

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Textile Painting: Exploration of Uli Symbolic Motifpainting of the Igbo on Dyed Canvas Using Acrylic as a Medium in Contemporary Textile Art

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## Abstract

Dyed fabrics have been in existence since thousands of years ago. In the olden days, people of different cultures globally including the Igbo in South Eastern, Nigeria dyed fabrics with natural dyes extracted from animals and plants, till recently when humans started producing artificial dyes to achieve a broader range of colours, a level of fastness and availability. The Igbo dyed some cloth with the juice from some local plants and others, for instance Uli/Uri which they use to decorate the female bodies, however, this practice is almost going into extinction. This study is predicated on the fact that dyed fabrics are primarily worn on the body and the designs on the fabrics achieved through dyeing are not so new to the eyes, they are somehow monotonous. Therefore, this study is of the view that if ulipainting which consists of some symbolic motifs based on Igbo life and well-being could be incorporated on dyed canvas before painting on it, perhaps the monotony could be broken to give birth to something new, thereby preserving and showcasing these Uli motifs in art. Those textile paintings could also be framed and hung up on the walls for interior decoration. The research methodology employed in this study is studio exploration. Photography and observations were also utilized as research instruments to collect some data. This study's objective is to carry out a textile painting by adapting Uli Symbolic Motifs of the Igbo on hand dyed canvas in the studio using acrylic paints as a medium. One among the many findings of this study reveals that painting on tie dyed canvas is achievable and not so popular. It summarily recommends that other explorations in form of synergic approaches to art and design should be given attention by artists and designers to produce something new.

**Keywords:** Textile design, Painting, Uli traditional motifs, Tie-dye, Textile painting.

## 1. Introduction

Artists of today are relentlessly developing inventive areas of expression that incite new approaches (mixed media, new media, appropriation and others). In textile arts and design, for instance; resist techniques are drawing more attention to themselves. According to Meilach (1973), tie-dye resist technique is as new as they are old but still very much in use till date because they are being studied, modernized and utilized in various creative ways. Tie-dye fabrics exhibit unimaginable textures as a result of how the dyes lurk around the tied up places of the fabric. Myriads of patterns which could be created by the variations

and combinations of the ties, folds, and wraps are boundless. Meilach (1973) further reveals that fabrics could be tied and dyed with one colour, later, it could be untied, then retied in a slightly different way and re-dyed with another stronger colour. These stages could be repeated several times for endless patterns and designs. Globally, tie-dye has gained popularity, in that during the past decade, young people in the United States of America quickly adapted the easy to do method of tie-dye for individualizing their shirts, jeans, and casual clothing. Africans are not left out, in that many parts including Nigeria, the art of tie-dyeing is being practiced as an indigenous art among

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the Yoruba. They are used as wall hangings, interior decoration, clothing and many others.

However, artists are recognizing that the circles, knots, gathers, stitches, pleats, folds have a much comprehensive potential. This study is of the view that further exploration of tie-dye promises new dimensions in art. They may be combined with screen printing, batik, embroidery, lino cut print, direct painting, application of dyes and many others. Although tie-dye fabrics are being used quite often in the fashion scenes for body adornment, and in some few cases, as curtains and table covers in eateries, not much has been done in terms of synergizing it with painting. That is textile painting. The older designs are often repeated and there's really nothing so new and captivating added to tie-dyed fabrics. As if most of them look common and alike in terms of techniques and colours. Therefore, since tie-dyed fabrics are indigenous to the Yoruba in Nigeria and uli traditional motifs are also indigenous to the Igbo in Nigeria the study is of the view that if an exploration could be carried out with Uli traditional designs on tie-dyed canvas (since some of the canvas can be dyed) using acrylic as a medium, this could boost the indigenous art scene and perhaps this could also bridge the gap between textile art and painting, break the frontiers and give birth to a new mixed media approach in art.

### 1.1 Tie-dye

Globally, people practice the art of tie-dyeing. Meilach (1973) opines that the practice of tie-dyeing fabrics has been used in almost all parts of the world at some time. He further mentions that the history on how tie-dye probably began in ancient Asia and spread down the sub-Indian continent to Malaysia and across Africa has been revealed through the fabric remnants. Remains of those tie-dye textiles also date from burial grounds in China and Persia along the ancient caravan and silk routes. In the early Chinese T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 618-906), there is a proof that tie-dyed fabrics were used by them. It spread to Japan from China where expensive silk fabrics were tie-dyed for clothing the rich and priests as crafts. Until hundreds of years later, in the nineteenth century when cottons and cotton fabrics were introduced, the masses at the end were able to procure those fabrics and practice tie-dyeing. The home craft dye industry was no more after industrialization took over.

