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Natural Synthesis and Contemporary Nigerian Visual Arts: An Exposition of Uche Okeke's Works

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Abstract

The frontiers of contemporary Nigerian art are expanding as ethnic traditions have continued to evolve in individual genius which gives it expression. In the visual art of Uche Okeke, we see a synthesis of old and new, hence a perpetuation of old artistic Nigeria traditions in modern artistic sensibility. Although a great deal has been written about Uche Okeke's exploit in arts, the corpus of his oeuvres requires continuous investigation alongside a myriad of artistic developments in Nigeria. More so, there is a dearth of scholarly materials in the global arena on the creative achievements of the artist which anchor on his philosophy of natural synthesis. This paper therefore examined

the concepts of synthesis as an art making philosophy and as a creative paradigm inherent in the visual art of Uche Okeke. It also looked at his methods and styles of creating art works alongside those entrenched in traditional *uli* art practice.

Introduction

The interplay of identity and styles in modern Nigerian art are seen as being anchored in natural synthesis. Hence the inspirational roots of most contemporary Nigeria artists are derived from past traditions. This shows that one can keep in the main stream of modern life and at the same time preserve one's tradition. This assertion has a bearing on many of the contemporary Nigerian artists and it provides the platform for the understanding and appreciation of Uche Okeke's works in which there is a demonstrable balance between modern art and the great Nigerian art traditions, particularly *uli*. This development has no doubt necessitated the artist's realization of natural synthesis and creative identity. The term natural synthesis, according to Akatakpo (2000, p.151), is the unconscious effort to assimilate what is the cream of foreign influence and wedding them to our native art culture.

Formative Period and Maturity

Christopher Uchefuma Okeke was born in Nimo, Anambra State on Sunday April 1933 to a family of artists. Discussion with Uche Okeke reveals that his father was a master craftsman and furniture designer while his mother was an accomplished *uli* painter. She had for many years partied *uli* on human bodies and walls during festive occasions. His mother's involvement in *uli* art is perhaps why he came in contact with *uli* at an early age. Since Nigeria was under colonial rule at that time and with the European formal education in place there were availability of foreign art material, hence Okeke even applied some concept of synthesis unconsciously in his early development as a visual artist.

Okeke, like many budding Nigerian artists, started drawings when he was in his early school years. The drawings he produced at this period perhaps were based on imitations of illustrations on school textbooks and magazines, which Otternberg (1977, p. 28) opines is how most artists began their artistic career. There is no doubt that Okeke must have unconsciously applied some of the characteristics of *uli* particularly lines in his early years. It can therefore be said that the philosophy of natural synthesis started to become very much evident in his works when he started drawing actively, collecting and writing

notes on Igbo folklore. This buttresses the fact that his inspiration and idioms were derived from Igbo pool. A look at the catalogue of his first solo exhibition reveals that cultural interest particularly the linear qualities of *uli* is very evident. Lasekan (1956, p. 2) in the same catalogue explains that he had been in close contact with him since 1954, and was very happy to identify in Okeke's unique style of art, an abundant love of nature as well as influence of his people's traditional art.

In an effort to develop his art talent, Uche Okeke secured admission in 1957 into the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, now Ahmadu Bello University Zaria from where he graduated in 1961, specializing in painting. According to Okeke, attending the Zaria Art School widened the scope of his knowledge of art. Perhaps, if Zaria were not part of his education, he would not have realized much of the value in his own local art tradition. The interest in their local tradition was the main reason he and his colleagues in school formed the Zaria Art Society of which he was first elected secretary and later president. The members of the Zaria Art Society were later to be known as the "Zaria Rebels" due to their radical approach to the art. Most significantly is that they resisted the European style of art teaching and agitated for an African oriented art at a time when the curriculum designed for art teaching for Nigerian institutions was overwhelmingly European. They preferred to draw directly from their own indigenous forms while employing European art material, and sometimes techniques. This development informed the ideology of natural synthesis which became the philosophy of the group and upon which their art derived substance. According to Uche Okeke (1979:128) members of the society worked in their individual ways to discover themselves and thereby re-establish the fact that traditional art is not dead, but alive in various forms that they have been repackaged.

