

## Three And Half Decades Of Modernism In Igbo Textile Art (1970 - 2005): A Summation

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### Abstract

The first three and half decades of the modern Igbo textile art covers from the early 1970 to 2005. The significance of this period is that it is the first three and half decades after the Nigerian Civil War. The onset and development of modernism in Igbo textile art was very radical, but conscious and profound. This paper traces the trajectory of this development and the contributions of the masters that brought about the changes. The study focused on specialization, professionalism and style as criteria for the selection of the modern Igbo textile artists. The study evolved a historical periodisation for a full perception of the creative activities of these artists in the modernism of Igbo textile art. In the process two periods two historical periods with phases were evolved based on the manifestation and development of the indices of modernism, of the prevalent creative attitude. The paper established a conscious pattern in this development, and identified some tendencies and affirmations of modernism in the Igbo textile art of the post civil war decades.

### Introduction

A study of the Igbo textile art prior to the onset of modernism in the 1970s reveals the perceived inability of textiles to achieve the level of aesthetic prominence attained by other areas of art such as painting, and sculpture in the Nigerian art. Further to this, the misconceived comparative aesthetic non-impactfulness of Igbo textile art based on lack of awareness, has engendered a dearth of literature on not only the modern Igbo textile art but also the modern Igbo textile artists. This gap in literature is surprising, in view of the fact that “The books written on Nigeria in general and on its crafts in particular are numerous, given the variety, beauty and fascination of the country and its people.” (Lamb and Holmes, 1980).

On the Nigerian traditional and international scenes, Igbo textile art has been very aesthetic and highly creative. The modernistic incursions of textiles into the three-dimensional domains of sculpture and ceramics, in the international scene since the 1960s, have made textiles generally more fascinating. In the traditional Igbo art and culture, the dynamics of the textile art in manifesting itself in and assimilating the traditional characteristics of other areas of art had long been a tradition. The *Ijele*, essentially a textile work of art by its materials and techniques of production, is a perfect illustration; effectively simulating mural painting in her colourful appliquéd panels, and incorporating the rhythms of music, the theatricals of drama and the enclosure of architecture.

In its dimensional qualities, this textile masterpiece, the Ijele, is “a composite sculpture bearing numerous other symbols and figures in the round” (Aniakor and Cole, 1984). Moreover, in terms of utility, textile products have remained the most indispensable to man compared with the products of the other areas of art, but till the onset of modernism it had not achieved the level of artistic popularity comparable with painting and sculpture in Nigeria.

The textile art has grossly been unattended to in the study of modern Nigerian visual arts. This paper will throw light on the fascinating creative luster, the versatility, and diverse aesthetic developments in Igbo textile art with the onset of modernism in the 1970s, through the next three and half decades. The paper will put these developments in a historical paradigm.

The textile tradition in Igbo land is a very old one, and its indigenous origin and technological and creative advancement, long before the colonial encounter, have been attested to by undisputed evidences. The *Studies in Primitive Looms* by Ling Ruth, “one of the pioneering works in the serious study of extra-European weaving” whose cover was illustrated with an Akwete loom (Held, 1978), is an example. More strongly, the excavations at Igbo Ukwu by Thurstan C. Shaw, hydrocarbon-dated to about the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D (Held, 1978), is an incontrovertible evidence of a well established and flourishing textile industry in Igbo land which predates the European contacts in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Origin and Nature of Modernism in Nigerian art and Igbo Textile art:**

The evolution of what is now known as modernism in the Nigerian art and Igbo textiles has its origins deeper in history than when its birth took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It took its bearing from the Renaissance humanism which established the modernist expression of self confidence. This self-assertive idealism is manifest in Aina Onabolu’s leadership of modernism in the Nigerian art and Uche Okeke’s vanguard in the development of modernism in Igbo textile art; a development that brought it at par with painting and sculpture.

