

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS *ULI* BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS

Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

Department of Fine and Applied Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

ujunki@gmail.com

This article explores the significance of animal motifs in traditional *Uli* body and wall paintings. A critical assessment and understanding of the philosophical import of animals in African concept of existence is vital for an in-depth appreciation of their (animals') symbols in indigenous African artworks. This paper attempts to draw a parallel between traditional beliefs concerning certain animals among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria and motifs derived from indigenous *Uli* body and wall painting. In essence, the article sees animal motifs in *Uli* body and wall paintings as playing an aesthetic as well as metaphysical roles. Hence I argue that local nuances of religiosity and spirituality have historically imbued the animals with a heightened sense of sacredness in some Igbo communities thus allowing the animals to occupy a mystical space in Igbo cosmology.

Introduction

The pre-colonial system of knowledge transmission in Africa was not only through oral literature but also through the varied artistic traditions that survived from one generation to the other. The rich heritage of ancient Egyptian arts (including the hieroglyphs), the numerous Neolithic rock paintings and engravings found in Northern Africa, which dates back to 5000 and 2000 BCE respectively were mainly symbolic of vital occurrences of the past, documented through art (Getlein 2002: 335). These rock engravings and paintings were mostly depictions of domestic and wild animals hunted by humans or animals thought to have spiritual relevance to the cultures that existed at that period. Some of the animals include cattle, antelope, birds, and other wild beasts that have become extinct. As Smith (2010:1) submits, the enormous mix of intricate symbols, patterns and designs attributed to traditional African forms served as highly codified linguistic signs in the absence of written word. It was "the linguistic symbols commonly used for recording the history of remarkable events, the deeds of great kings, celebrations, births and deaths, and extraordinary occurrences" (Ibid). These stylized symbols are evidenced in some of the artistic objects excavated in sites across Nigeria such as Nok, Igbo-Ukwu and Ife, which aided in appreciating the cultures that existed in these areas in the past. Classical African sculptures and other cultural materials are sometimes engraved with designs and symbols inspired by animals, exotic trees and leaves, human beings, as well as war and household implements. For that reason the materialization of abstract designs and motifs on their art forms,

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

placed a strong emphasis on the inter-relationship between humans, plants and animals and their place within Africans' indigenous social systems and religious beliefs.

A critical assessment and understanding of the essentiality of 'nature' in African concept of existence is vital for an in-depth appreciation animal symbols or motifs depicted on indigenous African artworks. Using motifs derived from *Uli* traditional body and wall painting as a point of reference, this paper attempts to make connections between the traditional belief systems concerning animals in Africa generally, but with specific reference to the Igbo of south-eastern part of Nigeria, where the artistic tradition of *Uli* emanated from. In essence, the essay explores the significance of animals in Igbo cosmology as evidenced in *Uli* aesthetics. I aim to identify the animal motifs in *Uli* body and wall paintings following the motifs Liz Willis compiled in her essay "A Lexicon of Igbo *Uli* Motifs" that was published in June, 1987, in *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*. I attempt to determine what these animals signify in Igbo world view while identifying certain animals considered sacred in some Igbo communities.

Animals in African cosmology

Animals considered sacred, in various parts of Africa, embody spiritual powers or extraordinary capabilities. Thus, they are highly valued and revered in their place in nature. These animals, depicted symbolically on various spaces – both two-dimensional and three-dimensional – were of religious and aesthetic relevance to Africans. Ben-Amos (1976:243) has argued that, "in particular artistic contexts, specific animals are utilized to express notions of order and harmony in the universe and the power – both political and supernatural – that obtains when this order is violated." In his study of the indigenous worldview of the people of Northern Ghana and the Shona of Zimbabwe, David Millar also suggests that, there is usually a "hierarchy between divine beings, spiritual beings, especially the ancestors, men and women and the natural forces, such as climate, disease, floods, soil, vegetation and animals (Ibid)." Millar's inclusion of "vegetation and animals" also points to their relevance within these groups. They are all interrelated and as such have their specific position within the sacred 'nature.' Reiterating similar assertions, Ben-Amos pointed out that Benin cosmology ascribes all beings to their particularized realms and within each of these realms or domains, associations are "hierarchical and orderly" (Ibid). She states thus:

all beings are assigned to specific spheres or domains, some of which are geographical (such as dry lands and great waters), others are existential (the spirit world and the world of daily life) or temporal (day and night). Within each of these domains relationships are hierarchical and orderly. The social structure parallels the human division into noble and commoner classes, and specific roles are recognized such as king, warrior, magician, and even spy. Order within each realm is maintained by each member's acceptance of his station in life and by following the laws of his intrinsic nature. The ontological distinction between men and animals is expressed symbolically in art, myth, and ritual in the contrast between their respective spheres of activities – the home (the social world of the village) versus the bush (the wild forest areas) (Ibid).

