

## DESCRIPTION OF NUDITY AS ISU-EBONYI FOLK KINESICS ART

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### **Abstract**

*Art creates symbols shared by the folk generator. It adds beauty and pleasure to everyday life. Various art forms are cultural outputs of inconceivable possibilities of a people's imagination. Perhaps, pristine art form involves using human body as a board for artistic expressions by painting, tattooing scarification, piercing ornamentation, reshaping and kinesics. This study used participant observation and focus-group methods to inquire into the symbolism of bodily nude kinesics art. The theoretical berth is symbolic interactionism. The ethnographic data were collected by focus-group discussion from Isu-Ebonyi folk community in Ebony South of South-Eastern Nigeria. Conclusions obtained however, do apply to other Igbo communities. Kinesics messages of nude bodily motions are not invitation to sexual activity or eroticism among the studied folks but delectable naturalism of beauty and not-to-be hidden purity, strength and valor. Beauty and purity are height of feminine wealth; strength and valor are essence of masculinity among the Isu-folks. Women's suppleness and "wooden" body frame of men are art symbols with subliminal message of beauty, purity, strength and valor. Any elicitation of sexual appeal by nude body is strange and a corrupt transmorfiguration of the folk naturalism brought by recent social urbanization. The study recommends cultural reorientation to the people's cultural values.*

**Key words:** Art, kinesics, Nude, Symbol.

### **Introduction**

Naturalism was for a long-time ignorantly denied of African art until the discovery of antiquities of bronze and terra-cotta heads in Ife, Oyo State of Nigeria in the early twentieth century. Although European naturalism has given way to African symbolic abstraction, the struggle between the two styles of art need not had arisen in the first place. There had been albeit unrecognized convergence of abstraction and naturalism in the bodily art form of Africans which pre-dated the Ife or Nok terra-cotta discoveries.

Bodily art abstracts culture on natural bare body finely, to present nature symbolically. Bodily art is thus not fine art but folk art. Folk art is culture of common people in pre-industrial societies growing spontaneously as an autochthonous expression of the people shaped by themselves to suit their own needs (McDonald, 2007).

Nude fashion is perhaps the oldest art form and is likely to have occurred at all parts of the inhabited world. Its age cannot be determined as bodily art is executed on perishable material, the skin, which could not have been preserved for archaeological/paleontological dating. Painting, tattooing, scarification and reshaping ideas have been preserved by socialization. Upper paleolithic peoples reportedly ornamented their bodies with neckless of perforated

animal teeth, shells, beads of bones, stones and ivory rings, bracelets and anklets. Clothing too, was adorned with beads (Haviland 2003:255) but left most parts of the body bare.

Isu-Ebonyi folks adorn their bodies in certain special ways and by so doing make statements about who they are both as individuals and as members of social groups of various sorts. They embellish their nude bodies in styles that reflect their values and concerns. How are these arts expressed on human body and what values and concerns do the nude arts depict? This paper describes Isu-Ebonyi folk arts and inquires into the symbolic meanings of the arts. The art is made on natural nude body but embodies abstracted values hidden in the nudity. Abstraction here is used within the context of African artist. Oloide (1979:10) had explained that:

Abstraction... is not just a simplification of natural or disorganization but a reorganization of nature. It is a ritual through which conceptualized ideas and experiences are spiritually and symbolically transformed and transfigured for contemplative, deliberative, reflective and emotive purposes. It suppresses the deceit and ephemerality of naturalism by interpreting the essence and the hidden characters of subject matters. Isu bodily art is thus an art both of nature, culture and emotion used by the folks to appreciate and enjoy life.

### **The Study Area**

Isu is a community in the Southern tip of Ebonyi South in the South Eastern Nigeria. The people have an actuating appellation of "Okoma", literally, "the sparkler" but with a tint of haughtiness. The folks are primarily rural, agrarian and just beginning to embrace western education in a social structure that is largely traditional. The society, about 30,000 inhabitants, is egalitarian and applauds individualism. Villages are made up of family households, each providing for most of its own needs. Organizational needs beyond the household level are met by kinship groups. Pan-Isu organization is fluid as the clan status is merely a myth with no functional reality.

