

## **Illustration as catalyst for cultural heutagogy: Totemism and axioms among the Igbo people of Nigeria in perspective**

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**Abstract:** This study expatiates on the roles of hand-made illustrations in self-determined Igbo cultural education. In simplistic terms, to illustrate means to draw or craft images for information passage. Totemism is the practice of harmless co-habitation between humans, animals, plants and lifeless objects. The Igbo culture is multifarious in existential mythologies that seem as doubtful as they are credible. Igbo mythology consolidates totemism and axiomatic expressions, thereby forming strong philosophical hedges around the people over the centuries. This study adopted the desktop qualitative research design. The specific objectives of the study were to: ascertain the cultural chattels of Igbo totemism and numerology, relive some Igbo axioms and mythology through illustrations, and buttress on illustration as catalyst for Igbo cultural heutagogy. The instruments for data collection and review were: journal articles, books and 53 researcher-made illustrations exemplified for advancing Igbo cultural heutagogy. Histrionic interpretations of axioms were also made.

**Keywords:** numerology, heutagogy, Igbo totemism, cultural chattels

### **Introduction**

Before the advent of paper drawing, gestures and sign languages complemented oral and written communication. Gestural communication, referred to, in Igbo language, as *ika akara* (making signs) or *ise aka* (finger drawing) crystallize into: *Ise ihe n'ikuku* (drawing in the air) and *Ise ihe n'aja* (drawing on sand); two core ways of communicating, from the cradle. In an average Igbo society a baby involuntarily makes drawings on the ground or sands where he plays

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every day. The natural ability to draw, therefore finds some ease of exertion, when the child grows to handle such materials as: pencil, chalk, charcoal, board, slate and paper. As the baby grows his natural drawing and communication skills also grow.

The proposition of Metts (2009) that conscious self-presentation shows the dynamic patterns of behaviour that provides an observer with the objectives behind an individual's actions, forms an angle to this study. Thus Metts (2009) states in the theory, that "individuals possess countless idiosyncrasies-habits, mannerisms, beliefs, attitudes, values, abilities, interests, family history, and so forth" which directly or indirectly influence their self-presentation (2009, 506). Another angle is the confirmation that "Igbo land is known for its sacred observance of culture and tradition which hinges on the spirituality of plants and animals, therefore, religious taboos and laws control the socio-political and religious activities of every Igbo community" (Nwashindu and Ihediwa 2015, 46). Learning and preserving these beliefs by means of illustration, for cultural heutagogy necessitates this study.

#### Slate A



Fig. 1 *Ise ihe n'ikuku* (Drawing in the air)



Fig. 2 *Ise ihe n'aja* (Drawing on sand)

Outline drawings on gestural and illustrative communications

Illustrator: Dr. Nkem Fortynes Alu (Figs. 1-2)

Source: Alu, Nkem Fortynes et al. 2024. Research

### **The Igbo people of Nigeria in a nutshell**

Igbo is one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, comprising the current Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States, in the South-East Geo-political zone, and some Igbo settlements in Delta and Rivers States, in the South-South. Igbo is the language of the Igbos, with slight differences in dialectical intonations from one settlement to another. The entirety of Igbo culture, *Omenani* or *Omenala* (way of living or way of life) also called *Odinani* or *Odinala* (Dictates of the land) means attitudes or behaviours that are accepted in Igbo land. "Though preceded by African Traditional Religion, a mode of

spirituality and reverence to the supreme being, conducted by the traditional philosophy of worshipping *Chukwu Okike* (God the creator) or *Chukwu abiama* (God whose presence is obvious) through smaller gods or deities” the Igbo people’s close attachment to the soil and nature, the warmth of their humanity in personal relationships, “their vitality and zest for life which are not circumscribed by too much planning are a cultural treasure that needs no apology” (Edeh 2007, 56).

Edeh (2007, 103) expatiated that “*Omenani* is an inherited pattern of thought and action that is mysteriously in harmony with the totality of all that is”. It is a generic term for “the body of Igbo socio-religious laws, customs and traditions passed from generation to generation and handed down from God, *Chukwu*, through the Earth-god. For the Igbos, an evil is basically regarded as an offensive against *Omenani*”.