Allen Roberts, in his book *Animals in African Art*, maintains that the more an animal stimulates thought and evokes feelings, the more frequently it appears in African visual arts

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

(1996:6). For instance, designs or motifs on traditional African masks were sometimes reflective of abstracted or exaggerated features of animal forms. The aim of abstracting or distorting the features of the masks was to serve as a symbolic reference to the essence of the whole. This invariably is an attributive element of traditional African art, which many African art historians perceive as being conceptual as against being perceptual. A typical example is the Bamana Ci Wara masks. The Bamako people of Mali believe that Ci Wara assisted their ancestors in learning the skill of farming. As Werness (2003:1) points out, “the Bamana consider some animals that dig and ‘cultivate’ to be human, especially the aardvark, [antelope] and the pangolin. Young men don, composite masks and by becoming ‘human-animals’ learn the secrets of the earth known to the animals. The masks if worn on the head, during farming and harvest festivities, represent mythical beings that have the ability to dig up the soil. In this context, the three animals that usually burrow or bore holes into the soil symbolically represent the perseverance attributed to successful farming – from clearing, ploughing, planting and harvesting seasons, which the Bamana farmers internalize in order to become successful farmers. Thus, Chi Wara mask typifies the relevance of animals to the social wellbeing of a particular cultural group and consequently to their art. Other instances of animal symbolism in African masks are illustrated in the Buffalo masks among the Twaba of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia¹. and the elephant mask worn by the Kuosi society of the Bamileke people of Cameroon.²

Ben-Amos (1976) also referred to some animals in her essay titled *Men and Animals in Benin Art* such as the leopard, elephant, python, crocodile and the vulturine fish eagle that are believed to be dangerous, as symbolic of leadership and political power. Ben-Amos states thus, “their [the animals’] representations appear on a variety of objects cast in brass, sewn on leather, and carved in wood and ivory, which function in the commemoration of royal achievements and the aesthetic enhancement of status.”

Against the backdrop of the place of animal symbolism in African cosmology lays the realisation that the animal motifs that characterize *uli* traditional wall and body painting refer to the value that the Igbo attribute to certain animals. Though its connection to the cultural relevance of certain animals in Igbo worldview is often apparent, most literatures on *uli* art focused on the aesthetic appeal the motifs portend, and how modern Nigerian artists have drawn inspirations and designs for their art by incorporating *uli* motifs. Researches on *uli* body and wall paintings centre on its use as design lexicons for contemporary art as championed by proponents of Nsukka School of Art. There are therefore sparse researches on the relevance of the animals depicted in *uli* motifs to the Igbo. How do these animal designs engage contemporary Igbo communities to the cultural relevance of these animals – domestic, wild, sacred to their worldview? Does their presence in these wall paintings speak to a cultural history of the communities’ association and relation with the animals referenced? Few have aimed to understand why these animal motifs exist in *uli* body and wall paintings and through that offer a more intellectual and conceptual framework for understanding indigenous Igbo women’s art. It could be argued that the flawed notion of relegating female aesthetics to the rudimentary, irrational and non-intellectual may have influenced the tendency to view *Uli* body and wall paintings from a purely aesthetic perspective thus engendering a passive attitude towards researches concerning *uli* body and wall art. This is more so if compared to how the *Nsibidi* texts

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

used by the male dominated *Ekpe* leopard society are considered highly religious, ritualistic, symbolic and thought proking.

Uli wall and body painting is an art tradition that originated among the Igbo. In some areas it is named *uri* due to dialect variations in Igbo language. The Igbo live in the South-eastern part of Nigeria notably, Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi, Abia states, and some parts of Rivers and Delta state. They are known for their itinerancy which probably explains why they reside, largely, in various parts of the world (Isichei,1976). In addition to the various artistic traditions such as masking, masquerades, textiles, and pottery, known to the Igbo, *Uli* wall and body painting has undergone quite a lot of critical documentation. There is evidence of motifs that are similar to *uli* motifs, on bronze and pottery materials excavated at Igbo-Ukwu, dated to as early as the ninth century (Isichei 1976:13), thus, indicating that *uli* aesthetics is an ancient art.

Uli traditional painting reflects the Igbo's adeptness for aesthetic ingenuity. It echoes the society's search to understand the experiences and challenges encountered in life, in relation to their socio-cultural environment and indigenous religious beliefs. *Uli* entails the use of a painting or drawing stick/knife (*mma nwauli*), dipped in a liquid juice, which is then used to draw or paint on mud walls (usually shrine walls) or on the body. The juice is extracted from grinding various species of *uli* pods.³ Conventionally, *uli* traditional painting was exclusively women's work in Igbo society. It was an outstanding type of Igbo female aesthetics. Nzegwu (2018:4) observed that before the contemporary metamorphosis of *uli* aesthetics, which brought it into the domain of modern Nigerian artists (especially males), *uli* was solely the prerequisite of women. She further suggests that "*uli* may appropriately be seen as constituting an "active voice," used by women to engage in a variety of sociocultural commentaries on history and life" (Nzegwu 2018:3). *Uli* dye was applied by females on other females and also on themselves for special occasions thus alluding to the gendered nature of *uli* aesthetics (Women drew, painted or moulded pottery, while men carved or sculpted (See also Otternberg 1997:4) However, the motifs used for the body were different from those used for shrine wall decorations.

