

Cultural dynamism in the jewelry and body-marking practices among the Igbo in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Igbo people are known for their entrepreneurial, itinerant, and adaptive tendencies, thus exemplifying the essence of cultural dynamism. This paper studies two aspects of Igbo dress culture, jewelry and body marking, to unravel the changes that occurred within one century or thereabout. The objectives of the study are to examine traditional jewelry and permanent body marking practices to determine the extent to which the practice has changed due to the forces of modernity. The study adopts a qualitative approach and relies on interviews, observations, and visual and textual data. The paper discovers that the Igbo have not entirely abandoned their traditional jewelry and body-marking dress traditions in favor of Western fashion. Igbo people appropriated foreign styles and modified some local styles to suit their philosophy and environment. The selective nature of the adoption manifests in the use of maxims and metaphors to reenact the essence of outmoded or old-fashioned styles entirely replaced by Western modes of dressing. The paper, therefore, argues that there will always be elements of continuity in instances where some change has occurred in traditions due to cultural contact, technological advancement, and other influences of modernity.

Keywords

Culture dynamism, jewelry, Igbo, nudity, 'ichi,' body marking, Western fashion

Introduction: Modernity, change, and continuity, all the same

An Igbo scholar, Onuora Nzekwu (1963, 164), lamented in the early post-independent era that the Igbo, having “gone very Western in their dress,” could no longer be recognized by their dress except during traditional festivals. By this time, people had abandoned the use of plate-like and spiral anklets and varieties of voguish body markings. Contemporary writers have also decried the reckless abandonment of the indigenous in favor of alternatives associated with developments in modern society (Ajakor et al. 2020).

One example of style transitions is the displacement of the indigenous styles by their foreign counterparts. To turn the tide, someone recommended the establishment of textile and fashion museums where outmoded styles could be stored (Chudi-Duru 2019). According to the literature, jewelry and body marking are the two areas of dress that the forces of modernity have threatened. Negative attitudinal changes in dressing, especially from the late twentieth century to the twenty-first century, made some writers describe the fallout as a “‘riot’ in dress code” that “defiled moral values” (Nwazonobi et al. 2021). This paper studies these two aspects to unravel the changes that occurred in the practice within a space of one century or more. The objective of the study is to examine traditional jewelry and body marking as marks of adornment and symbolic communication and certain changes that occurred in the traditions as a result of the forces of modernity.

Background: The concept of *cultural dynamism*

There is hardly any English word without a broad spectrum of meanings. It is, therefore, necessary to define *cultural dynamism* as it relates to this paper. The term *culture*, which came to be generally used in English and French in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to describe ways of life among members of a society, is not innate or instinctive (Amadi 1981, 60). Birukou et al. (2013) write on a formal definition of culture, noting that technological advancements, especially in information technology and globalization, constructed specificities of culture regarding a geographic area, race, or religion nonexistent. Rasmussen et al. (2014, 17) delved into issues relating to a broad definition of culture in the field of multicultural psychology and proposed multicultural thinking, advising that people should think about "their own cultural influences and multiple cultural identities as well as those of the other individuals with whom they interact." Implicit in the saying is the fact that culture can be shared among human beings.

The word *dynamism* refers to a state of change, force, and thus instability. Therefore, cultural dynamism describes the process of change associated with people's way of life, identity, and social spheres. The change could be slow and quick. During transitional periods, things tend to change rapidly, especially in an "open" society such

as the Igbo. Diogu (2010, 94) noted that the Igbo are dynamic, adaptive, assimilative, and open to new ideas and that these qualities are essential for the development of society. Trade and migration are key factors associated with the Igbo (Chudi-Duru 2021). When people travel, they see and sometimes buy different styles for themselves and their family members. In such instances, the adoption of foreign styles appears natural. The introduction of Christianity and formal or Western education affected and impacted the popularity of indigenous styles.

Herskovits and Bascom (1962) observe that given the dynamic nature of culture, one needs to study it in its historical dimensions as well as in terms of the relationship among its components, such as personhood, identities, and family-social roles. Indeed, change as a factor has been instrumental to a great number of studies carried out on people's cultural experiences. Little wonder Ndakalako-Bannikov (2020) studied the contested and fast-declining "traditional dress of the Owambo—the oshikutu sheenhulo." The author was interested in how the loose bodice of the dress connects to tradition, ethnicity, and national identity in Namibian contexts. Considering how aspects of indigenous institutions and culture varnished through cultural contact are being reinvented in modern times, the perspective is necessary. Nonetheless, the local textile industry in Igboland, for instance, has not enjoyed the same popularity and patronage today as before and during British rule.

