

Interrogating Tamil *Kolam* and Igbo *Uli* within a Postmodern Context

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Abstract

Though the Tamils of Sri-Lanka and the Igbos of Nigeria are culturally and geographically disparate, there are certain similarities that exist between the two ethnicities especially in the areas of floor and wall decorations; Tamil *kolam* and Igbo *Uli*. Despite the flux and fragmentations that are apparent between diverse cultures, it is of interest to note that such commonalities amid these two, one from Asia and the other from Africa. Hence, it is believed that cultural and scientific evidence support similarities as it exists between the *Kolam* and *Uli* it become an issue that demands serious attention. The objective of this paper is to identify the commonalities that existed between these two ethnic groups historically and culturally and to bring forth the seemingly interesting harmony amid Tamil *kolam* and Igbo *Uli* within a postmodern context. The paper posits a pre-colonial origin and situates recent shifts in painting traditions to normal dynamism that happens to any culture which is exposed to other cultures. We live in an era where we are exposed to other cultures. The finding of this paper is that investigation into our roots brings forth new narratives that define our cultural existences.

Keywords: *Contemporary, Dravidian, Igbo, Kolam, Uli*

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Background to the Study

There has been a continued interest in the various fields of human enquiries in Sciences and Arts with an aim to determine the pre-existing connections among the Dravidian group of languages found within the Indian subcontinent and the Negroid African cultures. While some of these investigations adopt scientific methodologies of empiricism, those conducted within the arts are culturally oriented and employ methodologies that are adequate to their specific area of study. However, both aspects of enquiries provide complementary ways towards a deeper understanding of our world and its cultures. As part of this growing multi-disciplinary interest on the above ethno-linguistic groups' possible prehistoric and cultural links, we are focusing our interest on tracing design similarities that exist between *Uli* wall and body decoration among Igbos of South East Nigeria and *Kolam* lineal and decorative floor drawings by Tamils of Northeastern Sri-Lanka and central highland of India. This can provide a handle to understanding the ethnological, ethnographical and other scientific findings pertaining to linking the two ethnic groups.

The Igbo belong to the Kwa language group, often referred to as the Niger-Congo linguistic area and is basically Negro African race while on the other hand; Tamil belong to the Dravidian language group that spread India and the Indian sub-continent. This study provides a semiotic system for understanding the linguistic groups' past material cultures and possible connections that have been spatially and temporally obliterated. The importance of this engagement cannot be overemphasized in our present encounter with postmodernism and its technological tool of information and Communication Technology (ICT) which precipitates a condensation of the world spaces with a rejuvenation of its erstwhile cultures. Considering also that postmodernism favors expansive mode of knowledge generation, this study contributes to growing documents on the subject of material cultures and their origins. . Currently, they have been adapted to contemporary languages of postmodernism with newer manifestations or synthesis among which are gender accommodation and synchronization to academic circumstances.

Cassirer notes that “What we call human culture may be defined as the progressive objectification of our human experience – as the objectification of our feelings, our emotions, our desires, our impressions, our intuitions, our thought and ideas.”¹ The systematic objectification of human desires and apprehensions on its natural environments through an available medium, across spatial and temporal divides is a vehicle for culture's transmission from one generation to the other. Through space, time and matter, humans have evolved systems of; rites, rituals and other forms of cultural practices from which their identities are hinged on. In this concatenation of events, “making meaning out of life's uncertainties is the manner that traditional societies in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world ensured harmonious balances between their communities and the natural/supernatural forces in their lives.”² Artistic traditions among the Igbos of Nigeria and Tamils of Sri-Lanka that have their origins in pre-historic times such as the *Uli* and *Kolam* therefore constitute latent semiotic system through material culture by which hidden truths about its peoples' identities can be decrypted.

Though the Igbo and Tamil are geographically and culturally separated, there exist commonalities that require investigation and insights into possible cultural affinities that had

¹Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 45.

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existed among the two ethnic groups. To start this engagement, therefore, we will bring into significance Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai's observation that "The two cultures are based on very similar weltanschauung. For millennia, they have emphasized the oneness of existence, the harmony between gods, nature and human beings. They both believe in the formula: I am because we are."³ This establishes a theoretical framework and inspiration from which our engagement derives its loci as studio artists and culture researcher within the university. Considering these parallel experiences of theory and practice, we will engage this issue through material facilities available to us though with an orientation towards the multi-perspectival *bricolage*⁴ which connects relevant findings in other fields of study. The *bricolage* approach brings an eclectic view of the similarities between the *Uli* and *Kolam* designs as a dynamic cultural issue that will involve the focus groups from pre-historic era as function of who they are today.

