

LINEAR AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF BEN ONOURAH OSONDU, OBIORAH UDECHUKWU AND UCHE OKEKE'S VISUAL ARTS.

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of linear aesthetics and Igbo traditional motifs in the drawings of Ben Onuorah Osondu, Obiorah Udechukwu, and Uche Okeke, focusing on how these artists engage indigenous visual systems such as Uli and Nsibidi to construct cultural narratives. Through formal and contextual analysis, the study reveals how each artist reinterprets indigenous symbols to address contemporary socio-political and philosophical themes. Employing a comparative lens, the research highlights aesthetic differences and ideological convergences in their works, positioning them within the framework of postcolonial African modernism and visual storytelling. The study underscores the significance of drawing as a medium for preserving Igbo heritage and articulating post-independence Nigerian identity.

Keywords: *Uli, Nsibidi, Linear Drawing, Igbo Art, Cultural Narrative, Indigenous Aesthetics, Nigerian Modernism, Postcolonial Identity, Osondu, Udechukwu, Uche Okeke*

Introduction

In the continuing evolution of African art history, Igbo traditional visual systems such as *Uli* and *Nsibidi* have resurfaced as vital sources of contemporary artistic expression. Rather than existing as static remnants of the past, these indigenous sign systems now function as living visual languages through which modern artists negotiate memory, identity, and historical consciousness. Artists such as **Ben Onuorah Osondu, Obiora Udechukwu, and Uche Okeke** have been central to this resurgence, reinterpreting traditional

linear aesthetics in ways that address postcolonial realities, cultural continuity, and the ongoing search for self-definition within modern African art.

In their drawings, line operates as more than a formal element; it becomes a vehicle for symbolism, storytelling, and encoded cultural philosophy rooted in Igbo visual thought. By transforming the fluid linearity of Uli and the ideographic structure of Nsibidi into contemporary drawing practices, these artists establish a dialogue between past and present, heritage and innovation. Their works reveal how indigenous aesthetics remain intellectually and spiritually relevant in shaping present-day African visual identity, while also serving as subtle yet powerful responses to histories of colonial disruption and cultural displacement.

This study focuses on selected drawings by Ben Onuorah Osondu, Obiora Udechukwu, and Uche Okeke that incorporate Igbo traditional motifs, particularly Uli and Nsibidi symbols. Situated within the broader framework of Nigerian postcolonial art, the research adopts a comparative and contextual approach to understand how tradition is not merely preserved but actively reimagined through contemporary linear expression.

This study aims to examine how linear drawing styles in the works of these artists function as **cultural narratives** through the adaptation and reinterpretation of Igbo traditional motifs. To achieve this, the study seeks to:

1. analyze the formal qualities of their drawings, particularly the use of line, composition, and visual structure;
2. investigate the contextual and symbolic meanings embedded in the traditional motifs they employ; and
3. compare their artistic approaches in order to understand how indigenous aesthetics contribute to contemporary African visual identity.

Guiding this inquiry are the following research questions:

- How do the selected artists utilize Igbo traditional motifs in their drawings?
- What cultural narratives emerge from their reinterpretation of Uli and Nsibidi symbols?
- How do their formal styles differ or align in expressing indigenous aesthetics?
- In what ways do these artists contribute to postcolonial discourses through drawing?

Together, these questions position drawing not simply as a medium of visual representation, but as a site of cultural memory, intellectual resistance, and aesthetic continuity within contemporary African art practice.

This paper contributes to African art scholarship in three distinct ways. First, it expands the canonical discourse of the Nsukka School by introducing **Ben Onourah Osondu**—a previously under-theorized artist—alongside the well-documented Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu. Second, it advances a **comparative framework** that distinguishes three distinct ideological orientations within the same visual tradition: Okeke's metaphysical abstraction, Udechukwu's socio-political humanism, and Osondu's ethnographic narration. Third, it argues for **linear aesthetics as an epistemological system**—demonstrating how line in Igbo-derived art functions not as decoration but as a carrier of philosophy, memory, and resistance. This study thereby enriches postcolonial modernism discourse by positioning drawing as a decolonial practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical perspectives: **postcolonial decolonial theory** and **visual semiotics**.

Postcolonial Decolonial Theory: Drawing on the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) and Okwui Enwezor (2002), this framework posits that artistic practices in postcolonial Africa are not merely aesthetic but constitute acts of epistemic resistance. For Igbo artists like Okeke, Udechukwu, and Osondu, the revival of *Uli* and *Nsibidi* represents a deliberate decolonization of visual language—rejecting Western modernist hegemony while asserting indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate, intellectual, and contemporary.

Visual Semiotics (Peircean Model): Following Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–1958) and Roland Barthes (1972), this study treats *Uli* lines and *Nsibidi* symbols as **signs** operating on iconic, indexical, and symbolic levels. The line is not merely a formal element but a **signifier** of cultural memory, spiritual authority, or social critique. This semiotic lens allows the analysis to move beyond description into interpretation of meaning-making.

By integrating these frameworks, the study positions drawing as a **decolonial archive** and a **narrative medium** through which Igbo aesthetics are translated into contemporary visual discourse.

