

# ARCHAEOLOGY AND TRADITIONAL MURAL PAINTING IN NSUKKA AREA OF NORTHERN IGBOLAND

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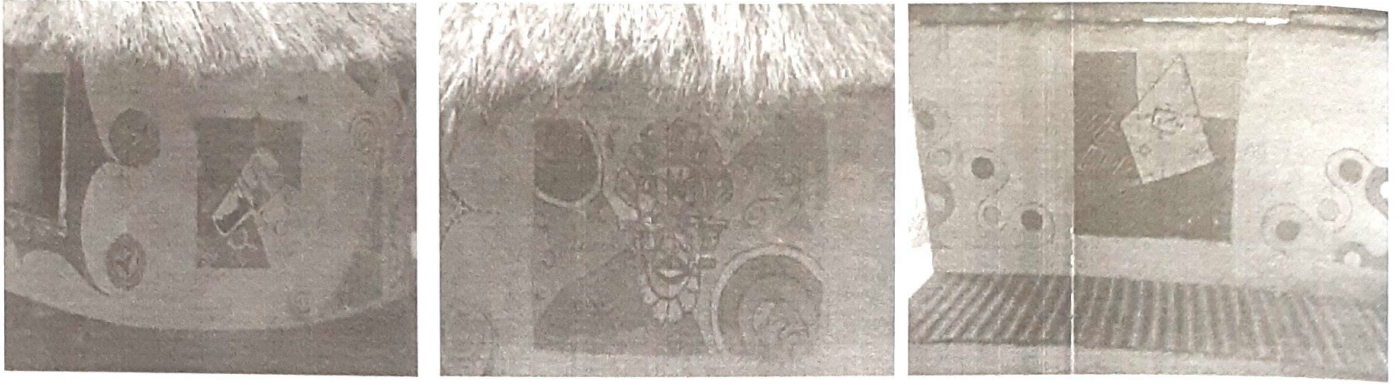
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## Abstract:

It has been observed that most artistic ideas in wood, clay, and metals in Igboland are expressed through traditional mural painting symbols which convey important lexical messages. This paper, seeks to bring to limelight, how the culture of Nsukka people and Igbo in general is expressed through the study of their traditional architectural wall paintings rendered in thorough naturally made indelible ink of “Uli” (black indigo), “Nzu”(natural clay), “Ufie”(red ochre gotten from plants), charcoal and other natural dyes in the form of leaves. These motifs touch on all aspects of Igbo life and serves as ethnographic evidence for studying the cultural history of the area in the absence of direct core archaeological evidence. The method applied in the course of carrying out this research is ethnographic method. This involves the collection of oral information from the extant members of the community that are knowledgeable in the topic of research. Primary secondary sources of information were used. The primary source of data came from oral tradition collected, while the secondary source came from documented literature on the topic of research. Pictures were also used for clarity sake.

## Introduction:

A mural is any piece of artwork painted or applied directly on a wall, ceiling or other large permanent surface. A particularly distinguishing characteristic of mural painting is that the architectural elements of a given space are harmoniously incorporated into the picture (Wikipedia free encyclopedia. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/mural](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/mural)). The study of man's existence cannot be investigated or studied without the indispensable association of man's existence to art. All art is of course an integral part of the social structure. The past study of man is, limited to the period of availability of documentation, records or evidential documentation of fossils as can be seen in the study of archaeology. The earliest historical documentation of man's activities can be traced to the wall painting or murals. This as well can be referred to as traditional architectural designs/motifs. This art form is the main object of discussion in this paper. The wall or mural paintings as practiced by the early man were recorded to have been executed about 30,000 years ago, when the caveman of Altamira caves in Spain produced paintings of animals and hunting scenes using natural dyes as Mena (Serberling, 1959). This can as well be referred to as parietal art or mural.



Presently and in recent time, more discoveries on past mural art practice of ethno-cultural scholars and groups were made in different parts of Africa. Worthy of mention are the wall paintings of the Igbo and the Hausa wall reliefs, in Nigeria. In Igboland for instance, the mural wall painting is a job mainly done by women. According to Willis (1987), "the Igbo woman's perceptions of all aspects of all life and nature and mostly notably ideas and objects which are held to be particularly important and representative of Igbo culture are translated into visual vocabulary which provides important reference materials for designers, art historians, engineers and ethnographers alike". At present however, wall or mural painting/art is practiced by professional artists in the form of commissions in public and private buildings. The mural painting of the walls of the Department of Archaeology and Tourism, University of Nigeria Nsukka museum (kitchen section) is a case at hand (plate:1).

**Plate: 1 Mural painting on the walls of Archaeology Museum University of Nigeria Nsukka**

As observed earlier, mural painting had existed for centuries but presently, it appears to have taken a new form and dimension which has peculiar characteristics. Mural painting /motif has the capacity of attracting equal of more significance than other forms of art rendered on other surfaces.

