

Material Culture in Historical Documentation: A Treatise of the Igbo Traditional Society in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Nigerian culture is indeed varied and manifold. The country parades over 250 tribes and language groups which have distinctive dialectical and cultural uniqueness. Each of these cultural groups have expressions in folklore, clothing, music, religion, arts and crafts. Although the cultural diversity is very evident and these tribes hold strongly to their traditional heritage, however a close study reveals some similarities among them. These include love, morals, and respect for the aged, royalty and worship. There are three major language groups that have dominated the cultural and political landscape of the nation, the Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba. This paper focuses on the cultural heritage of one of the three major ethnic groups in the country – the Igbo of the South East Nigeria. It investigates how they have documented their past with the aid of their material culture, which obviously has enabled proper documentation in postmodern Nigeria. It discusses the relevance of the material culture of the Igbo traditional society in the documentation and preservation of the people's cultural values. Finally, the importance of material culture in the revered Igbo traditional chieftaincy installation ceremonies, festivals and initiation ceremonies will be examined along with their indigenous philosophies.

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Background to the Study

The Igbo ethnic nationality occupies the five South Eastern States and parts of Niger Delta region. They are one of the three major ethnic groups in the country. The people embraced western education early, particularly as a result of their involvement in trade and commerce with the Europeans. The local population are predominantly traders, farmers and teachers at all levels. The towns are highly urbanized which is a consequence of the creation of States in Nigeria. Many Urban cities emerged along with the newly created State capitals. They include *Afikpo, Okigwe, Abakiliki, Orlu, Agbor, Ohafia, Oguta, Nsukka*. This is in addition to the well-developed State capitals and associated commercial cities of *Onitsha, Nnewi* and *Aba* which command international recognition along the West African region.

The Igbo nation is surrounded by many smaller ethnic nationalities with distrust linguistic disposition and culture. Most of the ethnic groups are found along the Niger Delta region of the country. They are; the Bini, Igala, Urhobo, Ijaw, Ogoni, the Tiv and the Ibibio. The Niger and Benue rivers provide a veritable means of trade and communication among the ethnic nationalities which inhabit region. The trade relationship among these ethnic groups had existed long before the advent of colonial rule in Nigeria. Consequently, the Igbo nation so parades strong cultural affinity with their neighbors through marriage and other social-cultural activities. Politically, Enugu is the incontrovertible capital of the Igbo nation.

It has been very difficult to trace the origin of the Igbo nation or where they migrated from. Various postulations some though controversial, have not clearly ascertained the migration claims beyond doubts. In most cases, such migration records have been quite speculative. However, the Igbo nation generally accept the *Nri* and *Aguleri* culture as its ancestral roots. The myth of their origin may also have been traced to *Umueri* clan. The *Nri* and *Aguleri* as well as some parts of *Umueri*, trace their ancestral origin of *Eri* (sky being). Today, the *Eze Nri* (priestly king) is regarded as the foremost traditional ruler in Igboland. The *Nri* kingdom has the structure of religio-political nature a theocratic society, which gradually has spread throughout Igboland with a quasi-democratic republican configuration.

The *Umunna* (a patrilineal male line of descent from common ancestry) remains the major beacon for the enforcement of law and order. The leadership is superintended by eldest male of the ancestry lineage. The decision of the *Umunna* is usually binding on every family unit and compounds that make up the lineage. This system is opposed to feudalism which is common in the Northern part of the country as well as the South West where the Emirs and Obas largely rule over the people with strong cultural institution. However, there are exceptions like in *Onitsha, Arochuku* and *Agbor* where the *Eze Aro* and *Obi* (traditional rules) are akin to the structure of the Yoruba of the South West Nigeria.

The Igbo nation with a population estimate of over 34 million as at 2017, has indigenous calendar system which controls their social, commercial, religious and political institutions. The Igbo week is made up of four days while a month has seven weeks. The traditional calendar year consist of thirteen months with an extra day on the last month of the year. Till date, the calendar still determines the nature of commercial activities in the towns and villages despite urbanization. For instance, the Aba international market is generally regard to *Ekeoha Aba*. The prefix *Eke-* is the first traditional market day in Igboland. The other three markets days following that sequence with the prefix for proper identification. The other market days are *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afo* and *Nkwo* generally regarded as the four Igbo market days.

