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Mbari Artists: *The Spiritual Painters of the Igbo People*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

An Igbo spirit worker painting the walls of a nearly completed Mbari house. Photograph taken in the 1930s somewhere in Owerri. - Herbert Cole, 1988. Edited and Colourized by Ozi Ikoro 2025.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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MBARI ARTISTS

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Mbari is a unique and deeply spiritual artistic tradition of the Igbo people, specifically practiced in the Urata (Oratta) and Echie (Etche) regions of present-day Imo State and Rivers State. These magnificent structures are votive shrines built to honor deities, particularly Ala, the Earth Mother, and feature a gallery of human, mythical, and divine figures representing Igbo cosmology.

01

The Purpose of Mbari Shrines

Mbari is not an everyday structure but a sacred offering to the gods, constructed only when diviners receive directives from a deity. The belief is that Ala or other deities demand these elaborate creations to maintain balance and harmony in the community. Unlike regular shrines (ihu agbara), where deities are worshipped and propitiated, an Mbari is a one-time sacred artistic project.

02

The Artists and Their Spiritual Journey

The Ndị Mgbè, or Mbari artists, are carefully selected and must undergo spiritual purification before beginning their work. They enter a state of ritual seclusion, cutting off contact with the public while

they sculpt and paint the divine figures.

Once the Mbari is completed, these artists symbolically flee the area, never to look upon their work again. This ritual signifies that their duty to the deity is complete. In Igbo spirituality, coming into repeated contact with a deity's sacred creation can lead to being "claimed" by the deity, making their departure necessary.

03

Structure and Imagery of Mbari

Mbari shrines are typically four-sided and open, resembling a gallery rather than a closed temple. Inside, they contain sculptures of deities, ancestors, spirits, animals, and even colonial figures, all painted in vibrant colours. Some Mbari shrines depict scenes from daily life, folklore, and mythological battles, creating a rich visual narrative of Igbo cosmology.

At the center of the Mbari is a sacred chamber representing the Chi (spiritual presence) of the honoured deity. This chamber is not used for active worship but serves as a symbolic connection between the divine and the physical world.

04

The Legacy of Mbari in Igbo Culture

Mbari is a rare and extraordinary expression of Igbo religious and artistic heritage. Due to the influences of colonialism and modernization, the tradition has declined, but some Mbari shrines are still preserved as cultural and historical landmarks. Scholars and artists continue to study them as a unique form of African sacred

architecture and art.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

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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