Gendered Inscriptions of Cultural Devoirs in Nneka Odoh's Uli Paintings

By

Egwu, Ifeanyi Ogbonnia
Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
ifeanyiegwu@gmail.com
08036537603

Abstract

This article examines how Nneka Odoh's Uli-based paintings may be read as a feminist reclamation of an art history that has too often separated the Igbo women originators of Uli from the modern acclaim generated by its later academic adaptation. Historically, Uli was a body and mural art practised principally by Igbo women. Its formal qualities – lyrical lines, asymmetry, elegance, abstraction, and the expressive activation of negative space – were inseparable from women's art, authority, ritual knowledge, and social visibility. In the twentieth century, the Uli revival associated with the Nsukka school translated that vernacular system into a major modernist idiom. While that development secured Uli a prominent place in Nigerian modernism, it also enabled a gendered redistribution of art-historical recognition, whereby male artists often emerged as the most visible interpreters of a female-authored visual language. Drawing on Nkiru Nzegwu's theorisation of gender transmogrification in African art history, alongside more recent scholarship on Uli women painters and Igbo women's authority, this paper argues that Odoh's paintings are significant in this interrogation – not simply because they employ Uli forms, but because they return those forms to the representation of women's embodied and reproductive labour. Read through the paintings Mother and Child, If Our Dreams Slip, No Room for Outsiders, and Thought, Odoh's practice transforms Uli from a generalised sign of Igbo identity into a specifically gendered archive through which maternity, exclusion, emotional endurance, domestic resilience, and female subjecthood are made visible. The paper adopts a thematic and historiographic method, grounding its claims in the artist's documented institutional and exhibition presence and in the wider formal and conceptual field of contemporary Uli revival. In this

framework, Odoh emerges as an important contemporary artist whose work helps recover Uli as a female intellectual and aesthetic inheritance rather than merely a stylistic source for modernist experiment.

Keywords
Uli, Nneka Odoh, Nsukka school, gender, Igbo women, African modernism, feminist art history, reproductive labour, cultural devoirs

Introduction

In the writing of modern Nigerian art history, few cases reveal the gender politics of inheritance as sharply as Uli. Uli originated as an Igbo women's art of body and wall painting, but its modern critical visibility has been shaped disproportionately by the Nsukka school, whose leading interpreters have often been men. This tension is not trivial. It raises foundational questions about authorship, cultural transmission, and the terms on which tradition becomes modernism. When a historically female visual language enters the university studio, the gallery, and the critical essay, who is recognised as its legitimate theorist, innovator, and custodian? Whose labour becomes source, and whose labour becomes art? These questions are central to understanding the significance of Nneka Odoh's Uli-based paintings.

This article argues that Odoh's paintings should be understood as an intervention in that contested genealogy. More than a continuation of Nsukka formalism, her Uli-based imagery may be read as a gendered reoccupation of a female art tradition whose modern prestige has often eclipsed its women makers. By mobilising Uli to visualise women's corporeality, maternity, caregiving, domestic work, social resilience, and emotional struggle, Odoh shifts the terms of Uli modernism from a largely formal discourse of line and abstraction to a feminist discourse of embodied authority. Her work matters because it returns Uli to the terrain from which it historically drew its force: women's knowledge, women's labour, and women's control over the inscriptions of social beauty and continuity.

This claim has both art-historical and theoretical stakes. Art-historically, it calls for a rebalancing of Nigerian modernist narratives that celebrate the appropriation of Uli by academically trained painters while under-examining women modernists working in the same field. Theoretically, it suggests that Uli cannot be treated

merely as a stylistic reservoir. As recent scholarship has emphasised, Uli was not only an idiom of line but part of a wider Igbo aesthetic and social order grounded in women's artistry, communal making, and vernacular philosophies of beauty, rhythm, and relation. To read Uli in modern painting without attention to this gendered history is to repeat the very erasure that Nkiru Nzegwu identifies when she critiques the gender transmogrification of African art history.

