CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | CRITICAL ESSAY

Eziafo Okaro: An *uli* woman painter’s tale in the Igbo heritage crisis

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**Abstract:** The over 200 ethnicities in Nigeria are known for their distinct cultures and heritages. For the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, their heritage cannot be fully discussed without a look at the almost extinct *uli* body and wall painting practiced by Igbo women. *Uli* is the Igbo name for the indigo dye obtained from several species of plants and used to draw cosmetically on the human body. It is also the name of the traditional mural painted by Igbo women with four simple colours. The decline of *uli* art in the postcolonial period is a reflection of the sorry state of cultural heritage in Igbo land and Nigeria in general. Yet the story of *uli* reflects the unsung contribution of women to social development in Igbo land and how this unique contribution has been devalued in the highly maleprivileging art field of today. My work, therefore, focuses on the work of one *uli* woman painter, Eziafo Okaro, and highlights the trans-epochal qualities of her vision. The story of Eziafo Okaro provides a basis for discussing the need to preserve the self while appropriating the other and how the work of Igbo *uli* women classicists helped to reinforce and preserve Igbo identity.

**Subjects:** Arts; Humanities; Museum and Heritage Studies

**Keywords:** *uli*, primitive; classicist; heritage crisis; westernisation; Ainu

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

It is difficult to discuss the heritage of the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, without a mention of the almost extinct *uli* body and wall painting practised by Igbo women. *Uli* is the Igbo name for the dye obtained from several species of plants and used to draw cosmetically on the human body. It is also the name of the traditional Igbo mural. The decline of *uli* in the postcolonial period is a reflection of the sorry state of cultural heritage in Igbo land and Nigeria. The situation of *uli*, as discussed in this paper, reflects the unacknowledged contribution of women to social development in Igbo land. This article focuses on the work of one *uli* woman painter, Eziafo Okaro, and highlights the trans-epochal qualities of the *uli* art in a globalising world.

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1. Introduction

Every people have their common heritage which derives from their history and identity. If by heritage we mean tangible and intangible resources deriving from tradition and the past with which the present can buttress, then heritage becomes the datum with which the present can engage the past and the future in meaningful conversation. In the cultural bazaar known as Nigeria, the over 200 ethnic groups are known for their distinct cultures and heritages. For the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, their heritage cannot be fully discussed without a look at their rich art traditions dating back several centuries. Within this, art traditions can be counted the highly developed masking theatre, the very dynamic sculpture techniques and the legendary *uli* body and wall painting system, among others. These arts are obviously co-eval with Igbo culture and society as is evidenced in the archaeology of the Igbo (Afigbo, 1981). The above-mentioned arts are still extant, but are on the verge of extinction, thanks to the curse and burden of postcolonialism, which inevitably include neocolonialism. As John Picton has argued, although these art forms have often been labelled “traditional”, they remain “contemporary” so long as they are practised as part of the reality of a subsisting culture (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2010). My presentation focuses on the work of one *uli* woman painter, Eziafo Okaro and how it withstood the flame of neocolonisation. The story of Eziafo Okaro provides a basis for my concluding remarks on Igbo corporate self-hate (see Ezeh, 2012; Ottenberg, 2012; Ugwu, 2012) and the need to preserve the self while appropriating the other. But before I go on, it is important to explain what *uli* is.