Some textile cottage industries existed in many places in Igboland. The areas of Akwete, Asaba, Nkanu, and Nsukka have been studied (Ibeto and Ogunduyile 2015; Nwigwe 2015; Afigbo and Okeke 1985). Akwete cloths which were dyed with natural dye, appeared more famous than any other cloth produced elsewhere in Igboland. They were in great demand in the nineteenth century. So competent were the Akwete weavers that they could combine about three or four motifs as an in-lay design in a single cotton cloth (Ibeto and Ogunduyile 2015). Some of their clothes were imbued with symbolic significance, as some served as talismans in protecting those who were pregnant or going to war. The absence of Akwete material in the local marketplace marks an impact of cultural dynamism.

Another form of cultural dynamism is the fight by older women, especially in 1925 (Bastian 2005), to ensure that girls remained unclothed until after every marriage rite. The struggle was partly because the women had a dim view of the realities of cultural dynamism. Their understanding of the concept of womanhood and decency appeared warped in new views of tradition. The European missionaries and colonial officers who had learned about global fashion trends at the time were firm in their stand against nudity, especially in the 1950s (Nwigwe 2015).

It is pertinent to state that there are social implications of cultural dynamism in textiles and dress codes, but also in the jewelry and body marking traditions of the Igbo. The changes in fashion bespeak not only the enduring attachment of the people to the idea of social status, social identity, social roles, and transitions among the Igbo as a distinct socio-cultural group but also of the changing times and contextual social spheres within each individual (women, children, men, elderly). These perspectives unfold theoretical understandings that, although each cultural object or design has meaning according to who wears what, the meaning is not static.

Research Methods

This study relied on primary and secondary sources of information. The primary sources included oral interviews conducted between 2012 and 2013. Three major research questions guide the study: 1) *What are the prevalent styles of jewelry and body markings among the Igbo at different times (and places)?*; 2) *Have there been changes in these aspects of the people's dress culture?*; 3) *What are the social implications of such changes, theoretically and practically?*

Twelve persons with in-depth knowledge of Igbo dress traditions were selected for the interview. Participants were drawn from different parts of Igbo land, especially the

author's home village, Amagunze. Participants gave their consent and spoke freely about the subject.

The secondary sources include archival materials from the National Archives in Enugu. Relevant archival images were obtained from people's photo albums and books. These secondary sources included books, journals, exhibition catalogs, magazines, newspapers, unpublished students' seminar papers, proposals, projects, theses, and dissertations. The keywords that guided the search in relevant literature included Igbo dress, jewelry, body markings, Akwete weave, Akwete cloth, and colonial.

Following the ethnographic nature of the research, the study relies on oral history and interviews and adopts a narrative cum descriptive approach. The narrative method, according to Leavy (2015, 46), "attempts to collaboratively access participants' life experiences and engage in the process of storying and re-storying to reveal multidimensional meanings and present an authentic and compelling rendering of the data." The descriptive approach to the photographic images presented here draws from semiology (Gurevich and Yashina 2008). The images are subject to visual analysis, one of the practices of seeing (Goodwin 2000). Rose (2001, 33, 69) spoke about the 'good eye' that looks at pictures based on compositional interpretation, and semiology that "offers a very full box of analytical tools for taking image apart and tracing how it works in relation to

broader systems of meaning." Semiology is, therefore, relevant in studying images and their social modality. Sonesson (2015) observes that although producing pictures with the camera does not give us a fresh or different "segmentation of perceptual reality in a strong sense," it, "perhaps, more than any other kind of picture, can detach things from their perceptual context" (Sonesson 2015, 449). In other words, pictures are a form of reality – visual reality.

The research behind this study lasted for over three years, ending in 2015. Our research covered Northern Igbo land as fieldwork was conducted within some areas of Enugu State like Amagunze in Nkanu East, Umuabi in Udi, Amukwa in Nsukka, and Nawfia in Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State.

Findings

The study findings will be presented in two sections: 1) different types of jewelry and 2) body markings among the Igbo, as revealed by respondents during the fieldwork. The explanations here are based on observation and data from secondary sources. The jewelry section includes beads and cords worn around the waists and jewelry worn around the legs, hands, and necks. Body markings were done on the face, and the front and back of the torso are discussed in one section. At the end of each section, I add some notes on

change and culture dynamism. A full discussion of change and dynamism in these aspects of local dress will come under the Discussion section where I discuss the significance of findings, add what other similar studies say, and discuss how previous studies' findings compare to mine. The section will include the social implications of cultural dynamism in the Igbo jewelry and body marking traditions.

Jewelry

For this study, I demarcate jewelry into two categories: 1) beads and cords worn around the loins, hereafter referred to as waist beads, and 2) those worn around the legs, hands, and necks. Waist beads tend to play dual roles as covering the pubic region and as an item of adornment, while the beads and other objects used in other parts of the body were both for symbolic and aesthetic reasons.