From the period of Okeke's first solo exhibition and throughout his stay in Zaria and Kafanchan, the need for a synthesis of old and new which presupposes the acceptance of change continued to influence both his work and theme. These two places of domicile also exposed him to other cross-cultural influences which he later exhibited in the forms and themes of his work. This is also in tandem with his quest for natural synthesis. Although Okeke created unique drawings that bear relevance to the place where he lived at the time, *uli* linearity and pictographic symbols were very evident. These works, depicted in pen and ink despite their northern themes, were also characterized by the

linearity of the *uli* art of his cultural roots. The above illustration is evident in the works titled *Fulani Milk Maid* (Plate 1) and *Mallam Liman Profile* (Plate 2)

Fulani Milk Maid (Plate 1) according to Ugiomoh and Aletor (2002:78) belongs to over worn cultural themes in contemporary Nigerian art. Here, Okeke presents a linear drawing of semi-abstract figure of a young maid carrying a small basin containing milk. The artist did not introduce two- dimensionality in this work although simplified in thin lines just like what is obtainable in traditional *uli* body decoration. The milk maid's hair style that flanked the two sides of her chic is typical of northern women especially among the Fulani. The hair style reminiscence *uli udo* motif (rope made with raffia). This hair style also harmonizes her angular facial frame and the entire head which is perfectly positioned on an elongated neck that has a necklace around it. In fact, *Fulani Milk Maid* illustrates one of the major occupations of the womenfolk in northern part of Nigeria. In addition to Okeke's peculiar style or approach in this work with thin lines, there are also manifestations of other *uli* motifs. The maid's mouth is reminiscence of *uli Okala onwa* (half-moon). While her eye brows derived its shape from *uli iku anya* (*uli* pattern for eye brow), the shape of her closed eyes reminds one of *uli akala* (sign of cut). Also the maid's nose takes the form of *uli oja* (local flute).

Mallam Liman Profile (Plate 2) is intriguing because of the uniqueness of the simple thin lines that run unobstructed. This approach exemplifies the statement by David Dale (1998:129) that Okeke has flairs for simple expressive line. The delineation of this drawing has some strength and there is considerable subtle in the handling of the man's facial expression. Whether this work is made from life, idealized out of context or from imagination, it shows the artist's skill in the use of line, observation and control of his tools. This work among others in pen and ink justifies Osa Egonwa's (2001) statement that there are dint sophisticated indigenous draughtmanship that can be seen in the art works of Uche Okeke. The use of line in this work accentuates important features that draw attention to interesting areas. For example, the wavy linear movements which define the contours at the back of man's neck region reminiscence *uli ije agwo* (snake movement) motif. The shape of his mouth is derived from *uli akala* (line, sign or cut). Also Mallam Liman's beard is in the form of *uli nza* (fly whisk) motif. A closer observation of the picture reveals that his entire facial appearance illustrates the unique look usually identified with the Moslem men.

Uli no doubt provided Okeke with ideological basis for his enquiry into indigenous cultural phenomena even as he became an academic staff at University of Nigeria Nsukka after his schooling. This brought him closer to the Igbo region where traditional *uli* art is being practised as he started more experiments with its forms and styles. More so, this development no doubt contributed to his articulation of a new artistic reality and inclinations in natural synthesis. It also gave him the impetus to become confident and assertive in his conceptual convictions. His series of documentations of Igbo folktales, which explain Igbo mythology and worldview, are also useful inspiration for his drawings. They attest to his successful use of Igbo folktales with *uli* symbols and motifs. These drawings apart from deriving from Igbo folktales exemplify the statement by Ottenberg (1997, p. 72) that Okeke's drawings have freedom and expressiveness of line in addition to a marked interest in patterns which typifies his drawing experiments. They also buttress the statement by Egonwa (2001: 56) that Uche Okeke's lines and patterns tell tales of a highly personalized idiom of deep culturist ambience. These characteristics are evident in works such as *Fabled Brute* (Plate 3), and *Maiden's Cry* (Plate 4) and *Uko, the Warrior* (Plate 5)

