Art as a tool for cross-cultural conversation: A personal dialogue with Igbo and Ainu art

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Cogent Arts & Humanities (2016), 3: 1262997
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Abstract: This paper examines the concepts and perceptions of art among the Igbo people of Nigeria and the Ainu people of Japan. From a practical point of view, it assesses each group’s notion of art and how it has fared in the postcolonial experience. It grapples with the the “lingering after-effects” of colonialism in the guises of postcolonialism and how they are manifested in the arts of the two groups. Since the postcolonial thrives on hybridity and contradictions as is reflected in the situations of postcolonial subjects, politically, economically, culturally and otherwise, the central concern in my work on one hand is the ebbing of Igbo creative enterprise and its systemic divorce from Igbo cultural heritage, and on the other hand, Ainu’s response to their cultural-political predicament through a resurgence of their arts and cultural production in light of their history in Japan and the challenges posed by a globalising world. The paper posits that the Ainu example may be the path for previously colonised cultures, including the Igbo of Nigeria.

Subjects: Museum and Heritage Studies; Arts; Humanities; Language & Literature
Keyword: art; Ainu; Igbo; colonial; postcolonial; cross-cultural; dialogue

1. Introduction
When I visited Japan for the first time in 2001 as one of twelve art professionals invited by the government for a study tour of that country, I was struck by the easy and pleasant fusion of tradition and modernity that pervaded the country. I noticed that the cultural enterprise was alive and
dynamic, that culture was indeed a basic need, not an ancient far away fantasy land which was re-
membered occasionally as an appendage to other aspects of human endeavour. In Japan, the ancient Roman saying pervades everything: *Ars natura ad solutem conspirat*—art com-
bined with nature leads to human health). I am not sure if we can say the same for Nigeria.

Little wonder I opted to return to Japan for my sabbatical in 2008, after a few other visits between 2001 and 2007. In November 2007, while I was attending a conference on the Philosophy of Cultural Resources at the National Museum of Ethnology (also known as Minpaku), Osaka, I had the opportu-
nity to witness the annual renewal/rededication ritual of cultural objects of Ainu people held by Minpaku. My intention for my sabbatical was to engage in a comparative study of some contempo-
rary Japanese and Nigerian artists, but after seeing the Ainu rededication, I was immediately fasci-
nated by some commonalities the aesthetic essences of the objects shared with aspects of Igbo art.2

Not unnaturally, when I came to Minpaku in February 2008 as a Guest Professor, I decided to focus on a study of arts and aesthetics among the Igbo of Nigeria and the Ainu of Japan. This paper exam-
ines briefly the art of the two peoples, their relevance to contemporary society, and how I have tried to adopt them in my own work.

2. On the notion of art in non-western societies

The precise origin of art in human societies is not known. If art is a bio-cultural phenomenon or be-
haviour as posited by Dissanayake (1998), then art and society are co-eval realities. Art's origin is
often associated with ancient rituals whose essence was partly a negotiation or renegotiation of
reality, a tendency also associated with art. Put differently, art is at once a universal phenomenon
and a multi-versal experience. From the beginning of time, all peoples had different means of re-
sponding to the mysteries and exigencies of being through the use of symbols and images.3 The
objects were not seen as art in the same sense similar objects in the West were considered. One of
the reasons also was that most traditional societies did not have a verbal equivalent for the word
“art”. However, the lack of a name or label for an experience or phenomenon does not translate to
its non-existence. Dissanayake (1998) seems to address this issue when she states that “although
the arts are a cultural phenomenon, Art might be viewed as a prior, biological one”.