Before the use of waist beads, children passed their entire childhood in a state of nudity. As they became physiologically mature, they were expected to wear minimal dress, such as waistbands, beads or cords, and loincloth. Some of these items, like shells and seeds, were sourced from the immediate environment. One of the colonists posted to the Awka, Price (1939, 20), once remarked that before he arrived in the area, "all the unmarried girls walked about entirely naked, as unashamed as Eve before the Fall." In

Nsukka, girls who had started to experience their menstrual period, which symbolized the beginning of womanhood, wore cotton cords, ringlets of brass coils, and stringed waist beads known as *ashimogboho* at different times before *jigida* became trendy. Girls could be laden with this jewelry, the dense layers reaching above their navels. Achebe ([1958] 2008) captures the intriguing encounter between the Igbo and the Europeans before and during the colonial period in his novel, where he notes rows of waist beads (*jigida*) seen among the women's wardrobe.

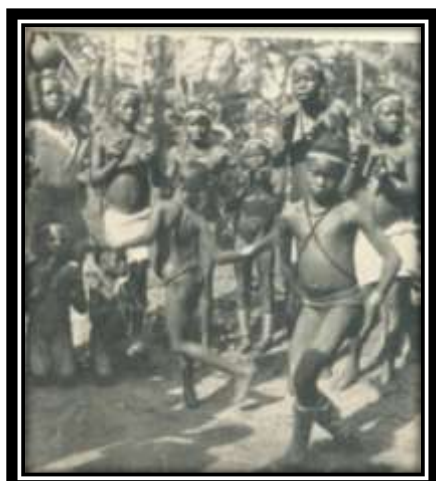


Figure 1: Young girls dancing near Nnewi in Onitsha Province. © Nigeria, 1938.



Figure 2: Young female attendants at the fattening house in the southern part of Igboland. © Nigeria, 1948.

In Figure 1, one would observe two dancing girls whose age could be put at eight. They wore loin dresses and simple coiffure styles in the form of headbands or haircuts. It appears that nudity became less fashionable in some parts of Igbo, like Awka, Onitsha, Nnewi, and other places where European presence was felt in the late 1930s. The mode

of the dancing girls in Figure 1 resonates with some of the girls' performances in Figure 2. It is important to remark on the different periods and places of the two photographs (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The former was taken around 1938, while the latter was about ten years later. The impact of the colonialists and the missionaries in fashion appears more discernible in the background subjects in the latter photograph. The spectators attired differently, in Western or colonial styles. The picture suggests that the tradition of nudity was not only to the younger ones but to some ritual or ceremonial contexts, as seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Girls from Umukwa village in Nawfia during a festival circa 1959. © Mr Onuorah [Caterpillar].

In some parts of the old Onitsha province during the early years of colonial rule, young maidens, like those in Figure 3, wore more rows of *jigida* (waist beads) so well arranged that they easily attracted one's attention. Depending on the financial strength of the maiden's family, she may wear the *jigida* up to the middle of the abdomen. A critical observation of the difference in the photographs' dates and the quantities of rows of waist beads worn by children and young maidens would reveal that, towards the close of the colonial period, people became uncomfortable going about nude. Girls' waist beads first consisted of cowrie shells before the variant made of plastic discs. The former remained in vogue until the 1930s (Dike 1978).

The tradition of wearing waist beads was one of Igbo girls' dress practices, among whom virginity was a highly coveted virtue. Women were, and are, expected to be chaste. In fact, in some communities, a piece of white cloth was used to cover the bed upon which a newly married couple would have their first sexual intercourse. Afterward, if the girl were truly a virgin, the groom's family would send back the piece of white cloth stained with blood to the bride's family as proof of the girl's virginity. As women's nudity, which served as a check for sexual promiscuity, came under severe attack, older women became worried. They feared that girls might hide under the guise of modern fashion and go wayward (Bastian 2005).

The Igbo, like people from other cultures, wore jewelry to enhance or accentuate the beautiful outlook of their legs, hands, and necks. They wore many varieties of jewelry, such as necklaces, anklets, brackets, brooches, earrings, armband hair pins, and other accessories. These were commonly seen with the titled men and women. These people of high social status took some traditional titles such as *ichie*, *nze*, *igwe*, *Ozioko*, *Oyima*, and several others peculiar to their places of origin. Such titles vary from one sub-cultural group to another. For instance, *Ozioko* is peculiar to the Nsukka cultural region. Natural and artificial beads were also strung and worn by such men and women of social honor for both ornamental and expressive reasons. Some served as a means to delineate character, identification, and protection. A section of the Igbo, particularly Onitsha with some of its surrounding towns, popularized the use of ivory ornaments in the form of bracelets and anklets in history. A lot of hard, cream-colored elephant tusks were carved and worn by the wealthy. Elephant eyebrows (*akia*) were used as a necklace.