Fabled Brute (Plate 3) is a concept taken from Igbo folktale. The composition is an abstract rendering of an animal that resembles a monstrous toad in such a dimension that allows only for a half of its body to be shown in frontal view and its head in profile. What then constitute this composition are the toad's large head, forearms and a mouth that is opened wide revealing sharp spike-like teeth that resemble claws. This work is rendered in a style similar to the abstracted forms found in *uli* wall murals. The angle of this composition is set at below eye level revealing again an unusual massiveness in the animal's throat, jaws and bulbous eye. Elements of *uli* linearity in outline and the use of several small circles that reminiscent *uli mkpulu mgbo* (small bullets) motif all over the animal's body are noticed here. They seem to serve as the animal's body scales or surface design. The overall approach to this drawing gives a feeling of three-dimensionality.

Maiden's Cry (Plate 4) shows an elegantly dressed woman weeping. Okeke explained that this has to do with the agony women go through because of the different injustices and unfavourable condition against them both in the traditional and modern societies. These include sexual abuse, forced marriage, intimidation, neglect and discrimination among others. The figure suggests she

could have been abused in one form or the other as earlier mentioned. In this work one can see a delicately structured form, with intent at three-dimensionality. This intention is made real in the quadrangular structured mouth whose form from an expressionistic point of view echoes wailing. This drawing requires careful observation for one to be able to identify Igbo *uli* culture synthesized in it. Her hands which are raised upwards, resting on her coiffure adorned with traditional carved wooden combs reminiscent of *uli nra* (*uli* comb) motif. *Uli Ije agwo* (snake movement) motif has been used to pattern the bracelets that adorn the maiden's right arm. *Uli ugbo okwe* (Igbo traditional game board) is also used on her right arm slightly above the elbow as an ornament. On her upper left hand is positioned a music-like symbol. This music-like symbol serves as a balance to the right arm whose beads seem weighty. A number of other *uli* motifs define the entire image. For instance the maiden's wailing mouth is reminiscent of *uli* dish (*o kwa uli*) which serves as Igbo traditional *uli* artists palette. The pointed nose of the maiden is suggestive of *okala isi nwoji* (half segment of kola nut) motif. More so, *uli ntupo* (dots) and *akala uli* (*uli* lines) are noticeable in the entire composition. Tayo Adenaike (1982:43) is of the view that taking into consideration the utilization of *uli* symbols, this drawing as a whole reminds one of the *mbari* shrine figures.

Uko the Warrior (Plate 5) combines discernible and abstracted forms. These characteristics are noticeable in the warrior's enormous beast-like head, with over grown or bushy hairs and bulbous strange facial features. The facial features on which the artist employed his philosophy of natural synthesis include its right eye represented with *uli ego ayolo* (*uli* cowry) motif and a wide mouth which has the upper lips portrayed in bird-beak-like form derived from *uli onu nwa nnunu* (*uli* bird's beak) motif. The warrior is adorned with headband patterned with *uli ajaba* (*uli* zig-zag) motif. The chest region of the figure reveals alternating linear patterns, which creates an impression of *uli ogaalu* (*uli* animal marks) motif. On the shoulder of the warrior's large hairy right hand is a shield which has varying repeated inter-woven patterns. The patterns are reminiscent of *uli akpala* (lines plaited or woven like matting or basket work). Above the shield is an unidentified form showing different motifs such as *uli ije agwo* (snake movement) motif. The free flow of lines in this work particularly in uko's chest region exemplifies the statement by Ugiomoh and Aletor (2002, p. 182) that line provided Okeke the tool with which he interpreted and distilled

concepts in design. Okeke also used this work to exemplify the brevity of legends in Igbo folktales.

