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The Evolution of Pre-Colonial Igbo Male Hairstyles: *Cultural Significance and Transformation*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Pre-colonial Igbo hairstyles,
Photogrid by Ukpuru.**

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The history of Igbo men's hairstyles offers a fascinating glimpse into the cultural evolution and social structure of the Igbo people. Pre-colonial Igbo hairstyles were much more than just fashion statements; they were symbolic expressions of identity, status, and roles within society. From warrior braids to intricate patterns worn by elders, the diversity and complexity of these hairstyles reveal deep-rooted values that have been transformed by the impact of colonialism.



A man from Enugwu Ukwu in present day Anambra State, photographed by Northcote Thomas, c. 1910-11. MAA Cambridge.

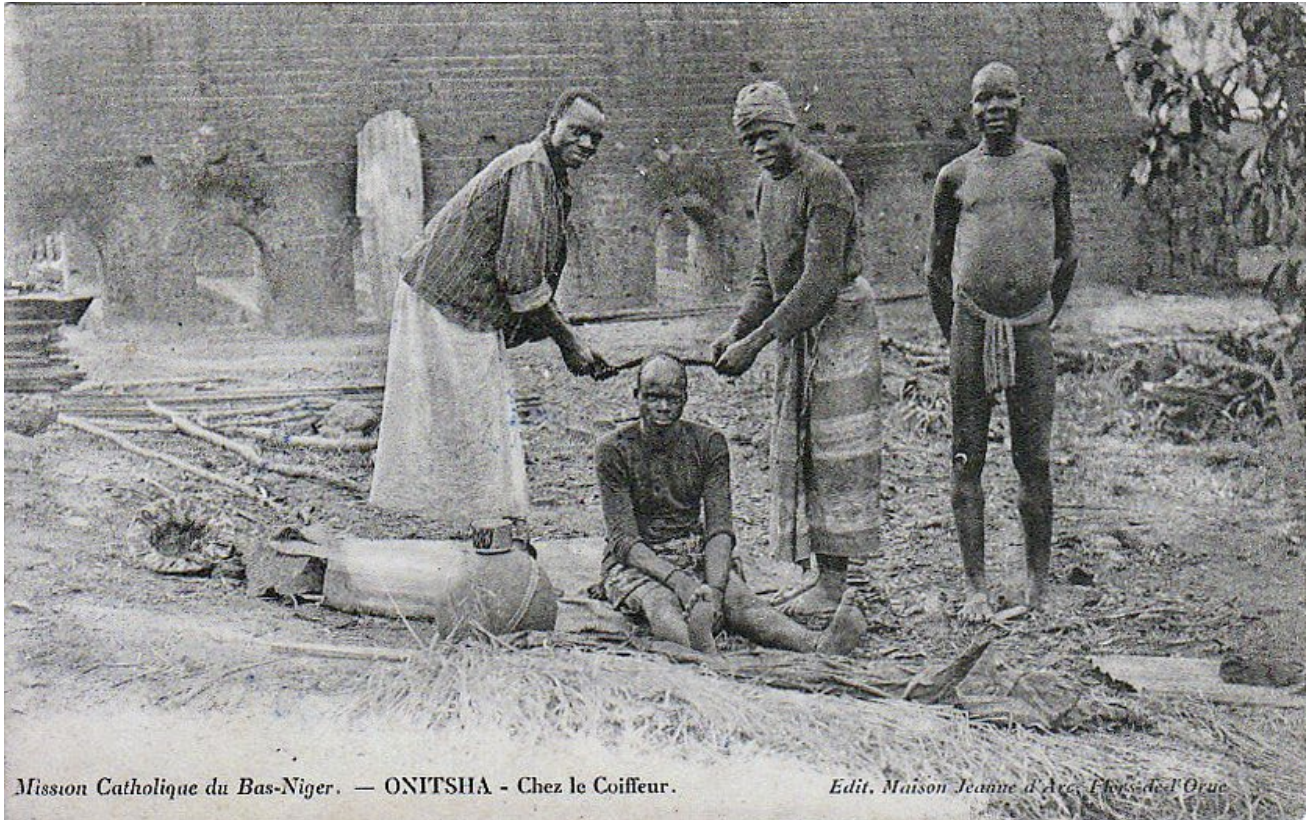
In pre-colonial Igbo society, each hairstyle had a specific meaning tied to age, status, and personal achievements. Some of the most prominent hairstyles include:

The Ibu (or Ibo) Hairstyle is a traditional Igbo hairstyle typically worn by older men or elders. This style features a small patch of hair left at the top of the head, while the rest of the scalp is shaved clean. The Ibu hairstyle symbolizes wisdom, age, and respect within the community, distinguishing elders from younger individuals.



man and child from Igbariam, c. 1911. MAA Cambridge. Originally, Nna (father) Igbo names did not reference a monotheistic deity, neither were they necessarily about a person's direct father. Nna names are about the collective of ancestors and all who come under them (umunna).

