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The Igbo Mbari House: *A Cultural and Historical Perspective*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Sculpture of Ala (The Earth Mother) among Igbos. William Buller Fagg, 28 February, 1946, Ebele, near Owere (Owerri), Oratta-Igbo. British Museum.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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The Igbo Mbari house is a traditional architectural and artistic expression of the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria. On February 28, 1946, a notable Mbari structure was documented at Ebele, Owerri (now part of Imo State, Nigeria). This particular Mbari house featured figures of telephone operators, showcasing a blend of traditional Igbo art and modern...

“ [g]bo MBARI house. 28/2/46. at EBELE, OWERRI [now in Imo State, Nigeria]. Figures of telephone operators” William Fagg. British Museum. 22 June 2018 The Igbo Mbari house is a traditional architectural and artistic expression of the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria. On February 28, 1946, a notable Mbari structure was documented at Ebele, Owerri (now part of Imo State, Nigeria). This particular Mbari house featured figures of telephone operators, showcasing a blend of traditional Igbo art and modern influences.

Mbari houses serve as sacred spaces dedicated to Ala, the earth goddess, and other deities. These structures are typically crafted by a community of artists over several years and feature elaborate sculptures and paintings that narrate significant cultural, historical, and social themes. The inclusion of figures like telephone operators reflects the adaptive and innovative nature of Igbo art, which incorporates contemporary elements into its storytelling.

The photograph, taken by William Buller Fagg on February 28, 1946, depicts the interior of an Mbari house in Ebele, near Owerri, within the Oratta-Igbo region. At the center of the image is a striking mud sculpture of Ala, the revered Earth Mother in Igbo cosmology,

embodying fertility, morality, and the sustenance of life. The sculpture portrays Ala in a seated position, flanked by a small boy and girl on her knees, symbolizing her nurturing role as the giver and protector of life.

Mbari houses are sacred spaces in Igbo culture, constructed as artistic offerings to the deities. They are completely decorated with sculptures and paintings that depict gods, spirits, and aspects of Igbo life. The creation of an Mbari house is a communal act of devotion, often initiated to appease Ala or other deities for blessings, protection, or resolution of crises.

The inclusion of children in the sculpture emphasizes Ala's connection to fertility and the continuity of the community. Her serene expression and detailed adornments underscore her role as a moral compass, enforcing justice and harmony within Igbo society.



The Igbo Earth Mother, Ala in an Mbari house dedicated to her in Ebele, near Owere (Owerri). William Fagg, 28th February 1946. British Museum.

This artifact, housed in the British Museum, remains a powerful testament to the artistic and spiritual traditions of the Igbo people. The use of mud as the medium reflects a deep connection to the earth, reinforcing Ala's embodiment of nature's essence. Such works not only serve religious purposes but also preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo, highlighting their artistic ingenuity and spiritual worldview.

The documentation of this Mbàrì house was done by William Fagg, a British anthropologist and art historian, who specialized in African art. His work has been preserved in the British Museum's archives, contributing significantly to the understanding and appreciation of Igbo cultural heritage.

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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 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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