Meilach (1973) postulates that probably tie-dye might have been developed earlier in India than in Japan for the reason of the fact that the clothing of the people

portrayed in fresco paintings on the caves at Ajanta, Hyderabad (A.D. sixth and seventh centuries), possess white circular patterns similar to the tie-dye practiced by the Indians by tying circles known as "plangi." These circles were very tiny and made by placing damp fabric on a bed of nails, girls with extremely long nails would handle the picking up the points of the fabric and tie them up using an endless thread from one point to the other. This creates a line from one point tied to the other. There are some indications pointing to the spread of tie-dye from Indonesia to Thailand and Cambodia. They are still using it till date to decorate shawls, veils and sarongs for men and women of Java and Bali. In the American continent, the earliest tie-dyed fabrics date from pre-Columbian times, circles and squares were utilized quite often to produce one colour pattern. Most Americans practicing the dyeing today learnt how to dye with natural dyes from foreigners while serving at the Peace Corps. They also brought back newer ideas like bolder designs than those that originated from Asia. African nations were not left out in that they have used tie-dye methods for years and still practice them till date.

Each tie-dyed fabric from any part of the globe possess unique design and colour characteristics by which scholars have been able to study and categorize these fabrics at different times in a particular culture. The techniques employed by many cultures are essentially the same. They are tied, bound, knotted, folded and sewn in one or various layers in some cases. The sewn designs are drawn after sewing and tied tightly together before immersing into the dye bath.

### 1.2 Tie-dyeing in Africa

For centuries African artists have used the tie-dye technique to produce vibrant and colourful fabrics for apparels and decorating homes. It usually starts with a plain fabric for the base, skillfully, intricate patterns are created by twisting or tying string or small strips of thread, rope to form a resist. Many of the symbols found or displayed in African tie-dye come from the various cultures in Africa (Tijan 2018).

There are several techniques used for tie-dyeing in Africa. He further mentions that one method is to tie up the cloth in various designs or stitch up some drawn designs tightly so that the dye cannot penetrate the fabric. To achieve some other effects, a starchy substance is applied to the fabric. This will resist the dye after it must have dried before dyeing, giving the fabric pale areas on a dark background when it

is washed at the end of the dyeing process. This is more often used for two-tone tie-dye. Tie-dye has been in practice in Africa for so long especially in West Africa as it is one of the best ways that shows the true African style, diversity and culture although some people are of the opinion that African tie dye is an old fashioned culture, yet most of the symbols used in decorating African tie dyed fabrics came from different cultures in Africa. The origin of those fabrics could be recognized and placed properly from the techniques used in tying and dyeing. For instance, the tie-dyed fabrics produced in Nigeria by the Yoruba and the Hausa could be distinguished from others in West Africa by mere looking at the symbolic motifs used as the surface decoration.

According to Wolff an internet blog, *Adire* is a resist-dyed cloth produced and worn by the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria in West Africa. The word *adire*, means “tied and dyed,” was first applied to indigo-dyed cloth decorated with resist patterns around the turn of the twentieth century. With the introduction of a broader color palette of imported synthetic dyes in the second half of the twentieth century, the label “adire” was expanded to include a variety of hand-dyed textiles using wax resist batik methods to produce patterned cloth in a stunning array of dye tints and hues.

According to (Bridget 2016), production is assumed to be inborn; inherited by birth and the heritage passed on to descendants of families who were also involved in the production process. In Egba land, the craft was formerly known to be a family business. Parents passed the techniques down to their female children and the wives of their sons. For a long time, people who were not from a certain family were not allowed to partake in adire production as it was a part of the family’s heritage. She further reveals that the Adire was first produced in Jojola’s compound of Kemta, Abeokuta by Chief Mrs. Miniya Jojolola Soetan, the second Iyalode (Head of Women) of Egba land. She then passed on the process to her children and onward to the future generations. The first Adire material was made with Teru (local white attire) and Elu (local Dye) made from elu leaf which is planted in the Saki area of Oyo state.

