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## **Visuality and Representation in Traditional Igbo Uli Body and Mud Wall Paintings**

**Onwuakpa, Samuel**

Department of Fine Art and Design

University of Port Harcourt,

River State, Nigeria

Email: [ifyonwuakpa@yahoo.com](mailto:ifyonwuakpa@yahoo.com)

Phone: 08028871838

### **Abstract**

Igbo *uli* art is a popular creative idiom in south-eastern Nigeria. It serves as decorative, ritual and cosmetic art. It does not exhibit any paradox because it has been considered as art that is aesthetically pleasing. *Uli* art is practiced purely by the womenfolk on human body and mud wall and based on linear configurations. The intention of *uli* painting is not to create an illusionistic representation of reality. However, it is dependent on both conceptual and perceptual, which results in abstract and non-figurative representations. *Uli* women painters have produced a voluminous body of work widely distributed throughout Igbo land. However, there is a dearth of *uli* body and mud wall paintings or decorations as well as their processes of execution as women community art project literature on the corpus of *uli* art, hence it requires a continuous investigation and scrutiny. This essay therefore provides an insight into the nature and social context of *uli* body and mud wall paintings or decorations as well as their processes of execution as women community art project.

### **Introduction**

Traditional art, according to Kaego Okeke (2002:1), is the chain linking the past with the present. It is indeed the basis of contemporary African artistic ideas. History has

shown that, of all the human activities going on in time and space, only objects of art and creative ideas retain their absolute value. Art, therefore, is the most desirable and the most profound means by which man records his life's experience.

Women in traditional African societies take part in the creative process of recording human experience. Traditionally, therefore, women artists are living treasures. In the past, women artists dominated certain art traditions. Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, the role of women as designers was differentiated from that of the men. They practice pottery, an additive creative art form. They also engaged in *uli* body decoration and mural painting as well as fabric weaving. The men, on their part, engage in artistic ventures such as carving and metal craft.

Among all the artistic practices of the Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria, *uli* body decoration and mural painting were most prominent. This is because in Igbo culture *uli* has been seen as the basic art form or creative activity of the women folk, which according to traditional belief was bestowed on them by *Ala* (Earth Goddess) because of their special relationship with her. Also, *uli* is appreciated by all, as it touches both the spiritual, artistic and cultural life of the Igbo. In fact, Uche Okeke (2005:23) says that *uli* design elements inform the Igbo art corpus.

It is not clear when *uli* painting, an integral part of Igbo culture, first began. But some motifs contained in the *uli* repertoire were used as decoration on footed bowls unearthed at Igbo-Ukwu along with the famous bronzes such as the roped bronze pot. Igbo-Ukwu pottery dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD (Thurstan Shaw, 1972). **This** shows that *uli* art must have started about the same period of Igbo-Ukwu art tradition since the latter is the oldest art tradition in Igbo culture areas. Other concepts concerning the origin of *uli* is by Uche Okeke (1977:25) who notes that *uli* painters used the forms, motifs and symbols contained on the body designs of *Asele* in manipulative ways on body decoration and wall murals. *Asele* is believed to be a mythical artist of high renown among the Igbo and who is claimed to have appropriated *uli* before other art forms started. However, Chinedu Chukueggu (2003:253) quoting Okeke 1983 says that the origin of *uli* concept is traceable to both *Asele* and *Badunka* who is the male opposite of *Asele*.

Notwithstanding the origin and inspiration for *uli* art in the Igbo traditional belief system, the *uli* artist is usually referenced in matters concerning *uli*. She is called "*Omenka*" (A name given to any skillful person) and held in very high esteem because of her special skill. *Uli* artists or *Omenka*, are mostly elderly women who got their training right from childhood either by watching their mothers, relatives or other *uli* artists at work, and sometimes by running little errands for them. There is a belief in Igbo society that every woman has a fairly good knowledge of *uli* painting, as Obiora Udechukwu (1990) opines that most women who could make *uli* drawings usually

encourage their daughters to learn the art from early childhood. It has also been noted that any woman who is betrothed to serve any deity in some Igbo culture area such as Nri must learn the art of *uli* drawing. This is because she is the only person who has the right to beautify both the deity and the shrine with *uli* designs if the space is not much at any period the community celebrates such a deity.

