

# Ethnic Traditions, Contemporary Nigerian Art and Group Identity

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## Introduction

Contemporary Nigerian artists like their counterparts in different parts of Africa have drawn some of their inspirations from traditional art and life and in so doing they have not only contributed to the creation of an amalgamated national identity, but also continue to give art tradition a lifeline. The creative and visual talents noticed among many Nigerians artists no doubt is an indication that they have responded to the dynamics of change and continuity within the frame-work of indigenous art and culture. Generally, but not exclusive, Igbo and Yoruba cultures are characterized by strong art traditions and a rich art vocabulary from which some contemporary artists drew from. Thus it is no surprise that it has enriched their creativity. As the artists draw from Igbo and Yoruba cultures for identity, there is continuity not a break with the past.

Among other things, this study focuses on the contemporary artists who study and adapt forms, decorative motifs and symbols taken from indigenous arts and craft of the Yoruba *Ona* and Igbo *Uli* for use in their works. The result of which have not only inspired them to congregate to form art groups, but made them masters in oil and acrylic painting, sculpture etc. This study observes and analyzes the works associated with the artists with a view to establishing the content of inculcating and adaptation of cultural elements, of theme, motif, patterns and folklores in their various works. The works produced by the artists make them distinct and unique in contemporary Nigerian art.

Traditional motifs incorporated directly into contemporary work of art contribute to its formal beauty, while also adding a dimension of historical and cultural depth. Traditional *Uli* art forms, one of the indigenous artistic traditions from which some contemporary artists have continuously derived inspiration for their art, is found among the Igbo of Southeastern. It is impossible to state when *Uli* is first began, but Udechukwu (1990) opines that some *Uli* motifs bear close resemblance to designs on Igbo-Ukwu bronze art objects discovered along with the remains of the priestly king of the Nri Hegemony. He further says that the radio carbon text for Igbo-Ukwu dates the site to between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Century AD. For Okeke (1977) it is possible that *Uli* originated as a result of the Igbo penchant to beautify the body and most importantly as a tribute paid to a deity within the context of annual festivals of rededication and thanksgiving centered on the said deity.

*Uli* is both the material and methods of design presentation using the human body or mud wall as canvas for painting. This therefore means that *Uli* refers to the style, the cosmetics associated with the style and the overall intricacy associated with the design known for its delightful aesthetic qualities. The juice for the body painting or decoration is derived from a variety of shrubs and small plants. The crushed fleshy seeds of their pods produced a liquid that is traced into the skin with a small knife or wood. Also the materials used for wall painting include earth and vegetable pigments.

In the traditional culture of the Igbo, *Uli* art according to Willis (1986) was an art of the women folk. The motifs and symbols or patterns employed in *Uli* body and wall decoration were derived from different aspects of the people environment and world view. Some *Uli* were abstract with zigzag patterns and concentric circles, while others stood for house hold objects such as bowls, stools, pots, farm tools etc. Many represented animals and birds such as python, lizard, leopard, alligator, lion, monkey, eagle, owl, and kite, etc. or celestial bodies, the crescent moon and star. Still others signified certain activities and movements such as cutting and slicing. Although some *Uli* designs may carry a symbolic or metaphorical connotations, Udechukwu (1990) is of the view that one must not lose sight of the fact that for the *Uli* artists themselves, the decorative aspect seems to be most highly valued.

It is pertinent to note that traditional *Uli* was employed in many social situations, such as title taking, marriages, memorial services for the dead, harvest rites and ritual performances. This perhaps is the reason why Ottenberg (1997:8) says that *Uli* designs which commonly appeared on the faces, arms, legs and body of females, from girls to senior women and occasionally on the males, as well as the presence of *Uli* murals on houses and compound walls of Igbo living areas suggest human sociability. In essence *Uli* designs tends to have expressed social relationship which made it gain popularity among the Igbo.

On the other hand *Ona* has also played a great role in the works of some of the contemporary artists herein studied. *Ona* is a Yoruba word that has a wide application. Adeyanju (1990:92) says that *Ona* refers to decoration, pattern, ornament, embellishment, design composition, form, plan and motif. Okediji (1989) explains

the use of *Ona* for embellishment of traditional sculpture in wood. Such examples are found on decorations on *Opon ifa* (Ifa Divination tray) *Osa Sango* (Sango Axe) *Opo* (house posts) doors and window carvings. *Ona* is also applicable to metal sculpture. *Ona* is also noticeable in traditional Yoruba pottery. In this case, the pots meant for domestic and ritual purposes often have elaborate *Ona* embellishments. The *Sango* ritual pots in particular have decorations or patterns arranged around the surface. *Ona* is also applicable to textile design. The people of Ogbomosho, Iseyin and Ilorin known for the weaving of *Aso-Oke* on the narrow loom usually incorporate variety of geometric effects and patterns which art connoisseurs refer to as *Ona* (Adeyanju Joel, 1990:92).