The new colorful adire continues to meet fashion challenges and to be an alternative to machine prints in the twenty-first century. New adire appeals to the fashion-conscious Yoruba in the urban and rural areas in their non-stop changing patterns and designs. In

Nigeria one can still buy indigo-dyed adireoniko and eleko made by older women in Abeokuta and Ibadan and by artisans at the Nike Center for the Arts and Culture in Oshogbo where the artist Nike Davies-Okundaye trains students in traditional adire techniques. The Oje Market in Ibadan serves as a place where the indigo dyed are sold. This art of dyeing is being taught in various schools of art across Nigeria. Therefore, the idea of dying the canvas before painting to achieve another style and for synergy will produce appropriate results.

### 1.3 Uli Traditional Painting

In Africa, there are ancient tradition for decorating and accessorizing the body in rich and varied ways. Traditionally, many Africans wore little to cover their bodies, leaving their skin exposed and available for decoration. They adorned themselves in four general ways: scarification, body painting, beadwork and jewelry. Among these ways of body adornment is body painting. African cultures used body painting for festivities, second burial rites, and achievement of a titled status, marriage celebration and the birth of a first child.

Slogar (2001) defines body painting as a colourful art used by various African cultures to celebrate, protect and mourn. Traditionally, body paint was mixed from natural ingredients and smoothed on the skin with fingers, sticks or grasses. He goes on to give examples of various ethnic groups in Africa that have body painting as a tradition. He said that oil, clay and chalk were the most common paint ingredients, but the Dinka of Southern Sudan have in the past used ash, cattle dung and urine to make their face paint. Specific colours are used to indicate certain periods in a person’s life such as puberty, courting, and marriage among other things. Berber women in Northern Africa paint their hands and feet with intricate henna designs called *Siyala* for their weddings. (Henna is a reddish powder or paste made from the dried leaves of henna bush). But body painting is used not only for special occasions among some African groups. He gives an example that Nuba men between the ages of seventeen and thirty living in Southern Sudan wear body paint to indicate their age and apply full body decorations as a kind of daily outfit.

Nigeria is a country in West Africa with a long tradition of body modification including scarification, body painting, female genital mutilation and circumcision. In Nigeria society, there are many ethnic groups with different traditions, culture and languages. Also in



this society, specific design motifs have been valued on the basis of culture, religion, social, economic and political purposes. Some examples are the Nsibidi signs from Cross River, the Ona traditional designs of the Yoruba Land, the traditional symbols from the Southern Kaduna, the Kwoma body decorations, Uli body and wall decorations of the Igbo and the Hausa Henna designs to mention but a few.

Among these tribes that practiced body modification and mural painting were the Igbo women of the south-eastern Nigeria who decorated their bodies with beautiful patterns using a juice obtained from the pods of Uli or Uri plant that temporary stained the skin black. Udechukwu (1992) defines Uli as a female art form that was practiced traditionally in the form of body and wall painting. Both of which share the fundamental aesthetics of Uli. Willis (1987) reports that as an art form, Uli paintings express the culture of the people. The motifs represent things of physical importance, aesthetic appeal and relevance to traditional beliefs. Udechukwu (1992) asserts that almost all the Uli motifs are derived or abstracted from natural phenomena like plants, animals, manmade objects and the cosmos. They all combine to show the physical and spiritual properties of the Igbo world. She went further to stress that the

element of beautification in Uli tradition is one of its strongest characteristics and a basis in Uli aesthetic. The aesthetic quality and appeal of Uli depend on the way the motifs are created. All the motifs basically reveal an abstraction that depict the essence of the objects they are derived from and this brings about the fluidity of Uli designs.

Aniakor (1973) postulates that most of these motifs, when represented individually or combined, encode messages, sometimes aimed at harnessing for the human good, the cosmic or elemental forces that empower the Igbo Universe. He also believed that these Uli Motifs recall the patterns on the palms of the hands (Akala Aka) patterns believed by the Igbo to play a major role in the attainment of success or the fulfillment of one's destiny or ambitions in life. The Uli tradition has been of great antiquity even though its time and origin has not been pinpointed.

Chukuegu (2003) cited Egonwa (2003) and says that the excavation at Igbo – Ukwu by Thurstan Shaw dated 9<sup>th</sup> century AD bore Uli Motifs. He went ahead by saying that some of these excavated art objects included: well decorated metal wares, shells, roped pots, glass beads and ornaments. These can be viewed on plates I to 2.