The paper proceeds in six parts. First, it reconstructs Uli as a woman's archive and domain of authority. Second, it situates the Nsukka school's Uli revival within the broader making of Nigerian modernism while identifying the gender asymmetries embedded in that revival. Third, it turns to Nzegwu's feminist theory and related scholarship on Igbo women's authority to build an interpretive framework. Fourth, it locates Nneka Odoh within contemporary Uli discourse through her institutional and exhibition record. Fifth, it develops a thematic analysis of the gendered inscriptions in Odoh's Uli-based paintings, focusing on line, embodiment, maternity, domesticity, exclusion, and the social labour of women. Finally, it argues that Odoh's work helps maintain Uli as a female enterprise within modern art, not by rejecting modernism, but by re-gendering it from within.

Uli as Women's Art: Line, Embodiment, and Social Authority



Fig. 1 Nneka Odoh, *No Room for Outsiders,* Oil on Canvas (2005)

Any sustained argument about gender in Uli-based modern painting must begin with the historical character of Uli itself. Scholarship describes Uli as a body and mural art practised primarily by Igbo women across southeastern Nigeria. The term refers both to the dye produced from specific plants and to the designs made with that dye on skin or on walls. Although body painting and wall painting differed in scale and occasion, they shared a formal language of elegant line, asymmetry, inventive abstraction, and responsive negative space. These visual qualities were not detachable from the social world that produced them. Uli was ephemeral, but not minor; vernacular, but not unsophisticated; communal, but also marked by individual virtuosity and improvisation.

Uli should therefore not be reduced to an ornament. It conveyed a holistic worldview in which beauty, environment, body, rhythm, and social meaning were interwoven. The motifs were often drawn from nature and everyday life, yet they transformed natural forms into signs of relation, balance, and movement. Later scholarship confirms that Uli participated in an artistic cosmology linking aesthetics to sociality, shrine space, body adornment, and collective life. Such a framework matters because it means that Uli was from the start a system of thought in visual form.

Equally important is the fact that this system was sustained by women. Traditional Uli was a vernacular art form performed by women, and mural painting in particular often involved communal labour - not only the women who executed the designs, but also those who prepared pigments, fetched water, and supported the work as a festive social event. In the classical Uli context, authorship moved through collaboration, apprenticeship, and gendered expertise. The art was passed down from mother to daughter and through other informal female networks. It therefore belonged to a domain of women's cultural authority, even when it appeared on domestic or shrine architecture rather than in officially recognised high-art spaces.

To describe Uli as a woman's authority is not to romanticise an undifferentiated feminine culture. Rather, it is worth noting that Uli was one of the media through which Igbo women shaped the visible order of social life. They marked celebratory

bodies, transformed walls, and mediated important occasions through design. Their artistic work was inseparable from broader female roles within Igbo society, where women possessed forms of political, ritual, and economic agency often obscured by colonial and patriarchal interpretations. Uli should therefore be placed alongside these other forms of women's agency rather than treated as decorative surplus.

This historical framing matters for Odoh because her work enters not an empty medium but a medium already charged with questions of female inheritance. When a contemporary woman painter deploys Uli today, she is not merely citing an indigenous style. She is engaging a lineage of women's inscription. The line carries historical memory. It also carries the possibility of returning that memory to a modern view.

From Vernacular Women's Practice to Nsukka Modernism

The modern afterlife of Uli is closely tied to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In the decades after Nigerian independence and especially after the civil war, artists associated with Nsukka sought to develop a modernism rooted in local sign systems rather than colonial academic models. Uli proved central to that effort. The language of line, asymmetry, attenuation, and negative space offered a powerful indigenous resource for postcolonial artistic experimentation, and it became one of the most recognisable markers of the Nsukka school.

This development was historically significant. It helped establish a Nigerian modernism that was neither a simple imitation of Europe nor a nostalgic retreat into ethnographic tradition. By translating Uli into drawing, painting, printmaking, and other media, Nsukka artists affirmed that indigenous African forms could generate serious modern art. Yet this achievement has a paradoxical underside. The modern success of Uli at Nsukka often travelled through artists, institutions, and exhibitions that foregrounded male practitioners. A woman's vernacular system could thus become art-historically legible under predominantly male signatures.