Prior to the advent of colonialism, the Igbo tradition was essentially an agrarian society. It was largely for subsistence. However, the people have a well-developed creative endowment in various aspects of handcrafts and indeed the visual arts. This includes; the *Uli* Art Idiom (body and wall decorations), pottery making, weaving and smiting among others. In the area of commerce, the people had engaged in long distance trading activities which led to the emergence of prominent merchants in Igboland before colonization. (Nwala, 1985).

The Material Culture of the Igbo

Having carefully explained the introductory note of the Igbo nation, though not comprehensive. The focus of this paper is on how the Igbo traditional Society documents its treasures from their ancestry with the aid of the material culture of the people. Andah (1982) sees culture as the “patterning of shared expectations about behavior in a given society”. This therefore translates into whatever the people do collectively while inhabiting in any given environment. The inhabitants of the cultural habitation determine the processes for the expression of their values and beliefs. He also informs us that the transmission of information in a traditional environment has two objectives; long term and immediate purposes. He further explained that the immediate objectives aim at solving the problems of suspicion, disunity and possible anarchy (Andah, African Anthropology, 1988). Short term objectives encourage the promotion and adoption of new ideas, while the long-time objective encourage the preservation of such culture for generations unborn.

Anyanwu (2011) sees culture differently, to him culture is universal based on the concept and experience. It means a perceived way of life which includes the entire human efforts, achievements and indeed the general attitude in a given environment. To him, culture is evident in language, music, dance, drama, religion, architecture, technology, education, knowledge system, morality and legal system. He cited the 2002 United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition of culture as a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society. This includes their art, literature, language, social behavior, traditions and belief system in a given environment. However, he informs us that there are over 150 generally accepted definitions of culture. Culture indeed is the moral order that guides or moderates the

behavior of a people in their given environment. Culture could also be applied to represent a people; such as the culture of the Igbo which simply imply the culture of Igbo nation. It could also refer to the culture of the Yoruba or Nupe which obviously translate in the people who own such cultures. (Anyawu, 2011).

In this case, the culture of the Igbo ethnic nationality is therefore synonymous with the principle that sustains the functioning of the traditional Igbo society. This includes arts, morals, law, custom, the belief system and other positive things the people may have acquired over the period of inhabiting in that environment. Therefore, culture and environment are very synonymous. Both have progressed with sustained development from one generation to another (Nwoko, 1979). The material culture of the Igbo in this paper refers to the visual cultural heritage of the people such as; language which could be oral or written, arts and crafts, music and drama, dance and religious practices. Other aspect of material culture include food such as yam, this food item is strongly rooted in Igbo tradition, and it could be boiled and eaten or pounded. Yam is a very vital part of the traditional life especially where feeding of guests is involved. In marriages, chieftaincy installations, religious activities in most modern Igbo culture, yam is served as a special delicacy with the popular *Olugbu*, *Okazi*, or *Ofé Owerre*. There is also the nutritious *achi* and ground pumpkin seed which the Igbo employ as local spices and soup thickeners` (Okeke, Eneobong, Uzuegbunam, Ozioko, and Kuhnlein , 2008) The Igbo Culture in essence is generally referred to as *Omenala Igbo*. By this we mean the cultural values; their beliefs about the universe (Nwala, 1985). Nwala also went on to inform us that *Omenala* contains the principles for propagating and protecting the traditional civilization. The *Omenala* Igbo is literally packaged with generally accepted sanctions as a way of protecting their cultural treasures.

Other aspects of the Igbo material culture include dressing, clothing and architecture which are predominantly indigenous to the people. These values are the propeller of cohabitation of the Igbos in their environment. They are therefore culture identity as well as bond of unity amongst the people. In essence, the above core cultural values control the principles which determine the functioning of the Igbo traditional institutions. However, we must note that the dynamism in culture is universal and therefore the Igbo cultural heritage is not an exception, but the core values remain unchanged.

Culture Documentation

Having examined culture as well as material culture as it relates to the Igbo traditional life, we proceed to investigate the Traditional Igbo Society. How they have been able to document their past with the aid of their material culture in their environment. This includes; language, writing system, Uli art idiom, symbolism in their culture, *Mgbede* traditional fattening ceremonies, songs, drama and poems.