Awka blacksmiths once made copper pendants, red glass beads, old agate beads, and cowry shells (with cut-off tops) strung together (Figure 4). Jeffrey (1954) identified about twenty-four types of Awka beads used in Igboland and beyond in the colonial era. One of the beads consisting of cloth sewn over a fiber core and decorated with cowrie shells could be used as a necklace. Male mourners wear such at the mortuary rites of a man of the grade. Other types include copper pendants, red glass beads, old gate beads,

and cowrie shells with tops cut off and strung together. All these attest to the creativity of the Awka smiths. Jeffreys (1954) studied Awka beads and included visuals of such beads in an article. I have introduced the images as an artistic illustration (Figure 4) in this paper. This shows the variety of forms and designs of Awka beads and the craftsmanship of Awka bead workers.



Figure 4: Zimuzo Agubata's illustrations of some beads from Awka seen in Jeffreys M. D. Waldegrave (1954), © Chukwuemeka Nwigwe, 2012.

Other jewelry forms include platelike brass anklets, spiral anklets, and cylinder-shaped ivory ornaments. Basden (1966) observed that one part of Igboland favored using

platelike brass anklets (*ogba*). Such were forged out of solid brass bars by Awka blacksmiths, who also attached them and removed them from the body after burning them. Women wore this while the girls had their small version, which they substituted for a big one when they were fully grown. A pair of *ogba* (Figure 5), which Basden described as being weighty, grotesque, and cumbrous, was worn around the two legs for life, though a wearer need great caution when lying, walking, or running. This type encircled the wearer's legs from foot to knee and was trendy among the Igbo girls. In their wisdom, the Igbo bandaged ankles with fabric and other soft materials before putting on the heavy spiral anklets to prevent sores caused by friction.



Figure 5: *Ogba* anklets, here described as plate-like anklets.
Source: Talbot (1969), *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vol. II.

Apart from the plate-like brass (*ogba*) (Figure 5), spiral ring (*nja*) and chased copper (*echi*) once served as anklets; the latter also served as currency. Cowries also served as currency. The spiral ring anklets, *nja*, made of quarter-inch brass wire, were popular over

a wide area and were still vogue until the 1930s when the plate-like version, *ogba*, made from brass rods, had become outdated (Basden 1966, 206). This type of anklet appeared spiral-shaped; the lower part, which usually seemed smaller in size than the upper, normally rested around the ankle. Young girls who were about to marry wore such a style of anklet on special occasions, as exemplified in Figure 6 and Figure 8.



Figure 6: Igbo Girls dressed for marriage in conically shaped leg ornaments. Source: Basden (1982), *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*.

Jewelry made of hairs from the tails of elephants and hairpins made of wrought iron were prized by Igbo women. Women with titles in Onitsha and Awka wore heavy ivory ornaments such as anklets, bangles, and coral necklaces, as exemplified in Figure 7. They would tie white loincloths with a white head tie in addition to other accessories like a part of an elephant tusk, costly big and small coral bead necklaces, and a horse-tail (Nzekwu 1963).



Figure 7: A titled Nsukka woman in her full regalia including cylindrically shaped hand and leg ornaments [ca 1940].

Source: Cole and Aniakor (1984), *Igbo Arts, Community and Cosmos*.

Additionally, jewelry contributed to enhancing gendered uses. Wealthy women wore heavy ornaments to show their high status and wealth. Women of high social and economic status had their wardrobes stocked with these costly ornaments, important dress items for both special and everyday use. They equally fit ivory bracelets around their arms and ivory anklets around their legs. Coral necklaces appeared in various sizes. Elders preferred loosely fitted ones, while the youth fancied the tightly fitting ones. Lander (1975) describes the traditional dress of an Igbo male ruler. He paid attention to his coral beads, said to be profuse to enhance his visibility as a king. His cap was ornamented with many strings of coral beads and pieces of broken mirror, so much so that the stuff the cap was made of could hardly be discerned. The king's trousers were

said to be embroidered and reached no further than the middle of his legs, which were also ornamented like the wrists precisely in the same number of strings of beads.

Describing the personal dress of one Miss Addizetta, his daughter, Lander (1975, 299), identifies her braided wooly hair bearing a crown with strings of coral beads that extended to the forehead. Her expensive clothing – coral necklace, copper rings, ivory bracelets, and leg ornaments– is said to have added to the immense weight and size of the girl, whose age was not over thirty years. The description reveals another dimension in which coral beads could be used – headgear.



Figure 8: Brides-Elect passing through *Nkpu* ceremonies in their Leg ornaments. Source: Basden (1982), *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*.