The traditional *uli* painters worked directly without the aid of sketches. As erasing or cleaning was discouraged, the *uli* artists strove for linear precision and delicacy in patterns. Obiora Udechukwu in an interview with Ulli Beier affirms that the interesting thing about *uli* design "was the directness.... And there is no conscious or visible planning; ... and there is no erasing ... No hesitation whatsoever! It's so direct" (Udechukwu 1981:8). As Aniakor beautifully sums in these poetic lines:

in uli, the lines dance, spirals into diverse
shapes, elongates, attenuates, thickens, swells
and slides, thins and fades out from a slick
point, leaving an empty space that sustains it
with mute echoes by which silence is part of sound (Ottenberg,128)

Uli designs communicate ideas vital to the Igbo cosmology. The motifs were created from life experiences. They generally reference to images of traditional Igbo life, farming, cooking and other human activities and implements. There were plants, animals and birds like the sacred python (*eke*), lizard (*ngwele*), kola nut head (*isi oji*), the tortoise, the paw prints of the

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

leopard, moon. Also included are abstract designs that may not be attributed to nature but reference certain social activities or behavioural norms and anomalies peculiar to the Igbo worldview. The abstracted objects “were like snapshots of the Igbo cosmos vividly appropriated in an ancient collage” (Ikwuemesi 2005:9). Of particular interest to this essay are the animal motifs which feature prominently in *uli* wall designs. A critical reading of some of these *uli* animal motifs, which Liz Willis listed in her essay titled *A Lexicon of Igbo Uli Motifs* (Willis 1987) could offer a more profound understanding of the significance of animals and their place in Igbo cosmology and Igbo cultural aesthetics.

Igbo cosmology is full of beliefs, proverbs, folktales, religious precepts and innuendoes intended to explain the society’s indigenous life with its mysteries, philosophies and forces. These thoughts concerning the universe, in relation to the Igbos’ world view, are explained, sometimes allegorically, through animals. Animals, in Igbo cosmology create spaces for understanding the behavioural tendencies of humans, that is, how these animals sometimes recall humanistic attributes. Animal imageries, whether in the form of oral folklore or visual aesthetics, provide logical rationalizations for human deeds and wisdom and at the same time naturalize certain mysteries about the universe which the Igbo cannot concretely explicate (Renclue2pin, 2011). It reflects the essence of the environment in which they exist. For instance, the excavations from the burial site in Igbo-Ukwu include “stylized rams’ heads, elephants’ heads and leopards’ heads. The snake is a recurrent motif, sometimes depicted swallowing eggs and frogs. Isichei has described the elephant tusks and pendants also found within the burial chamber thus:

The animal skull and elephant and leopard motifs remind one of the continuing vitality of these symbols of headship, power and authority. The snakes may well reflect the reverence which is still paid locally to the sacred python, *eke*. And there are further parallels.... [These] add up to an astonishing degree of cultural continuity, over a period of more than a thousand years (12).

These rationalizations could be a pointer to the presence of animal symbols in *Uli* wall paintings. Some of the designs were made and named by the individual *Uli* artist thus exposing the artist’s response to the environment (Willis 1987:94) and further indicating that there could be varied *Uli* motifs or symbols for a particular animal for the different areas in Igboland. The *Uli* animal motifs depicted in Willis’ essay are *Ngwele*: Lizard, *Aghu*: Monitor Lizard, *Aguiyi*: Crocodile, *Agu*: Leopard, *Agwo*: Snake, *Okwogho kwogho*: Owl, *Awo*: Toad, *Azu*: Fish, *Eke*: Python, *Mbe*: Tortoise, *Nkita*: Dog, *Egbe*: Kite, *Odogwu*: duck, among others. However, a few of the motifs will be analysed in this essay due to the reverence and these animals in Igbo thoughts and beliefs.

The Python:

Snakes are believed to be messengers for the gods. The traditional role that snakes play in Igbo cosmology is particularly exemplified with the python. The python, most especially, is both revered as royalty and feared for its skin patterning. It is usually represented in *Uli* as concentric

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

and wavy lines, thus referencing the spiral and coiled nature of snakes. Achebe (1962:22) narrates the killing of the sacred python, which is a taboo in some parts of Igbo, in Umuofia, a fictional Igbo community in *Things Fall Apart*, thus exposing the crisis and consequence that the Igbo experienced in the wake of colonial and Christian intervention. John Oriji describes the reverence accorded to the sacred python (*Eke*) among the Njaba of Orlu in Imo State where legend has it that it is the founding father of the community (Oriji 2009:10). Its presence portends crucial ancestral messages or omen which if heeded would avert calamities for the community. As such the python is neither molested nor killed in Njaba community. Parallels can be drawn with other cultures in Africa where the python is also revered. For instance, among the Kom of the Northwest province of Cameroon, the python played a vital role in the mythical origin of the Kom people (Olupona 1993). They believe that they were led to their present abode under the guidance of a python and as such are known as “the people of the snake” (Ibid).

