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Ichafu or Unari: *Igbo Headgear That Tells a Thousand Stories*

By Maduagwu Nzubechi

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Akwaugo wedding photoshoot. via
@officialbigdealweddings Insta**

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Ichafu is a common name for traditional headgear in Alaigbo, being the prime fashion accessory for Igbo women for over a century and a half. This article explores the history, origins, etymology and influence of Ichafu on modern-day Nigerian fashion.

Before the widespread use of the term “Ìchàfù”, headgear in precolonial Igbo society was known by various names depending on dialect. These include Ùnarị (also rendered as Ùnalị, Ùlarị, or Ìlarị), as well as terms such as “aka-isi”, “okaraisi”, and “ihe-isi”, all of which

refer broadly to head coverings or headgear.



Ichafu isi in damask fabric`

01

Etymology

The term *Ìchàfù* is a native Igbo compound noun derived from two verb roots:

- *Ìchị* – meaning “to gather”, “to bunch”, or “to collect”
- *Ìfù* or *Ìfọ* – meaning “to wrap”, “to bind”, or “to enclose”

Together, they form the descriptive action phrase “*Ìchị àfù isi*”, meaning “to gather and wrap the head”. This reflects the physical process involved in creating the headgear.

In Igbo morphology, the prefix *Ì-* is used to nominalise verbs, forming

concrete nouns from verbal expressions. Thus, “Ìchàfù” refers to the object produced from the act of gathering and wrapping fabric around the head.

Ichafu is usually big, bold and not patterned to be even or straight. Unlike flat or evenly patterned head ties, it is typically arranged in voluminous folds that rise upward, It’s mostly tied to sprouting up like the tall raised feathers of a peacock. Which symbolizes the pride and prestige that Igbo women are well known for.



Bianca Ojukwu donning an ichafu. Photo credit: Daily Review Online

Occasions That Demand The Tying Of Ichafu

Most times igbo women tie ichafu for occasions like

Traditional weddings: Igbo women tie ichafu for their igba nkwu (which is the celebratory stage of the marriage process), where they get to dress their best, while the ichafu sits elegantly as a crown on

their head.

Funerals: Ichafu is also tied during burials as a fashion statement and sometimes in support of the family of the deceased, representing their age group, etc.

Title Taking: Ichafu is a status symbol for titled women and those who would take up titles as well. This can be seen with ndi “odu” and ndi ekwe at events or at title takings



Two women in Akwete cloth attire, circa 1960s. Credit: Vintage Nigeria



Grace Nkemdilim Azuokwu and Agatha Emeagwali at the Odu title ceremony, Onitsha, 1996.

Materials used for Ichafu

Ìchàfù is made from various fabrics, with damask being the most commonly used due to its stiffness, sheen, and ability to hold elaborate shapes. Other materials include:

- George fabric
- Brocade
- Ankara
- Velvet
- Lace
- Akwete – a traditional handwoven textile of the Igbo people, known for its durability and intricate patterns [10]
- Akwaocha – a culturally significant white cloth associated with purity, ritual, and status in Igbo society [2]

In some cases, decorative elements such as beads may be used as alternatives or complements to headgear styling.

The Influence Of Ichafu On Modern-Day Fashion:

Ichafu has made a comeback in the Nigerian fashion scene, with its peculiar silhouette, bold and beautiful, high-standing pattern. From brides like Akwaugo rocking it on her wedding, to Ciara walking down the runway crowned with ichafu, with Gozie Okeke's akanchawa blasting in the background, paying homage to the origins of Ichafu. It shows that Ichafu has come here to stay, and it will be here for a long time to come.



Ciara at the Lagos fashion week donning an ichafu. Photo credit via @adedamola_op

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Nzubechi is a history, political enthusiast who dabbles into social commentary once in a while



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