Briefly, the term, *uli* is the Igbo name for the indigo dye obtained from several species of plants. Usually, the berries of these plants are extracted and ground and the dye is pressed out of the marsh with the fingers of the hand as a ready and workable medium for drawing on the human body (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2011). Usually, the dye is placed in a coconut shell or other receptacle from where the artist scoops it with the help of the *uli* knife (mna nw’uli) to make the intricate monochromatic drawings on the body. To ensure good registration, *ufie* (camwood dust or paste) may be used to prime the skin before the application of *uli* (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2011). Although derived originally from body drawing, *uli* wall painting is bolder, more vigorous and based on a palette of four colours: white, yellow, reddish brown and black. It is rarely the exertion of one woman and often celebrates the central myth of the community. Although it thrives on freedom and spontaneity, there are general rules and principles. Painters in a typical *uli* mural may number between 2 and 20 depending on the situation or context. *Uli* painting is a spontaneous process of exploration and experimentation (Figures 1 and 2). No two
painters may contrive exactly the same design ideas and elements. Inspiration is derived from diverse experiences as are the motifs which draw from forms in nature and issues in existence. The uli artists were highly respected group of women in Igbo society. The art was passed on from mother to daughter in line with the vernacular education system.

2. The story and work of Eziafo Okaro

When I was writing my BA thesis in 1991/92 under the supervision of Professor Ola Oloidi, I had cause to interview some uli classicists. My topic had to do with uli as a creative idiom in contemporary Nigerian art with a focus on the works of Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu and Ray Obeta (Chukwuezugo Ikwuemesi, 1992). For the fact that the works of these artists did not arise from a vacuum but had technical and formal connections with classical Igbo uli drawing and painting still practised by women in some Igbo villages then, I travelled to Ogidi, my village in Anambra State, in search of surviving uli practitioners.

My father, Samuel Okagbue Ikwuemesi, a retired insurance man who also shares my interest in Igbo tradition, introduced me to Eziafo Okaro (Figure 3) and If’ude Ejiofo, both adept in uli body and wall painting. Ejiofo, who died about five years ago, apart from being knowledgeable in the uli art, was also an Nne mmanwu (Mother of Masquerades), a rare title bestowed on some exceptional women in some Igbo areas which entitles them to full participation in masking cults and festivals. On her own part, Eziafo Okaro was an uli artist par excellence.

The Muse seemed to have taken her wholesale as she was not married and had the spirit of a great artist lurking in her rather frail-looking body. An intense personality, she understood the principles of design, albeit from vernacular standpoints. Talking to the two women in 1992 stirred up new excitement and curiosities in my young mind and brought me face to face for the first time with the beauty and richness of Igbo arts. I also came to the sudden realisation that culture is a continuum and not a lost experience in the past; that art is not a gift of the colonial masters to the rest of us, but a biosocial phenomenon, as Ellen Dissanayake has argued (Dissanayake, 1988, p. 4). Of the two women, Eziafo struck me as the more adept and resourceful in the uli art, although they were both friends and often worked together.

Eziafo also had a spiritual aura around her, although she was not cultic. Both women were simply rooted in tradition and typified some of the remaining resistance against modernity and the imported Christian religion. They did not go to church and were very proud to admit it, which is
remarkable in a place and era suffused with religious fundamentalism. And they had good reasons. As they told me in an interview when we met again in 2003 when I was filming for the uli documentary partly sponsored by the defunct Pendulum Centre for Culture and Development, they were angry and disappointed at the social conflicts and contradictions brought about by the colonisation and Christianity. In response to one of my questions, they retorted, “If we jettison tradition, where shall we stand? In these times, there are Christians who still patronise charms and amulets. I am not a Christian; I will never be till next tomorrow (that is, forever) (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2005a)”.

