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Igbo Cultural Expression: The Story and Rebirth of Mbari House and Uri Design

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Abstract: This paper analyzes Mbari house and Uri design as climatic, artistic, and architectural traditions of the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, exploring their spiritual, philosophical, and socio-cultural dimensions. Grounded in Igbo cosmology, these art forms serve as complex visual epistemologies that articulate moral consciousness and communal identity. Historically, the monumental, sacrificial architecture of Mbari, dedicated primarily to the earth goddess Ala, and the fluid visual language of Uri body and wall decoration served as sites of performativity for cosmic renewal and indigenous knowledge production. However, colonial governance, Christian evangelization, and rapid socio-economic shifts severely disrupted these practices, marginalizing indigenous belief systems and replacing ephemeral ritual materials. Using an analytical framework, the paper traces Igbo historical origins, Mbari architectural symbolism, the integrated Uri motif, and the transformative impacts of modernization. Findings reveal that, despite historical disruption, these traditions demonstrate remarkable resilience, evolving from sacred communal rites into dynamic visual strategies within contemporary art and global postcolonial discourse. This paper offers an integrated framework that links spatial architecture (Mbari) directly with linear visual design (Uri) under a unified Igbo cosmological principle, advancing postcolonial art scholarship and colonial heritage paradigms. The paper concludes that Mbari architecture and Uri idioms remain fundamental to Igbo heritage and cultural decolonization. To prevent further deterioration, the paper recommends systematic digital archiving, ethnographic documentation, community-based hands-on workshops, and policy-driven protection frameworks supported by strategic partnerships with heritage institutions and UNESCO.

Keywords: Cultural, Design, Igbo cosmology, Heritage, Mbari house, Postcolonial Modernism, Uri, Visual,

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1. Introduction

The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria possess a complex, multifaceted cultural heritage expressed through distinctive art forms, architectural traditions, and spiritual practices. Among these, the Mbari house and Uri designs are significant symbols of communal identity, spiritual devotion, and artistic innovation. These practices extend beyond aesthetics, being deeply integrated into the social, religious, and philosophical frameworks of Igbo society. Analyzing the significance of Mbari houses and Uri art offers valuable insight into the Igbo worldview, demonstrating how art and architecture serve as conduits for spiritual communication, social cohesion, and cultural continuity [1]. The Igbo community prioritizes communal participation and spiritual harmony, with traditional society structured around a belief system that venerates deities, ancestors, and organized forces and that perceives the universe as a balanced and interconnected entity [2].

The Artistic expressions such as *Mbari* houses and *Uri* designs play a critical role in sustaining communal harmony, serving as tangible symbols of reverence for divine forces and societal virtues. These art forms act as vehicles of collective memory, transmitting stories, values, and cosmological principles across generations. The sacred spaces of *Mbari* houses, in particular, physically manifest spiritual narratives and reinforce societal norms and cultural identity [3].

Willis characterizes the *Mbari* house as a monumental shrine and a definitive example of Igbo communal art and architecture. Unlike conventional religious structures, *Mbari* houses are constructed primarily as offerings to deities, especially *Ala*, the earth goddess. These structures honor divine entities and reflect communal appreciation, hope, and resilience. According to Ottenberg, *Mbari* houses symbolize collective devotion and artistic expression, often featuring elaborate sculptures and murals depicting deities, mythological beings, and ancestral figures [4]. The construction process is highly ritualized, involving community participation, spiritual purification, and artistic craftsmanship. Traditionally, interior walls are adorned with *Uri* motifs, which are fluid, abstract patterns resonating with the natural environment and spiritual symbolism. These motifs are deliberately crafted to

embody harmony, balance, and interconnectedness, reflecting Igbo cosmology and social values. *Uli* designs are a distinctive form of body and wall art practiced predominantly by Igbo women. Ikwuemesi notes that historically, *Uli* was applied using natural pigments derived from plants, soils, and minerals, resulting in ephemeral murals on walls or body surfaces. The designs feature flowing lines, geometric shapes, and abstract motifs inspired by nature, animals, and celestial symbols [5]. Although *Uli* is primarily abstract and non-representational, it conveys significant symbolic meanings related to morality, beauty, fertility, and spiritual harmony. Women, regarded as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms, played a central role in creating *Uli* art.

