

**Traditional Body Design Idioms and Multimedia Application:
The Igbo *Uli* Art Form**

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Abstract

Traces of body designing and decoration could be found in almost every indigenous culture around the world. Traditionally many African societies design the body in rich and varied ways. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria these design practices abound as part of the people's cultural heritage. *Uli* (black indigo) body design technique is the most popular of such design modes. *Uli* body make-up tradition however belongs to the Igbo cultural past, and it has become obvious that many practices of the traditional society have come under the corrosive influences of modernity. There is thus a need to find new expressions for *uli* design, and appropriately restore it to contemporary relevance. The theatre readily comes to mind as a place, where the potentials of *uli* could be explored and utilised. There is no gain saying that the Nigerian contemporary theatre is technically ill-equipped to meet the make-up demands of a dynamic theatre such as has evolved in the last decade. *Uli* make-up has the potential of filling a huge vacuum, especially in the area of body adornment in make-up. Being home-grown too its suitability to the African skin is not under contention. Based on research findings, *uli* is here presented as suitable make-up material and practice for contemporary Nigerian theatre.

Introduction

The art of make-up has always remained one of man's primal concerns. This art which at first, was purely utilitarian¹ - since man needed to disguise in order to kill the animal he required for his meals -

has since, grown and evolved into a mainly social endeavour. This socialisation of the art of disguise turned into the art of make-up essentially designed to help man interpret whatever role he wishes to assume realistically.

Make-up design in the theatre, therefore, developed as a craft which aids in the illumination of character for the actor playing a part and for the audience involved in a performance. Make-up, as one of the visual elements of production, complements costume by revealing characters through their physical appearances. In a bid to project a believable character portrait, the make-up designer artistically manipulates materials and instruments of design for the enhancement or alteration of physical features. Make-up plays a similar role of enlivening presentations and linking artists and their audiences in African traditional performances.

In different parts of Africa there are different design practices and these constitute the distinguishing hallmark of each locality or ethnic group. Different types of body designs made with coloured dyes or the more permanent types of designs such as tattoo, piercing and cicatrisation, are the essence of aesthetic body designs in many African societies. For many traditional African theatres make-up defines those materials and instruments of design used to transform a dancer, singer, drummer, masquerade, and other performers involved in dramatic interpretations, into the characters they are to embody. Make-up, which is given expression through masks and body decorations, are commonly employed in many traditional performances.

Africa is a culturally endowed continent, with a vast array of design practices. This is evident in the unique artistic legacies displayed in the people's pottery, sculpture, cloth-making, wall-decorations and body-designs. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria for example, these design practices abound; as part of the people's cultural heritage and body designing is one of such practices which exist as an integral part of the traditional society. Dyes derived from trees, animals and mineral deposits are used to draw temporary designs on the body while permanent designs in the forms of identity marks, bravery marks and/or marks of valour, fashion marks and beauty marks are incised into the skin to fulfil the design needs of the people. Whatever the reasons for making them, Negri submits that the '[m]arks made on the face and body in traditional Nigerian culture were of two kinds, permanent and temporary' (9).

Temporary designing of the body for aesthetic purposes is a widespread practice in traditional Igbo society. *Uli* (black indigo) body

design belongs to the temporary mode of design practices which are more or less, an indispensable part of traditional Igbo society. *Uli* is one of the most popular and aesthetically pleasing body design idioms in traditional Igbo society. In Peri's observation:

Uli was an important women's art form in Southeastern Nigeria in the early part of this (20th) century. Women decorated male and female bodies with the dye from the *Uli* pod. (37) (Emphasis mine)

Uli design was central to any function in traditional Igbo society. For example, preparatory to departing to her new home, a bride was designed with *uli* to enhance her beauty and attractiveness.

This paper discusses *uli* body design as a make-up art found in Igbo traditional society and seeks to find a place for this unique design idiom in contemporary setting. Our proposition includes the possible integration of new ideas into existing *uli* design traditions and the possibilities of translating the design elements into post-modern aesthetic idioms in performance and fashion. Through conscious multimedia utilisation and exhibitions, *uli* design idiom could be translated into modern stylistic appropriations. The designer by employing multimedia applications would make use of different kinds of materials apart from the traditional *uli* dye, in order to achieve as well as transform old *uli* motifs into new designs. This will impact the art of body design and indeed, the entire Igbo aesthetic landscape at a time that many media such as stage, film and diverse artistic performances, are on hand to use their wide coverage to exhibit *uli's* unique composition.