Recent scholarship has addressed this problem directly. While Nsukka artists helped prolong Uli by appropriating it into contemporary practice, this very appropriation also intensified the shadow cast over the work of classical Uli women painters. The binary of traditional women makers versus contemporary academic innovators subtly reproduced a hierarchy in which the former were construed as pre-modern while the latter acquired discursive prestige as interpreters of modernity. Revival, in this sense, can preserve and reorder recognition at the same time.

This is the point at which the issue becomes gendered in a particularly sharp way. Male Nsukka artists undoubtedly made consequential contributions to the survival and transformation of Uli. But if art history celebrates their innovation while leaving women originators as anonymous background, then Uli's transmission becomes a story of symbolic extraction: the women supply the archive, the men receive the canon. Odoh's significance lies in the fact that she stands inside the institutional and modernist world of Nsukka while reactivating a medium whose historical authority was female. Her work must therefore be read not only through the formal inheritance of the Nsukka School but also against the gendered asymmetry that has structured that school's reception.

Theoretical Frame: Nkiru Nzegwu, Motherhood, and the Re-reading of Female Power



Fig. 2, Nneka Odoh, "*Mother and Child"*, Oil on Canvas (2005)

Nkiru Nzegwu's scholarship offers one of the most incisive frameworks for interpreting the gender politics of Uli's modern afterlife. In her work on gender transmogrification, Nzegwu examines how African art history has repeatedly reassigned women's cultural labour within male-centred and colonial epistemologies. Her critique is not confined to one medium. It names a broader historiographic process through which the value of women's authorship is diluted when art enters institutional discourse and is reclassified through categories alien to its original social logic. This critique speaks directly to Uli, where a woman's visual system became a cornerstone of modernist discourse without proportionate recognition of women as the founding intellectuals of that system.

Nzegwu's wider philosophical work also sharpens how one should think about women's authority in relation to painting. Motherhood, in her account, is not a private biological fact devoid of social meaning. It is an epistemic and moral structure, central to the making of social personhood, ethical relations, and communal continuity. This argument is crucial for the present study because it provides a conceptual vocabulary for discussing women's biological and domestic roles without lapsing into biological reductionism.

This distinction matters particularly when reading Mother and Child (Fig. 1). The work may be said to look at childbearing as a biological role of women, yet its significance is richer than a merely naturalised statement about reproduction. Within Nzegwu's framework, the maternal relation becomes a structure of knowledge, continuity, and social centrality. Mother and Child, therefore, does not simply identify womanhood with childbirth; rather, it elevates maternity as a mode through which women bear the physical, ethical, and communal labour of sustaining life. The painting gives visible form to the burdens and dignity attached to gestation, nurture, and the care through which society reproduces itself.

Under this framework, painting becomes a site where those experiences can be re-signified as forms of knowledge, endurance, and authority. The female body is not merely represented; it becomes an archive of social labour. This insight helps explain why Uli is such a powerful medium for feminist recuperation. Traditionally, Uli was already bound to the body and to women's transformation of lived space. Its migration into modern painting, therefore, preserves a trace of embodied inscription. When a contemporary woman artist uses Uli to visualise women's lives, she is not arbitrarily joining a traditional style to a feminist theme. She is reactivating a historically female visual technology to articulate women's subjectivity from within its own archive.

This theoretical constellation allows Odoh's paintings to be read in three interrelated ways. First, they can be read as acts of historiographic repair, restoring a female relation to a medium often canonised through male modernists. Second, they can be read as acts of representational re-centring, shifting Uli from a generalised marker of Igbo culture to a vehicle for women's embodied experience.

Third, they can be read as acts of continuity, maintaining Uli as a female enterprise even within the transformed conditions of studio painting, art pedagogy, and exhibition culture.

Nneka Odoh and the Contemporary Uli Field

Publicly available sources place Nneka Odoh firmly within the contemporary Uli field. She teaches painting, drawing, and art history at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, a location of no small significance given the institutional history of Uli modernism. She was also included in the 2022 SOAS exhibition *Forward to the Past: Re-engaging Uli in New Experiments*, an important showcase of artists who draw upon and reconnect with Uli as an art form. These facts do not by themselves reveal the full range of her artistic output, but they do establish that Odoh occupies a visible position at the intersection of practice, pedagogy, and historical transmission.

