

## **HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN ART**

**Freedom A. Odum<sup>1</sup>, Bojor Enamhe<sup>1</sup>, Getaba Robert Emin<sup>1</sup>, Blessing Ernest Bassey<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Visual Arts and Technology,  
University of Cross River State (UNICROSS).

Corresponding author: [Odumfreedom@gmail.com](mailto:Odumfreedom@gmail.com), 07066793205

### **Abstract**

The power of history seems to have been underestimated in the emergence of contemporary Nigerian art even when it is loaded with visual art expressions in their various experimental forms, media and techniques, spanning as far as 5,000 BCE down to the period where modern Nigerian art would begin (19<sup>th</sup> Century). Therefore, this study interrogates the contemporariness of contemporary Nigerian art using history as a creative strategy to renegotiate and dissolve the boundaries between that which is termed “*Ancient and the New Nigerian Art*”. Through qualitative research method using both primary and secondary data sources, Findings shows that, the emergence of what is now called contemporary Nigerian art is simply a form of artistic re-excavation and reconnection with the ancient creative spirit of visual art expression in order to make a modern statement either as an individual encounter or as a group experience (art schools). Thus, the emergence of the concept or theory of natural synthesis that would define what one man called the “*New or True Art*” was not an isolated event but rooted in over 3, 000 years of Nigeria’s visual culture and art expression. Accordingly, the study concludes that, contemporary Nigerian art, is a form of artistic re-excavation, re-adaptation, and re-invention of the past, to create and formulate a new modern ideology. Hence, the past, has become a potential tool used to confront modern Nigerian condition. To explore into the past, is to explore the present. To restore is to interrogate if not to invent something new.

### **1. Introduction**

The creative journey and the very concept of contemporary Nigerian art did not just surfaced from nowhere, even as it is not an isolated phenomena, but embedded if not rooted in over 3,000 years of creative artistic culture and expression cutting across art variables such as media, techniques and form; pottery, carvings, textiles, paintings amongst others (Adepegba, 1989), which were often passed from generation to generation through apprenticeship, who in so many cases would be direct descendants of the craftsman (Famule, 2016). For example, from the linear inscriptions found on the famous Ikom monolith, somewhere in Cross River state that predates the Mesolithic period, to the abstract and stylized Nok terracotta heads that is traceable to around 3,000BCE. The art of sophisticated decoration seen in the excavated relics of the

Igbo-Okwu art that has been since 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. The classical and naturalistic features of the Ife art, to the semi-realistic properties contained in the art of wealth and power of the ancient Benin kingdom (13<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> century). It therefore means that, the creative source and artistic content that seem to define the contemporary Nigerian art, such as the concept if not theory of natural synthesis has been in Nigeria’s visual culture and artistic expression for as far as 5,000BCE. That is to say that,

Nigeria, from its earliest historical time till this moment, have been innovative and experimental through appropriation and domestication of natural and cultural artistic contents into the expression of visual culture that has served as a foundation on which Nigerian contemporary art is laid. No wonder, it is even said that, for one to fully understand African artwork such as that of

Nigeria, one needs to look at it, both as a historian (considering the form and techniques used), as well as look at it as an anthropologist (how objects function), or possibly, see how both the art and the artist(s) fit into the cultural context (Perani and Smith, 1998). This is perhaps to shed light in the nature of the technical sophistication of ancient Nigerian art. Today, contemporary Nigerian art is said to be synonymous with the western kind of art making in which an art maker requires a method of formal education through academics or workshop to be mature as an artist. Maybe the very reason why it is often referred to as “new or true art of Nigeria” (Oloidi, 2003). It is suspected that, around the period of political independence in Nigeria, a group of young artists whose career and professionalism would begin as college art students in Zaria, birthed the theory of natural synthesis as an art strategy which involves the integration of natural and indigenous content as a creative technique to produce a work of art. The very move that perhaps inaugurated the iconic Nigerian art modernism (Okeke-Agulu, 2004). The theory of natural synthesis became a creative force that would spread like wildfire across individual and group artist (art schools). The very creative spirit renaissance that is perceived in works of art produced by Nsuka, Oshogbo and the Zaria school respectively (Okediji, 2020). If that is what it seems, then art in this context, could be a form creative transition from the past to the present and vice-versa (Nicklin, 2003). The same creative fitness that provoked the re-excavation of ancient cultural contents such as the linearism and aesthetics of the Uli that belongs to the cultural past of the Igbo tribe of Nigeria, only to be used as a leitmotif that would be harnessed by sculptors, painters, ceramics, graphics illustrator and the textile artists, even as it is also deployed as a creative strategy for body adornment and as some make-up materials for contemporary Nigerian theatre (Utoh- Ezeajuh, 2008). The same linear content and motifs that is found on the Ikom monoliths and the ancient Calabar terracotta both in Cross River State of southern Nigeria. The Ife heads also shares almost the linear content but this time, disguised as a form of tribal makings, possibly as a mark of identity. In this sense, art especially in the context of the Real or True Nigerian art is concerned with re-adaptation, reinvention of the past, to create and formulate a new modern ideology (Aniakor,

