

Ana, Asele and Badunka: a triple synthesis

An analysis of the work of Uche Okeke

Modern Nigeria is an archetypal cauldron, enmeshed with a variety of cultural groups and traditions, nevertheless united by the prospect of forging a unique

independent national identity. Hausa, Fulbe, Yoruba and Igbo are among the largest of those, in the forty-three years since the end of colonial occupation, struggling to maintain their linguistic and cultural affiliations while simultaneously converging to create a syncretic sense of Nigerianness. Subsequently, as one means of understanding art, in essence, is as a celebration of identity, artwork in the post-independence era manifests this struggle; thus, placing artists at the epicenter of cultural identification.

In the 1960s, artist Uche Okeke emerged as an integral figure in the development of Nigerian art, and thus, Nigerian identity. Drawing from his Igbo heritage, Okeke effectively appropriated pre-colonial artistic traditions and applied them in an “art for art’s sake” context. Okeke’s work, however, is not a mere recontextualization and revitalization of “old” forms. Rather, informed by historical situation, Okeke’s artworks are personal testimonies of struggle characterized by a natural synthesis of traditional and contemporary form and context. As an emblem of identity in post-colonial Nigeria, however, the doctrinal aesthetic of “natural synthesis” promoted by Okeke is not a simple combination of old and new; it’s true nature is multi-tiered and specific to individual interpretation. Evident in Uche Okeke’s 1982 etching *Ana, Asele and Badunka*, “natural synthesis” represents a merger of *uli* design forms and Igbo cosmology; a synthesis of traditional design and contemporary applications; and a unification of writing and drawing in which themes of individual, community, and national identity are at the forefront.

Though linguistic affinities united villages in the Igbo-speaking regions in West Africa prior to colonialism, the acephalous nature of their communities contributed to a dynamic variation in aesthetic traditions. Body and wall painting were not practiced

throughout the whole of Igboland, nor were they solely referred to as *uli* painting.¹ Where such practices did exist, motifs and interpretations differed. It was not until the onset of colonialism, therefore, that communities and traditions in this region were classified under the auspices of a Pan-Igbo identity; in which the practices of *uli* body and wall painting were promoted as common Igbo customs.² Therefore, what is currently referred to as *uli* painting represents the synthesis of a variety of traditions and motifs, in which interpretations still vary from community to community and artist to artist.

Regardless of classification, however, body and wall painting designs exist on a similar aesthetic plane. Typically, *uli* designs represent a system of pictographs which, when applied to a given surface, serve as a method of beautification and represent a specific aspect of an individual on which they are applied or the community audience absorbing the imagery.³ As an object oriented design system, *uli* symbols are simplified and abstracted. Given their two-dimensionality and relative isolation on the picture plane, symbols are read individually, though they may occasionally bear meaning to the greater motif. Furthermore, application of the designs onto the body and the wall are conducted in a meditative and fluid manner, in which accidental drips in paint are modified to fit the context of the design.⁴

¹ Willis, Elizabeth Anne. "Uli Painting and Identity: twentieth century developments in art in the Igbo-speaking region of Nigeria" Ph.D. Thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. 1997. Vol. 1:18.

² Willis. 1:318-325

³ Ottenberg, Simon. *New Traditions From Nigeria: seven artists of the Nsukka Group*. Smithsonian Institution Press. Washington, D.C. 1997 58.

⁴ Okeke's mother often gave him practical demonstrations in *uli* visuals. During these demonstrations, he observed three factors integral to *uli* design: concentration, effective utilization of two-dimensional format, and economy of means. When Okeke asked his mother how the artists manage accidental drips of the stain, she answered that "...they were instantly chased up and anchored appropriately." ed.Ottenberg. Uche Okeke. 95.

Although *uli* body and wall painting were practiced at the time of Uche Okeke's birth in 1933, the vibrancy and fecundity of the tradition was largely opposed by the spread of Christianity and the centralization of government under colonial powers. Thus, while Okeke witnessed the withering traditions of his parents and ancestors, a majority of his early influences derived from his attendance to mission schools and access to Christian propaganda. Okeke attributes his initial interest in drawing, therefore, to the books, maps, and illustrations he found at a local Christian bookstore, rather than to a prescribed Igbo artistic tradition.⁵ According to Okeke, not until the threat of total obliteration of his community at the onset of the Biafran War, seven years after independence, did he realize the full potential of the *uli* aesthetic, and the importance of investigating his roots.⁶

Uche Okeke attributes his interest in the *uli* aesthetic less to the prescribed motifs than to the method of application and the overall design sensibilities of *uli* artists.⁷ Retracting from his earlier use of three-dimensional imagery in order to create the illusion of depth, Okeke employs the essence of *uli* design to convey his aesthetic identity. Hence, in his piece *Ana, Asele and Badunka*, Okeke presents a two-dimensional abstraction of three Igbo deities deriving his compositional influence from *uli* forms.

