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Ede Ala:

A Traditional Igbo Body Art Reflecting Beauty and Cultural Identity

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
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EDE ALA

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Ede Ala Body Art. Photo: Herbert Cole, 1966.

Ede Ala, also known in some Igbo dialects as Nkasi Ali, was a traditional form of body art among the Igbo people. This art form featured beautiful, curving tattoo designs typically applied around the neck, back, breasts, and belly. It was an important cultural expression in Igbo society, symbolizing beauty, identity, and status.

The ink used for Ede Ala designs was made from the bulbs of the ede ala plant, a local tuber different from the edible e de-bu-ji. These bulbs

were ground on large, smooth stones specifically set aside for this purpose. The entire process, from preparing the ink to applying the tattoos, followed strict cultural rules and practices to maintain its sacredness and purity.



Ede Ala Body Art. Photo: Herbert Cole, 1966.

Ede Ala tattoos were exclusively applied by women and worn by women of all ages. They were commonly displayed during festivals, ceremonies, and other special occasions. The process of making the ink and applying the tattoos was both physically demanding and painful, requiring deep focus. For this reason, it was often done at night when the environment was quiet and calm.

Women involved in this process had to follow certain rituals. They were expected to abstain from sexual activity for the entire day before the tattooing. Additionally, men and women considered “ritually unclean” were not allowed near the tattooing area to prevent any form of spiritual or physical contamination of the ink.

During application, the woman receiving the tattoo would be topless, and the intricate designs were drawn onto her skin using a thin, flat-edged tool called an owa. As the ink settled into the skin, it caused a painful burning sensation, eventually setting and creating permanent patterns that could last up to a year.



Ede Ala Body Art. Photo: Herbert Cole, 1966.

Ede Ala was more than just body decoration. It was a powerful artistic expression for Igbo women, allowing them to showcase their creativity through unique patterns and designs. These tattoos reflected personal stories, cultural beliefs, and the beauty ideals of Igbo society.

- Ancestors Media. (n.d.). One of the prominent forms of body art amongst the Igbo in the ages past.
- Igbo History. (n.d.). Ede Ala Body Art.
- Visit Nigeria. (n.d.). Ede Ala Body Art.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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