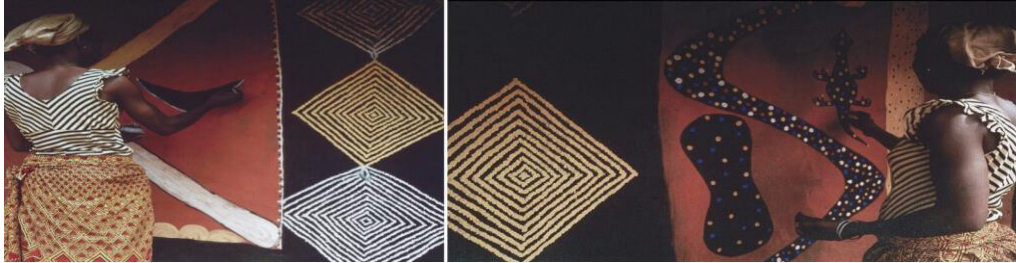
2005). It is to retrieve one’s culture only to deploy it again as creative way of making modern statement. The re-adaptation and exploration is evidential in famous El Anatsui’s early works that was influenced if not focused on the ancient Nok terracotta heads. Thus, through visual appropriation and domestication, the Nok terracotta heads have a chance effect of becoming a contemporary head again. To an extent, Nigerian modern art is a form of cultural re-excavation and at the same time, a social commentary maybe about event and happenings in Nigeria. And as well, a form of creative transition from tradition to modernity even as it integrated the Nigerian contemporary life (Aniakor, 2001). While others worked as a school (group), others worked individually. However, the singularity is that, their creative technique portrays a form of cultural excavation and recreation into modern contemporary arguments. It is however maintained that, the thematic and cultural discoveries, the re-excavated ancient artistic media and form, provided the basis for the interrogation of modern Nigerian society. So, the past, has become a potential tool used to confront modern Nigerian condition such as colonialism, religion, culture, and politics amongst others. In this way, by exploration into the past, contemporary Nigerian artists were exploring the present. Conceivably a counter argument such as the creative conflict between sign and countersign, where nothing is stable. To restore is to interrogate. It is to experiment if not to be innovative.

## 2. Uli Art

Uli is a town of historic importance located somewhere at the southern corner of Ihiala local government area of Anambra state in Nigeria. It could also mean a curvilinear traditional design drawn by the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria. It consist of abstract, linear, geometric and representational forms that often appears on the wall as mural, or on human as body art, which in so many cases, is spontaneously applied (Utoh-Ezeajuh, 2008). Uli is mainly for body decoration and on the walls of buildings (Pius, 1984). It is believed that Uli at some point, was produced across the Igbo land, but it resurfaced again around 1970’s. Since then, it has been kept alive in the creative hands of contemporary artistseven as it has spread across Nigeria as a source of

inspiration for upcoming artists (Ekwemesi, 2016) and across Europe and the Americas (Ogbechie, 2002). Uli art was amplified by contemporary artists struggling for cultural and ideological emancipation in the aesthetic domain. A perfect example of this is the Nsuka School of art (David- West, 1996). Uli to

an extent, is also an Igbo name for Indigo dye obtained from several species of plants that is often used to draw and as a cosmetics on human body (Ikwemesi, 2016), even as it also serve as a suitable make-up material and practice for contemporary Nigerian theatre (Utoh- Ezeajuh, 2008).



