

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF IGALA CULTURE: THE AESTHETICS OF *INA OLE*  
(BODY DECORATION) AMONGST THE IGALA PEOPLE AS A FORM OF ART**

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**Abstract**

*Body art or decoration is the ornamentation or reshaping of the human body, usually for aesthetics, status or identification purposes. Most forms of body art, including piercing (for the purpose of wearing jewelries or other ornaments), tattooing, branding, and scarification are either permanent or irreversible; meanwhile, others, such as painting or dyeing are temporary or reversible. This act of piercing or making incision on the human body has long been associated with mankind, and has been universally recognized as an integral part of the fabric of human art and existence. Initially, it was for identity and stigmatization but later it metamorphosised into other modes of expressions such as for aesthetics and self-expression in art and fashion. The exact date as to when this form of art began cannot be ascertained. However, it has taken root in different societies and culture and has equally evolved in various shapes and dimensions. Today, one can visibly see elaborate coloured decorations and other intricate designs on human body around the world irrespective of race, colour and creed. The study of this form of art has become a phenomenon worthy of scholarly attention. This paper therefore, will be an assessment of how the culture has been sustained through this form of art amongst the Igala people of the eastern part of Kogi State in Nigeria, the methodology of this work is survey method and descriptive analysis and the focus is to identify the various forms of piercing or making incision on the human body.*

**Introduction**

Pre-historic studies amongst various civilizations have indicated pristine interest in one form of art or the other. Hence, one could talk about cave writings, paintings of the Egyptians and other forms of art such as drawing on animal skins, scribbles and even doodles on earthenware of ancient man. All these attest to the fact that the natural instinct, and inclination of humans towards the visual aesthetics, is an inherent congenital trait.

However, humans would talk about how visually appealing and uncoordinated calligraphy on mud architectural structure can become momentarily pleasing to the human sensibility. Little wonder that such relics have had a worthwhile ingredients of both artistic as well as aesthetics means of visual aggrandizement for most appreciators of art pieces. Again, such appealing sublime visual inscriptions have equally caught the interest of scholars in the field of arts and aesthetics. To this end, a deeper probe of such anonymous and sometimes accidental creativity has equally pioneered great critical appraisals today in the art discipline.

The medium of expression in arts, in most cases remains extraneous of the human anatomy; meaning that man creates his own artificial ‘‘canvas’’ or from natural structures such as stones, linen, animal skin that he got from hunting e.t.c. But one amongst many of such mediums for artistic expression;

which in itself is profoundly unique is the act of using his own body as a platform to create art. Redmond (2008) defines body art as “decoration, ornamentation, or reshaping of the human body, usually for aesthetics, status, or identity. Most form of body art, including piercing (for the purpose of wearing jewelries or other ornaments) tattooing, branding, and scarification are permanent. Others such as painting or dyeing are temporal. It will therefore interest us to know that what is today a very common form of popular culture, which is body tattooing, takes its origin from artiste expression of pre-historic man in the form of body decoration; the Igala people in this regard are no exception”.

### **The Concept of Aesthetics in Visual Art**

Much as the notion of aesthetics chiefly connotes outward beauty and appeal, a deeper understanding of the concept in the Visual Arts underscores a philosophical depth. It implies, in the overall sense a composite and aggregated tendency toward individual and a holistic perception of art; both in abstract conjecture and concrete terms as a cultural text material; as such antiquities and live experience, whether in oral recordings or concrete artifact, it can be transposed and be subjected to appraisal and analysis. Hugh. (2010) posited that “in every human society, arts form part of a complex structure of belief and ritual, moral and social codes, magic and science, myth or history etc. It stands midway between scientific knowledge and magical or mythical thoughts, between what is perceived and what is believed, and also between human capability and human aspirations. This therefore, implies that the appeal of a great work of art is never purely visual, i.e. simply to delight the eyes. Many authors and scholars have defined aesthetics in many ways, Honby. (2015) sees aesthetics as concerned with beauty and art and the understanding of beautiful things while Ashinze (1998) defines aesthetics as “the study of values in the realm of beauty”. To this extent, aesthetics in arts involves a deeper comprehension of what pleases and gives impetus to the concept of art as that which might give pleasure and end use of design. Be that as it may, our preoccupation in this regard is the visual aesthetics in Igala body decoration *ina oḷe* amongst the Igala people. One might ask what is beautiful in this form of body decoration. Thus expressing a desire for a deeper understanding of the beauty therein. This is just like saying what is beautiful in a child’s scribble or doodle? This paper shall seek to appreciate *ina oḷe* within the context of visual art using the various motifs as well as probing into its evolution over time as well as the aesthetics value of the content of *ina oḷe* in its various shades and forms among the Igala people.