***Uli* Culture and Contemporary Art Practice**

The negative image and stigmatization of some cultural practices in Nigeria (and in most of Africa) is a phenomenon that was born in the colonial situation, though some of such practices have witnessed a new and more significant birth in the hopelessness occasioned by the failure of social institutions in modern times. Thus, the people's cultures and cultural practices have come under the corrosive influences of modernity and western religious indoctrination. About this Oguibe observes that;

Artistic practice in traditional idioms was condemned as idolatry and was therefore violently combated, with tons of art objects seized and destroyed in bonfires. Converts were warned in damning language of the harsh and irrevocable consequences of either creating or keeping indigenous art forms (37).

In these circumstances, the artist's utilisation of traditional design motifs or that of his/her clientele and society became unnecessarily contentious and a contest of identities which inevitably signalled the beginnings of a new discourse on traditional art forms. At the same time, it created two possibilities of 'resistance' – to persist with the indigenous forms which colonialism condemned and sought to obliterate or to possess the contested territory by mastering the forms and techniques of western artistic expression in order to cross out the ideological principles resident in its exclusivity. More interesting still, was the nature of this discourse which resided not in a direct confrontation with the structures of colonialism, nor in the tropes of imaging and representation, but was initiated through an appropriation of the forms of imperial culture by many African artists such as Bruce Onobrakpeya, Ben Enweonwu and Demas Nwoko.

In the Nigerian visual art scene, 'resistance' eventually gave rise to 'rebellion' and the recognition of *uli* art became part of the indirect accomplishments of the famous 'rebellion' led by the posse of Uche Okeke and nine other artists that became known as the Zaria Art Society (ZAS)². Eze notes about the styles of these students who later championed new directions for African art discourse:

Instead of the Hobson's choice of European art in the academic curricular, the students wanted the integration of Nigeria's home – grown genres (68).

The student - artists went ahead to embark on the appropriation of traditional art/design forms for adaptation in contemporary art practice. Filani (2005) is one of those who have used the term 'revolutionary' to describe the development (137). Uche Okeke is among what he calls 'the monumental four', (133) which include also Yusuf Grillo, Demas Nwoko and Bruce Onobrakpeya (133). ZAS held out for four years – 1958 to 1961, a relatively short time for an art movement - but its influence on contemporary Nigerian arts is eternal. Its philosophy was 'natural synthesis' which advocates for an evolutionary adaptation of autochthonous Nigerian art forms to contemporary realities.

Uche Okeke practised what he preached-and at Enugu and later at the University of Nigeria Nsukka's Fine Arts Department, he began his famous transformation of *uli* (body designing and decoration) into a modern art form. Subsequently he went ahead to transform *uli* into a major art idiom and as the patriarch of the *Uli* movement, he made *uli* a new stylistic expression that benefits from the linearity and spiral motifs,

using forms and themes that have socio-cultural advantage in relation to content. This goes to corroborate Peri's observation that; "*Uli* patterns are derived from the local environment and reflect cultural practices" (19).

Uche Okeke and other pioneer artists such as Chike Aniakor, Chika Amaefuna, Obiora Udechukwu, El-Anatsui (a Ghanaian) and Tayo Adenaike have continued to explore the formal possibilities in transforming *uli* into modern pictorial mode and Filani has further observed that these artists "have at the same time demonstrated that *uli*, at the philosophical/ideological level, can become a trans-cultural instrument" (87). Other exponents of *uli* include Chris Afuba, Chris Echeta, Chijioke Onuora, Krdayz Ikwuemesi, Ozioma Onuzulike and many others. Amongst the women artists who have lifted the flag of *uli* are Chinwe Uwatse and Ndidi Dike, the latter a prolific sculptor who specialises in wood carving and design.

