

*Axiomatic Dimensional Analysis of Art in the Visual Culture of
the Ibibio People of Nigeria*

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The Barcelona Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The research into visual culture, vis-à-vis art praxis and product, keeps on turning up as tangential to the history, context and practice of socio-cultural variables prevalent in specific cultural settings, despite the fundamentality of image flows and visual technologies in both the rural and urban domains of contemporary society. This study focused on this hiatus, first by presenting a detailed account of the central concepts and theoretical principles of visual culture in relation to their art in contemporary cultural milieu. It expressed some distinctive noticeable behavioural patterns of the Ibibio people in various forms, such as, indigenous fashion, pottery, native textile production, sculpture, painting and decoration, aboriginal drawings, music, and dance, among others. The study also articulated the creative abilities of the people which are manifested in their visual arts, folk songs and **nsibidi** writing – the original writing of the Ibibio people. The objectives of this study were to analyze the evolving trends of visual culture in both the rural and urban centres of the Ibibio society and to assess the dimensions of the art tradition relative to the extant visual cultural practice. The study benefited from thematic analysis as a method of interpreting patterns and meanings in the data obtained. It is expected that appropriately directed and controlled elements of the visual culture of the Ibibio people can contribute to critical introspective enquiry of the framework and substance of the visual culture of the Ibibio people to boost sustainable visual culture of the people in Nigeria.

Keywords: Art, Visual Culture, Ibibio People, Axiomatic Dimensional Analysis, Behavioural Patterns

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Introduction

The making and usage of art among the Ibibio people of Nigeria, as in other cultural settings in Africa and beyond, is a crucial index of the visual culture of her people. Every society, whether traditional or contemporary, obviously flaunts some unique perceptible behavioural patterns by which they interact, express their ideas or communicate among themselves. These perceptible behavioural patterns may be in the form of dress/dressing, speech, dance, gesticulation, mannerism or *art*, among others, and constitute the culture of the people.

The culture of a people is predicated upon the behavioural pattern of that people. Thus, culture can be defined as the “shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization” (Banks and McGee, 1989). These shared patterns identify the members of that culture group and, at the same time, distinguish those of another group. Banks and McGee (1989) further opine that today, culture can be viewed “as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies”. They are also of the opinion that the essence of a culture is not its artefacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another (or the others) in modernized societies. Therefore, it can be deduced that culture emanates from learning and sharing human patterns or models for day-to-day living among members of a given society or group. These shared patterns or models pervade all facets of human social transactions and cultural practice.

Cultural practice commonly denotes the materialization of a culture or sub-culture, especially in regard to the traditional or customary practices of a particular ethnic or other cultural grouping. In its broadest sense, the term cultural practice can relate to any person or persons exhibiting any characteristic of any culture at any time. This, in practical standard, however, often refers to the traditional practices developed within specific ethnic cultures, particularly, those facets of culture that have been practiced since ancient times. These perceptible cultural elements aptly denote that society’s visual culture.

Visual Culture

There are distinguishable visible features and tenets which identify and portray every society of the world: these, together, make up the visual culture of that society. Visual culture, thus, is a term that refers to the tangible, or visible, expressions by a people, a state or a civilization, and collectively describes the characteristics of that body as a whole (Kelly, n.d.). It is also a way of studying visuals through the use of art history, humanities, sciences, and social sciences. In fact, it is interwoven with everything that the eye can see – people, animals, cars, buildings, landscapes, advertisements, photographs, arts (paintings, sculptures, graphic arts, ceramic arts, textile arts, among others), movies, activities, apparels and, practically, anything within our culture – that communicates through visual means. The *Ibibio* princess in cultural attire (fig. 1.) and the Benin ivory mask (fig. 2.) are just two examples of visuals which are entrenched in the visual culture of two Nigerian societies. Visual culture, essentially, focuses on production, reception, and intention, as well as economical, social, and ideological aspects of life (Schleimer, 2008). It reflects the culture of the variable and analyzes how the visual aspect affects it. Schleimer (2008) further avers that “visual culture highlights issues concerning the visible object and the viewer – the interrelationship of sight, knowledge and power”.