Literature Review

The intersection of art and culture in Igbo tradition has been explored by several scholars. Okeke-Agulu (2015) highlights the significance of Igbo cultural heritage in shaping the works of modern Nigerian artists, including Uche Okeke, Ben Onourah Osondu, and Obiora Udechukwu. According to Okeke-Agulu, 'Igbo cultural traditions provide a rich source of inspiration for artists seeking to express their identity and cultural roots' (p.123). Similarly, Ottenberg (1977) discusses the importance of Igbo aesthetics in the artworks of Obiora Udechukwu, noting that his drawings often incorporate traditional Igbo motifs and symbolism. Ben Onourah Osondu's work, though less documented, also reflects Igbo cultural themes and

proverbs, contributing to the preservation of Igbo heritage through art. In this case study, these three artists-Ben Onuorah Osondu, Obiora Udechukwu, and Uche Okeke-exemplify the fusion of Igbo cultural traditions with modern artistic expressions. Uche Okeke's work, as analyzed by Oyelola (2002), often incorporates Igbo mythological themes and symbols, serving as a bridge between traditional culture and contemporary art. Obiora Udechukwu's drawings, on the other hand, are characterized by their intricate patterns and Igbo-inspired aesthetics (Ottenberg, 1997). Ben Onuorah Osondu's artistic style, while unique, also draws from Igbo axioms and cultural narratives, enriching the discourse on Igbo art and culture.

Methodology

This qualitative research employs:

1. Formal analysis to assess use of line, composition, symmetry, and symbolic integration of motifs
2. Contextual analysis to interpret cultural meanings and socio-political themes.
3. Comparative Study: To highlight stylistic and thematic difference and commonalities among the artists

The data for this study were from both primary and secondary sources. They were sourced from catalogues, interviews, books, peer-reviewed journals, and high-resolution images of selected artworks.

Biographical Sketches of the Three Artists

Ben Onuorah Osondu:

He is a contemporary Igbo linear artist known for his intricate use of line and cultural motifs. Osondu integrates *Uli* and *Nsibidi* in ways that emphasize storytelling and ancestral memory. His works often

depict folkloric and moral scenes rendered through minimalist line quality. He had his art education at the Yaba College of Technology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and University of Benin, where he graduated with National Diploma (N.D) in General Art, Bachelor's degree (B.A) in Fine and Applied Arts with Education and Master of Fine Art (M.F.A) in Painting respectively. He started the Osundu, Soul Searcher, and Spirit of Africa series of dazzling artwork with strokes effect. Osondu's series of collections of well over 100 cultural heritage drawings. These drawings are characterized by symmetric lines to show different socio-cultural phenomenon. In most of his works, pattern lines are deliberately organized to dazzle and mesmerize the artist himself and the viewer to instill different motifs, also having in them thin and solid linear impression to show off perpetual and concentric movements.

With either ink or with pen over paper or acrylic on canvas, he tells individual stories without necessarily planning the outcome that ends up making sense in the whole of life and narratives in other culture. He had Art projects in book illustration and cartooning; Professional certifications in Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist (MCTS) 2008, Microsoft Certified Professional Developer (MCPD) 2011, Oracle Certified Professional Java Programmer (OCPJP) 2011, held solo and 2-4 persons show, group exhibitions, and as a computer scientist, he specializes in software engineering and artificial intelligence.

Osondu's drawings are Afrocentric in nature and are characterized by symmetric lines, portraying different social cultural phenomena which are inspired by the rich Igbo philosophical ideology such as *Uli* and *Nsibidi* designs as well as everyday life. The lines were deliberately organized to dazzle the spectators; different motives, thin and thick lines showing movements and complexity of human mind, thought process and imagination. During the creative process, the lines are allowed to guide or direct itself and tell its own

story. The artist does not necessarily decide or plan the outcome before the commencement of the works which supposed to have their own lives and narratives.

Obiora Udechukwu

Obiora Udechukwu was born in 1946 in Onitsha, Nigeria and studied at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria for just one year and later moved to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka at the beginning of the Nigerian Civil War where he worked in the propaganda Unit and took part in the art and writing workshops. He began what was to be more than a decade-long process of studying *Uli* designs and experimenting in the method of Natural Synthesis, defined by Uche Okeke. Obiora also incorporated *Nsibidi* into his drawings; this design system was a system of motifs associated with male secret society known as *Ekpe*. It is a form of indigenous pictographic motif, which represents express characteristics of human relationships, such as love, marriage and divorce. Many of his drawings depict ordinary people; his wartime activities inspired pieces that showed great suffering that he witnessed. Also, his drawings ranged from philosophical subjects to socio-political commentary.