The Yoruba, generally, like adornment for their body. From Newman's (1974:73) observation, they also have the urge to beautify their homes with patterns. Their functional implements and tools such as domestic bowls, pots and ladles are not left out as they are often decorated with geometric patterns derived from *Ona*.

The sources by which traditional Yoruba artists derived the *Ona* motifs or pattern are from nature, animals, birds, man-made objects, insects, plants and dreams. Certain names have also been given to the various geometric and non geometric elements. Some of the names include *Onikikan*-hexagonal or diamond shape, *Onilawiniwi*-intricate lines. *Eletu*-cross hatched, *Ade oba*-chief's town, *Irukure*-at the lower end. *Elegun eja elege*-fish bone, *Iru aku*-rats tails, *Ojueyele*-pigeon eye, *Alaayan*- cockroach and *Alapere*- basketry. Some of these motifs such as *Alapere*- basket design, *Alaayan*-cockroach, *Onikikan*-diamond shape and the intricately carved lines called *Onilawiniwini* as earlier mentioned were mostly used for decorating the frame of carved doors, panels and figures (Fagg and Penbinton, 1982:147).

It is interesting to note here that it seems that traditionally, names derived from *Ona* are given to people in remembrance of the ancestral family occupation. The Yoruba names closely related to the word *Ona* include "*Onabolu* meaning design from the creator and *Olonade* the arrival of the design. Igbo and Yoruba cultures are characterized by strong art traditions and rich art vocabulary. Their influence on contemporary Nigerian artists and the use to which they have been put to project group identity is the focus of this paper.

### **Emergence of Art Groups inspired by Ethnic Art Tradition**

The emergence of art groups inspired by ethnic art tradition is a success story in Nigeria. Culture writers and art historians have documented or written about the evolution of contemporary Nigerian art with special reference to the formation of art groups. Some of the authors who had written on the development or evolution of modern art groups include Emi (1990), Adeyanju (1990), Campbell (1976), Oloidi (1990) and Akinosho (2003). Their studies show that art groups in Nigeria emerged not only to free themselves of western concepts and ideas but to protect in their works values inherent in their respective art traditions. Okeke (1982) Ottenberg (1976) and Adepegba (1995) have at different times discussed or classified the evolution processes and changes in contemporary Nigerian art into different art groups and styles. They made reference to some groups which include *Ona* and *Uli* art groups and suggest that the underlying factor for their coming together is for the adaptation and interpretation of traditional materials and methods, forms and styles to achieve a synthesis of purpose, culminating in the aesthetics of contemporary Yoruba and Igbo art and design.

Lampard (1996) focuses on African artists who were responsible for bringing changes in contemporary art. She specifically discusses modern art groups in Nigeria and some other African countries such as South Africa, Uganda, Abidjan and Ghana among others. Such scholars as Jegede (1983), Lawal (2002) Adenaike (1982) and Nicklin (2006) discuss the philosophies, methods, styles, organizers, periods and durations of some modern art groups in Nigeria which include the Zaria Art Society, among others. They are of the view that the creative energy exhibited by the artists of modern art groups in Nigeria from the early 50s to the present time particularly the pursuit of excellence in their art was inspired by indigenous art.

The activities of Zaria Art Society which advanced the theory of natural synthesis however were not without precedents. This is because in the later years, reactions to natural synthesis yielded interesting results. The philosophy of the Zaria Art Society has influenced and inspired other art groups, movements and artists who have today become independent of western culture in their approach to visual art. *Uli* group of artists which is one of such art groups was formed at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. According to Ottenberg (1976), the group which came into being in the 1960s and 1970s still flourishes today. The *Uli* style, for which the Nsukka group was known, according to Lampard (1995), was inspired by the Igbo sensibility which Uche Okeke had explored while still in Zaria. For Ottenberg (1995) the use of *Uli* form from the past which brought the artists together was initiated by a number of artists, in particular Uche Okeke -painter and Chike Aniakor -painter. Other members of the group include Obiora Udechukwu-painter, the Ghanaian El Anatsui-sculptor, Ola Oloidi-art historian, Tayo Adenaike-painter, Olu Oguibe-painter, Ego Uche Okeke-Textiles, Ada Udechukwu-Textiles and painter and Ndidi Dike-painter and sculptor among others. All the members of the Nsukka group received formal school training and lived in Southeastern Nigeria. In essence, the Nsukka group or modern *Uli* artists form a regionally cohesive group mostly living or having once resided in the Nsukka area or in nearby Igbo centers. While using older designs these contemporary artists are frequently concerned in their art with present