The Igbo Language

Language like in every other ethnic group or nation is the pivot on which cultures revolve. There is hardly any culture without a language. Any culture or race without

linguistic affiliation in essence does not exist; no culture is dumb or deaf. Indeed, there is no group or traditional society without culture. It means the totality of the ways and manners people live their lives and conduct their social, political, religious and commercial activities in a given environment with a distinctive linguistic disposition. Language therefore can be described as the repository of Culture. In fact, culture encompasses the totality of the people's behavioral patterns which includes customs and traditions etc.

In Nigeria alone, there are over 350 language groups. The diversity in the country's language obviously explains the multi-cultural nature of the nation. Speech conduct or language is the most extensive and common symbol of identification among the various ethnic group or nationalities in the world. Chukueggu (1998) informs us that language is indispensable and has therefore remained more permanent than any other aspect of the Igbo culture be it material or non-material. An American linguists and Anthropologist, (Edward Sapir 1884 - 1939) as cited by Obiegbu (2016) argues that language has the power to control the culture of the people and influence their thinking. Also, culture as we know is contrived in the human mind and consequently propagated and sustained with language. Therefore, the marriage of language and culture is indispensably symbolic. It not only serves as an expression of culture but gives relevance and recognition to the culture that has it. Language therefore is very fundamental to either regional, ethnic or even national identity. It guaranties the speaker full membership of such society and also enables him the power of self-expression. The absence of language renders the individual or community non-existent. The Igbo language therefore is the vehicle that give the society verbal expression.

The oral tradition of the Igbo ethnic group has its expression in the Igbo language which is properly documented. The language provides ample legitimacy and dependence in the documentation of the past. Oral tradition constitutes a primary source of information. The Igbo oral tradition therefore provides the first hand means of understanding the cultural vision of the people. This is expressed in their myths, legends, epics, folktales, proverbs and wise sayings. Through these means, the essence of the people's togetherness is explained and enforced. The non-literate society have their unique ways of proper documentation in oral tradition and symbolism. The information moves from one generation to another. The Igbo communal activity integrates both the permanent and changing values of the society. They include; achievement in science and arts, technology, medical, political and words of wisdom. The treasures of the people's origin is integrated in their oral tradition. The oral information transference could further be divided into oral history and oral literature.

The Igbo oral history basically explains the tradition of origin of the people as received from their forefathers, their original location to their present places of abode. It also reveals the identities and in some cases the activities, their past leaders and associated events that led to the emergence of such leaders. Closely related to the above is the involvement of Memory Passage. The traditional Igbo society document the memory of

events they do not want to reveal to common understanding or put down in written forms. Most of such events are usually associated with disaster, or misfortune. Younger generations are availed such information when the record keepers are too old or about to die.

Oral literature on the other hand contains the Igbo moral instructions, religious tenets, festivals, wise-sayings and riddles. Afigbo (1977) explained that the Igbo oral literature contains their customs and traditions. Consequently, the people are able to keep their cherished cultural beliefs and practices over the years. These are consciously transmitted from one generation to another. In the Igbo traditional society everyone both the young and old are custodians of their culture and tradition.

The Igbo Writing System

Chukueggu & Chukueggu (2001) rightly noted that writing is a visual communication of ideas only practiced by man. It involves the use of signs or symbols and only the writer and reader can understand it. Writing as we know can be inscribed on a piece of metal with sharp objects. It could also be on paper, stone, clay, cloth and any desired surfaces. Writing must be visible, legible and generally conveys meanings and ideas to the reader. Therefore, it is indispensable in record keeping and relaying of information. Consequently, this method of information is a human invention and only practiced by man. Animals generally communicate through signs, noise or actions. Writing is a bridge builder. Today, writing has become the most articulate, durable and reliable system of communication and documentation. The importance of writing cannot be over stressed. Several questions have been raised by researchers about the various African indigenous writing systems which were already in advance stages long before colonization and have been lost to western civilization and underdevelopment. They are tattooing, stone writing, picture writing, papyrus script writing, etc. Tattooing or symbol writing was popular in Africa. In Igbo land, parts of the Ashanti tribe in Ghana and various parts of the mountainous tribes of East Africa, people draw symbols on their bodies for the purpose of identification and documentation.

