosis took place when the Zaria Art Society was formed in the hands of artists like Uche Okeke, Yusuf Grill, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Jimoh Akolo, Emmanuel Odita and others. They
christened what was to be called “natural synthesis,” based on the philosophy that art should be natural and unforced, and created to reveal the rich artistic traditions of an artist’s culture. This philosophy propelled Uche Okeke to introduce and transform *uli* into a modern art form at Nsukka, when he took up teaching at the University of Nigeria in 1970 (Ikwuemesi 2005:7). Additionally, Nsukka artists Chike Aniakor, El Anatsui, Obiora Udechukwu, Ada Udechukwu, Chinwe Uwatse, and many others enfolded the spirit of *uli*. The artists transcended *uli* iconography onto canvas, paper, and numerous other modern mediums; thus, enabling *uli* to penetrate perspectives of modernity.

In the fullest sense, the modernization of *uli* as a creative idiom may be a continued task for the contemporary artist and scholar in the coming years. One direction new-classicists may follow will be to further explore art forms that could be a basis for economic stability and social development within Igboland. Besides, *uli* patterns and symbols are perfectly suited for decorative fabric and fashion apparel, ceramics, home furnishings, and much more. So too, C. Krydz Ikwuemesi in *The Rediscovery of Tradition: Uli and the Politics of Culture*, states:

> Uli represents a new challenge to young women in Igbo communities where the art was seriously practiced until recently. It is, however, not a challenge they can confront alone. A lot of encouragement would have to come from researchers, educational agencies, funding institutions, and of course the Nsukka masters, for *uli* to accommodate twentieth century commercial standards (Ikwuemesi 2005: xii).

Equally important, continued interest in exploring the potentials of *uli* will validate the place of the traditional woman painter in history as a veritable classicist.
This thesis has traced the art of *uli* from its traditional beginnings into contemporary mobility. *Uli* is an art form that pursues the dignity of linear simplicity and embraces creative exploration. So too, it has endured over time to bridge the void between the past and the present, as it facilitates recognizable identity in the future. Fortunately, the creative minds and skillful hands of Nsukka artists successfully reinvented *uli* into a modern art form indigenous to their ethnicity. Further, their art works are unspoken communicators exhibiting the aesthetic qualities of *uli*; as they have enabled *uli* to enter into twentieth century realism, while preserving its sacred form.
APPENDIX

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. FELIX EKECHI, JUNE, 2009

Honored and Emeritus Professor of History, Dr. Felix Ekechi, Kent State University, was born in Owerri, Nigeria. Dr. Ekechi has conducted seminars, and been a keynote speaker on African and Nigerian history throughout the United States and Nigeria. He has also written numerous books and articles focusing on social and political issues within Igboland (Nigeria).

Dr. Ekechi, what is your definition of *uli*?

First of all in my village [Uratta] Owerri, Nigeria, *uli* is pronounced *uri*. If you were to ask a local what is *uli*, they would not be able to answer your question. Because *uri*, *u- r-i* is the word used for describing the art of body painting.

Your mother was an *uri/uli* artist – was she trained in the art of body painting?

You are asking if my mother studied the art of *uri* painting—yes. But that depends if you mean formal or informal training. She did not go to school or take painting classes. She learned the art of body painting through Igbo tradition, knowledge, and from her home environment. My mother was naturally able to decorate the body of women and children. It was a gift—she had a talent.
Who, and what occasions required your mother’s skill as an *uri/uli* artist?

My mother painted women on special occasions such as marriage, market days, and festivals. One important festival in Owerri is *irl ji* (jam festival), and during this time women are made to look more beautiful—as well as the young girls ages ten to eighteen. Also, for a marriage the bride is decorated, and so is the mother of the bride. When my sister married, both my mother and soon to be married sister were decorated with *uri* for the special occasion. Plus when guests (other women) present gifts to the bride it is customary to praise or compliment both the bride and her mother. For example, praise expressions might be—how beautiful you look; how wise you are; what an exceptional person you are; or perhaps, how great you are. This is our culture—a custom.