Grace asserts that women were believed to be endowed by the Earth Goddess *Ala* with the divine capacity to create beauty and uphold societal order through artistic expression [6]. The motifs incorporate natural elements, deities, and ancestral spirits, establishing a sacred visual language that reinforces the community's cosmology. These practices exemplify a worldview in which art is regarded as a sacred act of devotion, communication, and social cohesion. Willis notes that the temporary nature of *Mbari* houses, which are intended to decay naturally after fulfilling their spiritual purpose, reflects Igbo beliefs in transformation and renewal. The impermanence of *Mbari* houses underscores the concept that life, art, and spirituality are components of an ongoing cycle, prioritizing meaning and experience over material permanence [7].

Historical Origin of the Igbo People

The Igbo played a significant role in the transatlantic slave trade by capturing and selling enslaved individuals to European traders. Their decentralized political structure enabled British colonial expansion in the nineteenth century. Isichei notes that the Igbo region became a major center for Christian missionary activity. The Igbo language, belonging to the Niger-Congo family, consists of several mutually intelligible regional dialects, reflecting linguistic diversity that supports cultural identity. Emeka and Ibeanu report that the Igbo homeland borders the Ibibio, Efik, and Idoma. Before British colonization, Igbo society was organized around chiefdoms including Nri, the Aro Confederacy, Agbor, and Onitsha. The British introduced the "warrant Chiefs", during their colonial rule which coincided with existing political structures among the Igbo [8]. The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) began with Biafra's attempt to secede amid ethnic tensions following Nigeria's independence.

The military embargo imposed by Nigeria led to severe famine in Biafra, widely condemned as genocide (Emeka, 2006). After the war ended in 1970, Biafra was reintegrated into Nigeria. However, organizations such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra

continue to advocate for an independent Igbo state. Obi argues that Igbo ethnic identity developed relatively recently, shaped by independence and the Nigerian Civil War. Achebe (1958) described Igbo identity as existing between a tribe and a "nation," highlighting the historically dispersed nature of Igbo-speaking communities [9], [10].

Following Biafra's defeat, the Igbo are often described as a "stateless nation," continually seeking political recognition and autonomy. The Igbo language belongs to the Volta-Niger phylum and is related to the Yoruboid and Edoid languages, as Eze documents. Migration patterns indicate that the proto-Igbo originated in the northern savannah, later settled in the Niger Delta, and established towns such as Awka. Ikenna argues that archaeological discoveries, including pottery from Nsukka and Afikpo dated to 3,000-2,500 BC and early iron smelting in Opi and Lejja, demonstrate the Igbo's advanced technological and artistic capabilities [11]. These findings suggest that the Nri dynasty, a theocratic monarchy, played a central role in the governance and spiritual life of the Igbo heartland. Royal tombs and associated artifacts reveal a structured political system in which the Nri monarch (Eze Nri) exercised significant authority over both the population and religious matters, underscoring the close relationship between the Nri kingdom and spiritual leadership. The influence of the Nri dynasty extends back to the ninth century, providing a durable political and spiritual foundation for Igbo society. Ikenna highlights Igbo-Ukwu in Anambra State as a leading archaeological site in West Africa, with artifacts dating from the ninth to eleventh centuries. The site has yielded approximately 600 artifacts, including intricately crafted bronze and copper-alloy sculptures and over 165,000 glass and carnelian beads [12], [13].

These discoveries demonstrate the Igbo's sophisticated metallurgical skills and early interactions with other African civilizations, particularly the Kingdom of Nri, which contributed to their cultural identity and regional prominence. Emeka maintains that these findings significantly improve understanding of the Igbo people's early history, cultural achievements, and regional relationships. However, Gordon states that prominent Igbo towns, such as Onitsha, were ruled by monarchs known as Obi, while priest-kings governed regions like the Nri Kingdom and Arochukwu [14]. Amadiume reports that the Igbo maintained a patrilineal system called *Umunna*, which served as the foundation of their society.

2. Methodology

An Overview of *Mbari* House

The *Mbari* house represents a major tradition of monumental public art and architecture in southern Nigeria. Originating among the Owerri and Mbaise Igbo communities, *Mbari* is not a conventional shrine or a permanent place of worship. Instead, it is a large artistic and architectural structure created as a sacrificial offering to deities, particularly *Ala*, the Igbo earth goddess. Bernice associates *Mbari* with creation, decoration, and communal building. In Owerri and Mbaise cosmology, constructing an *Mbari* symbolically recreates the universe, linking the human world with the spiritual realm. The structure serves as a visual medium for honoring deities, preserving history, and restoring balance after periods of crisis. Cole and Willett note that the relationship with the divine involves ongoing interaction and negotiation. When communities face prolonged misfortunes such as crop failures, famine, high infant mortality, or social instability, they consult a diviner to identify the spiritual cause. These crises are often interpreted as signs that *Ala* or another deity has been neglected. To restore harmony and prevent further disaster, the community constructs an *Mbari* house, which represents a significant collective sacrifice of labor, resources, time, and devotion to the deity.