Despite iconological similarities between the *Uli* and *Kolam* designs, there currently exists dearth or nonexistent documented materials pertaining to the connections of both artistic traditions of *Uli* and *Kolam* designs. Irrespective of obvious pieces of evidence of affinities in conceptual, design and gender origination of these artistic traditions, this gap presents a lacuna that calls for attention from the wide field of scholars and cultural practitioners to investigate. The thrust of this paper is to interrogate the two artistic cultures to prove possible links as it relates to early history, the similarity in design, purpose, possible influences (if any) between these two cultures, gender origination and significance of the design to both ethnic groups.

History

The Igbo People

The Igbo language belongs to the "KWA" group of languages which is a sub-family of the Niger-Congo group (Aniago p.357). Due to lack of recorded history as it pertains to the origin and autochthonous study of pre-historic Igbo society, a detailed and comprehensive claim to any single source of the Igbos still remains an issue of debate and conjecture. Sabinus Iweadighi argues that "just as the origin of the term 'Igbo' is unknown, so also is the origin or descent of the Igbo people yet known with certainty."⁵ Similarly, Dmitri van den Bersselaar had argued against any generally accepted ethnonym known as 'Igbo' by the people that exist today as Igbo ethnic nationalities. Bersselaar, noted that "It was only during the colonial period that the Igbo people crystallized as one group, accepting the term Igbo as an appropriate ethnonym." This observation is not only misleading but an intentional disinformation on the etymology of the word 'Igbo' and the Igbos as an ethnic group.

These researchers had been acquainted with the narratives of Olaudah Equiano known to his slave masters as Gustavus Vassa. His interesting narrative recollects his travails from an Eboe community which started around 1745 when he was born to a period when he was sold into slavery. The word 'Eboe' as used by Olaudah Equiano in the mid-eighteenth century is the same word with the contemporary word spelt as 'Igbo'. There are many factors that can influence the change of pronunciation of a word, among which are culture mutation, engulfment by a stronger language, trade, assimilation of linguistic patterns from neighboring language groups and in the above context, inability to find a correct spelling for the phonemic sound of *gb* may have resulted to a simplification of the sound to 'E-boe'. This happened in the colonial government's corruption of names of communities in Igboland to what was convenient for

³Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai:

⁴Denzin and Lincoln, 1999; Kincheloe, 2005; Berry, 2011; Rogers, 2012.

⁵Sabinus Iweadighi. Origin or Genealogy of the Igbo People of Nigeria.

them to spell. Towns such as Oguta – Ugwu-nta, Enugu – Enu-ugwu, Owerri – Owerre, and others can suffice for of Igbo word. There are some ideograms that had existed among elite groups of secret societies among the Igbos. Notwithstanding this ambivalence on the origin of the Igbos, scholars had relied on archaeological, ethno-linguistic, ethnographical and ethnological findings which give scientific insight or supports to what would have remained grossly speculative.

The Igbo had relied on oral transmission of culture before their encounter with European civilization. This accounts for the dearth of documented texts on origin or migration pattern of the early Igbo ethnic group of southern Nigeria. However, there are a considerable amount of artifacts and research findings that challenge this earlier position to redirect attention through cultural materials such as the Igboukwu bronze pottery, glass beads, copper objects and figural pendants. These have provided insights into possible origins of the Igbo. Sandra Smith rightly notes that “oral narratives form the most important source for the study of Igbo pre-colonial history; along with parables, proverbs, and personal observations.”⁶

Many Igbo scholars ranging from Angulu Onwuejeogwu,⁷ Anozie, F.N.,⁸ Catherine Acholonu,⁹ Sabinus Iweadighi,¹⁰ Luke Amadi and James Akena,¹¹ and a host of others had argued for an autochthonous origin of the Igbo. This is in contradistinction with a heterochthonous claim of some Igbos as belonging to one of the lost ethnic groups of Israel. Onwuejeogwu had suggested a Proto-Niger origin of about 8000 to account for this autochthony. Acholonu had moved beyond the autochthony narratives to infer that the Igbo civilization birthed the Dravidian ethnic groups in South Asia. In the “Lost Testament of the Ancestors of Adam: Unearthing Heliopolis/Igbo Ukwu – The Celestial City of the Gods of Egypt and Dravidian India”, the erudite professor of history notes that “Evidence of an Igbo-speaking nation of migrant people who laid the foundation of Indian civilization also abounds in Indian lexicon”.¹² Citing E.E. Okafor's submission on a new dating of samples of iron slag from ancient industrial furnaces in Lejja, in Nsukka that dates back to 4,000 B. C., she notes that:

By 4,000 B.C. Sumerian civilization in the Middle East, which is supposedly older than Egyptian civilization, was in its infancy, while Igbo people were making metal in industrial furnaces and piling up masses of slag and bloom that question to this very day the generally accepted notions of the origin of civilization.¹³

