

MBARI ART *

by

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The concept, *Mbari*, is well known in Igboland, particularly among its sole creators, the Owerri Igbo. The concept had been established and in use for many years before the recent founding of the "Mbari Artist" at Oshogbo by Ulli Beier¹ as well as the founding of the journal that bears the name, *Mbari*. Because *Mbari* is Owerri in origin, this study therefore centers around the Owerri area of Igboland. It is based on personal experiences which have come as a result of my growing up in Owerri. Second, I have recorded many oral interviews through field research done in the towns of Ezioho, Ihiagwa and Obinze in Owerri district. Through these typically Owerri towns I hope to provide the basic views on *Mbari* and to project its social and religious importance among the Igbo people.

In its original sense the term *Mbari* means the house of art. Its unique nature is in the difference between it and an art Museum. It is not like the Museum, the custodian of the art forms of individuals in a culture up to a particular time. *Mbari* is the use of the art form to express the contemporary life both in the immediate community and the world at large as it is known to the artists. It is this expression, in art form, of the world of the time as the artists see it that makes *Mbari* an important source material in the study of the contemporary Igbo community.

Mbari is usually established for a god, an important local deity. Not all the deities deserve, or, more appropriately, can afford *Mbari*. Owerri people say, "*Agbara, Enweghaku Oji Agba Mbari?*" Does a god without wealth celebrate *Mbari*? Obviously, the answer is "No." The deities that deserve and support *Mbari* are those who, in years gone by, before the advent of the Christian missionaries, extracted *Osu* from her or his subjects. An *Osu* is the person who has been dedicated or set apart for a particular god or goddess. The individual becomes a living sacrifice to the god. Not only is the person so dedicated an *Osu* but his children and children's children until eternity are supposed to be so dedicated. The humiliation, isolation and ostracism that the descendants of such a person suffer make the *Osu* issue, in my opinion, the worst social institution that could be allowed to continue in Igboland. It is the issue that put Obi Okonkwo

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and Clara Okeke, in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, in two different worlds that made it impossible for them to get married.² This class of gods demand and get rich sacrifices of cows, money and other articles of wealth. This makes them highly respected and feared among their subjects.

In an interview, Felix Ekechi argues that it is also possible for a community to want to demonstrate their wealth and superior status among the other communities by deciding to establish an Mbari. They would then consult an oracle for the choice of the location. In this case, the Mbari is built for the people and not for a god. The consultation of the oracle is in keeping with the religious life of the people and makes the god the guard over the Mbari.³ This is markedly a different view which supports the concept of "art for art's sake". Thus, it provides an exception to the generally held view of strong utilitarian and religious implications of African Art.⁴

Who performs this service of art for the people and the gods? Are they professional artists or amateurs? The answers to these questions introduce another unique feature of Mbari. The performers are called "Nde Mgbe". The term *Mgbe* seems to be a short form of "Mgbede" which is a concept used to describe the practice of nourishing a bride before marriage or setting a favorite wife apart in what I may call a fattening room. A woman so set apart is exempted from all forms of house work and isolated from society. Her main tasks are to eat and take care of her body which she grooms with camwood and oils for a fresh and beautiful look. In the same way, the *Mgbe* people who erect the Mbari are isolated and shielded from the public eyes from the time they begin their art assignment until the time they complete the Mbari. This covers a period of one year.

To be so selected is a special honor that remains permanently with the person. It is equally one of the highest honors among the Owerri Igbo. The person is given special recognition and his entire extended family takes pride that one of their sons is selected for *Mgbe*. It is the honor associated with the seclusion that ensures the material and moral support of the members of the family and of the village for the participant during this period.

A person must possess a special quality before he can be selected for *Mgbe*. It is often said among Owerri people that an ugly person is never selected for *Mgbe*. Physical and outward beauty is essential, but the beauty of the mind is regarded as fundamental. A thief, a murderer, or criminals of any description cannot be selected for a Mbari *Mgbe*. Therefore, to be selected for *Mgbe* is

a public declaration that in the eyes of the people and the spirits, the person so selected is a "beautiful person". It is little wonder that Mgbe people often become very conscious of their status and may even regard their non-Mgbe friends with contempt.

Apart from the *beauty* of the person, most of the people selected for Mgbe are usually artists or must have excelled in something. They may be singers or have the potential ability to be one. Some are dancers, or play some musical instruments. These qualities are essential for the life of the people during their period of seclusion and the work they would be doing. But a large number of those selected are usually the ordinary people.

The selection of Mgbe people is a sacred process. No one knows who would be selected, neither can anybody volunteer to participate. The selection is done by the god for whom the Mbiri is established through the priest he appoints for this special job. The invitation to join the Mgbe group is given personally to the person by the special group designated for this purpose by the deity.⁵ The group's appearance in a family creates heightened suspense which is released when one member is named.