In our study area, the beauty and neatness of a man's compound is determined by the carvings on the panel doors and the mural paintings on the walls. While the mural painting is a prerogative job of the women, the men do the carvings on the panel doors. Although mural paintings are only found on the walls, women use *Uli* motif on their bodies for both aesthetic and medicinal purposes such as the curing of measles and chicken box on children and adults. Mural painting in our study area involves the use of natural dyes like *Uli*(black indigo) , *Ufie Oha*(red ochre) (*Pterocarpus sayauxii*), *Nzu*(natural clay), *Alulu* leaves(*Lonchocarpus cyanenscens*), and charcoal to make geometric designs ranging from natural, animal to other abstract symbols and motifs. They are highly symbolic and touch on all the spheres of the people's culture. Lexically, they are of great importance as they convey vocal messages. In some cases, mural paintings are used and interwoven with the "*Nsigbidi*" sign language found among the eastern and western Igbo's in the olden

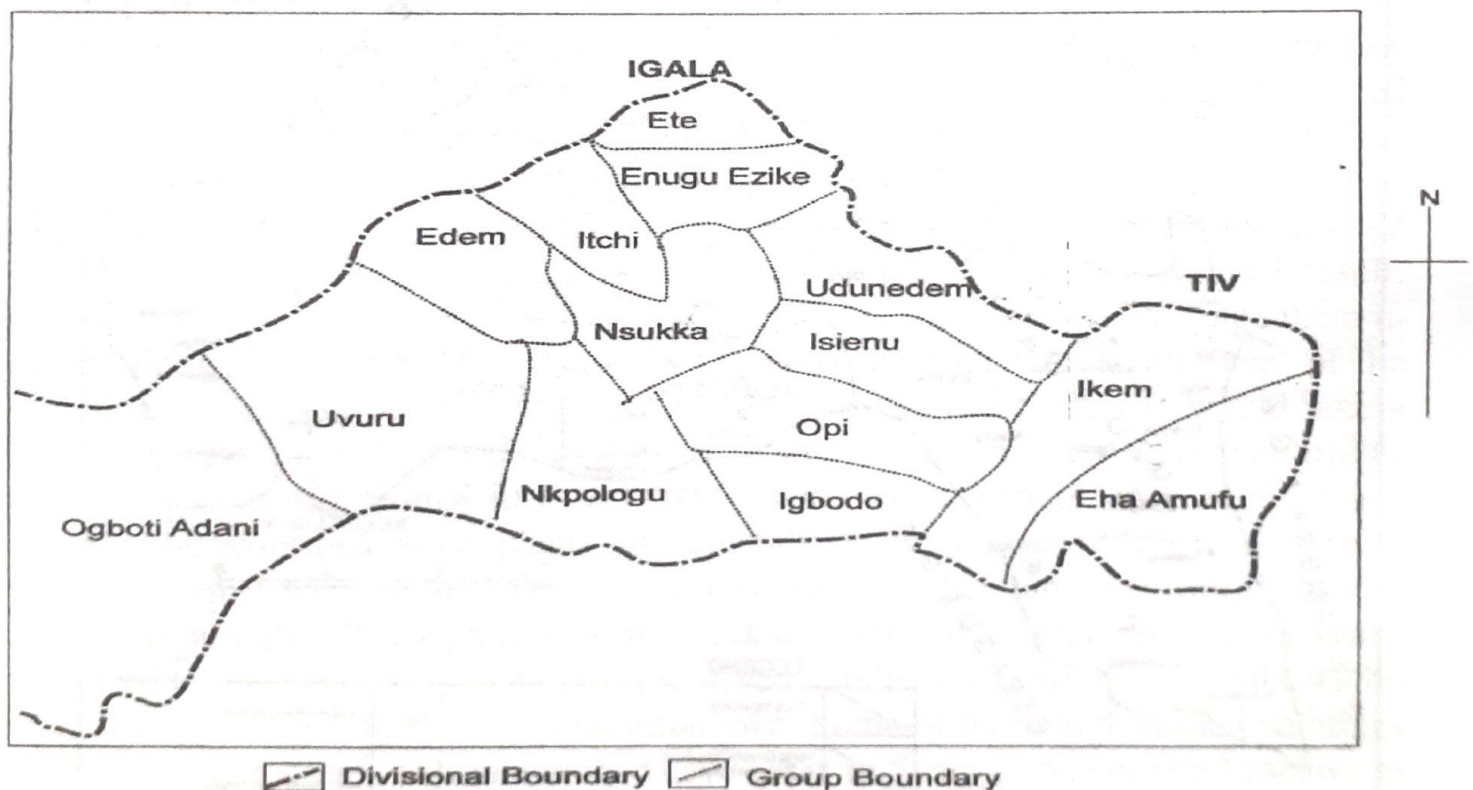
days. This type of sign language is mainly associated with certain cults ranging from societal to masquerade cults like the “*Ekpe*’ masquerade and Odo masquerade cults.

Many areas of art are practiced in Nsukka area. They include architecture, sculpture, mural painting, and textile arts. Their architecture manifests in huts made of mud walls and thatched roofs. However, as a result of change brought about by the Western influence, some aspects of this culture are fast disappearing. Most affected is the traditional architecture whose walls are adorned with the mural paintings. The traditional architectural walls/buildings have almost completely given way to the Western architectural style. This invariably affects the continuous existence of the traditional mural painting.