The Igbo communication symbol system is another method of traditional documentation. Andah (1982) had observed that in the African cultural societies, values are documented through perceived symbol system. These symbols are unique and unambiguous. The Igbo traditional society documents its history with the aid of symbols. They employ drawings and pictorial images to remind them of their past experiences and events, which they may likely forget to pass on to the younger generation. In this case one does not need to be an artist or involve an external aid in the course of the documentation. The interpretation of whatever the image or figures represents rests squarely on the door step of the owners. Therefore, it is generally very difficult for another person on even close family members to decode the meanings of the symbols engaged in this method of documentation. Such symbols may be exposed on the outside walls of buildings or secretly documented inside the bedrooms or living rooms. The symbols simple reminds the owner the full details of the events so documented. The

symbols are common sights sometimes behind the doors or window of elderly men and women in traditional compounds and lineages. Such records include land disputes and agreements general family records or history such as, misfortunes, deaths, disasters.

Chukueggu & Chukueggu (2001) noted that traditional writing is a conventional symbol practiced by man in his environment. They explained that script writing in ancient Africa, developed from symbols and picture writing. In Igbo land, parents in the traditional society explain the meanings of the coded writings when they are too old or about to die. Traditionally, eldest sons stay close to their aged parents for the passage of information and possible explanations which they may want to pass on to them. This explains why they do not permit the recoating of their living or bedrooms by their children. This is in order to prevent them from wiping out their treasured records. Little wonder some aged parents reject the occupation of new houses built for them by their children. This attitude resonates in Igbo philosophy, which is traditional and customary. It is not written anywhere but duly understood by all and ultimately personalized. This treasurable method of documentation is also a social control instrument which solves their problems and promotes peace and the general welfare of the families, lineages and sub-lineages of the traditional society (Nwala, 1985).

Also, the Igbo culture history could be preserved through festivals, chieftaincy installations, religious and re-enactment ceremonies. The religious ceremonies are very frequent in the cultural practices of the people. They are; the passage rites of elders and *Ndi Eze* or prominent title holders, the *Ozo* title ceremonies, the *Ekpe*, marriage ceremonies reverence to the *Ndichie* etc. Before the commencement of these ceremonies, the respective elders concerned recite the origin of such events. This must be carried out at the full glare of the audience, which include the younger generations. By so doing, the information is passed on to them. The new yam festival reminds the people about the painful but avoidable sacrifice of their son in order to covert imminent famine in the land. New generations of children ask questions and are primly educated on why such ceremonies are repeated annually. Elegantly decorated masquerades are involved in order to add colour to the occasions. Creative art is an important aspect of these ceremonies, be it the *Ozo* title and chieftaincy installations or even the passage rites celebrations. Okeke (1979) expressed that the Igbo philosophy is imbedded in the art on the people. Consequently, art is expressed as objects of religious worship and documentation. These art works and costume decorations of the masquerades involved in the ceremonies are for specific interpretations. For instance, the masks and decorations of the masquerades for the installation of the *Eze* is completely different from those of the *Ozo* title holders. Such masks and masquerades are clearly identifiable at sight.

Other symbolic images that are revered in socio-political and religious ceremonies are the *Ozotusk*, the *Ndichie* staff, Oath-taking and Agreement stones. The elders of the land keep custody of these art objects. The current wave of Christian evangelism in Igbo is however gradually eroding the acceptability of these ancestral relics by the younger generations. Nonetheless, they are indispensable part of the Igbo culture. Elders

constantly refer to such relics when the need arises, by so doing, the history and philosophy and indeed the culture of the people are properly documented.

Art works of various sizes and shapes are common sights in shrines and Mbari houses in Igbo land. Such images have taboos associated with their handling and as such are properly preserved. The deities in the images are perceived to be endowed with magical powers and functions for the good of the people. In Igbo land every ancestral decent has its own shrine and peculiar relics. The Mbari houses in particular, are obvious references the aversion of catastrophe or misfortune by the host communities (Chukueggu, Mbari Mud Sculpture; Continuety and Change, 1999). Such experiences are properly documented and preserved in the *Mbari* houses in Owerri, Logara and Enyigugu in Igboland. For instance, the *Mbari Logara* built in 1945 was for two reasons; the sudden death of the prominent sons in the land and a series of miscarriage by their pregnant women. In some cases, the *Mbari* houses are constructed in honour of the deities as a sign of gratitude for answering to the requests or prayers of the people (Nwala, 1985). The Mbari at Enyigugu in particular was a reaction to the atonement of sins committed against the gods of the land. This sin occasioned the invasion of the land by dangerous animals, famine and business failure. Inter-village wars or crises could lead to the construction of the *Mbari* houses by any community in Owerri (Chukueggu, Mbari Mud Sculpture; Continuety and Change, 1999).

