

THE MAKING OF MEANING IN NSIBIDI VISUAL METHOD OF COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA: INNOVATION AND DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract: This paper looks into the need to give the Nsibidi art Culture of Eastern Nigeria an artistic visual design identity based on their traditional and modern visual communication design approach. There is the need therefore to differentiate between traditional and modern visual communication design experience. The exploratory design analysis which is used is based on the concepts ideas and materials for the old and new methods of the Nsibidi culture. It has been analyzed and synthesized into more dynamic indigenous system of visual communication in Nigeria that will enhance the general development of the society. The analyses of signs, symbols, posters and other art works were carried out based on their artistic, aesthetic and functional design mainly as it concern the Nsibidi visual method of communication design in modern time. The research made an attempt to harmonize the traditional and the modern method with a view to developing a new visual communication method based on their culture and technology in recent time. The Nsibidi had a definite operation way of communication. The culture just like their close neighbor could also reduce these sign and symbols into simple code for confidentiality, security, affection and economic transitions among themselves.

Key Words: Indigenous, motifs and symbols in design and communication

Introduction

Communities, societies and others, the world over, have modes and means of communicating ideas, feelings and messages to each other. The Igbo's who employ different means are not an exception. Traditionally, Igbo and other societies in south eastern Nigeria employed

different modes of communication in reaching out and doing business with each other.

Nsibidi method as one of the ways is an ancient system of communication which is indigenous to the people of southeastern Nigerian. It is also used by neighboring Ibibio, Efike and Igbo communities in Nigeria. Aesthetically compelling and encoded, Nsibidi does not in any where correspond to any one spoken language of the world. It is an ideographic script whose symbolism refers to the abstract concepts actions or things and those use to facilitate communication among the peoples speaking different languages of that area.

The intra and inter-ethnic nationality of visual communication methods assisted communities in the Eastern Nigerian to improve and advance their present level of general development. Visual communication is a study through visual aids and is described as the conveyance of ideas and information in form that can be read or looked up. Visual communication in part or whole relies on vision and is primarily presented or expressed with two or three dimensional images, it includes sign, typography, drawing, graphics design, illustration, color and electronic references. It also explores the idea that a visual message accompanying text has greater power to inform, educate, or persuade a person or audience.

One of man's valuable tendencies, which is common to all communities and nationalities irrespective of place and time, has as one of its objectives the achievement of specific developmental goals. This success and continuity of such gregariousness and subsequent developmental achievements in turn depends largely and often wholly on the methods and levels of communication, for any form of interaction aimed. Thus communication is the inevitable binding force for any formed of interactions aimed at development'.

The early artist did not in all cases consciously start what we refer to today as artistic visual communication. Rather, some of them gave meaning to and adapted images and symbols as artistic. They later on built their visual abilities and functionalities on and around such interpretation and adaptations. Some of the comprehensive and figurative representation of their experience was pictures simplified into signs. Sketches and designs have been turned into sophisticated pieces. By imagination, meaning have been read into clouds in the sky which are seen as forming objects like human beings, galloping horses and so

on. The same can be said of spilling liquids on the flour, many of the shapes and forms can be attached some meaning. The Jews used specific dressing as very significant visual communication of virgins (Nelson, 1990. p. 287.

Communication must have a source and target. Parson (1978.36) elaborates on the essential term involved in communication. According to him, the person who initiate and send messages is referred to as the 'transmitter', the subject matter being communicated as the 'message', the route of communication as the ' form of communication', and whosoever the message is directed as the 'receiver' or audience.

All over the world, from the pre-historic to the present time, visual communication has passed through various stages. This has consequently affected human development. In the context of this paper therefore, there is the need to differentiate between traditional and modern visual communication design. Urdang (1991 pp 276, 511) defines 'tradition' merely as custom, practice or habit. On the other hand he refers to 'modern' as current, contemporary, present day or latest. The traditional visual communication in Nigerian context is considered as the type of communication that was devoid of western influence while the ' modern' is that what has been influenced by the western world.

Communication is a way of passing a message from one person to another. Hornsby (1995 p. 229) says communication is to make something known; to exchange information, news or ideas with somebody; to make one's idea or feels clear to others. Thus information exchange ability and clarity of same are dependent on communication technique employed.