Fig. 1. An Ibibio princess in a cultural attire



Fig. 2. Benin ivory mask

Taking into account the social, economic and educational atrophy that many traditional Ibibio artists – trainees and experts alike – face, the concern towards pecuniary exploit above social and ethical achievement engages a much higher stratum than any proficient or academic sophistication on some abstract models that underpin the production of art. The study of the visual culture of the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria thus interrogates the visual cultural forms that go beyond the frontiers of media. In fact, it presents an enquiry into what meanings they generate in the different settings where they come into play. For instance, do Ibibio artists in the contemporary milieu care about how their works are perceived, evaluated, processed, and classified? Do they care about contributing to visual culture discourses in an environment where society is principally nonchalant about an incomprehensible discussion that blossoms primarily on absolute academicism? Does it matter that the arts of the Ibibio people are classified as modern or contemporary, popular or traditional? What is the position of the artists on the visual culture in the contemporary dispensation?

Visuals are ubiquitous: they are found along roads, streets, in homes, offices, streams, bushes, forests, at shopping malls, or even on the Internet (Sampson and Sampson, 2020). Expressed in packaging, signs, logos, bills, receipts, leaflets, books, mobile phones, appliances, advertisements, graphic designs, films, typography, body prettification, and countless other examples, visuals convey messages and play very vital roles in the culture of a given people. In the contemporary circumstances, it is apparent that people in a particular cultural setting find themselves enveloped and, even, bombarded by images. Thus, the evaluation of a visual culture is mainly based on measuring comprehension by the audience within the cultural setting, not on personal aesthetic and/or artistic preference, as the “aesthetic principles that people value in art change dramatically from decade to decade” (Kreie, n.d.). Visual culture is expressed not only in two-dimensional or three-dimensional images, but in several other ways as well, including gesticulations and body language (figs. 3 and 4), puppetry, animation (digital or analogue), and film.



Fig. 3. Children playing



Fig. 4. Ibibio maidens in a cultural dance

The offerings of visual culture embrace perspectives that address a number of cultural problems by interrogating visual cultural forms that transcend the boundaries of media. It presents an enquiry into what meanings they generate in the different settings where they come into play, what histories they have, where they can be seen, the different forms they take, and the forgotten or invisible indices as the phenomenon re-emerges in new settings over time. A recent study (by Kari Andén-Papadopoulos) of the history of the photograph of New York firemen raising a flag in the ruins of the World Trade Centre (fig. 5) is an example, as she traced its use through a range of display forms and interviewed people about what this controversial image meant to them (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2004).

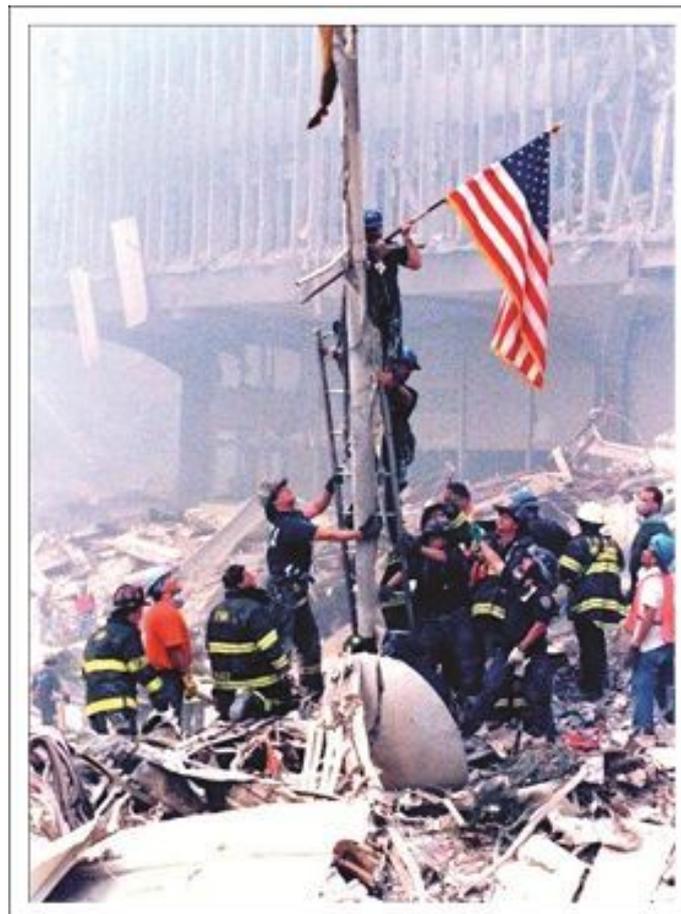


Fig. 5. New York firemen raising a flag in the ruins of the World Trade Centre

Art in the Contemporary Milieu

In the contemporary setting, the visual environment is clustered with, and barraged by, a plethora of images. Expressed in packaging, signs, logos, bills, receipts, leaflets, books, mobile phones, appliances, advertisements, graphic designs, films, typography, body prettification, and countless other examples, art conveys messages and plays very vital roles in the visual culture of any given society. On a daily basis, people use, come across or are influenced by a sizeable number of visuals which, consequently, find expressions in the visual culture of the environment they find themselves. This situation, typified as an image flow, increases in its concentration as the channels and bases of image creation and circulation are apt to assume a geometrical progression of expansion. Art, vis-à-vis, the visual arts, is usually considered the most common means of information dissemination, of self expression, and of inspiration to others. These play vital roles in the development and utilization of the visual culture of the Ibibio people of Nigeria.