Cole (1982) explained that the early 1930s appear to have had the greatest and indeed most elaborated preparation for the *Mbari* ensemble. However, obvious innovations have continued to manifest with the passage of time. There has been considerable increase in the number of sculptures in the *Mbari* houses. (Cole, 1982)

Also, images and figures in the subsequent *Mbari* configuration have witnessed improved aesthetic approach in their presentations. The documentation and preservation of the Igbo culture history in the *Mbari* houses is indeed amazing. There are images of elephants, leopard and baboon as well as hunters with locally made guns, most of these animals have gone into extinction in these committees. Also, images of traditional nurses attending to women at child-birth which the culture regards as secret are found in the *Mbari* houses. There are images of colonialism; such as forced labour and imprisonment of perceived opponents by the colonial masters in Igboland. All these are appropriately documented in some *Mbari* houses. Generally, the *Mbari* culture properly articulates the socio-political and religious life, as well as the general character of the people at period of execution. All these showcase the tenacity for historical documentation by Igbo traditional society.

The Uli Symbolism in Igbo Documentation

The Uli art Symbolism is practiced in Igbo land and it involves the painting and decoration of walls of traditional houses and body adornment. The motifs are abstracted in geometric and semi geometric forms. The Uli symbolism has uninhibited adaptation of symbols of organic nature this ultimately enriches the content of the art idiom. Locally produced colours such as chalk white, red earth, charcoal black and indigo blue are the

common applied in Uli symbolism. The Uli motifs were found on some of the objects excavated on the ancient art of the Igbo Ukwu by Professor Thurstan in 1959. The objects were dated 9th century AD. They were part of the decorations displayed on metal wares, rope pots, glass beads and ornaments (Egonwa, 1994). Also, the Uli decorations are common sights of walls of Mbari houses in Igbo Land. However, the art tradition was mainly the vocation of women, until recently when its adaptation extended to Art Schools in the Nigerian Institution of higher learning.

Also, the wood sculpture traditions in Igbo land have elements of the *Uli* decorations incorporated into it. Motifs are applied prominently on some relief sculpture. Some sculpture has less fluid and organic *Uli* decorations while others have geometric inscriptions on them. This is also applicable to the Igbo traditional pottery. The pottery designs are very decorative. In most cases the reliefs are created in very recognizable manner. Furthermore, the *Uli* symbolism are common sights on the Igbo ritual and domestic posts (Chukueggu, Uli Art Idiom and the Nsukka Art School, 2009). The Igbo motifs which can be in any form, dictate the direction of the traditional art in Igbo land. Apart from the body decoration which is very common, murals on the walls of family compounds and shrines whether communal or private, bear elaborate decorations of the *Uli* art idiom.

The Igbo traditional weavers are not left out of the elaborate *Uli* skill manipulation in their design application. The popular Akwete weavers in Ndoki, Abia State have demonstrated amazing skills in the application of the *Uli* art tendency in their fabric production. Most of the fabric today wear elaborately decorated motifs, typified with the dominance of bright colours such as green, yellow, red and blue. (Chinedu, Contemporary Nigerian Arts and its Classifications, 1998). Professor Uche Okeke (1933-2016) pioneered the integration of the art idiom into the curriculum of the University art study in Nigeria. He had carried out extensive study on the symbolism and subsequently introduced what he referred to as the Natural Synthesis ideology in art study at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1970. He explained that at the end of the Civil war in Nigeria, the University authorities mandated him to search deeply into the nature of *Uli* and explore its benefits to art study in the University domiciled in Igbo land (Okeke U. , Creative Conscience , 1993). The challenge coupled with enabling environment galvanized him into in-depth documentation of the *Uli* art symbolism and its eventual integration into the University art curriculum. He refers to it as the Natural synthesis ideology in art practice. A reference to the marriage of the Igbo traditional *Uli* art idiom with the essence of the Modern artistic sensibility (Chukueggu and Onwuakpa , 2016). Uche Okeke extensively documented the *Uli* art Idiom and further its frontier of function and aesthetics in art study in Nigeria.