Perhaps the notion of the Roman *ars* and the Greek *techne* (art or the capacity to make or do
something according to standard principles) were manifest in different ways in different societies
from earliest times. This is without prejudice to the phenomenon of influence which occurs both at
the individual and group levels when two people or cultures encounter each other. Cultures and
people thrive on give and take and so does art. Even now that the culture or art of many human
groups have received untold extraneous influences in many ways and for different reasons, a peo-
ple’s art derives mainly from a conjunction of their worldview and psycho-physical environments.
Igbo and Ainu arts are no exceptions.4

Figure 1. *Uli* drawing by Eziafo Okaro, Ogidi, Nigeria.
In spite of the peculiarities of cultural experiences, cultures and arts of different societies may share commonalities the same way that mankind in general shares some fundamental commonalities in many respects. In the case of Igbo and Ainu art, what arrested my attention in 2007 was the linearity of forms. For Igbo art, I refer mainly to the age-long uli body and wall painting and aspects of carving, especially doors, where lines are copiously employed (Figures 1 and 2). As for art among the Ainu, one would be looking mainly at body adornment, textiles, mostly attush robes and head gear (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 2. Uli women painter of Nri in 2003.

Figure 3. Ainu Attush samples.
Figure 4. Ainu men wearing headgear.

Figure 5. Menoko ita, carved kitchen ware.
and 4), and an assortment of carved objects for domestic and other purposes (Figures 5–7). There is also an emergent tradition of fine art in Hokkaido that should be mentioned. But before discussing these art forms, I should provide a background capsule on the Igbo and the Ainu. However, I shall not dwell much on the histories of both groups, as it is not the focus of this discussion. Rather, a capsule of the groups’ backgrounds is provided.

3. The Igbo

Igbo people are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The archaeology of the Igbo indicates that they are either an ancient people in Nigeria or the consequence of various migrations with a current population of over 40 million. (Afigbo, 1981). Although the migration theorists such as W.M.D. Jeffreys would point to Egypt or Israel as the original homeland of the Igbo race, Afigbo (1981) have explained that there is archaeological evidence that “Igbo land was already under occupation, at least the plateau and up land section of it, by the third millennium B.C.” He also explains that there is enough ethnographic evidence in the form of artifacts recovered from this area which supports this view and which relates to some artifacts of the present Igbo (Afigbo, 1981; Basden, 1966; Okoro-Ijoma, 1989). Most of the artifacts are mainly statuary, pottery, ritual objects as may be seen in the Igboukwu finds. Igbo also has a painting tradition, ulti.
When Igbo and other ethnicities were jumbled in 1914 to form Nigeria, most traditional practices had begun to cower in the face of imperial culture. Most were labelled fetishes in colonial times. As Afigbo (1981) has posited, “A study of the early history of Christianity in Igbo land reveals that it was marked by waves and waves of iconoclasm in which invaluable works of art and culture were destroyed...” (p. 341). The same sense of nihilism can be seen in the prevailing neocolonisation that overtook independence and in the onslaught of Pentecostalism since the 1990s (Ottenberg, 2012). This is one fact that drew me to uli as a research subject in 1992. In 2002 when I started working with traditional women painters in Igbo villages, my interest was further kindled by the fact that the painters were very few, non-Christian and in their sixties, seventies or eighties. The sorry state of uli in particular and Igbo art in general is, perhaps, an index for the cultural self-hate7 that is prevalent among the Igbo today (Ezeh, 2012; Ugwu, 2012).

Although Cole and Aniakor (1984) reports that there was resurgence of Igbo arts in the period following the civil war in Nigeria, that is in the 1970s, the triumph of Pentecostalism and neocolonisation, which arguably includes globalisation, engendered a remarkable downturn. As Ottenberg (2012) has argued, Pentecostalism is among the chief agents that corroded Igbo culture in the post-colonial period, as it viewed certain aspects of culture from a highly jaundiced perspective. It can also be argued that Pentecostalism is an agency of both globalisation and neocolonisation. If earlier colonial Christian evangelisation dealt a blow to Igbo autochthonous traditions, Pentecostalism, since the last decade of the twentieth century has driven more nails into the coffin. Thus there has been a reversal of the resurgence that excited Cole and Aniakor in their ground breaking book.

