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Uli: *Traditional Igbo Tattoo and Wall Art*

By Chizobem Chinedu Opiah

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Ozi Ikòrò
ULI

Uli: Traditional Igbo Tattoo and Wall Art

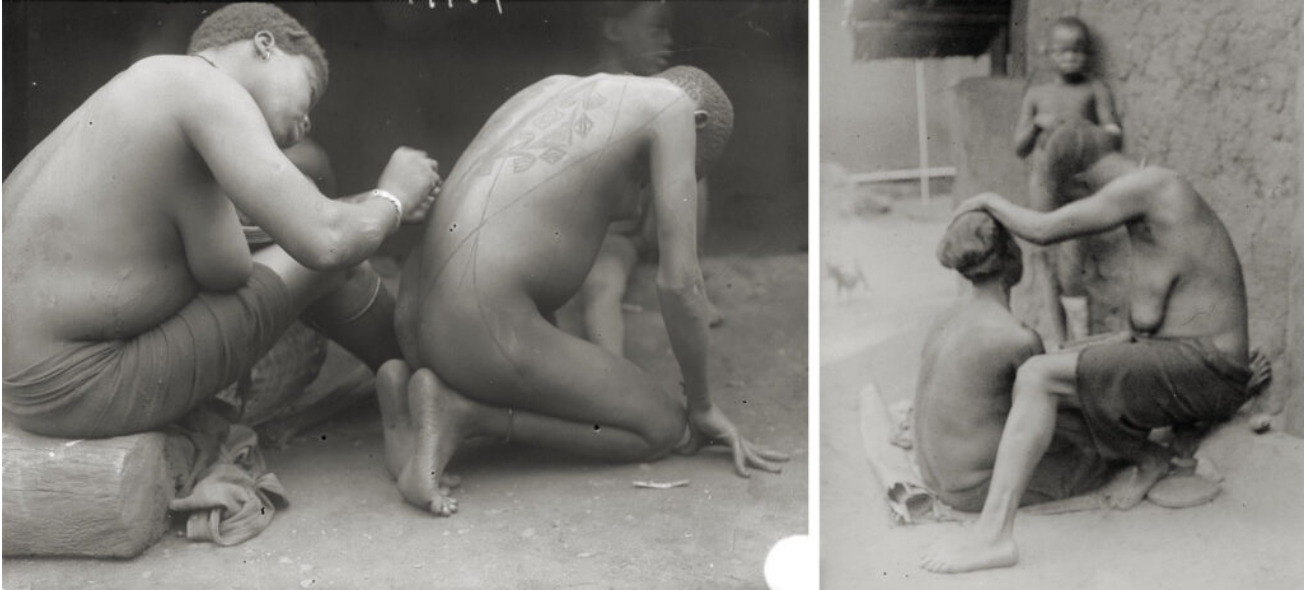
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Uli, or Uri (in some parts of Igboland), is an intricately beautiful and vibrant body art that is predominantly practiced by Igbo women in South-Eastern Nigeria. It is an artistic tradition that carries heavy cultural significance. The name, “Uli,” is derived from the trees whose fruit or pods are used for extracting the painting medium to illustrate the drawings. This fruit extract symbolizes a deep connection to nature.

01

The Beauty of Uli

Uli art is an embodiment of true beauty that expresses the essence of womanhood, spirit, community and nature. Their images are characterized by abstract, geometric and pictorial qualities that connote certain emotions. These designs and patterns are inspired by natural forms, for example, sharp colours, lines and curves radiate joyful energy, whereas negative spaces, known as oherè, forms an integral part of narrative. Every stroke, line and dimension convey a story that communicates the ethos of being within the Igbo culture.