“Myths and totemic beliefs link to the origins of clans, re-settlements, conquests and related patriarchal tales. In traditional Igbo administration, there are dos and don’ts handed down by patriarchs and matriarchs” and these ordinances constitute *Omenala*. “Rules of good living are ordinances laid down by ancestors and spirits, and the consequences of violating them were also structured into the administrative system by cultural progenitors” (Onuora et al. 2020, 239). Onuora et al also clarified that “Igbo traditionalists hold that they still serve *Chi ukwu* (the big God) through mediums like pendants, masks and other shrine objects believed to inhabit the spirit of ancestors and small gods, but carved or made by artists” (Ibidem). Igbo people constitute a very industrious, commercially procreative, artistically flourishing, and administratively heterogeneous nation whose impacts are felt wherever they are, worldwide.

### **Study design**

The study adopted the desktop research design because of its suitability for the theme. Desktop research, otherwise called desk research, is a type of research that is based on documents available in websites, libraries, podcasts, videos, magazines and journals. When you perform desk research, you don’t gather new information from primary sources, you rather depend on information gathered by previous researchers. Desk research “uses existing data from various sources, such as books, articles, websites and databases to answer your research questions” (Owa 2024, 1). Specifically this paper adopted the qualitative desk research design.

## **Objectives**

The specific objectives of this study were to: ascertain the cultural chattels of Igbo totemism and numerological philosophy, relive some Igbo axioms and mythology through illustrations, and buttress on illustration as catalyst for heutagogy in Igbo cultural education.

## **Scope of the study**

The study is localised within Igbo totemism, mythology and heutagogy. While axiomatic expressions were surveyed all through as vital in sustaining the Igbo culture, illustration, was projected for self-determined learning. Igbo cultures that emanated from known acculturations or foreign influences were not covered in the study.

## **Study instruments**

The qualitative nature of the study justified collection of non-numeric or textual data. To this effect, books, journals, blogs and magazines were sources of information gathering. Pencil, pen and charcoal were the major instruments for exemplification in drawing. Drawings, in turn, were made on paper, photographed and inserted in the appropriate boxes, as titled, each.

## **Core Igbo numerological doctrines of being**

Igbo worldview is largely numerological, meaning that numbers and numbering are highly significant. Whereas some aspects of Igbo culture portray singleness, others depict aspects of pluralism. The Igbo culture, like many others, naturally divide between sayings and doings; meaning that culture is sustained by axioms and practices.

## **Monism**

The theory of singleness is termed monism. In this worldview, all of reality is compacted into one thought-pattern which opposes pluralism. The *Ike otu onye* (One-man power) maxim, is often despised because it ascribes glory to the efforts of one man, which in turn, never produces full satisfaction, rather the *Igwe bu ike* (Crowd or multitude power) maxim is preferred in Igbo land. Much as pluralism is more prevalent, monism also holds sway. *Ofu ka anyanwu di n'igwe* (There is only one sun in the sky), *Kpakpando juru elu igwe, mana ha anaghi eti ala ka onwa* (There are many stars in the sky but they do not shine upon the earth like the moon), *Onye ihe ya di ofu gba aka* (he who owns a single belonging is empty-handed), etc are popular monistic axioms.

## Duality

Duality portends two elemental kinds of existence, thereby opposing the principles of monism. The *Enu or Elu* (Heaven, sky, upwards) and *Ani or Ala* (earth) concepts are a few of the many Igbo theories of duality. The Igbo doctrine of duality is also prominent in the *Mmuo na Mmadu* (Spirit and man) stance, which states that we incarnate from the *Mmuo* (spirit) land, live our lives as *mmadu* (Humans), then finally transit back to the *Mmuo* (spirit) land as ancestors. “The *Isi na Odu* (head and tail) concept, *Nwoke na Nwanyi* (male and female), *Ikwu na Ibe* (kin and neighbour), *Nnukwu na Obere* (big and small), *Mmuo na Mmadu* (spirit and human), *Ohia na Uzo* (bush and path), *Ihe na Ochichiri* (light and darkness) and *Mma na Njo* (good and evil) are a few of the opposite or adjacent phenomenal stances that justify duality as an essence of being” (Nzoiwu, Alu and Oyeoku 2018, 309).