Thus, many scholars have theorised and utilised the *uli* idiom such that it has become a dominant doctrinal cleavage in contemporary Nigerian art, thereby leading to the emergence of *Ullism*³ as a movement. As a result of, and in response to this development, many art historians and writers of *uli* and non-*uli* affiliations have written on *uli* as an art philosophy, concept and form⁴. One can therefore argue that the idea of evolving a style peculiar to, and native to Nigeria, has been a major concern of Uche Okeke (who can be rightly referred to as the 'father of *Uli* art'). In an interview with the *Daily Sun Newspaper* of 16th February 2005, Uche Okeke proudly declared:

The authenticity of *Uli* art; like other theories – cubism, impressionism, expressionism – qualified it for the Thesaurus seven years ago...
Entering into the Thesaurus means it is like any other art language ...
This has made *Uli* a world language. (30)

Since we have established that some modern Nsukka-trained artists have been able to adapt *uli* to the challenges of high art (painting, sculpture, drawing, textiles, ceramics and graphics), the pertinent question is: why has the *uli* idiom not found its way into modern theatrical practice and other functional design possibilities? The original canvas on which *uli* designs were created was the human body, yet no attempt has as yet been made to study *uli* body design culture or to translate the art of *uli* body make-up into modern body design idioms. Knowing that *uli* art grew out of *uli* body decoration, one continues to query why *uli* as body decoration has not found any disciples to advance its cause to such a level as *uli* art has been taken to. Ikwuemesi, one of the

Nsukka artists, wittingly or unwittingly, exposes the need to adapt *uli* to other design possibilities:

If the modern *Uli* artists could succeed in evoking the *Uli* spirit in their work using modern – if western – mediums, there is every reason for *Uli* to find resurrection in modern exterior and interior designs ... cosmetics ... and similar products. (7)

Uli is an aspect of the Igbo people's culture. As a way of developing a Nigerian or Igbo theatre built on truly African values, the adaptation of *uli* idioms into contemporary theatre practice ought arguably, to become an imperative for artists from theatre to fashion. This would go to support the observations made by scholars such as Ikwuemesi, Eze, Uche Okeke and Filani, who uphold the view that the *uli* design idiom is susceptible to wider application outside the domain of the visual arts. These scholars propose the need to expand the scope of the *uli* design culture and discover possibilities for *uli* in other aspects of modern design technicalities, functions and aesthetic spaces such as theatrical make-up design.

Body Design in African Culture

Design conceptualisations reverberate throughout African ritual and social life, merging the practical with the ideological. Taken as a whole, African design forms could be interpreted as celebrations of life, including the social and spiritual essence. As I have posited elsewhere:

They were an essential part of the people's way of life such that there was an elaborate artistic display during festivals, wrestling matches, as well as in displays, dances and historical enactments. Artistic skills were quite dominant in ... body decorations. (410)

Body designing is essential decoration in African culture; for instance, among ancient Egyptians and Nubians both men and women, particularly the aristocrats, took good care of their appearances by using elaborate make-up and splendid jewellery. This goes to buttress the point made by Wolf, that "many mammals groom and every culture uses body adornment" (in Kramarae and Spender 446). Trowel also reiterates the point, stating that; "Body adornment is a form of art in which aesthetic values are shown" (40). Body designing or decoration is a cultural activity which is widely practiced across Africa. They emphasise fixed social, political and religious roles. Body designs in most African societies have

been used to signal specific roles and status in many communities, celebrate the passage into sexual maturity, or to confirm spiritual experience.

As Hewitt observes, "It nearly always follows aesthetic as well as social canons". (15) In many traditional societies in which climate and custom permit scant clothing, body designing is common and is considered to be artistically and socially valuable. Trowel reiterates that; "the exposure of more parts of the body, because of their hot climate, made the Africans skilfully decorate the body" (45).

Body design distinguishes and differentiates an individual, and the precise meaning of the designs or patterns is unique for each person and society. Among the Baule of Ivory Coast, for instance, permanent body designing is made purely for cosmetic purposes. The Baule present a good example of the fashions of body designs, and these vary from time to time and from place to place. Vogel identifies a common pattern which was recurrent among the Baule. This consisted of "three, six or nine small scars on the nose" (82). Bohannon also gives evidence of the passing trends in body adornment among the Tiv of Nigeria. He observes that

Tiv body adornment is purely aesthetic and the designs may mark the wearer's generation since the patterns change about every ten years or according to fashion (76).

