

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

T

HE survey and pilot study for the Nka Emume project was undertaken from January to March, 1992. In November and December, 1992, the documentation aspect of the main project of revitalising the upa art commenced in the two primary project locations of Nsugbe and Omo, respectively. This entailed the audio-visual documentation of the processes and stylisation of wall (upa) art within its traditional as well as contemporary contexts.

Documentation of the uli art was also undertaken in Omo where it is still in limited practice. While this was going on, the recruitment of the women artists for the reorientation project was going on: On January 15, 1993 eight women (four each from Omo and Nsugbe), and two apprentices participating in the project, moved into camp in Nsugbe for eight months. The first day of reorientation started with painting on cloth canvasses. Doris Weller, the project director for painting, introduced the women to the use of modern binder in place of the non durable traditional binder - starch from cassava.

Women specialise in the fine arts of drawing, painting and other artistic body ornaments which use the human body as the canvass. They also specialise in the craft and art of pottery. The men folk are the sculptors on wood and metal. Both sexes specialise in music, dance and drama.

The ART of MOTHERS

• Project report by
Mechi Nzewi & Doris Weller

After that the women were left on their own, with the directive to approach their creativity on the cloth canvass the same way as they paint/draw on mud walls. By the end of the first day every woman participant was able to produce a finished canvass. The contents of the canvasses were creative transfer of their techniques and personal styles on mud walls. On white drawing paper, the women preferred to draw with blades from bamboo poles dipped in black pigment, while the materials and dichromatic essence of cloth canvasses were used on coloured paper, given the same background as walls and cloth canvasses.

While in the project camp, from January to August, 1993, the women observed regular working schedule. Monday to Friday every week from midday to six o'clock in the evening. This gave them some time to attend to their private

farms and other household chores. Presently the women are formed into Upa Women Arts' Collective, which is being administered and managed by the AMA DIALOG FOUNDATION. The Nka Emume project was funded by the German Foreign Office in Bonn.

Women's Art

In the Igbo traditional artistic milieu there is some division of labour in creativity and practice between men and women. Women specialise in the fine arts of drawing, painting and other artistic body ornaments which use the human body as the canvass. They also specialise in the craft and art of pottery. The men folk are the sculptors on wood and metal. Both sexes specialise in music, dance and drama.

The artistic practices which derive from earth materials are more commonly the specialisation of women. The women artists who work with red earth as their primary pigment for paint/drawing are known as *ndi n'ede upa* 'people who write/make paints (with) red earth'. The routine of smooth-rubbing living houses, floor and walls, with earth colour was a home management chore of any married traditional Igbo woman, in which she would normally be assisted by her daughters who could be regarded as apprentice home managers. This is known as *ite upa* 'to smooth-rub (with) red earth'. There is thus a distinction between the mandatory home care duty of (*ite*), keeping walls and floors of homes neat and polished, and the creative activity of aesthetic, fine art decoration (*ide*) of houses. Whereas the former was expected of every traditional woman as from childhood to adulthood, the latter was optional aesthetic beautification, *icho mma* - the art

During the Nka Emume we worked with eight traditional women artists. Two of them are only upa artists, three are acknowledged in their communities as specialists on both upa and uli arts, while three are acknowledged as upa artists but could also do uli art.



An art work on canvas by one of the Upa women artists

of creating artistic decorations on the smooth-rubbed walls. Any woman of any age who has any level of creative mettle could do this. Women who then manifest distinguishing creative talent beyond the general ability of paint/drawing on mud walls, are further recognised as creative specialists. They are the artists who are commissioned to produce environmental canvasses on special buildings and homes of people who can afford their services for something special during festive occasions.

Traditional Igbo women who are fine artists could specialise as environmental aesthetic artists, that is, upa paint/drawing. Upa artists use mud walls as their canvass. Others could have expertise for body cosmetic art, that is, uli or ogalu drawing. These use the human body as their canvass. During the Nka Emume we worked with eight traditional

women artists. Two of them are only upa artists, three are acknowledged in their communities as specialists on both upa and uli arts, while three are acknowledged as upa artists but could also do uli art.

Upa and uli are differentiated tributaries of the same stylistic stream. A clearer distinction between the two sub-styles of the same artistic stream is necessary.

Upa artists work on a hard surface, the solid mud wall, although paint/drawing around corners and doors and windows could give a feeling of working on a plastic surface; Uli artists work on a pliable, plastic surface, the human body, parts of which have different shapes, which recommend different motivic elements.

Upa artists use spongy materials, such as the pulp from the banana stem, also the hand (fingers and the base of the palm) for their paint/drawing; Uli artists use hard objects such as bamboo blade or a knife blade as their drawing tools, although the hand could be used to rub the pigment on areas around the neck, waist and ankles.

Upa artists derive their basic, heavy, swinging-arm technique of paint/drawing from the open and broad arm sweeps of *ite aja* (smooth-rubbing earth on walls/floors), which produces the peculiar background texture of mud wall art. Paint/drawing constitutes the foreground of this dual layered art, for upaism is basically a dichromatic art. Mud wall carving (when the mud is wet) is also found in some Igbo areas. The deep-carved designs are then painted when the mud wall dries and is smooth rubbed. Uli artistry is compact, narrow and light movement oriented. The technique derives from the narrow movements of the hand to produce fine lines on the curvilinear and supple medium of the various parts/sections of the human body, each of which is treated as an independent compositional unit of the whole canvass. Uli in tradition is discussed and recognised as a peculiar women's art typology.