Etched counterintuitively to the classical western designs Okeke studied throughout grade school and college, the figures on the picture plane are displayed linearly without the illusion of depth of field. Positive and negative space is crafted to demand equal attention, and the figures, though isolated, merge into one another to create

⁵ Ottenberg, 28.

⁶ Prior to the war, Okeke studied *uli* designs. After the war, however, Okeke "...worked to rediscover [his] roots..." and "[argued] for a gentle merger of tradition and modernity." Ottenberg, 67.

⁷ Ottenberg, 60.

a fluid composition. The eyes of the viewer are drawn into the abstracted tendrils of Ana's hair, for example, and woven around the picture plane through the ghost like and nearly transparent lines- whose ephemeral nature suggests a congruent relationship to the impermanent nature of *uli* body and wall motifs. Additionally, Okeke's flat application of an okra and red palate serve to simultaneously frame the figures on the picture plane and beckon the minimal use of subdued earthen tones in traditional *uli* paintings.

As aforementioned, *Ana, Asele and Badunka* employs *uli* design motifs to illustrate a series of Igbo deities. Typically, though "[*uli* design forms] appear to have been secular...they were associated with the spiritual world in that both body and wall *uli* appeared at important community rituals with religious aspects..."⁸ Even so, rarely did *uli* artists employ figural elements on their picture planes. Throughout his *uli* period⁹ Uche Okeke worked to create a synthesis between his design aesthetic and personal history; thus, achieving a body of works in which both Igbo and Christian imagery are presented in the context of *uli* designs:

"Ana, Asele, and Badunka indicate to Okeke that there are spiritual forces that support the visual aesthetics of the Igbo, reinforcing his interest in Igbo tradition. Okeke's interest in spiritual figures complements his concern with *uli*, and he employs *uli* elements to depict them in art, seeing both as interrelated in Igbo art and culture..."¹⁰

Thus, by uniting *uli* designs and Igbo and, in some cases, Christian cosmology, Okeke also merges elements of his visual and temporal histories: projecting his aesthetic and his identity on his canvas.

⁸ Ottenberg. 52.

⁹ 1970-1986

¹⁰ Ottenberg. 62.

Immediately evident in the application of *uli* forms and Igbo imagery on paper, rather than on body or wall during his *uli* period, Uche Okeke defined a new *uli* aesthetic. Okeke's contemporary applications transcend mere revitalization of motifs, however, due to his interpretation of *uli* design methods rather than direct use of actual *uli* forms.

Prior to colonialism, body and wall painting were typically carried out by women, and, with respect to wall painting, in the spirit of co-wife competition. While the facile construction of an Igbo ethnic identity promoted *uli* painting as a common Igbo tradition, the installment of Western religious practices in the region also perpetuated their containment: in replacing local cosmologies with Christian rhetoric, a characteristic demise of polygamy followed suit. In addition to gaining more household responsibilities, and thus, less time to engage in artistic endeavors, missionaries consistently denounced body painting as an unacceptable art form and sought to replace the role of women as painters and artists with roles conducive to European traditions and profit.¹¹

Therefore, when Uche Okeke began teaching at Nsukka, a dramatic shift, not only in the method of application of *uli* designs, but also in the identities of the artists employing them, took shape. Okeke's interests were not in the creation of public arts projects, in which *uli* designs would be applied in a traditional context, but in the abstraction of the *uli* idiom in an application relevant to one's history and artistic endeavors.¹² While teaching at the University, Okeke encouraged Nsukka artists to investigate the histories of their families and communities in order to develop their artistic identities. As a result, the Nigerian and international communities witnessed a

¹¹ Willis. 1:146

rise in contemporary applications of *uli* and other traditional designs and design methods largely carried out by university educated males.

The synthesis of traditional and contemporary in *Ana, Asele, and Badunka* exceeds application of *uli* art forms in a new medium and context. Painted by a man trained as an artist, *Ana, Asele and Badunka* symbolizes the transformation of an art form in Nigeria and the development of a new artistic identity in an international setting. In addition, the fact that the piece is an etching on paper makes the work less ephemeral, more transportable, and thus, more accessible to an international audience. The expanse of Uche Okeke's influence in the solidification of personal, community, national and international identity in the context of post-colonial Nigeria, therefore, is far reaching.

While the use of *uli* forms in a contemporary context represents an important transformation in Nigerian art and a relevant development in concepts of identity in modern Nigeria, the utilization of the art form by Uche Okeke epitomizes the struggle to identify his aesthetic and grasp an art form relevant to his endeavors. Uche Okeke grew up in northern Nigeria. And, although Igbo, by the time he entered grade school, could speak, but not write in his family's tongue. Okeke could, however, write in Hausa. "...If one is exposed early enough," claims Okeke, "then the language will, of course, depend very much on what [one wants] to say."¹³ The implementation of the *uli* idiom in his artwork, therefore, bemoans Okeke's desire to connect with the language of his ancestors.