Traditionally, *uli* body drawing or painting is a real boost to a woman's ego because it gives satisfaction and confidence to any woman decorated with it. In essence, great importance is attached to a woman carrying *uli* design on her body. The designs will enhance her natural beauty, so much so that without *uli* designs she could appear less attractive. Elizabeth Willis (1989:63) reveals that *uli* application has a straight forward function as an art, which beautifies the body, makes a person feel more appealing and as well attracts the opposite sex. One can argue that *uli*, basically, is an art for display and enjoyment. It can be used by people of all ages and appreciated by anyone who comes across whoever wears it (Plate 1 and 2).

#### **Tools, materials and techniques employed in *uli* body painting**

The tools, materials and techniques involved in creating *uli* body painting could be described as simple, but the traditional *uli* artist has much regard for her tools and materials. They become sacred when they are employed for medicinal purposes. These traditional instruments, however, vary in both style and structure. The juice which is one of the important items available to the *uli* artists for body decoration was extracted from the following fruits namely: *uli oba* or *uli nkpo*, *uli nkilisi* or *uli nkpuru*, *uli ede-eji* and *uli okorobiam*.

*Uli Oba or Nkpo*: (*Rothmania Whitfieldi*) is a tree which grows as tall as forty feet high and contains many branches. The seeds in the pods are mashed to extract the juice (Plate 3). *Uli Nkilisi or Uli Nkpuru* (*CreMASpora Triflora*) is a fair sized plant which produces rusty leaves, stems as well as pods that contain small seeds that have a smooth surface. The seeds inside the pod are removed when not dried and mashed to extract the juice for use. Okeke (1977:26) explains that it is most effective when green and can last as long as three weeks on the body (Plate 4). *Uli Ede Eji* (*Gardenia imperialis*) is a tree that produces numerous seeds bedded in fleshy pulp. When the juice extracted from the seeds is exposed or applied on the skin it is usually the fastest in turning dark (Uche Okeke, 1977:26). It also lasts for many weeks on the skin (Plate 4). *Uli Okorobiam* (*Rothmania Hispida*) is a tree that produces elongated fruits with grooved ridges which when mashed the juice is used for body decoration (Plate 5). Although the Igbo speak many different dialects the application of *uli* is virtually the same among the people.

Apart from *uli* juice, which are extracted from seeds and fruits, other items used by the *uli* traditional artists are *ufie*, (Camwood) which must be applied on the

body before designing. It is a brilliant red power obtained by crushing to powder the bark of the camwood tree. *Ufie* is mixed with water into a paste and liberally applied on the body as a primer and left to dry before *uli* designs are applied. The absorbent characteristic of *ufie* prevents the *uli* juice from spreading on the skin. When *uli* designs dry on the body together with *ufie* as the foundation, they last for a longer period. Beside the fact that *ufie* ensures longer lasting *uli* painting, it also enhances the brilliance of the designs on the body of women and could serve as body cream. The colour of *ufie* has a lot of significance attributed to it. To some Igbo groups, it signifies womanhood, while to others it means the life and blood of a living creature.

*Okwa uli* another item used by *uli* artists and serves as palette is a small wooden rectangular container used for *uli* stains or *uli* paste. Some have short handle while others have none (Plate 6). *Nkpsiuli* is also another tool used in drawing *uli* designs on the body. This drawing tool is usually formed from a bird's feather or a thin stick made to be pointed at one end. In fact, bristle made from a local broom (Plate 7) could also be used dexterously to create effective designs (Elizabeth Willis, 1986:4). Another important tool is *mma nwuli* (Plate 8) which is a small knife fashioned in an unusually elegant shape and size employed mostly for opening the pods that contain *uli* seeds or fruits. Some *uli* painters also employ *mma nwuli* not only as another tool for drawing *uli* designs but in the cutting of permanent body decorations. Jeffreys (1957:220) opines that *mma nwuli* is manipulated during body decoration to produce a variety of marks and lines.

