

SYNERGY OF ULI SYMBOLS AND TEXTILES: AN EXPLORATION IN TEXTILE SCULPTURAL FORMS.

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Abstract.

In the flowing technology of this era, interaction of various disciplines and activities in life is inevitable. The collaboration of various aspects of art has been and still is a unique dynamic expressive medium which allows for unlimited expression for modern artists in terms of media. Symbols existing in various communities are experiencing obsolescence. This is because these signs and symbols are merely objects of communal enjoyment rather than signs and symbols of artistic production. In this study explorative experiments were carried out in sculptural form using textile and textile related materials (Textile Sculpture) in order to invigorate these symbols adopting their meanings but giving them different place through innovative and creative process. Uli, a symbolic painting of female body provides unique symbols used for this study.

Introduction

To most lay persons, textile is cloths. Textile design, then, is garment making or fabrication referred to as fashion design. Textile is the entire above but means more than cloths and garments. Textile entails all materials that can be or have been formed into yarns or fabricated into cloth. It is mainly concerned with all fabrics and materials from which they are made. The above definition by Wingate, (1964) made it possible for mattress made of coconut fiber to be a textile product. Others like carpets, drapes, towels and their like found in various homes are textile materials. Textile covers such industrial products as boat sail; book binding materials, conveyor belts, tapes, bagging and sound prove pads. Also in automotive industries textile products are used in the production of tires. Some hospital equipments such as adhesive tapes, bandages, and surgical threads are textile materials. Textile also has permeated into aircrafts and aquarium production both as decorative and constructive materials in form of ceno style glass (an Eglass or fiberglass fabric)

The above mentioned materials deal with textile either in processing the raw materials into yarn or cloth construction. These can be achieved through the process of spinning and twisting of yarns while fabrics are constructed by either the interlacing method of weaving, interlocking of knitting, braiding, felting, bonding or lamination. Therefore textiles can be described as any material which method of production involves one or a combination of the aforementioned processes. These products which are two dimensional can go through a creative process to be transformed into three dimensional works, thus Textile Sculpture.

Textile sculpture is a medium of expression with fiber, thread, fabric and movable objects through which sculptural forms are achieved by weaving and other creative processes. The merging of forms and tactile effects of sculpture and textile is a unique dynamic expressive medium that allows for "Unlimited freedom of expression for the modern artists in terms of media" (Obodo, 1998) which on the other hand widen the scope of textile and other related art.

This fusion has been referred to as a marriage of fiber and dimensionality (Waller 1977). The results of these formations in most cases are highly symbolic.

Symbols are abstract representation of objects. The use of symbols and images has been in existence long before the introduction of formal education which was passed down from one generation to another. These symbols and images were communal more in enjoyment rather than in production in that they were used as body adornment and murals. The creative ability and the capacity to appreciate the art therefore, were for everyone. Some symbols are laden with high philosophical meanings such as *nsibidi* symbols (fig.1), while others are just images or objects for aesthetic appreciation like *ona* motifs of the Yorubas,. Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, a major manifestation of the use of these symbols was to be found in *uli* (fig.2), a feminine, cosmetic art which made it more or less a female tradition in the Igbo cultural symbolic synthesis. *uli* and *ona* are two art patterns and motifs, according to Filani in Filani (2005) that evolved distinct structures rooted in cultural traditions that are ingeniously employed to serve modern and universal artistic development. He expressed the linearity and poetic nature of *uli* in comparison with the delineated hard edge effect of *ona* symbols. The linear nature of *uli* has been described by ikwuemesi (2011) as vigorous and intricate. On the other hand, *nsibidi* symbols are a more formal language used by the secret members of the *ekpe* cult society. The hidden meanings of these symbols were only known by the members until recently as it came under study by many.

Oloidi (1995) defines *uli* as a very linear, curvilinear, calligraphic visually precise, space emanating and greatly elemental art with high romantic appeal and culturally implied symbolism. It is an expression of the people's capacity for creative design, which is firmly rooted in their myths and their experience of life in the past, present and future (okoye, 2011). Figuratively, *uli* means decoration or beautification. *uli* also served as dress or clothing among some Igbo women folk in pre-contact times. In some places it symbolized nobility among young maidens (Ikwuemesi, 2011). *Uli* painting is a spontaneous process of exploration and experimentation. Inspiration is derived from diverse experiences and so are the motifs, which draw from forms in nature and issues in existence. One striking characteristic of *uli* painting is its directness of execution and the vigour and intricacy of its linear and spatial configurations. It is also a highly exploratory art that requires no preliminary sketches. According to Uche-okeke (2005), it is the ordering of these design elements in space as broadly defined by traditional usage that challenges the ingenuity of individual Igbo designers. Unlike the *nsibidi* symbols of the Ibibio of eastern Nigeria, which are trite communicative alphabets, the *uli* decorative motifs are elegant carriers of aesthetic and cultural values, history and identity (Ikwuemesi, 2011). On the body, *uli* could be either purely aesthetic or functional or both. But on the wall or other public places, it is both decorative and ritualistic.