Some Igbo groups have an honorary title called *Nkpu* for girls born to wealthy or highly respected parents. Daughters of *Ozo* men, among others, take the title before marriage. Several photographs of nubile girls in G. T. Basden's two texts, *Niger and Ibos* and *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, show photographic images of such girls in their

characteristic attire. While the girls in Figure 6 wear the *nja* brass spiral rings, which stretch from the ankle to a part beneath the knee, those in Figure 8 wear a more sophisticated version that appears segmented into three parts. The leg ornament in Figure 7 was made of an entirely different material, ivory.

Igbo-Ukwu artifacts excavated around 1959 reveal some beads associated with a corpse sitting on a copper-studded stool in a wooden-lined burial chamber (Shaw 1967). The rich dress of the deceased consists of an array of beads, a beaded head-dress, a crown, and a pectoral plate suspended on its chest, a beautiful wristlet about 6 inches long, made up of panels of blue beads set in a copper framework (Shaw 1967, 66). Indeed, the presence of the beads supports the notion of the antiquity of Igbo jewelry tradition as the archeological findings dated to the ninth century CE (McIntosh 2022). I am sure that at the time of the excavation, the sight of such beads was rare among the Igbo. During traditional events, some wore waist beads in the similitude of the old-fashioned style atop their traditional attire. In films that portray traditional contexts, actresses sometimes wear beads. Home-based artists have also found some inspiration in indigenous or traditional styles, such as beads, based on their historical and cultural significance. So, they tend to use the imagery of such objects as motifs in textile design and other art forms (Buami et al. 2022).

Today, much has changed in these aspects of beaded dress. Children are dressed shortly after birth as there are varieties of children's wear in terms of gender, age, and class. Pregnant mothers who are unsure of the sex of their unborn babies could buy unisex clothing ahead of their delivery. Diapers that serve dual purposes as panties and undergarments for managing body waste are used from the day of delivery until the children mature to a level where they can use the toilet unaided. Beyond the diaper stage, they would wear panties and clothes that befit their gender. I have observed that some Igbo girls wear cords strung with tiny, often colorful beads around their waists.

The three main noticeable variants of leg ornaments – the plate-like type, conically shaped, and cylindrically shaped ones – have gone into extinction. The relics could be found in museums. I have not seen such in films, though their reinvention in theatrical performance in history is possible. I have noticed three modern versions in the form of cotton rope, tiny chains, and fiber-woven cord. The latter consists of a triangle-sided solid, each containing tiny objects. Dancers wear them to create certain noise as they dance. The cotton ropes and tiny chains are worn by *Ozo*-titled men, their wives, and those similarly titled.

Body Markings

Body markings, whether drawn, incised or raised, permanent or temporal, have been part of Igbo traditional dress. The emphasis on the drawn type, *Uli*, a temporal means of body decoration among Igbo women, explains why Willis (1997), like many other scholars, has examined this style of body marking. *Uli* is somewhat different from scarification, cicatrization, keloid, and tattoo discussed here, though they all constitute "clothing" in their own right (de Negri 1964, 116). Incised and raised styles, keloids, tattoos, and scarification or cicatrization are discussed here as they seem to have received less scholarly attention in the context of cultural dynamism. Keloid refers to raised scars, while tattoo involves pricking the skin with a sharp instrument to create a pattern or picture to which certain colorants could be applied. Cicatrization refers to scar formation on the skin, particularly after some incisions have been made thereon. Most body markings entail cutting human skin and the consequent loss of blood.

During the colonial era, body markings were quite fashionable among Igbo women and men. They were applied to different parts of the body. The markings could be on different body parts, like the face, stomach, chest, neck, back, and leg. Some designs were peculiar to women, usually from the neck to the area near the genitalia. During marriage ceremonies in Oraifite, girls usually wore skin decorations as permanent body

markings known locally as *egbugbu* or *mbubu*. So significant were such markings among the Umuchu group that they assigned the name *iri mbubu* to fattening experience. This important marriage rite afforded girls an opportunity to be so marked. The fattening experience is called *iru mgbede* or *ushi* among other Igbo groups. During this period, girls could be characteristically marked, from the top of the neck down through the chest, across the belly, to the upper parts of the private parts.

Among the Igbo, the face marks appear on the checks, near the eyes and mouth, and on the temples. Some Igbo men seemed to be dignified with face marking known as *ichi*, which fills the upper part of the face and sometimes the whole face except the eyes, nose, and mouth. This scarification style was common to the noble people in the Awka, Nri, Igbo-Ukwu, and Onitsha areas. Body markings were popular in the Awka area (Thomas 1913). The men favored *ichi* face marks, while the women had raised linear body marks, *mbubu*, which appeared at both the back and frontal parts of the body, including the forehead and the cheek. *Mbubu* consists of cuts down the forehead and extending to the naval bridge. A photographic image of Nri woman with *mbubu* body scarification marks taken by Northcote Thomas was available at the time of this writing at the Re-Entanglement website (Agbo et al. 2019).