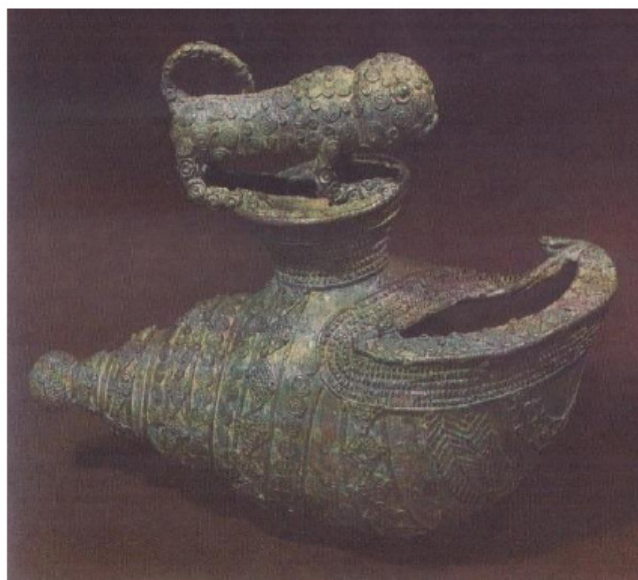


Plate 1

IGBO UKWU: Bronze snail. 9th Century A.D. Nat. Mus. Lagos. Source: Eyo (1990).



Plate 2

IGBO UKWU: Bronze Crescentic bowl. 9th Century A.D. Nat. Mus. Lagos. Source: Eyo (1990).

Willet (1973) emphasizes that life styles of Africans are linked with their political, social and religious practices. He further expressed regret over the alarming speed with which this rich cultural heritage

and tradition are declining. Alau cited Newman (1974), and is of the same view that African Traditional heritage is likely to disappear.

## 1.4 Painting

Painting is the act or process of using paint. The paint can create an artwork known as a painting, or it can be used more practically as a protective coating or form of decoration (Gallery 2021). Paintings are a form of visual art that captures the expression of ideas and emotions on a two-dimensional surface. Painting can also be defined as the process of applying paint, or another medium, to a solid surface – usually a canvas. Paints or other forms of color are commonly applied to surfaces using a paintbrush. However, artists do use different tools such as sponges, spray paint, or even knives. In the art world, the term “painting” is used to describe both the act of painting and the resulting artwork created by the action. An artist can both be painting as action and create an object known as a painting.

Encyclopedia Britannica, defines acrylic painting as painting executed in the medium of synthetic acrylic resins. Acrylics dry rapidly, serve as a vehicle for any kind of pigment, and are capable of giving both the transparent brilliance of watercolour and the density of oil paint. They are considered to be less affected by heat and other destructive forces than is oil paint. They found favour among artists who were concerned about the health risks posed by the handling of oil paints and the inhalation of fumes associated with them. Because of all these desirable characteristics, acrylic paints became immediately popular with artists when they were first commercially promoted in the 1960s. Notable 20th-century artists who used acrylic paint include Pop artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, Op artist Bridget Riley, colour field artists Mark Rothko, Ellsworth Kelly, and Barnett Newman, and British artist David Hockney. However there are different media in painting but this study concentrates on acrylic painting.

## 1.5 Canvas

The fabric used for most canvases are either linen or cotton. Out of the two, linen is regarded as the best due to the quality of the surface and its durability, however, it is also very expensive. Cotton is a more affordable option that provides an excellent surface of suitably durable quality. With the use of acrylics, one can paint straight onto the canvas, as it will not sink into the material like oils. Gallery (2021) describes a canvas as a durable plain-woven fabric usually made from cotton or hemp yarn. It is used to create crafts and paintings.