**Geographical Location and Economy of the Study Areas:**

Nsukka area as used here refers to all the areas formally under Old Nsukka Division. The area is made up of four county councils namely, Igbo-Etiti, Igbo-Eze, Isi-Uzo and Uzo-Uwani. The area presently has been split into seven local government areas which include Igbo- Etiti, Igbo-Eze North, Igbo-Eze South, Isi-

**Map of Nsukka Division showing Local groupings/Clans**



**Fig 1 After A. E. Afigbo 1981**

Uzo, Nsukka urban, Uzo-Uwani and Udenu (Fig:1).

These county councils are held together through some socio-cultural, economic and political ties. These occur in form of intermarriages, festivals and trade contacts. Others include masquerade institutions, *Ozo*, *mkpozi* and *Nze* title institutions.

Geographically, the area is bound to the North, North-West and East by Benue state, North-West and West by Kogi state, Anambra River, Ezeagu, Udi and Nkanu L.G.Areas (Fig: 2).

Fig: 2 Nsukka Areas after G.E.K Ofomata 1978  
With modifications by the author, 2009.

The area lies between latitude  $5^{\circ} 50'$  and  $7^{\circ} 00''$ . The town itself is on latitude  $6^{\circ} 51''$  (Iyang, 1978). Two main seasons prevail. Thus, we have the rainy and dry seasons as is the case with most parts of eastern Nigeria. The vegetation belongs to the derived savannah environment (Iyang, 1978).

Economically, the people depend mostly on subsistence agriculture for their livelihood producing crops like yams (*Dioscorea spp*), Cocoyam (*Xanthosoma spp*),

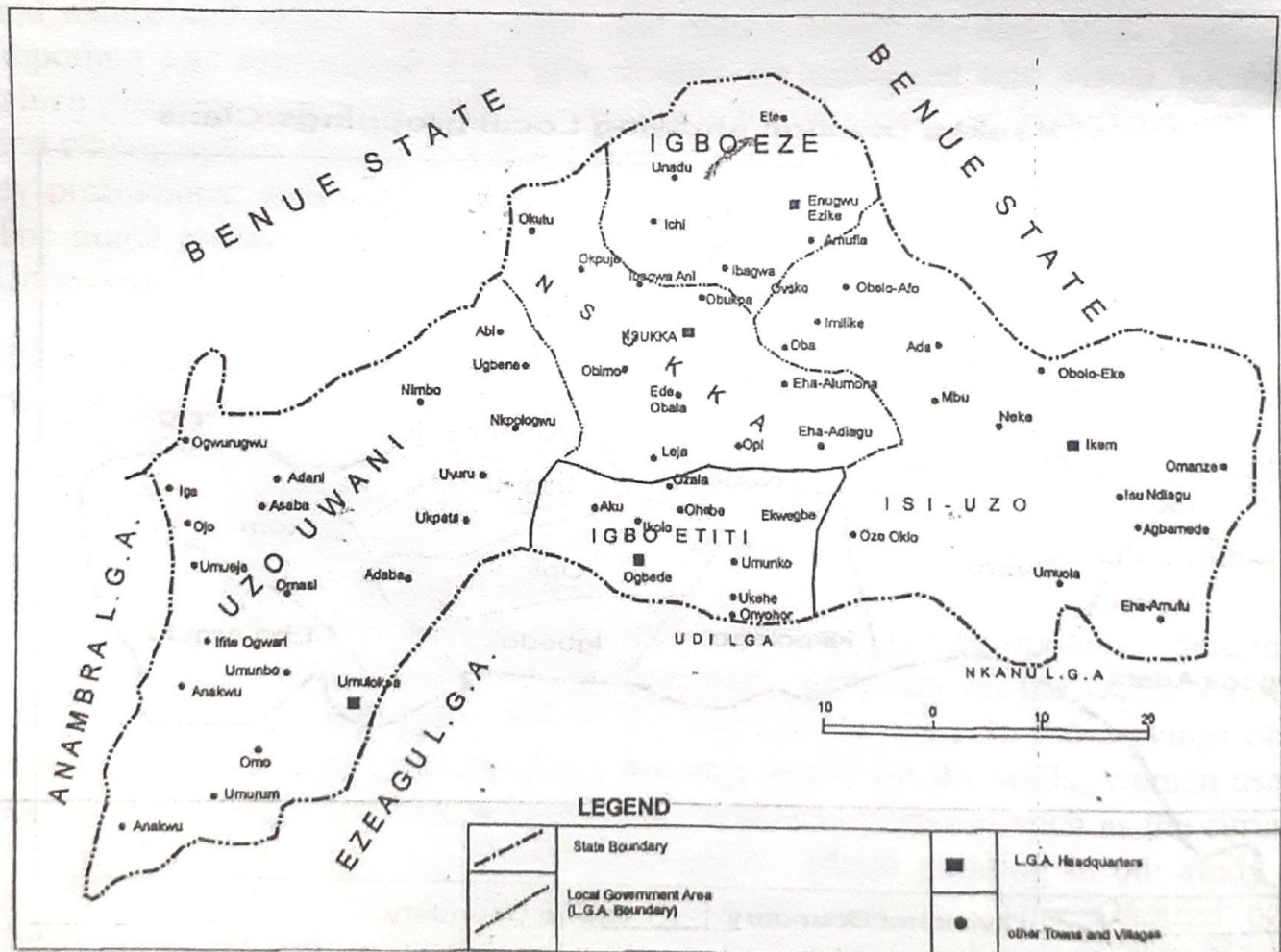


Fig 2: Nsukka area after G. E. K. Ofomata 1978 with modifications by the author, 2009

