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The Symbolism of Ichi Markings Among the Igbo People in the Early 20th Century

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

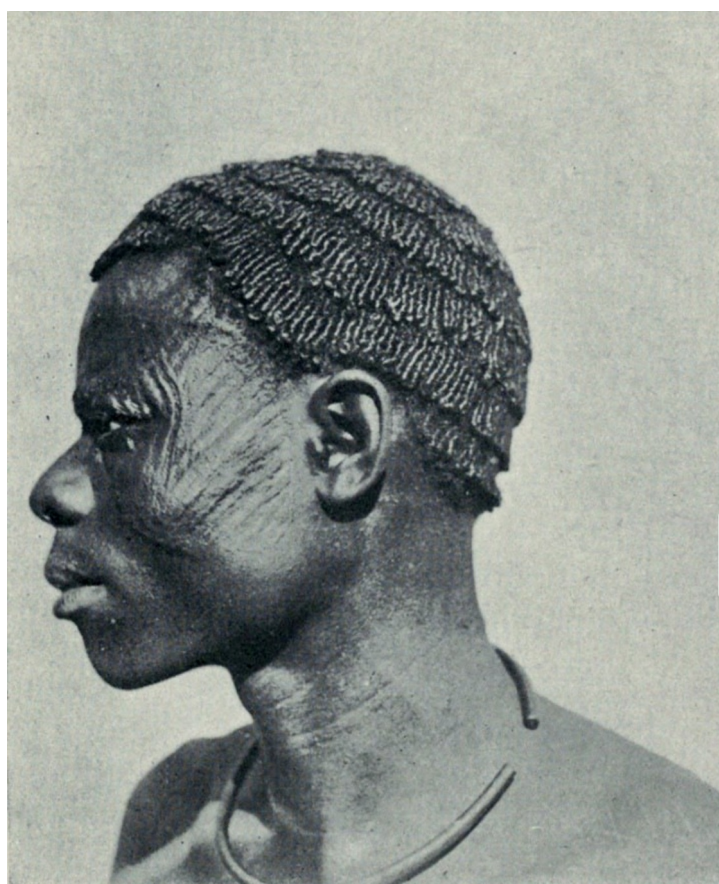
A man labelled as being from Ögbü (Awgbu) in present day Anambra State by Northcote Thomas, c. 1910-1911. The marks on his face are known as ichi given symbolically to people associated with Nze, often times the children of Nze titled people. Colourised, Ukpúrí 2019.

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An Igbo man photographed by British government anthropologist Northcote Thomas in the 1910s, the markings on his face are known as ichi which is worn by men and young boys as part of initiation into the the Nze na Ozo society, a society originally consisting of priests. The marks were also referred to as ogba ubi, farm furrows.



In the early 20th century, an Igbo man was photographed by British government anthropologist Northcote Thomas, capturing a visual representation of the detailed markings known as “*ichi*”. These facial scarifications, thoroughly etched into the skin, served as a physical testament to the bearer’s social and spiritual journey. Specifically, *ichi* markings were traditionally worn by men and young boys as part of their initiation into the esteemed Nze na Ozo society.

The Nze na Ozo society was an exclusive organization originally composed of priests and high-ranking community members, signifying wisdom, leadership, and a deep commitment to Igbo cultural and spiritual values. Members of this society were recognized as custodians of tradition, mediators of justice, and bearers of sacred responsibilities. Through initiation, they acquired not only the *ichi* markings but also a new status and titles that elevated them within their communities.

The term *ogba ubi*, meaning “farm furrows,” poetically describes the appearance of the markings, drawing a parallel to the ridges of farmland. This metaphor reflects the agricultural foundation of Igbo society, linking the markings to the values of hard work, prosperity, and growth. Beyond their social significance, *ichi* also symbolized personal bravery, as enduring the process of scarification required immense courage and pain tolerance.

Northcote Thomas’s photographs and documentations provides valuable insights into Igbo customs and practices during the colonial period. His photographs and writings preserve a critical part of Igbo heritage, serving as a reference for cultural and historical research into this era.

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Trowell, M. (1970). Classical African Sculpture. Faber and Faber.

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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