The table below shows the *Uli* design elements as recorded by Uche Okeke in his research documentation. These design elements were adopted from natural forms and objects. Okeke explained that they are pictorial language employed in order to communicate ideas and meanings to man in his environment. In most cases, they are ritualistic which however, depends on the purpose for such designs. He further posited that the design

element was fetched from the surrounding environments of the designers. They are organic elements and very dynamic in disposition.

Table 1: Uli Design Elements as Documented by Uche Okeke

S/N	Element	Igbo name	English Meaning
i		<i>Nnupo or Nnupo uli</i>	Point
ii		<i>Okukili or okirikiri</i>	Concentric circle
iii		<i>Ochwa</i>	Parallel lines
iv		<i>Agwlagwo or Okolokolo</i>	Spiral
v		<i>Mpo-mpo onutu</i>	Spots
vi		<i>Ije-agwo or ije-nwagwo</i>	Snake movement
vii		<i>Okpa okuku</i>	Hen's foot
viii		<i>Ist nwoji or Ist oji</i>	Head of kola nut
ix		<i>Okara ist nwoji</i>	Half of kola nut
x		<i>Aji Ihu</i>	Eye brow
xi		<i>Akwukwo ukpaka</i>	Oil bean leaf
xii		<i>Akwukwo Akpu</i>	Cassava leaf
xiii		<i>Egu or Ogu</i>	Hoe
xiv		<i>Oke unene or unele</i>	Male banana flower
xv		<i>Ogene</i>	Metal gong
xvi		<i>Eke</i>	Python
xvii		<i>Kpakpando</i>	Star
xviii		<i>Akala omu</i>	Diamond shape
xix		<i>Nra</i>	Comb
xx		<i>Odu Eke</i>	Python's tail
xxi		<i>Okuku or Nnunu</i>	Hen or Bird
xxii		<i>Akala-afor Eke</i>	Python's Belly Mark

Source: Okeke (1983:7, 8 and 9) Design Inspiration through Ulias cited in Chukueggu (2003) in Nku Di Na Mba: Uche Okeke and Modern Nigerian Art.

The application of the design element depends on two competing factors; they are, the *Uli* designer and the environment where the designs are produced. Also, the traditional designers could be identified through their expert signature designs.

My late father, a first-generation prominent Nigerian sculptor, Sylvester Agu Opara Chukueggu (1909-2006) had *Uli* decorations on his arms. He informed me that his mother was a popular *Uli* designer who was well patronized because of her creative tenacity and ingenuity. She was engaged in the decoration of young ladies during the traditional fattening room ceremonies (*Mgbede*) as well as many other Igbo cultural activities. However, the motifs employed on the body of her son (my late father) were largely dependent on the circumstance of his birth. In her son's body design, she applied *Nki* (permanent body marks) used in documenting very important events in Igbo traditional Society. This was to keep permanent memory of the events which led to the birth of her son. The motifs were cowrie's shells, iroko leaves and the head of a lion. The reason for such motif according to her son was that her husband (my grandfather) had threatened to kill any other girl born by his wife. She had previously given birth to three girls. Armed with a machete, her husband stood at the entrance of her labour room to either murder the child or rejoice with her if she gives birth to a baby boy. When her son eventually arrived, the traditional birth attendants announced to him that his wife had delivered a baby boy. He suddenly dropped the machete in his hand and shouted *Agum ooh! Agum ooh!!* (My lion! My Lion!!). People gathered to congratulate him and there was celebration in the village. He named his son *Agu* (lion) and that informed the decoration of his arms with the permanent *Uli* design motifs of lion head, cowries shell and the iroko leaves. The traditional interpretation of the cowry shell signifies wealth, while the iroko is an obvious reference to greatness and long life. The importance of these design elements in Igbo tradition cannot be overemphasized. Through this process, a very important family event was documented for generation unborn.