Many of the world’s most iconic paintings were made on canvas. It is also popularly used by artists as a painting surface, typically stretched across a wooden frame. Stretched cotton canvas is the surface used most often by professional artists, for its cloth weave and spring. In recent times, canvas is usually made of cotton or linen, or sometimes polyvinyl chloride (PVC), although historically it was made from hemp. It is durable and sturdy. By blending cotton with synthetic fibers, canvas can become water resistant or even waterproof, making it a great outdoor fabric. The extremely thick plain weave used in canvas makes it superbly durable – and perfect for uses that involve rough treatment and high pressure levels. Canvas is a traditional support for painting, used for centuries by the masters, and it has endured in modern times as the support of choice. There are 2 main reasons why artists prefer to paint on canvas, its pleasing receptivity to the brush and longevity. In the past, some objects like hard wood have also been used traditionally to create permanent art, but canvas is much lighter and easier to transport. The fabrics used as canvas are natural fibers that are woven together and then stretched over a frame or glued to a panel. Each fiber comes in different textures or weights. The texture depends on the weave, so a finely woven canvas is smooth and best suited to small, detailed works. A rough texture is preferred by painters who like bold brushstrokes and larger paintings. The weight is dependent on the thread density and is measured in ounces per yard. The higher the weight, the better the quality. Linen is said to be the best of the best and expensive and has a permanence characteristic. On the other hand some money can be saved by using a high-quality cotton duck canvas, which should weigh from 12-15 oz. It is cheaper than linen, but is still a suitable choice for permanent paintings. Canvas for acrylic painting is usually stretched over a wooden frame (called stretcher bars) and then primed with glue that creates a surface receptive to the paint. Unlike oils, acrylics will adhere to an unprimed canvas, but the colors may be somewhat dull compared to acrylics painted onto a primed canvas. Also, the texture of canvas will be more prominent on an unprimed canvas. Cotton and linen are textiles made of natural fibres, therefore they have high affinity for dyes. Therefore they are very suitable for this studio exploration.

## 1.6 Textile Painting

Textile painting is a very old practice (study.com- an

internet blog). For centuries people have painted on fabric, creating beautiful wearable art and striking wall hangings. Many methods can be employed in painting on textiles for instance dyeing, printing and hand painting. It could be any method of using a brush or other manual means to put pigment onto fabric which results to a unique work. In this context textile painting is the synergy of any textile design and painting with acrylic, oils or gauche. This will be experimented on in the studio.

### 1.7 Statement of the Problem

Although this art of dyeing fabrics has become common in that the techniques are being taught in various schools of art and some vocational centres, the results are almost the same thing. The dyed fabrics still bear the same characteristics they've had since the time they came into existence except that an array of synthetic dyes are utilized more instead of only indigo dyes. The surface decorations achieved by tying and dyeing still remains the same with little or no difference. Also they are mostly utilized for body adornment, hotel and home furnishing. The problem of this study is that nothing captivating is being added to this technique to make it more appreciated. Hence, this study is of the view that if this technique could be used to dye some pieces of canvas before painting with acrylic colours, perhaps this might produce some art pieces that could be thought- provoking, attract more attention and behung up in places solely for aesthetics purposes. In that manner, the technique of tie-dyeing will be revived and kept alive in art as textile painting. Consequently, this study carried out some explorations of uli symbolic motif painting of the Igbo on tie- dyed

canvas using acrylic as a medium to establish if this technique could yield positive results.

## 2. Objective of the Study

1. To ascertain if painting on tie-dyed canvas with acrylics could yield appropriate results.

### 2.1 Research Question

1. In what ways can the tie-dyed canvas produce appropriate results in painting using acrylics as a medium?

### 2.2 Population of the Study

The population of the study is all the Uli traditional symbols the researcher found.

### 2.3 Methodology

This is a qualitative research. The study adopted studio exploratory method as the research design. Photography and observations were also utilized as research instruments.

### 2.4 Collection of Uli Traditional Design Motifs (raw materials) for Painting

They were collected from the documentation by willis (1987) and chudi-duru (2011).

### 2.5 Studio Exploration Materials

**They are as follows :**Acrylic paints of different colours, Dye stuffs and chemicals (caustic soda and sodium hydros) for dyeing, Canvas(sturdy fabric), Wooden frame as a stretcher, Staple gun and pins, Glue for priming, Sets of brushes, Water, Equipment for dyeing: stove, pot, gloves, ropes, nasal mask, spoon, stick, bucket, basin, Palette.



Plate 3. Materials used for studio exploration.