This intersection is crucial. To teach painting and art history at Nsukka is already to inhabit a space shaped by the intellectual legacy of Uli modernism. It suggests that Odoh's relation to Uli is not incidental but embedded within a living discourse about modern Nigerian art, indigenous forms, and the historiography of the Nsukka school. Her inclusion in a major Uli-focused exhibition strengthens that conclusion.

What distinguishes Odoh within this field, however, is not only that she works through Uli, but that she does so as a woman in a discourse where women remain comparatively under-recognised. Here, the contrast with the historical structure of Nsukka reception becomes instructive. The major international exhibitions and art-historical narratives of Uli-inflected modernism have tended to privilege a set of mostly male artists whose work was often read through innovation, nationhood, postcolonial critique, or formal experiment. Women artists working through Uli have received far less sustained critical attention, even though their work speaks with particular force to the medium's gendered genealogy. Odoh, therefore, appears not simply as another Uli revivalist but as an artist whose very position exposes the unfinished gender politics of the field.

That unfinished politics becomes particularly legible in If Our Dreams Slip (Fig. 2). As the title and thematic framing suggest, the painting stems from the struggles women have to face in order not to be edged out of Uli by men, even though Uli is historically theirs. The work may therefore be read as a visual allegory of cultural dispossession and persistence. The dream in danger of slipping is not only personal aspiration; it is also the possibility that women's custodianship of Uli might be overwritten by masculinised art-historical authority. Odoh's intervention lies in refusing that slip. By painting through Uli as a contemporary woman artist, she transforms the medium itself into a claim about inheritance, ownership, and the right to remain visible within a tradition that women originally sustained.

Gendered Inscriptions in Odoh's Paintings

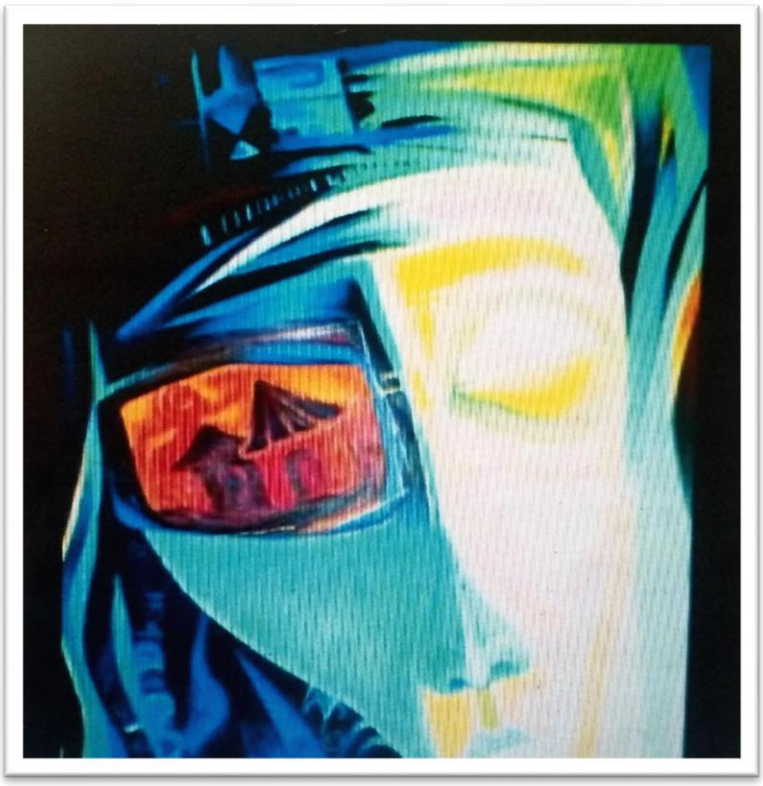


Fig. 3, Nneka Odoh, *"Thoughts"*, Acrylic on Canvas, (2009)

The strongest way to understand Odoh's paintings is not to treat them as generic Uli exercises but as gendered inscriptions. Uli, in her hands, functions as both medium and argument. It is a visual syntax through which women's lives are not merely pictured but interpreted. To say that Odoh uses Uli as a vehicle is, therefore, to say that the inherited line carries conceptual weight. It becomes the means by which women's bodies, burdens, and forms of agency are written back into modern art.