Uli is both material and method of making design. As a material, *uli* is a kind of indigo dye extracted from the pods of several species of plants such as *Uli Oba* (*Rothmania Whitfieldi*), *Uli Nkilisi*, (*Rothmania hispiole*), *Uli Edeji* (*Rothmania cuspica*), and *Uli Okolobo* (*Rothmania urcelli*). As method of making design, the extracted dye is used to make the intricate monochromatic drawings on the body and wall using *ufie* (camwood dust or paste). *Uli* is not just the plant, dye or pigment. It also stands for the drawing made on the body or wall with the dye or pigment; it is also the name of the entire art tradition in which the indigo dye or earth pigments were used in Igbo land. It should also be pointed out at this juncture that the word *uli* equally functioned as an aesthetic determinant among the Igbo.

The *uli* as art tradition is on the verge of extinction due to Christianity and the whirlwind of westernisation and is therefore endangered as many other traditional art forms in much of

Africa. This great influence on the cultural practices of the Igbo culture in particular and the African traditions in general, has caused these practices to become a thing of the past, but Uli has found a resource base in modern painting, sculpture and interior decoration. The act of posterity and the beauty and elegance embedded in *uli* symbols and images is the main attraction to this old tradition which has permeated into the fabrics of many artists fronted by Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu and others in 1970. The trajectory of these great movement resulted in Nsukka art school with many faithful that are celebrated today among who are Chris Echeta, Ozioma Onuzuluike, C. Krydz Ikwemesi, Chika Okeke Chijoke Onuora, Ifediorama Dike and many others. Chijioke Onuora and Ifediorama Dike are outstanding in the textile medium used in the execution of *uli* metaphors. Uche-Okeke (2005) opined that the artist is guided by the philosophy of life of his society; the infusion of *uli* into textile both in two and three dimension opened a leeway for a new experimentation and exploration in textile experience.

Uli as a textile creative idiom

The quest for dynamism in art is like a bug in the blood of artists that draws an ultimate search for a dwelling tranquil place. It is a search that traced a past that can be used to re-shape the present for the future. Just like fashion that comes and goes, design motifs or elements most often, are resuscitated. Artists and designers look inwards, to re-interrogate symbols and images that can quell the restless minds and they became sojourner in *uli* and similar pictograms which are appropriate repertoire of motifs and ideas for contemporary needs and its re-adaptation into contemporary craft becomes a necessity.

Ulisim has become a possible resource base for contemporary designers looking inwards for new spin-offs (Ikwemesi, 2011). The potential and promise are enormous. Transferring *uli* ethno-aesthetics to contemporary crafts and products not only bares new frontiers of creativity, but assumes a new way of life for modern artists especially from Nsukka School which took stance from 1970. *Uli's* lyrical qualities express harmony and brevity. It is an art style that has often been created in freedom and spontaneity.

Ikwemesi (2005) reports an exhibition of both traditional and modern *uli* women painters by Obiora Udechukwu in 1992 at University of Nigeria Nsukka and ever since then, *uli* experiment, exploration and exhibitions has become an in thing in every aspect of art. The marriage of tradition and modernity is the result of these experiments and explorations. In the works of Udeani (2002), many *uli* pictograms were explored in the production of sculptural textile. "Royalty" (plate 1) (2002) is a study made from circular shape (*okirikiri*) and long line (*ntuwa*). The strong vertical '*ntuwa*' forms the base that holds the circle. The medium of production is fabric, raw jute, aluminium, bicycle-wheel and copper wire. The inner circle reflects the uncommon reality or ritual reality of the cultural existence, so the outer circle is in contact with the human and ecological reality, which it expresses. The art makes use of contrasts between positive and negative space. The wavy nature of the yam stem (*ukwu ji*) and circles (*okirikiri*) bore the "Royal and the subjects", (plate 2) (2002) which denotes leadership at any level to showcase the terms of mandate. This piece is executed with nylon sack, jute, fabric and acrylic yarns.

The symbols of *uli* pictograms most often represents an idea, a physical entity or a process but is distinct from it. The purpose of a symbol is to communicate meaning. Signs are invented and forgotten, symbols are born and die. There are therefore dead and living symbols. A living symbol can reveal hidden levels of meaning, and transcendent or religious realities to the individual. A symbol always "points beyond itself" to something that is unquantifiable and mysterious. This is

the symbol's "depth dimension". Symbols are complex and their meanings can evolve as the individual evolves. When a symbol loses its meaning and power for an individual or culture, it becomes a dead symbol. Coiled, spiral or concentric shapes (*agwolagwo/akuruaku, or okirikiri*), are probably the most common mode of symbolic expression in *uli* design motifs. They were used as snake representations and other decorative symbols. These circles are complete and definite and are maybe used as a representation of the cyclic nature of life in Igbo cosmology. The belief in reincarnation is being stressed in this symbol laden motif. "Nipples of generations" (plate 3) (2002) is a piece derived from the concentric shape of the *uli* symbol. The shape of a woman's breast is manifested in this spiral form when viewed sideways. It symbolizes life, growth, fertility and most importantly womanhood. "Authority symbol"(plate 4) was executed with fabrics wood, foam, acrylic twine, adhesive, nylon bias ribbon and cord with cow tail which is actually a title symbol. The work depicts some of the important objects for a titled man