## Triality

‘Threeness’ represents the philosophical belief that existence of life is measured in threes. *Ekwu* (cooking tripod) usually represents asymmetric balancing but well respected as the basement upon which food is cooked. “Originally made of three stones as pedestals for the cooking fireplace, the traditional cooking tripod could also be made of three mounds of hard earth, triangularly positioned, with openings underneath for firewood” (Nzoiwu, Alu and Oyeoku 2018, 310). The Igbo adage: *Ekwu anaghi ano, ite adoro n’ala* (A pot cannot sit on the ground while the cooking tripod is within reach) means a lot to an average Igbo woman, in the sense that sometimes when cooking is not ongoing, tripods carry pots. In addition to many other trilogic stances in Igbo thinking, Nzoiwu, Alu and Oyeoku (2018) posited that “the Mind, Soul and Body have a tripartite balance in Igbo philosophical outlook, in that man is considered to be incomplete without the three” (310). The *Mmuo* (spirit, mind), *Mkpuru obi* (Soul) and *Anu ahu or Anu aru* (Body) constitute the threesome making of every mortal. Also, Igbo cosmology reflects the inter-relative roles between *Chi Ukwu* (the big God), *Chi ndi ozo* (other mediating or smaller gods) and *Mmadu* (man) in a clear-cut threesome setting. Nzoiwu, Alu and Oyeoku (2018, 310) asserted that “in Igbo land, warnings are considered enough after three counts; if a trouble maker refuses to heed a third warning, he stands to be punished or retaliated upon”.

## **Quadrality**

Quadrality is the belief that things exist in fours. Most Igbo cultural bearings drive from the four traditional Igbo market days: *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afo* and *Nkwo*. *Ubochi ano* (four days), also make up the Igbo traditional week, called *Izu*. In other words, there are four *Ubochi ahia* (market days) in one *Igbo Izu* (week). Parents and family heads bless their kids with kola nut in hand or wine for libation, saying such familiar prayers as: *Oga adiri gi mma na Eke* (It shall be well with you on Eke), ...*n'Orie* (...on Orié), ... *n'Afo* (... on Afo), ...*ma na Nkwo* (...and also on Nkwo day). There is a species of Igbo local dog called *Nkita anya ano* (the four-eyed dog), meaning that such dogs have two eyes in front and two behind their heads, but in actual sense, the eyes behind are not seen, the dogs use such eyes to see bad spirits and malevolent persons. The *Anyá ano* (four eyes) ascription is also given to humans that can see beyond the ordinary realm.

## **Other numerological concepts**

Apart from monism, other philosophical standings constitute pluralism. There are other numerological standings, like: Pentality (5 substances) attributable to the five fingers of a hand, Hexality (6 substances), Heptality (7 substances) etc. Igbo philosophy also holds: *Ise* (Five), *Isii* (Six), *Asaa* (Seven) *Asato* (Eight) and more, in good reckoning under pluralism. *Igwe bu ike* (There is power in the multitude or in a crowd) is a maxim that posits the Igbo liking for pluralism or multiplicity.

## **Igbo axioms as consolidating totemism and mythology**

The Igbo man talks more in proverbs, it is often said that *onye aturu ilu, ma kowaara ya ilu ahu; ego ejiri luo Nne ya lara n'iyi* (A fellow to whom interpretations are made after a proverbial communication; his mother's bride price payment was a waste of money). The axiom compels an average Igbo child to grow understanding and talking in proverbs. Nobody wishes to be insulted with derisive adages. Some adages portray humans and animals in a mysterious world of co-habitation where a common language of communication existed. The *mgbe gboo* or *mgbe mbu* (olden days) phrase, often used to refer to the good old days, holds till date. *Mgbe elu bu ala osa* (When the tree tops were equivalents of the land for the squirrel) usually refers to the olden days as lacking harm or danger. But nowadays, the proverbial squirrel does not feel safe patrolling tree branches and tops anymore.

Burton (1977, 282) states that “totems are used to designate those things whose names the clan or family bears and revere”. Totemism encourages that *onye agbata obi* (one’s neighbour) is not necessarily a fellow human. A python, monkey, tortoise, tree or shrub can be referred to as your *onye agbata obi* for totemic reasons. Erim (1978, 56) submits that in the classic anthropological sense, “totemism linked man into groups under an emblem of common totemic species (animal or plant) and set them apart from groups claiming common origin under other species”. In Igbo traditional religion virtuous acts get rewarded by the gods and ancestors while wicked acts get punished. Onuora et al. (2020) report that “benevolent spirits are believed to reward persons with abstemious restraints by discharging unannounced blessings to them for refusing to indulge in evil, even when they had the powers to do so and seemingly go scot-free”.