Magnus Aniago's paper presents a similar focus with Okafor's thesis. However, Aniago locates Okpogho, a nearby region to Lejja, as the site for the discovery of huge pre-historic evidence of iron smelting industry. He notes that “More recent discoveries of iron production sites in Okpogho, Enugu state of Nigeria, has further sealed assertions by Forde and Jones and indeed

⁶Sandra Smith 2010, Uli: Metamorphosis Of a Tradition into Contemporary Aesthetics. (p. 8)

⁷Angulu Onwuejeogwu, An Igbo Civilization and Nri Hegemony, 1981

⁸Anozie, F.N., “Archaeology of Igboland: The Prehistory” in G.E.K. Ofomata, A Survey of Igbo Nation, AFP, 2002.

⁹Catherine Acholonu; “Presenting the Lost Testament of the Ancestors of Adam”, Public Lecture at the Institute of African Studies, UNN, Nsukka, December, 2010.

¹⁰Sandra Smith 2010, Uli: Metamorphosis Of a Tradition into Contemporary Aesthetics. (P. 8)

¹¹Luke Amadi and James Akena (2015). Globalization, Culture Mutation and New Identity: Implications for the Igbo Cultural heritage. African Journal of History and Culture. Vol 7 (1) (January 2015) 16-27.

¹²Acholonu, Catherine et.al. The Lost Testament of the Ancestors of Adam: Unearthing Heliopolis/Igbo Ukwu – The Celestial City of the Gods of Egypt and Dravidian India. 2010

¹³Catherine Acholonu; “Presenting the Lost Testament of the Ancestors of Adam”, Public Lecture at the Institute of African Studies, UNN, Nsukka, December, 2010.

many authors of their like.”¹⁴ These claims detract from the notion that Igbos migrated from Israel or Egypt.

The Tamil People

According to Velupillai, “The Tamils can be defined as people having Tamil as their mother tongue. Tamil language is a member of the Dravidian/South Indian family of languages.”¹⁵ It is one of the two official languages spoken in Sri-Lanka. The Tamil are one of the major ethnic nationalities in Sri-Lanka, second to the Sinhalese. Their population is put around 18 percent. However, they constitute about 40 million people in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu alone while some of its speakers can be found in other neighboring states in India.

The Tamil belong to a larger group of the Dravidian population known to have settled in south India, Sri-Lanka, part of Malaysia and some areas of the Indian sub-continent. Dravidians are mostly referred to as the Sudran or Sudroid. The term Shudra can be traced to early Sanskrit text of 1500 BC which refers to aboriginal black settlers that were conquered by invading Aryan conquerors from Europe.¹⁶ There are evidences of genomic similarities between the Negroid race of Africa and the Dravidians of the Indian subcontinent. In their research on the “Genomic view on the peopling of India” Tamang and Thangaraj observed that, “an interesting finding about the Indian population is the evidence of the early settlement in Andaman and Nicobar Islands by a group of modern humans, whose ancestors made the first journey out-of-Africa.”¹⁷ According to Clyde Winters, Dravidian languages are predominantly spoken in southern India and Sri Lanka”. Clyde believes that these languages are “genetically related to African languages”, this sentiment had earlier been expressed by some scholars on Indo-African connections such as; K.P. Aravanan, N'diaye, L. S Senghor, and a host of others who link the early settlers of India to migration from Africa.

The poet and first president of Senegal drew the world's attention to the prehistoric ties of Negro Dravidians-Mediterranean races with ethnological and archaeological evidences. In a public lecture delivered at Madras in 1974, under the aegis of the International Institute of Tamil Studies, he traces the ancestral links that exists among the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu in southern India and Negro Africa. He noted that: Southern India is in the same latitude as Senegal, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. More than this, only the Indian Ocean separates the eastern coast of Africa from the south of India. As a matter of fact, geologists maintain that the Indian sub-continent was formerly attached to East Africa. In this respect the findings of marine biology are of outstanding importance.¹⁸

In this lecture, Senghor succeeded in tracing some characteristic resemblance between the Dravidians of South India and Sri-Lanka, among which are shared linguistic terms in metallurgy and cotton industry. He cited evidences from Wolof and Dravidian words to make a

¹⁴Magnus Aniago. “A Historical Review of the Evolution of Metal Technology in Africa-The Igbo Case.”American-Eurasian Journal of Scientific Research 10 (6): 2015 (358)

¹⁵Vellupillai, A. *An Introduction to the History of Tamil People*. Webpage of Tamil Electronic Library ©K Kalyanasundaram. <http://www.tamilelibrary.org/teli/tamil.html>

¹⁶Catherine Acholonu; “Presenting the *Lost Testament of the Ancestors of Adam*”, Public Lecture at the Institute of African Studies, UNN, Nsukka, December, 2010. see also Clyde Winters' *The Ancestors of the Dravidians spoke a Niger-Congo Language*. (September 2014)

¹⁷Rakesh Tamang and Kumarasamy Thangaraj. Genomic View on the Peopling of India. 2012. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>),

¹⁸Leopold Sedar Senghor. (Lecture delivered in Madras under the auspices of the International Institute of Tamil Studies on the 23rd May, 1974)

point for a possible kinship through linguistic similarities of Black Dravidians and Black African cultures. This position is reinforced by observation posted in Race and History website with the image of a young Sri-Lankan girl of Dravidian origin observes the similarities in physiognomic features of both groups.