The first level of this inscription is formal. Uli's spare linearity, rhythmic contour, and dependence on suggestion rather than illusion are especially suited to representing embodied experience without reducing it to naturalistic depiction. The line can elongate, compress, envelop, and connect. It can imply gestation, tenderness, strain, and continuity all at once. Because it begins with contour, relation, and movement rather than volume and objectification, it allows the female body to appear as a lived presence rather than an inert object. In this way, Odoh's use of Uli may be understood as formally feminist.

The second level is iconographic and thematic. Read through the problem of women's embodied labour, Odoh's Uli-based paintings bring into visibility those forms of work often naturalised under the phrase women's duties: pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, child care, cooking, washing, emotional support, and the everyday preservation of household and kinship life. In many social contexts, these activities are treated as background, as though they occur outside the field of history. Yet they are precisely the labours through which life is reproduced. When Odoh turns Uli toward these realities, she transforms domestic and reproductive labour into worthy subjects of modern painting.

At a third level, Odoh's paintings interrogate the social and marital structures within which women's labour unfolds. No Room for Outsiders (Fig. 3) is especially compelling in this regard. The work interrogates the right of men to have many women while a woman is locked into only one. In that sense, the painting moves the essay beyond maternity and domestic service into the politics of sexual entitlement and unequal social codes. It exposes the asymmetry by which patriarchy expands male choice while restricting female autonomy. Read through

Uli's history as a women's medium, this interrogation is even sharper: a female visual language becomes the means of critiquing the gendered rules that constrain women in the very society whose surface they have long helped beautify and sustain.

A fourth level concerns domestic space. Historically, Uli was not confined to the body; it also transformed walls, compounds, and built surfaces. This means that Uli always moved between embodiment and environment. In Odoh's paintings, women are therefore not isolated figures inserted into neutral space. They are world-making agents who maintain the spaces in which community life unfolds. The continuity between skin and wall in traditional Uli becomes, in modern painting, a continuity between body and dwelling, body and social environment, body and history. The female subject is thus figured as one who inscribes, maintains, and inhabits the social surface.

A fifth level is effective. Women's labour is never merely physical. It involves anxiety, waiting, tenderness, grief, expectation, and the emotional management of familial life. Thought (Fig. 4) gives this dimension particular urgency. The painting may be read as a meditation on the fear and challenges women go through in order to meet social and cultural demands and to survive the burden of feminine ideology within a male-dominated society. What appears as inwardness in the image is therefore not passivity; it is the concentrated emotional labour of negotiating judgment, duty, vulnerability, and endurance. Odoh makes visible the interior cost of social conformity. The line does not only describe the body; it registers pressure placed upon the mind and spirit.

A sixth level concerns temporality and continuity. Traditional Uli was ephemeral. It faded on the body and had to be renewed on the wall. That temporality is deeply relevant to women's labour, which is also cyclical, repetitive, and perennially renewed. When Uli enters modern painting, its old ephemerality is partly arrested, but the memory of repetition remains. Odoh's paintings can be read through that tension. They monumentalize forms of labour and struggle that are ordinarily repetitive and unrecorded. In doing so, they convert the ordinary recurrence of women's work, exclusion, and endurance into a historical image.

In this sense, the gendered inscriptions in Odoh's paintings are not only thematic but historiographic. They write women into the image, but they also write women back into the history of the medium itself.