Uche Okeke's adventurous mind and research inquisitiveness to actualize his artistic dream, particularly drawing, which takes its root from the abundant artistic heritage of Nigeria particularly the linear characteristics of traditional *uli* of his cultural root was very significant in the 1960's. His works of the 1960's and beyond were done mostly with bold lines, which were direct contrast with the former drawings executed with thin lines. This development however, reveals the stylistic variations that remained resilient in Okeke's art. Adenaike (1982:30) is of the opinion that this period in Okeke's experiments with indigenous *uli* line drawing makes his works unique thematically and stylistically, which further portrays him as an exponent of *uli* motifs and Igbo tales in contemporary Nigerian art. There is no doubt that this resourceful trait also positioned him as one of the major exponents of natural synthesis in contemporary Nigerian art scene. His advancement in drawing with bold lines taken from indigenous *uli* drawing can be seen in the work titled *Onah's Grave* (Plate 6).

Okeke said that *Onah's Grave* (Plate 6) is a drawing he made in memory of his childhood friend called Onah. It signifies the artist's grief on the death of a dear friend. The strength of line in this work is uniform. They move, avoiding in most cases the straight course, developing ultimately into spirals reminiscent of *uli omeji* (*uli* yam tendril) motif. Lines are also used in this work to suggest plants and weeds. The uniqueness of this composition is that the character of line recalls the bold outline of forms as found in *uli murals*.

Uli linear fluidity and folklore have contributed to the influence and richness of Okeke's drawing analyzed above as he continues to use his art to respond to the ideology of synthesis with artistic expression that derived from Negritude. *Uli* mural painting which shows that space, line and spontaneity seem to be the pillars on which the whole tradition rests are also evident in Okeke's paintings. Most of his symbolic mythic and folkloric oil paintings reveal the use of a rich repertoire derived from Igbo indigenous mural painting. This is evident in his use of geometric and organic motifs and symbols, which attest to his affinity and penchant for indigenous forms. His oil painting such as *Primeval Forest* (Plate 7) and *Ogbanje* (Plate 8) re-echo Adenaike (1982:22) view that some of Okeke's works leave one in solemn or reverential wonder at

things of the far beyond or the other world. The paintings have two qualities of *uli* murals which include the use of space and economy of design. The later shows that *uli* can be felt without the use of specific *uli* motifs and symbols because of compositional style and the use of lines in a manner to the way they were used in *uli* murals.

Of the aforementioned oil paintings that make reference to Igbo tradition, *Primeval Forest* (Plate 7) echoes the mystery or calls attention to the numerous mysterious events happening in forest areas of Igbo land. There is a tradition in Igbo land that whoever dies mysteriously should be thrown into the deep forest. This is because it is an abomination to bury such a person in the ground which represents the earth goddess. It is also believed that the dead body will defile the earth which is the main source of food to the Igbo. There is a form in the centre of this picture that resembles a human head in blue and orange tones. This human head which seems to be trapped within linear nondescript shapes that represent wild weeds give the painting a mystic effect. However, Okeke did not include a lot of trees which are characteristics of spirit forest in Igboland; instead he introduced more colours of red and yellow tones which fill in for the trees and wild weeds. This rectangular shaped painting according to the artist is a breakthrough in a technique of working in a rectangular platform similar to the shape of mud walls used in indigenous *uli* art tradition.