At the center of every *Mbari* is *Ala*, the goddess of the earth, fertility, morality, creativity, and the underworld. In Igbo cosmology, she is considered the foundation of life and the guardian of social order. Her laws, known as *Omenala*, regulate human behavior and maintain communal stability. Within the *Mbari* house, *Ala* is typically depicted as a majestic mother figure at the center, often surrounded by her children or attendants. This

arrangement underscores her role as the source of life and the primary recipient of the community's artistic and spiritual offering.

Achebe and Willis observe that the *Mbari* house also includes sculptures of other deities such as *Amadioha*, water spirits, ancestors, animals, and figures from daily life. The *Mbari* does not exclude unpleasant or unfamiliar subjects; rather, it functions as a cultural archive that documents myths, social realities, historical events, and evolving circumstances. This inclusiveness reflects the Igbo belief that art should engage with all aspects of human experience rather than remain separate from society. Cole notes that during the colonial period, this artistic philosophy led to the incorporation of Western figures and objects into *Mbari* compositions. Sculptures of British colonial officers, tax collectors, bicycles, umbrellas, and other foreign items appeared alongside indigenous deities and spirits. By integrating these new influences, the Owerri Igbo symbolically interpreted and domesticated the power of colonial rule, incorporating foreign authority into their spiritual and cultural system. Traditionally, the structure is square or rectangular, with open sides, numerous supporting columns, and a large thatched roof. The wide roof protects the clay sculptures from heavy rainfall and intense sunlight, while the open design promotes ventilation and reduces humidity. This arrangement encourages visitors to move throughout the structure and gradually experience the narrative represented by the sculptures.

Cole further notes that the materials used in constructing *Mbari* are closely connected to its ritual significance. The primary material is clay collected from termite mounds or anthills, which are considered symbols of fertility and purity. When applied to walls and statues, curvilinear designs derived from traditional Igbo body art transform the surfaces into expressive visual forms, symbolic patterns, and lifelike colours.

3. Result and Discussion

The walls are often decorated with representations of the sun, moon, and animals, reinforcing the *Mbari*'s function as a miniature reflection of the universe. Cole notes that, through divination, selected community members are chosen as spirit workers and placed in ritual seclusion for several months. During this period, they construct the building, prepare the clay, and create the sculptures. This temporary separation marks the transformation of ordinary individuals into sacred participants in a divine task. Aniakor emphasizes that the entire process highlights collective creativity rather than individual achievement [15]. Upon completion, a public unveiling ceremony is held, featuring celebration, dance, and ritual performances. The spirit workers are then reintegrated into society and traditionally feign ignorance regarding the construction process.



Plate: 1

Artist: Ezem

Title: *Front side of Mbari House*

Medium: Clay

Source: Photograph by Herbert M. Cole

Year: 1960

The Spiritual and Symbolic Significance of *Mbari* House in Igbo Culture

The *Mbari* house occupies a central position within the religious, artistic, and cultural landscape of the Igbo people. Beyond its role as a physical structure, *Mbari* functions as a sacred institution that articulates and preserves cosmological beliefs, communal values, and indigenous knowledge systems. Recent scholarship increasingly interprets *Mbari* as a form of cultural architecture encapsulating the collective worldview of the Igbo community. Eghelle and Brisibe identify *Mbari* houses as significant examples of vernacular architecture, reflecting the social, religious, and philosophical foundations of the communities that construct them. As sacred spaces primarily dedicated to *Ala*, the Earth Goddess, *Mbari* houses serve as symbolic sites where spiritual devotion, artistic creativity, and communal identity converge. The symbolic importance of *Mbari* is evident in its visual representations, which convey complex cosmological concepts through sculpture, painting, and architecture [16]. The artistic motifs within *Mbari* structures are not merely decorative; rather, they constitute a sophisticated system of indigenous communication. Representations of animals, deities, ancestral figures, celestial bodies, and scenes from daily life articulate the interconnectedness between the spiritual and material realms [17].