4. Ainu

According to Poisson (2002) “When scientists from Europe and the United States first met Ainu people in the late 1800s they were surprised and confused” (p. 14). This was because the Ainu had curly hair and pale skin and looked more like Europeans than Japanese or other Asians. The Nihon Shoki (日本書紀 [sometimes translated as The Chronicles of Japan]), the second oldest book of classical Japanese history, contains the first recorded mention of the Ainu. The Ainu, a society of hunter-gatherers, who settled Hokkaido and lived mainly off fish and plants, saw themselves as distinct from plants and animals and kamuy (gods or divine beings), hence their choice of the name Ainu, literally “Human Beings”. Little wonder they also proudly named their homeland Ainu Mosir, “the great, quiet land where human beings dwell” (Toshimitisu, 1998, p. 10). Historically they spoke the Ainu language and related varieties and were also found in the Kurile Islands and much of Sakhalin.

Like the Igbo, the Ainu were also thought to be one of the “last tribes of Israel” (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1974, p. 1). Origin of the Ainu has been a matter of academic speculation and debate. However, Ono (1999) reports that:

Ainu culture seems to have originated from the earlier Jomon and Epi-Jomon cultures whose peoples had developed special adaptations to the natural resources of the Hokkaido environment and persisted in this essentially nonagricultural tradition, with only limited growth garden farming, until the nineteenth century. (pp. 32–33)

Ainu culture dates from around 1200 CE and recent research suggests that it is a complex that originated in a merger of the Okhotsk and Satsumon cultures (Siddle, 1999, pp. 67–73). Ainu religion, a cross between animism and pantheism, revolved around the mysteries of the cosmic cycle and natural phenomena.

It is this culture and religion that were to come under repression when the Japanese colonised, annexed and assimilated Hokkaido and the Ainu aborigines following years of contact through trade and socio-political commerce dating from around the thirteenth century and which tended to favour the Japanese much more than it did the Ainu in every respect. Thus, between 1868 in the Meiji era when Hokkaido was practically annexed and 2008 when the Japanese Diet officially declared Ainu Indigenous People of Japan (Ito, 2008), the Ainu had been trying to reclaim their history,
culture and identity as indigenous people of Japan. Beyond the Diet’s declaration, the struggle continues and has been sustained, not only through political consciousness and adherence to their religion but through the soft power often embodied in cultural resources. For centuries, Ainu artists, craftsmen and cultural actors have deployed their work as a bridge between the past and the present, an instrumental arbiter of memory and desire. As Fitzhugh (1999) puts it:

Though they lost territories and suffered economic and social hardship, they did not lose their culture—their Ainu society, customs, beliefs, and material forms. Because their struggles have been rewarded by survival, they remain a viable people with much to teach the world. (p. 26).

Since the colonisation of the Ainu was from within, it is not easy to pinpoint the date of their independence. While 1997 could be taken in principle as a date because of the passing of the Ainu Shimpo that year, the consummation of whatever freedom embodied in that law may be found in the Diet’s declaration of the Ainu as indigenous people of Japan in 2008. Whether this declaration will have much impact on postcolonial Ainu art and culture is not the concern of this paper. Ainu art and culture have always been very resilient even in the face of Japanese repression. However, one can say that the survival of the Ainu both in colonial and postcolonial times seems to have depended on the capacity of their artists and cultural actors to mediate between generations.