Women Decorating Iyazi Shrine, Agukwu Nri, 1984.  
Photographed by Chike Aniakor



Uli Painting on the walls of the Ogwugwu Shrine, Nibo, present day Anambra State, Nigeria.  
Photographed by one of the Northcote Thomas's assistant in 1911.  
Details from Panoramic Photograph (MAAP39450).

### 3. The Ikom Monoliths

Ikom monoliths of Cross River State, constitute over 450 engraved standing stones found in about thirty different communities, all in Ikom Local Government Area of Cross River state (Okwoche, Okonkwo and Oyong, 2021). These stones contain linear inscriptions of African ideographs that is believed to depict a form of ancient writing, designs and possibly visual codes which are meant for communication purpose. Often found at the centre of the community, it is believed that, they represent powerful ancestral spirits and departed heroes. Thus, the reason for periodic sacrifices and rituals to consult with these spirits (Akpang, 2013). What seem interesting about these monoliths are the compositional characteristics;

the linear markings, abstract stylized figurations, with rounded eyes and mouth, two heads and five fingers amongst other attributes which seem to complement if not close to that of the ancient Nok terracotta sculptures. Yet, they are seen as a mere artefacts and monuments through western/European anthropological and archaeological discuss, forgetting the artistic attributes, content and context (Akpang, 2004). It is even suspected that, this formal and technical manipulation of form may have directly and indirectly inspired the contemporary artists, including the new generations of studio artists in their various technical handling of form and techniques.

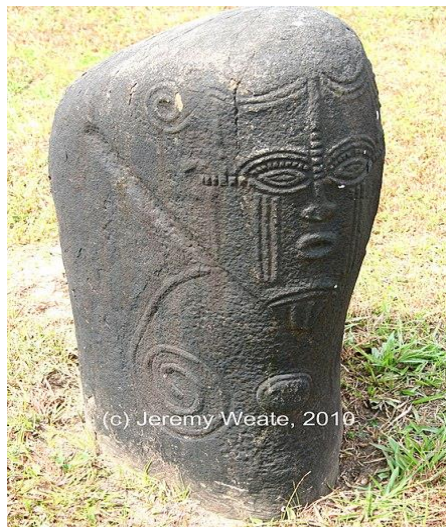


*Carved monoliths, Alok, Cross River State, Nigeria.  
Photograph courtesy of EkpoEyo.*



*Image of Ikom monolith*

*Source; <https://africanrockart.britishmuseum.org/country/Nigeria/ikom-monolith%20/>*



*Image of Ikom Monolith.*

*Source; <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/ikom-monolith>*

#### 4. Calabar Terracotta

What is today known as Calabar terracotta, covers works from Cross River State, Akwalbom, Abia and Rivers State respectively that have been in existence for over 800 years, mirroring the ancient artistic culture of the southern Nigeria. These terracotta reflects the ideographs (Nsibidi) used as an ancient writing system which were often used for communication and surfaced decoration and ornamentation (Carlson, 2003). Discovered

around 1970's, it include art forms such as vessels, headrest, coffers or headgear and decorated bowels in their various expressive and stylistic renditions, with core characteristics features such as varieties motifs, cruciform, figurations, concentric circles, lozenges, spiral forms, coiling techniques, made of clay, inscriptions and linear accents which in so many cases, portrays the Nsibidi ideographs as a creative tool for surface decoration( Slogar, 2005)



Two terracotta bowls excavated by EkpoEyo at Oron.  
National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Oron Museum.  
Photograph by Christopher Slogar.