Igbo communities surrounding the Idemmili river in Anambra State, such as Abatete, Umuoji, Ogidi, Obosi, Alor, Oraukwu, Nnobi, Awka-Etiti, Nkpor, Nnokwa, Ojoto, Obosi, Uke, Ideani, Eziowelle, Abacha, Agulu and Nri, also reverence the python. Among these areas, the python (*eke idemmili*), which is a female goddess, is associated with the *Ogwugwu* and *Idemmili* deities (Ejiofor 2016). If accidentally killed, the culprit would appease the goddess of *Idemmili* through a ritual called *ikpu ani*, a form of cleansing or purification (Ibid). As a consequence, the perpetrator buries the python in an elaborate ceremony similar to the kind of burial rites that is accorded to humans.



Eke: Python

Nri, Njilkoka, Idemmili, Anambra

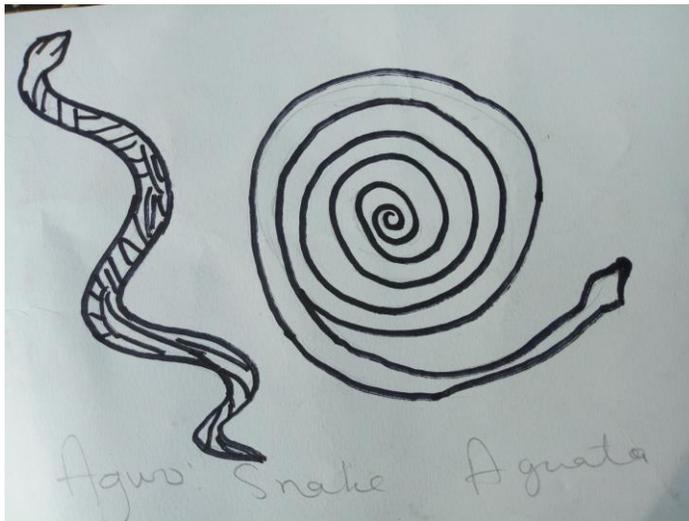
Source: Elizabeth Willis, “A lexicon of Igbo *Uli* motifs”

The association of the python with river or stream appears to be similar in narratives concerning the python in many Igbo communities as well as in other indigenous communities in

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

Nigeria. In Benin cosmology, the python and the crocodile were associated with the realm of Olokun, lord of the great waters (Ben-Amos, 1976:246). For example, the large brass casting of a python, which had earlier decorated the frontal turret of the palace, prior to the British Punitive Expedition in 1897, emphasized the correspondence between the king of the Dry land (Oba) and King of the sea (Olokun).

Likewise, some towns in Ngor-Okpala in Imo State, such as Obike and Nguru that inhabit places located along the Ogochie stream equally consider the python (*Eke ukwu*) sacred (Uju, author's interview, 2016). The stream, which runs through several towns, in Ngor- Okpala in Imo state and Etche in Rivers state, Nigeria, into the tributaries of the Atlantic Ocean, has heavy vegetation on both banks and these snakes inhabit such luxuriant rainforest vegetation (Ibid). Because it is a sacred animal associated with the river, people neither eat it nor cut the vegetation which forms a shed over the stream (Abaleke 2016). If people encounter it on the path to the stream, they withdraw (Ibid). However, if deliberately killed, it will be reported to the custodians of the Ogochie shrine so that the appropriate propitiation would be undertaken to avoid retributive consequences. It is vital to note that the two side arms of the royal throne belonging to the traditional ruler of Obike town are designed with the heads of pythons thus indicating its inviolability and value to the Obike community (Ibid). Through depicting *uli* motifs that symbolise the sacred python on houses, the *uli* artists create a visual narrative of co-existence with and importance on reverence for, pythons, among the Igbo.