### **Body Decoration amongst the Igala People**

According to Ekpo, (1990) “the Igalas are found in extreme east of what is now Kogi State (formerly Kwara). The River Benue and Niger form their northern and western boundaries and they share their eastern border with the Idoma and southern with the Onitsha Igbo. The northern part of Igala country is occupied by the Nupe-speaking Bassa-Nge and the Bassa-Komo. South of Idah live the Ibaji, a mixed Igbo and Igala people.

The Igala are related linguistically to the Yoruba. Their principal town is Idah and their chief is called the Ata”. The Igala people are largely agrarian and they have various legends and myths connected to their origin, most of which are embellished histrionics. Fidelis, (2013) states that “in Igala tradition, infants from some parts of the kingdom, like Ankpa receive three deep horizontal cuts on each side of the face slightly above the corner of their mouths, as a way of identifying each other. However, this practice is becoming less common”. As a matter of fact, the tradition of tattooing and scarification is deeply rooted that in contemporary Igala communities, women and men still give

body markings for several reasons. The body in this sense becomes an immediate object of expression and inscription. There is the reversible and the irreversible.

Beyond this, is an act of artistic creation in cultural state which does not draw boundaries between the ritual, the magic, the erotic and indeed the aesthetics. Colin, (2001) posited that "from the western point of view primitive body art is easily seen as anti-aesthetic deformation". Why? Culturally, this could simply be interpreted as due to differences between aesthetic codes. According to Bernard, (1967) 'primitivism is not so much a product of date; it is a state of mind and development stemming from geographical, social, religious, and other circumstances'. Methodically, piercing and incision which sometimes are akin to body mutilation as perceived by some cultures has two fundamental purposes. One, for aesthetics as well as identity, and secondly, for medical or spiritual purposes; in which case it is for therapeutic purpose of healing. In the former, the *ina oļe* tattoo enhances the beauty of the body; a captivating body designs which becomes attractive to onlookers. While in the later, it could be for curative purposes or for spiritual cleansing. However, the practice, as the case may be leaves marking on the outer skin; and a temporal or lasting incision that can sometimes become an artistic impression.



Igala women and children with facial marks.

**Source:** Boston (1968), *The Igala Kingdom*, Ibadan: Oxford University Press.

Anthropological documentation by John Boston as seen from some photographic representation of the Igala people clearly shows the prevalence of tattoos and other body markings. Also worthy of note is the fact that these body decorations or markings come in different shapes, sizes and on different parts of the body; some appear on the face e.g., tribal marks, on the chest, (in the case of men), while for the most part, women pierce or decorate their wrist or arm to showcase the beauty therein. To this end, body decoration was a significant form of creative exercise in visual art amongst them. This paper therefore in isolating this form of art as a profoundly unique exercise, highlights the scholarly dimension of this ingenious art form with a view to unravel its salient qualities.

### **Transposition and Adaptation of *Ina Ọlẹ* (Body Decoration) as a Form of Visual Art**

Within the cultural environment, adaptation is a strategic part of creative exercise which allows creative persons to tap into various traditional roots for the purpose of creativity. Hence, one can talk of using such materials to create artistic forms. For instance, in performative art, it could be in the form of songs, chants, and dances. By the same token, modern visual art such as drawing, painting and graphic works can equally outsource cultural craft as source of inspiration. This kind of cultural transposition has been explored in various forms for art. Krydz, (2003) states that “Uli is also identifiable with the Ichi facial scarification. This is found among titled men and very few old women in the Igbo traditional society. It is remarkable to note that Uche Okeke dwelled basically on drawing and painting on human body and other indigenous patterns derived from ancient traditional art for self-expression, the exploration of this indigenous motifs and research into the ethnic artistic idioms of the people spread extensively into many part of Southern Nigeria today”.