*Base from a small terracotta bowl from OkangMbang.*  
*National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, Old Residency Museum,*  
*Calabar.*  
*Photograph by Christopher Slogar.*



*Base of a small terracotta bowl from OkangMbang.  
National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, Old Residency Museum,  
Calabar.*

*Photograph by Christopher Slogar.*



*Base of a small terracotta bowl from OkangMbang .  
National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria,  
Old ResidencyMuseum, Calabar.*

*Photograph by Christopher Slogar.*

## **5. Igbo Ukwu**

Igbo-Ukwuis known for its famous bronze artefacts including ceramics, jewelry, copper and iron, that spreads across three archaeological sites such as Igbo Isaiah ( shrine), Igbo Richards (burial chambers) and Igbo Jonah ( a cache)

respectively. All of which contains the remains of the Igbo ancient artistic culture. At some point, radiocarbon dating even placed the sites to around 850AD (Shaw, 1995). This of course, make Igbo- Ukwu culture, the earliest known example in the region. It is exceptional for its unique bronze, casting of ritual vessels and

ceremonial objects. Others include, terracotta, iron and ivory which together, hints at the religious believe of the Igbo people and their rich culture including the links with other part of the world through trade (Sutton, 2001). Archaeological findings seem to demonstrate that the technical skills and artistic inspiration of the Igbo- Ukwu art were largely locally evolved

especially since it shows no influence of other art culture (Sutton, 1991). What is interesting about this art is, its stylistic manipulation of forms that is rapped with a complex surface decoration skills through repetition of forms and linear inscriptions that resonates the Uli art form.



*Terracotta vessel excavated by Thurstan Shaw at the Igbo-Jonah site, Igbo-Ukwu.  
National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, National Museum, Lagos.*

*Source: Shaw, Igbo-Ukwu.*



*500px-Bronze\_Ornamental\_Staff\_Head,\_9th\_Century,\_Igbo-Ukwu*

*Source: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaeology-of-Igbo-IUkwu>*



*Intricate Bronze of Ceremonial Pot, 9<sup>th</sup> Century, Igbo-Ukwu, Nigeria.*

*Source: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaeology-of-Igbo-IUkwu>*

## **6. Nok Terracotta**

What is known as Nok art today, is a collection of human, animal, figurines amongst others, that are made of terracotta pottery from the Nok culture in Nigeria, representing the earliest sculptural art attempt in West Africa traceably to around 1,000BCE (Hirst, 2020). Nok terracotta such as that found in southern Kaduna, Nigeria is a testament to the advanced stylistic development of the Nok sculptures( Breunig, and Mannel, 2016). It represents the oldest figurative art of

sub-Saharan Africa ( Breunig and Amaje, 2006). Characteristics of Nok figure include perforated ears and mouths, triangular shaped eyes with pierced pupil, distinctive traditional African hairstyle etc. it is mostly hollowed human and animal heads even as it suspected to be a complex funerary culture maybe because of its arts sophistication ( Peter, 2022). The very visual characteristics that would become a creative source of inspiration for famous African sculpture and other contemporary visual artists.





*Image of Nok Terracotta Figurin*

Source: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>



*Image of Nok Terracotta*

Source: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

### 7. UcheOkeke (1933- 2016)

Okeke was a founding member of the Nigerian art modernism. A period that marked the emancipation and the re-excitation of the ancient Nigerian culture and artistic value that include the ancient symbols, hieroglyphics that were commonly used to decorate pottery, vessels, walls of buildings, shrines and even as body art such as Uli( Clarke, 2007), which would

later become the creative identity of the famous Nsuka school of art that has influence generations of professional studio artists within and outside Nigeria art space (Egonwa, 2003). Thus he appropriated folklore and the linear inscriptions found in Uli and domesticated it only to become his creative style and a means of self-expression.



**UcheOkeke. From the Wild Region ( From the Experiments) 1962.**

Source: [www.artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com)



*UcheOkeke. Two Works on Paper (i – ii).1962*

Source: [www.artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com)



*UcheOkeke. Untitled, 1985*

Source: [www.artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com)

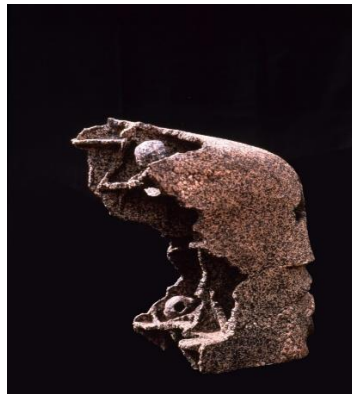
### 8. El Anatsui

Anatsui is known for his iconic sculptural installations that often appear in their various large sizes using media such bottle top and copper wire as a binder even as he has become a source of inspiration for global contemporary artists. No wonder, he was included in the 2023time, 100 list of the most influential people in 2023. However, before this period in his artistic career, together with Okeke, Aniakor, Udechukwu and others, were the founding members of the Nsuka School of Art where the creative theory of natural synthesis was embraced (Egonwa, 2001). Thus artists explored