Source: Chika Chudi-duru (2022)



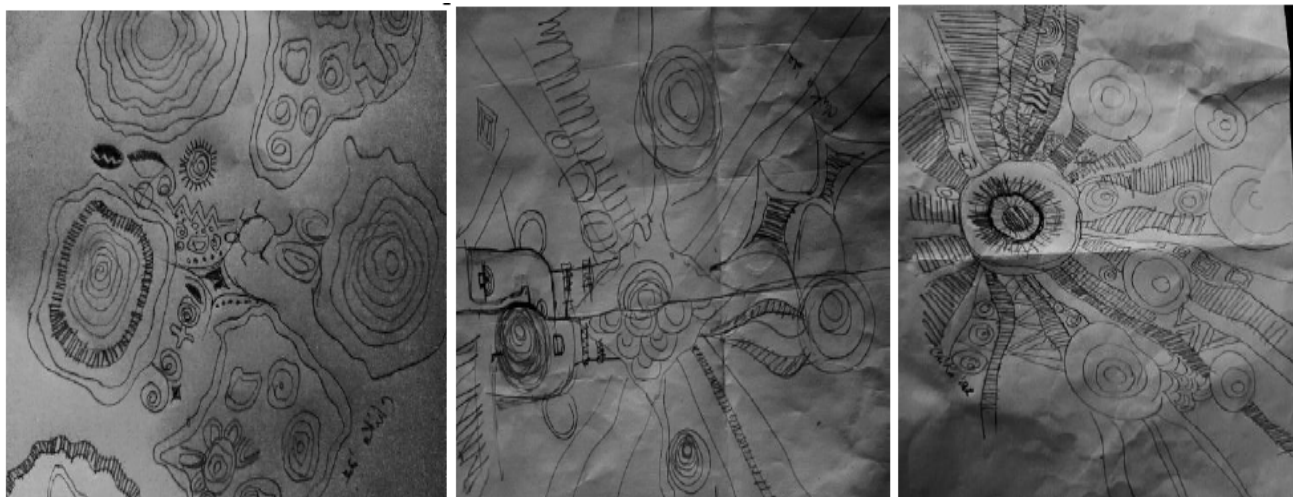


Plate 4. sketches used as guide for studio exploration.

Source: Chika Chudi-duru (2022)

### 3. Methods

1. The first thing to be done is to wash the plain canvas to ensure a surface free of dirt or any sort of finishing and sizing which the fabric passed through during its production.
2. Dyeing of the canvas with one or two colours depending on what the artist wants. The colours to be dyed should not be many in order to accommodate the acrylic colours used in painting. The artist made used hot water to mix the dye
3. Stretching of the dyed canvas on a wooden frame using a staple gun.
4. Priming the stretched dyed canvas using glue (top bond) with the help of a roller or brush.
5. After the priming has dried, the painting commences.
6. Varnishing the artwork with an acrylic fixative spray.

#### 3.1 Studio Exploration



Plate 5. Plain canvas material.

Source: Chika Chudi-duru (2021)



Plate 6. dyeing of the canvas material.

Source: Chika Chudi-duru (2021)



Plate 7. dyed canvas.

Source: Chika Chudi-duru (2021)



Plates 8 &9. primed dyed canvas stretched on wooden frame ready for painting.

Source: Chika Chudi-duru (2021)

In the studio experiments, the same processes were utilized in all three explorations.



## 4. Results and Analysis

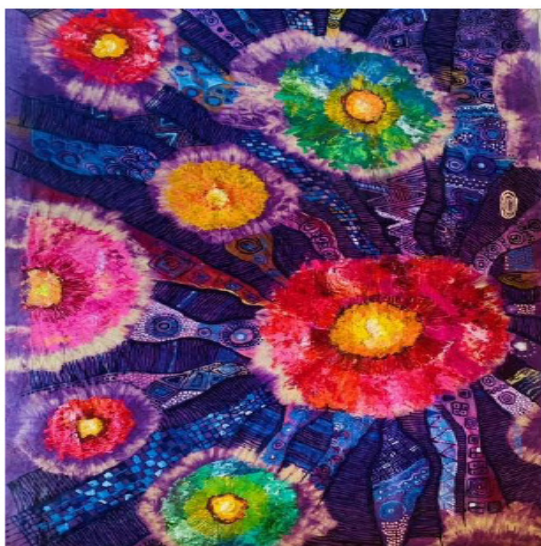


Plate 10. Chika Chudi-duru(2021). “The source”. Acrylic on tie-dyed canvas (mixed media). 79cm x 147cm



Plate 11. Chika Chudi-duru (2021). “The gathering”. Acrylic on tie-dyed canvas(mixed media). 69cmx92cm.