Modernism in art generally; Western, Nigerian and Igbo textile art, constitute the attitudinal changes in the textual and contextual nature of the art. It is the radical changes in the works of some individual artists of note, indicating a new direction and signaling a break with the past: a new direction which has remained dominant in these three areas till date. These changes and the new direction are “in the artist’s attitude toward artistic means and issues—toward subject matter, expression, and literary content, toward colour, drawing, and the problem of the nature and purpose of a work of art” (Arnason, 1977).

This revolution, the emergence of modernism, was fundamental and as radical in the Nigerian art and Igbo textiles as it was in the Western art, and did not also take place simultaneously all over Nigeria. The geography of the administrative and education centres which were also centres for the elites and socialites dictated the tone of the emergence of art modernism in Nigeria. Lagos, the colonial administration headquarters in Nigeria, therefore, was the place of birth and took the leadership in the development of modernism, in Nigerian art, midwifed by Aina Onabolu. So was Ibadan and former site of the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, and its subsequent site and centre for the re-engineering of Kenneth Murray’s cultural idealism, Zaria, with the enunciation of “Natural Synthesis” by Uche Okeke. The seeds of modernism were dispersed with the establishment of Departments of Art in various high institutions including the University of Nigeria at Nsukka which is the cradle of modernism in Igbo textile art.

### **Modern Igbo Textile Artists:**

While modernism progressed, some if not most of the Igbo artists from the 1970s persevered in the tradition. Therefore, not all contemporary Igbo textile artists of the period are modern. The modern Igbo textile artists are those who have shown in their works a departure from, if not a rebellion against, the creative attitude of the past. They are men and women who could take the idiom, tradition or trait of Igbo art and re-create it in the artistic language of today or of their own individualities.

This paper has focused on specialisation; professionalism and style in the selection of these modern Igbo textile artists. They include Chukwuanugo Samuel Okeke, Ifedioramma Dike, Godson Onyebuchi Diogu, Nicholas Amamchukwu Anozie, Sylvanus Odoja Asogwa, Rita Doris Edumchieke Ubah, Loretta Adaobi Olikagu and Jane Nwamaka Emeafor, all of whom are textile artists by training. A number of other artists, trained as painters or sculptors, have also found in some creative areas of textiles like dyeing, fibres, fabrics and other textile-based materials, satisfactory medium of expression. A few of them made significant impact in the development of the modern Igbo textile art. They include Uche Okeke, a painter, and Chijioke Onuorah and Obiora Anidi, both of whom are sculptors.

The diverse characters and the creative restlessness of these artists created new vistas and broke new grounds, in their haste to bring Igbo textile art into the mainstream of internationalism. They redefined the meaning and the concept base of Igbo textile art in their effort to create this paradigm. For the full perception of these artists as contributors and possible indices in the modernism of Igbo textile art, a historical periodisation is necessary. Two major periods with phases are identifiable from the onset of modernism in the early 1970s: the Pioneering Period, from 1970s to 1980s, and the Modernizing Period, from 1990s to 2005. The Pioneering Period comprises two phases: the Transitional phase, covering the developments in the first half of the 1970s, and the Early Phase which covers from the second half of 1970s through the 1980s.

### **The Pioneering Period, 1970s to 1980s:**

#### **The Transitional Phase**

The first part of the Pioneering Period of modernism in Igbo textile art; the Transitional Phase, originated the departure from the traditions in Igbo textile art. The leadership in charting the new direction was not by the professionally trained textile artists. It was a painter, Uche Okeke that championed the break with the creative standards of the past and the attempt to redefine the scope, the nature and the purpose of Igbo textiles. The Transitional Phase, the first half of 1970s, is dominated by the creative efforts of Uche Okeke and Chukwuanugo Samuel Okeke, a textile designer. However, Chukwuanugo Okeke's major impact is in the area of technology—in the innovation in the tools of production.

Uche Okeke's contribution to the development of the modern Igbo textile art is not only his creative output but also, more importantly, his fundamental influence on the shaping of the creative minds of the modern Igbo textile art. Okeke's influence on, and contribution to the modern Igbo textile art was felt when he became the head of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria in 1970. The result was tremendous. He inculcated in his students, among who are most of the modern Igbo textile artists, an avid relationship with culture, if not a passionate culture sense, in their creative expressions. This passion gave

rise to the *Uli*-tradition for which the Art Department of the University of Nigeria—the Nsukka School, is famous.