Obiora Udechukwu is one of the leading exponents of *Uli* movement in contemporary Nigerian art. This traditional Igbo linear expression is a design which is drawn on human body with a special tool called *mmanwuli*. In his search for a personal idiom of artistic expression, Obiora Udechukwu has transformed the *Uli* from mere body decoration into an aesthetic 'hot line' just to communicate human emotions and aspiration. Unlike other *Uli* artists, such as Okeke who is more concerned with Igbo folklore and the ancestral past, Chuka Amaefunah who dwells on the beauty of *Ana*, the Igbo earth goddess, as seen on the body of *Eke*, the sacred python, or Tayo Adenaike who conjures images of childhood fears. Obiora Udechukwu focused on the poor-the trodden masses-whose social

condition is very severe and precarious that they are not sure of the next meal. In many of his drawings under review, agitated or motionless drawings of human figures stare us in the face as though prying into our conscience or pleading for social justice; others simply ignore our presence as though fed up with life and only waiting for the worst to happen.

Obiora Udechukwu has not directed his *mmanwuli* to the human predicament alone. He is also interested in the sensuous aspects of human existence such as dance, music, visual pleasure and personal fulfillment. In his use of negative space in his drawings, Obiora writes 'the ingenious exploitation of large negative areas in a picture in such a way, for instance, that with the strategic deployment of just a few motifs, the picture looks right and the large spaces provide the areas of rest for the eyes while at the same time emphasizing or delimiting the motifs. This is one of the 'tricks' of the Igbo muralist that I try to use in my own work' (Udechukwu 1980:44).

Uchefuna Okeke Christopher (1933-2016)

Christopher Uchefuna Okeke, also known as Uche Okeke was an artist from Anambra State. He was influenced by his mother who was skillful in '*Uli*'- a form of body and wall painting popular among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria. Being the protégée of his mother, he explored the Igbo folklore and traditions and learnt the basics of '*Uli*'. He was a native of Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State. He attended St. Peter Claver's (Primary) School, Kafanchan; Metropolitan College, Onitsha; and Bishop Shanahan College, Orlu, all in Nigeria. During this period, he had already begun to demonstrate avid interest in drawing. Nonetheless, before he was admitted at Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), now Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, he already exhibited taxidermy work during the Field Society meeting in Jos and also participated in the preparation and presentation of Nigerian

drawings, with Bernard Fagg as curator, and had a solo exhibition of drawings and paintings in Jos and Kaduna State, having Sir Ahmadu Bello as guest of honor (Bernice M., 1993, pp.361–368). He was one of the founding members of the Zaria Art Society in 1958. This society opposed the imposition of European art school ideas on up- and-coming artists in Nigeria which brought into existence the natural synthesis.

Uche Okeke joined the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka as a professor and teacher in 1971. Together with his colleagues, a new and unique style in drawing came into existence which became the trait of Nsukka School. The formation of art and aesthetics of Nigerian modernism in the seventies was established by Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu (Ikwemesi C.K, 2010, pp.15-19). In his early childhood, he was exposed to Igbo folktales as a child which he later adapted. In his drawings, he rendered the heroic mythological figures to draw attention to his Igbo heritage (Windmuller , 2015).

In the Igbo culture, there is an evidence of an ancient artistic culture. The traditional Igbo art form is called *Uli* Drawing. Okeke opine that *Uli* is an attempt to enhance the beauty of the human body. The *Uli* artist is a female in Igbo society who designs patterns on the human body and sometimes on walls of sacred places. Okeke's drawings have freedom and expressiveness of line in addition to a marked interest in patterns which typifies Okeke's drawing experiments. His lines and patterns tell tales of a highly personalized idiom of deep culturist ambience. These essential qualities are evident in works such as '*Uko the Warrior*' among other drawings he executed in his linear expressions (Egonwa, 2001, p.56).

Artistic Contributions of Ben Onuorah Osondu; Obiora Udechukwu, and Uche Okeke's Visual Depiction

Ben Onuorah Osondu's work is notable for its incorporation of Igbo axioms, proverbs and cultural narratives. His drawings often serve as

visual representations of Igbo philosophical thoughts and traditional wisdom, making his art a medium for cultural preservation. Besides, Obiora Udechukwu's artistic style is characterized by intricate patterns and motifs inspired by Igbo aesthetics. His works reflect a deep engagement with Igbo cultural heritage, while also exploring themes of modernity and social commentary. Furthermore, Uche Okeke, as a pioneer of modern Nigerian art, his work significantly contributed to the development of a distinct Nigerian artistic identity. Okeke's incorporation of Igbo mythological themes and symbols in his art helped to establish a connection between traditional Igbo culture and contemporary artistic expressions.

Formal and Contextual Analysis

The drawings of Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, and Ben Onuorah Osondu reflect a deep engagement with Igbo traditional aesthetics, particularly through their use of line, symbolism, and indigenous motifs. Each artist, while operating within the broader scope of Nigerian postcolonial modernism, adopts unique formal strategies and contextual meanings to express cultural identity and socio-political commentary.

Under this section, the formal analysis is all about breaking down the visual elements of the artworks of the three artists. This approach helps the viewer's understanding the artists' techniques and intentions, providing a deeper insight into the artwork's meaning and aesthetic appeal. More so, the drawings are dissected to see how these various components work together to create the overall effect. On the other hand, contextual analysis takes a step back to consider the historical, cultural, social, and biographical context surrounding the artworks. This facilitates the interpretation the artworks' significance and meaning within specific contexts. Besides, knowing the artists' background and the time period they worked can reveal hidden layers of meaning in their drawings. By combining formal and contextual

analysis, the viewer gets a more holistic understanding of the drawings and have a richer, more nuanced conversation with the artwork.