The phenomenon of “Africanity” is tailored to redirect art scholars today especially in Nigeria to situate their artistic prowess within the context of their local environment to enable them capture the essence of self expression “sincerity and originality”. In doing this, fictions and facts must be intermarried to forge a dynamic style which would be embraced universally. Nigerian contemporary artists such as Bruce Onobrakpeya’s “*Ahwaire and Enemu*”, Jimo Buraimo’s “*Obatala and the Devil*”, Mufu Onifade’s “*Ajoji*” and many others have utilized such indigenous motifs to create tremendous masterpieces. To this end, *ina ọlẹ* body decoration in most cases does not take any clear and tangible form but rather becomes a spontaneous creative endeavour. The Igala people often indulge in designs that are in tandem with their socio-cultural realities. Hence, there are instances where young people, out of exuberance desire scribble their names in patterns on their body, while others draw symbols such as combs, rings, alphabets and such symbolisms as they might deem fit in consonance with what catches their fancy. Little wonder, creativity is rather instinctive and becomes a reflection of their socio-cultural reality. For the average artist, these raw materials are readily available, more so, that creative expressions often tend to mirror the society and nature. Hence, this paper assesses how *ina ọlẹ* can be utilized for contemporary art, particularly for drawings and paintings which is the primary trust of this research.

#### ***Ina ọlẹ* (body decoration) in contemporary Igala society: an appraisal**

Today, this form of art has become a common and recurrent factor in Igala community. For the most part, young Igala men and women alike have used body marking, in this case *ina ọlẹ* to accentuate or add to their beauty, especially for ceremonial events and public appearance. They have even gone further to embellish the arts especially during celebration, for example, the muslims use specific body design that sometimes reflect Arabic calligraphy on the body. Others such as traditional acolytes, custodians of deities and worshippers use body markings that reflect mystical aura to give impetus to their priestly, spiritual cum mystical overture. Again, contemporary young men and women of Igala extraction have equally marked their bodies with exceptional terminologies such as inscription of “love” on their arms designed in such a manner as to convey emotion, compassion and sexuality; all in a bid to create some form of artistic connotation of what is beautiful on the surface.

It is interesting how the concept of body marking has become such gratuitous exercise, which has become a form of contemporary art, so much so that it gives attention and meaning to the concept of extraneous beauty amongst the Igala people in pristine and contemporary time.

## Findings

It goes without saying that *ina oḷe* (body decoration) as an artistic practice has always been a part of the Igala cultural heritage and tradition; a design process and activity that has always enthralled the Igala artistic profundity. However, the exact date or periodic assertion as to when the custom began is not known. The findings remain that, Igala sense of arts is replete with different kind of artistic expression, amongst which is *ina oḷe*; a tradition that has sustained up to the modern era. For this reason, it has remained textual motif which remains a recurrent means of self-expression for the Igala artiste, even for the contemporary artist.

Like most artistic tradition, the artist often borrows from their root in crafting the hunch that ignites the muse for their creative works. Hence, fascinated by the originality in traditional forms such as *ina oḷe* which has inspired very profound and notable art pieces across the world and among the Igala artiste in particular, this mode of artistic expression remains a veritable source material in drawings and paintings. So to ignore *ina oḷe* for the Igala artist is self-deprivation of the huge potentials for artistic expression.

## Recommendations

In view of the significance of traditional motif in creative endeavour and the necessity of reviving cultural African heritage and other forms of traditional creativity, it is imperative to encourage and harness available cultural resources within the local parlance in order to promote popular art, especially for the visual artist. To this end, relevant agencies of government such as Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Centre for Museum and Monument and other sister agencies, such as the various research institutes for culture and tourism must as a matter of urgency beam their search light on such cultural motif and tradition like extinct or abrogated traditional festivals and performances, mask carving among the various ethnic group and Traditional Crafts and designs such as *ina oḷe* for modern arts. It is imperative to research into the aesthetic values of *ina oḷe* which has endured for decades and centuries to promote the Igala culture.

This is not to say however, that contemporary artists are not conscious and currently exploring this tradition. This paper has projected futuristically a more robust and deft engagement with such highly proficient tradition that are readily available to be tapped and possibly transposed into a more visionary and socio- culturally relevant art pieces in Nigeria.

Again, the need for better mediums and new opportunities are available in such traditional forms like the *ina oḷe*. It will therefore be expedient to explore *ina oḷe* in the most resourceful manner for a new mode, for a post modern artistic tradition of popular art amongst the Igala people.

## Conclusion

No doubt *ina oḷe* as a traditional art form amongst the Igala remains a major source of artistic inspiration, more so that its evolution continues to recreate and readapt in the most dynamic manner. Thus, even in contemporary times, *ina oḷe* has continued to reflect and influence the evolving socio reality of the Igala people and serves as a source of muse in framing as well as forming the imaginative fecundity. For this reason, a deeper exploration of this traditional form reveals greater and bigger opportunities for contemporary artists and those of the future, especially, artists from the Igala extraction.

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