Fig 1. Source: Race and History, 2006

Extending the Discourse: The Big Bang Theory, Myths and lore

Extending our search for the explanation of these possible cultural links between the Tamil and the Igbo is a subject as complex and conjectural as “Big Bang theory” expounded by Georges Lemaitre in 1927 may seem ambitious since our engagement is culturally oriented. It has as one of its key observations, the expansion of the universe,¹⁹ from a pristine singular source. One can deduce that prior to the point of expansion; some cultures were the same but now reside in different regions of the globe. It is within this concatenation of ideas that cosmological tales from historical past gain congruency with scientific findings through the explanation that an ambient energy which had been described severally in various cultures' creation mythologies is now understood in contemporary science as an eventual subatomic charge which caused a sudden dispersion of matter within seconds of the bang. With recent discoveries in sciences such as the human evolution theory by Charles Darwin, the Big Bang Theory of Georges Lemaitre and a host of others, scientists tend to give credence to ancient mythologies as not subject to merely fabricated stories without a determinable basis from the past. Rather, they show that the myths of yesterday created the basis for empirical sciences of today.

Within the cosmological tales from different cultures, including religious holy books, one can find corollary with contemporary scientific observations. It is within this framework of finite and infinite structures of creation stories that the connection between the old mythical system and contemporary scientific realities can be derived. Mythologies or stories of origin of a people exist in different cultures. These stories, however, try to situate a people's identity and are sometimes relatedness to some other cultures. Some of these mythologies are identical to the recent and scientifically supported “Big Bang Theory”. Ron Wilcox in his Freshman Project wrote that “Many of these creation myths embody similar themes that hint at a deeper meaning behind these stories and demonstrate the intricate connections some of these civilizations shared.”²⁰ Among the Indians, there is a mythology that relates the Samudra Manthan (connotes commotion) and Vishnu Avatar to the concept of the Big Bang. Similarly, David and Margaret Leeming, narrate how Brahman and Purusa were split to create the world.²¹

¹⁹The Evolution of the Universe.Ed.David L. Alles.Western Washington University.

²⁰Ron Wilcox. *A Big Bang of Mythic Proportions: A Comparison of Ancient Mythological Cosmologies and Current Scientific Creation Theory*. Freshman Monroe Project 2008. <http://www.anyflip.com/vzha>pgle>basic>.

²¹Leeming, David and Margaret Leeming.A Dictionary of Creation Myths. New York: Oxford University Press. 1995 (139-144)

Explicating further on this theory, Alles notes that “if matter is everywhere receding, it would seem natural to suppose that in the distant past it was closer together.”²² The theory provides a comfortable explanation of the existence of the Dravidian ethnic group with physiognomic semblance to Negroes of the sub-Saharan Africa of which the Igbo ethnic nationality is a member. By bringing in the bang theory, we are tacitly resurrecting Benedict de Spinoza's maxim of causality that was not anthropocentric. Rather, just as Cassirer notes, humans are “only a single link in the general chain of evolution. Cultural life is always bound up with the conditions of organic life.”²³ Therefore, if world spaces had shifted with people finding themselves in different regions of the globe, it is possible that some practices had survived temporal and spatial gaps.

In this same vein, Velluppillai narrates a widely shared legend among the Dravidians of having occupied a vast land that was incidentally swallowed up by the sea, according to Velluppillai, “The legend is first mentioned in the commentary of KaLavijal, which is assigned to about 8th century AD. This legend is one of the reasons- one of the excuses- for connecting up the Tamil civilization with some prehistoric ancient civilizations, whose identity and continuity poses special problems.” Furthermore, Senghor makes reference to this lost city when he notes that “Tamil legends refer to the existence, from time immemorial, of flourishing cities long since buried beneath the seas.”