In Igbo culture, the Ibu hairstyle was a mark of honour and experience, signifying that the wearer had achieved a respected position due to age or wisdom. Elders with this hairstyle were often seen as the custodians of knowledge, culture, and tradition.



Mission Catholique du Bas-Niger. — ONITSHA - Chez le Coiffeur.

Edit. Maison Jeanne d'Arc, Fives-de-l'Orue

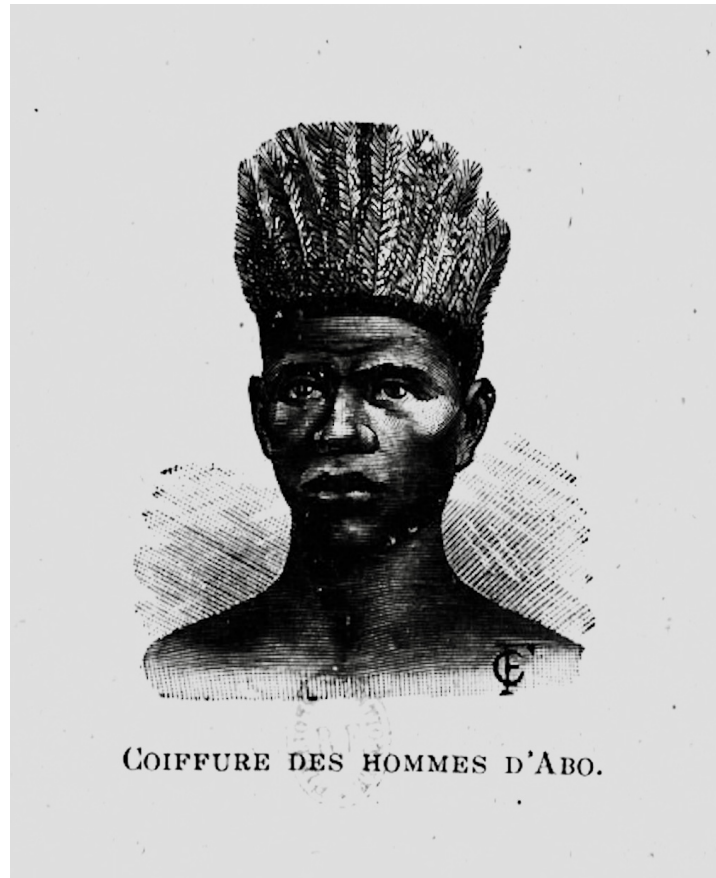
At a hairdressers in Onicha (Onitsha) (not necessarily getting their hair cut as previously stated). French Catholic Lower Niger Mission postcard, early 20th century.

The Odo (Chieftain's) Hairstyle is a traditional Igbo hairstyle worn by men of high social status, such as chiefs or community leaders. This elaborate hairstyle was designed to reflect the wearer's leadership, power, and prestige within the community. The style often involved intricate braiding, carving, or decorating the hair, sometimes with beads or other adornments to signify wealth and authority.



A titled Igbo man from Ogwashi Ukwu, (Aniocha), Enuani in Delta State, photographed by Northcote Thomas in 1912, and later colorized by Ukpuru in 2019.