Yet another important occasion when women are painted with *uri* is on market days. It is a gathering day—a social exchange.

How did women know about your mother’s talent as an *uri/uli* artist?

My mother painted the bodies of her own children—my sisters. People in the village saw my sisters and admired my mother’s work. They asked her to paint their children, as well as their bodies. She was viewed as an enlightened woman, and highly respected for her talent and ability as an *uri* artist.

Did your mother paint her own body?

No! This is impossible. You do not paint our own body. Someone else paints your body because you cannot extend or properly paint the back, or
correctly follow the curves or shape of the body. This is the beauty of *uri* painting—the line—the freedom to decorate.

[In her thesis, Sara Adams notes the following comment about women painting their own bodies, “although artists may paint their own face, arms, feet and fronts of their legs, they paint each other’s backs and the backs of each other’s legs (Adams 2002:127)].

I read that *uri/uli* artists concentrate on painting the neck of a woman, is that true?

Yes, that is true. In African culture (in general)—women having round and full necks display great beauty, and of course, *uri* enhances a woman appearance making her more beautiful.

Are *uri/uli* motifs painted on men in the same fashion as seen on women?

No! Men are not decorated/painted with *uri*. 
Figure 1. Map of Africa
Figure 2. Map A: Nigeria
Figure 3. *Uli* motifs, drawn by Sylveter Ogbechie
Figure 4. Ukara cloth (lgbo), cotton, indigo dye
Figure 5. Image of leopard on “ukava” cloth.
Figure 6. *Uli* body designs from Awka District collected by W.B. Yeatman, c. 1933
Figure 7. Skeuomorphic “roped pot,” Igbo-Ukwu. Leaded bronze water-pot, setting on medestal
Figure 8. Map of Nigeria (Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa/Fulani)
Figure 9. Map of major Igbo masking locations and types.
Figure 10. Igbo white faced masks (mmuo)
Figure 11. Uli motifs painted on the leg and foot of a woman
Figure 12. Examples of *Uli* painted on the neck and arm.
Figure 13. Examples of uli patterns painted on the arm.
Figure 14. *Iyi Azi Shrine* in Nri, and examples of *uli* patterns and shrine construction.
Figure 15. Uli designs drawn on paper using black ink.
Figure 16. Uli designs drawn on paper using black ink.
Figure 17. Paul Klee. Park Near Lu(cerne). 1938. Oil and newsprint on burlap, 31 1/2 x 27 1/2” (100.3x69.7 cm). Fondation Paul Klee, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Berne, Bern, Switzerland.
Figure 18. Example of *uli* painted on dwelling walls.
Figure 19. Example of an Igbo woman’s hair style, built-up on an armature.
Figure 20. Simple *uli* patterns painted on a man’s chest and shoulder.
Figure 21. Uche Okeke, “Fabled Brute,” 1959, pen and ink on paper.
Figure 22. Uche Okeke, “Punishment,” (Oja Suite no. 4), 1962, pen and ink on paper.
Figure 23. Chike Aniakor, "Exodus" (the refugees), 1977, ink drawing on paper.
Figure 24. Chike Aniakor, “Music Makers,” 1977, ink drawing on paper.
Figure 25. Obiora Udechukwu, “Fisher Bird,” 1985, linocut
Figure 26. Ndidi Dike, wood sculptured relief panels.
Figure 27. Chinwe Uwatse, watercolors on heavy white paper.
Figure 28. Ada Udechukwu, black and white ink drawings on paper, 1990 – 94.
Figure 29. Ada Udechukwu, textile art, appliqué (untitled work), 1990
Figure 30. Marcia Kure, “The Post-Post Modern Commuter,” watercolor, ink and kola-nut pigment on paper, 2004.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