During one of my earlier interviews with Eziafo Okaro, a python emerged through the roof. As I fidgeted, visibly frightened and shaken, she spoke to the animal in a loving and patronising manner, asking it to go away and stop frightening her “modern and young visitor”. The python hesitated for a while, rolled down on a stick on the side walls and went through the door. It was not an unusual occurrence. Up until this day, pythons still find their way into people’s homes in some Igbo villages where they are revered as totemic creatures. Their place and significance in some Igbo communities is captured in some of Chinua Achebe’s literary works. Their totemic grace is one of those strange phenomena which modern science and phenomenology cannot explain. Why is a python harmful in one village and harmless in the next? Perhaps, the reason could be found in ancient vernacular medicine and religion which the present Igbo generation and their sages cannot understand or explain. A python coming into a house and not attacking humans encapsulates some of the mysteries of the universe and calls for more interrogations of the forms, contents and significations of vernacular religion and medicine. The python is a totem of a disappearing heritage in need of study for the benefit of a new and younger generation (including my own) caught in the crossfire of colonisation, postcolonisation and neocolonisation. This may contribute to a cross-generational dialogue that ensures the perpetuation of a people. After all, the new Christian generation in the villages and urban centres today did not emerge from the skies. Okaro, Ejiofo and many more women and men like them, besides being the vanguard of a vanishing order, are the parents of the dashing new...
church-goers. Indeed, when I worked with some *uli* classical women painters in Nri in Anambra in 2003 and again in 2005, they sang and danced to consummate their mural on the last day (Figure 4). In one of the songs, they insisted with a note of disdain: “*Okwo anyi bu nne ndi uka; okwo anyi mulu ndi uka*” (we are the mothers of these church-goers; we gave birth to these church-goers) (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2005b, 30 min). Like Eziafo and If’ude, the Nri women were avowed traditionalists.

The song is very significant as it subtly mirrors the agony and sense of loneliness such minority people may suffer in a vastly Christian domain and considering the influence religion (especially the imported ones) wields in Igbo land and other parts of Nigeria. Yet Eziafo Okaro remained adamant in her traditional religion and also kept alive her *uli* practice till her death on the last day of February 2014, the penultimate day of the 2nd Anambra Book and Creativity Festival (ANBUKRAFT) in which one of her drawings was exhibited (Figure 5). When I took the former US Ambassador to Nigeria, Dr Robin Sanders to see Eziafo Okaro in Ogidi in June 2009 while the former was researching the *uli* tradition, the *uli* classicist told the visiting diplomat with superlative sincerity and severity: “I am not a Christian. I do not go to church. I shall never go. If I re-incarnate after I am gone, I may change my
mind and become a Christian. As for the present life, I am happy not being a Christian” (Krydz Ikwuemesi & Agbaiyi, 2005).

It is this same steadfastness that I found in the drawings of Eziafo and all the other uli women in Nri who had upheld the uli tradition in the face of the challenge and politics of modernisation, even when the art, like other autochthonous art forms, had been branded “fetish” or “evil” in an age desperately bent on cultural self-effacement and lost in the mirage of globalist normalisation and the curse of postcolonality. In 2003, when I was to assemble some uli painters in Nri to renovate the Iyi Azi walls there, for instance, most of the women declined to participate on the grounds that they were now Christians and the uli communal painting was a pastime of the heathen (Figure 6). Yet the few women who participated in the three-day mural painting demonstrated, like Eziafo Okaro, that culture is a continuum; that the past, present and future are in unison; and that history is an endless cycle revolving around these three realities of human existence. This fact was reflected in the consummation songs and dances with which the women ended the painting session. As in the other song about parenting contemporary church-goers, the women also boasted in another song that “Omenani y’oje en’igwe” (tradition will go to heaven) (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2005b). In yet another song, they remonstrated inter alia:

Olue k’o n’eluoooo
Igaligaa
Olue k’o n’eluoooo
Igaligaa
Igba kwo anyi nkiti
Anyi eme ije kalilu anyi
Igaligaa
Ife di anyi mpka
Anyi esisie ike gboo gboo
Igaligaa
Chorus:
Ndị anyị na fa tol’ okolobia
si n’anyị akarụ go
gbafo nkiti, anyị akarọ nka
n’o bụ ogodụ anyị kalu nka

Meaning:
The time has come once more
_Igaligaa_
The time has come has again
_Igaligaa_
If we are allowed
We would do things mightier than us
_Igaligaa_
If pressured
We become strong as of old
_Igaligaa_

Chorus:
Men with whom we sowed
the wild oats now claim that
we are old;
Don’t mind them; we are not old
it’s our clothes that are old. (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2005b)