Anyokwu argues that the Igbo conception of art, as exemplified by *Mbari*, extends beyond aesthetics and serves as a medium for conveying philosophical and spiritual meanings. Consequently, *Mbari* art functions as a visual language through which cultural values, moral principles, and religious beliefs are transmitted across generations [18]. Notable symbols within *Mbari* houses include the python, birds, celestial motifs, and fertility-related imagery. These symbols represent concepts such as divine authority, continuity, prosperity, regeneration, and cosmic harmony.

The frequent depiction of sacred animals, particularly the python, demonstrates the close relationship between spirituality and nature in Igbo cosmology. Abakporo notes that indigenous Igbo artistic traditions exhibit a profound ecological consciousness by integrating natural elements into religious expression. This ecological dimension suggests that *Mbari* symbolism encompasses not only religious representation but also an ethical relationship between humanity and the environment. Such symbolism affirms the belief that social stability and spiritual well-being depend on maintaining harmony with both natural and supernatural realms [19]. *Mbari* houses also function as repositories of collective memory and cultural heritage. Through sculptures and murals, they preserve myths, historical narratives, religious teachings, and communal experiences that might otherwise be lost. Onyejegbu emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural objects and indigenous artistic traditions in southeastern Nigeria, arguing that these resources are essential for understanding historical identities and ensuring cultural continuity. In this context, *Mbari* can be regarded as a visual archive through which communities document and transmit knowledge. The narratives embedded in *Mbari* art provide insight into traditional beliefs, social structures, political experiences, and evolving historical realities [20]. Constructing an *Mbari* house is a ritual act that embodies communal participation and collective responsibility. Unlike individual artistic production, creating *Mbari* requires the collaborative efforts of artists, religious specialists, and elders, women, and youth groups. This collective engagement transforms the construction process into a social institution that reinforces community cohesion and shared identity [21].



P

Artist: Herbert Cole

Title: *Figure of Ala in an Mbari*

Medium: Clay

Source: <https://www.themoriginalian.org/2020/08/06/chinua-achebe-mbari>

Year: 2020

2

***Uri* Design in *Mbari* House**

Uri design within *Mbari* houses represents a sophisticated visual system that articulates Igbo cosmological thought, ritual knowledge, and social memory. In this sacred architectural context, *Uri* functions as a structured language that transforms built space into a cosmological environment, rather than serving as mere ornamentation [22]. Recent scholarship highlights *Uri* as an indigenous epistemic design that encodes and transmits knowledge about existence, morality, and the spiritual universe. Ikwuemesi argue that *Uli* women painters should be recognized as classical knowledge producers whose work constitutes a complex intellectual tradition.

Within *Mbari* structures, *Uli* serves as a medium through which the community negotiates relationships with deities, ancestors, and the natural world. *Uli* motifs are applied to both interior and exterior surfaces, creating a continuous visual field that reflects the Igbo conception of an interconnected universe governed by spiritual forces. These motifs include depictions of deities, ancestors, human figures, animals, and natural symbols.

The Earth deity *Ala* occupies a central role, as *Mbari* structures are frequently dedicated to her as a moral authority. These spaces function as performative environments where visual forms actively generate spiritual meaning [23]. Egwutuoha notes that sacred visual systems act as active mediators of spiritual balance and communal order, rather than serving as passive decoration. The integration of *Uli* into *Mbari* architecture demonstrates the inseparability of art, ritual, and social life in Igbo culture. *Mbari* houses are ritually commissioned responses to spiritual imbalance and are allowed to decay naturally after completion. Within this temporary sacred environment, *Uli* helps establish moral and spiritual order. Njoku asserts that indigenous spatial systems in southeastern Nigeria function as both physical shelters and

metaphysical constructs. *Uli* motifs therefore serve protective, communicative, and moral functions, reinforcing social values and maintaining spiritual equilibrium. The production of *Uli* is deeply embedded in gendered systems of knowledge, with women as primary custodians. Their responsibilities extend beyond artistic production to encompass spiritual mediation and cultural preservation. Knowledge is transmitted through apprenticeship, ritual participation, and embodied practice [24]. Ikwuemesi further emphasize the re-evaluation of *Uli* women painters as central intellectual figures in Igbo visual culture. Painting within *Mbari* constitutes both an artistic and ritualistic practice, often requiring spiritual preparation and communal participation.