Another account narrated by NzeIzo Omenigboab out the creation mythology among the Igbos falls within the same framework as the “Big Bang” theory. Omenigbo gives an insight to a certain known and unperceivable state of the universe which he identified as “the primal house” in Igbo cosmogony. According to Omenigbo:

In this immensely unifying house – once existed as the “secret project” of Chi-Ukwu, the colossal God. However, given the very curious nature of Chi-Ukwu's wife – Komosu, this “secret project” was consequently made known when she bravely ventured to peep into Chi-Ukwu's coveted *Obi* or sacred enclave, which was located right in the middle of the larger “primal house.”²⁴

His story ends that the act of revealing the secret initiated a blast of a primal energy which force killed the very beautiful *Komosu* but this became an action that gave birth to the world with the martyred *Komosure* incarnating back as *Ala*, the Igbo Earth goddess.

The aesthetic principle of expression in Igbo culture is also embodied in the aforementioned Uli body-painting/inscribing tradition. The *Edeulior Uli*, for short, is a sacred, linear-oriented body-inscribing aesthetic employed by women in pre-contemporary Igbo society. It's highly attractive and intricately executed expressions were regarded deeply by women and young girls – even beyond the Igbo cultural area. Among other things, it is also a key feature of *Ala*(Earth Goddess) cult.²⁵

²²Ibid. see also, David H. Weinberg, *A Space-to-Time Translation*

²³(Cassirer p. 168)

²⁴NzeIzoOmenigbo. The Ecotheology of Ahobinagu: An Igbo Deity of Wildlife and Forestry in *Odinani: The Sacred Arts and Science of the Igbo People* <http://www.igbocybershrine.com/2012/03/28/the-ecotheology-of-ahobinagu-an-igbo-deity-of-wildlife-and-forestry/>

²⁵NzeIzoOmenigbo. ChukwuBuUli dereuwa: Odinala, Igbo Antiquity and the Esoteric Roots of Human Expressions. <http://www.igbocybershrine.com/2012/05/03/>

The above narratives take us to shared sources of both artistic cultures of *Uli* and *Kolam* as an attribution and veneration to Mother-Goddesses by both ethnic groups.

Other Similarities: Imperialism, Colonial and Post-colonial Experiences

Despite having similar experiences through colonial intervention, both ethnic groups have come under a certain mistrust and consequential subjugation by most ethnic groups in their present countries. These have resulted in attempts at secession and an aftermath of the civil war. However, we choose to engage the topic above due to obvious similarities between the *Kolam* designs of the people of Tamil of South East Asia and the Igbo of South East Nigeria. This is because of the shared cultural heritage that predates the Indo-Portuguese trade links that flourished around 16th century and its subsequent introduction of slave population mostly from the Bantu speaking African regions such as Botswana, Mozambique and other parts of East Africa.

Between *Uli* and *Kolam*: On Culture and its Pollinations

Though humans experience earthly phenomena universally, expressions of these experiences can either be similar or entirely different. This is due to cultural, psychological and other historical peculiarities. But some commonalities can be found in some cultural aspects. The sand drawing tradition cuts across the Tamil, Chokwe in Africa and the Americas' Navajo Indians. When cultural and scientific pieces of evidence support similarities as it exists between the *Uli* and *Kolam*, it becomes an issue that demands serious attention. The process of creativity also provides “room for cross-cultural influences at pan-regional, national and continental levels,”²⁶ through generational transference and synthesis which implies that what goes into an artwork could be traced far beyond its geographical mapping.

This cross-cultural design recognition among the Igbo and the Tamil suggests a possible culture connectedness and an absence of insularity for both cultural groups. Taking a deeper look into both art forms, we will be tweaking information from cross-disciplinary pieces of evidence available to us in the aforementioned areas of studies. This provides the framework for determining origins, purposes, formal similarities between both artistic traditions and also investigates both the iconographical and iconological implications of these artistic traditions within their local areas.

Uli or *Uri* depending on the dialectical orientation is a word that functions simultaneously as noun and verb. As a noun *Uli* is an Igbo word for an organic plant called *Rothmania Whitfieldi*. *Rothmania Hispida* is a genus of flowering plants found within the *Rubiaceae* family. The plant contains a blue-black liquid that is inside a pod and is used in creating a semi-permanent design on human bodies or wall of houses, “However, when painting *ulimotifs* on dwellings and shrine walls, women use colored earth and plant pigments.”²⁷ *Uli* also refers to the act of making a mark, of saying something through 'drawing' lines and 'painting' colours using the human body as canvas support or on walls as mural painting. The art of *Uli* is seen by the Igbo as writing which has a divine origin. NzeIzo Omenigbo captured this notion in a discourse posted on his blog with a phrase that is explicit of this belief on its divine nature. His topic reads “*Chukwubu Uli dereuwa*”²⁸ which translates as “God is the scribe or ink that wrote the world”. This suggests that God is the primal artist who embodies both the medium and means by which

²⁶Sukanthy Visagapperumal Egharevba

²⁷Sandra Smith (2010. 6)

²⁸NzeIzo Omenigbo.

things are visible in the world. Among the Igbo, it is believed that one needs a spiritual insight to decipher the hidden messages of an *Uli* design.