### **Some Igbo totemic animals**

Onuora et al (2020) report that “in some parts of Igbo land, the tortoise is abhorred because myths have it that it is associated with tricks and slowness” If the tortoise is used to prepare charms against one’s enemy, he incurs slowness in life”. Conversely, “in some other parts Igbo land, the tortoise represents endurance and long life” (2020, 242). The *Amegugwu* family in *Ezioha, Mgbowo* in Awgu Enugu State does not hunt or kill *Utobo*, the brown monkey. “It is the family’s belief that *Utobos* are representatives of the kindred, and bear a direct link between the living and the dead. Every male in the family is represented by his own *Utobo*. Therefore, the death of the animal will eventually crystallize in the death of a man in the family, and vice-versa” (Ndubuisi 2014, 47). Ndubuisi (2014, 48) reckoned that “Amegugwu family is reputed to have the powers to summon, command, ward off, or invoke *Utobo* into an enemy’s farm”, and so “members of the family are respected by the community for this unique spiritual endowment”. The people of *Akpugoeze*, also in Enugu State, do not hunt and harm a species of monkeys believed to be consecrated to the deities. The monkeys easily roam the homesteads undisturbed.

In Afikpo, Ebonyi State, *Ozziza* people do not eat crab because it is deified. Once a crab is killed, the anger of the gods is incurred by the killer. In Akaeze, Ebonyi State, the green snake, commonly called *Nne ochie* (Grandmother), is not harmed and it does not harm the indigenes. If anyone kills the green snake by mistake the offender must conduct a

burial ceremony for the late green with snake rites. The people of Idemmili, Awkuzu, Igboukwu and Nnewi in Anambra State do not harm pythons and pythons do not bite them. If a python mistakenly bites somebody, it will sigh and retrieve its venom from the victim. There are many other totemic animals from one part of the Igbo nation to another.

### **Some Igbo totemic plants**

In Igbo land “some species of plants are held sacred or are actually worshipped with sacrifices offered to them, whereas other plants are used in offering worship to the deities and ancestors” (Ogbalu 1983, 56), to this effect “rituals and sacrifices are performed before certain trees because they are considered as altars of sacrifice. In some homesteads, some trees are treated with utmost respect because they are believed to possess powers that ward off evil spirits and bad luck” (Onuora et al. 2020, 242). Plants are totemised for many reasons. The *Oji* (Iroko) tree is believed to be the king of trees because of its strong mythical inclinations. Nick-named *Oke osisi* (the great tree) the iroko, is not easily hewn down because it is reputed to inhabit spirits of great ancestors.

The *Oji*, (kola nut tree) (differently pronounced from *Oji*, the Iroko tree) is an economic tree highly regarded in Igbo land because it produces the kola nut, an edible fruit that comes in lobes, but also a prayer material in Igbo land. Onuora et al. (2020, 243) stated that it is “held in the hands of the oldest man for prayers, consultations with ancestors and spirits, as well as propitiatory commitments, prior to any occasion”. This invitation of the ancestors and gods to the kola nut ritual is usually “the end bit of a well orchestrated and undulating spokespersonship” in traditional prayers and supplications, “then the rest of the kola nut is further fragmented and shared around by the youngest man in the lot”.

Land demarcating trees differ from one Igbo town to another. In Arochukwu, Abia State, *Oduma* is used to border lands. In some Anambra and Imo States *Ogbu* and *Ogirisi* trees are for land demarcation. Like *Oduma*, *Ogbu* and *Ogirisi* can grow from shrub to tree. In Mbaise, Imo State, *Ogirisi*, believed to have ancestral linkage with yam, is used to build yam barns. Generally, “if one was in doubt regarding the borders of his land and that of his neighbour, upon seeing such demarcating trees or shrubs in questionable posts, they called in elders to mitigate” (Onuora et al. 2020, 243). Because trees are



regarded as general sources of life, a woman; newly married or looking for the fruit of the womb, is advised to be kind to trees on one hand and to consume a lot of fruits on the other” (Ibidem). In Mgbowo, Enugu State, *Akpu Onyima*, a prominent silk cotton tree located at Obodo Ikoro, Ezioha, was, in the words of Onuoha et al. (2020), “sacred and highly deified”.