The technique derives from the narrow movements of the hand to produce fine lines on the curvilinear and supple medium of the various parts/sections of the human body, each of which is treated as an independent compositional unit of the whole canvass



Ohiku Nzekwu, the leader of the Upa Women Artists during a press interview

There are, however, creative motifs common to the two art sub-styles while other typical motifs are peculiar to each.

Feeling for the nature of the object awakes feeling for the forms to be composed on it. In Upa art the contact is with a hard surface which is first rubbed and felt before paint/drawing commences. As such, the nature of composition and the art produced are influenced by this awareness or experience of the solid, flat surface, architectural shape and structures. In Uli art, the body to be drawn is also first touched and rubbed with the hands. The feeling is different. It starts with the experience of the mother daily and always rubbing and massaging a baby, especially after bath. When the mother becomes an Uli artist this feeling for the human body informs creativity. It is of a round, supple, that is, yielding surface. This feeling for a different surface recommends a different nature of artistry on the human body.

Upa artists use earth colours as well as the black of charcoal from special woods. Vegetable pigments are available but rarely used. When the green of leaves is used it is mixed with black to

highlight it. The vegetable green alone does not appear as strong colour against upa, red, and nzu, white, backgrounds. Although the finished canvass is commonly dichromatic, monochromatic paint/drawing as in finger paint/drawing, as well as multi-coloured works are found. The uli liquid extracted from the pod of the uli plant is not used in any form in upa, wall art. Uli artists use the pigment from the pod of a plant, uli. The pigment is colourless when applied, but, through a chemical process, soon turns into blue-black on the body as it dries. Uli drawing is monochromatic art.

A natural binder, usually a binding starch prepared from fresh cassava tuber is used by the upa artists in some parts of Igboland to bind the colours to the wall canvass. An upa canvass could last a year or many years depending on environmental factors. In uli, body art, binders are not used. The drawing washes off in a short while.

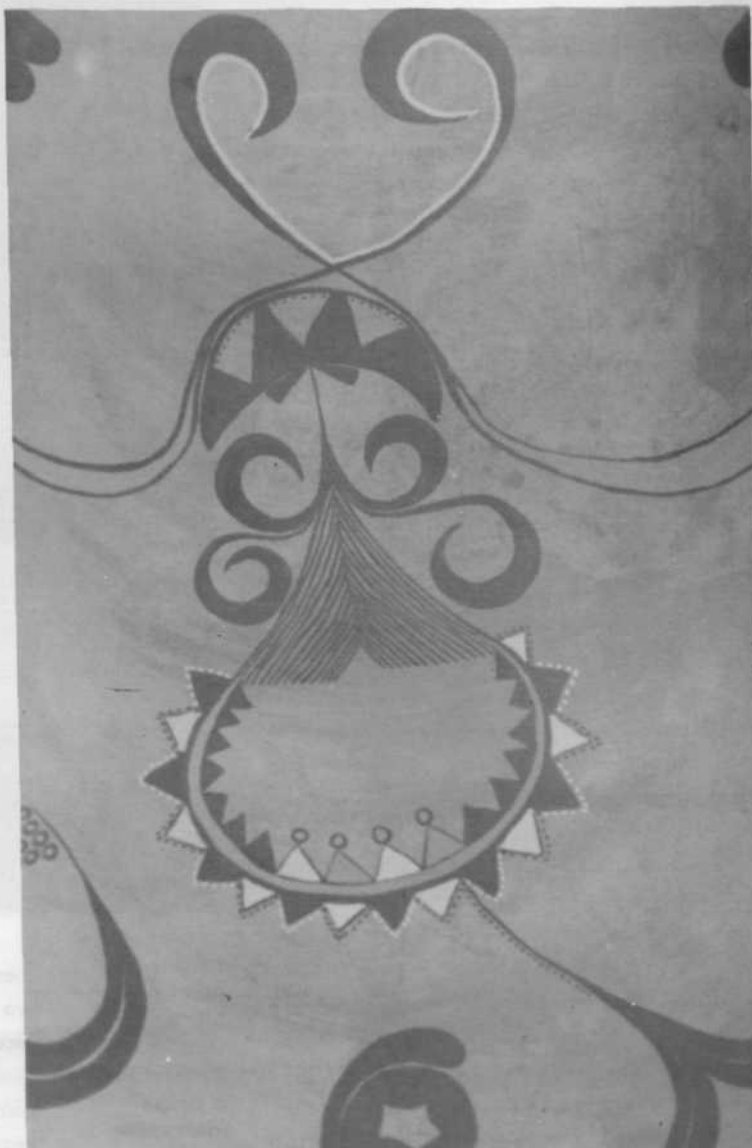
Upa art is exhibited as fixed canvasses in the living environment or around worship places. Uli art is exhibited as mobile canvasses which the uli art model carries about.

