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The Representation of Igbo Women in Early Colonial Photography: *A Focus on Northcote Thomas's Work*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**An Igbo woman photographed by
Northcote Thomas, Onicha Olona,
1912. Image colourized by Ozi
Ikoro, 2024.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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An Igbo woman photographed by Northcote Thomas, Onicha Olona, 1912.

The Igbo people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa, have a rich cultural heritage that has been documented through various mediums. Among these are the photographs of Igbo women captured by British anthropologist Northcote Thomas between 1910 and 1911 during his ethnographic surveys. These photographs, now preserved and some colourized, provide valuable insights into the cultural, social, and historical contexts of Igbo society during the colonial era.



An Igbo woman photographed by British colonial government anthropologist Northcote Thomas, 1910-1911, colourised from black and white, 2018. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

01

Igbo Women Through Northcote Thomas's Lens

Northcote Thomas was commissioned by the British colonial

government to conduct anthropological research in Nigeria. His work involved detailed studies of Igbo communities, including their customs, architecture, and daily lives. Among his most compelling contributions are his portraits of Igbo women. These images, originally in black and white, were later colourized to bring a new dimension to the historical records.

The photographs, such as the one of an unnamed Igbo woman and another of a woman from Öka (Awka), capture the essence of Igbo femininity, showcasing the hairstyles, attire, and adornments that reflect the cultural identity of the time. These women are depicted with dignity and grace, presenting a visual narrative that contrasts with the often reductive colonial accounts of African societies.



A woman of Öka (Awka) photographed by British colonial government anthropologist Northcote Thomas, 1910-1911. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.



Cultural and Historical Significance

The photographs of Igbo women hold cultural and historical significance, as they document aspects of Igbo life that might otherwise have been lost. Hairstyles, for instance, were a vital aspect of Igbo identity, serving as markers of age, marital status, or social standing. These images allow modern viewers to appreciate the intricacies of traditional Igbo aesthetics and their role in expressing individuality and community belonging.

In addition to showcasing cultural practices, these portraits provide a window into the lived experiences of Igbo women during the early 20th century. The colonial period was a time of profound social and political change, and women often occupied a unique position within these dynamics. While they maintained their roles in agriculture, trade, and family life, they also navigated the challenges posed by colonial rule and its disruptions to traditional Igbo society.



A woman of Öka (Awka) photographed by British colonial government anthropologist Northcote Thomas, 1910-1911, colourised (and cropped) from black and white, 2018. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

03

Preservation and Modern Interpretation

The preservation and subsequent colorization of Northcote Thomas's photographs by institutions such as the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, underscore the enduring value of these historical records. Colorization, in particular, brings a sense of immediacy and relatability to the images, bridging the gap between the past and the present. However, it also raises questions about the ethics of modifying historical artifacts and the potential loss of original context.

Modern interpretations of these photographs have also sparked conversations about the portrayal of African women in historical records. While Thomas's work aimed to document Igbo culture, it was also shaped by colonial power dynamics, which often influenced how African subjects were represented. Revisiting these images today offers an opportunity to reclaim their narratives, centering the voices and experiences of the women depicted.



A woman of Öka (Awka) photographed by British colonial government anthropologist Northcote Thomas, 1910-1911. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge and Colourized by Ozi Ikoro 2024.

04

Conclusion

The photographs of Igbo women taken by Northcote Thomas in 1910-1911 are more than mere visual records; they are cultural artifacts that tell stories of resilience, beauty, and identity. By preserving and interpreting these images, we gain valuable insights



into the lives of Igbo women and the broader cultural landscape of early 20th-century Igbo society. They remind us of the importance of historical documentation and the need to critically engage with the legacies of colonial anthropology.

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. (1910-1911). Photographs by Northcote Thomas: Igbo women of Nigeria.

Thomas, N. (1910-1911). Anthropological documentation of the Igbo people of Nigeria.

Ukpuru. (2018). An Igbo woman photographed by Northcote Thomas, 1910-1911, colourised from black and white. Instagram.

Ukpuru. (2018). A woman of Öka (Awka) photographed by Northcote Thomas, 1910-1911, colourised (and cropped). Instagram.

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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