Ichi served as a status emblem and a means of identifying the Igbo group, among others. Photographs show that the Igbo who had *ichi* markings in the colonial period were far greater in number than those with such markings in the post-colonial era. Presently, one could hardly come across anybody with *ichi* markings. The photograph of an Iwollo woman with *ichi* face marking (Figure 9) represents the last generation of people with such markings. Some styles appear more or less subdued and confined to the upper face (Adepegba 1976).



Figure 9: An Iwollo woman with *ichi* scarification. Source: Cole & Aniakor (1984), *Igbo Arts, Community, and Cosmos*.

Though it seems that *ichi* marking was originally meant for deserving male children, women with men-looking similarities or physical qualities could also wear such markings. *Ichi* face marking was part of *Ozo* titled person's identity. Later, it was no longer considered a prerequisite for being an *Ozo* because of Christian influences. Recently, I heard that Chief Odidika Chidolue, the last man in the chief lineage with such marks in Neni and perhaps the entire Igbo region, died last year or so in Anambra State. Earlier, he had been interviewed in the Igbo vernacular, as evident in a video on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) website. The video has this caption, loosely translated as: "See a man that *ichi* scarification at the age of nine."

Some Igbo youths, like the young man with *ichi* face markings in Figure 10 (a and b), were seen in some parts of the Igbo, perhaps around the early 1950s when M.D.W. Jeffreys published photographic images of some young men with the markings.



Figure 10 A: An Ibo Youth with *Ichi* marks. Source: Jeffreys, 1951



Figure 10 B: A three-quarter view

Since most Igbo cultures are derived from that of Umunri, *Ichi* face marking might have spread from there to other areas. This may explain why the Iwollo woman seen in Figure 9 bears the mark. Other parts of Igbo favored the usually tiny incisions on the face and other parts of the body. The lines are usually short, about one inch. They are done mainly for identification and symbolic reasons such as spiritual and medicinal protection. There was a case where a male herbalist from Enugu-Ezike, a self-acclaimed king of Satan who married fifty-nine wives, reported giving his over two hundred children some little markings at the corner of his eyes as a means of identification (Ede 2021). Women in the Awka area once had a sort of rosette in an area very close to the outer margin of the eye. They also had "a series of cuts down the forehead and reaching to the bridge of the nose, this is almost invariably accompanied by a cross or crescent just above the level of the eyes" (Thomas 1913, 75).

Another type of marking runs from the forehead to the abdomen. The women of Nawfia favored this style, locally called *nkii* (personal communication with Onuorah (Caterpillar), ex-cabinet member, January 2, 2012.). The cutting of other parts of the body other than the face was more prominent among Igbo women. This is generally called *mbubu* or *mbu*. The Ogbaru and Nawfia people had some ornamental scars on the legs or

[upper] arms (Nkwo 151). It appears that some people from Nawfia achieved their body markings in late colonial times by applying liquid extracted from cashew seeds (personal communication with Onuorah, January 2, 2012). *Mbubu* could be seen as a "permanent necklace composed of keloids." (Talbot 1969, 404). Raised keloids were part of the identity of mature boys and girls. Girls were given such marks when they reached puberty age or before marriage while the boys got theirs before they took their first title (Basden 1966, 326).

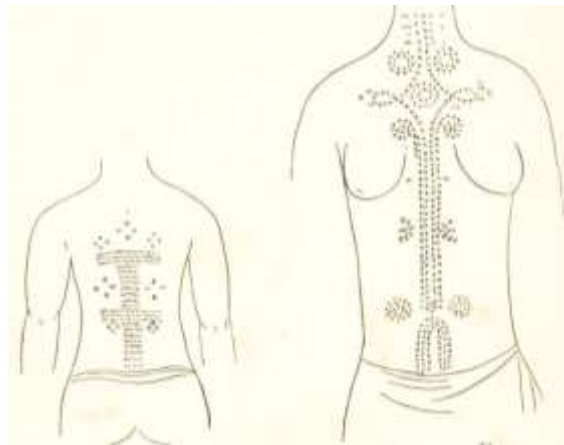


Figure 11: Keloid design among the Igbo. Source: Talbot (1969), *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vol. II.