A defining characteristic of *Uli* aesthetics is its ephemerality. Unlike Western traditions that emphasize permanence, *Uli* is grounded in impermanence, with meaning understood as fluid and procession. The fading of murals is regarded not as loss but as an integral part of cosmic cycles of renewal. Eze argues that temporality in African art reflects broader metaphysical concepts of life, death, and regeneration. *Uli* thus aligns with Igbo cosmology, which prioritizes continuity through transformation rather than static existence. Thus, continuity between traditional *Mbari* contexts and modern visual culture exemplifies the resilience of Igbo indigenous knowledge systems [25], [26].

Colonization, Christianity, and Rejuvenation in *Uri* and *Mbari* Tradition European colonial rule and Christian missionary activity in southeastern Nigeria disrupted indigenous artistic, religious, and architectural traditions, including *Mbari* ritual architecture and *Uri* visual culture. Colonial ideology often labeled Igbo cosmology as pagan, leading to the devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems. Falola and Heaton argue that colonial governance in West Africa imposed political control and restructured cultural and epistemological systems, replacing indigenous standards with Western religious and aesthetic

norms. As a result, sacred practices such as *Mbari* construction were marginalized or stripped of their ritual significance [27]. Christianity had a pronounced effect on the transformation of sacred spaces and artistic expression. *Mbari* houses, traditionally constructed as ritual responses to spiritual imbalance, were increasingly abandoned or reinterpreted as incompatible with Christian worship. *Uli* art, closely linked to indigenous religion and female artistic agency, was similarly stigmatized as heathen. Uchendu notes that missionary education contributed to the decline of indigenous ritual systems by redefining them as superstitious, while Western schooling replaced

apprenticeship-based knowledge transmission, thereby weakening the continuity of *Uli* practice. Colonialism also altered the material basis of artistic production [28].

Imported pigments, industrial paints, and European building materials replaced locally sourced clay, plant dyes, and mineral pigments used in *Mbari* and *Uli* traditions. Nzegwu contends that colonial modernity privileged permanence and commodification over indigenous aesthetics rooted in ephemerality and ritual function. This shift changed visual outcomes and diminished the ecological and spiritual foundations of traditional art forms. The Nsukka art school later played a central role in reintroducing *Uli* aesthetics into contemporary Nigerian art, transforming it into a modern visual language and reaffirming its cultural significance [29], [30], [31].

Okeke states that postcolonial Nigerian modernism often involves a deliberate return to indigenous knowledge systems as a form of cultural decolonization, characterized by creative reinvention rather than simple restoration. Contemporary artists incorporate *Uli* motifs in painting, textiles, sculpture, and digital media, reflecting broader efforts in cultural reclamation [32]. Oguibe notes that African contemporary art often engages in dialogue between indigenous epistemologies and global artistic systems, allowing traditional forms to evolve in new contexts. Exhibitions have repositioned *Uli* as an active component of African modernism rather than a historical artifact. Nevertheless, urbanization, environmental change, and infrastructural expansion threaten sacred sites and limit access to natural materials essential for traditional production [33].

4. Conclusion

Mbari houses and *Uri* design are interconnected artistic traditions embodying the cosmological beliefs, social organization, and cultural identity of the Igbo people. These art forms function as systems of knowledge, conveying spiritual, moral, and historical meanings beyond their aesthetic qualities. *Mbari* architecture and *Uri* visual expression serve as complementary cultural mechanisms, transforming physical spaces and surfaces into sacred narratives that reinforce communal values and sustain indigenous epistemologies. Through symbolic motifs, ritual functions, and participating production processes, these traditions remain repositories of Igbo mythology, and collective memory. This resurgence reflects a broader movement toward cultural decolonization and heritage reclamation, with indigenous knowledge increasingly acknowledged for its intellectual and aesthetic significance. These traditions provide valuable perspectives on alternative conceptions of art, space, time, and existence, emphasizing interconnectedness, impermanence, and communal responsibility. Their preservation supports both Igbo cultural continuity and the global appreciation of diverse systems of knowledge and artistic expression. However, offering an integrated framework that links spatial architecture (*Mbari*) directly with linear visual design (*Uri*) under a unified Igbo cosmological principle, advancing postcolonial art scholarship and decolonial heritage paradigms. These recommendations are based on the paper. Involve local communities in revitalizing *Mbari* and *Uri* traditions through cultural festivals, workshops, and apprenticeship systems to transmit skills from custodians to younger practitioners. Provide funding, policy frameworks, and legal protection for endangered indigenous cultural sites and artistic traditions. This includes safeguarding *Mbari* sites and supporting artists in traditional and contemporary *Uri* forms. Establish a digital archive of ancient and modern *Mbari* house, including their historical and cultural contexts for artists, researchers, and educators.

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