their indigenous culture as a creative source of inspiration that is contrast to the western kind of art (Newman, 1974). It is in this light, that artist such as Anatsui found creative delight in reconciling with the ancient Nok terracotta heads possibly to bring back to the fore, our lost ancient culture. Consequently, in doing this, Anatsui creative innovation, experimentation, visual appropriation and domestication of artistic media, technique and form, the ancient Nok heads have chances to renew themselves into contemporary heads. By exploring into the past, he was exploring the present. Example of this is the “*chambers of Memor ( 1977)*” as seen bellow.



*El-Anatsui-Chambers-of-Memory-1977 (Front View) -Nok-Head-Nigeria-768x909*  
<https://brunoclaessense.com/2021/04/chambers-of-memory-an-early-work-by-el-anatsui-inspired-by-a=2000-year-old-nok-terracotta-head>



*El-Anatsui-Chambers-of-Memory (Back View)-1977-Nok-head-Nigeria-terra-cotta-710x1024*  
<https://brunoclaessense.com/2021/04/chambers-of-memory-an-early-work-by-el-anatsui-inspired-by-a=2000-year-old-nok-terracotta-head/>



*El Anatsui. Wonder Masquerade II, 1990.*  
*Oak, 159x 20x 14cm, (EA026)*  
*Source: www.artnet.com*

## 9. Methodology

The research method deployed is qualitative with reliance on the use of primary and secondary data sources such as academic interviews, journals, books, dairies, archival sources, intelligent reports, and oral recorded interviews possibly to understand the subject matter. In addition, three theoretical frameworks would be deployed such as formalism, Iconology as well as Semiotics. These paradigms were used in order to decode if not to understand the influence or shared similarities between the ancient and contemporary Nigerian art (New Nigerian Art).

## 10. Research Findings/ Conclusion

Findings shows that, the emergence of contemporary Nigerian art is simply a form of artistic re-excavation and reconnection with the ancient creative spirit of visual art expression in order to make a modern statement either as an individual encounter or as a group experience (art schools). This is evidential in the creative works of Uche Okeke that is inspired by the linearism of Uli and the Igbo stories (folklore). The very same linear content that is found in the Ikom Monoliths and Calabar terracotta. And on the other hand, Anatsui's creative interest was centred on the ancient Nok Terracotta heads. Thus, through visual appropriation and domestication of forms and techniques, the ancient Nok terracotta heads found a chance effect of being a contemporary head again. Thus, the emergence of the concept or theory of natural synthesis that would define what one man called the "New or True Art" was not an isolated event but rooted in over 3, 000 years of Nigeria's visual culture and art expression. Accordingly, the study concludes that, contemporary Nigerian art, is a form of artistic re-excavation, re-adaptation, and re-invention of the past, to create and formulate a new modern ideology. Hence, the past, has become a potential tool used to confront modern Nigerian condition. To explore into the past, is to explore the present. To restore is to interrogate if not to invent something new.

