



# BEAUTY TRADITIONS AND HEALTHY CUTANEOUS RITUALS AMONG THE IGBOS OF SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is insightful to the understanding of how practices, ingredients, recipes for youthful, radiant, glowing and healthy skin in the Igbo society are rooted in tradition and culture. It problematizes modern chemical skin care routines, toxic ingredients, products, and practices that expose people of colour to bodily and environmental damage. The aim of this study is to examine the interplay of the Igbo cultural beliefs and practices and the adoption of certain natural ingredients in their environment for skin beauty rituals from the theoretical lens of cultural ecology. The cultural ecology framework offers a platform to explore how the Igbos meet their specific skincare needs in relation to their approved norms of beauty definitely influenced by the resources available in their environment. The study is qualitative research that draws on ethnographic evidence, through observation and oral history. Data from oral narratives were collected from women aged seventy (70 years) and above in three (3) out of the five (5) Igbo states of South-east Nigeria. The states are Abia, Anambra and Imo out of which Ngwa clan; Awka and Mbaise were purposively selected respectively. This method portrays the influence of the natural environment in the beauty practices and products for skin care in Igbo culture. The study found that these indigenous natural and plant-based ingredients have medicinal properties, non-toxic and sustainable. In addition, beauty traditions are a source of inspiration to the global beauty industry and give insight to culturally inspired beauty products and practices that engender a healthy skin, lifestyle, and environment. The study recommends a shift to organic, non-toxic and environmental friendly trends in the global beauty and wellness landscape.*

**Key words:** Skin care rituals; cultural ecology; local recipes; healthy skin; ancient knowledge.

## Introduction

The human skin is a soft, large, outer and complex layer providing protection for the body. Naturally, due to aging, it undergoes continuous changes at different times throughout the life time. Strikingly, the skin is a parameter for defining a beautiful and healthy body, an indicator of age, environmental exposure and a major defence line against diseases, as its care greatly affects appearance. Cutaneous rituals form an integral part of the cultural beliefs and practices that have shaped Igbo beauty standards. Igbo beauty standards celebrate feminine bodily ideals [1] through skin care rituals that accentuate their radiant, healthy body and mind. These rituals are embedded in the beauty traditions of diverse indigenous cultures that connect people to their heritage. The study examines the customary confines of cutaneous rituals and situates it in the beauty traditions trajectories of the Igbo of

South-east Nigeria. It problematizes modern chemical skin care routines, toxic ingredients, products, and practices that expose people of colour to bodily and environmental damage. The aim of this study is to examine the interplay of the Igbos cultural beliefs and practices and the adoption of certain natural ingredients in their environment for skin beauty rituals.

Beauty traditions are rooted in ancient knowledge and the power of nature to nurture the skin. Skin care rituals are an aspect of Igbo beauty culture that portray the Igbo identity and philosophy. Basically, elaborate cutaneous preparations and routines were mostly prevalent during festivals especially, in initiation rites into womanhood like in pre-marriage or after post-partum care namely, "mgbede" and "omugwo". The practice of nurturing the skin is an age-long tradition peculiar to many ancient cultures and societies as highlighted [2]. Chinua Achebe's work provides a window into the

descriptions of patterns of adornments, decorations and beautification in traditional Igbo culture [3]. Different cultures globally adopt diverse products, ingredients, and methods in relation to their environment in everyday skin care routines. Natural and plant-based ingredients formed the foundations of the clean and sustainable cutaneous rituals of the Igbo traditional beauty landscape. [4] affirmed the age-long practice of using animal and plant-based ingredients in skin care practices as herbal remedies for the newborn in Nigeria generally and among the Igbo. Historically, beauty traditions of the Egyptians and Sumerians dates back to 5000 years ago [5] and Egypt adopted different natural ingredients from animals, minerals and plants such as castor oil, myrrh, lavender, cinnamon, kohl, chamomile [6] and others for aesthetics and health condition.