Uli has been basically a feminine gender art whereby they use the liquid from the *Rothmania Whitfield* to decorate their bodies, and paint murals on clay walls. In pre-colonial Igbo societies, the *Uli* design is symbolic of socio-cultural values but this importance has waned with the advent of colonialism and Christianization. Chinedu Chukwueggu traces *Uli* design to Igbo-ukwu pottery by citing an excavation led by Thurstan Shaw dated around the 9th century B.C. According to Chukwueggu, “the designs were incorporated in well-decorated metal wares, shell, roped pots, glass, beads, and ornaments.”²⁹ Similarly, many artists and scholars had written extensively on *Uli* creative designs and its adaptations to contemporary art. In one of such scholarly investigation by Sandra Smith, she notes that:

Uli is historically an ephemeral art form practiced predominantly by female Igbo artists, by which the body is used as a canvas for inscribing patterns and symbols which serve as a means of beautification. The motifs further enhance specific aspects of a woman's character and physical strengths, which are looked for by a future husband as indications of potential financial success. *Uli* patterns and motifs are simplified or abstracted forms taken from nature or functional items used in everyday life. Designs are effortlessly created through the use of rhythmic curved lines; the exact placement of a dot; or the directness of a mark. Identical or stylistically similar designs are painted on the walls of dwellings, compound and communal shrines where motifs are generally larger in size.³⁰

Uli had been ascribed to the Earth Goddess called *Ala*. Onwuakpa notes that “*Uli* has been seen as the basic art form or creative activity of the womenfolk which according to traditional beliefs was bestowed on them by *Ala* (Earth Goddess) because of their special relationship with her.”³¹ In this same vein, Smith had noted that, “In Igboland, *uli* was a feminine art form, and the design repertoire of the artist varied from village to village as did the compositional forms, designs, and motifs.”³² It is this connection with Mother-Goddess, and practice among the feminine gender that draws one's attention to the same religious connotation and gender origination among the Tamils of South East Asia.

Kolam decoration is one of the traditional art expressions of the Tamil; it ranks with *Akamand Puram* traditional poetry. *Kolam* can be said to be a visual variant of this auditory poetry which is drawn by women on the floor of houses, temples and public space. Sukanthy Egharevba observes that “It is the most popular art form and practice among the Southern Indian Tamils as well as the Sri-Lankan Tamils.”³³ It is a visual statement on the sand. Its stretch of influence extends beyond India and Sri-Lanka as it is common within cultures around the Indian sub-continent and Melanesia. It is called *Rangavalli* in Andhra Pradesh and *Rangoli* in some parts of India. A Singapore official online database called singaporeinfopedia dates *kolam* to about 5000 years ago, “during the pre-Aryan period”³⁴.

²⁹Chinedu C. Chukwueggu. *The Uli Art Idiom: UcheOkeke's Creative Legacy at the Nsukka Art School*. In “The Triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on UcheOkeke and Modern Art in Nigeria.” ed. KrydzIkwuemesi. (Pendulum Art Gallery. Lagos: 2003) 87.

³⁰Sandra Smith 2010, *Uli: Metamorphosis Of Tradition into Contemporary Aesthetics*. a thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. (2010.) 6.

³¹Samuel Onwuapka “Visuality and Representation in Traditional Igbo Uli Body and Mud Wall Paintings” African Research Review *An International Multi-disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia Vol. 10(2)*, 2016: 345-357 2016 p. 346

³²Sandra Smith 2010 (p.3)

³³Sukanthy Visagapperumal Egharevba 2014(3)

³⁴eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia

Kolam just like *Uli*, has both religious and ornamental connotations and is originally practiced by women who wait eagerly for the month of *Margazhi* to show their skill. Lance Nelson in his seminal book “*Purifying the Earthly Body of God*” records his interview with a *Kolam* artist from the Thilaikkudi village in Thanjavur District thus:

Bhumi Devi (Earth Goddess) is our mother. She is everyone's source of existence. Nothing would exist without her. The entire world depends on her for sustenance and life. So, we draw the *kolam* first to remind ourselves of her. We spit on her. We poke her. We burden her. We do everything on her. We expect her to bear us and all the activities we do on her with endless patience. That is why we do the *Kolam*.³⁵

By using organic and edible substances to create, a *Kolam* artist invites little insects, birds, and animals to feast. This is taken as good *Karma*, as one maintains a harmonious coexistence with natural elements within the environment. It could be due to this spiritual undertone that *Kolam* is believed to usher in good luck. “Worship of the Mother Goddess is an important religious rite commonly noticed among the followers of this culture and we find this custom practiced throughout this region.”³⁶