Cassava (*Manihot esculantum*) and engages very well in the production of palm produce like palm oil, palm kernel and palm wine. They rear animals like goats, sheep, cows and chickens/fowls which they depict in their wall mural paintings. They

also engage in hunting, harvesting of honey bees, crafts production and trading. Religiously, the people prior to the coming of Western culture practiced the African traditional religion (ATR). Politically, they were democratic and egalitarian and authority came from elders with the family as the unit base.

### **Traditional Mural Painting and Archaeology:**

Artists and others in related disciplines have looked at traditional mural paintings from many perspectives and at the end arrived at the same conclusion. According to Oguibe (1986),

“in simple technical terms, a mural is a painting executed on a wall which serves as a support. Traditionalists and fundamentalists would stick to the simple basic definition of a mural wall painting. In recent times, however, the word has been stretched to accommodate such agencies as changing architectural patterns, painting materials, borderlines between the graphic and plastic arts durability, nature of wall surface and idiosyncrasies of artistic and art scholars”.

Africa, according to Rapport (1969), is symbolic in nature and they tried to represent most aspects of their culture in signs and symbols. A typical example is the dexterity with which African women adorns the wall of their compound yearly, using beautiful motifs ranging from natural to animal and abstract objects. As earlier mentioned, mural painting generally is an age long tradition in the history of man. This started with the cave and rock paintings. The Stone Age man that occupied the caves had little or no tool at hand until the close of the Pleistocene when the *Homo habilis* produced the simple pebble tools which includes the choppers, spheroids and the polyhedrals. With this, he was able to adapt to the environment he found himself. Still, man was afraid of other animals that roam the earth. For him to engage them in a fight during hunting expeditions he has to draw these animals in the faces of the rocks and caves and there, have a sort of mock-battle with them. He would take a vantage position and punch different parts of the animal with his bows and arrows before engaging the animal in a real fight. In the same manner, man at this stage painted and inscribed those plants and animals within his environment especially those that must have served him one purpose or the other ranging from dietary to medicinal purposes. Through this means, rock art/cave arts and paintings would have been said to have started. The earliest preserved paintings according to Oguibe(1980) were wall paintings in caves by primordial man. Some of these high skilled paintings are preserved in caves in Altamera and cave lanes in Spain in Niaux and Lascaux in southern France. These caves are dated to between 20,000 and 10,000BC. As a result of lack of recorded history on the early Igbo cultures and traditions, no one can say emphatically when traditional mural painting started in this part of the world. However, it could be asserted here that as far as traditional architecture cannot be completed without some motifs on them, and for the fact that the Igbo man made use of traditional architecture centuries before the arrival of the white man, traditional

mural painting in this vicinity must have been a thing of the remote past. Moreover, 'Uli' and 'Ufie' decoration amongst Igbo women could be looked at as the takeoff point of mural painting amongst the people.

From the foregoing, it could be said that the Nsukka people attach the same value to both the *Uli* aesthetics and the mural wall painting. Most of the *Uli* designs made on the body are found on the walls. In the words of Ejiogu (1971), "body decorations and wall paintings are two aspects of our traditional art common in all Igbo speaking towns and villages of east central state of Nigeria". According to him, body decoration was the forerunner of traditional mural painting. In the other way round, traditional mural painting stems from body decoration. Body decoration was and is still a popular art among the people of Nsukka in particular and Igboland in general. It is an exclusive reserve for women as is the case with traditional mural painting.

The genesis of mural painting as earlier mentioned is as old as the beginning of traditional architecture starting from the time that he vacated the caves due to certain reasons like the flow of ice into the caves to the construction of wind breaks and finally enclosed shelters. Also, the caves must have been abandoned due to the increase in population. Man while occupying the caves made some drawings and paintings inside the caves. Most of these paintings were for religious and very few of them for aesthetic and historical purposes. In Nsukka, when traditional architecture was developed and propelled by the concern to protect their huts followed by religious and ritualistic zeal and aesthetic concern, the people started to engage in traditional mural painting under their traditional architecture. These traditional architectural buildings have walls made of mud and thatched roofs. No knowledge of when and how this art in Nsukka started was kept. According to one of my informants, Ozioko Ezugwu Asadu, "as far as I can remember, this art was there when I was young. I could remember accompanying my mother to Obu-Umu-Azoke to decorate the walls before the 'Egba-Onwa-Ishi' (the sixth month festival). Since then, this art has continued to exist but with less attention till today. Its' survival is due to the fact that it is handed over from mother to daughter in most of the communities within Nsukka'. Generally speaking, mural painting is a tradition handed over from mother to daughter from generation to generation and it signifies certain patterns and motifs.