day social, economic and political problems in Nigeria and sometimes Africa. See Adenaike's **Burden of Leadership** (Plate 1) and Anatu's **Invitation into African History** (Plate 2). According to Ottenberg (Ibid : 12) some members of the group particularly Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu were involved in the Biafran side of the Nigerian civil war of 1967 -1970. To this day many of their works express considerable sensitivity to issues of war and military control. See Udechukwu's **Air Raid** (plate 3) and Aniakor's **The Leader and Us** (plate 4).

Desiring to create images, motifs and symbols of traditional Igbo life, the artists of the Nsukka group have adopted European/American art media and technology except for the use of Nigerian woods and items such as cowry shells and small metals. Filani (2003) says that with a modern touch the contemporary *Uli* artists researched and explored the calligraphic nature of the traditional *Uli* body decoration and wall murals. The European/American art media they employed include pen, brush and ink, pastel, water colour, tempera, guache, oil and acrylic paints. The *Uli* motifs were adopted and adapted in their works. However, Ottenberg (1998) is of the view that each artist utilized *Uli* in a personal way.

According to Okeke (1995:42) the idea of *Ona* developed at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife. *Ona* group of artists include critics, scholars, practicing artists, historians and teachers committed to the pursuit of excellence in the creative arts. The founding members of the *Ona* group include Moyo Okediji –a painter, Tola Wewe-a painter and Kunle Filani-a painter. Others include Bolaji Campbell a painter, Babatunde Nasiru-a ceramist. In a bid to create a new art the *Ona* group took off with an exhibition in 1989. The exhibition featured the works of founding members who adapted in their works Yoruba indigenous craft motifs as Okediji (1989) describes the exhibition as the humble beginning of a renaissance of art of the Yoruba.

Generally one rightly say that the works of the *Ona* group celebrates Yoruba traditional motifs, decorations and embellishment. Like the modern *Uli* group of artists, *Ona* group of artists also employed foreign media in executing their art. Filani (1990:162) says that though some *Ona* artists employed imported materials they have successfully domesticated the technique. Hence the materials are no longer seen from a detached point of view of foreign media, but as integral part of the whole work process accentuated by the use of traditional forms and content. Despite the use of foreign media which the artists have internalized, the use of local materials is also inherent among some of the artists. This exemplified by Moyo Okediji and Bolaji Campbell. Okediji produces his paints with clay and vegetable dyes, his canvases with jute which he mounts on a circular frame (*Ate*) a traditional hawking tray. Among his work that he explored local material as well as traditional Yoruba arts forms is **Transatlantic Akire** (plate 5). Like Okediji, Campbell also uses earth pigment and incorporates some intricate weaving with raffia on his jute canvas. Most of his paintings are abstract deriving visual images from Yoruba proverbs and maxims. See Campbell's *People only See the Eyes* (plate 6)

#### INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS OF BOTH ULI AND ONA MODERN ART GROUPS

Four artists drawn from the highlighted modern art groups inspired by ethnic art traditions are selected for discussions here. The artists are randomly selected with no deliberate regional consideration by the researchers. The selection is based on their unique creativity, prolific production and consistent adaptation of indigenous forms, motifs, patterns and themes in their works. It was discovered that the two modern art groups that these talented artists belonged to, were located in the Southeast and Southwest, Nigeria respectively. Many artists that belonged to these two art groups are mostly of Igbo and Yoruba origins. Therefore if no artist from other regions in Nigeria is not studied fully; it is due to the reasons given above. The four artists discussed in this study are Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor who belong to *Uli* art group as well as Tola Wewe and Kunle Filani who belong to the *Ona* group.