Oghanje (Plate 8) refers to a specific belief, widespread in southeastern Nigeria, which centre on the recurrent death of spirit- children called *Oghanje* who are usually pretty when they are born. *Oghanje* is a stubborn spirit-child that maintains a cycle of dying and being reborn. The Igbo believes that a spiritual force is responsible for the child's consistent return to another world. Because of their beauty, they attract lots of presents to their mothers. Then the babies fall ill and die. According to Dale's (1998:191), this phenomenon or act enables them to convert all the presents received by their mothers to some kind of spiritual properties, which they then take with them to the spirit world. However, the process of birth and infant death is repeated several times even with the same woman. In the picture, Okeke depicts a pretty young girl beautifully dressed in traditional attire called *buba*. She posed as if showing off her beautiful dress to the two standing figures in the background. The representation of her nose is in the form of *uli okuku mbe* (small calabash for letting blood in the past) motif. While her head gear takes the shape of *okwa uli* (Igbo traditional artists' palette) motif, her angular shaped facial frame is

derived from *uli nko* (a tool used by Igbo potters for smoothing their pots). The yellowish colour of the tree positioned on the left corner and the orange background give the painting variety of tones, a characteristic of *uli* murals. In Igbo culture the burial of an *Ogbanje* child is usually quiet and unknown to people other than the dead child's parents and close relatives.

The Biafran war of 1967 is also one of the favorites themes of Uche Okeke in his advocacy on the reflection of Nigerian cultural values in contemporary artistic expressions. He uses elements from indigenous Igbo *uli* graphic culture to treat the themes of war. He served as head of the visual art section on the Biafran side, which exposed him more to the struggle as he later reflected in his art works. Among his works inspired by the war are *Osondu* (Plate 9) and *Refugee family* (Plate 10).

Osondu (Plate 9) is a portrait of Biafra showing the Igbo bound by faith and fleeing from their displaced community threatened by air raids and starvation. The work depicts a large group of refugees carrying heavy loads and human beings on their heads, backs and shoulders. According to Dale (1998: 139), Okeke demonstrated in this work a testament to the indomitable human spirit fighting to oppose the forces of death and destruction at all cost. The use of line to define the many fleeing figures is distinct. This is because though they are clustered; one can still do a count of them. Okeke's approach to this work with the use of lines has shown that he has stimulated and energized his fanatical adoption of his people's *uli* artistic tradition in order to create an identity for himself and his art.

Refugee Family (Plate 10) which is rendered in pen and ink captured the tragic situation people found themselves during the war. It also tells of the artist's revolution against war and its aftermath. The picture shows the young and old with skinny bodies, weary faces and tired eyes. These strained ravaged faces of war wearied men, women and children with bare sunken eyes were the effect of the war which resulted to the wastage of life and propriety. While *uli oja motif* (local flute) is used to depict their noses, *nkpulu oka motif* (maize seed) represents their eyes. The artist's use of lines, complimentary positive and negative spaces is also reminiscences of *uli* tradition.

Okeke's inquiry into cultures as an ultimate goal of self-realization particularly that of the Igbo and his use of *uli* art forms and those of other crafts have been a source to which he has had cause to return now and then. His

commissioned works in 1971 by the Roman Catholic Cathedral Church Onitsha to produce seats in wood, murals and other religious illustrations, of which he incorporated indigenous culture and ideas especially *uli* elements opened a new phase or provides for a progression that ultimately reflects his philosophy of natural synthesis that one identifies in his art. Hence, after the execution of these works for the Cathedral, Okeke produced a number of private works with Christian themes, sometimes adhering to orthodox iconography and sometimes deviating from it. He executed these works using linear abstract human forms with the combination of indigenous motifs and symbols. This is an approach similar to that of the artists of Oye-Ekiti workshop who used Yoruba forms and motifs in their works. Father Carroll, the founder of the Oye –Ekiti workshop, invited traditional carvers who used modern tools to produce works with biblical themes including those based on the experience of Christ in traditional Yoruba style.