In-Depth Visual Analysis: Form and Context of Uche Okeke's Works (*Uko the Warrior* and *Fable Brute*). Bridging Tradition and Modernity via Igbo Mythology:

A pioneer of the Natural Synthesis philosophy employed minimalist, rhythmic line drawings influenced by the traditional Igbo Uli painting. His formal approach is characterized by elegant linear contours, asymmetrical balance, and deliberate spatial economy. Works such as '*Uko the Warrior*' (1959) and '*Fable Brute*' (1959) reflect abstract representations of folklore concepts grounded in Igbo cosmology. The use of varieties of lines with various functions in the drawings are the elemental strokes the artist used to create shapes, forms and textures in the images.

Formal Analysis of '*Uko the Warrior*':

The fluidity of lines in these drawings especially in the chest region of *Uko* exemplifies the statement that line provided Okeke the tool with which he interpreted and distilled concepts in design (Ugiomoh and Aletor, 2002, p.12). Okeke verily used this linear expression to exemplify the brevity of legends in Igbo folklores. He used wavy lines which suggest, gentle fluid movements that are calming and organic. He also applied straight lines for stability, clarity and order in the picture. In addition, he explored spiral lines that represent expansion, growth, transformation, evolution and progression in the drawing that draw the viewer inward and outward, and suggesting the process of change. The headband of the warrior is delineated with *uli ajaba* (*uli zigzag*) motif lines. The artist used space in this drawing to focus the viewer's attention and to create perspective within the composition. The placement of the warrior in

this composition and the use of space around it can purposely draw the attention of the viewer to the image. This space which is the area the shape or form occupies is also the background against which the viewer sees the warrior. It can be defined as positive or negative in visual art. The positive space in this work is the filled space the subject occupies or the shape that makes up the drawing, while the negative space is the whitespace or the unmarked areas around the visual component. Okeke used space in this drawing to create a balance between elements which provide visual breathing room for the composition.

Formal Analysis of '*Fable Brute*':

Additionally, '*Fable Brute*' is a linear expression of a monstrous toad by Uche Okeke, depicted in pen and ink on paper (24cm x 35cm), in Anambra State in 1959. This concept which is derived from Igbo traditional folklore and it is an abstract composition of an animal that really looks like a monstrous toad in such a dimension that allows only for a half of its total body to be revealed in frontal view and its head in profile. The constitution of this composition are the toad's large head, forearms and a mouth that is opened very wide revealing sharp-like teeth that looks like a claw. The style of this work is similar to the abstracted forms which are found in Uli wall murals. The angle of this composition is set at below eyelevel revealing again an unusual massiveness in the animal's throat, jaws and bulbous eye. Elements of *Uli* linearity in outline and the use of several small circle those reminiscent *Uli mkpulu mgbo* (small bullets) motifs which are noticeable all over the animal's body. These seem to serve the purpose of the animal scales or surface artist's impression.

The artist used some blend of the building blocks of the art to depict this drawing. One of these visual structures of the art he used is line which is the elemental strokes applied to create forms, shapes and textures in this composition. He used curve lines that form gentle

and flowing curves to convey a sense of sensuality, softness, and fluidity. He also applied zigzag lines which are characterized by sharp angles and abrupt changes in direction in the dentition of the subject. These lines create a sense of energy that suggests conflict in the image. Additionally, the line conveys negative energy in the context of the composition. There is also the application of straight lines which are consistent in direction and do not curve to convey stability and purpose.

These lines which move directly from one point to the other, creating boundaries and defining spaces are used to suggest diagonal movement based on their orientation of this drawing.

Furthermore, he used other elemental strokes in this picture which are wavy lines that portray natural movement, freedom and rhythm at the feet of the beast. Solid line which is a precise, well-defined line is also used to show sharp contrasts, is used to exhibit dominance, strength and emphasis. In addition, the artist introduced lines to draw the attention of the viewer to the key elements in the composition, creating a strong visual presence. Okeke also used dotted lines which are made up of series of dots, which are clustered on the subject or evenly spaced, indicate a path, and suggest a sense of incompleteness. He also applied thin lines to convey a sense of delicacy and used to create fine details which suggest softness in the piece.

He also applies the principle of balance which is the way that the visual aspects and elements are distributed within an artwork as observed in this drawing. It is also how elements are weighted against each other on different sides of a composition to create cohesiveness, completion, and satisfaction. The image may be balanced vertically, horizontally or diagonally. He made use of symmetrical balance in this picture which he achieved by arranging elements on either side of the center of this drawing in an equally weighted manner. He used it to achieve a sense of harmony and order in the composition.