The utilization of the *uli* idiom in *Ana, Asele and Badunka* allows Okeke to present the deities metaphorically in the context of the design system. In a discussion on

¹² ed. Ottenburg, Simon. *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*. Smithsonian Institution Press. Washington, D.C. 2002. Dele Jegede. 186.

traditional *uli* designs, Simon Ottenberg concurs, "...these designs could, in fact, be enjoyed aesthetically without knowing their meanings, something that frequently occurs with a modern viewer looking at contemporary art with *uli* designs."¹⁴ Thus, though the figures in the composition may be read solely in accordance with their aesthetic design quality, understanding their individual meanings provides insight into Okeke's testimony.

Ana, isolated in a white plane, is an Igbo deity "...concerned with the fertility and welfare of living things, both the earth and the spirit of the earth..."¹⁵ To Okeke, Ana is the "...source of beauty and the keeper of moral law."¹⁶ Asele, seen to the right of Ana on the picture plane, is also a major Igbo deity. Her presence in the image reinforces Okeke's interest in *uli*, as Asele is "...the spirit of design, who excels in *uli* in both the land of the living and the dead."¹⁷ Badunka, Asele's male counterpart, completes the triad. As the "...master of handicrafts and technology, the genius of manipulative skill..." Badunka's relative importance to Okeke's craft cannot be understated.¹⁸

The arrangement of the abstracted figures on Okeke's picture plane beckon the arrangement of *uli* forms in traditional applications. While it may not be important to read one symbol as it relates to the next, *uli* compositions as a whole dispense a kind of visual poetry. Artist Obiora Udechukwu, who also works with *uli* designs, believes that "*uli* has a celestial quality, much like the stars, the moon, the planets, and the constellations, and that *uli* exhibits a lyrical symbolism, a kind of metaphorical expression of poetry and music."¹⁹ Likewise, the forms the deities take on in Okeke's

¹³ ed. Ottenberg. 167.

¹⁴ Ottenberg. 59.

¹⁵ Ottenberg. 61.

¹⁶ Ottenberg. 61.

¹⁷ Ottenberg. 62.

¹⁸ Ottenberg. 62.

¹⁹ Ottenberg. 58.

composition are like constellations; each figure occupying a distinct and isolated space, yet connected to the others through their containment on the canvas.

As aforementioned, though designs are generally applied in an effort to beautify, motifs utilized in a given composition inevitably contain deeper symbolic meanings. As a system of pictographs, *uli* designs are employed as a form of writing. The compositions created, therefore, represent a potent form of visual poetry. Reading *Ana, Asele, and Badunka* as one would read an *uli* painting allows the viewer to absorb the encoded Igbo cosmology, as well as understand the importance of the various deities to Okeke's aesthetic. Through his use of *uli* design concepts, Okeke is able to seamlessly unite poetry and painting: his two favored modes of expression.²⁰ Thus, a natural synthesis of forms in Uche Okeke's work is evident in the development of a medium whose syncretic nature bridges the fields of writing and drawing.

Furthermore, by working in an Igbo writing system, not only does he symbolically combine his dual expressive nature, Okeke is also able to explore his past and the lives of his ancestors. In developing his personal and aesthetic identity, Okeke had to first find himself in his own family's history.

The duality that exists in Western ideologies between traditional and contemporary artworks in Africa often leads to the classification of modern African art as an addendum to Western movements. In reality, the space between traditional and contemporary artwork is created only by the motivation for creation: traditional works are commonly seen as functional pieces while contemporary artwork is created out of the necessity to express. The division, then, between traditional and contemporary applications of *uli* designs is blurred. *Uli* is typically utilized as a mechanism for

expression of personal and community identity: an expression all too relevant during colonial occupation as well as during the post-independence era.

Uche Okeke's implementation of *uli* forms allows him to call to the forefront the struggle for identity in post-colonial Nigeria. As an artist trained in Nigeria, Germany and the United States, Okeke has been exposed to a variety of artistic styles and movements. The distinct history of his community, however, is Okeke's greatest aesthetic influence. Employing *uli* forms, then, not only allows Okeke to investigate and express his personal history and identity, but it offers insight into the diverse artistic styles prevalent in Nigeria. Thus, Okeke sagaciously penetrates *uli* concepts to reveal their poetic nature and potent historical symbolism; engaging his African identity in a utilization of Igbo forms.

The natural synthesis that characterizes Uche Okeke's work, therefore, transcends a mere revitalization of *uli* forms. In an effort to develop his aesthetic and his identity in the post-independence and post-revolutionary era in Nigeria, Okeke utilized an art form relevant to his history and influence. Not only did the employment of *uli* forms in his work allow Okeke to reestablish a connection with the withering traditions of his community, the triple synthesis inherent in the merger between traditional and contemporary also enabled Okeke to unify his aesthetic perspective and world-view in a way conducive to his dual artistic nature.

²⁰ Okeke is renowned both for his poetry and painting, and has worked in both throughout his life.

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