Modern influences especially Christianity and social urbanization have disorganized Isu-Ebonyi traditional patterns of life. Normative values are bizarre not inclined to ester-while traditionalism or encouraging modernism.

### **Methodology**

The study combined two methods of data gathering instruments to collect information from the respondents. These methods are participant observation and focus-group discussion. The researcher lived in the Isu community in 2024 and 2025 interacting with the natives and observing their cultural activities and observances such as marriages, funerals, festivities and everyday routines and pastime/leisure. Behavior regarding the natives' body usages, observances and adornment were seen and heard during this period. Some pieces of information were recorded using audio tape and transcribed for results.

The results from the participant observation were arranged in categories and information on each category was enriched by further inquiry using eight focus-group discussion (FGD). The community has eight-village clusters/Agbabor, Isuachara, Umuniko, Amanator, Mgbaneze, Mgbanaukwu, Obegu and Agba-isu. From each of these clusters, nine-member focus-group was organized for deeper and more targeted discussions. The selection of members into the groups was by purposive sampling to have information on the meaning of symbolic associated with the nude bodies of the natives observed. The focus-group discussions were conducted at the village of each group during evenings of an agreed day lasting one hour to one and half hours with the researcher personally moderating each meeting. The information from the combined “instruments” form the result of this study as described in this paper.

### **Theory- symbolic interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism has Herbert Mead (Mead, 1934) as the proponent. The tenet of the theory is that human beings are active and communicative. Society is an extremely complex network of actions and interactions between individuals all of them organized and motivated by group membership, with its inherent roles and demands. These roles involve gestures that are turned into symbols that come to stand for something, that is, symbolic meaning. The meanings of behaviours are learned and shared and form the fulcrum of each society as a unique people.

Among the studied people, the body is a board of subliminal expression of meanings shared by the people and transmitted by socialization from generation to generation. Nudity for them evokes strength and beauty and not a paramour expression of eroticism in modern fashion.

### **Literature**

Art is wholly a signification activity using human creative imagination with symbols. Art portrays feelings, values, hopes, concerns and world-views. Art is shared by the folk who generated it to add beauty, pleasure and value to life. Baudrillard (2015) has presented four stages through which signs in human culture have passed. The first stage creates signs to reflect a basic reality; in the second stage, sign “masks and perverts some basic reality”, the third stage, uses sign to mask the absence of some basic reality, and the fourth bears no relation to any reality whatsoever,” here a sign is its own pure simulacrum.

Folk culture evolves authentic art out of genuine community of experiences and therefore reflects a basic reality. Art embellishes all sorts of objects including human bodies. To the extent that bodily motions, facial expression and postures convey messages, they are art forms. Scarification, piercing, ornamentation, reshaping, painting and tattooing require that the body be left bare. Body postures convey information most poignantly. Elgin (2014:5) aptly observed that “not all languages are ... rich in mechanisms of evasion or impoverished in mechanism of truth”. As a symbolic expression, bodily art creates a mimetic cosmos that has a certain degree of correspondence with the experimental world, and carries meanings which are not vulnerable to personal idiosyncrasies.

A symbol is any kind of sound or gesture to which cultural tradition has assigned meaning as standing for something (Haviland, 2013:336). Art forms should always be related to the culture in which they are found (Philip 2013; vii), and the “understanding of such forms can only be attained through... comprehension of the culture of a society... that created them. However, art like all cultural forms are subject to change if it is to remain adaptive under changing conditions.

Changes take place by diffusion and modification of behaviour and values within culture.