The lasting effect of this influence from Uche Okeke is the ethnocentrism that characterizes the works of most of the modern Igbo textile artists. Some of his students like Ifedioramma Dike, a fibre artist, took recourse to the Igbo masquerade tradition and found in the *Ijele* and other masquerades endless resources for idioms of creative expression. Likewise, Sylvanus Asogwa found a kindred experience in the *Odo* and *Omabe* masquerade culture of the Nsukka Igbo. Nicholas Anozie went with Thurstan Shaw into the antiquities of Igbo Ukwu culture and found in them a creative soul mate. The designs of Chukwuanugo Okeke, who also schooled at Zaria at a much later date, also show a strong presence of this influence from Uche Okeke. These are part of the global aesthetic prominence of Uche Okeke in the development of modern Igbo textile art.

Apart from his navigating influence on the development of modernism in Igbo textile art, Uche Okeke also made an outstanding creative contribution in mid-wifing its birth as a pioneer fibre artist, particularly in the area of tapestry. His most important work in Igbo textile art is a tapestry, *Omwuelo Depart* (Plate 1).

Chukwuanguo Okeke, also a pioneer of the Transitional Phase, has a less, eventful creative career. His creative works, to say the least, are not revolutionary. They are predominantly printed and woven textiles (Plates 2 and 3) which, though ethnocentric, do not singularly aesthetically indicate the paradigm shift to modernism. It is in weaving that Okeke, through series of experiments, indicated one of the new directions for Igbo textile art, not as a weaver or designer but as an inventor. His innovation of the *Anii Loom* (Plate 4) aimed at revolutionizing the traditional weaving of fabrics, but was not successful.

### **The Early Phase**

The Early Phase of the Pioneering Period, from the middle 1970s to 1980s, was more eventful, revolutionary and radically more experimental than the Transitional Phase. In contrast with the Transitional Phase, which centred on very few individuals, the Early Phase saw the emergence of a number of pioneer modern Igbo textile artists. Some of these artists showed in their works the determination and the haste to free themselves from the traditions and the limitations imposed by the functional use of textiles. Although modernism in Igbo textile art could be said to have started in tapestry by Uche Okeke, full aesthetic revolution did not take place till the Early Phase, by the middle 1970s. The introduction of tapestry was novel but it was not aesthetically diverse and the scope for experimentation was very limited because it did not go beyond the introduction of a single textile technique. The innovations by Uche Okeke and Chukwuanugo Okeke (particularly as an inventor) were impactful and did indicate the new direction. Nevertheless, it was Ifedioramma Dike that took the leadership in the aesthetic revolution in modern Igbo textile art, and in the radical break with the past, through his experiments in fibre and other textile materials and techniques, in the Early Phase. Other artists that came later in this revolution in the same period, though less radical, include Godson Diogu and Nicholas Anozie.

The works of this Phase show remarkable shift, if not change, in the attitude of the artists towards artistic means and materials, towards subject matter and the concept of artistic expressions. There were efforts in the Early Phase to redefine the scope and the meaning of the Igbo textile art. The entire landscape was changed by the incursions into fibre art, textile sculpture and textile painting, led by Dike, in a manner that included and went beyond

tapestry, involving other textile and fibre art materials and techniques. Typical are *The Wings are There, Kano on Friday, The Lost Scrolls, Meditation, The Wise Man, We Can Still Live Together* and *Igwe* (Plates 5 to 11). Texturality, sculpturality and dimensional qualities were introduced into the modern Igbo textile art. With the works of this period, Igbo textiles were no longer redolent of cloth yardage. Their functionality as clothing materials was played down. They left the body, as it were, and climbed the walls as hangings and moved into space as relief and free-standing sculptures as exemplified by these and other works.