#### Uche Okeke

Uche Okeke was born in April 30, 1993 in Nimo, Njikoka local government area of Anambra State, Nigeria. For those who value creativity and modern African painting inspired by art tradition, Okeke is a household name. Although Okeke's mother was an *Uli* artist; he was inspired by his father from whom he inherited the art of craftsmanship and who unarguably was a notable craftsman, who made wood carvings and furniture in his time. Uche Okeke has his primary school education at St. Peters Clavers Catholic School Kafanchan, Nasarawa State between 1940-1947, where he began to exhibit his artistic talent through the assistance of his art teacher Mr. Patrick Otega. Ottenberg (1976) describes Patrick Otega as a good draughtsman of some sought. Okeke after his secondary education took a clerk's position in the department of Labour and Employment Exchange at Jos where he got the opportunity to visit Jos museum regularly as he continued to practice drawing and painting. The museum which was under the direction of the archeologist Bernard Fagg exhibited works by Nigerian expatriate artists in 1956. Ottenberg (ibid: 31) reports that Okeke helped prepare the exhibition which afforded him the opportunity to exhibit some of his own works. Okeke (1963) revealed that the exhibition reshaped his career because it afforded him the opportunity to study at first hand the works of both local and foreign artists living in the country such Clara Ugbudaga and Ben Enwonwu among others. In essence, the experience from the

exhibition must have made him turn himself from a master to a learner.

In furtherance of his artistic career, Okeke entered the Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology at Zaria in 1977 in order to study art. He graduated in 1961 specializing in painting. According to Akinosho (2003) attending the Zaria Art School widened the scope of his education; he would not have realized much of the value in his own local art tradition. More so, Okeke's activities in Zaria such as his role in the formation of the Zaria Art Society were also commemorative in his art career. The society which resisted the European style of art teaching and agitated for a more African oriented art was a landmark achievement for Okeke and his contemporaries. Nwana (2006) opines that Okeke cultivated his genius so brilliantly that one achievement led to another and before long he had earned enough reputation as the best sought after painter /illustrated within and outside his immediate environment. Since the Zaria experience ended which he carried over to Nsukka and initiated the *Uli* art movement, he has won many local, national and international commissions.

Okeke's dexterity in executing works that are mainly adapted from traditional motifs has been researched into by art scholars in Nigeria. Ottenberg (1976) describes figures in his works as unique and bear relevance to his cultural root. Okeke's works according to Udechukwu (1977) contain stylizations of human figures as well as animal ones, in conformity with the images employed in Igbo *Uli* walls murals. Egonwa (2001) says that Okeke's works are rich in lines and patterns that tell tales in a highly personalized idiom of deep artistic ambience. As a conscious culture artist, Okeke's use of lines from his drawings and paintings and lavish use of motifs to represent human forms and objects can be noticed in his **Maiden's Cry** (Plate 7). Because Okeke operates in the contemporary times, but still use indigenous Igbo *Uli* art forms, he has been described as neo-traditionalist by Oloidi (2002) and trado-contemporary artist by Nwosu (2003). As attested to by Omoighe (2003), Okeke generally explores myths, cultural history and social structure of the Igbo to express his themes. See Okeke's **Anyanwu na Agballa** (Plate 8) and *Ite ofe Mbe* (Plate 9). Okeke's depiction of forms derived from tradition and reflection of cultural themes in his works are testimonies to his conscious belief in his culture and tradition which his agitation with his contemporaries for natural synthesis during his stay in Zaria as a student had firmly affirmed. While some of his themes may be a reminder to those who are grounded in Igbo folktales, others who are not familiar with Igbo culture and tradition may be agitated to know the stories behind his themes.

In **Dancers** (plate 10) he reminds his viewers of the important role of dancers in entertaining a community, royal families, and during ceremonies. In this work he depicts three masked dancers which show that among other things Igbo masks have also remained authentic sources of his inspiration. The head of the masked figure is decorated with *Uli ije agwo* (snake movement) while the upper left and right hand of the main dancer contain a hand patterned with *Uli ugbo okwe* (traditional game board). *Uli ntupo* (dots) are employed in their eyes.

### **Chike Aniakor**

Chike Aniakor cut his artistic identity and as a result of his experiences in the Nsukka school, particularly his strong participation in pioneering the formation of the modern *Uli* movement. Aniakor was born in 1939, in his home town Abatete in Anambra State, Nigeria. Ikwemesi (1991) is of the view that Aniakor though younger than Okeke, is of the same artistic generation. Aniakor had his primary and secondary education in his home town. His mother like Okeke, is of the same artistic generation. Aniakor had his primary and secondary education in his home town. His mother like Okeke's mother was an *Uli* artist. He revealed that despite his mother being annuli artist, the encouragement given to him by his teachers in secondary school made him for the first time to think of becoming an artist. Because his early child activities were mostly in his home town, he experienced Igbo culture intensively and was active in it. The interest in his culture led him to join a traditional dance group where he was a lead dancer. He still retains his interest in Igbo culture particularly Igbo music, dance, rituals, visual arts and architecture.

