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Okpu Ngwo: *The Symbolism and Use of the Raffia Hat in Afikpo Cultural Tradition*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Afikpo man wearing okpu ngwo raffia hat, Mgbom village, Afikpo Village-Group, Nigeria.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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“Tom Ibe, my field assistant wearing okpu ngwo (hat-raffia). Diviners (dibia) use it when carrying sacred objects for swearing an oath somewhere, but anyone can do so when it rains. Ancient hat form rarely seen nowadays. Note that it was used in Afikpo Yam Priest’s compound the day of first cooking of new yams.” – Simon Ottenberg, 1960.

The Okpu Ngwo, a traditional raffia hat from the Afikpo region of Southeastern Nigeria, holds deep cultural and symbolic significance within the Igbo community. This ancient hat, photographed by anthropologist Simon Ottenberg in 1960 and worn by his field assistant, Tom Ibe, is an item of clothing intertwined with the spiritual and cultural practices of the Afikpo people. While now rarely seen, Okpu Ngwo was once a common accessory with specific roles and meanings.

In the Afikpo Village-Group, especially in communities like Mgbom village, Okpu Ngwo served as a marker of status and function. Traditionally, diviners, known as dibia, wore the hat while carrying sacred objects during ceremonial occasions or when swearing oaths. This use underscores the hat’s association with ritual and spiritual authority, as dibia were respected figures who acted as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds.

1. Diviners and Sacred Oaths: The wearing of Okpu Ngwo by dibia was especially significant during rituals involving oaths or when carrying sacred items. The raffia material, derived from the local

palm, connects the wearer to nature, reinforcing the belief in unity between the material and spiritual realms.

2. Everyday Use: While Okpu Ngwo had ritual importance, it also served practical purposes. It could be worn by anyone in the community, particularly during rainy weather, highlighting its adaptability as a functional item in daily life. This duality reflects the Igbo tradition of merging practicality with symbolic meaning.

3. Yam Festival Connection: The photograph taken by Ottenberg records the use of Okpu Ngwo in the Yam Priest's compound on the day of the first cooking of new yams. The Yam Festival, celebrated throughout Igbo communities, marks the beginning of the harvest and is deeply spiritual, as yams symbolize prosperity and sustenance. Wearing the Okpu Ngwo on this occasion reinforces the hat's cultural relevance, linking it to the cycle of agriculture and community rites.

By the mid-20th century, the Okpu Ngwo was already becoming rare, with fewer community members donning the hat in daily life or ceremonies. This decline mirrors broader changes within Igbo society, as colonial influences and modernization led to shifts in traditional attire and practices. Today, the Okpu Ngwo serves as a cultural artifact, reminding the Afikpo people of their heritage and the rich symbolism embedded in traditional attire.

Ottenberg, S. (1960). Photograph of Tom Ibe wearing Okpu Ngwo raffia hat. In personal collection.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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