Innovation in Indigenous Visual Communication

The innovation of new things, idea, or ways of doing something is one way of changing and developing the environment and the society. Artist (Uli and Nsibidi) have introduced new ways of representing their works in contemporary era. Innovation and creativity have increasingly come to be seen as African's response to their condition or, to put it differently, as the expression of local agency in Africa.

Communication in any setting is an important aspect of human activity. Most means of human communication are carried out by means of putting a line around something or by drawing a sign or symbol in order to name it and further enumerate its characteristics

Nsibidi comprises nearly a thousand symbols that can be drawn in different media as gestures, on the ground, skin (as tattoos), on houses, and on art forms, such as mask, and textiles. Though it is enjoyed as an artistic practice by the general public, deeper knowledge of the Nsibidi symbols is restricted to the member of men's association of a certain society in a community, which once controlled trade and maintained social and political order of the society. Nsibidi is used on wall designs, calabashes, metals, leaves, swords, and tattoos. It is important to state that it is primarily used by the Ekpe leopard secret society, which is mostly found across Cross River among the Ekoi, Efik, Igbo people, and other nearby communities.

The symbols are at least several centuries old: Early forms appeared on excavated pottery as well as what are most likely ceramic stools and headrests from the Calabar region, with a range of dates from 400 to 1400 CE. There are thousands of Nsibidi symbols, of which over 500 have been recorded. They were once taught in a school to children. Many of the signs deal with love affairs; those that deal with warfare and the sacred are kept secret. Nsibidi was divided into a sacred version and public, more decorative versions are used by women.

Traditionally as it concerns the original owner of the tradition that is before the British colonization of the area Nsibidi was divided into a sacred version and a public, more decorative version which could be used by women. The Ikpe from Enyong written in nsibidi as recorded by J. K. Macgregor Nsibidi was used in judgment cases known as 'Ikpe' in some Cross River communities.

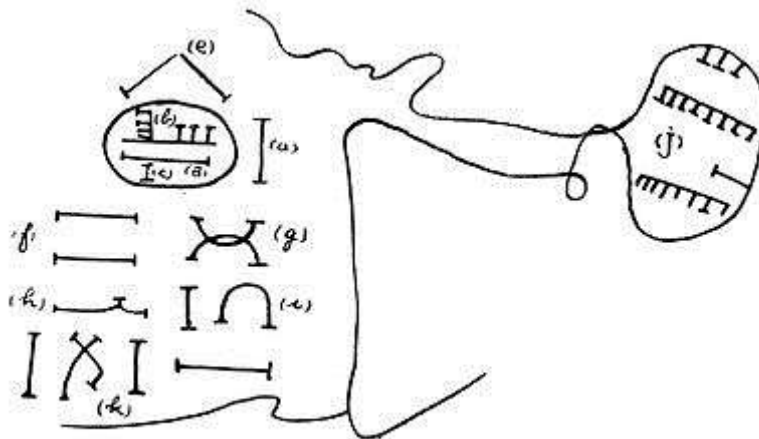
In case of any dispute between communities, people or individuals or as the case may be the record is of an Ikpe or judgment case. Artistically the illustration can be demonstrated with the visual below

Court

- (a) The court was normally held under a tree as is the custom,
- (b) The parties in the case,
- (c) The chief who judged it,
- (d) His staff (these are enclosed in a circle),

- (e) Is a man whispering into the ear of another just outside the circle of those concerned?
- (f) Denotes all the members of the party who won the case. Two of them
- (g) Are embracing,
- (h) Is a man who holds a cloth between his finger and thumbs as a sign of contempt? He does not care for the words spoken. The lines round and twisting mean that the case was a difficult one which the people of the town could not judge for themselves. So they sent to the surrounding towns to call the wise men from them and the case was tried by them
- (j) And decided;
- (k) Denotes that the case was one of adultery or No. 20.