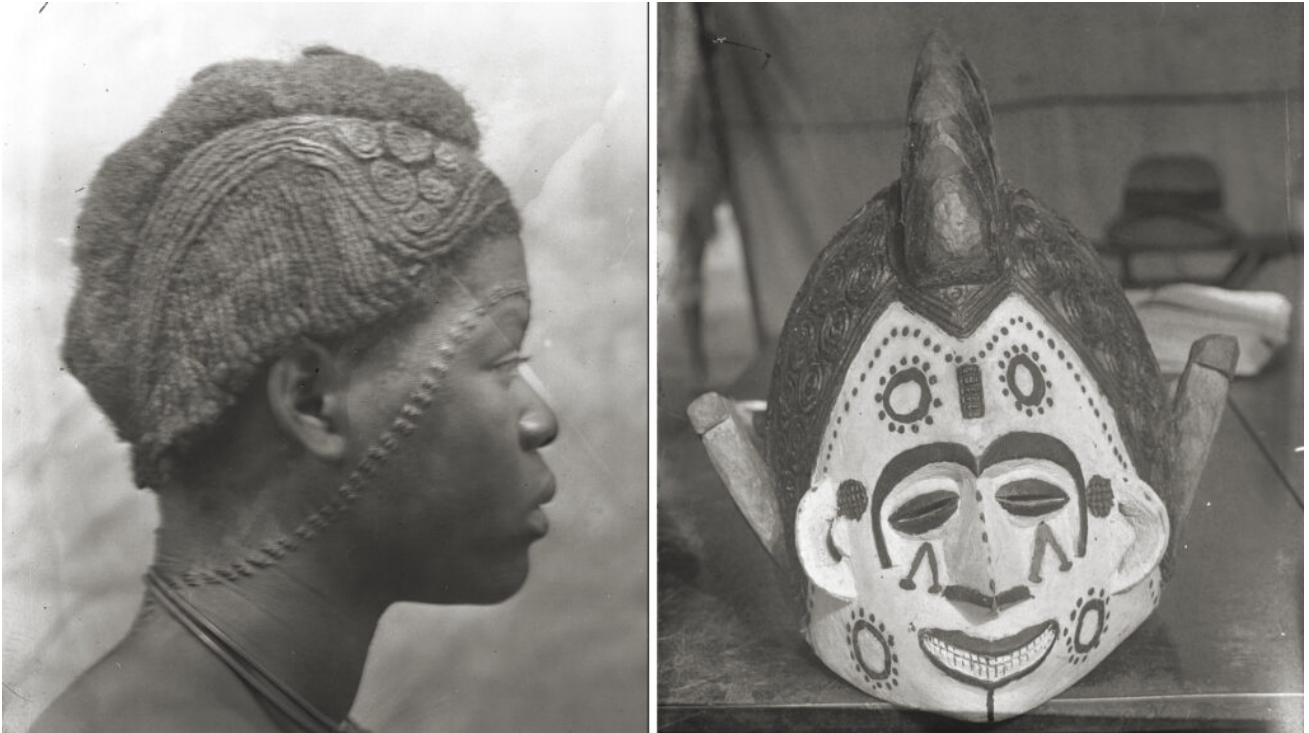


Left: Body painting in Fugar, present-day Edo State, Nigeria. Photographed by Northcote W. Thomas in 1909 (NWT 1072, RAI 400.19719). Right: Two women making uli in Achalla, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria. Photographed by Northcote W. Thomas in 1911 (NWT 3751, MAA P.31898).

02

Distinct Styles of Uli

Different regions in Southern Nigeria have their own distinct styles of Uli. For example, designs in Nri-Alwka feature slender tapering lines, while Arochukwu designs tend to be denser and more heavily populated with motifs. There's diversity amongst Uli artists, where each artist brings their own unique style that shines through even in collective drawing sessions. One aspect of Uli art that makes it stand out are the repeated abstract designs that artists adapt across various works, and they are named after either natural elements or the execution method. Unlike the Nsibidi symbols associated with male secret societies in Igbo culture, Uli motifs do not carry symbolic representation but are instead named for their visual resemblance.



Uli motifs are part of a wider aesthetic repertoire, including hair and facial scarification design. In these photographs one can compare feminine hair and scarification designs on a young woman from Igbariam and the same as represented on a 'maiden spirit' mask collected by Thomas in Agukwu Nri. Left: 'Girl with (?)ohgba hair', photographed by Northcote W. Thomas in Igbariam, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria, in 1911 (NWT 3853, RAI 400.19946); Right: 'Isi Agboefi' maiden spirit mask, photographed by Northcote W. Thomas in Nimo, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria, in 1911 (NWT 2970, RAI 400.16379).



Uli-like motifs in hair design. Left: 'Nwamadu', photographed by Northcote W. Thomas in Awka, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria, in 1910 (NWT 1834a, RAI 400.17577); Right: 'Mboye', photographed by Northcote W. Thomas in Nibo, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria, in 1911. Note the smudge of nzu chalk on his left eyelid. (NWT 3172, MAA P.31389.)