Body designs exist in temporary and permanent forms. Temporary forms include those made with dyes, different colours of chalks and mineral deposits. The permanent forms are believed to have their origin in body painting which can be found even earlier than rock-paintings. Permanent body designs such as tattoo, piercing, branding and cicatrisations, were associated with rites of passage or tests of bravery or even spiritual experience and as such, they tended to indicate social status and social structure. Thus, the cultural significance of body designs in theatre and fashion is something that requires serious attention in the current of globalisation and commodification of cultural practices. As Hewitt has pointed out:

The body is considered meaningful beyond its mechanistic ability to function. It is an avenue of social and spiritual meaning, and allows humankind to write their past, present and future upon the intimate and yet public self of their physical being. (12)

Permanent body designs made by incision were very significant in many societies such as among the Igbo of Nigeria, and the Baule of Ivory Coast. A lot of stock was placed on the intricacies and patterns of designs as well as on the pain the wearers endured in the process of application, proof of which can be seen and so identified with the designs. Pain is a crucial part of initiatory rites of passage. It serves to elevate the status of the individual who proudly undergoes the process as an integral part of the social conventions for establishing his or her worth in society. Pain also facilitates catharsis and healing. Thus, the social status of the chieftain or warrior or any other member of the society who had received permanent body markings was clearly recognisable. A case in point is the *Ichi* marks of the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. *Ichi* are closely carved continuous marks made in parallel rows over the entire upper part of the face, including the eye-lids, parts of the nose and the cheek bones. Basden reports that among the Igbo, a full set of *Ichi* marks was the highest mark of honour and bravery a youth or a man could achieve (141). Similar practices have existed among the various ethnic groups of Nigeria, where Negri identifies, in addition to the *Ichi* marks of the Igbo, the *Gbere* marks of the Yoruba ethnic group which were made for protection, the royal marks of Benin made for its aesthetic appeal, the Fulani face marks made for ethnic identity and for the enhancement of facial features, and many other permanent body design practices.

In most of Africa, temporary and permanent body designs have social and ritual significance as well as satisfying the human need for beauty. Negri identifies two major types of permanent body adornment among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. She groups all the markings made for ethnic identity under one category. Examples include the Ogbomosho face-marks, and the royal marks of Oyo which are drawn as gashes on the whole length of the arms and legs. These have definite forms to distinguish various families within a clan, village, or geographical area. In the second category could be found decoration marks and fertility symbols. An example is the *fin-fin* cuts which are made in groups in geometric patterns over almost the whole of a woman's body. These marks enhance feminine appeal (9-10). The Yombe of Zaire also promotes female beauty. The elaborate body markings which cover the back and front of a woman among the Yombe, illustrate a lengthy process which begins at the age of ten and is completed when a woman reaches adulthood and is eligible for marriage. The patterns mimic the patterns apparent in basketwork and textiles.

Patterns which re-occur throughout African societies are reproduced on the body since they represent the people's concepts of, and values for beauty. Social and ethnic values are imprinted using aesthetically pleasing design patterns. In the case of the Yombe, Hooper associates beautiful patterns with attractiveness. This seems appropriate since success in marriage is recorded through attractive body designs, whether on a male or a female body. A person is thus, able to enter the social stages of the community through different patterns of body designs (182). In ancient Egypt too, body designs such as tattoo and henna were thought to be somewhat erotic and were also linked to fertility. Scholars have recorded that it was fashionable among entertainers who danced and sang at social gatherings to be tattooed, and this form of body art could often be found on breasts, thighs, arms, torsos, chins and even noses.

Temporary body designing has been recorded as possessing great social values for the many ethnic groups in Africa. Two types of temporary body designs are distinguishable among the many design practices – the temporarily indelible body designs which last a few days, weeks or months as the case may be; and the instant make-up designs that wash-off straight away. Among the Hausa in the Northern part of Nigeria, Negri observes that the application of temporary body design is a widespread practice. Henna make-up is extensively used to design the hands and the feet. On the 'Night of Henna' which is a pre-marriage ceremony observed among Nupe women, for instance, the hands and feet are usually immersed in a pot of henna liquid to signal the transition into a new social group - married women. Other types of temporary make-up used amongst the Nupe are black indigo which is rubbed into the hair, yellow ochre used on the lips, and red camwood which is rubbed over the teeth (14).

One of the make-up materials that enjoys cross-cultural patronage in Nigeria is *Tiro* (native antimony or lead-ore). This material is usually ground into a fine substance which may be mixed with soot and indigo for a more attractive colour. Negri explains that "Tiro is kept in a small phial and applied on the eyelid with a thin ivory or bone-stick, thus affecting a blush-black tinge" (14). Among the many temporary make-up practices in the body design repertoire of Nigeria, *uli* body design tradition among the Igbo held much fascination for many scholars including early European visitors who met the Igbo already practicing the make-up technique. Basden in his book *Niger Ibos* which he wrote in 1917 after having spent seventeen years among the Igbo narrated seeing

both men and women wearing the designs (95). Scholars such as Eze isolate two categories of *uli*: the somatic and the mural *uli*. The former is on the human body. The latter is on the walls of houses. The body variety consists of simple to intricate geometric patterns or other diverse artistic expressions. All sorts of objects including human, animal, plant, and anionic figures are just some of the examples. Eze goes further to explain that;

One way to gauge the importance of a special event was whether wearing the somatic *Uli* was obligatory or strongly recommended. Rites of passage, wedding, and second funeral are only some of such celebrations where the bearing of somatic *Uli* was de rigueur (56).