In the Early Phase, Igbo textile art became conceptually more intellectual, abstract and worthy of contemplation, and came to aesthetic parity with painting and sculpture. The Early Phase saw the entrenchment of Igbo iconography and ethnocentrism as characteristics of the modern Igbo textile art. Internationalization or globalization became an identifiable feature of modernism in Igbo textile art with not only the diverse experimentation with the fibre but the introduction of international concepts like installation, introduced for the first time by Ifedioramma Dike. The artists in the Early Phase were more dynamic, adventurous and experimental in their techniques and more diverse in their choice of materials, media of expression and concept than in any other period.

#### **The Modernising Period, 1990 to 2005:**

The Modernising Period of the modern Igbo textile art, 1990 to 2005, was not as dynamic, experimental and adventurous as the preceding phase but it did produce more and younger modernists. By the time of its inception in 1990, the modernist tradition had already been in place for about two decades and had produced many modern artists. These young entrants include Chijioke Onuorah, Jane Nwamaka Emeafor, Adaobi Loretta Olikagu, Sylvanus Odoja Asogwa, Ritadoris Edumchieke Ubah and of late, Obiora Anidi. All, apart from Obiora Anidi, at one time or the other were students of the masters of the Pioneering Period. Among these are artists from other areas of art, particularly sculptors, who saw in textiles and textile-based materials and techniques, satisfying avenues for self expression. Chijioke Onuorah and Obiora Anidi, both sculptors, are among the few of these sojourners whose works have made some impact on the modern Igbo textile art scene. Though the artists of the Modernising Period are not as diverse in their techniques or as adventurous in their experiments as those of the Pioneering Period, nevertheless, they placed more emphasis on specializing in one technique or area of textiles and made their best out of it. This is unlike the masters of the Pioneering Period who, perhaps, in a haste to make radical break with the past and change the entire landscape and definition of Igbo textile art, delved into virtually every domain of textiles. Individualism and specialisation, therefore, constitute the principal character of the Modernising Period.

These Periods and Phases in the modern Igbo textile art are however, not hermetically sealed. Some of the artists and the characteristics of the preceding Periods, continued being prominent far into the later Periods. For instances, the concept of installation which was at its fledging stage by the close of the Pioneering Period through the pioneering works of Ifedioramma Dike, could not engage the interest of many later artists. The search for an enduring statement on the concept in modern Igbo textile art continued in the Modernising Period. The strong presence of ethnocentrism as characteristic of modern Igbo textile art that began in the Transitional Period with Uche Okeke, continued in the Modernising Period in the works of Ifedioramma Dike, Godson Diogu, Nicholas Anozie and Sylvanus Asogwa. Textile works assumed greater ritual dimensions and became more

diverse in concepts. Textile art as a satire came to the front burners and was no more illustrated before than in the textile paintings of Ubah and Dike's sculptures in the Modernising Period.

### **Characterizations and Conceptual Attributes of Modern Igbo Textile art:**

Five broad characterizations or conceptual attributes of the modern Igbo textile art are identifiable. They include ethnocentric, technological, painterly, impressionistic and metaphorical conceptual attributes. While some of the artists built their concepts on a number of these attributes, others found satisfaction with one dominant area. The most fundamental is ethnocentrism which took its root in Uche Okeke's "natural synthesis", an advocacy of culturalism as the essence of art. This study reveals two aspects of ethnocentrism: the folkloric and the iconographic. The folkloric bothers on imageries from legendary stories and fables. Iconographic ethnocentrism as conceptual attribute borders on the use of traditional or cultural symbols of the Igbo in creating modern works of art. Icons like the *Uli* symbols derived from the Igbo traditional body and wall paintings, and wood carving became veritable sources of design ideas and motifs. Some elemental forces like thunder, lightening and the moon and sun provide sources for this iconography. Some aspects and materials of the Igbo culture like the masquerade tradition, and the relics of Igbo cultural and historical past, represent endless flowing streams of creativity from which the modern Igbo textile art has derived conceptual sustenance. Perhaps, the only technological conceptual attribute of the modern Igbo textile art was found in Chukwuanugo Okeke's invention, the *Anii Loom* (Plate 4). The loom was designed to improve the yardage of the locally woven cloth and the comfort of the weaver.

