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The Sacred Art of Mbari Houses: *A Glimpse into Igbo Votive Shrine Galleries*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**photographed by A. A. Whitehouse,
1904.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Mbari houses are sacred votive shrine galleries created by the Urata-Echie Igbo people, primarily in what is now Imo and Rivers States, Nigeria. These structures are built in honour of deities, most commonly Ala, the Igbo Earth Mother, as well as other significant spiritual entities such as Amadioha (the god of thunder) and various local river deities. Mbari houses depict multiple divine figures alongside scenes from daily life, folklore, and symbolic representations of Igbo cosmology.

Constructed from termite earth mixed with water and washed in white, Mbari shrines carry profound spiritual significance. White, in Igbo culture, symbolizes purity and the divine, while additional colourful patterns and decorations, derived from natural pigments, enhance the shrine's sacred aesthetics. The construction of an Mbari house is considered a deeply spiritual task, often performed under the guidance of a deity. The process typically takes several months, during which artisans create detailed sculptures and designs with the understanding that the completed shrine will be left to decay naturally over time. This abandonment stems from a belief that the structure is imbued with spiritual energy and should not be disturbed once consecrated.

A fascinating scene from an Mbari house was captured in 1904 by photographer A. A. Whitehouse, who documented a ritual moment. According to Whitehouse's description:

“The only explanation I could obtain of this subject is that the girl

lying down is about to have her teeth cut or sharpened; but it does not seem probable that a matchet would be used for the purpose. The hairpins as worn by the lady presiding are made by the blacksmiths in the Nkwerri country, north of Owerri.”

This historical photograph offers valuable insight into Igbo cultural practices and the symbolic role of Mbari in preserving their spiritual heritage. The image highlights the ritualistic aspects of life depicted in Mbari houses, which serve as both a means of religious expression and a testament to the artistic ingenuity of the Igbo people

Whitehouse, A. A. (1904). Igbo Cultural Practices and Art Forms. British Museum Archives.

Cole, H. M. (1982). Mbari: Art and Life among the Owerri Igbo. Indiana University Press.

Basden, G. T. (1966). Among the Ibos of Nigeria. Frank Cass & Co. Ltd.

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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