### **Techniques Used in Applying Uli Body Decoration**

The techniques used for *uli* body decoration are the same all over Igbo land. Preparing the skin to be painted with *uli* designs is an important part of the total aesthetic process. Sometimes in order to achieve a smooth surface body hair is shaved onto which *ufie* (camwood) is rubbed. Not only that it provides a good foundation for *uli* application, *ufie* also serves as an antiperspirant in the sense that when *uli* dye is carefully applied, there is no danger of the designs being smeared or smudged. The application of *uli* design motifs on the body usually takes place in the evening when the heat from the sun has reduced drastically and the process lasts for a long period and does not only depend on the available space on the body to be decorated but how elaborate and intricate the designs appear. The choice of evening period is to avoid the blazing afternoon sun from drying the *uli* juice which is exposed in the *okwa uli* (*uli* palette) and for the person being decorated not to sweat. Anybody painted with *uli* designs will stay for a long period before engaging in any work so that his body will not produce sweat. The person being painted or decorated usually stand, sit or lie down on a mat or large leaves such as that of the banana which is usually spread on the ground, while the designer either sits or

stands. Oloidi (1985:8), describing an *uli* designer at work explains that she sees every part of the body as a curve, which she tries to follow with the desired motifs. In some cases, *uli* painters stylise and simplify the designs which they consider useful before they apply such designs on the human body.

Certain parts of the human body such as the stomach, back and thigh regions interest the *uli* painter more than others. This is because these regions of the human body have large surfaces for decoration. Their choice of motifs for any part of the body shows clearly their mastery of human body contours and their expertise in the use of the tools available for applying the designs. When designing the human body, *uli* artists usually put many things into consideration, particularly clarity, precision and balanced distribution of motifs that are most appropriate to the body being decorated. The excellent ordering of the aforementioned aesthetic qualities during *uli* painting reveals again the ingenuity of individual designers. *Uli* designers have over time developed many motifs that are suitable for different parts of the human body. The motifs could either be combined or applied separately. Some are also named after parts of the body on which they are applied. However, a motif could be suitable for more than one part of the body.

### **Wall Painting**

In Igbo culture, wall paintings or mural decorations may have also been inspired by religion. Udechukwu (1990:14) explains that Igbo wall painting originated as a tribute paid to a deity within the context of the annual festivities of rededication and thanksgiving centered on the said deity. He is also of the opinion that *uli* was first painted on the human body before it began to appear on walls, and it appeared on shrine walls before it came to adorn the walls of private compounds. In fact, a retired *uli* artist/painter responded “Is that person a god?” from a question by Obiora Udechukwu on whether private residences were painted in Agulu (Obiora Udechukwu, 1990:14). One can say that from her response that *uli* was first painted on shrine walls before the walls of private compounds because *uli* was originally an art exclusively for the gods. Mural painting is more developed in some communities of Igbo land, namely Anambra, Imo, Abia and Enugu States where mud walled compounds are a feature of traditional architecture. Just as it is applicable to *uli* body paintings, mural in Igbo society is entirely performed by women. However, while *uli* body painting is essentially a solo performance by an artist, wall paintings, particularly, on shrine walls, are more of a community art project involving many women from different segments of a village or community who are experts in the tradition of mural painting and whose responsibility it is to take care of the compound of a deity (Obiora Udechukwu, 1990:15). Sometimes murals may be painted entirely by one artist and her children who might be working with her as apprentice. Sometimes it might be that they want to get involved in order to

enjoy the fun of the exercise or painting. Their task often does not exceed mural paintings for private compound walls since painting the walls of shrine is the prerogative of the women who takes care of it.

It is important to note at this point that *uli* wall paintings in Igbo communities are not meant to be permanent. They are not works of art to be preserved ones they have finished serving whatever purpose by which they were produced just like the sculptures of the *Mbari* houses. This is because the mural paintings are created only to celebrate or honour gods and perhaps inform the people of an event to come. Therefore, when the celebration is over and another festive period is being observed, a new mural is expected to be painted in order to replace the old one. The Igbo believe that it is a taboo for a shrine that housed the community god or deity not to be renewed or renovated when a new season that calls for celebration is being observed. Hence, the shrine walls always enjoy regular beautification by the village women painters every festive period. Moreover, the pigments used for *uli* wall murals, which are derived from vegetable dyes, tree barks, different coloured soils and stones as well as other local sources don't usually last long on mud walls. Rain water does wash the colours off easily. But the washing off of the pigments from the walls during the rains does not create concern for the *uli* painters. This is because they can easily locate the sources of various colours they use when a new season sets in, and the artists will paint even better pictures since newer and perhaps younger artists with stronger strength and fresh ideas will join the older ones.

