

Body Marking as a Cornerstone of African Art

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Abstract: It is only in the western recontextualisation of African culture, where everything different from a Eurocentric model is considered art that body marking becomes a cornerstone. Onobrakpeya's statement that "Body marking is a corner-stone in African art" was born out of a time and place that called for a unification of the arts of Africa and panafrican political and social consciousness. Instead of truly building on traditions unique to all areas of Africa, modern African art movements created a framework that would promote an art world in which contemporary African artists were in the respected and influential positions that they rightly deserved.

Only in seeing African cultures as "others" can generalisations about body marking and symbolism be valid. Onobrakpeya's statement that "Body marking is a corner-stone in African art" (1992:132) was born out of a time and place that called for a unification of the arts of Africa and panafrican political and social movements. While similar views were useful in simplifying an "African aesthetic" for a world stage, the statement is at best a broad statement that was ultimately conceived for motives other than artistic analysis.

It is only in the western recontextualisation of African culture, where everything different from a Eurocentric model is considered art—possibly for lack of other categorical understandings—that body marking becomes a "cornerstone of African art." In fact, body marking or modification is present in nearly all societies in various forms. There are anthropological examples of body marking from the Amazon to the Arctic, and spanning all epochs of human existence from at least the Palaeolithic period. (Schildkrout 2004; Turner 1995:148). So ubiquitous is body marking throughout time and across the globe that it may be more accurate to say not that body marking is a cornerstone of African culture, but that an aversion to body marking is a cornerstone of European culture (and only then in the passed several hundred years).

In *Marks of Civilization* (1988), Arnold Rubin compares body marking processes throughout the world. He begins with Lévi-Strauss's idea that a marked

body is an expression of the culture in which it resides; “[T]he purpose of Maori tattooings is not only to imprint a drawing onto the flesh but also to stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group” (Lévi-Strauss 1963:257). Rubin expanded on the Lévi-Strauss view by postulating that body marking is “universally associated with the idea of ‘civilization’” (Rubin 1988:97) and as Turner stated, body marking helps individuals become “transformed into social beings with collectively recognized identities, the prerequisite of any culturally patterned social life” (1995:148).

For the three centuries following John Bulwer's *Anthropometamorphosis* in 1653, body marking “became a way of describing the exotic uncivilized Other in comparison to the ideal civilized and Christian European” (Schildkrout 2004:324). Some still ascribe to this understanding of body marking as an earmark of the Other. Turner seems to agree with A. L. Kroeber’s remarks that body marking through tattoo and scarification are present only in “ethnographically distinctive ‘primitive’ society,” justifying his agreement on the basis that the “general social practice tends to be found far more frequently in simple societies with relatively rudimentary divisions of labor, that do not produce primarily for exchange” (Turner 1995:146). He does not however take into account the contemporary western paradigm in regard to body marking, at least until very recent times—the dominant culture that is the main focus for exchange of goods that is at the same time systemically and sometimes prohibitively unsympathetic to individuals with such markings. For example, a westernised market trader will, in most circumstances, be more successful than one with distinctive and visible markings, simply because the general westernised view associates markings with various categories of unsavouriness. In many situations Turner’s view may in fact be statistically correct, but care must be taken to acknowledge the self replicating nature of such complex cross-cultural patterns.

However they are perceived in the larger culture, different forms of body marking do share a basic function. In all cases they form a social divide between those who are marked and those who are not. In some cases, such as the punitive tattoos of third century Europe, they serve as a strict divider of those society deems “good” or “bad” (Gustafson 1997), but in most cases dividing lines are as subtle and nuanced as the individuals themselves. Body marking is a “border skirmishing” (Fleming 2001:84) between first individuals and then in the larger context, between social groups. They “redefine the relationship between self and society through the skin” (Schildkrout 2004:320).

In Africa, as in most places the world over, body marking exists in some groups but not others, and even within groups is not universally practiced. It serves universally to differentiate one social or cultural group from another and varies in style, perceived meaning and use. Significant studies regarding body marking practices have been done in Nigeria as Nigeria has, in many situations,

adapted and adopted specific group histories of body marking into a more unified national identity since the country's independence in 1960.

The Igbo-speaking groups of Nigeria can be seen as a microcosm of body marking practices within Africa and beyond. For the Igbo, body marking is closely associated with house painting as they incorporate some of the same styles and practices. There are several types of body marking among the Igbo, *Ide Uli* is characterised by the drawing of designs on the body with ink or dye. The *Ogaalu* method (called 'etching') is the practise of drawing designs with a plant based skin irritant that causes a raised design. *Ogaalu* can be used under *Uli* painting to add effect (Willis 1997:45). Styles vary from village to village but also incorporate a significant amount of borrowing and adaptation (Willis 1997:172).