Contextual Analysis of 'Fable Brute' and 'Uko the Warrior':

Contextually, Okeke's revival of *Uli* was intentional-serving as a post-independence cultural reclamation strategy aimed at decolonizing Nigerian art education and aesthetics (Okeke, 1982; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). His drawings present the human body, nature, and spiritual symbolism in a unified visual language, reestablishing the link between contemporary art and indigenous knowledge systems. Uche Okeke produced his drawings on Igbo folklore in the post-independence Nigerian context, specifically during a period of national cultural reawakening and postcolonial identity reconstruction. His work was deeply embedded in the ideology of cultural nationalism, where reclaiming indigenous artistic traditions became central to redefining Nigerian modern art and resisting the dominance of Western aesthetics.



Plate 1: Title: *Fable Brute*; Artist: Uche Okeke: Size: 24cm x 35cm: Year: 1959; Medium: Pen and Ink on Paper: Image: Courtesy of Asele Institute.



Plate: 2, Title: *Uko, the Warrior*, Artist: Uche Okeke, Size: 25cm x 35cm, Year: 1959, Medium: Pen and Ink Image: Courtesy of National Museum of African Art

Visual Analysis: 'Dancer' and 'Man with Elephant Horn' by Obiora Udechukwu. Igbo Aesthetics in Modern Drawings:

Obiora Udechukwu's modern drawings often incorporate Igbo aesthetics, characterized by intricate patterns and symbolic imagery. He advances Okeke's foundation by combining *Uli* linear aesthetics with politically charged themes. His formal style is more expressive and densely composed, integrating human figures, symbolic elements, and abstract forms into intricate visual tapestries. The drawing 'Dancer' (1973) and 'Titled Man with Elephant Horn' (1974) exemplify his signature technique—combining jagged, fragmented

lines with *Nsibidi* symbols to capture the resilience of the Igbo community. Udechukwu's line work, while rooted in traditional Igbo aesthetics, is emotionally evocative and dynamic, responding to the socio-political tensions of post-civil war Nigeria.

Formal Analysis of 'Dancer'.

He used symmetrical balance in the compositions to create a sense of order, formality and stability. Additionally, these works are symmetrical because the elements in the drawings balanced each other maintaining a sense of clarity and unity. There is also the principle of emphasis which is a strategy that aims to draw the viewer's attention to a specific design element in drawing. The artist used it to help the viewer to put the story of the drawings or the female dancer in mind. The focal point or emphasis created in this composition is the female dancer; he achieved or demonstrated this emphasis by placement or positioning of the subject, use of tone, size and depth.



Plate 3. Title: *Dancer*. Artist: Obiora Udechukwu. Size: 22.8 x 16.7cm, Year 1973. Medium: Pen and Ink on paper Image: Courtesy of The Smithsonian National Museum of African Art

Formally, Udechukwu's use of line is expressive and deliberate, tracing the contours of movement, emotion, and ritual. The *Uli* tradition, originally used by Igbo women for body and wall painting, becomes a modern drawing language in Udechukwu's hand. The aesthetic principle of asymmetry, linearity, and abstraction gives the work a rhythmic flow that echoes both dance and musical performance. This aligns with Obiora's statement that *Uli* 'can say much more than realism can' (Udechukwu, 1990).

Contextual Analysis of '*Dancer*'.

Contextually, this drawing act as visual protest, with *Uli* and *Nsibidi* transformed into languages of resistance and consciousness (Udechukwu, 1990; Ottenberg, 1997). His works blend artistic and political intentionality, merging form and content to capture the resilience of Nigerian society. More so, the '*Dancer*' (1973) is not just an illustration of a ceremony, but a visual metaphor for endurance, and cultural sophistication. Additionally, culturally, in the Igbo society, it affirms traditional Igbo rites, particularly those involving dance, music, and spiritual authority.

Formal Analysis of '*Titled Man with the Elephant Horn*'.

Obiora Udechukwu's *Titled Man with the Elephant Horn* is a compelling example of his mastery of line, form, and space, filtered through an indigenous aesthetic framework rooted in *Uli* art traditions. This drawing captures the dignity, authority, and cultural prestige of a titled Igbo man—a figure of respect and power—using minimal but highly expressive formal elements. The most dominant formal element in this work is line—deliberate, rhythmic, and flowing. Udechukwu employs the curvilinear style of *Uli* art, evident in the sinuous outlines of the figure's posture and costume. Lines are not overly rigid or mechanical; instead, they possess a hand-drawn vitality that suggests movement and breath, even in a static pose. The

line quality varies—some are bold to demarcate form, others are fine and subtle, indicating surface texture or ornamental detail.

These varied lines not only define the human figure but also convey symbolic information: the horn is drawn with proud elevation and carefully curved length, while the man's garment is etched with patterned symbols, perhaps referencing status, ancestry, or spiritual authority. This work exemplifies Obiora Udechukwu's innovative fusion of traditional Igbo aesthetics with contemporary drawing strategies. The work relies on line, flatness, stylization, and symbolism to evoke cultural depth and personal dignity. Through his thoughtful use of form, Udechukwu elevates a singular Igbo figure into a visual icon of identity, authority, and spiritual resonance, reasserting indigenous modes of representation in postcolonial African art.



Plate 3. Title: *Titled Man with Elephant Horn*. Artist: Obiora Udechukwu. Size: 25.3 x 17.8cm, Year 1974. Medium: brush and ink: Image:

Courtesy of : K_s Artspace

Contextual Analysis of 'Titled Man with the Elephant Horn'.