Before the advent of Christianity, it was unheard of that a person could refuse to serve if called upon by the deity to serve in Mbiri. The impact of Christianity on Mbiri can be demonstrated in a crisis that nearly took place at Ohinze in 1958 during the construction of Mbiri for the god, Oruruala. Before 1958, many of the Christians who had been selected in that town had usually withdrawn from the church, attended to the services of the local deity before surfacing again to join the church. The case in question was the selection of a recent convert who happened to be the mother of a newly ordained and enthusiastic evangelist. Actually, the young priest had converted the mother to Christianity. He was ready, at least by his utterances and demonstrated Christian life, to challenge the god, Oruruala, to the end. The contest was averted when both Oruruala and the woman's agnate family reached a compromise. The woman's younger sister was offered as a substitute by the family.⁶

There is no simple answer as to why Christians have not revolted from participation. It is deep rooted in the culture of the Igbo people. One church usher who took part in the 1961 establishment of Mbiri for Alagwa at Ohoku Ohinze told me that he accepted the selection because of his responsibility to his family. While he believed that the god had no control over him he was not sure that the faith of the other members of his family would see them through the rejection. And, he added, who would

refuse to accept such public honor as being selected for Mgbe, an honor that comes once in a person's lifetime? The simple answer may be the practice of a substitution by the family. It is an important point to investigate further why the usher should accept to serve. Also, the fact that the young preacher accepted, in principle, the use of a substitute for his mother may give more strength to the fact that philosophically, Mbiri as well as many other cultural concepts, have not been completely written off by many Christians.

The composition of the people selected cuts across the social groups in the society. Men and women, young and old, married and unmarried, are selected indiscriminately. Women married in other towns could be called upon to participate. It is this aspect that makes Mbiri the people's art.

The whole work of art is done during the period of isolation. The selection is usually made up of citizens of the town. They create works of art usually different from any. Under the leadership of an artist usually mandated by the god, the ordinary people become amateur artists. With clay, mud and every day materials, they create a house of art that would become the pride of the whole town and all associated with the god.

The period of isolation is divided into two. During the first half, usually about six months, the Mgbe people are in complete seclusion. They neither receive visitors nor do they visit their homes or families. It is a period of rest, grooming, and work. They rub their entire body with camwood everyday, learn their respective duties and the rules guiding them. They organize dances. Music is an important ingredient in their performance. Usually they end each day with group singing and dancing.

After the first half, when they have broken the outer fence—for they are fenced in and have to literally break a fence so they could receive visitors in the outer vicinity of their community. Parents could then visit their children, husbands or wives their spouses, and friends may visit friends. By custom, conversations must not relate to the activities of Mbiri. Apart from such special days of visit, Mgbe people are forbidden to be seen by outsiders. Their close association with the spirit world makes it an offense to see them. To avoid involving the public, they go to collect materials for their work at night. Their movements are generally accompanied with a particular song and the beating of the gong to warn the public to keep off their path. A lead

singer sings "Anyi Ana Abiala" meaning "We are coming". The whole group responds in unison, "Ndi Oma Eleele", meaning "Beautiful ones spectacle-worthy". At the sound of this song, the roads are deserted. Anybody who has no way of escape must lie flat on his face and close his eyes. Mgbé people will make sure that this is done. It is assumed that whenever they are on the road, the deity they are serving is in the forefront leading them. Moreover they work as a team and the outsider is not supposed to know who does what in the inner circle.

It is a sad situation to be caught watching Mgbé people. There was a case in 1961 I was told of a man who went to visit his in-laws on their market day. Not only was he be-nighted, he was so drunk that he could not ride his bicycle home. So he walked the distance covering eight miles and unfortunately stumbled on Mgbé people on the way. The following day, when he became sober, he regretted meeting them and vowed never to taste palm wine again. He was asked to bring a whole lot of things to sanctify and purify the Mgbé people he had defiled. Not even the sale from his bicycle could solve this problem.⁷ Funny enough he broke his drinking vow the same day he called his people to report o his misfortune!

The content of Mbari is varied. A close examination reveals why it is a house of art rather than an art museum. The Mbari Ala-Gwa reveals that at the center of the hall seated with all dignity is the image of Ala-Gwa himself. On both sides of him sit ten of his selected wives. It is unnecessary to put all his wives there because among the Igbo, literally speaking, one never counts or exposes members of his family to be counted. The wives were all dignifiedly dressed with th one nearest to him on the right hand side most ostentatiously dressed. She might be the first wife.