Many scholars thus bear witness to the centrality of body designs – whether permanent or temporary in traditional African societies. The fact that these design practices play important roles in a wide range of ceremonies from rites of passage, healing and war to agriculture and many others is an indication of the enormous potentials of African body design traditions.

Modernity and globalisation have impacted on traditional attitudes to autochthonous body decorations. Many design practices have been gradually and even sometimes hurriedly dropped from the design repertoire. In West Africa, for instance, many of the design practices which existed in traditional society such as facial/tribal markings, body decorations and incisions have been abandoned. Many urban elites see these design practices as connecting people to an unenlightened past. Thus, through acculturation, local values are deprecated and replaced by Western cultural ideology's fetishisation of the 'natural body'. Ironically, the so called 'primitive' design cultures are currently the symbols and inspiration for an alternative subculture in the Western societies that rejected them. This is evident in the increasing vibrant tattoo culture of Western societies, as well as the exportation of same to those very cultures which gave it birth and from where it was appropriated. Owning up to this double-standard, Rowanchilde confesses:

Africa can be called the cradle of body-decoration because in nearly every tribe in African regions and landscapes, different forms of body-decoration are usual; slightly changed, they can be found in *our (western) culture* today. (40) (Emphasis mine)

Given these diverse cultural applications and social implications of body designs, it is no surprise therefore, that body decoration has

continued to hold sway as an essential means of physical embellishment, especially in the light of modern scientific advancements and technological breakthroughs. With the aid of make-up, a person is transformed into whatever image he or she desires to present to the world. Body designs thus, link men or women through time and space, to that primordial setting when disguise was a necessity and *man* acquired psychological leverage over his fellows and forces of his environment by masking or altering his natural features; a practice appropriated by the actor on stage, who must, through make-up, become the character his role demands.

The Igbo Uli Body Design

Uli body design is a unique make-up art practiced by the Igbo of Nigeria. *Uli* is the art of decorating the body in patterns with liquid juices extracted from *uli* pods from the *Randi Cordetta* tree. The liquid is a dark monochromatic indigo dye containing the colouring agent *indigotin*, which is obtained from a variety of plants and used for body decoration. The dye which is extracted from the pods of specific varieties of trees or the fruits from a shrub-like plant is known as *uli*. The plants which yield the pods or fruits from which the dye is extracted are also known as *uli*, and when the dye is applied to the skin, the patterns or motifs created as designs on the body are also called *uli*. *Uli* therefore, refers to the material and method of design presentation. *Uli* make-up design - which entails drawing beautiful patterns on the body with the *uli* liquid - highlights in a special way the distinctive features of the person being designed. The designs beautify the body, make a person feel more unique, and attract the opposite sex. As Uche Okeke opines:

Uli drawing is an attempt I think, to enhance the beauty of the human body in the same way as for example, the python is attractively striped.
(25)

Uli designs, patterns and motifs go beyond their physical attractiveness to depict the cultural, spiritual and religious disposition of a community. The designs usually reflect and epitomise the essence of a festival or ceremony. As well as being a form of personal expression and individuality, the highly stylised forms of the designs embody the people's common perception of nature. Bediako maintains that:

Uli is an Igbo art form initially used by women to decorate the body and walls on certain occasions. It consists of a system of symbolic and

graphic designs; some of them refer to animals, plants and material objects, others, are abstract designs (163)

Uli make-up design may be considered the highest form of body adornment art in Igboland and enjoys great patronage from the people.