5. Igbo and Ainu arts

We are often told that much of “traditional” art is for religious purposes. It is not always so. Some are in response to quotidian needs. In other words, art could arise out of a need in religious ritual in the same way it could be contrived to address practical social, existential problems in the community. But in all cases, art embodies an aesthetic essence, which sometimes includes beauty as perceived by the group from which the art emanates. This is true of both Igbo and Ainu societies. Although the Ainu did/do not have a painting tradition, in spite of evidence of body decorations (shinuye—body drawing and decoration—usually in monochrome), there are similarities between Igbo uli and Ainu linear configurations on the body, textile, carved wooden trays, knife sheaths, and libation sticks. The major, if remarkable, difference is perhaps in the issue of preservation. For where Igbo art is dying or dead in the face of Americanisation, Ainu art is constantly renewed as a tool for the group’s self-affirmation and as a datum with which their culture could be appreciated in relation to others. It is this fact that fuelled my enthusiasm for a comparative study of Ainu and Igbo aesthetics and the subsequent attempts to fuse both and appropriate the result in my work as a studio artist.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the arts of the two peoples have witnessed various influences through colonial times and that their present states reflect the usual conditions of previously colonised peoples, chief of which is the tendency to catch up with state of development of their former colonisers, with the resulting hybridity and dissonance. In the conclusion, we shall see to what extent this holds for each of the two societies.

6. Igbo art

Igbo art includes statuary (in wood and clay), textile, metal work, masking, and pottery. There is also textile (mainly weaving) done by women in the Igbo area. Men carved masks, stools, doors and other utility objects (Figure 8). And we must not forget to mention the masquerade itself which, though is an embodiment of vernacular theatre, is also a confluence of all the arts—textiles, sculpture, painting and that branch of art vaguely known as visual communication (Figure 9). Before now, masquerades were major part of festivals such as new yam, new (vernacular) year which often started with the planting season, and other special occasions. Although masquerades still feature in some surviving traditional Igbo festivals today, they are also not absent at Christian celebrations such as Christmas and Easter, especially in urban areas. Igbo also had a painting tradition—the uli body and wall painting, as described above. This painting tradition has survived up until this day,
although it is at the point of extinction (Figure 10). The linearity of *uli* designs and its expression in most other Igbo art forms explains my interest in it. As I have explained, the term, *uli* was originally the Igbo name for the indigo dye obtained from several species of plants identified with the several botanical names.9

Scholars have speculated on the origin of *uli* among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria. *Uli* art must have originated as a sign language and later transformed into a means of body and wall decoration. Classical *uli* monochromatic drawing on the body is very closely related to the Igbo murals rendered in the four traditional earth colours and both are essentially a female tradition. In other words, traditional paintings on walls are also known as *uli* painting, although the indigo dye does not form part of the palette in such painting (Figure 11). The *uli* mural palette was at once austere and rich, consisting in four colours: *nzu* (white), *edo* (yellow), *ufie* (red), and *oji* (black). Blue, obtained from washing blue—a commodity that came with the colonisers—latter joined the *uli* palette (Ikwuemesi, 2011, p. 5). In Igbo carved doors, textile and masking costumes, *uli* decorative lines were also fundamental. Even where the linear configurations on such items were named in accordance with their geometric or organic significations, meaning did not necessarily supersede aesthetics.
Figure 9. Igbo Masquerade, Enugu, 2009.

Figure 10. Igbo uli woman painter.
In Igbo society, as in most traditional African societies, there was a term for creativity—*nka*. Literally meaning “skill”, *nka* was used to refer to a wide range of creative experiences, not just visual art as we know it in the contemporary world. It was also believed that *agwu*, the highly extra-sensory awareness and spirituality common in diviners and priests, vernacular medicine, witchcraft, shamanism and herbalism, was a form of creativity (Ikwuemesi, 2011, p. 5). Although Igbo believe that life/living in its entirety is art (*ino ndu bu ikwa nka*), art in Igbo land expresses and celebrates various aspects and estates of the human person and condition. Art is life and life is art, in the basic sense that both complement each other. This, perhaps, relates to what Seiji Oshima calls “an aestheticizing of life” in his discussion on the meaning of *ars* in the Roman world (Ikwuemesi, 2003, pp. 57–58). Oshima’s view of *ars* captures the concept of art and creativity as it was held by different societies in earlier times. For the present purpose, his postulation holds less for the Igbo than it does for the Ainu in view of the postcolonial realities in the two societies, principally the narrowing of the purview and function of art in line with Western perspectives.

