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INDIGENOUS ARCHITECTURE

Mbari Houses: *A Living Tradition of Igbo Architecture, Spiritual and Artistic Expression*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

An Mbari dedicated to the deified Otamini river in the Echie town of 'Opioro' as noted by P. A. Talbot in "Some Nigerian Fertility Cults," 1927. Ala still retained a prominent position among the figures in this Mbari. The Mbari's head priest is noted as Amade Onyeche.

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Introduction Mbari houses are unique cultural and spiritual edifices found in Igbo land, particularly in the Owerri region and some substantial number of towns in Imo states and Rivers States, Nigeria. These ceremonial structures serve as artistic expressions of gratitude to Ala, the Earth goddess, and other deities. Built as part of religious rituals, Mbari...



Urata-Igbo Mbari house dedicated to Amadioha, photographed by William Fagg in Owerri. British Museum.

Introduction

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Mbari house, Umowa town, Oratta Ibo, just completed, 1933." G. I. Jones.

02

Origins and Purpose

The concept of Mbari houses originates from the deep reverence the Igbo have for Ala, the goddess of fertility, morality, and the earth. These structures are often constructed after periods of calamity, such as drought or epidemics, as offerings to appease the gods. The process of building a Mbari house is as significant as the structure itself, symbolizing renewal, communal unity, and spiritual harmony (Okonkwo, 2015).

03

Architectural Features

A typical Mbari house is an open-sided, rectangular structure built with clay and decorated with vibrant wall paintings and sculptures. The walls are adorned with scenes from everyday life, mythological stories, and symbolic figures representing deities, humans, and animals. The central figure is usually a large sculpture of Ala, surrounded by other deities and symbolic images that convey moral lessons and societal values (Ikwuemesi, 2016).



Urata-Igbo Mbari votive shrine. Photo: Edward Chadwick, 1927-1943. British Museum.

04

Construction Process

The construction of a Mbari house is a sacred act led by a selected group of artisans and ritual specialists. The process begins with divination to determine the site and the appropriate time for construction. Builders, who are often secluded from the community, engage in rituals and follow strict taboos throughout the building period. The entire process can take several months or even years, emphasizing the spiritual commitment involved (Nzewi, 2013).



The largest single mbari structure still standing in 1966-67. – Herbert M. Cole, 1982.

05

Cultural Significance

Mbari houses serve as both religious centers and cultural museums. They are not intended for daily worship but are instead left to decay naturally, symbolizing the transient nature of life and the importance of renewal. These structures reinforce communal values, preserve oral traditions, and provide a space for artistic expression. They also play a critical role in passing down Igbo cosmology and ethics to younger generations (Uche, 2019).



Mbari votive shrine being taken over by a termite nest, mbari are made mostly from termite earth. Owerri area (Urata-Igbo). Photo: Zbigniew Dmochowski, c. 1960s.

06

Contemporary Relevance

Though less common today due to modern influences and the decline of traditional religious practices, Mbari houses remain a vital part of Igbo cultural heritage. Efforts by cultural preservationists and scholars have been made to document and revive this tradition. Museums and cultural centers often feature replicas of Mbari houses, showcasing the artistry and spirituality of the Igbo people to a global audience (Obi, 2020).

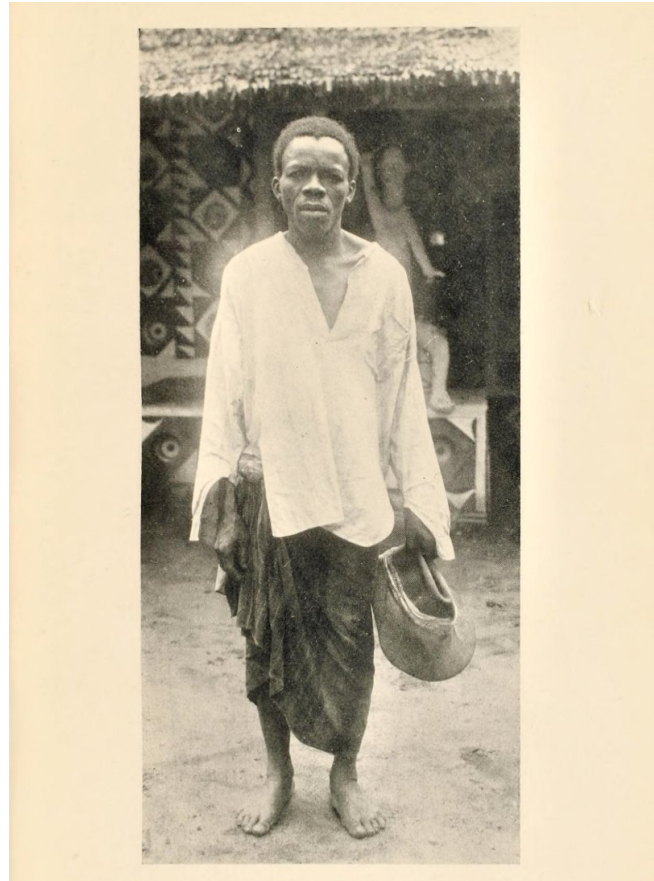


"Nigeria, view of Oratta Igbo Mbari house. Thatched-roof has several points. Sculptures and wall-paintings are visible inside the building." Edward Chadwick, 1927-1943. British Museum.

07

Conclusion

Mbari houses stand as a testament to the rich cultural and spiritual legacy of the Igbo people. They embody a deep connection to the divine, a commitment to artistic excellence, and a communal spirit. Preserving and celebrating these structures is essential for maintaining the cultural identity and historical continuity of the Igbo nation.



The head priest of the Mbari Otamini, Opioro, Etche in Rivers State, noted by Talbot as Amade Onyeche.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

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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