### **Colours Used for Traditional *uli* Wall Painting**

The colour range used for mural painting in Igbo land is reasonably wide. Udechukwu (1990:2) describes colours in *uli* murals as the spirit of festivity to the Igbo designer and that traditional painters know how to collect their pigments and how to prepare and preserve them to be used again if need be. The following pigments are available to *uli* painters for traditional *uli* wall painting. They include white, yellow and ochre, blue and green, black, red and brown. In fact, Chukueggu (2003:266) says that there is hardly any colour that the *uli* artists does not access to or cannot produce.

Apart from colour, the traditional *uli* artists have the following tools available to them, which they employ during mural painting. These include *ife ogilisi* (a piece of stick), *ntecha or ntite* (a "rag" derived from the rotten stalk of the banana tree), *ugbene* (feather), *nkpolo or akpulunkwo* (pebble) and *mma – nwuli* (*uli* knife). Udechukwu (1990:29) observes that the *uli* painter sometimes uses her fingers for stippling.

Wall painting takes a longer time than body decoration. Before the actual painting is done, the artist would scrub the walls (*ite aja*), and repair or cover the cracks or holes that must have affected the wall overtime with slip made from *aja ukpa* (laterite) and later use *nkpolo* (pebbles) to polish or smoothen the wall. The process

could last for a period of four to five days until the wall reaches a certain stage called the *omimi* or *onuno* (smooth slippery). In fact, the duration of the aforementioned processes depends on the length of the wall and the number of artists involved. After this wall –smoothing processes, *aja nwammuo* (yellow ochre) slip is then painted all over the wall with the rotten stalk of the banana tree that serve as smoothing rag. An interesting development during the wall –smoothing process is that the use of rotten stock of the banana tree as smoothing rag creates some geometric patterns on the mud walls, which Willis (1986:29) identified as *uli echirechi* or *nziwasi* motifs (multiple lines).

The actual *uli* mural painting sometimes begins with dividing the entire wall surface into segments with bold lines or bands called *uli nkpowa*. This means that after the painting process each segment or division can stand on its own as a work of art, if isolated. Nevertheless, when viewed together, they form a coherent system of units. *Uli* mural painting is thus a commune of ideas. No single woman can lay claim to the entire painting, although some are noted in the community for their dexterity in *uli*. The older women among them who can no longer withstand the demands of such painting programme play the role of consultants and boost the morale of those at work. They usually sit and watch the painting exercise or the younger women at work. Hence, the finished work is credited to all of them and the entire community. An outstanding characteristic of *uli* wall painting is the directness of execution. The artists do not erase or clean during the entire painting process.

In *uli* painting, it is not only the motifs and symbols that determine the beauty of the wall decoration, colours also do. Colours define and differentiate the motifs and symbols as well as their symbolism. Motifs and symbols employed in traditional wall painting are usually larger than those of body decoration. According to Tayo Adenaike (1982:89), this is because the walls have wider spaces than the human body. When *uli* painters use large motifs and symbols, their aim is to lay emphasis on or perhaps to fill wider areas of the space available to them within the shortest possible time with fewer motifs and more details.

The motifs and symbols used in wall painting are also symbolic, folkloric as well as metaphoric references to certain animals and objects. *Uli* motifs touch upon all aspects of Igbo life and further re-affirm the people's image of reality and thought. Willis (1987:91) opines that the motifs represent things of physical importance, aesthetic appeal, relevant to traditional beliefs and are an eloquent testimony of the people's dynamic worldview. This is evident in the use of animal and bird motifs, which are significant to the divinities and sacred to the Igbo. Some of the animals represented and which also appear frequently in *uli* paintings include the snake, tortoise, alligator, agama lizard, eagle, vulture, crocodile, and cock, among others.

Occasionally, these animals are drawn standing alone but generally they form an intricate hieratic composition.