### 7. Ainu art

In Ainu art, as seen on most kimonos or *attush*, bags and head dresses, lines are used preponderantly to evoke a plethora of images, designs and motifs. But unlike *uli*, the linear designs on Ainu materials are, in addition to being aesthetic, ritually functional, for the fact that they are deployed on the fabrics and other objects to protect wearers or users from attack from evil spirits (Fitzhugh, 1999, p. 22). Some of the designs, especially on *attush* and other textiles have spike-like ends and points which are supposed to amplify this ritual/protective purpose (Figure 12).

The major art forms of the Ainu people are wood carving (*inuye*) usually done by men and textile design and embroidery which are feminine art forms. There is no pottery, although records of a pristine pottery tradition are mentioned by some scholars (Yamaura & Ushiro, 1999). Like their Igbo counterparts, Ainu women had a tradition of body painting which had no mural variant like *uli* of the Igbo. Thus one can argue that the Ainu had no painting tradition as such. This lack of a painting tradition is still reflected in contemporary Ainu art. Apart from Bikky Sunazawa, it is yet to be confirmed whether there are contemporary Ainu painter practising in Hokkaido at this time.
In traditional Ainu society, art was intertwined with life itself, as in some African societies. The pre-contact perception and purpose of art among the Ainu are, for instance, not different from those of the Igbo. Beyond such commonalities in the perception of art, both cultures also share the lack of a composite word for art before the colonial encounter. As Koji Yuki (Personal interview with Koji Yuki, print maker and Ainu culture activist, Hokkaido, November 20, 2009) told me in 2009:

There was no word for art. The word art is immanent in human nature and experience. It was a gift from the gods. These objects are now called art in modern times. But in traditional times, art as a word did not exist. Art was seen as something magical. One who could make art was seen to have magical powers. Many Ainu names actually described the character or ability of the bearers. So a person who was an artist, for instance, had that ability expressed in his name; one who could carve also had that ability reflected in his name. A person with good looks also had that quality expressed in his or her name. (Personal interview, Hokkaido, November 20, 2009)

This is also true of the Igbo. For both the Igbo and Ainu, the notion of art seems not to be easily separable from the demands and the dynamics of mundane living. Art was not cherished for its own sake, but was crucial to the goals of society, so long as it could enhance the daily, social and spiritual needs of the people and the community. Igbo and Ainu had a sense of aesthetics, as they appreciated the beautiful in life and nature. For the Ainu, this is readable in the notion of “pirika noka” (beauty in relation to forms and shapes) as commonly held by the Ainu people. Thus it could be said that the Ainu “pirika noka”, “Nuye” (a description of the acts of writing and drawing), “inuye” (the general term for handcrafts and carvings) and “shinuye” (body drawing or tattoo) as well as the Igbo nka all harbour various levels of relationships with the Roman ars and the greek techne.

8. Adapting tradition to today—A cross-generational conversation

When I visited Hokkaido in 2008 and saw what the Ainu were doing with their art, how they were exploring the past in the challenges of today, I saw what Jonathan Sacks (2000, p. 184) meant when he succinctly described education as “the transmission of a tradition”, a process of “developing individuals articulate in the language of their heritage”, through a “conversation between the generations” (Sacks, 2000, p. 184). Unfortunately education in Nigeria thrives on the here and now without much recourse to the past. Operating largely on bread-and-butter principles, it does not encourage much conversation across generations. In these parts, the past is out of the window, the present is dangerously isolated and the future has no compass to rely on. Neocolonisation, Pentecostalist extremis, and the prevalent Igbo corporate cultural self-hate have not helped matters. Every wise people recognise the past as the beginning of the future. When a people throw away their past, their future eludes them (Ezeh, 2012; Ottenberg, 2012; Ugwu, 2012). This is the bone of
post-independence Africa, and Igboland is one place where the situation is vividly exemplified. That Igbo art is in the throes of death while Ainu art continues to thrive as a tool for the politics of identity is a sad testimonial to Igbo heritage crisis.