## Reference

- Akpang, C. (2013). Traditionalism in Contemporary Art: Re- contextualizing African Ideographs through Hybrid Aesthetics. *Arts and Design Studies*.11. 25-36.
- Akpang, C. (2004). Beyond Anthropological and Associational Discuss- Interrogating the Minimalism of Ikom Monoliths as a Concept and Found Object Art. *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*. 2. (1). 67-84.
- Aniakor, C. (1995). What is Uli?: The Emergence of a Modern Art Idiom. *UliArt: Master Works, Recent Works*, np New York: Skoto Gallery.
- Aniakor, C.( 2001). Modern Sensibility and Africanity in Contemporary African Art. *Nigerian Journal of Art* 3 (1 and 2), 60-85.
- Aniakor, C. (2006). *The Contemporary Nigerian Artists and Tradition*.
- Breunig, P. and Amaje, J. ( 2006). The Making of "Nok Terracotta". *Afrique: Archaeology and Arts*, 91- 102.
- Breunig, P. and Mannel, T.( 2016). The Nok Terracotta sculptures Pangwari. *Journal of African Archaeology* 14 (3), 313- 329.
- Carlson. A. (2003). *Nsibidi: Gender and Literacy; the Arts of the Bakor- Ejagam (Cross River State)*. Indiana University.
- Clarke, C. (2007). UcheOkeke and Chinua Achebe: Artist and Author in Conversation, *Critical Interventions*. 1:1. 143- 153.
- David- West, H. (1996). *Uli Art: Master Works, Recent Works*. *African Art* 29 (1), 71
- Dike, P. (2003): *UcheOkeke and Modern Nigerian Art*. Nku din aMbaUcheOkeke and Modern Nigerian Art. A Publication of the National Gallery of Art, Lagos.
- Egonwa, O. (2001): *The Revolution of the Concept of Natural Synthesis*. Lagos: *USO Nigerian Journal of Art*, Vol. 3. No. 1.
- Egonwa, O. (2003). *UcheOkeke in the History and Practice in the Nigeria's*

Contemporary Art. The triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on UcheOkeke and Modern Art in Nigeria.

- Famule, O. (2016). Contemporary Art of Nigeria and its Post-Independence Impact. University of Wisconsin- A Paper presented at contemporary Art of Nigeria Panel discussion, Chicago.
- Hirst, K. (2020). Nok Art was Early Sculptural Pottery in West Africa. [www.thoughtco.com](http://www.thoughtco.com)
- Ikwemesi, C. (2016). EziaforOkaro: An Uli Woman Painter's Tale in the Igbo Heritage Crises. *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 3 (1), 1247614.
- Newman, T. (1974): *Contemporary African Arts and Crafts*. London: George Allen Unwin Ltd.
- Nicklin, K. (2003): *Experiments in the Revival of Traditional Art Forms in Southeastern Nigeria*. Symposium on Nigerian Art. Lagos: National Gallery of Art.
- sOgbachie, S. (2002). Zaria Art Society and the Uli Movement in Nigera. In Waxman, Lori (ed). *Anthology of African Art. The Twentieth Century*, New York: Distributed Art Publishers. Pp. 246-249.
- Okeke-Agulu, C. (2004). *Nigerian Art in the Independence Decades, 1957- 1967*.
- Okeke-Agulu, C. (2015). *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth –Century Nigeria*. Duke University Press.
- Okediji, M. (2020). *African Renaissance*. University Press of Colorado.
- Okwoche, A. ET all, (021). *Ethnographic Studies of Bakor Stone Monoliths and their implication to Tourism Development*. Lakhomi Journal Scientific Journal of culture 2 (4), 171- 187.
- Oloidi, O. (2003). *Art Recentism, Art Currentism and the Physiognomy of Modern Nigeria Art from 1970-2003*. *Darker-Minorities, Majorities*. 1-7.
- Perami, J. and Smith, F. (1998). *The Visual Arts of Africa: Gender, Power and Life Cycle Rituals*. Prentice Halls.
- Peter, B. (2022). *Prehistoric Development in Nigeria*. In Falola, Toyini; Heuton, Mathew M (ed) *the Oxford Handbook of Nigerian History*. Oxford University Press. Pp. 123-124.
- Pius, E, (1984). *Aspects of Igbo Aesthetics*. ( MFA thesis) University of Nigeria Nsuka.
- Shaw, T. (1975). *Those Igbo- Ukwu Radiocarbon dates: Facts, fictions and Probabilities*. *Journal of African History*.
- Slogar, C. (2005). *Iconography and Continuity in West Africa: CalabarTerracottas and the Art of Cross River Region of Nigeria/ Cameroon*.
- Sutton, J. (2001). *Igbo- Ukwu and the Nile*. *African Archaeological Review*. 18, 49- 62.
- Sutton, J. (1991). *The International Factor of the Igbo- Ukwu*. *African Archaeological Review*. 9 (1), 145- 160.
- Utoh- Ezeaguh, T. (2008). *Traditional Body Design Idioms and Multimedia Application: The Igbo Uli Art Forms*.