However, despite his interest in the culture of his Igbo people, his pursuit of higher education took him out of the traditional setting. This is because his formal academic training did not terminate at secondary level. He also attended Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria between 1960 and 1964 to study Fine Art. His area of specialization was painting. According Ottenberg (1976) Aniakor was not a member of the Zaria art society when he was a student but he attended several of its meetings. It is worthy to note that Aniakor's undergraduate project which according to Ottenberg (Ibid: 8) was on Igbo Wooden Carved Doors did not only take him back to his cultural root, it also enabled him to explore and utilize motifs and designs he found on them inspired by *Uli* in his own work.

Aniakor, like Okeke, experienced the Biafran war Ottengerg (Op. cit.: 86) revealed that in order to make a living he took a management position in a refugee camp and later served as art editor of the Biafran government newsletter. He made drawings during this period using *Uli* style, which was not elaborate because of the conflict situation of that period and much of the art he created at that period according to Aniakor was destroyed by termites. The saving he made during the war alongside government scholarship made him go to Indian University USA where he received masters (1974) and doctorate (1978) degrees in art history, submitting

a thoughtful dissertation on Igbo architecture. Aniakor's return to Igbo land, particularly University of Nigeria Nsukka as a lecturer afforded him more opportunity to experiment with the design on Igbo wooden carved doors and those of *Uli* art forms. He also took his studies to some Igbo villages to explore this traditional art.

While at Nsukka, Aniakor ventured more into drawing but also experimented with oil painting, water colour and guache while still employing *Uli* motifs. Adenaike (1982) affirms that the variety of media used by him informed his diverse technique in the process of art making and that his versatility and experience made him one of the prolific and widely exhibited of the Nsukka group. The adaptation of Igbo culture and traditions in his drawing, water colour and oil paintings is magnificent. Aniakor (1972) revealed that his adaptation from Igbo culture influenced not only his painting and drawing, but also his technique and forms. This can be noticed in his *Ikenga* (Plate 11) and *Exodus* (Plate 12).

**Ikenga** (Plate 11) shown with raised hands is reminiscence of the real Igbo *Ikenga* carved wooden images. The raised hands are a gesture of uprightness, innocence, peace and a submission to the norms and ethnics of the society. He employed a combination of bold and intricate linear geometric and organic motifs. For example *Uli abuba akpu* (cassava leaves) are located at the lower left corner. A suggestive of *Uli isi-nwoji* (head of Kola-nut) is positioned at the upper-left corner beside series of circular lines that portray *Uli agwolagwo* (concentric circle or snake coil). The rectangular form at the bottom right corner is reminiscent of *okwa uli* (*Uli* palette used by traditional *uli* artists). Also, series of *Uli mkpulu mgbo* (bullets) located on the center of the two raised hands of the *Ikenga* portray it as a warrior.

In **Exodus** (Plate 12), a dominant feature in the drawing is the use of strong bold lines to depict the multiple human figures which are massed together. The arrangement of the human figures adds balance to the movement of lines he derived from strong linear quality of Igbo *Uli* body art. *Uli agwolagwo* (concentric circle or snake coil) is located at the top left corner of the picture, perhaps it represents the sun or moon. The swollen eyes of the figures are reminiscent of *Uli ogbe oji* (Head of Kola-nut).

Unlike other artists of the *Uli* group who engaged in folkloric, and mythical themes as well as stylization of human forms which exemplifies one of Adepegba's (1995) classification of the works of artists of Oshogbo school as abstraction beyond human understanding. Some of Aniakor's subject matter and human forms are more figural and identifiable, though they often possess elongated bodies, and limbs as well as being clustered together. He also makes skillful use of negative spaces. His **Music Makers** (Plate 13) where he creates a dynamic compartment of free flowing human images that runs from top to bottom of the picture exemplifies the above illustration.

Like Okeke, Igbo carved masks have also inspired some of Aniakor's works. In the **Elders** (Plate 14) the oval quality of the elders face are suggestive of Igbo carved masks. *Uli* motifs identified in the picture include *uli agwolagwo* (concentric circle or snake coil) used as border from top to lower corners of the picture. *Okwa uli* motif (*Uli* palette used by indigenous female *Uli* artists) is used to represent the elder's mouth.