Women's cicatrization could be quite profuse, as shown in Figure 11. The practice was somewhat widespread. It was done not only on the upper frontal part of the body but also on the backside. The styles differ from one locality to another, but the commonest styles were abdominal linear and radiating patterns. Vertical and horizontal lines could

be combined, as seen in Figure 10. The process of scarification was a painful experience. In the case of the *ichi*, the bearer's surface skin could be scrapped off while the area surrounding the mouth and eyes was carved with a sharp instrument like a razor blade. The pain explains the reason for the introduction of the Nka-Dioka cultural festival. Agbo et al. (2019) gave a witness account of an *ichi* marking event:

On 31 December 2018, the pavilion of the Umudioka Arts and Cultural Centre in Neni, Anambra State, Nigeria, was filled by thousands of people who attended the 40th Nka Dioka Cultural Festival of Umudioka, Neni. Ndi Igwe (community leaders), titled men, and state functionaries graced the occasion. ...The people of Umudioka filed in groups according to their age grades, all dressed in the same uniform designed exclusively for the occasion.

It was reported that two men received the marks symbolically that day. The ritual involved recipients being carried on the backs of their attendants to a spot where they were laid on mats for the symbolic *ichi* markings. The main motifs repeated on the commemorative uniform consist of texts, a man's face with *ichi* marks, and knives often used for the scarification captured beneath the portraits. The text, '40th Year Nka Dioka Cultural Festival of Umudioka Community Neni,' frames the images and helps one understand the festival's history.

The three girls in Figure 12, with recently cut *mbubu* marks, had neck jewelry and elaborate coiffure. Running from the neck down below the navel, the keloid design appeared as three parallel dotted lines.



Figure 12: Body markings of girls preparing for marriage. Source: Basden (1966), *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*.

The girls' sternly serious facial expressions seem to convey the pain they must have felt during and after the operation. In some places, such markings are called *egbugbu afo* or *itu mbibi*. The marking shows some linear movement from the neck region to the pelvic region. *Mbubu* scarification was also fashionable in different parts of Igbo society. The tools for the operation among the Umunede in Delta State include "*aguba*" or "*Ikpu –Ikpe*". These local razors are triangular and serve as barbing and circumcision tools. Among the Abadja in Enugu State, male cicatrization was only for the titled men. (Talbot 1969, 416).

Among the Iji and Ezza groups who are very close to Nkanu people in Enugu State, males had various marks on their faces before marriage, while maidens had cuts on their bodies.

The changes in body markings appear remarkable. For instance, the field study suggests that no Igbo man has *ichi* face marking, especially the profuse linear pattern that nearly fills the entire face. *Ichi* tradition exists today in parts of Anambra State as a ceremony to honor people who perhaps have distinguished themselves in their careers. The transformations in the body marking tradition of the Igbo is that elaborate markings appear to have been crystalized into a few lines and dots in the form of tattoos and often tiny body markings. The former is done by some youths who copy the style of some celebrities whom they follow and adore.

Discussion and conclusion

Arguably, jewelry is a timeless fashion for the Igbo. The practice, however, has gone through many phases from the earliest time in the recorded history of the people to the present day. Some of the many changes are evident in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3. Today's styles are mostly foreign and factory-made. The introduction of Christian and Islamic religions, which led to the decline of cultural festivals, is a factor. This is also true of the adoption of tailored skirts, gowns, and tops and the availability of relatively large-

size pieces of wrappers. The new dress styles marked the end of nude fashion and, by extension, waist beads, although the latter has existed to date in highly limited social and cultural contexts. One may see a row of beads around a woman's waist if she decides to show it or if such is seen perchance.

The preceding summarized jewelry tradition associated with the Igbo is true of body markings. So popular and esteemed are the *ichi* face-marking that some carved wooden figures and objects, such as a pot used for giving palm wine to certain elders from Nibo, Ngene shrine figure from Nibo and a base of wooden *ozo* title stool from Awgbu in the N. W. Thomas' collections at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology bear similar patterns (Agbo et al. 2019).

Regarding body marking today, only a few people bear permanent marks on their bodies. *Ichi* marking, the types represented in Figure 9 and Figure 10 (a and b, or the female body marking seen in Figure 11 and Figure 12, for instance, has gone out of fashion. Such marks would be minimal and thus somewhat hidden where they probably exist. The last assertion hinges on the fact that wearing clothes or fabric dress makes it difficult to ascertain the true situation of the body-mark tradition. Although one hardly sees Igbo children these days bearing face marks around the cheeks and corners of the eyes, it must be noted that children and adults alike could be subjected to taking some

incisions as a form of spiritual protection. There is also an exceptional case earlier cited where a man with about fifty-nine wives allegedly gave marks to all his over two hundred children as a mark of identification.

