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The Golden Burden: *Why Northern Igbo Women Wore Brass Anklets for Life*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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FEATURE
IMAGE

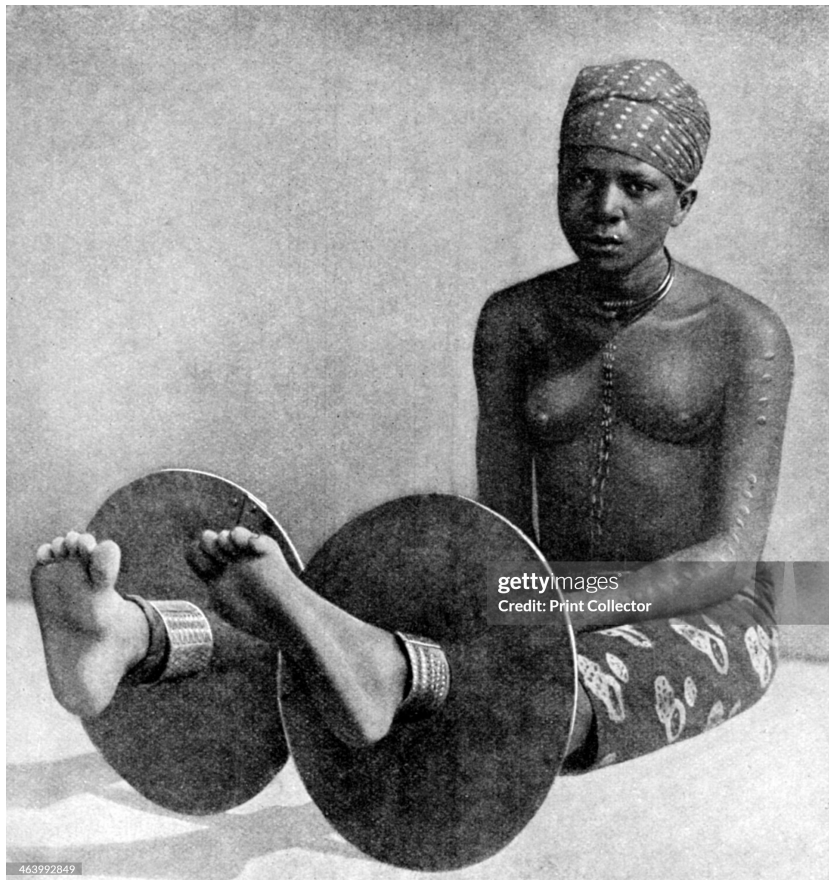
An archival 1911 image from the Northcote Thomas collection showing an Igbo woman with flared brass anklets, documenting a tradition that was soon to fade under colonial influence.

Photo Credit: University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology

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THE GOLDEN BURDEN

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An Igbo woman wearing ankle plates, Nigeria, West Africa, 1922. From *Peoples of All Nations, Their Life Today and the Story of Their Past*, volume I: Abyssinia to the British Empire, edited by JA Hammerton and published by the Educational Book Company (London, 1922). (Photo by The Print Collector/Print Collector/Getty Images)

In the historical consciousness of the Northern Igbo specifically the sub-groups within the Nri-Awka and Nsukka axes, the image of a woman adorned with massive, gleaming brass discs is one of the most enduring symbols of pre-colonial prestige. These anklets, known variously as *Ọla-arọ* (heavy brass) or *Ọmụmụ*, were not mere fashion statements to be donned and removed at a whim. For the elite women of Northern Igboland, these ornaments were “permanent fixtures” of their identity, often hammered onto their limbs in adolescence or upon marriage and worn until death. The practice was a sophisticated blend of “economic display,” “ritual sanctity,” and “social control.” This article explores the metallurgical origins, the socio-economic motivations for lifelong wear, and the multifaceted reasons behind the eventual decline of this striking cultural tradition.

01

Origins and the Metallurgy of Power

The tradition of wearing brass anklets is deeply rooted in the history of West African metalwork and the expansion of trade networks;

The Legacy of Awka Smiths: The Northern Igbo region was the home of the renowned Awka blacksmiths and carvers. These traveling smiths were the “engineers of status,” possessing the secret techniques of the “lost-wax” casting process and the ability to forge heavy copper alloys into smooth, wearable art.

Manillas as Raw Material: With the advent of the Atlantic trade, “manillas” (C-shaped brass or copper bracelets) flooded the Niger Delta. Northern Igbo smiths melted these imported currencies to create the large, flat discs characteristic of the region. This transformed “foreign money” into “local prestige.”

Sacred Associations: Copper and its alloys were associated with the

sun and the “Earth Goddess” (Ala). Because the metal did not rust and maintained a golden luster when polished, it was viewed as a “divine substance” that could protect the wearer from spiritual impurities.