There are also basic geometric shapes, which appear in several variations used as both decorative and symbolic motifs. These range from the archetypal shapes – the dot, curvilinear line, triangle, rectangle, double triangle, circle, crescent, and to their extensions in the concentric coil derived from snake coils. There are also motifs based on royal paraphernalia such as crowns, beads, ivory tusks, swords, umbrellas, stools and staffs, which are symbols of authority. Man-made objects and plant life are not left out as numerous motifs are derived from them including *ogene* (gong), *ite mmili* (water pot), *amala* (paddle), *aziza* (broom), *jigida* (beads), *odu nmi* (pestle), *abuba akpu* (cassava leaf), *oke osisi* (big tree), *ukpaka* (oil bean seed) and *akuriko ji* (yam tendrils).

Some of the visual delights of Igbo *uli* wall paintings are their linear imagery and the skillful use of space and texture. The Igbo also use wall murals to display their artistry during festivals and important occasions. These numerous festivals and occasions, most of which are connected with religion, provided an impetus for wall paintings which serve both religious and aesthetic purposes. For instance, paintings, particularly the ones on shrine walls, serve as a link between the living and the dead and as a medium through which people interact with their ancestors. These decorations also remind the Igbo of all the stories associated with a deity or deities.

While the murals on shrine walls are executed during a festival period in honour of the deity housed in the shrine, murals on the walls of private buildings are done mostly when any member of such a private building is taking a title. *Uli* motifs employed in decorating the walls of such a private building will be associated with the title that necessitated wall decoration. For example, taking title both for men and women such as *ozo* title as well as *Iru Mgbede* will require the wall of the recipients to be decorated. In fact, Igbo women, especially those being honoured with other titles such as *Lolo* and *Oso di eme* among others that celebrate remarkable feats would decorate their compound walls during such events. As Igboanugo (1972:18) reveals, in Oraifite community in Anambra state, any woman who is able to slaughter a cow for the *Ikwu Aru* festival in honour of the god called *Edo* is entitled to decorate the facade of her husband's compound wall or her own if she is not married. The overall style of wall painting reveals much about Igbo aesthetic taste and vision of life. However, some variations in cultural practices and styles of art and architecture exist among the Igbo subgroups. While certain motifs, patterns, and wall painting techniques are to be seen throughout Igboland, individual towns and village groups have developed their own recognisable styles. The mural paintings accompanying this study were done on the



wall of community meeting-house in Nsugbe and *Alusi Iyiazi* shrine wall in Agbadana Nri in Anambra state southeastern Nigeria. .

### **Mural on the Wall of a Meeting-house in Nsugbe Community**

This is one of the many complex *uli* wall paintings because the numerous motifs used by the artists are not coherent. The painting contains non-representational motifs of several kinds. Patterns are distributed over the entire wall surface, which is not divided into panels. The attractiveness of the painting is in the lively and playful distribution of design motifs and symbols, which are defined with black lines. Some of the motifs employed in this mural include *agwo* (snake), *uli obo obo* (bold, large *uli*), *uli aka* (ivory bracelet), *uli nko* (zig-zag), *uli anya efi* (cow eyes), *uli agwolagwo or akuraku* (spiral or concentric circle), *uli akpa* (darning or net-like pattern), *uli amadioha* (thunder), *uli efuru* (flower), and *uli nko* (a metal fork) among others. The background of this mural is bright, monochrome yellow. (Fig. 11)

### **Mural on Alusi Iyiazi Shrine wall in Agbadana Nri Community**

This is an elaborate painting made on the shrine walls of *Alusi Iyiazi* (*Iyiazi* shrine) in Agbadana Nri. Its big size suggests that a lot of local women must have participated in its execution. This mural was painted having first been divided vertically into panels of varying widths before the motifs were applied. The wall mural exhibits a colourful spectacle, typical of Igbo *uli* wall murals. The artists in this painting combined abstract geometric shapes with figurative images. The central images in this wall painting represent a male and a pregnant female alligator. The male alligator on the left is about to catch a fish. At the extreme left is a man in a canoe, so small in scale that he seems to be lost in the picture. The motif is called *ogbuotogbonakwuugbo* (killer of hippopotamus paddling a canoe). Above him are motifs such as *ugbuabacha* (tray for spreading out cassava flasks) and *akpata* (stand for the cassava tray). Other motifs identified on the extreme left panels are *myo* (sieve), *ukpa* (long oblong basket), *ndudu* (for picking things from the cooking pot), *akupe akpukpo* (leather fan) and *uli akpaoru* (*uli* drawn /applied to the buttocks or back side).