Uli and Kolam within Contemporary and Postmodern Praxis

Uli and *Kolam*, just like any other as cultural aspects have gone through transmutation and eventual adaptation to vestiges of time and space. The dual forces of Christianity and Westernization had brought about the annihilation of native cultures in their bid to supplant the traditional systems and the eventual aftermath of self-inflicted psychological neo-colonization. This has led to the 'negativisation of the notion of culture' (to borrow from Ikwemesi). *Uli* and *Kolam* artistic tradition had narrowly survived this cultural *Tsunami* by conscious efforts of some cultural revivalists. Currently both had adopted some postmodern attitudes of; playfulness, reflexivity, openness, simultaneity, de-centeredness, and fragmentation as sources or means of expression that inform our present study. Both art forms currently constitute design focuses within creative art departments in the universities in their respective localities. For instance, the art department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka had achieved international prominence due to its adaptation of the design elements of the traditional *Uli* into contemporary artistic idiom.

Under the influence of pan-Africanism in the 1950s championed by Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas³⁷ or what Ben Enweonwu in his visual interpretation of the “zeitgeist” of the Negritude philosophy termed *African Style*. This spirit inspired Chike Aniakor, Uche Okeke and others to bring into Nigerian art discourse the concept of *natural synthesis* and *Uli* revitalization as product of that consciousness. *Uli* gained a cultural revitalization and transmutation into the modernist vernacular when under the headship of Uche Okeke as the Head of Department of Fine and Applied Art in the University of Nigeria Nsukka with the collaboration of colleagues, the prominent artist and scholar Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu. Other artists and scholars such as Chuka Amaefuna, El-Anatsui, Tayo Adenaike, Chris Echeta, Chinwe Uwatse, ChuuKrydz Ikwemesi, Ndidi Dike, Ozioma Onuzulike, just to mention but a few, have explored the visual and theoretical possibilities of *Uli* into a modernistic visual language.³⁸

³⁵Lance E. Nelson. *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*. State University of New York Press. Albany, NY. 1998. (273.)

³⁶U.PupadhyayaSusheelaO.Uphadyaya

³⁷OkoronkwoIkechukwu Francis. *Dak'art 2012: A Critique of Artistic Trajectories and Politics of Power*

³⁸See Ottenburg, 1992

The mobility of *uli* into a post-modernistic language is evident in works of contemporary artists. The likes of El-Anatsui, Dilomprizulike, Sukanthy Visagaperumal-Egharevba, Ike Francis, derives linearity from contemporary materials as reminiscent of *Uli* lines. However, Sukanthy had combined both the *Uli* and *Kolam* design elements in her mixed media paintings to reflect the postmodern zeitgeist. Dilomprizu like explored the visual potentials of *Uli* beyond the two-dimensional format by bringing in junks to reflect his *Uli* design consciousness. These artists, in Smith's words, “have refashioned the antiquated and unique into contemporary forms, which now appear etched on pottery, cast on bronze and precious metals, carved on wood, woven into textiles, stitched on cloth, or inscribed on the human body.”³⁹

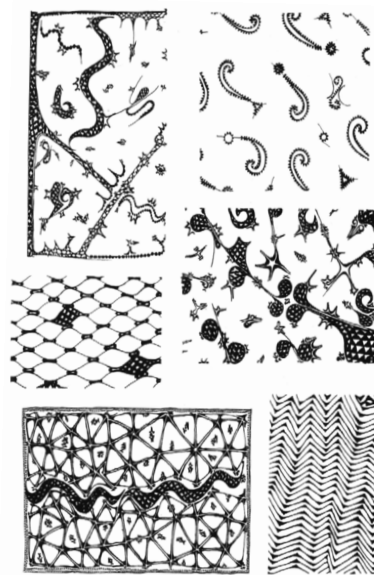


Fig. 2. *Uli* designs drawn on paper using black ink.