***Uli* Body Design and Multimedia Application**

Uli body designing is a highly developed traditional art form. The designs are unique in their treatment, concept and attention to details. This design idiom has much potential for contemporary artists/designers in traditional and contemporary settings. The theatre as a carrier and preserver of culture is a good place to showcase *uli* body design, document the practice, and in the process institute the design tradition for posterity. This will provide the much needed avenue for transmitting this rich artistic heritage into modern artistic expressions. By this move too, the theatre would be better-placed to challenge foreign influences directed to the total eradication of cultural forms like *uli* and many other highly challenging and aesthetically pleasing art forms, under the guise of westernisation. The transformation of *uli* design techniques from the traditional setting where it embodies the people's socio-cultural ideals, to the theatre where it will become a tool for character definition, role interpretation and means for cultural preservation, would be of great benefit both to the theatre and to Igbo society that yielded it. The search for contemporary relevance for *uli* has attracted concerns elsewhere for Ikwuemesi queries concernedly:

Why has *Uli* not found new expressions in contemporary ideas and creativity? Why has it remained a relic part of the tatters of a past that must be jettisoned in its entirety? (8)

Uli design has sadly been caught up in the prevailing cultural self-effacement that is also the lot of traditional design practices among other Nigerian ethnic groups. Many middle-aged and elderly women interviewed in the course of this research blamed the abandonment of traditional make-up materials on the influence of westernisation and foreign religion. They confirmed that the church smothered the practice of traditional body designing through condemnations, denouncements and indoctrination. Christians were made to believe that traditional body designing is a sinful, immoral and 'pagan' act, capable of sending one to hell. As a result, traditional methods of body adornment were abandoned. The situation is summed up by Ikwuemesi thus:

In the Igbo villages, *Uli* has died so that the new generations of women and young maidens can clap and dance their ways into heaven uninterrupted. (viii)

A critical, analytical study of *uli* design technique has yielded hard facts contrary to the much publicised western propaganda being paraded by western apologists, teleguided to consciously destroy their own cultures in order to make way for commercialised western make-up. Research has shown that there is nothing 'heathen' about *uli* body designs. No deities are consulted before or after the designing process; and no incantations are made during the collection and use of the designing materials. *Uli* trees are not dedicated to any gods or oracles. The only logical conclusion which can be drawn from these submissions is that *Uli* designers and their designs are caught up in the politics of culture. Therefore, if socio-political circumstances have foisted new values upon society, old ideas and traditions can be given new channels of expression to bring them up-to-date with contemporary art practice. Efforts ought to be made by art and culture scholars to educate those who have accepted western propaganda about African cultures hook, line and sinker, and alert them to the dangers of cultural genocide. Which other medium can be used to or has the capacity to influence society and culture and the platform to "educate, inform and entertain" other than the creative arts?

In the three decades following the Nigeria civil war some modern Nigerian artists at the University of Nigeria Nsukka have adapted ideas from classical *uli* paintings and drawings to reinforce their philosophy and to enrich their works. Over the years, *Uli* has influenced the works of artists in painting, textile, sculpture, graphics and ceramics, not only at Nsukka but also in places and centres where the Nsukka artists have operated as artists, teachers or theoreticians. Some other ethnic groups in Nigeria have also adapted design idioms from their cultures into modern art concepts. An example is the *Ona* art which utilises patterns and motifs adapted from Yoruba artistic heritage. This goes to prove that modern Nigerian art can align with tradition and derive new energies from the past. Sadly, the same cannot be said about traditional body design practices especially as utilised in the theatre. Make-up designers in the theatre are yet to rise to the challenges of translating traditional make-up idioms into modern concepts, styles and practices. The original canvas on which *uli* designs were made was the human body. Make-up designers ought to provide a channel for the translation of *uli* designs into contemporary theatrical design concepts.

Uli designers in traditional Igbo society were so skilled that one could rightly assert that most of them attained some measure of professionalism in the art. Knowledge of their methods and skills would be of immense benefit to the make-up designer in contemporary Nigerian and African theatres. *Uli* designers did not only create unique design patterns, they gave their clients personal undivided attention. Their method of administering this beauty treatment ensured people were given any unique designs they desired. The designers could create designs solely for a person which may not be copied for another. This is an advantage for the contemporary theatre, especially the video movie industry where the craze for custom-made designer wears and the desire to create an 'image' is the preoccupation of many actors and actresses.

The trend going on in many Igbo communities in recent times is a conscious move towards cultural revival. Many young men and women in a bid to recapture the near – extinct cultural heritage of their people, have taken to wearing period costumes and make-up during their traditional weddings. A new consciousness for 'the proper cultural look' has caught on, whereby brides and grooms strive to recapture the perceived cultural image of an Igbo bride and groom. Spectators have shown great admiration and appreciation bothering on pride, for this unique cultural heritage. Entrenching *uli* as a make-up practice both in the society and contemporary theatre will no doubt appeal to the sensibilities of the audience.