Furthermore, Obiora Udechukwu's drawing of 'Titled Man with the Elephant Horn' (1974) is a profound visual articulation of prestige, identity, and indigenous authority in Igbo society. The work transcends mere portraiture, operating on cultural, political, and philosophical levels. It is rooted in the artist's commitment to reclaiming African traditional values and visual forms in a postcolonial and post-civil war Nigerian context. In cultural context; symbol of prestige and ancestral connection in traditional Igbo society, a 'titled man' (*Nze* or *Ozo*) is one who has achieved high social and spiritual status. The elephant tusk horn (*Opi* or *Oji*) is not a mere musical instrument-it is a symbol of honour, communication with ancestors, and sacred authority. It is used in ceremonies to announce the presence of nobility or during ancestral veneration rites.

In the drawing, the titled man is depicted with dignity and composure, embodying the Igbo ideal of elder hood, wisdom, and moral uprightness. The image emphasizes the reverence for hierarchy, tradition, and age in Igbo cosmology. In political and historical context and assertion of indigenous values post-war, this work was produced in the aftermath of the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-1970), during which the Igbo people suffered significant devastation and cultural trauma. Udechukwu lived through the war and experienced its psychological toll, used his art as a medium of cultural resilience. 'Titled Man with the Elephant Horn' reasserts Igbo dignity in a period when ethnic identity was politically marginalized. The return to the traditional symbols like the elephant horn is not just nostalgic; it is a decolonial act, affirming indigenous values in contrast to imposed colonial systems that had undermined such institutions.

In the philosophical context: the sacred and the ethical in Igbo epistemology, the elephant horn is not just an accessory; it is a sacred

object. Blowing the horn traditionally signals important messages, such as calls to justice, ritual, or communal gatherings. The titled man, in this sense, becomes a moral compass in society-a bearer of both authority and responsibility. Udechukwu subtly captures this through restrained line work, meditative poses, and symbolic abstraction that reference *Uli* aesthetics-thus reinforcing the philosophical, thushical role of art as both a mirror and guardian of cultural values.

In aesthetic and formal context: *Uli* linearity and modernist abstraction, Udechukwu employs a style deeply influenced by *Uli* art, characterized by fluid, calligraphic lines, asymmetry, and symbolic minimalism. These formal qualities are significant: they bridge the gap between the traditional Igbo female body painting and contemporary drawing. In 'Titled Man with Elephant Horn,' the use of line as expression evokes not only the figure's physical form but also his status, restraint, and moral clarity. It elevates the subject beyond the individual to represent an archetype of cultural excellence. Furthermore, is the spiritual and communal context: collective memory and continuity. This drawing functions as a repository of collective memory, ensuring the visual continuity of cultural heritage. Udechukwu's decision to document such figure reflects his commitment to visualizing the metaphysical-the connection between the living and the ancestral world in Igbo believe. By placing such imagery within the scope of modern Nigerian art, he challenges Western linear notions of progress and affirms circular, communal, and ancestral logics inherent in African cosmology.

Formal and Contextual Analysis of Ben Onourah Osondu's Works (*Mmeko and Umu ada*): Artistic Expressions of Igbo Aesthetics.

The formal analysis of Ben Onourah Osondu's works '*Umu Ada*' (2018) and '*Mmeko*'(2019), focusing on visual elements,

composition, technique, and style-independent of narrative or cultural meaning (which are covered under contextual analysis).

Formal Analysis of 'Umu Ada'

In the formal analysis of 'Umu Ada', under medium and technique, the artwork is rendered primarily using linear drawing techniques, with pen and ink on paper. His use of stylized, rhythmic linework is deliberate, favoring contour lines over shading. The most dominant element is line-flowing, repetitive, and interwoven. Additionally, these lines are both expressive and descriptive, outlining human forms and cultural symbols with a graceful, continuous rhythm. Also, the intricate use of curvilinear and angular lines creates a sense of movement and ritualized presence.



Plate 5: Title: Umu ada; Artist: Ben Onuorah Osondu: Standard size: Year: 2018; medium: Pen and Ink on paper Image: Courtesy of Artsy

In form and shape, the human figures are stylized rather than naturalistic, leaning toward elongated forms and abstracted shapes. The figures are often depicted in symmetrical groupings that reflect unity and shared identity. The composition is frontal and structured, with figures often arranged in hierarchical or circular forms, reflecting their communal or ritual roles. There is spatial flattening, where depth is minimized in favor of decorative arrangement and symbolic clarity. The negative space is often activated by surrounding line textures or motif patterns, creating dense, unified surface. In texture and pattern-*Uli*-inspired symbols or fabric designs-are integrated into clothing, hairstyles, or backgrounds. Furthermore, repetitive linear textures suggest ornamentation and cultural coding.

The contextual nature of Ben Onuorah Osondu's works such as 'Umu Ada' and 'Mmeko' reflects his engagement with Igbo cultural values, gender identity, and the socio-communal structures that define traditional and contemporary Igbo society. These works are steeped in cultural symbolism, social commentary, and the representation of indigenous aesthetics, particularly through linear stylization and narrative figuration.