Willis's study examining the process of body marking clarifies the variability of the practice in Nigeria.

Some Igbo-speaking areas, for example the North Eastern and Eastern Groups (with the exception of *Arochukwu* and *Ututu*) appear to have little or no tradition of *Uli* body or wall painting. Yet body and wall painting is not limited to the Igbo speaking area and could be seen among the *Igala*, *Idoma*, *Edo*, *Ijo*, *Kalabari*, *Tiv*, *Ekoi*, *Ibibo* and *Anang*. (1997:63)

Even in the most simplified of views, body marking divides individuals into two groups, those who are marked, and those who are not. An intentional action must occur in order for an individual to be marked, whether it is a personal choice or that of a family member or superior. The *Tiv*, who in addition to body painting sometimes have very intricate scarring patterns, "were originally unmarked and took up scarification to distinguish themselves from other tribes" (Bohannon 1956:129).

Some body-marked divisions are gender-based and serve as a further cultural separation between men and women. "In *Nri-Awka* there was no rigid distinction between the designs worn by males and females, though straight lines were more commonly seen on men than on women" (Willis 1997:120). But in some groups, there are no gender distinctions at all. "Both men and women could be painted with fine linear patterns. Gender was differentiated more by clothing and accessories, than by body patterns" (Willis 1997:87). For some the act of painting itself is a gender-related task. For the *Tiv*, curvilinear designs are drawn on women by young men (Willis 1997:51).

In some areas, body marks serve to divide children and adults, or an act of body marking may signal different cultural "rites of passage." In the Nigerian groups studied by Willis, *Uli* and *Ichi* (scarification) were used to mark an individual's transition to adulthood, marriage or inclusion into an elite society, with "the most elaborate *Uli* patterns" painted on young women just before marriage (Willis 1997:92). Among the *Elugu Igbo*, Mrs. *Ezeomeka* reported that

in the past, “Uli body painting gave you an honour and respect. You got married [attracted a husband] because of Uli designs” (Willis 1997:53).

In other situations styles of marking or marking itself may differentiate between generations, as different designs and practices go in and out of style. In Bohannan observed that within the Tiv population “there are four ‘generations’ of scarification types to be found in Tivland today. The oldest of these is called *ishondu*; they are seen occasionally on very old people, and are sometimes done today, as an ‘old-fashioned’ gesture, on young men” (1956:118). The elders in Willis’ study confirmed that in earlier times too “designs changed over time as new ones were invented” incorporating contemporary designs such as bicycles and fences (1997:173). In some areas (Enugu Ezike, Arochukwu, Umuahia, Bende) Uli painting has fallen out of practice and “could not be revived” as women had replaced Uli body painting with western cosmetics such as lipstick and eyebrow pencil (Willis 1997:53).

While many designs are considered decorative, the dye from the Uli pod can be considered to have medicinal properties so is used in curative ways as well. Some children described by Willis had broad bands painted around ankles and wrists to prevent measles or snake bites (1997:45). Similar practices are seen in other areas of Africa such as Benin where herbal medicines are integrated into tattoo and circumcision processes (Nevadomsky and Aisien 1995:69).

Uli designs are also painted on houses and other objects. Painting on houses is done after harvesting when men & women have extra time. Uli house painting can also coincide with festivals, the agricultural cycle and Christian christmas. There is a performative aspect of house painting, just as there is in body marking. In some areas, mural painting is less important because houses are not likely to be seen by people indicating, according to Willis, that “there was an element of competition involved” (1997:53). Designs on calabashes are also made with visual appreciation in mind as they are given as gifts from husband to wife after conception (Willis 1997:51). It’s clear from the use of Uli designs on inanimate objects that the style is transferable and adaptable to other genres.

Uli designs or what has come to be known as the “Igbo aesthetic” have become important in the contemporary art world. While it is “difficult to know” how much of the ideas and ideals of Uli body marking had fallen out of favour or been otherwise adapted by the 1950s, the next thirty years would bring an exceptional revival (Willis 1997:160). In the 1960s, when Nigerian independence sparked an air of freedom, nine students at Ahmadu Bello University (then called the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology) formed a group they called the Zaria Art Society. “Motivated by an obvious spirit of nationalism, patriotism, and radicalism, the students joined the crusade for freedom, this time not freedom from Colonial rule but freedom to Africanize the mode, style and technique of artistic expression in their work” (Onuchukwu 1994:58).

The nine students, among them Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya, published a manifesto that suggested a major reevaluation of art in African society.

“They abhorred the mimetic canon emphasized by the art curriculum and espoused a conceptual synthesis of the ethos of ethnic art and the reality of their time and place” (David-West 1996:72). They believed that the cultural roots of Nigeria, and Africa in general, had inspirational qualities that should be proudly incorporated into their work.