02

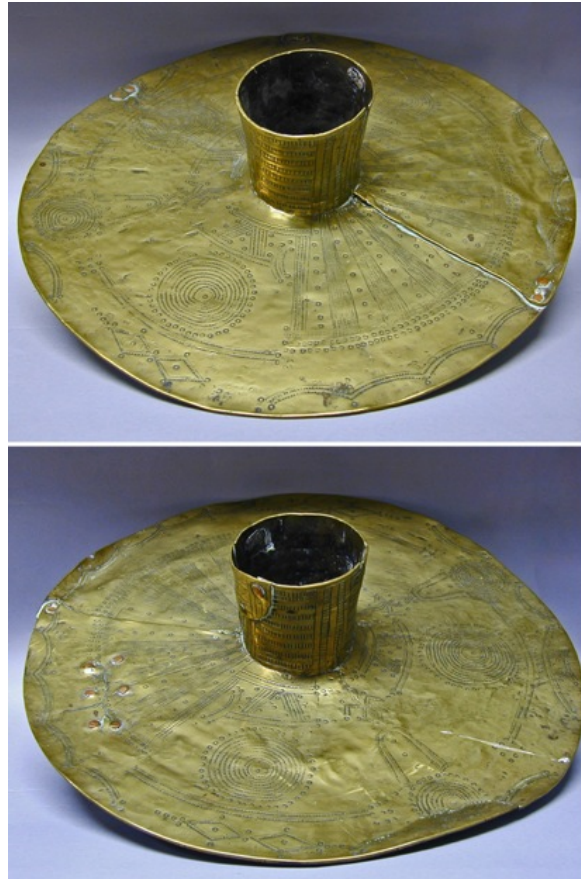
The Lifelong Commitment: Why They Were Not Removed

Unlike modern jewelry, the Northern Igbo anklets were often a “permanent modification” of the body. The decision to wear them for life was driven by several systemic factors;

Anchoring Social Status: The anklets were usually granted when a woman’s husband took a high-level Ozo title or when she herself attained the rank of Lolo. Removal of the anklets was seen as a “renunciation of rank” or a sign of family bankruptcy. To wear them for life was to provide a “permanent testimony” to the family’s enduring wealth.

The Mechanics of Fitting: The anklets were often fitted by a smith who would hammer the metal shut or weld the ends together while the metal was still warm or pliable. The process was so intensive and the metal so thick that removing them required a professional smith to literally “break” the status, a process that was both costly and socially stigmatized.

The Aesthetic of the Gait: Over years of wearing several pounds of brass on each leg, women developed a distinctive “swinging gait.” The discs were often so wide that the wearer had to walk with legs apart to prevent the plates from clashing. This “noble stride” became a part of the woman’s physical identity; removing the weight would literally change the way she moved, marking her as someone who had “fallen from grace.”



A museum display featuring a variety of Igbo brass leg ornaments, ranging from heavy solid rings to the iconic wide-disc “ogba.” Photo Credit: The British Museum / Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas.

03

Economic and Social Functions

The anklets functioned as a “living bank account” and a tool for defining the female experience in the Northern Igbo hierarchy;

Portable Wealth: In a society without paper money or digital ledgers, a woman’s legs carried the “family’s capital.” In times of extreme communal crisis or famine, the brass could be “liquidated” (melted down) to support the household, though this was considered a last resort.

Exemption from Labor: A woman wearing the massive *Ọla-arọ* was physically incapable of performing “menial farm labor” or trekking long distances for water. Thus, the anklets served as a “visual proof of

leisure.” They signaled that the wearer was a woman of such high station that she had “servants or younger kin” to perform the grueling tasks of the soil.

The Marital Bond: In many cases, the anklets were a “gift of marriage.” They acted as a physical manifestation of the husband’s ability to “provide and protect,” effectively “binding” the woman to the socio-economic structure of her husband’s House.

04

Cultural Symbolism and Ritual Purity

Beyond wealth, the anklets were “spiritual conductors” that demarcated the sacred from the profane;

Ritual Barriers: It was believed that the “ring of brass” acted as a barrier against malevolent spirits that crawled upon the earth. A titled woman, being closer to the ancestors, required this “metallic shield” to maintain her ritual purity.

Uli and Brass: Titled women often paired their brass anklets with intricate Uli body painting. The contrast between the dark, organic dyes and the bright, industrial brass created a “visual harmony” that represented the balance between the “human forest” and the “world of crafted metal.”

05

The Decline: Why the Tradition Faded

By the mid-20th century, the sight of women in heavy brass anklets had become a rarity. The decline was precipitated by a “perfect storm” of colonial, religious, and economic shifts;

Missionary Disruption: Christian missionaries were perhaps the most vocal opponents of the practice. They viewed the anklets as “symbols of pagan titles” and “idolatrous pride.” Converts were often required to “cut off their brass” as a prerequisite for baptism, a symbolic act of breaking with the ancestral past.

The Shift to Colonial Currency: As the British colonial administration replaced manillas and cowries with the “shilling and the pound,” brass lost its status as a “hard currency.” The intrinsic value of the anklets evaporated, and they were viewed more as “cumbersome relics” than as viable financial assets.

Western Education and Mobility: The rise of Western-style schools and the “urbanization” of Sapele, Warri, and Enugu demanded greater physical mobility. A woman could not easily work as a “teacher, nurse, or clerk” while wearing ten pounds of brass on her legs. The “noble gait” was replaced by the “functional stride” of the modern professional.

The Adoption of Ivory: For those who still wished to display high status, Ivory tusks (Ọdu) became the preferred alternative. Ivory was lighter, more expensive, and critically removable. This allowed for the display of status during “ceremonial occasions” without the burden of lifelong attachment.

The tradition of Northern Igbo women wearing brass anklets for life was a profound expression of “embodied history.” For centuries, these golden weights anchored women to their social roles, protected them

through spiritual symbolism, and broadcasted the economic might of their lineages. While the “permanent wear” of brass has vanished under the pressures of Christianity and modern economic structures, the legacy lives on in the “aesthetic DNA” of the Igbo people. Today, these anklets are viewed as “masterpieces of African art,” reminding the modern world of an era when a woman’s worth was measured not just in her words, but in the “golden resonance” of her footsteps.

SOURCES

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