Agwo: snake

Aguata, Anambra

Source: Elizabeth Willis, "A lexicon of Igbo *Uli* motifs"

The leopard (*agu*):

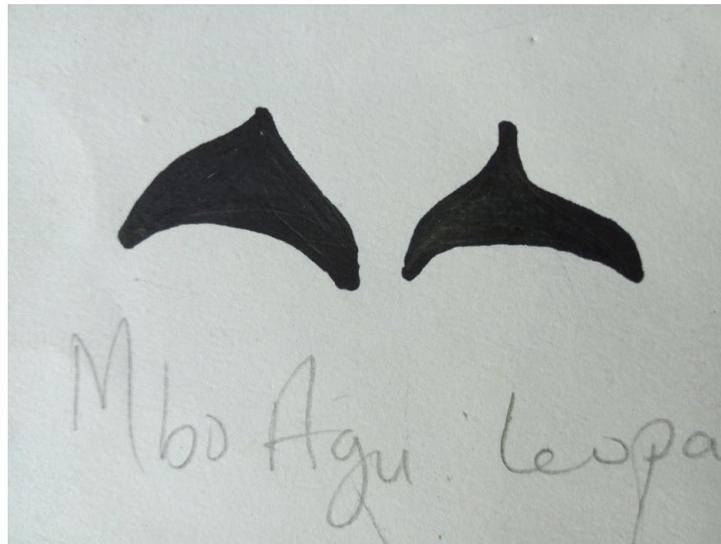
The leopard symbolizes physical strength, dreadfulness and power. To dare to kill a leopard is considered bravery, and this is epitomised in such names as *ogbuagu* or *otagburuagu*, all titles that are characteristics of accomplishing the daunting mission of ‘killing a leopard.’ (Agbasiere 2000:58). This is ably represented in the ruler or king. Leopard’s connection with leadership, among the Igbo, is evidenced in its representation on bronze objects found in the excavated burial site of a 10th century Eze Nri king in Igbo-Ukwu (Isichei 1976:12). It is also featured in the apparels and paraphernalia of traditional rulers among the Igbo. For instance, among the Onitsha Igbo, the traditional ruler is compared with “the leopard (*agu*) regarded as the animal most dangerous to man and called king (*eze*) of the fores” (Farris Thompson 1974:133). As such, a ruler’s chair is covered with leopard skin and he adorns himself and his palace with visual trophies of a leopard like pendant made from leopard teeth, leopard spots skin robe and claws designs, among others (Ibid). Chinyere Ogbu, mentions that by 1849, the Brudo who visited the Obi Akazua, observed that there were leopard skin on the headrest of Obi of Onitsha (Happiness 2013:460). A similar notion of kingship is observed among the Bini where the leopard is often depicted as “the king of the bush,” on art objects, or in folktales as a metaphor for the Oba of Benin, who they see as “the King of the Home” (Ben-Amos 1976: 246).



Agu Nwadiani: Leopard who has a right to the land.
Umuleri, Anambra.

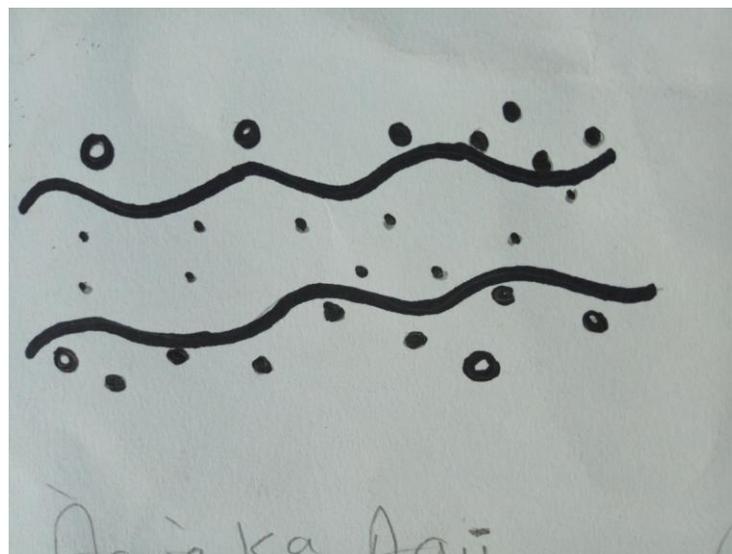
Source: Elizabeth Willis, “A lexicon of Igbo *Uli* motifs”

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor



*Mbo Agu: Leopard who has a right to the land.
Umuleri, Anambra.*

Source: Elizabeth Willis, "A lexicon of Igbo *Uli* motifs"



Agwa ka agu: Spots like the leopards.

Source: Elizabeth Willis, "A lexicon of Igbo *Uli* motifs"

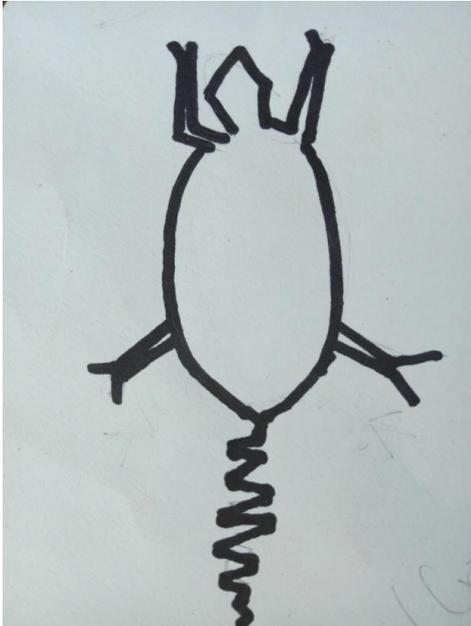
The concept of leopard as a symbol of leadership is also exemplified in the leopard designs (the plaid design symbolizing the leopard's paw prints) on the *ukara* cloth worn by members of the *Ekpe* secret society (Cole and Aniakor 1985:59). However the secret nature of