It is, perhaps, against the background of this song that the works of Eziafo Okaro and other uli classicists can be appreciated. The artists and their works belonged to an era with all its codified systems and norms; with its aesthetic principles and taste. These realities may have shifted in the face of temporal and social forces unleashed in the heart and aftermath of colonisation. But they are not wiped out in the collective psyche and history. Thus the attempt, as it seems, by contemporary Igbo society to break away from its past and write its history on a _tabla rassa_ is at once futile and unfortunate. About three decades ago, some scholars perceived and extolled this reality as a form of dynamic receptivity on the part of Igbo. Today, Igbo receptivity has become somewhat corrosive and implosive (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2014, p. 58).

It is the search for a link between the past and future that led me to encourage some of the _uli_ women such as Eziafo Okaro (Ogidi), Martina Okafor (Figure 7) and Ekedinmma Ojiakor (Agulu), Thezela Nwokedi (Figure 8), and Roseline Chukwu (Inyi), Onwukwe Nwosu, Mma Nwobu and others (Nri) to use modern ground and media for their works as a way of preserving the _uli_ tradition, especially with the decline of _uli_ body and wall painting in the raging flame of modernisation. Of all the works produced on acid-free paper by these women on different occasions, Okaro’s drawings appear to be the most striking, as she boldly seeks to transcend the mere rehash of known _uli_ motifs in a bid to arrive at new forms and meaning. In some of these works commissioned by the late Peter Areh and Ambassador Robin Sanders, Okaro cleverly juxtaposes lines of varying thicknesses, bold and thin patterns, positive and negative spaces in a manner that rivals the works of modern university-trained artists.
3. Between the primitive, the classic and the contemporary

Okaro’s works present a basis for Dissanayake’s thesis about a biology of art (Dissanayake, 1988). Modern scholarship in the “third” and “fourth” worlds may advance the cause of art but art did not arise, and cannot thrive, completely as a branch of scholarship in these places or anywhere. Nor can education be defined solely along Western lines. Okaro was not educated in the Western or modern paradigm but she was also not uneducated, if education fundamentally entails a conversation between generations, that is, the transmission of knowledge, skills and traditions from one generation to another. Like all young maidens of her time, she had learnt the uli art, life skills and social etiquette from her mother. Unfortunately, her generation could not pass on the uli art baton to the next due to the disruptive tendencies of colonisation. Yet it was from people in Okaro’s generation that Professors Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu and other uli exponents at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, appropriated the uli ideogram from the 1960s onwards and transformed it into a modern art idiom that has enjoyed a remarkable followership among Nsukka-trained artists in the last five decades (Figures 9 and 10). However, the uli moderns have been accused of elitism, of not
brokering much dialogue between their works and those of the women classicists (Krydz Ikwuemesi, 2014, p. 140). It has been argued that besides a few tokenistic exhibitions,* the works of the uli women are known mainly through textbooks; much of their story has been ventriloquised through the voice of academic artists.
Most times when I contemplate the works of Eziafo Okaro, I wonder what it would have been like if she had the same opportunity and international exposure like the Australian aboriginal painter, Emily Kame Kngwarreye or indeed any other well-exposed “fourth world” artist (à la Graburn) (see Graburn, 1976). While I was researching in Japan in 2008, Emily Kngwarreye’s works were on show in a traveling exhibition in major museums in Japan; it attracted a lot of visitors (see Kngwarreye, 2008). Ironically, in a symposium at the National Council for Arts and Culture, Enugu, in September 2009, a visiting Japanese anthropologist and curator wondered what it would benefit the Igbo if *uli* art was shown in international museums. The comment by the Japanese curator stirs judgemental notions of “fourth world” perceptions held by the world’s self-appointed dominant powers, including Japan, against former objects of colonisation, and the best repost to it, perhaps, would be, why have Japan’s traditional and aboriginal arts been preserved and shown on large scale and with so much commitment in major museums in Japan, Europe and the United States? Why must contemporary Africa, including the Igbo, lose its memory as a condition for finding a seat in globalisation’s trending train?