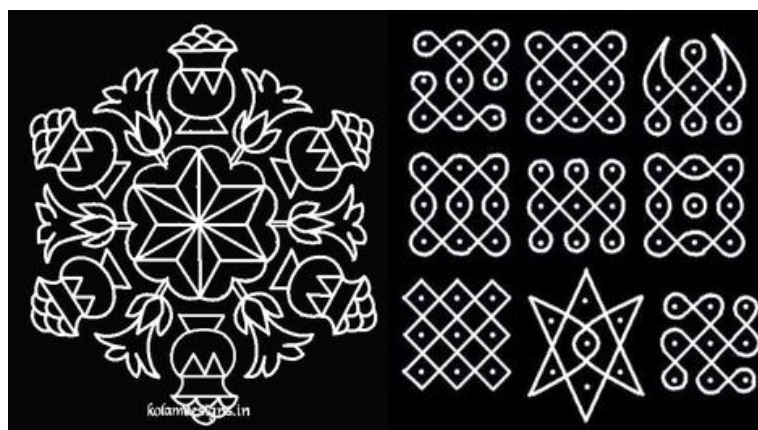


Fig. 3. Pulli Kolam Designs

Source: <https://allencentre.wikispaces.com/Indian+Art+-+Rangoli+Kolam>

³⁹Sandra Smith 2010, p. 1

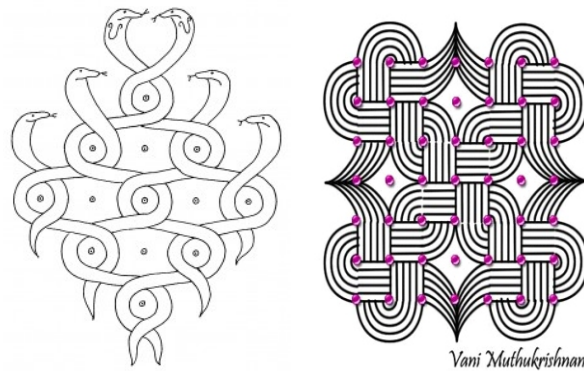


Fig 3: Tamil Kolam designs with Pulliand Kambi

Source: <http://www.chantal-jumel-kolam-kalam.com/en/category/drawing-kolam/>

Figures 4a and b below shows triangular motifs and similar designs from *Uli* and *Kolam*



Fig.4a. Image of leopard on ukava cloth.

Source: Sandra Smith.

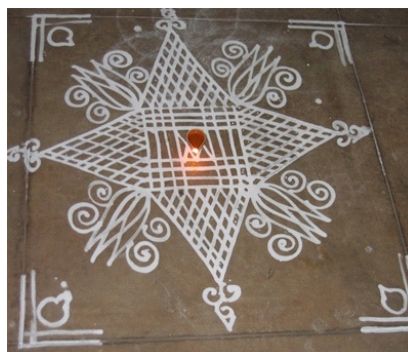


Fig. 4b. NavratriRangoli Designs

Source: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/lathasr/rangoli/>



Fig 5. Kolam and Uli in progress

Source: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/feesensation/diy-kolams/>
<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/358810295288360079/>

Conclusion

Kolam is currently a popular design that has inspired local and international artists derive inspirations to create contemporary fashion. People look forward to the *Pongal* festival that happens around the month of mid-December to mid-January which is the month of *Margazhi* to buy clothes, designs and other souvenirs containing the *Kolam* patterns. *Uli* on the other hand has crossed from classical designs by traditional women into the academic environment. However, it is yet to attain the popularization and commercialization attributed to *Kolam*. This challenge is to be located within the cultural effacement that is ongoing to the extent that the Igbos in their proselytizing bid to Christianity, westernization and other foreign religions is in a hurry to erase anything that reminds them of their root. This they term to be heathen and not modern.

We also noticed that *kolam* and *Uli* designs in the figs 2 and 3, *pulli* and *ntupo* (dots) have commonalities of feature among the two cultural groups. In *kolam*, *pulli* is symmetrical and making an organized design while in *Uli*, *ntupo* forms detail decorations. In any case, dots are an important component of design in the two cultures. Furthermore, *akalauli* (line) predominates in most *Uli* designs in the same way *kambi* (line) plays a pivotal role. In both cultures, *ntupo* and *pulli* (lines) though may have other symbolic purposes; they play a supportive and ornamental role in their compositions. In the same way as with *ntupo* and *pulli*, *Onwa* and *Vattam* (circle) are strategically used to unite compositions in both cultures and most often have deeper spiritual references to terrestrial elemental bodies in the cosmogony of the Igbos and Tamils. Other design motifs that share similarities are the *Mboagu* and *Mukkōnam*, *agwolagwo* and *surul* (concentric circle or spiral), the *Ijeagwo* translate to the journey of the python (rhythm) in Igbo *uli* and *Naga naga* refer to similar symbolism though with deeper religious undertone of the worship of cobra in Tamil *kolam* patterns. Another seemingly prominent motif for the *kolam* and *Uli* is circle, *vattam*, respectively. Both cultures use spatial strategies to involve their environments within a dynamic relationship of space and artistic interventions. These design orientations, their symbolism and creative use in both *Kolam* and *Uli* are evident in figures 4 and 5. We also found out that while *Kolam* depends on sequential repetition, the *Uli* is highly asymmetrical. This makes it susceptible for researchers and artistic exploration as a way ascertain deeper connections among the two cultures through empirical and maybe ontological approaches. Our study also opens up more thematic possibilities for artists to explore these connections to create mixed media and installation artworks that reflect the postmodern art idioms of pluralism and inclusivity.

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