Impressions created by the external appearances or morphology constitute the impressionistic conceptual attributes of the modern Igbo textile art. Artists like Jane Emeafor and Adaobi Olikagu have been inspired by the formal, textural and other visual characters of objects in creating visually propelling modern works of art. They have explored some textile techniques and the tactile and textural qualities of objects and materials for the sheer love of effects and experimentation. Olikagu resorted to the deceptive powers of appearances; illusion and abstraction, in her search for design inspirations and concepts.

Textile art as a satire, a metaphorical conceptual attribute, has introduced rather intellectual, nationalistic and journalistic qualities to the concept base of the modern Igbo textile art. Environmental and socio-political problems in Nigeria have been resourceful conceptual frameworks for the critically minded modern Igbo textile artists. Artists like Ifedioramma Dike and Ritadoris Edumchieke Ubah have seen in their works not only objects of beauty but also weapons for social reforms and justice, and means of drawing attention to the ills of the Nigerian society (Plates 5 and 12 to 16). Ubah's textile paintings are journalistic, particularly as her series based on the traffic menace of Lagos are satirical. In diverse themes, these works analytically critique in a novel manner, not with words, but with dyes, paints and fabrics, the problems and the attendant social ills of the traffic congestion of Lagos metropolis.

**Conclusion:**

Considering the vibrancy, dynamism and luster of the modern Igbo textile art, and given the variety, beauty and fascination of Igbo people and culture, one is now able to conclude that the modern Igbo textile art has made serious aesthetic and artistic impact on the Nigerian art scene. The development of the modern Igbo textile art has followed a conscious pattern comparable to the development in the Western World. The question of the lack of interest in Igbo textile art by writers and the consequent dearth of literature deserve serious enquiry and research. It is, however, hoped that this paper will provide much of the missing link in the gap created by the lack of literature on the modern Igbo textile art.

This paper is by no means exhaustive of modernism in Igbo textile art even within the period studied. There are other modern Igbo textile artists like Eva Obodo, Ugochukwu Onyishi, Ibiwari Dike and Paul Ntagu who could not be reached or were not disposed to make themselves and their works available for his research. By the definition of modernism and the character of their works, they come within the scope of this work. Their creative activities would, no doubt, open some other vistas in the modern Igbo art literature. These and other artists who may have been inadvertently left out deserve some serious study. This study has revealed a vibrant and dynamic modern Igbo textile art that is fast bridging the creative gap with the West. There are cutting edge works that show some post modern tendencies and affirmations. These works and their artists are recommended for further studies to update the currency of the modern Igbo textile art.



Plate 1. **Onwuelo depart**, (1977)  
210cmX150cm Tapestry, © The artist.



Plate 2 **Ufe na Uli** (1989)  
By C.S. Okeke. Printed fabric  
© P.A.Okpara

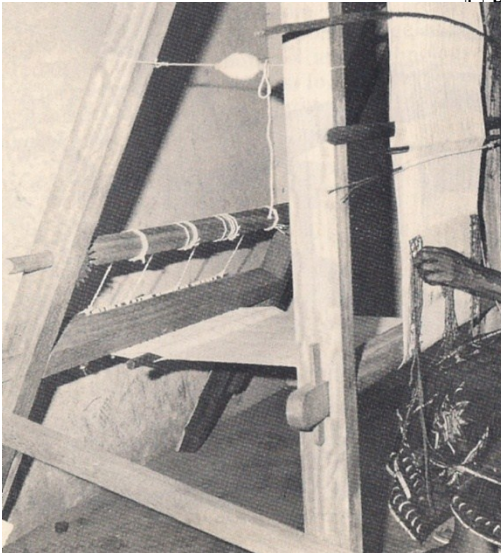
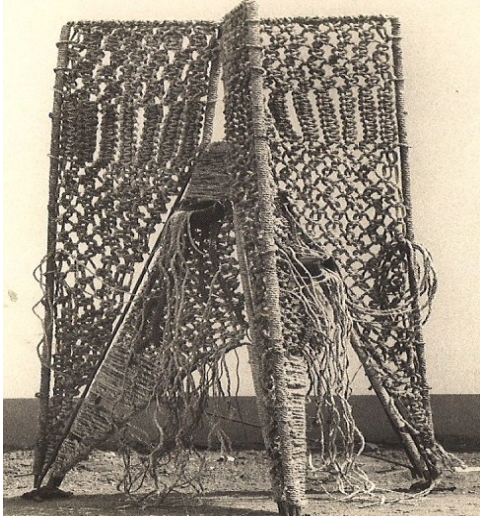