Contextual Analysis of 'Umu Ada'

Contextually, 'Umu Ada' which translates to 'daughters of the lineage' in Igbo, explores the cultural position of women within Igbo traditional society—especially married daughters who return to their natal homes for rituals, decision-making, and social mediation. These women, often seen as both insiders and outsiders, hold symbolic power in maintaining lineage continuity and enforcing ancestral customs. 'Umu Ada' exhibits cultural authority and ancestral ties. Besides, the group often serves as moral enforcers in Igbo traditions. Osondu's drawing may depict them in stylized linear

forms, emphasizing their communal power, spiritual alignment, and intergenerational roles. They also show feminine identity and social power, as their work visualizes the balance between traditional gender roles and cultural leadership, subtly questioning or reinforcing how Igbo women exercise agency within patriarchal frameworks. The linear compositions evoke the ritualized presence of 'Umu Ada' in events such as funerals, conflicts resolution, and communal festivals.

Formal Analysis of 'Mmeko'

In medium and technique, this work is similar to 'Umu Ada'. It relies on line-based drawing, executed with pen, and ink. The artist explored line which is structural and connective, visually binding multiple figures into a single coherent rhythm. Additionally, these lines overlap or interface, emphasizing togetherness and continuity, echoing the thematic concept of 'cooperation'. Also, on form and shape, figures are abstracted, yet recognizable; their interlocking postures and gestures communicate collective efforts. The shapes are geometricized-bodies rendered in ovals, arcs, and triangles to enhance balance and unity. The composition is horizontal and rhythmic; guiding the viewer's eye across the picture plane from the viewer's left to right. Repetition of figures and gestures-such as lifting, working, or embracing-creates a visual chorus of participation. The texture and pattern are exhibited through line variation and hatching to create textural depth, especially in garments and backgrounds. In addition, symbolic motifs are embedded within the scene, acting as visual shorthand for cultural ideas. Also, the overall composition achieves visual harmony through balance and symmetry, reinforcing the concept of social equilibrium.



Plate 6: Title : Mmeko; Artist: Ben Onourah Osondu: Size: Standard size: Year: 2019; medium: Pen and Ink on Paper: Image: Courtesy of Ogirikan Art Gallery

Contextual Analysis of 'Mmeko'

'Mmeko' (meaning cooperation, 'togetherness' or 'unity' in Igbo) explores themes of social cohesion, communal labor, and interdependence, which are core to traditional Igbo life. The artwork likely reflects age-grade systems, family units, or market scenes, where collaboration is a tool for survival and identity formation. Osondu's work draws from the Igbo ethos of communal life, where the individual is incomplete without the group. The concept of 'onye aghala nwanne ya' (no one should abandon their kin) is visually represented. Mmeko often involves both men and women (gender and social harmony); his drawing explores how genders work together within ritual and economic frameworks. More so, his use of intertwining linear forms mirrors the interconnected nature of relationships, showing how each figure's role contributes to the cultural tapestry.

Both '*Umu Ada*' and '*Mmeko*' reflect Ben Onourah Osondu's deep commitment to documenting and reinterpreting Igbo socio-cultural structures through a modern linear visual language. His works serve as visual ethnographies, and capturing the dynamics of gender.

Comparative Analysis of the Drawing Styles and Cultural Engagement of Ben Onourah Osondu, Obiora Udechukwu and Uche Okeke.

The artistic practices of Ben Onourah Osondu, Obiora Udechukwu, and Uche Okeke reveal a profound engagement with Igbo traditional motifs, each employing linear aesthetics as a means of expressing distinct yet interrelated cultural narratives. Though their works are individually unique in stylistic execution and philosophical orientation, they converge in their commitment to cultural continuity, visual decolonization, and the revitalization of indigenous knowledge systems through drawing.

Ben Onourah Osondu:

He anchors his artistic expression in the symbolism of Igbo social structures, particularly the roles and rituals surrounding *Umu Ada* (daughters of the lineage) and *Mmeko* (female associations). His line work is rhythmic and symbolic, heavily stylized yet representational. Osondu uses linear forms not merely to depict figures but to encode ritual authority, gender roles, and social unity. His figures often appear elongated and adorned with geometric motifs that suggest communal identity, drawing from traditional wall painting and textile patterns. Unlike Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu, Osondu leans more toward social ethnography in his depictions, focusing on ritual functions and collective values.

Uche Okeke:

Conversely, Uche Okeke, widely recognized as a pioneer of the *Uli* Revival Movement, adopts a more abstract and minimalist visual language. His drawings, particularly those inspired by Igbo folklore,

rely on *Uli* line aesthetics-characterized by asymmetry, fragility, and spiritual fluidity-to evoke the essence of ancestral narratives. Okeke's works are less about direct representation and more about the visual philosophy of *Uli*, transforming it into a modern drawing practice. In works like '*Uko the Warrior*' or '*Titled Man with Elephant Horn*', he channels symbolic depth through linear composition, highlighting mythical content, cultural appearance, and metaphysical dimensions of Igbo cosmology. His art emphasizes philosophical abstraction over literal interpretation, positioning him as both a visual and cultural theorist.