Although Okeke satirises the images in his works that are based on Christian themes, it is not at the expense of technical perfection. One of his works that depict Christian theme is *Christ's entry into Nimo* (Plate 11). This work portrays Christ riding triumphantly into Nimo, Okeke's home town on a fabulous animal. The human and animal images exhibited in this work are outlined with bold black lines, which also separated the colours. The facial features of the images are distorted and rendered in vertical form. This is similar to typical Igbo carved masks such as *agbogho mmuo* (maiden mask). The composition shows the influence of *uli*, although they are used sparingly in the composition. They include *uli onwa* (moon), which is used for the eyes and mouth of the lonely image on the right corner. *Uli Okala onwa* (half-moon) depicts the two eyes of the fabulous animal. The representation of eyelids and nose of the human images are reminiscent of *uli mkpo* (elder's walking stick). The simplicity of the forms and techniques of this composition elevates it above the common place.

Conclusion

Analysis of Uche Okeke and his art show that the evolving concept of synthesis rooted in his mastery of *uli* art could best be appreciated in his drawings. The works seek to domesticate the media he employs in new ways. Egonwa (2000, p. 58) says he is the main originator of modern *uli*. He is a prolific draughtsman. The philosophy of natural synthesis which this study has

identified in his art was enriched particularly by the Igbo indigenous art traditions. Ola Oloidi (1988:10) observes that his art adds a new dimension to the form and content of modern art. Simon Ikpakronyi (2003:17) also contends that Okeke is one of the earliest Nigerian artists to have intensively employed traditional art and folkloric ideas to create new art form in modern art.

Uche Okeke's contribution to contemporary Nigerian art is his active role in fostering of the culturist tradition particularly in several budding artists while at Nsukka School. Hence the style or trend presently identified with the school is majorly his handwork. This is not to undermine the effort of others who also played a major role in institutionalizing *uli* in modern art. They include Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, Tayo Adenaike and El Anatsui.

However, apart from being one of the pioneers of *uli* art in contemporary Nigeria visual arts, Okeke, who is also a poet, has pioneered the tradition of poetry. Indeed, he was a medium through which poem on Igbo mythology, culture and creative activities could be reached. Dale (1998: 147) explains that through Okeke's pioneering role in poetry in Nigeria, he has won for himself two first place poetry prizes before Nigerian independence including one from the Nigerian Art Council Lagos. As a poet, Okeke interprets stories and writes poems with sensitive lines in an attempt to show that literature and visual art are complimentary. He was of the opinion that there is a close relationship between poetry and art. To him poetic lines also suggest forms, colours, movement and texture. This is why Udechukwu (1977, p. 77) sees Okeke's art as also deriving from his brilliant poetic expressions and thoughts.

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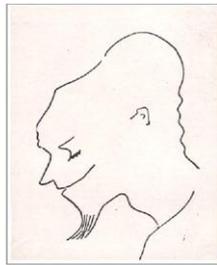
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Plates



Title: Fulani Milk Maid
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Pen and Ink
Size: 15cm x 30cm
Year: 1958
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Mallam Liman Profile
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Pen and Ink
Size: 12cm x 24cm
Year: 1959
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Fabled Brute
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Pen and Ink
Size: 24cm x 35cm
Year: 1959
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Maiden's Cry
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Pen and Ink
Size: 27cm x 35cm
Year: 1962
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Uko, the Warrior
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Pen and Ink
Size: 25cm x 35cm
Year: 1959
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Onah's Grave
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Brush and Ink
Size: 15cm x 27cm
Year: 1962
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Primeval Forest
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Oil and Canvas
Size: 30cm x 45cm
Year: 1962
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Ogbanje, the Death Child
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Acrylic
Size: 48cm x 70cm
Year: 1964
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Osondu
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Pen and Ink
Size: 38cm x 58cm
Year: 1968
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Refugee Family
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Acrylic
Size: 35cm x 41cm
Year: 1966
Photo Credit: Uche Okeke



Title: Christ's Entry into Nimo
Artist: Uche Okeke
Medium: Stained Glass
Size: 48cm x 70cm
Year: 1962
Photo Credit: Samuel Onwuakpa