### Tola Wewe

Tola Wewe is one of the most referenced points to the survival of *Ona* movement. Filani (2005) is of the view that Tola Wewe is an intellectual artist who seems to have successfully appropriated basic forms of Yoruba art in his work. Born in 1959 in Shabomi in Okitipupa area of Ondo State, Nigeria. Wewe had his academic training at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) where he graduated in 1983, with specialization in painting. From Ife he proceeded to University of Ibadan where he obtained a masters degree in Visual Art History. Tola Wewe's thesis at the Institute of African Studies, Ibadan, exposed him to the exponential features of African sculpture, especially water spirit masks of his Apoi Ijo homeland which Kelly and Stanley (1993) say he also adapts as forms, motifs, symbols and metaphors in his paintings. While commenting on his works, Akatakpo (1998) identified in Wewe's paintings the qualities of a genius, especially in the way he vacillates between linear, composite and semi abstract forms. Akatakpo particularly drew attention to Wewe's use of circles and ovals in his depiction of eyes, human head and faces. See Wewe's work titled **Female Icons** (Plate 15). This work also suffused with signs, symbols, motifs and clichés from culture and folklore such as human images that represent goddesses, all living in harmony with mankind. According to Filani (2005) the human images in Wewe's works sometimes assumes spiritual dimensions by becoming gods and goddesses who are protecting and watching over the human nation.

The intriguing aspect of Wewe's works is that he has established his own individuality not only with the materials and techniques he employs, but also in his forms which are often quite different from those of most repertoires of Yoruba images. The use of geometric and organic motifs in his works attests to his affinity for indigenous forms and motifs. He adapts the representation of human figures in a state of nudity, a characteristic of Yoruba wood carving tradition. The figures are also drawn with precise edges with exaggerated forms peculiar to traditional Yoruba carvings. For instance, Wewe's **Sensual Vibes** (Plate 16) portrays women whose breasts are firm, robust and pointed. Their buttocks and breasts are broad and protuberant. The posture of female images in this work exemplifies Filani's (1996) statement that Wewe explores the images of women as an

instrument of protest, the ultimate arbiter, social and political jam-lock and the last hope in conflict resolution. The brilliant colours he employs in this painting such as yellow, orange and white are reminiscent of colours employed on Yoruba traditional wall mural on shrines and palaces.

Wewe oscillates between his typical Yoruba style and sub-styles. He allows for structural depth, by creating windows through which images and motifs are seen. He manipulates each picture plane into convenient visual compartment made up of bold rectangular boxes painted to contrast against the background colour. The faces of the human figures he employs are sometimes mask-like portraits of a single or more faces with the head significantly bigger than the body. The facial features such as eyes, nose and lips often serve as both forms and decorative motifs as evidence in the works titled **Comb of Divorce** (Plate 17) and **Beauty Queen** (Plate 18). At other times he explores the use of linear drawings in a child-like way to illustrate stories adapted from folktales. He discards the law of perspective by allowing images to float in space without regard for proportion. The images are stylized animal forms, the elephant, lizard, fish, snake and tortoise. In his work titled **Story-story** (Plate 19), he explores Yoruba folklore characters, cultural elements and items.

### **Kunle Filani**

He is arguably the leading theorist of the *Ona* artists. He also reconciles theory with practice in art. Born in 1957 into the home of Mr. Jacob Ogunmoroti, Kunle's primary education was not all that very eventful because frequent transfer of his father affected his schooling. He started with Bishop Akinyele Primary School in Ibadan between 1967 and 1969 and St. Peters Primary School Ikole where he finished in 1969. For his secondary education, he attended Doherty Memorial Grammar School, Ijero-Ekiti. After his secondary education he proceeded to University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) Ile-Ife to study Fine Art. He obtained his bachelors degree in Fine Arts specializing in Graphics design. He was at the University of Benin in 1982 for his post-graduate studies where he obtained his second degree and awarded Masters of Fine Arts (M.F.A) specializing in print-making. Kunle also attended the University of Ibadan where he was awarded a Ph. D in Visual Art History.