The rational for using mural paintings on the architectural mud walls are: protection of the walls from leaching during rainy seasons and also during the harsh hamattan weather. These two seasons always have devastating effects on the surfaces of the mud walls especially the external part of the walls. Most often, each year after the harvest season, most women in Nsukka gather to restore and paint their dwellings which have been washed clean by the relentless rain of the wet season. With their hands as brushes and the walls as their canvas, the women dexterously set about creating an art whose composition, technique and treatment of colour is as dynamic as

that of any western painting, enhancing an otherwise harsh environment. The art form here is purely an indigenous magical form of creativity from mud used to build wall to natural pigments and plants gathered to make colours like cam wood 'Abosi' (*Baphia nitida*), 'Uli' plant seeds (*Rotmania whiitfuldii*, *Rotmania cuspidata*, and *Rotmania urcelliformis*) and 'Alulu' Inigo leaves (*Conchocarpus cyanescens*). Other materials used include ground leaves of 'Ukpunkulu' (*Mucuna sloanei*), bark from the roots of 'Agaru' and 'Uriede' (*Cassia alata*) (Okigbo, 1980). Also included among the materials used in traditional mural painting are the 'Odo' yellow pigment and the 'Eja- Ogwurugwu'. In doing this, they make use of very sticky earthy materials mainly clay of various colours. Probably, in the process of doing this, they discovered that it adds beauty to their dwellings. This discovery gave rise to the second factor which has now become the most important factor. That is, beauty and aesthetics which are not only found on the mud walls, but also on the bodies of Nsukka women using 'Uli' designs.

The third factor for embarking on mural painting in Nsukka area could be found in the realms of preservation of the mud walls using traditional architectural methods. This method helps in expelling termites from both mud walls and the thatched roof. In most cases, grog produced during palm oil processing is used for rubbing both the wall and the floors of these mud buildings. The offensive smell from the grog help a lot in keeping away termites which is one of the most destructive agents to traditional architectural buildings (Itanyi, 2007:173).

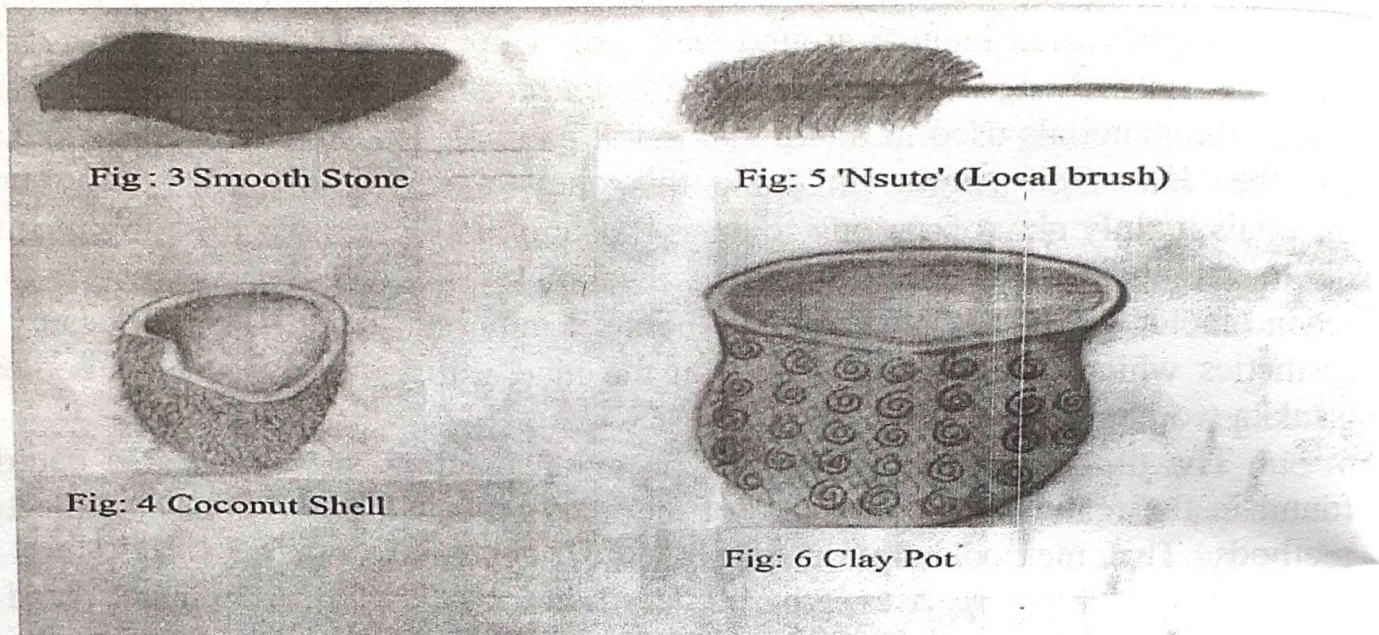
Looking at our study area, most of the motifs of their mural painting were animals and inanimate objects. Others were just abstract geometric designs which convey some meanings dialectically. All these objects represented in the mud walls tell much about the environment in which the people of Nsukka area and environs found themselves. Animals like lizard, fowl/chicken, goat, and cow, pig, and bird motifs give information on their compound environment. This shows the animals very close to them. Snake motif gives information on the dangerous animals like vipers 'Echieteka' popularly known among the students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka as 'Nsukka snake'. Apart from this, the motifs on domestic animals tell much about the people's dietary life. Other inanimate objects as would be seen from (Fig. 7) depicts aspects of their socio-religious and cultural life.