### **Illustration as pivotal in Igbo cultural heutagogy**

Illustration helps to learn culture; though Alu et al. (2018, 155) asserted that “it has remained debatable whether digitization is meant to complement raw art or obliterate it” self-learning students of Igbo cosmology will find handmade drawings a lot more incisive. Heutagogy is “different from the traditional system of learning where a student has to follow a teacher’s instructions” (Bordia 2022). Coined by Stewart Hase and Chris Kenyon, Heutagogy is the study of “self-determined learning” (Patel and Khanushiya 2018, 282). As a cultural enthusiast, drawing is essential in self-learning if an artist can draw his findings, if not, he can use ready-made illustrations for inquiry. “Skills that are most valuable in an industry world are those that are human-centric such as leadership, social influence, emotional intelligence, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, flexibility, and adaptation to change” (Salmon 2019; World Economic Forum 2020, 1-133). “Learning has become “more aligned with what we do rather than what we know, making traditional methods of discipline-based knowledge inadequate to prepare learners to live and work in communities and workplaces” (Davis and Hase 2001).

### **Slate B**



Fig. 3. *Ikuku ama n'onyia*  
(Air does not get caught in a trap)



Fig. 4. *Oso nwan'yi gbawara hapu ara ya aka abughi oso nkiti*  
(The race in which a woman lets go her breasts is not ordinary)



Fig. 5. *Onye noro, nsogbu ya anoro*  
(When one sits down his trouble also sits down)



Fig. 6. *Igba kpowa oku, ndi ote egwu aputawa*  
(When the drum beckons dancers begin to emerge)



Fig. 7. *Nwa akwo n'azu amaghi n'ije di anya*  
(A baby on the back has no knowledge of a journey's distance)

Illustration as catalyst for cultural heutagogy



Fig. 8. *Agbogho n'egwu; ibu ya n'egwu*  
(As a girl undulates her loads also undulate)

Smudge drawings on Igbo axiomatic expressions  
Illustrator: Dr. Nkem Fortyunes Alu (Figs. 3-8)  
Source: Alu, Nkem Fortyunes et al. 2024. Research

**Slate C**



Fig. 9. *Ichi echichi* (Title taking/coronation)



Fig. 10. *Iwa oji* (Kola nut breaking)



Fig. 11. *Igo Oji* (Kola nut contemplations)



Fig. 12. *Ikeji, Iwa ji* (New yam festival)



Fig. 13. *Iwupu mmanya* (Libation)



Fig. 14. *Igba Ofala* (The king's outing ceremony)



Fig. 15. *Igba afa* (Divination)



Fig. 16. *Inu iyi* (Oath taking)

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Fig. 17. *Igo Ofo* (Ofo contemplations)



Fig. 18. *Ichu aja* (Sacrifice performance)



Fig. 19. *Oriko* (Communion)



Fig. 20. *Igboto mma* (Traditional retirement)

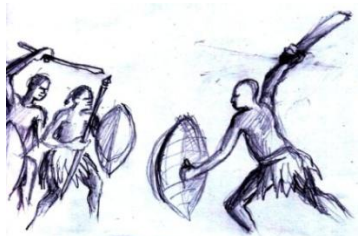


Fig. 21. *Inu Agha* (Warfare)



Fig. 22. *Isopuru ndi okenye* (Respect for elders)



Fig. 23. *Ikpa oke ala* (Land boundary marking)

Drawings on administration and divination-related aspects of Igbo Culture

Illustrators: Prof. Chijioke Noel Onuora (Figs. 9-21, 23);

Dr. Nkem Fortyunes Alu (Fig. 22)

Source: Alu, Nkem Fortyunes et al. 2024. Research

#### Slate D



Fig. 24. *Ikpa ute* (Mat weaving)



Fig. 25. *Ipi osisi* (Wood carving)

Illustration as catalyst for cultural heutagogy



Fig. 26. *Ikpu ite* (Pottery)



Fig. 27. *Ite uri* (Make up and, body decoration)



Fig. 28. *Ikpa akwa* (Fabric weaving)



Fig. 29. *Ikpa isi* (Hair plaiting or braiding)



Fig. 30. *Iru ulo aja oto* (Mud architecture)