Recent explorations exude *uli* experience in complete sculptural form. Outstanding among the lot is "If only we can be one II" (plate 5) (2005). This piece was executed with wheel, dyed lose jute twine knotted together in segments that meandered in and out each circle and reappeared in strands. The piece borders on national issue as it concerns different ethnic groups with divergent languages. The slogan "unity in diversity" (plate 6) (2005) actually is a test of time. It is indeed a cynical statement to the actual situation in the country. "A cry for help" (plate 7) (2006) is a testimony that exhibits real synergy in *uli* symbols in textile sculpture. The Marquette is a metal construction of "*okara isi nwaoji*" and "*okirikiri*" covered with a network of weave. The Marquette was constructed in a way to face every angle in a complete three dimensional form. The piece is highly symbolic which borders on global issues where hunger and starvation, natural deserver, economic and financial meltdown, war and peace deliberation is the other of the day. Generally, it is obvious that every part of the globe has one ill or the other and needs a special attention in its own way.

A painter merry in executing their works with colours on canvas, but yarn and pigment dye is akin to me. "The way we are" (plate 8) (2011) is an exploration with cotton twine/yarn that depicts the struggle between good and evil. The inner struggle in man to do good or evil is a general omen that we can do without. Good or evil which is represented with outer black and white yarn, comes from inner self, no matter how much we try to hide; the ugly part often rears its head. "*Isi nwaoji*" (plate 9) (2011) executed in circular form covered in cool blue colour, is bordered on creation and leadership, 'the head'. "Family ties" (plate 10) (2011) exposes the family links in human ecology

Generally most of these works take their stance from circle ("*okirikiri*"). The reason surrounds on the singular belief that life is in cyclic according to Igbo cosmology (Cole and Aniakor, 1984). A symbol is an abstraction, tokens of which may be marks or a configuration of marks which form a particular pattern. Formal symbols on the other hand are purely syntactic entities with no necessary association. Though some *uli* pictograms may be without any kind of association or meaning attached to them, but the context in which they are use in works of art gives it an inherited meaning.

The synergy of *uli* symbols into tactile pliable materials is a way of bringing back the joyful and inspired youthfulness of expression regardless of when the artist wants to be profound, playful, satirical, or to merely create some bright accessory for decoration. The explorations have opened a new way of looking at textile in more decorative than utilitarian way. The technique adopted here is mainly weaving and knotting in various ways. The techniques are not limited as more can still be developed, enhanced and imbibed into textile experience. Other tactile pliable

materials can further be explored for this production. The experience of the artist can be a remarkable exposition especially on material and process.

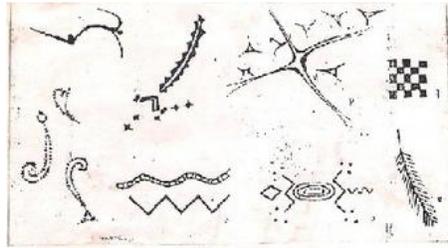


FIG 1 ULI SYMBOLS

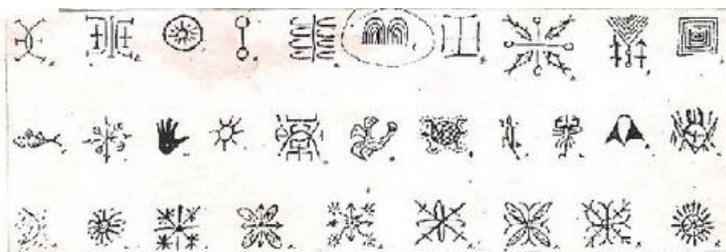


FIG 2 NSIBIDI SYMBOLS FOR EKPE CULT SOCIETY



PLATE. 1 ROYALTY

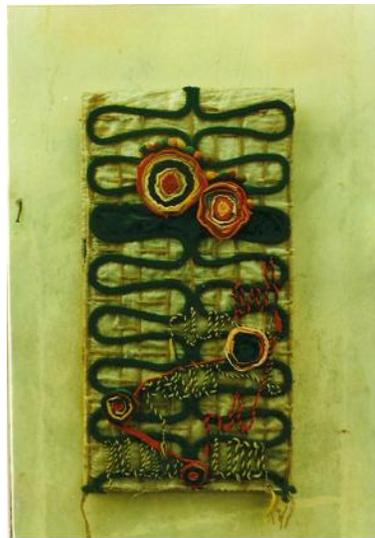


PLATE. 2 THE ROYAL AND THE SUBJECTS



PLATE. 3 NIPPLES OF GENERATIONS



PLATE. 4 AUTHORITY SYMBOL



Plate. 5 IF ONLY WE CAN BE ONE



Plate. 6 UNITY IN DIVERSITY



PLATE. 7 A CRY FOR HELP



PLATE. 8 THE WAY WE ARE



PLATE. 9 ISI NWAJOI



PLATE. 10 FAMILY TIES

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