03

The Pursuit of Beauty and Morality

In Igbo tradition, it is believed that Ala/ Ana-the Earth Goddess-blessed women with the ability to create art and beauty. Also, women hold the responsibility of upholding morals. As such, they are often involved in resolving conflicts within the community. The lacing of beauty with morality is encapsulated in the word “Nma,” which means good and beautiful. Uli reflects this belief. When a dispute is settled, the woman who mediates often paints lines down the other person’s body, symbolizing resolution and harmony.

The first Uli artist in Igbo tradition, Asele, is celebrated for her exceptional skills. Her artistic prowess granted her access to the realm of spirits and emerge as the greatest artist of all time, a

testament to the sacredness of this art form.

04

Celebration of Womanhood: Iru Mgbede

Iru Mgbede is a rite of passage that celebrates womanhood to the fullest. It included an isolation process that takes place for six months, where the lady is pampered and fed with the finest foods. This process occurs because a fattened body is prized and viewed as being harmonious with nature and strength. During this period, the woman undergoes various activities from learning traditional dances to decorating her quarters to taking care of her body and skin. During this celebration, her body is adorned with Uli made of strokes so soothing they can lull one to sleep.

05

Community and Collaboration

Uli is not merely an individual art form; it is deeply embedded in the Igbo way of life. It is used in daily activities and special occasions, including festivals, weddings, title-taking ceremonies, funerals, and women's market days. Mural painting is a communal effort, often involving two to twenty women working together to paint the walls of a celebrant's home or temple. The wall is divided into sections marked by bold lines, known as Uli nkpowa, allowing each artist to explore her unique style. This collaborative process fosters conversations, learning, and laughter, with elder women leading the groups and imparting their knowledge, while younger women contribute fresh energy and ideas.

06

Techniques and Sustainability

Uli murals involve techniques that are both careful and meticulous. The first step is the preparation of the wall surface with laterite, before burnishing it with fine pebbles. Afterwards, a slip of red mud is applied to the wall to create a textured working surface. Pigments are then mixed with water and applied using hands, twigs or traditional tools like the mmanwauli (Uli knife). Modernization, Christo-Colonial influences and the evolution of building materials have led to the decline of many traditional practices, but some artists have begun to reclaim and reinterpret Uli in contemporary contexts.

07

Conversations with Nature

The motifs utilized in Uli art reflect every aspect of Igbo life, honoring and appreciating nature. The ability to create Uli is believed to be a gift from Mother Earth herself, Ala/Ana. Common patterns include animals such as snakes, tortoises, alligators, agama lizards, eagles, vultures, and leopards, each aligned with divinities and human characteristics. Additionally, plants such as cassava leaves, seed pods, yams, fruit flowers, and kola nuts—symbols of peace and hospitality—are prominently featured.

08

Historical Context and Revival

In the 1970s heralded a movement of Uli revival, where contemporary Nigerian artists began to incorporate Uli designs into their works.

This movement was called the Uli Revivalist Movement, which aimed to restore Uli aesthetics and acknowledge the historical contributions of female artists. The Ama Dialog, established in 1991 by Doris Weller and Meki Nwezi, aimed to create a dialogue between modern and traditional practices. Eventually, it led to the formation of the Upa Women Artists Collective, which focused on transferring traditional designs to paper and canvas. This allowed for broader visibility and appreciation of the craft.

Northcote Thomas was one of the first British anthropologists who documented Uli during his anthropological surveys in Southern Nigeria. Between 1910 and 1911, the photographs he took of Uli artworks provided valuable insight into its practice and aesthetics. His work shed light on the beauty and complexity of Uli, as a marker that blends the spiritual, social, and artistic threads of Igbo culture.