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

the *ekpe* society made admittance exclusive to men. Women on the other hand had monopoly of the more public *Uli* body and wall designing where they equally exploited the leopard motifs as design elements (Smith 2010). Such *Uli* motifs as *agu nwadiani*, *agwa ka agu* (leopard spots), leopard claws, *ogbuagu*, validates its relevance in Igbo worldview.

Crocodile (Aguiyi):

Like the python, the crocodile is also believed to be a sacred river goddess among indigenes of Agulu town in Anambra State, Nigeria. They neither kill nor harm the crocodiles



Aguiyu: Crocodile

Agulu

Anambra

Source: Elizabeth Willis, "A lexicon of Igbo *Uli* motifs"

that inhabit the Agulu Lake since they "believe crocodiles were messengers of *Chukwu* sent to protect the people from attacks emanating from enemy communities" (Obindiigbo 2015). As such *uli* women painters from Agulu relentlessly pay homage to their beliefs by reflecting motifs associated with crocodile in *uli* wall paintings. Though they do not practice the *uli* mural painting, the Mokwa people of Northern Nigeria consider crocodiles sacred and have a treaty with the crocodile, part of which includes that none should kill each other (Olupona 1993).

Elephant (*Enyi*):

Elephant images are also in some of the Nok terracotta, which existed as early as 500BCE in the plateau regions in Nigeria, indicating that its relevance to humans is time immemorial (Werness 2010:159). The elephant and its physical characteristics "embody power, longevity and wisdom, leadership" in Benin Kingdom, in Gelede and Egungu masquerades of the Yoruba and most importantly among the Igbo (Werness 159). Its association with political and spiritual leadership is majorly in the use of ivory as a symbol of royalty. The discovery from

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

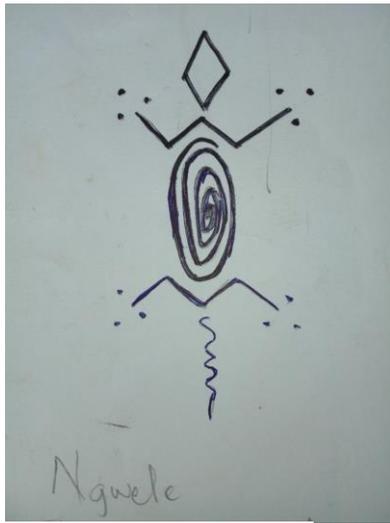
the excavated burial site of a 10th century royal king, the Eze Nri, in Igbo Ukwu, Nigeria, indicated that the Eze Nri's legs rested on elephant tusks. In addition, the inclusion of bronze elephant head pendant as part of grave treasuries could probably also be linked to its relevance to the kingship of Nri royal dynasty among the Igbo. These have also proven that there may have been trade in elephant ivory within the West African forest zone where Igbo geographical space is also situated (Insoll and Shaw, 1997:18). The excavated ivory tusks or images in bronze may symbolize not only power and royalty, but accomplishment and profit from killing and trading elephant ivory (Ibid, Nevadomsky 1993:67). Its exploration as motif in uli wall paintings, indicate that it is part of an ancient Igbo cultural world view.

In essence, animals that recall certain humanistic characteristics constitute “vehicles of meaning and of thought,” for indigenous African socio-political structures and religions. It was the perception of animals and their life in the forest, as well as their contact with humans that informed the entirety of African art and accorded it its exceptional and great attributes, its capacity to mirror societies that subsisted harmoniously with the laws of the land and of the seasons.

Lizard (Ngwele/Ngwere)

The lizard is a regular visitor around the walls of many households in Igbo communities as with other places in Nigeria. Its feature in Igbo proverbs indicates how the Igbo use its personality to equally understand and validate human experiences. For instance, Chinua Achebe uses the proverb, “The lizard that jumped from the high Iroko tree to the ground said he will praise himself if no one else did,” in his novel *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1959:25). The lizard on dropping from a significant height often nods its head before taking off. This characteristics among the Igbo, is interpreted as a sign of self applause which the lizard accords itself regardless of what other entities might think of its fall. This verse, Okonkwo, the protagonist uses to affirm his prowess in farming. Among the Etiti community in Imo state, the lizard is used for sacrifices (Willis 1987:108). The lizard is used in ritual sacrifice among the Igbo, particularly sacrifices that “have a rather sinister character (involving sorcery)” (Arinze cited in Turner 1992:102).