Thus on visiting Hokkaido in 2008 and 2009 as Japan Foundation Fellow, I felt that what Igbo art, especially *uli*, was in dire need of was a critical conversation with the present for the benefit of now and the future. After all, is *uli* not essentially the line and is the line not *uli*? Is the line not a pan-cultural design element even in the contemporary era with all the ICT revolution? Why can *uli* linear configurations not find expression in modern design possibilities? Perhaps the crisis of heritage in Igbo land and in Nigeria as whole calls for a surgical operation on the education system. Sacks (2000) addresses this situation when he asserts forcefully when he asserts that “traditions are never lost” so long as they are cherished, and that “Cultures survive the way post-biblical Judaism survived: when ... they see at least part of the role of education as developing individuals articulate in the language of their heritage. But Sacks also implies that traditions can be lost in two ways; either through sheer neglect or as a result of actions and inactions calculated to bring such traditions to a possible end, a process Sacks himself recognises as extremis. These two scenarios are playing out in the case of *uli* and other heritages that define the Igbo of Nigeria (Ikwuemesi, 2014).

My work with *uli* women painters (Figure 13) in Igbo villages dates back to 2002 and consisted in *uli* mural painting sessions, initially with some assistance from Pendulum Centre for Culture and Development. But occasional paintings of idle walls in the villages are not enough, if *uli* is to become an objective basis for the kind of cross-generational conversation described by Jonathan Sacks. The real opportunity to explore the essences of such dialogue came in 2009 and 2010 when I received grants from the US Mission in Nigeria to re-engage *uli* from a more populist pedestal to complement what has been done in the fields of painting and drawing. The goal of the project is to train artists, artisans, and craftspeople who can give *uli* a new lease of life and a wider appeal through the means of craft or I what I call econo-art. This would return *uli* to the people, to the centre, where it originally belonged and reaffirm it once more as a cultural resource that can be accessed and shared by all, not only by a narrow clique of privileged museum and university cranks and gallery-goers.

Figure 13. *Uli* women painters in Nri, 2003.
The justification for the goal of the project is that uli can no longer be preserved in its primordial state for too long, except perhaps in museums which tend to hold isolated objects captive without fully offering a holistic representation of their usage, signification and meaning. In other words, “museums attempt to represent vast and rich cultural resources with a poverty of visuality while denying them life and dynamism”. And museums in these parts are dead ends, caught in the cross-fire of bureaucracy and the long-running divorce of culture and society in Nigeria. Although I have tried to combine uli and Ainu linear configurations in my recent paintings, imitating both uli murals and Japanese biobu panelling, as an outcome of my Igbo–Ainu research (Figure 14), uli’s ultimate survival cannot depend on museum collections or the exertion of modern academic artists but on a general appreciation of its essences as embodiments of identity and civilisation. Therefore, transferring uli ethno-aesthetics to contemporary crafts and products not only presents a new frontier in the creative industries; it also challenges and subverts notions of contemporaneity and modernity as West-monopolised, if universal, concepts.

In all this, the Ainu experience—especially the resilience of Ainu art and culture after centuries of Japanese suppression and even when it is recorded that only about 26,000 Ainu remain in Hokkaido—provides a huge impetus for a reinvention of uli. The kind of reception received by the products from the uli re-adaptation workshops when they were exhibited in Abuja, Bonny and Enugu are pointers to enormous possibilities yet untapped. The enduring success of kente and adinkra in Ghana also offer another example of how cultures and traditions “survive the way post-biblical Judaism survived”. This is another source of encouragement for those interested in a sustained exploration of uli and other aspects of Igbo art. When uli is effectively reawakened uli from slumber, the next step may be to attempt an instrumental and productive marriage between it and other idioms, such as the Ainu inuye and to bring it to the precincts of technology, as both Ainu and Ghanaians have done, as a means of sustaining production and reproduction. In the last two years I have been experimenting on possibilities in such marriage in some easel paintings, fashion and sundry craft in the hope that the result will endear itself to creative people and consumers of cultural production in Nigeria and elsewhere, but it may take a long time for these efforts to fructify.