Dimensions of Art in the Visual Culture of the Ibibio People

The visual culture of the Nigerian people embraces munificent facets/amount of art. Opposed to extant contemporary art tradition, the art practice among the Ibibio people is not skewed towards definite art specialties such as graphics, painting, or sculpture, but is open to an implausible exploration of local and universal ideas, whether formal, informal or semi-formal. The art is not classified into groups with regard to which genre they belong, or the methodical connections and disparities, within the practice (Hughes, n.d.). Yet, products thereof are set to be exhibited to both local and international audiences when the need arises. The goals and dynamics of art practice in the contemporary Ibibio setting have changed, and have become much more diverse and free because of the need of the times. This, as with any African creative work, is a direct manifestation of the contingent ambience within this very setting. Each art practitioner or group of practitioners engages in a sole venture or adventure. As a corollary, each of the works so created, exhibits a substantiation of adventurism and, in the opinion of Hughes (n.d.), “evidence of experimentation, of research, and an openness that seek to break the barriers of cultural stagnation through the combination of emotional and intellectual acuity”. Since culture is dynamic and prone to manipulation and change, the creative designs produced currently by the Ibibio artists are but a “fabric of the cosmopolitan melting pot, a protean of its past, a reality of its present and a determinant of its future” (Hughes, n.d.). The art of the Ibibio people is not only directional, but purposive, and ranges from two-dimensional designs to three-dimensional art forms. These find expressions in sculpture, textile design and production, architecture, pottery and painting/graphics, not necessarily in the modern sense of the specialties, but in the basic understanding thereof.

Art practice among the Ibibio people is, in the view of Sampson (2018), “predicated upon the need of the tradition or custom of the people, such as rites of passage, coronations and seasonal festivals”. Other reasons for creating works of art hinge on the demands for some of these arts to enhance self-esteem, pride and the advancement of the dignity of some prominent individuals within the society. Such artworks are not just art for art sake, but carefully crafted designs that bear important narratives to the anticipated rationale.

Sculpture – Mud sculptures and wood carvings

The sculptural art of the Ibibio people are majorly mud sculptures and wood carvings. They manifest in the likelihood of baby dolls, divination figures/figurines, puppet figures and masks for various masquerades such as *Ekong*, *Ekpo*, *Akata* and *Ekpe*, and many more.



Fig. 6. Ibibio puppet carvin



Fig. 7. *Ekong* puppet figure



Fig. 8. Ibibio mask for Ekpo masquerade



Fig. 9. Ekpo masquerade mask (with fibrous attachment)



Fig. 10. Ekpo masquerade displaying his dance steps

Architecture:

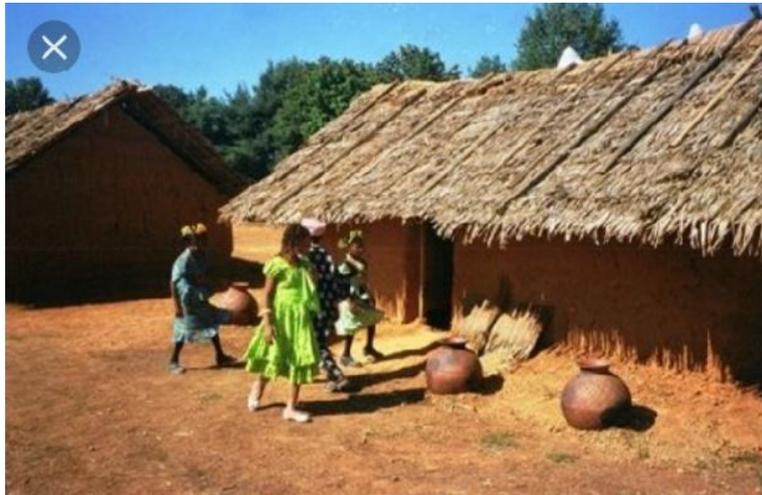


Fig. 11. Traditional architecture of the Ibibio people

Textile design and production:



Fig. 12. Textile design/product



Fig. 13. Ibibio visual culture expressed in tufted textile art



Fig. 14. Maidens dancing in traditional attire

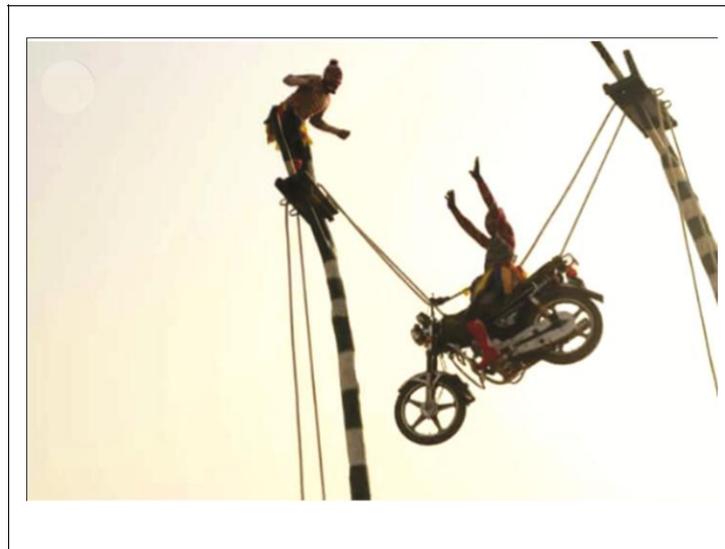


Fig. 15. Utu-ekpe (traditional gymnastics)

Pottery:



Fig. 16. Decorative earthen pot for divination

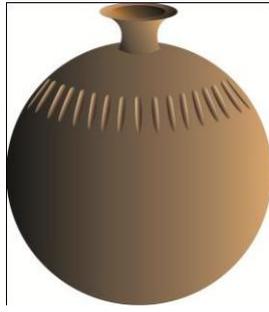


Fig. 17. Abang-idim
(pot for fetching water)

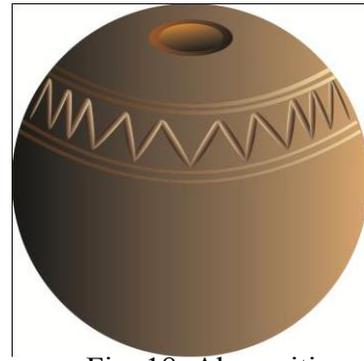


Fig. 18. Abang-itie
(pot for water storage)

Painting/graphics

The concept of painting and graphics in the Ibibio traditional setting is rather adversative to contemporary comprehension of the idea. For instance, there is no clear delineation between painting and graphics: paintings are mostly graphically rendered. These include, but are not limited to, body prettification, mural painting, nsibidi graphical symbols, and many more. Nsibidi, a complex of sacred/secret writings, is made up of signs and symbols (figs.); the use thereof plays a vital role therein, and in other art specialties such as textiles. The majority of the decorative patterns observable in Ibibio arts originates from Nsibidi symbols. That is to say that many of the art forms evidenced in Ibibio traditional art milieu have allusion to the graphic symbols of Nsibidi. They are, as well, conceptually inspired in the visual culture of the Ibibio people through traditional art forms such as carvings, sculptures, paintings/drawings/graphics, pottery and textiles, among others (Sampson, 2016).

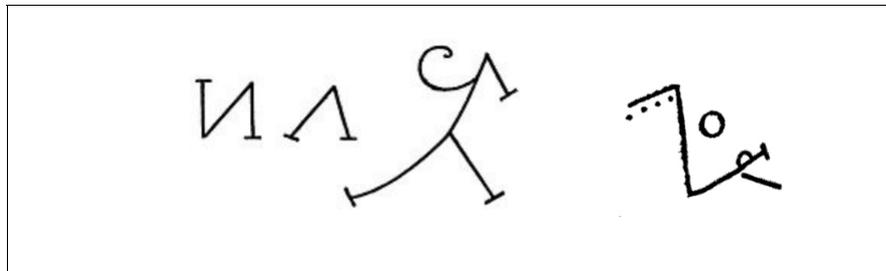


Fig. 19. Early nsibidi symbols
Source: nsibidi.wikia.com/wiki/Nsibidi



Fig. 20. *Ekara*
(circles)



Fig. 21. *Esio-uwat*
(brass pot)