In what became known as a philosophy of “natural synthesis,” Okeke promoted “a synthesis of old and new, of functional art and art for its own sake” (1960) and proclaimed that “our art should be based on our past, present and possibly on our future ways of life in this country” (1982:1). The Zaria Art Society also sought to reform art education in Nigeria, succeeding in forcing a reconsideration of teaching art in an African context while placing it in a global environment, retaining local aesthetics and encouraging adaptation based on all aspects of the art world, including both African and colonialist histories.

This mode of thought help to sort out some of the confusion created by independence. Onobrakpeya himself notes that “after independence, African countries had to contend with questions of unity among the various ethnic groups in their new nations” (Willis 1997:254). A philosophy of natural synthesis gave African artists permission to appreciate their heritage without negating the work and ideals adopted during colonialism. However, it was essential to promote, and sometimes simplify individual or localised styles into what a western audience could deem “African” in order to show a unified force in the art world.

Onobrakpeya notes, that after Independence, African countries had to contend with questions of unity among the various ethnic groups in their new nations. In Nigeria after the Civil War, art festivals at State level encouraged an interest in music, visual art and dance. At National level similar events enabled artists from different areas to entertain in a multi-ethnic environment. (Willis 1997:224)

Following the natural synthesis model and drawing upon his personal past in his work, Okeke’s used Uli designs that were characteristic of the Nigeria of his childhood, the Nri-Awka. “His use of Uli was not motivated by any ethnocentric ambitions nor as a means to promote a positive sense of Igbo identity after a catastrophic defeat in the Civil war. It was, however, a form which he had explored over many years and had come to understand to be a system of drawing” (Willis 1997:357). On a world stage his work came to symbolise contemporary “African” art, an idea that while overly simplistic made an easy foothold for a western art world that was otherwise on unfamiliar new territory. To the west, “the works glaringly displayed the physical characteristics of African traditional art” (Onuchukwu 1994:59).

Even in the context of the Nigeria of Okeke’s childhood, Uli motifs were not fully representational. His sentiment that “[Uli] symbols have inspired the entire corpus of Igbo art and cultural materials and informed their aesthetic and moral values” (1985:7) was too, a generalisation of the widely variable Igbo-speaking groups. “That ‘traditions’ of Uli body and wall painting did not exist in

the N. E. Igbo area, challenges Uche Okeke's assertion that Uli painting holds a central place in Igbo civilisation" (Willis 1997:51).

However, if we look beyond the Nigerian perspective, Smith believes that "the idea of natural synthesis can be a useful methodological tool for analyzing the dynamics of contemporary art and society" (Smith 1983:85). Contemporary arts of Africa, like art everywhere, builds upon the aesthetics and standards of beauty that came before it. Patterns and styles from one genre migrate and influence other areas and mediums and take on new meanings in different cultural and political landscapes.

From an anthropological perspective, an individual's body is the primary place where culture is defined from both the individual from within and by society from without. Body marking is a way to differentiate between groups, mark the passage of time and define an individual's "way of being in the world" (Csordas 1994:10). As Schildkraut states, "bodily inscriptions are all about boundaries, a perennial theme in anthropology between self and society, between groups, and between humans and divinity" (2004:338).

Bodymarking is a cornerstone of African art only in that bodymarking, in its various forms, whether viewed as a part of the art world or not, is a cornerstone of human culture everywhere and throughout time, as an expression of an individual's place in, boundaries with, and understanding of, their own society. Its association with African art, or other "tribal" factions is only valid in relation to a relatively recent Eurocentrist world view.

The colonialist image of the "naked savage" long poisoned the relationship between African and Western peoples; the forced or coerced abandonment of indigenous attire in favor of Western dress was for much of the past two centuries a symbol of the "civilizing" process. Throughout Africa today, deliberate revivals of "traditional" forms serve as symbols of political and cultural movements, often coexisting with Western styles that have been modified to suit local tastes. (Rovine and Adams 2002:8)

The contemporary use of Uli and interest in the body marking of Nigeria began as a reaction to both the classical western art world and "a growing sense of freedom from colonial restraints on cultural tradition" (Ottenberg 2002:36). The Zaria Art Society sought to build up "truly modern African art to be cherished and appreciated for its own sake" (Okeke 1982:1). In doing so, they promoted an art world in which contemporary African artists were in the respected and influential positions that they rightly deserved. Simplification of themes served to unify Nigeria and other African countries during a particularly difficult post-independence era, giving a common, albeit somewhat artificial, voice to millions of otherwise separate communities while transitioning the European art world into a space that would more readily accept the varied styles of African artists.

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