9. Sankofa (Go back and pick): A conclusion

Although the project discussed in this paper easily foregrounds how certain fundamental principles undergird art and aesthetics across diverse cultural communities, some people may wonder how it may help Nigeria’s situation economically, as if heritage preservation is not important enough as a project in itself. But that raises some questions. Is culture not a basic need? Is culture not us and we culture? As humans, are we not ecological actors because we can affect the environment through our cultural and economic actions? Is cultural production not vital to the creation and harnessing of cultural capital and the sustenance of a creative economy that is so terribly lacking in Nigeria and Africa? Perhaps the most important essence of the project in light of the Nigerian reality is its ability to contribute to socio-economic advancement both for individuals and communities. The project demonstrates that art can be returned to the centre of society and put at the service of the community (according to the needs and reality of that community) through a creative and positive subversion of the esoteric gallery-museum system that derives from imperial models, a subversion also of the work of university/academic artists trapped in the often deceptive glory of the ivory tower. But beyond the economics of uli or its marriage with inuye, Igbo cultural experience faces a fundamental challenge with regard to globalisation’s onslaught and its clever deployment of the agency of soft power of cultural recolonisation. That challenge cannot be contained by casting the past away like the proverbial baby and bath water or by claiming new births in the politics of culture through the
arbitrary re-christening of old children. What Igbo artists and cultural producers ought to do is to use the past as a datum for confronting and coming to terms with the present to make the future more meaningful. That is how civilisations are sustained. In the words of Sacks (2000):

A civilisation is like an ancient but still magnificent building. Different ages have added new wings here, an altered façade there, rooms have been redecorated, old furniture restored … We inherited the house from our parents, and we want to leave it in good order to our children … We must do our best to ensure that, in time, they will come to love it as we do, so that when they come to change it, as they will, they will do so harmoniously, not destructively, according to their best understanding of what it represents to them and those who came before them …

This is what is required in the encounter with modernisation and it is the pattern the Ainu seem to have adopted in their struggle against Japanese colonisation and doka seisaku, that is, assimilation (Cotterill, 2011; Dubreuil, 2007; Fitzhugh, 1999); not so for Igbo in their journey through the forest path of modernisation, now globalisation. Perhaps population is a factor here, considering that the Ainu are about 15,000 today compared to Igbo population of about 40 million. Yet for most previously colonised societies, modernisation is, to borrow from El Anatsui, “a fateful journey nowhere”.17 It is a long way from home; they know what it looked like when they took off and are aware of all the landmarks on the way; but the final destination is uncertain; nor is a return journey possible. In light of the postcolonial condition, the best possibility that remains for the Igbo and Ainu is, perhaps, the sankofa option; Igbo and Ainu artists and peoples must “go back and pick”.18 For the Ainu, the journey has been on and fruitful. For the Igbo, it seems the journey is yet to begin.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information
Cite this article as: Art as a tool for cross-cultural conversation: A personal dialogue with Igbo and Ainu art, Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi, Cogent Arts & Humanities (2016), 3: 1262997.

Notes
1. According to Seiji Oshima, “The Latin word ars refer to both art and technical skill, and are used in one or the other meaning depending on the circumstances. It would probably be correct to say, however, that originally the two meanings were closely bound together. The eventual separation of art and technology is a misfortune of modern times. Technology, being more closely bound to the needs of everyday life, has made rapid progress but has lost its human warmth in the process, becoming a force for dehumanization and moving far away from the realm of art … Ars should not be simply interpreted as art, but all the things necessary for human dealings with the outside world, remembering that these things can always possess an aesthetic as well as a practical aspect. Simply put, this idea implies an aestheticizing of life, making life a work of art”. See Ikwuemesi (2003).