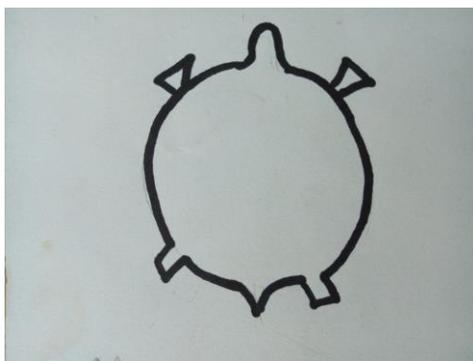
SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor



Ngwele/Ngwere: Lizard
Njikoka, Umuleri, Anambra; Etiti Imo.
Source: Elizabeth Willis, "A lexicon of Igbo *Uli* motifs

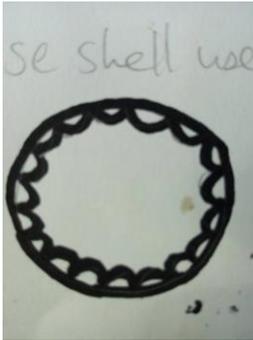
Tortoise (Mbe):

The tortoise is featured in most Igbo folklores as a lazy, greedy and crafty character. Uche Okeke, a modern exponent of Uli aesthetics, explored this theme in his art work *Greedy Mbe* (Chukueggu 2010:265). Likewise, Achebe's allegorical narrative of "the tortoise and the birds" folktale, in *Things Fall Apart*, also is the consequences of it being a selfish and crafty animal (Achebe 1959). These allegorical representations, among others, of the tortoise indicate a moral compass that is instrumental in appreciating the distinct cultural values of the Igbo. It further explains why it is imperative as a visual lexicon for local *uli* designer on walls mud houses.



Mbe: Tortoise
Nri, Njikoka, Anambra ; Etiti, Imo

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor



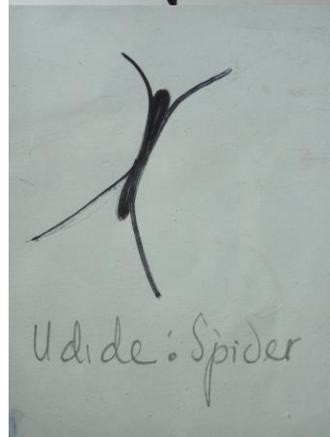
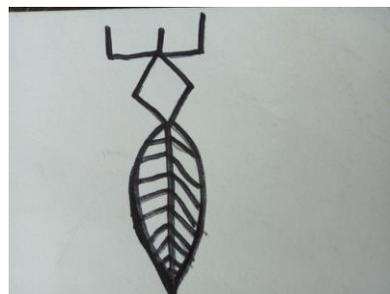
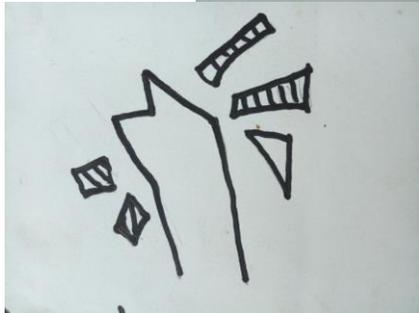
Ekpuru: Tortoise Shell use by a diviner.
Etiti, Imo.



Aghu: Monitor Lizard
Agulu, Njikoka, Anambra



SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor



Conclusion

Animal motifs on artworks are an indication of the relevance and place of animals in the lives of the Igbo. Humans have their place within the social structure - the noble, poor, men, women and children. The same is as well tenable in the domain of animals - strong, aggressive, cunning and intelligent animals as opposed to the submissive, meek, docile or passive ones. The figurative attributes of animals thus is compared, allegorically and philosophically, to specific

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

personal temperaments attributed to humans as well as, to the ranking of individuals within various social indigenous organizations in Africa. James Fernandez, cited in Ben-Amos, affirms that animals “constitute a primordial metaphor through which men come to define their own humanity” (Ibid). Folklores and fables concerning animals were often narrated as moonlight tales or re-enacted by masquerades publicly during festivities, in order to teach morals. Through the animal motifs in *uli* traditional body and wall paintings, it has become evident that visual images and motifs in traditional African thoughts, therefore, transcend the domain of aesthetics and mediate between the physical, social and spiritual realm as conduits for emphasizing the essentiality of aestheticized animal characters to human existence. This paper therefore draws attention to the enormous connection between the *Uli* animal motifs and through using animals as design lexicons for mural paintings, the *Uli* muralists record a logical and social history of relation among the Igbo and the animals that habit their cosmos.