Reclaiming Uli as Female Enterprise

To argue that Odoh's paintings help maintain Uli as a female enterprise is not to claim that only women may use Uli. Such a claim would flatten the complex history of exchange, pedagogy, and adaptation through which modern Nigerian art developed. The point instead is that female ownership of Uli must remain conceptually and historically legible even within a field of shared practice. Odoh's significance lies in her capacity to preserve that legibility. This preservation occurs on at least three fronts. First, it occurs at the level of subject matter. By centring women's embodied and social realities, Odoh counters the tendency for Uli to function as a generalised sign of Igbo-ness detached from its female roots. Second, it occurs at the level of artistic agency. As a woman painter and teacher at Nsukka, she demonstrates that women are not merely the ancestral sources of Uli but its ongoing modern interpreters.



Fig. 4, Nneka Odoh, *"If Our Dreams Slip"*, Oil on Canvas (2005)

Third, it occurs at the level of historiography. Her work pressures art historians to rethink the distribution of critical attention and to place women's Uli-based modernism at the centre rather than at the margin of the field.

The four paintings considered here clarify this threefold preservation. Mother and Child secures maternity against trivialization by showing that child-bearing is not just a biological fate but a social centrality. If Our Dreams Slip resists the displacement of women from a medium that historically belongs to them. No Room for Outsiders turns Uli into a critique of unequal sexual privilege and patriarchal double standards. Thought reveals the inner tension through which women negotiate social and cultural challenges in a male-dominated order. Taken together, these works expand the discourse of Uli from formal inheritance to a fuller account of women's lived realities.

It is useful here to contrast Odoh's position with the earlier modernist celebration of Uli primarily as formal innovation. That formalist emphasis was necessary and fruitful. It enabled Uli to enter debates on abstraction, design, and postcolonial modernism. Yet formalism alone risks evacuating the medium's social gendering. Odoh's significance lies in the fact that she preserves the achievements of Uli modernism while restoring social content that formalism sometimes sidelines. She shows that the line is never merely a line. In Uli, line is genealogy, labour, body, authority, memory, and contestation.

That insight also has implications beyond Odoh. It suggests that the future of Uli studies cannot lie only in tracing how famous male modernists transformed a traditional idiom. It must also lie in examining how contemporary women artists reactivate Uli to theorise women's experience, and how such work unsettles the very categories of traditional versus modern, domestic versus fine art, biological versus social labour, and source versus innovation. In a deeper sense, reclaiming Uli as a female enterprise means refusing the narrative that women belong to the origin while men belong to the future. Odoh's work refuses that temporal split. It insists that women belong to both.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Nneka Odoh's Uli-based paintings are most productively understood as feminist acts of re-inscription. They do not merely revive a traditional art form, nor do they merely reproduce the visual codes of the Nsukka school. Rather, they reactivate Uli as a female archive through which women's embodied labour, reproductive work, domestic authority, emotional endurance, and social centrality can be made visible within contemporary painting. In doing so, they challenge one of the persistent distortions of Nigerian modern art history: the tendency to celebrate the modern appropriation of Uli while under-recognising the women whose artistry first constituted its visual language.

The argument has proceeded by placing Odoh within a longer genealogy. Uli was historically a woman's body and mural art. It carried not only formal elegance but social and cosmological meaning. The Nsukka school transformed Uli into a major modernist idiom, but that transformation also enabled a gendered redistribution of prestige. Nzegwu's critique of gender transmogrification, together with her work on motherhood and female authority in Igbo social thought, provides a theoretical basis for understanding why this redistribution matters. It is not simply a matter of omitted names. It is a matter of how women's knowledge is conceptually recoded when it enters official art history.

Against that backdrop, Odoh's practice assumes major significance. Through Mother and Child, she presents maternity as socially central labour rather than mere biological destiny. Through If Our Dreams Slip, she confronts the struggle of women to remain visible within a Uli tradition historically threatened by male appropriation. Through No Room for Outsiders, she questions patriarchal entitlement and the unequal sexual freedoms granted to men over women. Through Thought, she registers the fear, interior strain, and cultural pressure women bear in order to survive within a male-dominated order. The image thus becomes both an aesthetic field and an argument about women's place in history.

Even at this provisional stage, however, the importance of Odoh's practice is clear. She helps restore a crucial truth: Uli was never only a set of motifs waiting to be translated by modernism. It was and remains a domain of women's authority.

When Odoh paints through Uli, she does more than remember that fact. She makes it present.

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