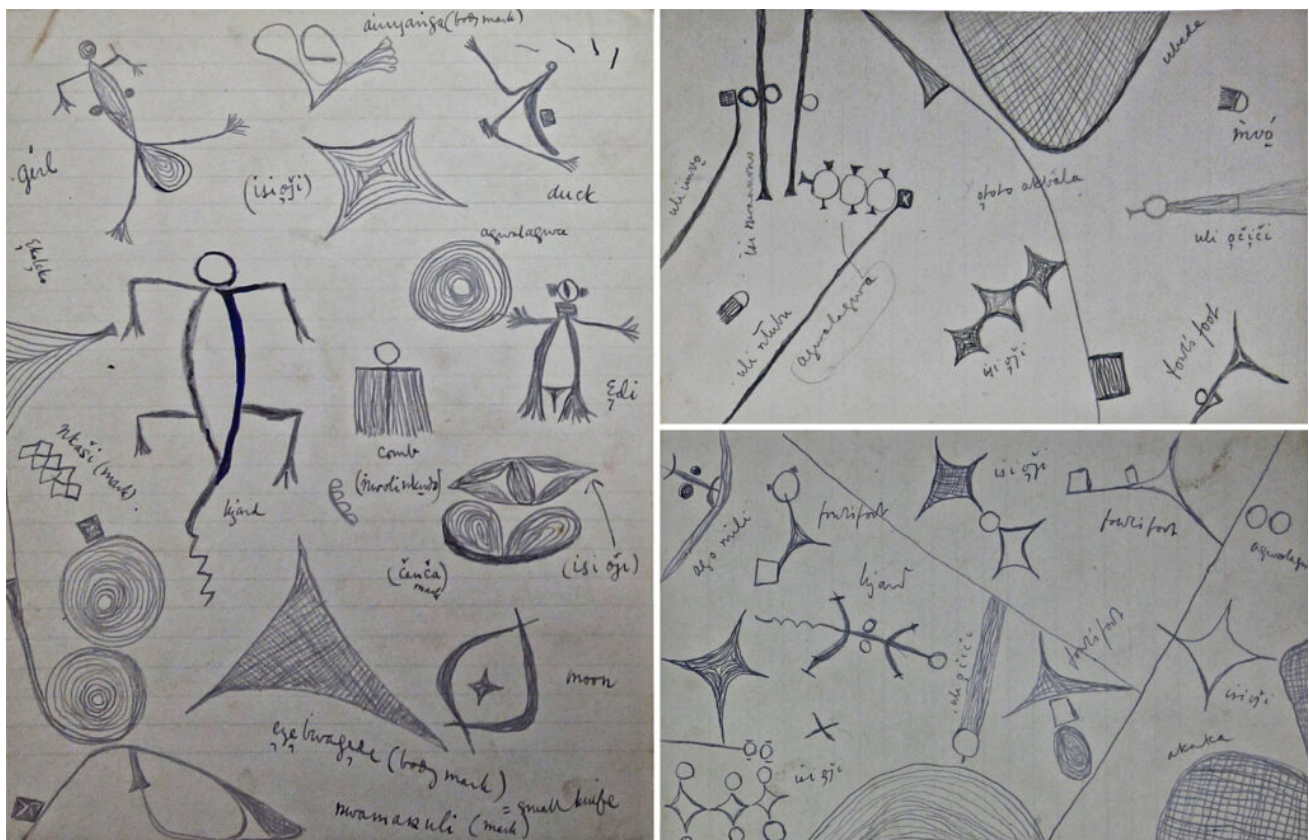
09

Dynamic and Multi-Dimensional Expression

Because the Igbo worldview values dynamism and multi-dimensionality, Uli artists strive to convey the three states of reality: physical, spiritual, and abstract. There is an Igbo art that states, “The people have three eyes. One is the eye with which the spirit is seen; the other two are used to see people and the material world.” This perspective enhances the depth and meaning embedded within Uli art.

Transience and Renewal

Uli art is temporary in nature. Wall paintings wash away during the rainy season and body paintings last from eight days to several months. This artistic brevity symbolizes renewal and reflects the ever-changing nature of life.



Uli samples from Awka District, N.W. Thomas (1910-11)

- Ikwuemesi, C. K. (n.d.). Eziafo Okaro: An uli woman painter's tale in the Igbo heritage crisis.
- Smith, S. A. (n.d.). Uli: Metamorphosis of a tradition into contemporary aesthetics.
- Thomas, N. W. (1910). Decorative art among the Edo-speaking peoples of Nigeria: I. Decoration of buildings. *Man*, 10, 65-66.
- Thomas, N. W. (1913). Anthropological report on the Ibo-speaking peoples of Nigeria, Part I: Law and custom. London: Harrison.

- Willis, E. A. (1987). A lexicon of Igbo uli motifs. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 1, 91-121.
- Adams, S. (n.d.). People have three eyes: Ephemeral art and the archive in Southeastern Nigeria.
- Willis, L. (n.d.). "Uli" painting and the Igbo world view. *African Arts Journal*.
- The poetics of line: Seven artists of the Nsukka group; The Uli aesthetics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chizobem Chinedu Opiah

Chikwere is a passionate history blogger dedicated towards sharing fascinating stories and untold tales of Igbo history and culture. I am also a Graphic Designer and a Tech enthusiasts. I developed a deep love for Igbo culture and tradition since my teenage age. So far I've learnt alot about Igbo History and Culture and I'll share the knowledge acquired so far in this space of Igbo History and Culture. Daalu.



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