Fig. 22. *Nyoi-uyai*
(beauty spots)



Fig. 23. *Ibit*
(talking drum)

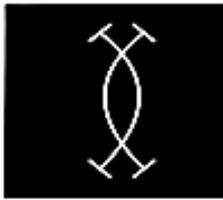


Fig. 24. *Ima*
(love)

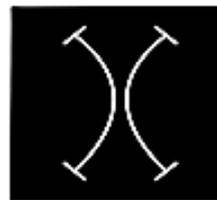


Fig. 25. *Utok*
(quarrel)

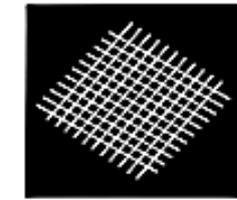


Fig. 26. *Ukeng*
(sieve)



Fig. 27. *Ufim-idem*
(fan)



Fig. 28. *Nnutokuhim-grong*
(ram's horn)



Fig. 29. *Nsibidi*
(sign language)

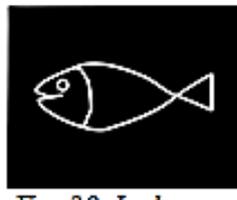


Fig. 30. *Ivak*
(fish)



Fig. 31. *Ivakitpök*
(scaly fish)



Fig. 32. *Niantaefiong*
(star)



Fig. 33. *Uwaak ofiong*
(half moon)

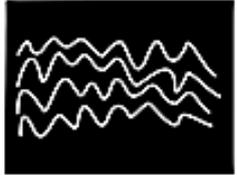


Fig. 34. *Mbufti*
(wave)



Fig. 35. *Isorö*
(squatting)

Figs. 20 – 35: Some Nsibidi symbols (excerpts from Nsentip, 2008:65 – 67)



Fig. 36. Adaptation of nsibidi in art production



Figs. 37/38. Application of nsibidi design on facial prettification

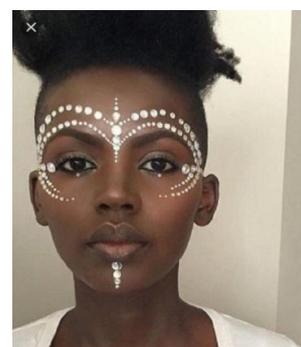




Fig. 39/40. Wall paintings
Source: University of Uyo (Town Campus), Nigeria



Fig. 41. Decorative art of the Ibibio people
Source: University of Uyo (Town Campus), Nigeria

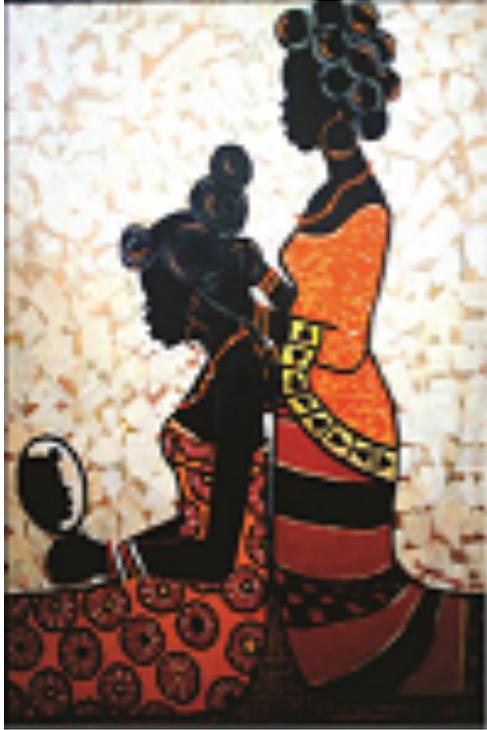


Fig. 42. Painting done with natural colours



Fig. 43. Hand-painted relief print

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custom of the people, such as rites of passage, coronations and seasonal festivals” (Sampson, 2018).

Conclusion

Visual culture portrays the collective substantiation that overlies the boundaries of the varying approaches understanding culture – whether sociological, anthropological, political or religious, and the problems encountered in an attempt to outline the boundaries between them. The features ascribed to that evidence provide a conduit towards expressing the collective identity of that people and their unique way of thinking.

The visual environment today is clustered with, and bombarded by, an overabundance of images expressed in diverse forms. Art communicates messages and plays very fundamental roles in the visual culture of any given society, especially, as it is usually deemed a universal means of information dissemination, of self expression, and of inspiration to others. These play vital roles in the development and utilization of the visual culture of the Ibibio people of Nigeria.

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