The make-up for actors and actresses can be designed with *uli* for epic productions and even for character definitions in contemporary plays. Many of the imported make-up materials for theatre use, such as lipsticks, rouges, eye pencil, pancakes, concealers, grease paint and many others were not originally meant for black skin and as such, do not adequately produce the expected effects when applied. For instance, when used on black skin foreign concealers produce mask-like effect on the face and patches rather than conceal defects and blemishes. This undermines the work of make-up designers. Most of the make-up materials are either oil based or water based and because of their synthetic nature, they tend to smudge or run when exposed to sunlight, water, heat, or any activity requiring some form of physical exertion. *Uli* make-up is derived from natural sources and does not smudge under any circumstances. With its introduction into the theatre, *uli* is going to enhance the efficiency of make-up artists and designers.

Uli could become an indispensable source of make-up for the movie industry. Most epic films produced by the Nigerian Movie Industry

hardly portray African culture, even when they set out to do so. *Uli* make-up would project features favourably in the movies where the eye of the camera easily picks up discrepancies and inadequacies. In order to ensure unity of time and actions, especially where scenes involving a character wearing the same make-up design are not shot in one day, the designer might have problems replicating the exact designs unless the designs were properly documented on paper. But if actors and actresses' make-up for these productions are done with *uli*, the designs would stay longer on the skin. They may even be retouched by tracing the initial lines and marks when they begin to fade, should the need arise. *Uli* designs usually last for five days before they begin to fade, and eight to ten days before they fade out completely. *Uli* designs could last the number of days which actors and actresses would spend on location for a particular production. In effect, the eight to ten days life-span of designs would sustain the entire shooting and fade at the close of the production.

Uli design motifs are a legacy, as they represent things of physical importance, aesthetic appeal and socio-cultural relevance. The theatre/movie industry would exhibit professionalism and knowledge born out of conscious research, when concerted efforts are made to incorporate traditional design motif and materials. Some cultures use basic patterns in their design practices and *uli* falls into such a group. One notices an array of patterns purportedly representing *uli* design motifs but which do not even reflect the essence of any known African motifs. Such designs undermine the socio-cultural significance of Igbo and African motifs and subject characters to wrong cultural interpretations. When the aim is to transpose *uli* motifs, designers ought to understand the basic motifs in *uli* design lexicon if they are to successfully adapt them to modern patterns for the theatre.

Uli art utilising *uli* design motifs would become in as a useful style for designing scenery in play productions. Murals could be painted on sets in bold forms as part of the scenic background. The designs could be made on canvas and used as backdrops or on flats and kept for future use. I note here, the fact that mural paintings were carried out with *uli* on compound walls, walls of houses and public/religious arena in traditional Igbo society (see Filani, 2005: 86).

The theatre could halt the gradual erosion of Igbo cultural practices by making a decisive move towards the adaptation and adoption of *uli* design as theatrical make-up, a practice that Ikwuemesi, a visual artist laments:

The *Uli* women painters and their work have become an endangered species. They are not necessarily a spent force, but frightened horses cowed and over-awed by a conquering, imported tradition which uses religion as its principal war horse. (3)

Bearing in mind that art is not static, but a material process that grows, evolves and undergoes changes and modifications as a way of finding new expressions, this paper proposes the integration of new ideas into the existing *uli* design tradition. By adopting *uli* the contemporary theatre performance makers, especially theatre practitioners can explore the possibilities of translating the design elements into post-modern idioms. *Uli* motifs, design processes and materials may be repackaged to make them more versatile and more compliant to contemporary design techniques and usage. Since *uli* is not just the tree or the dye which the tree yields but also the style inherent in the motifs, symbols and patterns which are designed on the body, these design idioms can be appropriated using modern mediums such as black eye pencil and black drawing pen. This will engender universal acceptability and with widespread support, *uli* designs would find new expressions and channels for exhibition within and outside their primary/present domain as fashion and beauty design and products.

Conclusions

Uli designers should be encouraged to map out strategies for placing *uli* design culture in the fashion vocabulary of Igbo society, so that *uli* designing would become big business in the same way as, for instance, tattooing is becoming a widely accepted fashion statement in recent times. *Uli* designers would then earn a living just like graphic artists, hairdressers, modern make-up designers, fashion designers and many other skilled artists. This will reduce unemployment and dependency amongst the women designers and also give the economy a boost by adding to the *per capita* income.