Kunle's artistic development could not have been by accident neither did it start in the school. According to Ademuleya (2003) there is also no evidence of any traditional artist in the family neither was there any known story of an artistic lineage in the family history. As a kid, Kunle always changed pose while standing or sitting, his hands equally always at work scratching, drawing or writing (Kunle Filani, 1997). More so, his artistic involvement could also be traced to his older brothers who Ademuleya (2003) says Kunle used to practice art with whenever they are on holidays.

Since Kunle completed his academic programmes, he has remained a prolific artists, seasoned art critic and educationist. He has staged several solo and also participated in group art exhibitions. Although Kunle has been a prominent actor in the formation and the running of some reputable art groups and associations in Nigeria, he was particularly at the centre of *Ona* group from conception to consolidation. Ademuleya (Ibid:7) is of the view that *Ona* provided the theoretical base for Filani's numerous experiments and also opened him to theorization proper.

It is worthy to note here that the adoption of indigenous forms led identity to Filani's art. His works discussed here reveal the fact that they are inspired by traditional ideas. In **Vestiges of the Past** (Plate 20) canvas on canvas were stitched together with the background rendered in the old *aso-oke* pattern called *alaarin*. The canvas on top gives the feeling or looks more like the mystical flying carpet. Represented on it are symbolic images such as tortoise, goat, ostrich, snake, sword and an image representing human figure. Enclosing these items is a thick wall of patterns preventing unwanted visitors, the unpredictable lizards. Filani seems to use this work as a way of calling attention to the calmness and relative peace that existed in the time past, when swords were better hung than used, when there were no cracks on the walls for unwanted visitors such as lizards to come on. In **Fortune is Mine** (Plate 21), he employs *Opon* (Divination tray) and *Opele* (its seeds) both used by *Orunmila*. Around the *Opon* are Naira and Dollar designs which serve as background to the composition. Filani here uses the cultural symbols to emphasize faith, the hope in God. **Relics of Grandma** (Plate 22) is another work that directs viewer's attention to objects and items used for sacrifices in the traditional African societies. The work is also of *aso-oke* patterns. On the canvas are two other stitched smaller ones which also bear objects such as *alaamu* (snakes), *oga* (chameleon), *aake* (axe) and *ooya* (comb). Snake though feared by women, yet its appearance in designs for women according to Carr (2001) is an appeal for protection. Comb is one of the few things any woman of virtue should possess. The combination of these items calls attention to the Grandma's legacy of patience, tolerance, contentment and perseverance. Beyond being seen as rag of glory, this work is here presented not as ruins, but as object to be venerated, since its primary owner has been elevated to the status of an ancestor. In **Patterns of Honour** (Plate 23) Filani shows interplay of motifs and images cast against their background without any feeling of detachment, although the zoomorphic lizard motifs placed on the right middle corner is the only identifiable object in the picture. His mastery of decorative surface treatment and depth of understanding of the use of patterns that are systematically build-up of symbols, motifs and signs are noticed

within the structure of the composition. Kunle (2007) also considers his patterns which he said are inspired by *Ona* as patterns of honour.

### Conclusion

The contemporary artists of both *Uli* and *Ona* groups will continue to remain faithful to their ethnic culture and tradition as their forms and themes always tell one story or the other. The four artists discussed here among many others although belong to different generations in terms of their years of birth; the binding factor is their reference to their culture and tradition in their individual works. For instance Uche Okeke, the oldest among them, would always remind the viewers in his drawings of Igbo folklore and deliberate distorted forms and application of patterns and motifs commonly found on Igbo *Uli* body decoration and wall mural. Chike Aniakor's use of mask-like features for the faces of his human figures in a testimony to the important role attached to the use of masks in most Africa societies, especially among the Igbo.

Tola Wewe though uses forms different from the other artists of the *Ona* group, his adaptations of Yoruba indigenous visual culture such as symbols, patterns and motifs and folkloric images is quite imaginative. Kunle Filani's use of such materials as mats and fabrics is not only an innovation, it is also a pointer to the importance attached to woven materials especially textiles in Africa.

The originality and uniqueness in their works can be located in their capacity to build on what their ancestors conceived as art. The artists have sustained indigenous ideas and they are true to their indigenous culture as reflected in their individual works. They express themselves freely without being bogged down by foreign ideas and Western indoctrination. The art works created by the artists are unique and personal, but they have employed creative use of different media and cultural elements such as forms, symbols, patterns, motifs and folkloric images to project rich African cultural heritage and proclaim the African identity as a people.