Plate 3 **Kpakpando (Stars)**  
(1988) by C.S.Okeke. Woven  
fabric © P.A. Okpara





Dike.

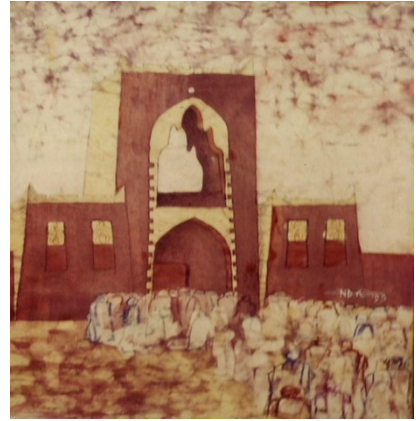


Plate 6 **Kano on Friday** (1993),

75cmX50cm by Ifedioramma

Plate 5 **The Wings are There** (1988),  
240cm by Ifedioramma Dike.  
Iron, jute and cotton fibres.  
© The artist.



Plate 7 **The Lost Scrolls** (1989),  
142cmX63cm, by Ifedioramma Dike.  
Acrylic yarn, cotton twine, plastic rings,  
wood, appliqué © The artist



Plate 8 **Meditation** (1986),  
136cmX65cm, by Ifedioramma Dike.  
Tapestry, acrylic yarn, cotton twine,  
plastic rings. © The artist.



oguo



Tapestry, jute, cotton, rayon. © The artist

Plate 10 **We can Still Live Together** (1988) By Godson Diogu. Tapestry, Jute cotton, ceramic beads, metal. © The artist



Plate 11 **Igwe (The King)** (2004)  
**Flow**  
by Godson Diogu. Yarns, buttons, **Untied.** (1995)  
foam, metal, plastic bottles.  
Ifedioramma Dike  
© The artist  
pipes.



Plate 12 **The Pipes Will**  
**When the Knot is**  
124cmX48cm by  
Wood, bast ropes, plastic



© The artist

Plate 13 **Contusion**. By Edumchieke Ubah Acrylic on cotton. (c) The arti



Plate 14 **War** 180cmX64cm by Edumchieke Ubah. Dyed fabric.

© The artist



Plate 15 **T-Junction** by Edumchieke Ubah. Tie-dye and screen print on fabric.

© The artist

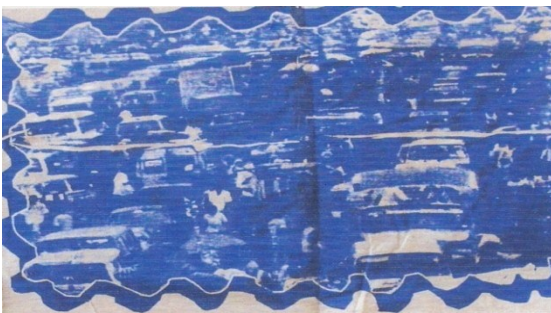


Plate 16 **It has Happened**  
180cmX54cm by Edumchieke Ubah  
Hanging,  
Screen print on fabric. © The artist



Plate 17 **Afikpo Mask** (1977)  
by Ifedioramma Dike. Wall

batik on cotton acrylic yarn.  
© The artist

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