Though some old dress practices still exist, there is no doubt that Western-style traditions have displaced much of Igbo traditions within a relatively short century. For instance, great transformations in Igbo dress practice among the Igbo happened between 1900 and 1960 (Nwigwe 2015). The Igbo have been selective in accepting foreign cultures. The dress still plays some basic symbolic function of asserting an individual's and group's identities or statuses. The dress still encodes morality, decency, and decorum in Igbo traditional society. The Igbo adopted a new fashion consciousness from all indications because they thought it wise.

Indigenous Igbo fashion, as it were, is outdated and bygone. Only a few people could relate their forms or how they were used. This explains why the indigenous Igbo fashion seen in movies and home videos features some elements of artificiality. Most of the supposed relics of the pre-colonial era are mere models fashioned in the perceived form of the original type. For instance, an artist, based on secondary sources, could recreate several valuable works of art, especially on commission for galleries and museums, in a way that is reminiscent of ancient Igbo fashion or clothing practice. For

instance, an Igbo proverb, "*Okoro erughi eruwaru ogo, ikuku eburu ya, buru ogo*," loosely translates in English, "If a young man begins to tie a piece of cloth and does so prematurely, he would be carried away by wind alongside his cloth. This suggests a specific time a boy could tie a loincloth. The Igbo people considered wearing clothes a mark of honor, an indicator of a certain age, and a sense of maturity. Hence, objects of worship, sculpted figures, and other forms could be adorned with dress and/or markings as humans. For them, body marking is beyond mere decoration. People observed girls' bodies with body markings intently, not necessarily out of lust. The admiration is either based on beauty or social attainments.

As earlier observed, technological advancement, especially the introduction of information communication technology, has led to globalization. This tends to blur culture-specificities occasioned earlier by factors such as geographic area, race, or religion. The rate of borrowing is becoming faster with further advancements in technology. This has perhaps led to increased human knowledge and the broad definitions of culture in keeping with diverse perspectives, school thoughts, and academic fields of study. For instance, the field of multicultural psychology with its definition of culture proposed, as earlier stated, a multicultural thinking which allows people to think about themselves and others inter-related to them in cultural terms. So,

in the world of cross-cultural influences and multiple cultural identities, the dress culture to which jewelry and body marking belong appears amorphous and unstable.

The making of jewelry belongs to the manufacturing industry. Their use is an integral part of the Igbo dress culture. As regards body marking, there were art experts. They, too, make use of tools and substances. All these factors have come under social pressure at work in modern society. The rate of change and instability due to forces of modernity at this time of the information technology revolution is remarkable. This explains why it is difficult to see anyone putting on a platelike anklet known as *ogba* (Figure 5) or the spiral type called *nja* or *echi* (Figure 6). The wearing of the *ichi* marking (see Figure 9, Figure 10a, and Figure 10b) consisting of multiple curved diagonal gashes that look like relief lines have been extinct. Western-style accessories in earrings and necklaces manufactured in modern factories have practically replaced a good percentage of ancient jewelry used in traditional Igbo society. The rate of change is comparable to what happens during transition and culture contact periods. Things tend to change very rapidly at the time. This change becomes more glaring in a democratic society that upholds human rights principles.

The social implication of this study's analytical objects - jewelry and body markings – includes the fact that both are parts of the people's cultural heritage. Igbo children often

encounter this history in some way as they engage in the study of the customs or traditions of the people. Another implication relates to the process of reenactment of outmoded, especially the *ichi*, body markings. Cultural festivals such as Nka-Dioka provide avenues for activities associated with *ichi* marking. However, the cutting performance would merely exist as mimicry and not as the actual marking made with knives on the initiates' foreheads in the past. The 40th annual event calls to mind a few things. The body markings ceased at least 40 years ago. *Ichi* markings as cultural elements are valued for being an emblem of social status, social identity, social roles, and social transitions among the Igbo as a distinct ethnic group. It also bears some ideas of change in socio-cultural spheres. For instance, the design of the commemorative textile for the event consists of several portraits with marks. This implies the reassigning of meaning. It would be assumed that those who wear the attires made of such textile have a foretaste of the feel of *ichi* markings.

To conclude, I must note one recurrent phenomenon in the cultural dynamism in the context of this paper that is comparable to the tenets of the Renaissance. That is the interest in the old, especially where such is perceived as being fundamentally symbolic or emblematic of indigenous knowledge and traditional values. The old thus becomes a mark of authenticity. This explains various attempts by some locals to reinvent, particularly the use of waist beads and leg ornaments in real cultural contexts and

creative works. Today, for instance, the bride and her female escorts could dress in the prevailing traditional attire and wear some beads reminiscent of the outmoded styles. They would normally put on waist beads atop their clothes. This is also the case when such reenactment is done in films. The only exception is visual arts, where nude representations have long been legitimized. In other words, there would always be elements of continuity in instances where some change has occurred in traditions due to cultural contact, technological advancement, and other influences of modernity.

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