Thus, in the absence of direct core archaeological evidence for the reconstruction of the cultural history of the study area, mural painting on the faces of the walls like 'Uli' painting on the bodies of their women has a great role to play.

**Tools Used For Mural Painting:** Like in modern painting, traditional mural painting requires some tools and techniques which in most cases are not bought from the market, but produced by the artists. They are manufactured locally and may be disposed off after first use as they are readily available within the environment. Such tools include smooth stone, coconut shells, local brushes and clay pot. The smooth stones are used to grind

some materials like charcoal and leaves. It is also used for smoothening the wall surface before mural painting is done (Fig. 3).

Archaeologically, the presence of this grinding stone in our study area is indicative of producing and usage of late Stone Age tools in the area. The coconut shell is used to



smoothen the walls surface before colours are applied on them (Fig.4). Brushes got from oil palm fiber are used in applying colours to the walls. At times, they are fashioned by cutting a withering banana (*Musa sapientum*) leave and beating one end flat. It is locally called 'Nsute' (Fig: 5). The clay pot serve as storage vessel while the pot shards, especially the open mouthed ones are used as pallets (Fig: 6).

### Techniques Employed In Mural Painting:

In traditional mural painting, techniques vary from one artist to the other. This is as a result of the theme or effect the artist wants to achieve at the end. Some artists start by covering the whole surface of both inside and outside with brownish red soil after which coconut shell and smooth stone are used to smoothen the wall. This first coating is what is today called priming in modern painting. Gradually, bold designs are broken into intricate designs having motifs in common with body decoration. Earthly materials like 'Nzu' (white chalk) and other clayish materials were usually prepared into slimy concoctions and applied on the walls with bare hand.

### Some Motifs of Nsukka Mural Painting:

Like any other painting, traditional mural painting is executed with colours, motifs and techniques. These colours, motifs, techniques and designs say something about the culture and environment of the people under study. According to (Aniakor, 2002:279)"the use of painted murals to adorn woman's house attests to the decorative resourcefulness of the female members as well as their aesthetic and social well-being. They also contribute to the notions of building aesthetics". He further



delineated some abstracts/geometric decorative motifs used in Igbo art and mural paintings. This ranges from triangles, squares, to clock-wise and anti-clock-wise, spiral, concentric, and non-concentric cycles. All so included are concave and convex lines (Aniakor, 2002:302). It studies in detail the ethnography of the people. As earlier stated, the motifs they use are things that they come in contact with in their everyday life. Most often, these subjects used as motifs are not depicted in their realistic form. They are rendered in semi-abstract or stylized form. As a result of the relationship between traditional mural painting and body decoration, the technique employed usually tally with the 'Uli' lineal technique of body decoration. The simplification of these forms to lines and silhouette is a way of creating beauty or improving their aesthetic quality, albeit in a rugged way. To this end, Jefferson (1974) has this to say, "Much of what we know about craftsmanship result from simple urge to improve the appearance of things to achieve design pleasing to the eye, to enrich both utilitarian and religious objects with familiar patterns and symbols meaningful to the artist and his people. The motifs used are drawn from plants, animals, house hold materials including cooking utensils". Most of the patterns drawn to the evidence are purely abstract.

Some of the motifs found in mural painting in Nsukka area and their relevancies include; *OMUNE* (Banana) *Musa sapientum*: This is plant common in our study area. Both the fruit and the leaves are of great economic importance to the people. While the fruits are consumed, the leaves are used for wrapping edible food items. The stem can be cut down during acute water scarcity and water squeezed out from it (Fig: 7).

*NGWERE-ULO* (House Lizard): They usually represented because they are ubiquitous in the compound and are seen basking themselves in the morning and evening suns. This could be the reason why the traditional muralists employ this motif to help reflect their environment (Fig: 8).

*NGU* (Metal Pin): This is a slim metal pin used in bringing out cooked yams from the hot pot. It is one of the motifs that were transferred from body decoration to traditional mural painting without any alteration because of its lineal form. This motif refers to the place of yam in Igbo cosmology in general and informs the dietary aspect of their life (Fig: 9).

*AZU* (Fish): Apart from the Ebonyi River, there are no rivers within the upper escarpment of Nsukka area big enough for fishes to live still, fish plays very important role to the people of Nsukka. It is used for cooking on daily bases and constitutes almost their only source of non-food protein outside meat from hunters and domestic animals. Thus, fish is very popular among the people and that is why their muralists use it as motif in their traditional paintings (Fig: 10).