Figure 1 Nsibidi Symbols in Design



Visual communication design in deed is an essential part of our daily living. Design skills acquired in visual communication are used to persuade and communicate specific information and messages that can inspire thoughts using symbols, signs, words and images informing good design for effective problem solving through practical application. The use of signs, symbols and motifs in communication is described as conveyance of ideas and information in form that can be read or looked

upon. It is in part or whole relies on vision and primarily presented or expressed in two or three dimensional images and texts. The term "visual" presentation in graphics communication is used to refer to the actual presentation of information to the public through a visual medium such as text, images, symbols, and a combination of other graphics elements via any of the following graphic media: posters, billboards, labels, flyers, calendars, package postage stamps and a lot others. Graphics designers predominantly use this method of visual communication in their professional practice,

Nsibidi was first documented in the Western world by T. D. Maxwell, district commissioner of Calaber, Nigeria. In 1904, he discovered that Nsibidi signs were used as decorative symbols on calabashes and native pianos during exhibition of native goods. No historical evidence available that can help date the creation or evolution of Nsibidi as a cultural concept but few writers on Nsibidi insists that it is of considerable age as it possesses a certain amount of conventionality about its sign language. It is understood from available literature that it evolved from traditional visual communication as a sign and body language. It can be seen as a logographic system of communication that is popular with the south eastern people, particularly Cross-River region of Nigeria.

Nsibidi is referred to by Macgregor (1909:209) as "the native name for writing, used in the Calabar district of the eastern province of southern Nigeria, more largely up the cross river and the inland". Macgregor then a Presbyterian missionary posted to teach at Hope Waddel Training Institute, Calabar. Kalu (1978:77) describes Nsibidi as an ancient script, that existed before the coming of the Europeans. Kalu (1978:84), Umoetuk (1985:40) and Ubom (1987:75) agreed that Nsibidi was an ancient pictographic writing used within and around South Eastern State before the coming of the colonial masters. They stated that Nsibidi was not restricted to secret societies but that it was secularized to meet the economic and social needs of the people. Ubom further stated that it was used for identification of label, public notices, private warning, declaration of taboos, amorous messages, reckoning goods and money, keeping records and body decoration. Most Nsibidi symbols are also used for their body adornment as enumerated by Umoetuk (1985:40-49).

Isichei (1983) states that Nsibidi writing forms worked on the same principle as the Chinese Writing. He further states that these writing were in the form of tattoos on human body, paintings or incision on calabashes, stems, house walls and drawings on the ground. Nsibidi signs or objects serve economic, political, cultural and social functions; it is used within secular and sacred system in sending public notice, public warning, and recording of goods and money as well as for decoration. Nsibidi transmits and conceals various kinds of information using a wide fluid vocabulary of geometric and naturalistic signs placed on objects.

Nsibidi as a symbol is important to visual communication design because it has been described as a fluid system of communication that has hundred of pictographic signs. In the traditional era, it was used for messages, cut or painted on split palm stems, it is a kind of primitive secret writing, chiefly carried out by means of poke work on calabashes, canoes, stools and so on, but occasionally by marking on the body and face (Talbot 1912:308, 1969:932).

This traditional motif known as Nsibidi is generally associated or originated from the Ekoi people of the Southern Nigeria. It is primarily used or employed by the Ekpe Secret Society of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Nsibidi is a means of transmitting or communicating in secret terms the Ekpe symbolism. It is a form of drawing or design used or found on walls, calabashes, metal, leaves, swords and as tattoos. Nsibidi as a visual communication design concepts is used for recording decision, facts, thoughts and communicating messages. The type of messages varies but the most frequent are short messages and letters sent at a distance. These motifs are still in use by contemporary artists in their work and linking it with visual communication.

Visual communication has been in existence from the older generation (the time of our fore fathers) through the use of traditional motifs, symbols, patterns, which are art forms and also part of our cultural heritage. Some of these traditional Nigerian motifs includes: Uli design of the Igbo culture Nigeria, Nsibidi design of the Southern Nigeria, Islamic motifs of the Northern Nigeria to mention but a few.

THE ARTIST (Victor Ekpuk) AND HIS WORKS

The artist and his works who have engaged in the new innovation of re-creating indigenous art forms, Nsibidi and Uli concepts of representation is here presented and discussed

Victor Ekpuk attended the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, with a BA degree in Fine and Applied Arts (specializing in Painting), during his years in the University, he was an active member of Ona group of Artist. This group encouraged the use of traditional or indigenous motif such as Uli, Nsibidi and others in creating contemporary art works. Victor has for long been producing and exhibiting art works, especially with Uli and Nsibidi motifs.