If Emily Kngwarreye of Australia and all the Ainu autodidacts in Hokkaido, northernmost Japan, can find a place in contemporary art, there is no doubt that Okaro would have excelled as a draughtsman and painter, if Igbo land and Nigeria in general are not committed to leaving the “past” effectively behind in their skewed notion of modernisation, normalisation and development (please read: Westernisation). Okaro’s works, however, in spite of her lack of adequate exposure, challenge notions of primitivism associated with African artists in the imperialist era and beyond. They also validate Franz Boas’ assertion that all societies had art, although the aesthetic values may differ from Western standards (Welsch, Venbrux, & Rosi, 2006). This argument has been at the heart of some writing on *uli*, including books and catalogues, some of which feature works and interviews by Eziafo Okaro and other *uli* classicists. Likewise, Robin Sanders’ recent book, *The Legendary Uli Women of Eastern Nigeria*, takes these issues further in arguing that *uli* is indeed a form of “communication expression” (Sanders, 2014). The book discusses Okaro and her works as well as the contributions of other *uli* classicists who once held sway in various Igbo villages as artists of honour. If the *uli* women truly represent a vanishing zeitgeist, Eziafo Okaro, in light of her work, must be among the very best.

4. Conclusion
The death of Eziafo Okaro in February 2014 continues the unfolding tragedy of *uli* and Igbo heritage in Nigeria. As *uli* women painters in many Igbo villages, mostly in their seventies and eighties, are depleted by death and the onslaught of modernisation, their art faces the danger of effacement. Colonialism and postcolonialism have not left effective platforms for instrumental engagement of the past and present in Igbo land and other parts of Nigeria. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells us that “tradi
are never lost” so long as they are cherished, and that “Cultures survive the way post-biblical Judaism survived: when...they see at least part of the role of education as developing individuals articulate in the language of their heritage” (Sacks, 2000, p. 184). But Sacks also implies that traditions can be lost in two ways; either through sheer neglect or as a result of actions and inactions calculated to bring such traditions to a possible end, a process Sacks himself recognises as extremis. These two scenarios are playing out in the case of uli and other heritages associated with the Igbo of Nigeria.

What is needed, therefore, are calculated actions, such as effective heritage education and community arts projects that can help people appreciate their heritage better as a tool for grappling with the challenges of the present. Artists of University of Nigeria, Nsukka have tried to sustain uli through high art for several decades; I am not very sure that we succeeded. Challenged by my experience with the Ainu of Japan, I began to experiment with transferring uli to craft objects since 2008 (Figures 11–13). These experiments have been in the form of workshops for village women and art students over the last five years with initial support from the US Embassy in Nigeria. However, in spite of its prospects, in view of an estimated Igbo population of over forty million, this effort is a drop in

Figure 12. Toru Kaizawa, Ainu artist.

Figure 13. Ainu Carved Tray, 2009.
the ocean. The pointers are quite clear; it will require more than the exertion of academic artists and museums to halt the imminent disappearance of uli art and other important heritages of the Igbo and make them more useful to contemporary society.

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Notes
1. For a dynamic perspective on heritage, see Turnbridge and Ashworth (1996).
2. Quintessential uli painter, Eziafo Okaro, was well known in Ogidi, Anambra State, Nigeria. She died on February 28, 2014.
3. See for instance, Achebe (1958); also see Achebe (1987).
4. One major exhibition was organized by Ada Udechukwu. See Ada Udechukwu (1992).
7. Extremis is a Latin word meaning “in the farthest reaches” or “at the point of death”. According to Jonathan Sacks (2000), the term can also be used to refer to the tendency among people to believe in the imminent of the end of history and to act in ways intended to bring history to an end. See Sacks (2000, p. 259).

References