*FOWLS AND CHICKENS (Okuku or Okuko)*: The people of our study area being subsistence farmers do engage in free range poultry farming. In fact, every home does engage in this venture. As a result of the close contact between the people and these

domestic animals, they were depicted on their walls in colours. Some of these animals and at times young trees and pregnant women are drawn as metaphoric expression of the future (Fig: 11).

*UGWU* (Hill): Hills are depicted in the mural painting because Nsukka area is noted for its hilly landscape. The area lies in most cases within dry valleys and surrounded by hills. Thus, Nsukka traditional muralists represented their environment, especially the relief very much in their paintings (Fig: 12).

There are other representations of supernatural things in the people's traditional mural painting that in most cases expresses both their socio-religious and cultural inclinations. Among them are the Stars (*Kpakpando*), Moon (*Onwa*), and Sun (*Anyanwu*) (Figs: 13, 14, and 15). Unfriendly and dangerous animals like snakes are also represented (Fig: 16). Some indigenous plant crops like 'Ukwa' – Bread fruit (*Treculia africana*) are also being represented (Fig: 17). These show that the people of our study area to a large extent still practice mural art.

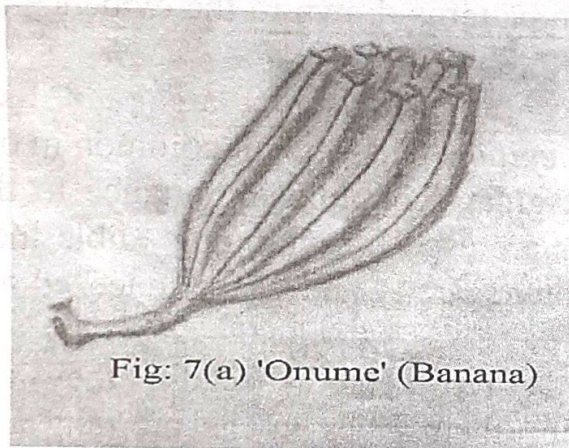


Fig: 7(a) 'Onume' (Banana)

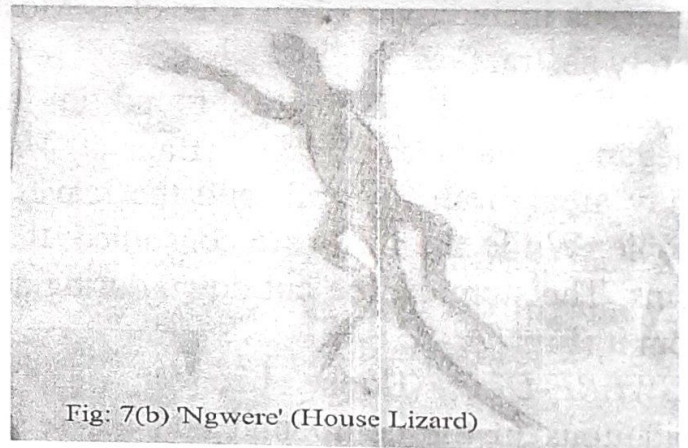


Fig: 7(b) 'Ngwere' (House Lizard)



Fig: 7(c) 'Ngu' (Metal pin)

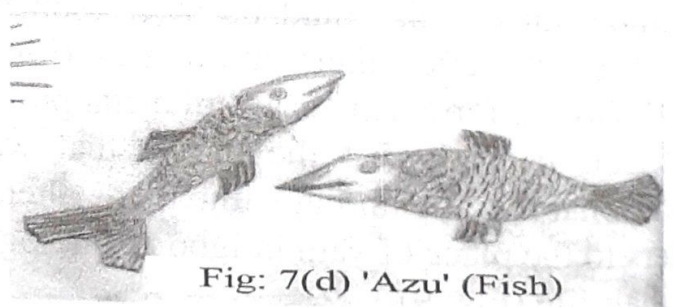


Fig: 7(d) 'Azu' (Fish)



Fig: 7(e) 'Okuko' (Fowl/Chicken)

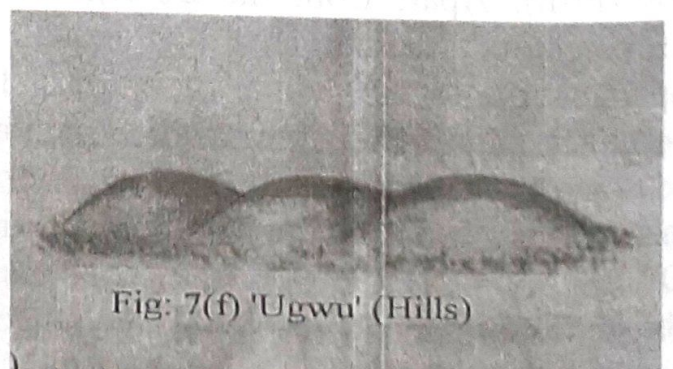


Fig: 7(f) 'Ugwu' (Hills)