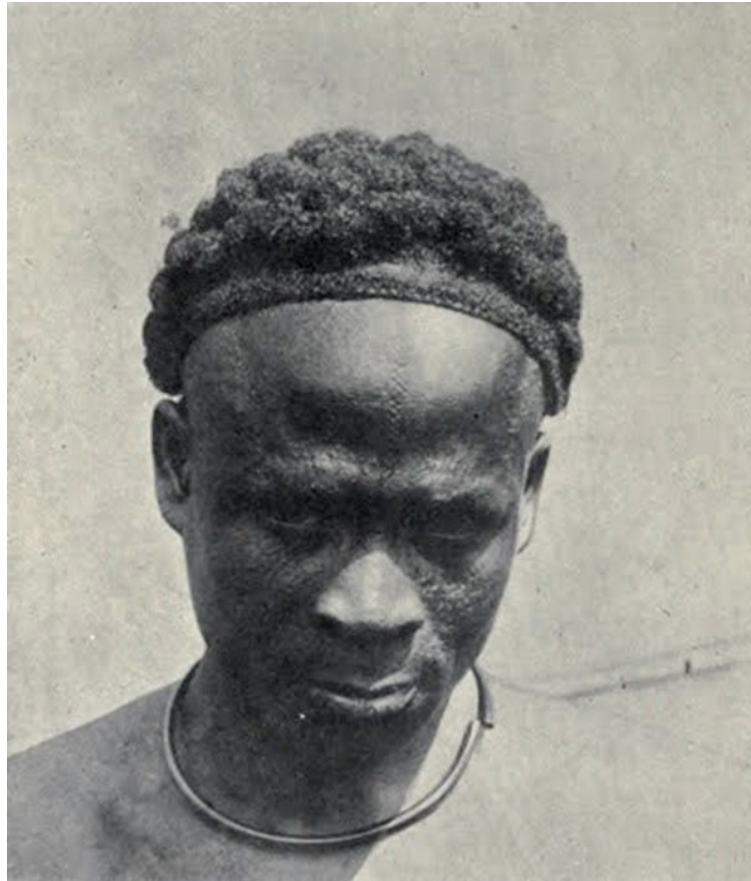
The Odo hairstyle was a symbol of the individual's elevated position and was often worn during important cultural ceremonies, social gatherings, or public events. It was a way for chiefs and influential men to distinguish themselves from others and to assert their authority and respect within Igbo society.



Men's hairstyle from Abö (Aboh), an Igbo state in present-day Delta State; c. 1890 engraving from the travels of the French Foreign Legion officer Antoine Mattei. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Ịsi Kpolọkpolọ is a traditional Igbo male hairstyle characterized by a unique pattern where the hair is shaved in a circular or spiral fashion, often leaving a small patch of hair in the middle of the scalp. The term “Ịsi Kpolọkpolọ” translates roughly to “hair arranged in a spiral or circular design.”

This hairstyle was worn by young men and sometimes by warriors or those who were in training for battle. It was a distinctive look that conveyed a sense of pride, youthfulness, and energy. The circular pattern symbolized the individual's place in society and could indicate that the person was still in the phase of preparation, learning, or coming of age within the community.



Igbo man with hairstyle called 'isi kpọlọkpọlọ (hair puffs)'. Photo by Northcote Thomas, c. 1910.

The Onu-eke Hairstyle is a traditional Igbo hairstyle worn by young men, typically during festive seasons or social gatherings. The style involves tightly woven sections of hair, often creating a neat and symmetrical appearance. It is a reflection of youthful vigor, energy, and potential within the community.

In Igbo culture, the Onu-eke hairstyle was worn to symbolize a man's strength, readiness for life's challenges, and his social status as a young adult. The style was often associated with celebration and rites of passage, marking important milestones in a young man's life.



Young Igbo man photographed by J Stocker, early 20th century. British Museum.

The Okwu-Ekpo Hairstyle is a traditional Igbo hairstyle characterized by the use of palm oil or other natural oils to give the hair a smooth and polished appearance. This style was typically worn by men who were preparing for ceremonial or important community events.

The Okwu-Ekpo hairstyle was more than just a grooming practice; it symbolized the individual's readiness to participate in significant social or spiritual activities. It was often associated with men of high status or those engaged in leadership roles, as the polished look reflected both pride and prestige.

North Thomas' notes on an Igbo man from Agulu: "Side fringe [?], man." 1910-11. This style appears on a number of young Igbo men and may have some significance. Northcote Thomas' album, MAA Cambridge. 6. Aso (or Asa) Hairstyle: - This Hairstyle is a traditional Igbo hairstyle characterized by intricate shaved patterns or designs in the hair. These geometric or symbolic shapes were often used to

reflect one's personal identity, social status, or affiliation with a particular group in the community.

Commonly worn by young men or warriors, the Aso hairstyle featured designs that could signify age, achievements, or roles within society. The shaved patterns often represented the individual's village, family, or even spiritual beliefs. The process required skill, as it involved creating precise shapes that were both decorative and meaningful.