Obiora Udechukwu:

Meanwhile, Obiora Udechukwu integrates both the formal qualities of *Uli* and a documentary approach rooted in social realism. His drawings such as '*Titled Man with the Elephant Horn*' reflect his sensitivity to socio-political concerns, especially the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War. Udechukwu's use of line is expressive, often capturing human struggle, resilience, and dignity. He bridges the stylistic precision of *Uli* with the narrative power of the figuration. While Okeke is more metaphysical, and Osondu more ethnographic, Udechukwu is humanistic and political, often portraying scenes of ritual, migration, displacement, and cultural survival.

In terms of cultural intentionality, all three artists utilize line as a visual metaphor for continuity, communication, and identity. However, Osondu's works are contextualized within living traditions, focusing on actual practices still performed in Igbo societies. Udechukwu employs line as both a mnemonic device and a political tool, archiving experiences of trauma and resilience. Okeke, on the other hand, seeks to universalize indigenous knowledge. Using the line to construct a timeless visual philosophy that merges folklore with modernism.

Stylistically, Osondu's lines are bold and symbolic, emphasizing design and ritual symmetry. Udechukwu's lines are expressive and spontaneous, often using gestural marks to signify emotion and

motion. Okeke's lines are expressive and spontaneous, often using gestural marks to signify emotion and motion. Okeke's line is delicate, restrained, and conceptual, following *Uli's* principles of negative space and abstraction. Each of them expands the expressive potential of drawing beyond Western norms, affirming that line, in African visual culture, is not just a tool of form, but a carrier of meaning.

Furthermore, while Ben Onuorah Osondu, Obiora Udechukwu, and Uche Okeke differ in subject matter and stylistic execution, they are united by a shared cultural intentionality. Their drawings embody a conscious reclamation of Igbo aesthetics, each contributing uniquely to the preservation, adaptation, and transformation of traditional motifs in contemporary visual discourse. Through their works, line becomes a bridge between the ancestral past and the contemporary present, affirming art as a vessel of memory, identity, and resistance.

Exploring Igbo Culture in Art.

Igbo culture is rich in artistic traditions, including textiles, sculpture, and drawing. Key aspects of Igbo culture that influence art include:

Igbo Aesthetics:

Igbo aesthetics emphasize intricate patterns, symbolic imagery, and a blend of abstract and representational forms. These aesthetic principles are reflected in the works of Osondu, Udechukwu, and Okeke.

Cultural Symbolism:

Igbo culture is replete with symbols that carry deep meanings, such as the '*Chi*' (personal god) and '*Ofo*' (symbol of justice and truth). These symbols are often incorporated into Igbo art, adding layers of meaning and cultural significance.

Proverbs and Folklore:

Igbo proverbs and folklore serve as a rich source of inspiration for Igbo artist. These oral traditions convey moral values, historical narrative, and cultural wisdom, which are then translated into visual art forms.

Integration in Contemporary Art

The integration of Igbo cultural elements in contemporary art serves many purposes:

Cultural Preservation:

By incorporating Igbo cultural themes and motifs, artists like Osondu, Udechukwu, and Okeke contribute to the preservation of Igbo heritage.

Identity Expression:

Igbo art allows artists to express their cultural identity and connect with their roots, even as they engage with modernity and global artistic trends.

Cross-Cultural Dialogue:

Igbo-inspired art can facilitate cross-cultural dialogue, inviting audiences from diverse backgrounds to engage with and appreciate Igbo cultural traditions.

Comparative Analysis Table:

Artist	Line Use	Motif Integration	Cultural Theme	Style
Okeke	Sparse, Lyrical	<i>Uli</i> (abstracted)	Myth, cosmology	Modernist-Abstract
Udechukwu	Dense, expressive	<i>Uli + Nsibidi</i>	Protest, politics	Figurative-Expressive
Osondu	Narrative, organic	<i>Uli</i> + narrative icons	Morality, folklore	Contemporary-Linear

While Okeke focuses on metaphysical and historical themes, Udechukwu turns symbols into instruments of political activism. Osondu retools the same traditions for storytelling and cultural continuity.

Findings

1. All three artists use *Uli* and *Nsibidi* to sustain and reinterpret Igbo traditions.
2. Line is not merely decorative but serves symbolic, narrative, and political purposes.
3. Their works illustrate a conscious effort to indigenize modern African art.
4. The revival of indigenous symbols through drawing challenges Western-centric art paradigms.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the linear aesthetics of Ben Osondu, Obiorah Udechukwu, and Uche Okeke are not only stylistic choices but also conceptual strategies. They reclaim indigenous Igbo visual language to address contemporary issues and cultural preservation. Their works establish drawing as both an artistic and ideological medium in postcolonial Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Art institutions should incorporate indigenous visual systems like *Uli* and *Nsibidi* in their curricula.
2. Further scholarly research should explore other lesser-known Igbo artists using traditional symbols.
3. Cultural policies should support exhibitions and archiving of works that promote indigenous knowledge.

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