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## APPENDIXES



Plate 1:  
Artist: Tayo Adenaike  
Title: Burden of the Leaders  
Medium: Acrylic on Canvas  
Year: 1995



Plate 2:  
Artist: El Anatsui  
Title: Invitation Into History  
Medium: Wood and Tempera  
Year: 1995



Plate 3:  
Artist: Obiora Udechukwu  
Title: Air Raid  
Medium: Pen/Ink on Paper  
Year: 1989

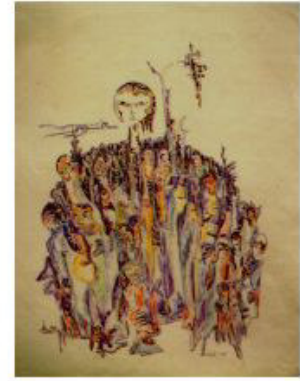


Plate 4:  
Artist: Chike Aniakor  
Title: Leaders and Us  
Medium: Oil on Canvas  
Year: 1994



Plate 5:  
Artist: Bolaji Campbell  
Title: Eniyan N Woju (People Only See The Eyes)  
Medium: Mixed Media  
Year: 2000



Plate 6:  
Artist: Moyo Okediji  
Title: Transatlantic Akire  
Medium: Terrachroma on Canvas  
Year: 2000



Plate 7:  
Artist: Uche Okeke  
Title: Maiden's Cry  
Medium: Pen/Ink on Paper  
Year: 1962



Plate 8:  
Artist: Uche Okeke  
Title: Anyanwu Na Agbala  
Medium: Guache on Paper  
Year: 1976



Plate 9:  
Artist: Uche Okeke  
Title: Ite Ofe Mbe  
Medium: Pen/Ink on Paper  
Year: 1966



Plate 10:  
Artist: Uche Okeke  
Title: Oyolima Dancers  
Medium: Pen/Ink on Paper  
Year: 1963

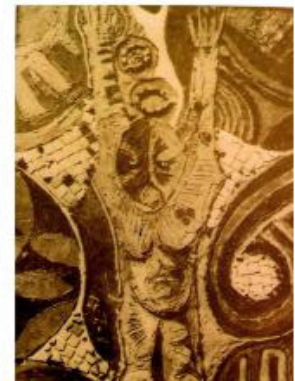


Plate 11:  
Artist: Aniakor Chike  
Title: Ikenga  
Medium: Pen/Ink on Paper  
Year: 1962

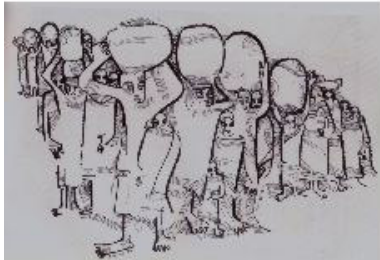


Plate 12:  
 Artist: Aniakor Chike  
 Title: Exodus  
 Medium: Pen/Ink on Paper  
 Year: 1977



Plate 13:  
 Artist: Aniakor Chike  
 Title: Music Makers  
 Medium: Pen/Ink on Paper  
 Year: 1977



Plate 14:  
 Artist: Aniakor Chike  
 Title: Elders  
 Medium: Pen/Ink on Paper  
 Year: 1967



Plate 15:  
 Artist: Tola Wewe  
 Title: Female Icons  
 Medium: Oil on Canvas  
 Year: 1998



Plate 16:  
 Artist: Tola Wewe  
 Title: Sensual Vibes  
 Medium: Guache on Canvas  
 Year: 1998



Plate 17:  
 Artist: Tola Wewe  
 Title: Comb of Divorce  
 Medium: Guache on Canvas  
 Year: 2000



Plate 18:  
 Artist: Tola Wewe  
 Title: Beauty Queen  
 Medium: Guache on Paper  
 Year: 1998



Plate 19:  
 Artist: Tola Wewe  
 Title: Story-Story  
 Medium: Guache on Canvas  
 Year: 1998



Plate 20:  
 Artist: Kunle Filani  
 Title: Vestiges of the Past  
 Medium: Oil and Guache on Canvas. Year: 2000



Plate 21:  
 Artist: Kunle Filani  
 Title: Fortune is Mine  
 Medium: Acrylic  
 Year: 2003



Plate 22:  
 Artist: Kunle Filani  
 Title: Relics of Grandma  
 Medium: Acrylic on Canvas  
 Year: 2003



Plate 23:  
 Artist: Kunle Filani  
 Title: Patterns of Honour  
 Medium: Mixed Media  
 Year: 2003