Symbolism in Igbo Traditional Documentation

The Igbo tradition society preserves past records through the planting of symbolic trees such as palm trees, Iroko, coconut trees etc. In some cases, growing or full-grown trees are employed for record-keeping. For instance, in the documentation of the birth of a male child, the umbilical cord is usually buried beside a tree. When the child eventually grows up, he claims the ownership of the economic tree. The tree however becomes a memorial which serves as remembrance or commemoration for the child if eventually he dies before adulthood. Every male child in the traditional Igbo society has an economic tree dedicated to his birth unless such children are bastards who obviously do not have associated parental inheritance or land claims.

Closely related to the above method of record keeping is the documentation of the migration or relocation from one part of the village to another. In this type of situation, economic trees could be planted for such proposes. Lineage or compound relocation may be occasioned by mysterious deaths or disasters. In such cases track routs could be created to link the former habitation to the new abode. Associated records concerning the

movement or relocation are always traced to such track roads decades after decades. These types of record-keeping are well known to families and the entire surrounding villages and cannot be kept secret. Reasons for the movement are usually related to the younger generations whenever the need arises.

Symbolism in Igbo Traditional Documentation enables the people to develop and adapt to new ideals in a given environment. It also promotes co-habitation among the people. The major symbols employed in the Igbo culture history include; arts and crafts, songs and poems, tattoos, re-enactment, festivals, religious ceremonies, music, drama and chieftaincy installation. Arts and crafts remain very vital in Igbo cultural history documentation. It manifested very strongly in the pioneer archaeological excavations in Igbo land by Professor Thurstan Shaw between 1959 and 1960. Tracing the Igbo-Ukwu excavations, Shaw unearthed an abandoned but recorded ninth century A.D Igbo civilization. He informed us about the 850 A.D ancestral relics found in Igbo-Ukwu. The findings remain the earliest dated bronze civilization in West Africa. He explained that their Igbo-Ukwu artistic traditions are delicate and sophisticated (Shaw, 1977). Also, in documenting the history of weaving in Nigeria, Shaw explained that weaving had thrived in Igbo-Ukwu before 900AD. He based his claim on the archaeological excavation of scraps of woven cloths which according to him were preserved in metal containers. The preservation and subsequent excavation of the cloth fabric (material culture), nonetheless settled the issue of the existence of an ancient weaving technology in Igbo-Ukwu.

The Igbo *Uli* design elements is a major traditional approach to documentation. The *Uli* designs are adopted from natural forms or objects. They are ritual pictorial language employed essentially in the communication of ideas and meanings in the Igbo traditional environment. Each of the *Uli* elements have ritual symbolic relevance. The art idiom is deeply rooted in Igbo tradition despite the dialectical differences of the people. The motive for the *Uli* art decoration whether on human body or walls of houses is for proper documentation of events and activities. Okeke (Okeke U. , Design Inspirsation Through Uli, 1983) explained that the designs so adopted depends on the circumstance of the events, since according to him, the design elements must be derived from the immediate environment. Permanent *Uli* body decorations otherwise known as *Nki* are also used in recording of traditional events of vital relevance to the people. In order to keep permanent memory of events and actions which led to the decorations, relevant motifs are usually adopted. They include; cowrie's shells, Iroko leaves, animal heads like lion, tiger, zebra, fish, snakes and birds (Chinedu, Uche Okeke and The Uli Experiment, 2003)

Mgbede Tradition (Fattening Room Rituals)

In Igbo tradition, young adolescent girls are involved in passage rites rituals referred to as *Mgbede* (fattening room rituals). Here the young ladies are culturally prepared for marriage because they are expected to move into their husbands' homes upon the completion of the ritual ceremonies. During this period, the ladies undergo special trainings in domestic activities and behaviors in marriage. They also study the marriage

taboos in Igbo tradition and the attendant consequences of their violation. In the training, they receive body marks of various designs and meaning, which are explained to them. Apart from the aesthetic perspective of the designs, they record valuable information regarding their experiences in the training. The designs on their bodies quickly remind them of certain values they are supposed to imbibe in their homes. The unmarried males have similar training in their passage rites referred to as *Iwa-akwa*. As part of their training, they also receive tattoo on their bodies. These are ways of documenting the values they imbibed in their training, which they are expected to practice in their homes. Suffice it to say that the crises and domestic violence which have plagued the postmodern marriages in our society may have been averted if the younger generations had embraced the culture of passage rites before marriage. Although the period of training of the males is very short when compared with that of ladies, they are sufficiently positioned to take full responsibilities in marriage.