Notes

1. The buffalo is considered vital to the Twaba culture. Buffalos are known for their aggressiveness and are believed to be the most cunning and dangerous animals. They are nocturnal, active at dusk and dawn, but are able to hide away unseen in the day. Buffalos therefore possess dual personalities; passive in the day and aggressive at night; visible and invisible. These contradictions detected by Twaba hunters are the basis for metaphoric relationships between buffalos and humans. Therefore, to the Twaba, buffalos are associated with leadership and heroism. See www.arted.osu.edu/./storytelling.htm
2. The elephant mask is worn by the Kuosi society, a secret society whose members are all men. The members gain entrance by paying a fee to the chief who owns the society. Members of the elephant society act as agents under the chief’s control and as formerly emissaries. The Elephants are significant of sacred power, might and strength in the Bamileke cosmology. Paula Ben-Amos, ‘Men and Animals in Benin Art,’ in *Man* New Series Vol. 11, no. 2. (June 1976), p.243-252.
3. The juice is extracted by grinding various species of *uli* fruits .Most notable are the *uli* plant *ramdi cordata*, *uli oba*, or *nkpo* with the botanical name *rothmania whitfieldi*, or *uli nkilisi*, *remaspora Triflore*, *uli ede eji`gardenia imperialis* and *uli okorobiam rothmania hispiole*.

References

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

Achebe Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1962).

Allen F. Roberts, *Animal in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvellous*, New York, NY Museum for African Art, New York, 1995.

Chinedu C. Chukwueggu, 'The Asele Period in Uche Okeke's Creativity 1958-1966,' *African Research Review*, Vol. 4 (3a) July, 2010, pp.261-275.

Cole, Herbert and Aniakor, Chike, 'Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos', *African Arts*, Vol 1, No. 3, May, 1985.

Amanda Carlson, "Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts," in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, (ed.) Christine Mullen Kreamer [et al.]. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2007.

Elizabeth A. Willis, "A Lexicon of Igbo Uli Motifs," *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, No.1, June 1987.

Elizabeth Isichei, *A history of the Igbo People*, (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1976).

Francis A. Arinze cited in Victor Witter Turner, *Blazing the Trail: Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols* (Tucson & London: University of Arizona Press, 1992).

Hope B. Werness, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*, (London, the Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2003). Books.google.uk.co visited on 18 October 2010.

Jacob Kehinde Olupona, "Some notes on Animal Symbolism in Africa Religion and Culture," *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol.18, No.1, 1993, pp.3-12.

John N. Oriji, Transformations in Igbo Cosmology during Slavery: A Study of the Geneses of Place-Names, Totems & Taboos," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 4, No. 194, 2009.
<https://www.cain.info/revue-cahiers-d-etudes-africaines-2009-4-pages-953.htm>

Joseph Nevadomsky, 'Elephant: The animal and its ivory in Africa Culture,' *Museum Anthropology*, Vol.17, No. 3. Exhibition Reviews, Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, (September 30 1992- May 1 1993).

Joseph Therese Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo life and thought*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN INDIGENOUS ULI BODY AND WALL PAINTINGS... Nkiruka Jane Uju Nwafor

Krydz Ikwuemesi, 'Primitives or Classicists? The Uli Women Painters of Nri,' in K. Ikwuemesi and E. Agbaya (eds.) *The Rediscovery of Tradition: Uli and the Politics of Culture*, (Enugu, Pearls and Gold, 2005).

Mark Getlein, *Gilbert's Living With Art*, (London: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

Nkiru Nzegwu, *Crossing Boundaries: Gender Transmogrification of African Art History*, <https://escholarship.org> visited on 21st May, 2018.

Obindiigbo, "Sacred Places and Things in Traditional Igbo Religion," November 22, 2015 <http://obindiigbo.com.ng/2015/11/sacred-places-and-things-in-igbo-traditional-religion/> visited on July 30, 2016.

Obiora, Udechukwu's interview with Ulli Beier in Udechukwu Obiora. *No Water: An Exhibition Catalogue*, (Nsukka, Odonke Publications, 1981).

Ogbu Chinyere Happiness, "The essence of symbols on Igbo Modern Thrones", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol 4, Nos. 6, July 2013.

Oral Interview with Mr. Ejiofor, an indigene of Awka-Etiti in Anambra State, August 5, 2016.

Oral interview with Dr. Godfrey Chukwuma Uju, an indigene of Umueme Obike, on 10 August, 2016.

Oral interview with Killian Abaleke, the Oldest Man in Umuokita Kindred of Umuofor Obike., August, 10, 2016.

Paula Ben-Amos, 'Men and Animals in Benin Art,' in *Man New Series* Vol. 11, No. 2. (June 1976).

Renclue2pin, 'Change Vs Tradition: Interpretations of Masculinity & Animal Imagery in Things Fall Apart,' in www.hubpages.com/hub/ visited on January 21, 2011.

Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*, (California: University of California Press, 1974).

Sandra A. Smith, *Uli Metamorphosis of a Tradition into Contemporary Aesthetics*, MA Thesis, Kent State University, May, 2010.

Simon Ottenberg. *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*. (Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

Timothy Insoll and Thurstan Shaw, 'Gao and Igbo-Ukwu: Beads, Interregional Trade, and Beyond,' *African Archaeological Review*, Vol.1, No.1, 1997.