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The Cultural Significance and Evolution of Igbo Uli Painting

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

An Igbo woman is painting a persons back, presumably with uri, 1930s. Photo: Winifred Yeatman.

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Igbo Uri painting, also known as uli painting, is a traditional form of body art practiced by the Igbo people, particularly women. It involves intricate designs made with natural dyes on the body, often during special occasions such as festivals, ceremonies, and rituals. These patterns are also applied to walls, fabrics, and objects, but their application to the body holds particular cultural significance.

Uli designs are typically made using plant-based dyes, often derived from the seeds or leaves of the uli tree (*Combretum* sp.). These dyes were semi-permanent, fading after a few days or weeks, which aligned with the temporary nature of the events they commemorated.

Uli patterns are characterized by their flowing lines and organic motifs, often reflecting themes from nature. Traditionally, the dyes were semi-permanent, gradually fading over days or weeks—a transience that symbolized the fleeting nature of the events celebrated. While traditional uli painting on the body has diminished due to modernization, the art form remains an important part of contemporary Igbo cultural heritage. Today, it is increasingly featured in art exhibitions and fashion, where it serves as a powerful symbol of Igbo identity and heritage.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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