Fig: 7(g) 'Kpakpando' (Star)

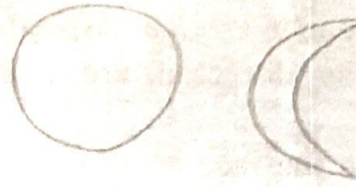


Fig: 7(h) 'Onwa' (Moon)

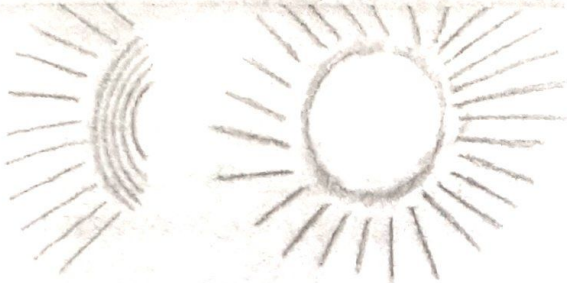


Fig: 7(i) 'Anyanwu' (Sun)

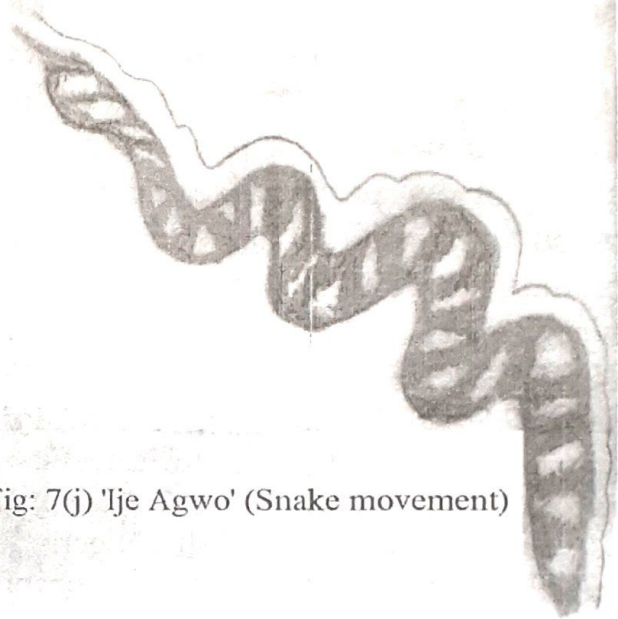


Fig: 7(j) 'Ije Agwo' (Snake movement)

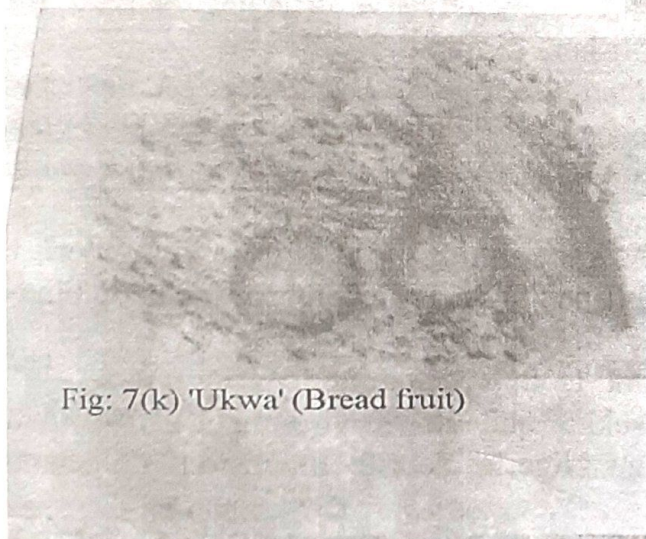


Fig: 7(k) 'Ukwa' (Bread fruit)

### Conclusion:

From the ongoing work, it is evident that traditional mural painting just like the 'Uli' motif is an age long tradition in Nsukka area in particular and Igboland in general. It is an art which is as old as the period of human occupation of the caves. It served not only aesthetic, but also religious and magical purposes amongst the people. The interaction between the Nsukka people and their immediate surrounding/environment was depicted in their mural painting motifs. Besides, the mural painting motifs amongst Nsukka people convey a lot of lexical meanings within the study area.

Traditional mural painting within Nsukka still exists, but at a reduced rate. One of the factors that limit the existence of this art is the influence of modernity.

Today, traditional architectural buildings have been replaced by corrugated iron sheeted houses with cement blocks and brick walls. In addition, the advent of Christianity has nearly eroded African traditional religion as most shrine houses where this art was depicted are demolished and their adherents converted to Christianity.

However, in the face of all these odds, traditional mural painting still exist on the walls of art galleries, museums and other resort and amusement parks throughout the country. It is therefore our contention through this paper that, in the face of the various socio-religious, political, economic, and cultural roles which this art plays, all efforts should be made towards conserving it. It is a very important aspect of our indigenous technology and hence an important aspect of our cultural patrimony. We therefore advocate for its total revival and conservation through more emphasis on its teaching in our primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions in the country. Art is creation and a gift that came directly from God. We should not allow our art to elude us; rather, we should use all possible means to protect it.

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