Haviland (2013) explaining cultural change in fashion among North Americans wrote:

*Clothing fashions change frequently over the past century, it became culturally permissible for men and women alike to bare more of their bodies not just in swimming but in dresses as well. Along with this has come greater permissiveness about the body in photographs, movie and television. Finally, in the latter half of the century, the sexual attitude and practices of many North Americans became less restrictive (2003:378).*

Clothing fashion has also changed among the Isu-Igbo of Nigeria not in terms of baring “more of their bodies” but in baring less of their bodies. The perceived indecency in modern attire is not the outcome of observed body exposure but the adoption of western permissive attitude towards rules regarding the body in general and sex in particular. Images of the body now hold different social symbolism expressing meaning alien to indigenous culture. Symbolic interaction may help explain the Isu-Ebonyi transmorfiguration of nude art better. The theory holds human thoughts and behaviours as entirely social and operates in terms of symbols. Symbols are man- made and concerns with how people perceive objects/events and not their intrinsic nature (Mead, 1934). People have meanings assigned or defined by others in the course of their interactions. By accepting definitions by significant others, individual members internalize certain norms and values that accompany the meaning.

A particular clothing fashion is encouraged by the meaning assigned to it within the cultural context. Where the body is left bare to exhibit its elegance in a social milieu, individuals carry the meaning and practice nudism with fulfillment. It is the idea behind nudity that changes to connote eroticism, the meaning spreads even without actual body exposure. In the instant context, decorated nude body aims to present the body according to the ideals of the folk conception of beauty, strength and valor. Nudity is an art.

## **Result**

### **Bodily Nude Art among the Isu Folk**

Traditional clothing fashion among the Isu folk leaves the body conspicuously bare. Usually, girls’ clothing covers the genital areas and the hip to the upper quadrant of the thighs. The breasts are tied up completely with a purposively designed article of clothing fastened at the back. The genitals and the breasts are the culturally erotic zones for the folks. These areas are

never exposed. Bare areas are decorated with paintings, *Uli*, red or yellow Orche, “*Ufie na Odo*”; tattoos with *Nzu*, scarifications “*Ichie*”, ornamentations with beads of Ivory, cowries shells etc and reshaping of teeth, “*Ipi-eze*”. Young men on a marriage mission to the bride’s home spray *Ufue na Odo* on their legs from the knees to the heels. Women offer the service to men for some gifts usually cash. Any part of the body painted with *Ufi na Odo* is left bare for general admiration.

### **Tattooing/Scarification**

Isu folks have a peculiar tattooing pattern called “*Igbuichi*”, by the men. “*Agube*” a small scapula-shaped metal is sharpened for incision. The cheeks, forehead, shoulder, chest, back and thighs are usual parts where *iche* (cuts) are marked. *Agube* is used to incise designed mark on the body and the springing blood is wiped off with “*Uke*”, a grounded black indelible marks. These marks are left bare as status of valor among the folks. Among the women, tattooing and scarification are equally common. Women make scarifications on their forehead, cheeks, lower jaw and in-between the breasts to the lower abdomen below the navel. The cuts produce indelible black beautifully designed scars. The embellishing marks are meant to be exhibited making nudity fashionable.

### **Body Painting Art**

*Uli* is the act of making designs on the body using potent sap from certain wild leaves, barks or roots. These plant materials are crushed and the inky liquid is extracted and used by women skilled in the *Uli* art to create various designs on the bare body of the client. The designed marks are left on the body for some 3 to 6 hours to be shade-dried after which a cold bathe is taken. The outcome is indelible imprints as designed lining the body to the delight of all.

Human faces, arms, chests to the breasts and the back are adorned with *Uli* by maidens while older women may extend the *Uli* to the lower abdomen. *Uli* designed body is meant to be left nude for the folks’ admiration.

### ***Ufie na Odo* (Red and Yellow Ochre)**

Red and yellow Ochre are made from certain woods whose substances are grounded in mortar to paste and sun-dried for perseveration. Occasionally, desired quantity/volume of these substances are taken and moistened for body painting. Women paint their heels, lower abdomen for beautification simply. Maiden being prepared for circumcision and women ending their rite-de-passage into widowhood daub their entire body with *Ufi na Odo*. Tattooing is also a religious art. Priests make tattoos around their eyes, cheeks, foreheads and at times on the chests and shoulders. These artistic creations are made on the bare body to be seen for the cultural effects.