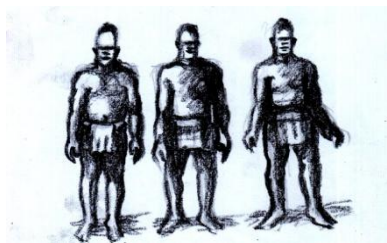


Fig. 31. *Iwa ogo* (Fabric pants costuming)



Fig. 32. *Ikpu uzu* (Black/metal smithing)



Fig. 33. *Iru mgbede* (Fattening/bridal outing)



Fig. 34. *Iti mmonwu* (Masquerading)



Illustration as catalyst for cultural heutagogy



Fig. 35. *Ikpa nkata* (Basket weaving)



Fig. 36. *Ite egwu* (Dance)



Fig. 37. *Igba mgba* (Wrestling)



Fig. 38. *Ima mbem* (Panegyrics)

Drawings on art, crafts and entertainment-related aspects of Igbo Culture

Illustrator: Prof. Chijioke Noel Onuora (Figs. 24-38)

Source: Nkem Fortynues, Alu et al. 2024. Research

**Slate E**



Fig. 39. *Alum di na nwunye*  
(Marriage and its rites)



Fig. 40. *Ikupute nwa/igu nwa aha*  
(Traditional child naming)



Fig. 41. *Omugwo* (Visit of a mother during her grandchild's weaning)



Fig. 42. *Ichu mmiri* (Fetching water)

Illustration as catalyst for cultural heutagogy

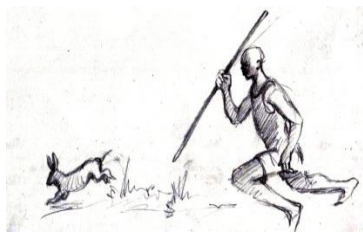


Fig. 43. *Ichu nta* (Hunting)



Fig. 44. *Igbu azu* (Fishing)



Fig. 45. *Iko ugbo/iku mkpuru*  
(Land cultivation/sowing of seeds)

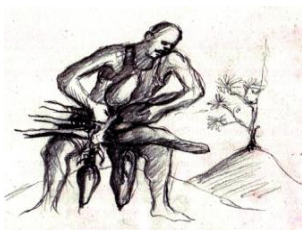


Fig. 46. *Iweputa ihe ubi* (Harvesting)



Fig. 47. *Ichere eluigwe aja* (Lifting a sacrifice to the heavens)



Fig. 48. *Ili ozu* (Interment of the deceased)



Fig. 49. *Ikwa Ozu* (Burial rites)



Fig. 50. *Igbu akwu* (Harvesting of palm nuts)



Fig. 51. *Akuko ifo* (Folklore)



Fig. 52. *Iku ogene/ekwe* (Town crying; metal or wooden gong)



Fig. 53. *Ikwa Ariri* (Lamentations)

Drawings on family, communication, agriculture and mortality-related aspects of Igbo Culture

Illustrators: Prof. Chijioke Noel Onuora (Figs. 39-46, 48-49);

Dr. Nkem Fortyunes Alu (Figs. 47, 50-53)

Source: Alu, Nkem Fortyunes et al. 2024. Research

## Conclusion

Visual culture researchers have constantly harped on the need to wedge culture extinction using the explicit illustrative powers of the visual arts. In this study the cultural chattels of Igbo totemism and numerological philosophy were exemplified in smudge drawings on selected Igbo axiomatic expressions (Figs. 3-8). Irrespective of certain misconceptions about African culture, reliving Igbo axioms and mythology, as illustrated in three axes: Administration and divination (Figs. 9-23) Art, crafts and entertainment (Figs. 24-38), and Family, communication, agriculture and mortality (Figs 39-53) is of great pertinence. The misunderstanding of African art and its values notwithstanding, Angba, Alu and Oyeoku (2018, 5) in asserting that “most of Africa’s so-branded primitivism by the Europeans are the enshrinement of her culture; culture that is likened to a skeleton, the flesh of which is art” corroborates a lee way for neo-revival of Igbo cosmology through visual arts, especially from the cradle as shown in: *ise ihe n’ikuku* (drawing in the air) and *ise ihe n’aja* (drawing on the sand) (Figs. 1 and 2). “Book illustrations, public advertising, audio-visuals, animation pictures, cartoon art, instructional media and motion picture graphics are a few of the many avenues in which visual arts have become communication agents” (Alu et al. 2018, 156).

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