



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Uli Art and Cultural Transformation in Igboland:

The Influence of Missionary Intervention and the Resilience of Igbo Artistic Traditions

By Chuka Odike

FEATURE
IMAGE

**Painters of the Earth Shrine (Ala).'
Nimo, Nigeria, October 1994. Photo:
Elizabeth Péri.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò
ULI ART AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN IGBOLAND

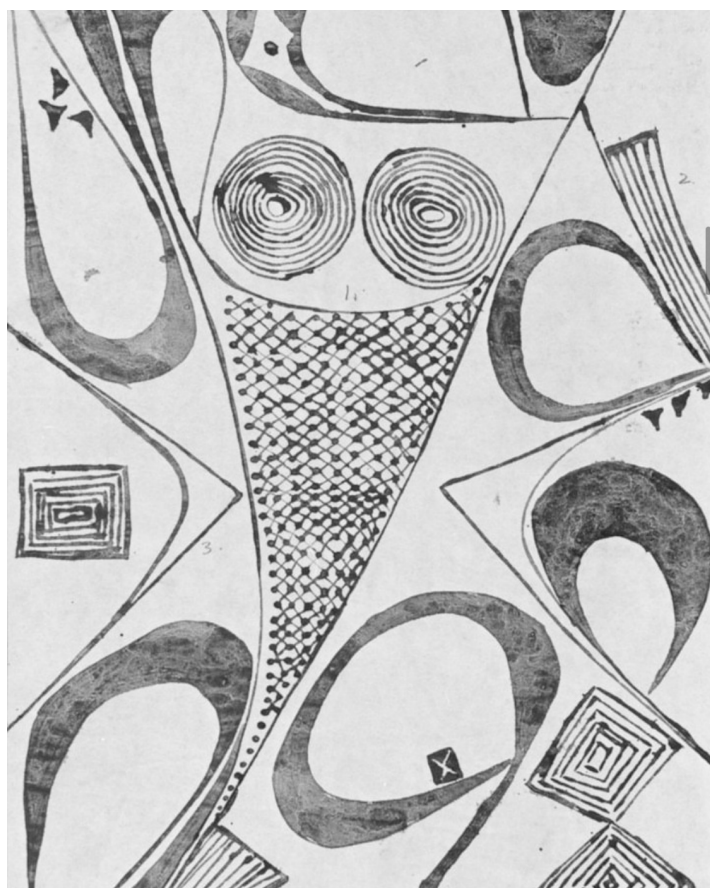
Uli Art and Cultural Transformation in Igboland: The Influence of Missionary Intervention and the Resilience of Igbo Artistic Traditions

By Chuka Odike · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com



Igbo lady decorating house walls with uli, Igboland. Photo by Margaret Courtney-Clarke, late 1980s.

Uli art, a distinctive form of body and wall decoration traditionally practiced by Igbo women, represents a unique cultural heritage in Igboland. This art form utilizes fluid, abstract motifs applied to walls, bodies, and ceremonial structures, often with deep symbolic meanings tied to Igbo cosmology. Uli designs, characterized by their elegance and simplicity, are typically painted by skilled female artists who use natural pigments to create semi-permanent motifs on their skin or walls of homes and shrines. However, colonial-era missionary influences significantly altered the context and practice of uli art, pushing it away from traditional settings and encouraging new applications.



Úlì designed by Igbo women of Awka collected by missionaries, c. 1933.

In the early 20th century, Christian missionaries in southeastern Nigeria discouraged Igbo women from applying uli on their skin, associating the practice with indigenous spirituality, which missionaries often viewed as incompatible with Christianity. Instead, missionaries urged women to reproduce uli designs on paper, with

collections of these works preserved in institutions like the Pitt Rivers Museum. By the 1930s, missionaries had begun training women to use uli-inspired motifs in embroidery, attempting to redirect uli art toward decorative objects rather than its original form of body art. These works were often taken to museums worldwide, transforming uli from a localized cultural expression into a globalized artifact of “primitive” art.

Despite missionary efforts to discourage body painting, the resilience of uli art continued, though it underwent significant transformation. For example, in the mid-20th century, uli designs were still present in traditional Igbo religious contexts, as seen in the Ala shrine in Nimo, where elder women adorned their bodies with uli motifs for ritual purposes. The photo of an Igbo woman decorating house walls with uli, captured by Margaret Courtney-Clarke in the late 1980s, highlights the continued use of uli in personal and communal spaces.



Uli semi-permanent body art, Mgbala Agwa, 1983. Liz Willis.

Scholars such as Simon Ottenberg and Liz Willis have documented the generational decline of uli art as younger Igbo women show less interest in learning the techniques, possibly due to shifts in cultural values and the influence of Western beauty standards. By the 1980s, most uli artists were elderly women, leaving a generational gap in the art's continuity. The art form's link to the Igbo spiritual and cosmological belief system is evident in literature by Chinua Achebe, who explored the concept of "chi" (personal god) and "eke" (creation) in Igbo cosmology, further underlining the cultural depth that uli motifs represent in Igbo society.



Mrs Arnott & Girls at Slessor Memorial Home, Arochuku", a sewing lesson at a centre in Arochuku established in memory of Scottish missionary Mary Slessor after her death in 1915.

Missionaries also established educational centers such as the Slessor Memorial Home in Arochuku, where women were introduced to Western schooling and trained to be "Christian wives." Here, they learned to transfer uli motifs to textiles, producing embroidered designs that were eventually displayed in museums worldwide. These works represent a cultural shift as uli moved from being a personal,

spiritual art form to a commercialized craft collected by foreign institutions.



Reproduction of uli drawings by Igbo women on paper in the early 20th century. These were to be drawn on skin, earlier Christian missionaries discouraged their use on skin and had Igbo women draw them on paper. Pitt River Museum.

In summary, uli art reflects both the resilience of Igbo cultural identity and the significant impact of colonial and missionary intervention. Although the traditional use of uli on the body has largely faded, the art form's influence endures in museums and scholarly works worldwide, preserving a visual representation of Igbo spirituality and artistic innovation.

Achebe, C. (1975). Chi in Igbo cosmology.

Courtney-Clarke, M. (Photographer). (1980s). Igbo lady decorating house walls with uli, Igboland [Photograph].

Ottenberg, S. (1994). Painters of the Earth Shrine (Ala). Nimo, Nigeria

[Photograph].

Pitt Rivers Museum. (n.d.). Reproduction of uli drawings by Igbo women on paper.

Willis, L. (Photographer). (1983). Uli semi-permanent body art, Mgbala Agwa.

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 explore 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.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