Victor was born into a culture where Nsibidi is an open secret. Nsibidi ceremony is usually performed among members of Ekpe and Ekpo secret societies. During ceremonial rites of passage, some Nsibidi signs were painted as decorations on the bodies of maidens. Nsibidi is an ancient form of sacred communication among the male secret societies of the Ibibio, Efik, Ejagham and Igbo (Ohafia) peoples of southeastern Nigeria. It uses mime, speech, and placement of objects and graphic symbols that represent concepts. Being secret codes of communication, their meanings were revealed only to initiates. Some aspects of these signs are secularized and used for public notices and record keeping. The graphic aspect of Nsibidi thus becomes one of Africa's indigenous writing systems.

Victor Ekpuk derives his artistic creative inspiration from different sources (Uli art, Nsibidi and others) are Nigerian indigenous communicative visual ideas. In his renderings mainly on black and white background as a narrative to his art, employs many medium from sand to black and color marker to creatively express both traditional and contemporary human experiences, which are so evident in almost all his works. According to Ekpuk's, his limited knowledge of Nsibidi signs today is from memory of observations and documented anthropological archives. He further stated that what immensely inspired the direction of his work has taken the past two decades as a professional visual artist and his contact with Nsibidi has inspired the essence of ancient art form to express contemporary experience.

He now resides in the U.S.A. Victor, as among the exponent of this new innovation into indigenous traditional art form, began an

exploration of Nsibidi traditional visual communication and writing system in Nigeria from which he has developed a style of drawing and graphics means of communication.

Critical looking at his works, forms are reduced to their linear essence, depicting the interplay between art and writing in the form of drawing. His works showcases a wide spectrum of meaning that is deeply rooted not only in African culture but in global contemporary art discourse.

Some of his works are here presented and discussed

Plate 1: “Kiss and Tell” shows two figures presented in abstract form, these figures seems to be having fun by kissing each other. According to the artist as interviewed by Egwu 2013 the title came about as a reference to “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell which use to be the official position of gays and lesbians in the United States military.

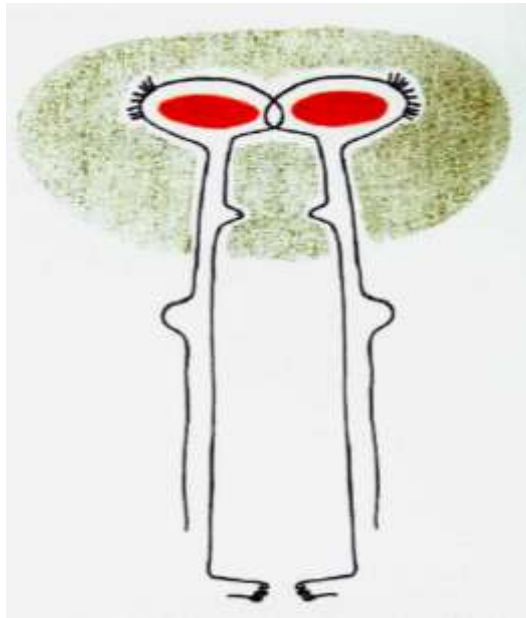


Plate 1: Kiss and Tell.

There are red oval shapes seen in the heads of the figures. The background of the work has tiny Nsibidi designs which form an oval

shape and the upper parts of the figures are inside the oval shaped design. Another work plate 2 titled “Fiestpad Blues” by Victor used bright colors. He used orange, blue, and green in addition to black to harmonies the design. Lines are used to create designs in different ways; an eye can be seen and under it are blue dots. Three figures presented abstractly can also be seen, the one in the middle appears to be the mother and other two her children, one in her front and the other at her back on a bicycle. According to the artist as interviewed by Egwu 2013, the artist noted that the work was inspired by his memory of the Netherlands properly when visited the country. He further stated that the bicycle is very central to everyday life of the Dutch people.