### **Reshaping/Piercing**

The art of piercing and reshaping the body is common among the Isu-folk. Piercing and reshaping the body are exclusive to women except for occasional ritual concerns where they may be etched on the male. Women’s ears are commonly pierced to create openings to fasten

ornaments. Piercing is thus only instrumental and not an art of beautification in itself. Within a female's first ten days of birth, she would have her two ears pierced with a needle-like thorn and a smooth non-absorbent raffia thread is passed through the opening where it remains until the pierced ears are healed. By the body openings are hung all sorts of ornamental ear-rings to embellish the body which must be bare for admiration.

Artistic reshaping of teeth is about the most exquisite piece of bodily art among the folks. Teeth reshapers operate a guild. Only females-ladies of top glamorous desire-reshape their teeth. It involves skillful percussion of the upper and lower teeth into equal spindle-shaped form. The incisors, canines and premolars are shaped attractively alike. Every smile radiates beauty.

Each of these bodily arts is intertwined with the folk culture. As culture changes, so do art symbols and their meaning. The people continue to create and develop in new directions. What is described now as "indecent dressing" among Nigerian youth is not a statement about merely external dressing fashion but expression of inner distaste against underlying change in attitudes toward cultural rules regarding the body in general and sexuality mostly.

### **Meaning of Isu Nude Art Symbols**

Folk art evolves from a mimetic cosmos that has wholesome degree of correspondence with the experiential world. A description of certain Isu-folk bodily art having been achieved in the preceding section, it remains to decipher the symbolic meaning of nudism to present correspondence with Isu culture and environment. An appropriate method is to match the indigenous exegesis of the symbols with an analytical one derived from the broader context of Isu culture and environment.

### **Nudity**

External and observable symbol of nudity is absolute bare body. The young girls leave their bodies bare from the lower abdomen to the neck. The breast is tied up with matching cloth. Neckless of beads and armlets are everyday attire. There are some strings of beads worn on the waist on top of a hip wrapped to the thighs. For the young men, the waist to the head is left virtually bare. Only the waist to the knee is tied with a loose cloth. Adult women tie up from their breast to the ankle with cloth, while the chest and back shoulders are left bare.

How do the folks interpret the nude symbols? Most of the discussants explained that the bare body is an expression of transparency; a value cherished much by the folks. They live a life of communalism and share sentiments which abhor secrecy and intrigues.

Further, the people associate body built with behaviours. Supple body denotes kindness and free-mindedness; while scraggy body is adjudged dried up by excess bile of wickedness and vindictive heart. The folk detested any inkling of wickedness as it portends misery for the whole community. So nudity is an outward demonstration of inner values of kindness and purity of heart necessary for communal interaction and relationship which sustain the solidarity of the folks. That is the real beauty of a woman. The body is left bare for all to observe and judge. For the men, muscular body is a visible, index of bravery, strength and

valor. The body is made bare as a visible symbol of the invisible valor. Painting, scarification, tattoos and other body decoration are augmentation of inner beauty and naturalism produced by the imagination of the folk's world of ideals.

Although the body is largely bare, the purity of the mind clothed the nudity of the body. Paramour relation was a taboo. Bare body was no sex appeal nor arouse erotic feelings because the mind was shielded by morals in the culture. Current rage against indecent dressing among the youths is not because the body is exposed more than in the traditional setting but because of the change in meaning of "bare body" among the folks. What is indecent is not the body that is bare but the meaning that is made out of the bare body now.

### **Conclusion**

Art as a mimetic element of culture often change in response to environmental crisis, intrusion of outsiders, or modification of behaviour and values within the culture. The art of clothing fashions change frequently carrying with it some underlying attitudes towards cultural rules regarding the body and sexuality. Growing permissiveness regarding sexual practices occasioned by social urbanization has pressed amorous meaning on indigenous folk bodily art. Only value reorientation is needed to contain the perception around what is considered indecent dressing among our extant youth and society.

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