It is important, however, to note that the term uli has multiple meanings which make sense in the context of usage. It is common in Igbo language that the same word could give different meanings depending on the tones of the pronunciation. In the case of uli, however, the same pronunciation gives different meanings with regard to the sense of usage in a sentence.

(i) Uli is the name of the fruit of the plant, uli (indigo).

(ii) Uli is the colour term for the blue black pigment that is extracted from the ground uli pulp. Other plants such as the alu which is used in ukara ekpe textile art also give the colour, blue.

(iii) Uli is the term which conveys the quality of beautification which is visual. It is used as an aesthetic qualification to discuss any intricate, cosmetic or decorative art work on any surface and/or medium such as wood or textiles. Ife edelu uli conveys the same aesthetic implication as ife acholu mma, that is, 'something that has received



Art work by one of the Upa women artists

exceptional beautifying attention.' Uli is thus an aesthetic term that denotes creative merit in any finished artistic production from drawing, to paint/drawing, to spirit manifest costume, to sculpture etc. Any work that goes beyond utility to demonstrate creative elaboration in composition and detail is critically discussed as uli. The technical processes of fine arts production are discussed in the following terms: ise, to draw, ide to paint/draw, ite, to rub.

(iv) Uli is the term for the finished cosmetic fine art canvass on the human body. Some distinction are further made in some Igbo areas with respect to uli aru (an artistic beautification on a human body) as different from uli aja (an artistic beautification

on a wall) when the reference is to the quality of the artistic content, and not necessarily the art form or sub-style.

Context

Traditional Igbo architecture makes use of kneaded mud for the walls and floors. Some Igbo areas use bamboo lattice framework on which the mud balls are thrown. In other areas no such frameworks are necessary; mud balls are piled and pressed to shape the walls. The smoothness of a wall depends sometimes on the texture of the mud used for construction. Qualities of mud vary from one Igbo area to another. Some mud house constructions have a rough finish while others are plastered smooth. Fine textured mud enables smooth plastering of the walls. Upa art is possible on smooth surfaces. Hence upa art is more popularly practised in those Igbo areas where the texture of the mud available for building houses can be given smooth-rubbed finish. Upa art was, in tradition, only practised in the context of mud houses. Mud wall art became more intensive during celebrations in a community. Upa art is strongly practised as festival aesthetic art, because during festivals members of a community take extra pains to update the aesthetic and hygienic quality of their living environment.

Upa art is non durable art. The paints easily wears off, especially when no binder is used. This is as a result of the combined forces of rain, dust and other environmental hazards which eat off or rub off the paint. Upa art is thus regenerative in nature. The women are constrained to rub off the old art works, re-plaster the walls, apply fresh background and produce new upa paint/drawing which constitute completely new works on the same fixed canvass.

At the present, cement houses are preferred to mud houses in former mud wall art environments. Cement houses have emerged as prestige symbols, and require very little maintenance compared to mud houses. As such mud houses have disappeared completely in some Igbo communities. No mud houses, no upa art. Apart from faded old relics on surviving, often collapsed mud houses there are fewer and fewer villages in the Igbo human environment where upa art can be seen.

The state of Igbo creative arts heritage now is that the traditional art types of upa and uli have more or else lost their traditional essence and audience. This is due to the nature of the media of expression - the

mud wall and the human body, respectively - which have become unpopular. Two courses hence are only possible: the devising of new directions or orientations for these artistically and aesthetically unique art forms. So far two initiatives are being explored in the latter.

The first initiative is academic, and has relegated as well as excluded not only the original practitioners, but, equally, the original form or style. It is the movement known as the Nsukka School. The Nsukka School of Art is a core of modern European-art-trained fine artists who have, through research, identified and isolated some motifs and stylistic components of the uli and upa art styles. These components and motifs are used in stylistic abstraction to devise new creative directions in painting and drawing. The resulting art work are essentially modern-European in stylistic as well as in technical orientation. But the artists have successfully integrated the creative motifs borrowed from the traditional art forms as superficial, decorative features. It is a new, hybrid as well as radical artistic development which is valid in terms of its experimental content and creative objectives. The evidence of the current stage of the radical modern direction is that there is clear stylistic difference between the works of the Nsukka School of artists and the works of the original, traditional upa/uli artists.

The second movement is committed to providing new relevance, continuum and creative development for the two art types of upa and uli in a manner that ensures self-propelled stylistic growth as well as the involvement and modern relevance of the traditional practitioners. The forte of this direction, such as initiated and pursued by the Ama Dialog, is the recognition that formative stylistic orientation as well as fundamental formal training in modern upa/uli painting should exclude extraneous modern art style. Also, that these art forms, being stylistically accomplished in creative principles and compositional content, can only be meaningfully appreciated in the modern art scene, solely in terms of their stylistic and compositional uniqueness. Any developmental directions must be rooted in the style, that is, have creative base in the style in order not to eliminate the cultural-artistic authenticity. The commitment of the Ama Dialog initiative ensures the retention and systematic continuum of the traditional creative materials, techniques and most importantly, style. **GR**