Victor in this work made use of lines in “ Night Watch” plate 3 to form animals, one of the animals has half its body with dots around it like that of leopard, another seems to have ornaments on it, there are about four houses, two with doors and the other with none. The background of the work has small dots all around forming a circle. A moon can also be seen up the pictures treated in blue with candle like object around it. The artist made use of lines and shapes of different wave length in his rendering.



Plate 2: Fiestpad



Plate3: Night Watch (54" x 45")



Plate 4: Scape Goat

Plate 4 titled “Scape Goat”; here symbols are clearly used to form a square with an opening in it that has the picture of two figures carrying an animal probably as suggested by the title of the work. The animal is being carried on a stick with the figures holding each end of the stick. In other parts of the work, there are figures of animal that seems to be running, and also pictures of what appears to be a hunter chasing or hunting the animal. The titled of the work expresses the human condition.

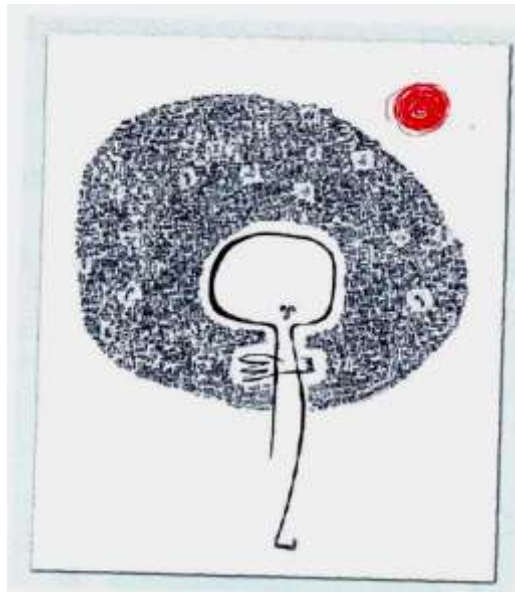


Plate 5: Child in the Wilderness

Plate 5 is titled “Child in the Wilderness”, here the artist made use of lines ranging from bold lines to tiny lines, the child is presented in an abstract manner and these tiny lines forms a circle around the head, the hands of the child have the look of wings and it has one feet. Also it appears to have very features on its face such as the eyes and nose, it does not seem to have a mouth. There is also a red spiral circle at the top. According to the artist as interviewed by Egwu (2013) the artist was considering a state of loneliness in a world of chaos. The figure in the middle is a stylized form of Akwaba doll from Ghana; he explores the aesthetics of classical African sculpture in this work.



Plate 6 UYAN IBAN

Plate 7 is titled “Uyan Iban” shows an abstract figure with a foot, a very large head that has what looks like the brain treated in white and red dots, with black underneath. It also has an outer circular layer around it. The figure has tiny streaks of hair, about four stranding out on its head; while the other parts went down in such a way that one can say is a female figure. This work is one of his recent rendering or drawings; here he tries to explore the female aesthetics in the hair style of the Ibibio Culture of South Eastern Nigeria. “Uyan Iban” means Beautiful Maiden



Plate 7: Bird Call

Plate 7 is titled “Bird Call”, the artist made use of lines to create different forms, abstract faces, figures, shapes when looked at closely. The lines and forms depict an aspect of Igbo and Ibibio Culture of Nigeria. The bird is done with red color and blue and white dots on its body. The bird has a very long leg, with its claw. The background of the work has a mixture of white and yellow patches; there are also blue patches that can be seen at a closer observation.

ANALYSIS OF VICTOR EKPUK’S WORKS

The aesthetics philosophy of Nsibidi rendering where that ideas and forms are reduced to their essence, forms the basis of victor Ekpuk’s works. Sometimes there are specific uses of Nsibidi signs in his compositions, if the subject matter demands it at other times, he uses symbols. There times when symbols are not used at all. The general idea of his work is not so it could be read literally, grasping the essence of the work is equally important. The artist believes that his styles of art work

have aroused conversation about literacy, writing and other modes of communication in Africa. Victor in his innovative thinking and exploration believes that his works has added to the conversation that challenges Eurocentric notion of Africa as an illiterate culture

Some of his works are meant to explore aesthetic pleasure of the composition rather than meaning. “Kiss and Tells” (Plate 1). In this presentation the artist depicts an experience of two women lovers kissing on the street of The Netherlands. The artist asserts that the title came about as reference to “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell “it used to be the united official position of guys and lesbians in the United State Military. Plate 2 “Fiestpad blues” was inspired by victor’s memory of the Netherlands. The bicycle was central to everyday life of Dutch people. The figure in the center is a woman and her two children on a bicycle.