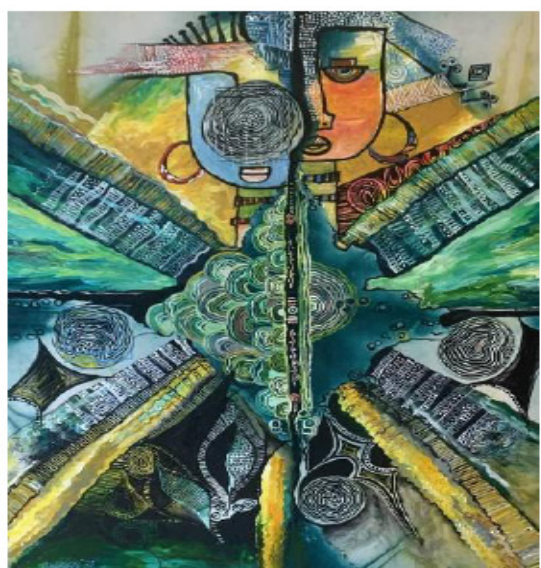


Plate 12. Chika Chudi-duru (2021). “Two daughters”. Acrylic on tie-dyed canvas (mixed media). 69cmx92cm.

In plate 10, the textile painting untitled. But the artist derived some inspirations from the designs that emanated from the dyed fabrics. The dyed designs in plate 7 are in concentric forms, which gave rise to the painted flowers. The flowers are also enclosed in those dyed circles leaving some of the dyed areas unpainted. The uli traditional motifs are used to define what looks like a connection to the source. This is a mixed media art, a synergy of textile designs and painting.

In plate 11, the textile painting titled “*the gathering*,” showcases the assemblage of uli traditional motifs symbolizing a crowd, rowdy meetings, rallies, assembly, conference, congress, interviews, and convention in a typical Nigerian setting. It reminds the artist of some interviews attended by her that was chaotic and very rowdy and filled with bashing and pushing. There was a state of complete disorder and confusion everywhere. Those outside the arena were struggling to come into the arena then those security personnel manning the gate resolved to batter. The uli traditional motifs symbolizes those that came to the gathering and the round discs symbolize the inner room where the interview was taking place. This is a mixed media art. It comprises of acrylic painting on tie-dyed canvas.

In plate 12, titled “*the two daughters*”, one could see two female figures, comprising of the first and second daughters in the Igbo family. The artist showcased the rivalry that springs up sometimes between the first daughter (Ada) and the second daughter (Ulu). The first female in this painting is ulu and the second female here is ada. Ulu, knowing that she is the second feels neglected most times and tries to force her views on all. She tries to overshadow the ada in everything because she feels that she is playing the second fiddle (spare). That explains the concentric circles covering her eyes and her being placed in front of the elder sister. She tries to project herself as the best. And feels jealous over the relationship between the father and the ada. She is a bit boisterous over her achievements and tries to measure up to her elder sister. The artist is interested in the family set ups and societal happenings. And inspired by what happens in the family setting and the community at large.

The artist uses a postmodernist approach in her textile painting. She pushes aside the African technique and ideas to embrace a unique African approach to art with the aim to obtain some insights from African

traditional art. To achieve this, she utilizes uli traditional hand painting symbols and motifs of the Igbo and the tie-hand dyeing techniques of the Yoruba – Nigeria on the canvas. Her works vocalize African thoughts. Also, the uli traditional painting could be seen in the painting on dyed canvas creating an impression which challenges the old ways of dyeing for clothing only.

## 5. Conclusion

This study concludes by revealing that there are little or no art works as regards to acrylic painting on tie-dye canvas. Most tie-dye fabrics are either worn or utilized for furnishing. Tie-dyed canvas have some results which were achieved through dyeing and when painted on produced some thought provoking textile paintings which could be framed and hung on the walls for interior decoration. Uli traditional motif symbols of the Igbo were adapted to produce appropriate results in this study.

## 6. Recommendation

This study is of the view that experiments on tie-dyed canvas have not been sufficiently explored. Therefore, it suggests that more studio experiments in form of innovations should be engaged by artists and designers with various techniques and materials in dyeing so as to keep the dyeing tradition alive and open more channels of making textile-painting more interesting.

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