There were other scenes depicting almost every aspect of human activity. There was a pregnant woman, a new born baby and a couple making love to each other. There was a court scene, a bicycle repairer's shop, a barber, and school children. The depiction of the school children reveals one of the great values of Mbari in the study of society. A comparison of the Mbari Ala Oke in 1956 and that of Alargwa in 1961 shows a difference. The depiction in 1956 showed boys and girls in uniform. In 1961, the boys and girls were shown along with young men wearing ties and jackets. This marks a change of events in the society because a teacher training college has

been built in the town and the students always wore ties and blazers whenever they went into town.

There were also depictions of different occupations known to the community. There were animals, birds and reptiles. The sacred python was put across the ceiling right above the god. Airplanes, cars, and bicycles were shown. Every aspect of the life in the society, ironically, a preacher with his bible on a pulpit was shown as well. Thus the Mbari depict the contemporary world as they see it. Mbari houses are therefore very valuable to those who study Owerri societies of yester-years.

Before the opening day, a great event in the life of Mgbè people takes place. It is called "*Izo Igwe*" which literally means "trampling the iron rod". To the ordinary man, "*Izo Igwe*" simply means that a piece of iron rod is placed on the ground in front of the shrine of the god in whose honor the Mbari is being built. Each Mgbè person walks unaided on this suspended piece of iron rod from one end to the other. He walks, usually from the area of the shrine to the outside amidst a group of enthusiastic spectators. Friends, relatives and interested fellow townsmen watch with suspense and fear which turn to joy when their own person successfully balances through the rod.

I understand from one of my informants, Madam Nlemchi Ihenacho who is seventy years old and who participated in *Izo Igwe* in 1961, that Mgbè people have prior practices. It is important for them to do so because failure to balance oneself to walk the rod is an open demonstration of the god's disfavor with the person.⁸ Of course, it would require some sacrifice to appease the god. It also brings shame to the person and his relations.

"*Izo Igwe*", however, is more than just balancing on a piece of iron rod. It is a symbolic event. The instrument, the iron rod, could represent the strong tie that holds the spirit world and the world of people together. It also could symbolize the difficulty in crossing from one world to the other. More important, the event demonstrates the official exit of the participants from the spirit world into the human world. Having enjoyed the luxury of belonging to the two worlds for one year, the Mgbè person re-enters the world of people and becomes human once more.

The opening day or the day the Mbari will be shown to the general public is a very important day. It is the climax of a year's work not only by the Mgbè people making the Mbari but for the whole town and everybody associated with it. It is termed the day for breaking the inner fence. Again, the inner fence surrounding the Mbari is literally broken and the Mbari

is exposed for public view. In a more specific way, it could be stated that the opening day is the dedication day. The Mbari which the god has so far monopolized during the one year of creation is now dedicated also the people. The god and her people, the general public, are once more joined together in sharing the work symbolized by Mbari.

It is also the day the Mgbe people will go home after a year of hard work and isolation from families. While in seclusion Mgbe people must be learning a dance which they would stage for the visitors coming to view the Mbari. Friends, members of each Mgbe person's village and his family would come to Mbari to lead his or her home in style. Usually, they would hire a singer if none among them can sing. With the Mgbe person in the front, they would sing and lead him home. There is usually an open invitation to the general public for such an event. Thus, it is a day of feasting at the village where the Mbari is erected and in the individual homes of the participants. Nobody would like to be left out of the participation. Even people that do not have anybody directly involved, participate through the village or town celebration.

The opening day and the Mbari itself therefore would expose the town to the general public within the area. They would enjoy a higher status. There is a general scene of pride among the people for their accomplishment. The neighboring towns will also respect them as such. After this, the Mbari may now fall into the category of museum. There is no special effort at preserving it. This is important because there is no carryover from one Mbari to the next one. The Mbari would be there until the weather works on it and it eventually falls apart in the course of time. No repairs are made, and nobody aids the Mbari to fall apart.

The greater preservation is in the minds of the people and in the continuing honors received by the Mgbe people. Mgbe people are honored thereafter. There would be an automatic increase in attendance whenever a dance is to be staged if either the dancer or singer had participated in Mbari. The special names they acquire during the period go with them for the rest of their lives. More so, the Mbari is immortalized in the names given to the children born at the time. Ufengbe (literally meaning Mgbe Camwood) is given to a girl born during the year of the establishment of Mbari—a reminder that her village has achieved this high social status of establishing an Mbari.

Footnotes

1. Frank Willett, *African Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 257.
2. Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1960) p. 71.
3. Dr. F.K. Ekechi, interviewed 10 March 1974.
4. Elizabeth Isichei, *Ibo People and the Europeans* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1973) p. 80.
5. Ozoemena Nwaozuzu, interviewed 23 December 1972.
6. Ejike Eke, interviewed 3 January 1973.
7. Madam Nlenchi Ihenacho, interviewed 22 December 1972.
8. *Ibid.*

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