Plate 3 titled “Night watch” expressed a typical night life where lines were employed to form animals. A moon is depicted shining and watching over them in a cluster can also be seen up the pictures treated in blue with candle like object around it. In this work one can see combination with different techniques and media that indicates an experiment with different materials. The contemporary mood is seen in the Night Watch and it is the relative simplicity of this particular works that seems modern and I think is influenced by modernist art forms and shapes. It is visible clear that the animal forms in this work “Night Watch” the artist was inspired by terracotta equestrian figurines of the Niger region in Mali. It is important to observe that the artist works are highly stylized and relatively simplified in terms of forms and functions which make his works wear a contemporary look.

Plate 4 titled “Escape Goat” expresses the situation or shows the pictures depict a statement about the human condition. Plate 5 titled “Child in the wilderness” the work depicts loneliness a a world full of chaos. The figure represent the middle of the work is probably a stylized form of Akwaba doll from Ghana, here he try to explore the aesthetics of classical African sculpture. On a closer observation one can see the amalgam of symbols, and can recognize signs that could further explain the representation “Uyan Iban” plate 6 is one of victor’s recent drawings where he explores the female aesthetics in Ibibio culture, “Uyan Iban” means Beautiful Maiden, the focus here is on the hair style.

Plate 7 titled Bird call, here the idea and forms of Nsibidi aesthetic philosophy in his lyrical presentation of lines and various images within a certain environment.

FINDINGS

The finding of this paper indicates that visual communication design is an essential part of our daily living. Design skills acquired in visual communication are used to persuade and communicate specific information and messages that can inspire thoughts using symbols, signs, words and images informing good design for effective problem solving through practical application. Graphics designers predominantly use this method of visual communication in their professional practice, Nsibidi transmits and conceals various kinds of information using a wide fluid vocabulary of geometric and naturalistic signs placed on objects.

Nsibidi as a symbol is important to visual communication design because it has been described as a fluid system of communication that has hundreds of pictographic signs. Artists in general in recent times have engaged in the new innovation of re-creating indigenous art forms, especially using Nsibidi and Uli concepts of representation in the eastern part of Nigeria.

Conclusion

The ideas or ways of doing something new is one way of changing and developing our environment. Uli and Nsibidi artists have introduced new ways of representing their works in the contemporary era. Africans have embraced creativity and innovation as a way forward towards the expression of our artistic ingenuity to the whole world. Creativity and spontaneity may succeed in limiting uncertainty leading to more stable living conditions in Africa. Changes brought by creativity and spontaneity can be subsumed under the more general framework of a quest for order which can be assumed to lie at the heart of any kind of socialization. The symbols, signs and motifs used by Nsibidi and Uli artists are forms of visual presentation and communication which in deed form part of our daily living. In the traditional setting these signs, symbols and motifs were used by our past generations to communicate messages, ideas and information in a form that can be read or looked upon for aesthetics and other purposes. The term "visual" presentation in graphics communication is used to refer to the actual

presentation of information to the public through a visual medium such as text, images, symbols, and a combination of other graphics elements via a particular media of presentation.

A lot of modern Nigerian artist have being using this indigenous images in this contemporary period for aesthetics, functional and other purposes. Among this artist are Uche Okeke, Aniakor, Obiora Ude Uchukwu, El Anatsui, Tayo Adenaike, Godwin O. Uka, Kyris Ikuemmessi, Chijioke Onoura, Ekene to mention a few and Victor Ekuk whose works have been used for this analysis. Victor's technical proficiency in drawing, design, composition and surface manipulation are basic tools that convey his visual imagery that captures and sustain the attention of viewers. This paper have tried to analysis and expose indigenous symbols, images, signs and their role in visual communication using victors works as case study.

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