Uli designers in traditional Igbo society were highly skilled; knowledge of their methods and skills would be of immense benefit to contemporary Igbo and African societies and theatres. The government, theatre designers and concerned individuals should pool efforts and resources to organise workshops, seminars and practical demonstrations where the few existing designers would serve as instructors. Efforts should be made as a matter of urgency, to reach these designers and tap their skills for posterity as majority of them are getting on in years.

Costume, make-up and other design lecturers in the nation's higher institutions of learning-should take the study of traditional African body designs such as *uli* as a challenge. Efforts should be made to incorporate these design idioms into the curriculum so that course contents for Make-up Design for instance, would reflect the versatility of these designs and their potential applications to Creative Art practice. Students and lecturers should be encouraged through sponsorships or grants to pursue the study of traditional make-up techniques and to experiment with such in educational and professional theatre productions.

Theatre practitioners ought to explore different means of improving on traditional design techniques and possibly remodel them for a modern clientele and settings. In line with current production concerns, major cosmetic industry leaders should take the lead in the creation and mass production of indigenous semi-permanent make-up. The temporarily indelible nature of *uli* no doubt qualifies it as a semi-permanent make-up. Opening up *uli* to the contemporary theatre would enhance its universal acceptance. The dye from the *uli* pod which is the make-up substance should be taken to the laboratory for scientific analysis and consequently refined and used for the mass-production of cosmetics, so that *uli* make-up retains its heavy pigment as well as becoming available for the mass market as a make-up and fashion accessory.

Uli design tradition is an artistic legacy of traditional Igbo society. It is disheartening to witness a systematic destruction of this cultural practice as a result of misconceptions and misinformation. As the situation stands, it is obvious that Igbo society, albeit African society, is gradually sliding towards cultural genocide. A revival of *uli* body design practice will go a long way to disabuse people's minds of negative attitudes to traditional design practices. Many traditional body design practices have remained largely unexplored and, therefore, whatever prospects they may have for the modern setting may remain undiscovered, unless a conscious effort is made to research into, and document such design practices. With some encouragement *uli* design may find new expressions and channels for exhibition out side the society of its birth.

Uli trees possess enormous socio-cultural and economic values; therefore, effort should be made to preserve them. As a way of complementing the government's efforts in the battle against deforestation the relevant government agencies and concerned individuals should embark on *uli* tree-planting exercises. This will boost production and make *uli* more readily available for designing and fashion

purposes. Research into the well-publicised curative qualities of *uli* is recommended. The medicinal properties contained in *uli* should be subjected to laboratory analysis and efforts made to manufacture drugs using *uli* as the raw material. Finally, as a potential fashion and theatre trade accessory, there is a great need to manufacture instant removal solvent for *uli*. This will take care of the only seeming deficiency of *uli* design which is the temporarily indelible nature of the designs. Such a move would endear *uli* designs to actors and actresses as well as the wider society.

Notes

¹ Note that the arts of make-up and costume were primarily employed in traditional societies, as a means of trapping animals or procuring items which man needed for his food. For further reading see Vera Roberts, *On Stage: A History of Theatre*. 2nd Ed, New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

² The following were members of the Zaria Art Society: Yusuf Grillo, Demas Nwoko, William Olaosebikan, Emmanuel Okechukwu Odita, Oseloka Osadebe, Ogbonnaya Nwagbara, Felix Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Simon Obiekezie Okeke and Uche Okeke. For more information on the Zaria School (see Dele Jegede, 1983: 43-50).

³ *Ullism* is a movement which grew out of the 'Nsukka School'. It is the practice whereby, artists utilise the forms and motifs of the Igbo *Uli* body designs and wall painting, adapting them to the challenges of modern art practice. (See also Jegede, 2002: 181-192).

⁴ Books and papers/articles by these writers include: Uche Okeke's *Design Inspiration Through Uli* (1981); Chike Aniakor's "What is Uli?: The Emergence of a Modern Art Idiom" in *Uli Art: Master Works, Recent Works, Exhibition Folder* (1995); Chika Okeke's "Obiora Udechukwu: The Uli Artists from Nigeria" in *Contemporary Textures: Multidimensionality in Nigerian Art* (1999); Dele Jegede's *Globalizing Ullism* (2002); Chris Ikwuemesi and Emeka Agbaiyi's *The Rediscovery of Tradition: Uli and the Politics of Culture* (2005).

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