The other panels on the left section, that follow the panel which contains the alligators exhibit motifs which include *ije agwo* (snake's movement), *anyanwu* (sun), *uli nchighali or apialapianchighali* (turn over) and *onwa* (moon). The rest of the panels in the right section show motifs derived from plant life, household objects and non-representational objects. Some of these motifs are meant to emphasise the human figure or certain parts of the body, while others are purely decorative. Hence, some of the motifs do not reflect the meaning of the main images, but they do increase the total aesthetic of the mural. These motifs that do not reflect the meaning of the main images exemplify Udechukwu's (1971:94) view that ignorance of the symbolic significance or

meaning of some motifs employed by traditional artists does not impair one's enjoyment of the paintings.

Four basic colours are evenly distributed over the entire picture plane, namely red, yellow, white and black. One of the characteristics of this painting is the use of *ntupo* (dots) as texture on all the motifs. The artists also show in this painting some motifs derived from different types of cloth. Such cloths are *akwarekereke* (maiden's cloth), *ikpachi* (thick cloth), *akwa ndi bia ndibia* (all-comers garment) *ogodo agbogho* (thick woven cloth) and *akwa iyaji* (adire cloth). These are represented in square and rectangular forms and are also textured with dots. An examination of the entire painting shows that it was largely a communal effort, that is, it is not painted by one artist (Fig.12).

### Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that *uli* motifs and symbols that adorn the human body and both shrine and compound walls fulfill certain purposes. They include traditional religious practices and rituals, love for aesthetics and medicinal purposes. In *uli* art, the attribute that inspired traditional religious practices are the same that convey a sense of aesthetics. Both the gods and humans being who reverence them enjoy aesthetic dimensions of their body and the environment. Today, *uli* art motif and symbols are not only inherent in traditional setting but has made an impact into the shifting sound of art practice in new media and new forms fosters by contemporary exponents of *uli* art in modern Nigerian art.

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**Plate 1**  
Children adorned with uli designs

Location: Awka  
Date: 1982  
Photo credit: Chike Aniakor



**Plate 2**  
An adult decorated with uli designs

Location: Umuagana  
Date: 1983  
Photo credit: Elizabeth Willis



**Plate 3**  
Fruit of uli oba

Location: Nimo  
Date: 2013  
Photo credit: Samuel Onwuakpa



**Plate 4**  
Fruit of uli nkilisi

Location: Nimo  
Date: 2013  
Photo credit: Samuel Onwuakpa



**Plate 5**  
Fruit of uli ede-eji

Location: Nimo  
Date: 2013  
Photo credit: Samuel Onwuakpa



**Plate 6**  
Fruit of uli okorobiam

Location: Nimo  
Date: 2013  
Photo credit: Samuel Onwuakpa



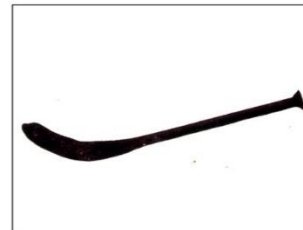
**Plate 7**  
Okwa uli (Uli dye container)

Location: Ukpo  
Date: 2013  
Photo credit: Samuel Onwuakpa



**Plate 8**  
Mkpisi uli used for body decoration

Location: Umu Okpu  
Date: 1985  
Photo credit: Elizabeth Willis



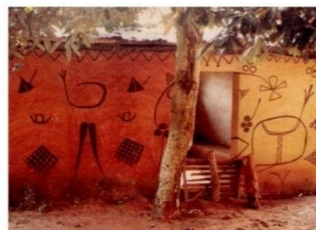
**Plate 9**  
Mma-nwuli

Location: Nimo  
Date: 2013  
Photo credit: Samuel Onwuakpa



**Plate 10**  
A little girl decorated with uli akala (line) motif which signifies long life

Location: Ukpo  
Date: 2014  
Photo credit: Samuel Onwuakpa



**Plate 11**  
Uli mural on the wall of a central meeting house

Location: Nsugbe  
Date: 1983  
Photo credit: Simon Ottenberg



**Plate 12**  
Mural on a shrine wall

Location: Nri  
Date: 1999  
Photo credit: Chike Aniakor