2. Uli is a feminine art of the Igbo which originated on the body as monochromatic drawing and painting and later was used as a mural painting technique with a four-colour palette. This painting tradition has survived until this day, although it is at the point of extinction.

3. The problem of anonymity of art objects was a tool of imperialist supremacist anthropology. The huge image crisis created by this approach in the study of the art of Africa endures.

4. The point is that art is a multifarious and multicultural phenomenon and cannot, at a critical level, be seen from the perspective of one people.

5. For details of the Igbo ukwu finds, see Shaw (1977).

6. See 2 above.

7. By cultural self-hate, I mean the lack of belief by a people in themselves and what they represent. See Peter Ezeh, 2012; Chidi Ugwu, 2012.

8. The Ainu Shimpo, otherwise known as the Act for the Promotion of Ainu Culture, was a result of actions and struggles by the Ainu over several years. Enacted on July 1, 1997 to replace the outdated Hokkaido Former Aborigines Act of 1899, it retained some of the objectionable features of the 1899 act, contained unsavoury characteristics of its own, and fell short of expectation, especially as it did not address political and rights issues.

9. Some of the botanical names include Rothmania Whitfieldi, Rothmania hispiale, Rothmania cuspicula and Rothmania urcelli. Species also have Igbo names as Uli Oba, Uli Nkilisi, Uli Edeji and Uli Okolobo. Usually, the berries of these plants are extracted and ground and the dye is pressed out of the marsh with the fingers of the hand. Once extracted it is a ready and workable medium for drawing on the human body. Usually, the dye is placed in a wooden receptacle or coconut shell from where the artist scoops it with the help of the uli knife (mma nw uli) to make the intricate monochromatic drawings on the body. To ensure good registration, ujie (camwood dust or paste) may be used to prime the skin before the application of uli.

10. In an interview, Koji Yuki, claims to be the only practising Ainu printmaker in Hokkaido.

11. I say so because the words tend to cover a wide range of creative activities and their skills and at the same
time embody the notions of beauty and aesthetics.

12. *Extremis* is a Latin word meaning “in the farthest reaches” or “at the point of death”. According to Jonathan Sacks, the term is used to refer to the tendency among people to believe in the imminence of the end of history and to act in ways calculated to realise such an end of history. See Sacks (2000).

13. Pendulum started as a gallery in Lagos in 2002 and was later renamed Pendulum Centre for Culture and Development in 2004, becoming an important art centre in a few years. Most tragically, it ceased operations in 2009 following the brutal murder of its founder and director, Mr. Peter Aree.

14. The funds from the US mission enabled craft workshops for Igbo *uli* women and others in villages and towns as well as art students keen on interrogating and exploring the thin line that purports to separate art and craft. The workshops had the broad theme “Forward to the Past”.

15. According to Ikwuemesi and Ikwuemesi (2013), econo-art is “grassroots art whose primary objective is to provide meal ticket for its practitioners while promoting the common heritage. It is not high art but small scale art in which function and aesthetics must conjoin as a matter of necessity”.

16. From the 1970s, artists associated with the art department at University of Nigeria, Nsukka experimented with *uli*, propagating its philosophy and principles in their works. Although the modern all zeitgeist enjoyed tremendous attention and accolade locally and internationally, it has not saved the *uli* heritage from the curse of decline. Hence, the recourse to craft’s populist tendencies in the Forward-to-the Past Project.

17. This is the title of a sculpture installation by Ghanaian artist and Africa’s leading sculptor, El Anatsui. It is also the theme of an exhibition of works by Anatsui organised by Yukiya Kawaguchi and others in 2010 at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka and other museums in Japan. See Kawaguchi (2010).

18. Sankofa is the name of a mythical Ghanaian bird said to frequently turn back in its track in search of forgotten crumbs. Sankofa’s signification is in the need to buttress the present with the past.

**Cover image**

Source: Author.

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