Igbo Traditional Documentation in Songs, Drama and Poems

Songs and poems in Igbo traditional documentation contain the people's customs and tradition, it also embraces the world view and philosophy of the Igbo tradition. The children sing the songs during the moonlight plays. Some of the songs contain list of ancestors in their lineages, events and progress in the community. Also, the list of major misfortune in the community could be chronicled as songs. Songs document moral decadence in the society. For instance, the popular *Abigbo* songs in Mbaise and Owerri areas of the Igboland serve as strong moral check in their traditional environment. It exposes with clear identification, those involved in such actions. This type of documentation through songs are dreaded by families and lineages. The sons and daughters who excelled in their various endeavors are commended or praised in the traditional songs.

At the end of the Nigerian Civil war, the Igbo ethnic group bore the direct consequence of the crisis. Their land was ravaged, their economy and almost every means of livelihood was destroyed. The invading federal soldiers occupied the major flash points in the defunct Biafra and there was hunger in the land. Consequently, upon the soldier's occupation, young ladies were forced by situation to marry the invading soldiers. Some of the military men conscripted the women as wives and their action ran contrary to the customs and tradition of Igbo land with respect to marriage and other social behaviors. It is true that the presence of the military was to maintain law and order, nonetheless, they created cultural problems. Therefore, in order to stem the cultural aberration, the people resorted to the strong weapon of songs, poems, proverbs and wise saying, which chronicled the implications of such actions on the people. Some of the songs include; *Ndi Ogo Aru* (Evil Inlaws) and *Nke a bu Omenelu* (This is not our custom) composed by the *Mbaise Abigbo* Dance Group. Also, following the advent of co-educational boarding schools and establishment of several secondary schools soon after the war, many young boys and girls who enrolled in the program were culturally perceived as immoral. This was because some of the female teenagers returned home with pregnancies. The outrage of condemnation led to the composition of such songs as *Umu College Alowala* (Secondary

School boys and girls are returning home). The song warns parents to keep eyes on their daughters during holidays and school periods. It condemned such behaviors as uncultural while exposing the implications of such actions. These songs among others are still very popular till date.

Conclusion

The foregoing has given us an in-depth exploration into the Igbo Traditional Society located in the South East Nigeria. The various aspect of their cultural endowment particularly the material culture, which was our main focus, have given us invaluable insights into the people's behavioral patterns in their traditional environment. Although the origin and the migration pattern of the people is still varied sketchy, however, we have sufficiently revealed the essence of their traditional foundation and belief system on the issue. The Igbo ethnic nationality as we have noticed is naturally endowed with creative ability in both performing and the visual arts. This claim has been authenticated from the cultural relics and valuable artifacts recovered by Professor Thurstan Shaw in the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological excavation in Igbo land in 1959. The 9th century material culture revelation, is indeed a verifiable credence on the veracity of subsequent claims about the Igbo cultural heritage. The relevance of material culture in properly documenting the cultural activities and events in the traditional society as we have observed is an eloquent testimony of deep-rooted appreciation of the people's cultural values in their environment. Though the process of documenting their cultural values appear complex, the people however, enlisted obvious aesthetic dynamism in their material cultural documentation and associated cultural belief systems, which generally down played the complexity and stress encountered in the process of documenting such events.

By means of rigorous creative research and documentation, the *Uli* Art Idiom has found its way into the art curriculum of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Furthermore, it has been consciously integrated into the *Natural Synthesis Ideology* propagated by Professor Uche Okeke. This practice has been imbibed in modern Nigerian art study in the institutions of higher learning in Nigeria (Lawal, 2003).

Finally, other aspects of the Igbo material culture such as songs, proverbs and wise-sayings have also been discussed along with their socio-cultural relevance in record-keeping. The various traditional passage rites and initiation ceremonies such as the Fattening Room Ceremonies (*Mgbede*), which bears relevance in proper historical documentation of the Igbo culture and tradition have revealed tremendous information on the people's life pattern in their tradition environment. Historical documentation process in Igbo cultural heritage, covers every aspect of the people's traditional life-style.

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