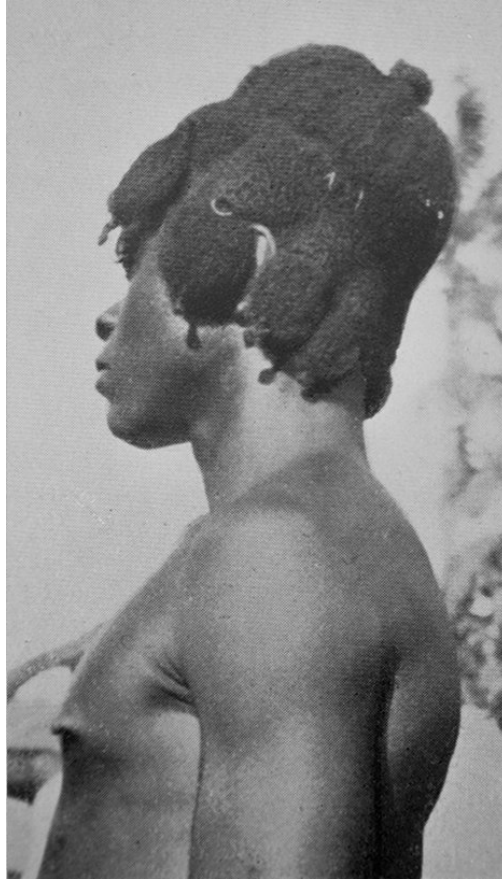
An Igbo man from Nibo, present-day Anambra State, photographed by Northcote Thomas, c. 1910-11. RAI. Colourised from black and white, Ụkpúrụ 2019.

7. Igbo Mohawk: The Igbo Mohawk is a traditional Igbo hairstyle that resembles the modern Mohawk, featuring shaved sides with a strip of hair left in the middle of the head. This hairstyle was often worn by young men, particularly warriors, to symbolize strength, courage, and readiness for battle. The style was bold and distinct, designed to showcase the wearer's vigor and warrior spirit.



"Achetefu(?) young man." ... "Hairdressing (Ibo) Man of Awka". Northcote Thomas, c. 1911. MAA Cambridge.

The Igbo Mohawk was more than just a fashion statement; it had cultural significance. It marked the individual as someone who had proven their bravery or was preparing for important communal or ritual activities, such as warfare or coming-of-age ceremonies. The boldness of the hairstyle reflected the wearer's courage and their commitment to defending their community



This is the kind of hairstyle worn by young Igbo men around the northern side of the Igbo area. The photo was taken around the 1920s. Young guys grew their hair like this for the same reasons young guys grow their hair today.

8. Ekpo (Masquerade) Hairstyle: This is a traditional Igbo hairstyle associated with men who participate in masquerade rituals, a key cultural practice in many Igbo communities. This style is typically elaborate and symbolic, often worn by individuals involved in masquerade performances, where the hairstyle is part of the ceremonial attire.



10 Aug. 1905. Edet market, Ndiya. An Inokun (Aro) man spotted." – Charles Partridge. Inokun is the Ibibio term for Aro-Igbo people.

The Ekpo hairstyle was characterized by distinctive, sometimes ornate, designs that could include intricate braids or adorned hair, designed to complement the masquerade costume. The hairstyle played a crucial role in the masquerade's spiritual and cultural significance, as it helped distinguish the masquerader as a spiritual or ceremonial figure

9. Warrior Braids: The warrior braids were a significant part of Igbo male identity, often worn by young men who had proven themselves in battle. These braids were complex, with varying patterns to signify different levels of achievement in warfare. The more intricate the braid, the higher the warrior's rank.



Unidentified masquerade band and leader, shot by G. I. Jones, 1930s, around what is today Anambra State. Their coats are covered in hard-nut shell which are also used in making masquerade costumes. The leader is carrying a knife, animal skulls and has plaited hair with feathers.

The diversity in Igbo male hairstyles was a direct reflection of the values and social structures within the community. These hairstyles communicated a man's role in society, his achievements, and his standing within his family and the wider community.



Unidentified masquerade band and leader, shot by G. I. Jones, 1930s, around what is today Anambra State. Their coats are covered in hard-nut shell which are also used in making masquerade costumes. The leader is carrying a knife, animal skulls and has plaited hair with feathers.

However, the arrival of European colonialism significantly altered Igbo society, and with it, the traditional practices surrounding grooming and personal appearance. Photographs of Igbo men from the early 20th century show the gradual shift from these complex, culturally significant hairstyles to simpler, more European-inspired cuts. The colonial influence introduced a new standard of beauty and masculinity, which led to the decline of many traditional Igbo hairstyles by the late 1930s.



A young Igbo man from Ōka (Awka) photographed by Northcote Thomas, 1910-11. Coloured by @ukpuru 2019.

Despite these changes, many aspects of traditional Igbo culture, including hairstyles, have seen a resurgence in modern times. Today, Igbo men continue to wear traditional styles during cultural festivals and important events, celebrating their heritage while navigating the complexities of a post-colonial society.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR****Chuka Odi**

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 explores 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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