Beauty traditions represent an array of practices, recipes and natural products rooted in a people's culture depicting the individual's health, wealth, social and spiritual standing. A series of studies have shown that indigenous cultures or traditional societies had employed the use of plants, and minerals in cutaneous routines to enhance beauty and wellness [7], [8],

[5], [6], [2]. More so, the beauty traditions of Asian countries especially, India are rooted in Ayurveda; the ancient Indian system of medicine [9], [10], [11]. Mild, biodegradable and non-toxic local or indigenous skin care practices predated the emergence of synthetic and chemical based cosmetics. Among the Hausa/Fulani culture of northern Nigeria, the use of the following plants for everyday skincare has been documented [12]. These are shea butter (*kade*), balsam apple (*garahuni*) henna (*lalle*), 'faru', sesame (*yodo*) palmy palm (*giginya*), custard apple (*gwandar*), Neem (*dogonyaro*) mango (*mangwaro*), cashew (*yazawa*), and others. Similarly, skin care materials employed by the Yoruba nation of south west Nigeria include coconut oil, 'laal' for hand and foot care, 'tiro' for eyes, black soap, camwood, fragrances, and traditional tattoo [13], [14], [15]. Several studies have focused on Igbo beauty and aesthetics with emphasis on conceptual clarifications. Far less scholarly investigations have examined the intersection between healthy skin care rituals and beauty traditions among the Igbo of South-east Nigeria. This obvious dearth of studies from a sociological understanding creates a knowledge gap that this study fills.

**Table 1. Indigenous Skincare Practices and Functions**

| Ingredient | Source      | Skincare Function | Cultural Significance      |
|------------|-------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Lalle      | Plant-based | Beautification    | feminity (Hausa/Fulani)    |
| Lavender   | plant-based | Fragrance         | purity/protection (Egypt)  |
| Tiro       | iron-ore    | medicinal         | beauty/protection (Yoruba) |
| Turmeric   | plant-based | cleansing         | glowing skin (Ayurveda)    |
| Uhie       | plant-based | decoration        | radiant skin (Igbo)        |
| Ncha-obo   | plant-based | cleansing         | healthy skin               |
| Ori/okwuma | plant-based | moisturizing      | protection                 |

**Objectives**

The discourse on the beauty traditions and healthy cutaneous rituals of the Igbo society advances basic issues that have been understudied especially from a sociological perspective. The goal of the present study is to:

1. Explore how specific skincare practices of the Igbo society are shaped by their cultural beliefs, beauty standards and practices;
2. Examine the influence of environmental resource availability on the adoption of certain natural ingredients and products;

3. Analyse the place of sustainability and wellness in their traditional recipes for skincare.

**Research Questions**

The study addresses some key questions namely;

1. How are specific skincare practices of the Igbo society shaped by their cultural beauty standards and practices?
2. How does environmental resource availability influence the adoption of certain natural ingredients and products?
3. Why do Igbo traditional skin care

recipes promote sustainability and wellness?

### Literature Review

A significant body of work abound in the arts on the constructions and perceptions of beauty. The concept of beauty has been variously construed in Igbo aesthetics as consisting an intrinsic and extrinsic value [16], [17]. The extrinsic quality referred to as “mma” in Igbo is nurtured based on ancient knowledge of certain healthy natural ingredients found in the immediate environment [17]. [18] noted that some cultural objects in Igbo culture share its beliefs and values about beauty.

Similarly, skin care rituals have been greatly researched among the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria. This study highlighted the diverse applications of “indigenous cosmetics” for beautification, and herbal remedies across all age strata and gender [19]. Cutaneous routines have been an integral feature of Yoruba beauty tradition that employed various locally made products [15]. Ethical issues, wellness and sustainability have sparked new interests in the use of natural, healthy and environmental-friendly ingredients and products. The growing use of locally sourced plant and animal-based recipes for skin care are closely linked to their non-toxicity or lack of negative consequences [15], [19], [20], [21]. Harmful chemical ingredients in cosmetics particularly, skincare products such as, formaldehyde, hydroquinone, phthalates, parabens, lead, mercury, triclosan, benzophenone, and others are linked to various health issues [22], [23]. Health awareness on the dangers of the chemical properties of many personal care products and cosmetic procedures is driving the demand for natural and organic skincare products. Ubelejit-Nte, (2023) [1] observed that the Nigerian beauty terrain had experienced a major transformation with the introduction and adoption of unregulated harmful chemicals in personal care products resulting in a global problem. The profundity of this research lies in its understanding of how practices, ingredients, recipes for youthful, radiant, glowing and healthy skin in the Igbo society are rooted in tradition and culture. The research contributes theoretically, empirically, and practically to the sociological understanding of the historical

landscape of specific skincare practices of the Igbos of South-east Nigeria, the indigenous knowledge, cultural beliefs, and standards of beauty.

The Cultural ecology framework; a coinage of Julian Steward also known as ecological anthropology is suitable to explain the way man adapts to the complex and dynamic interrelationship between culture and the environment [24]. The cultural ecology lens offers a platform to explore how the Igbos meet their specific skincare needs based on their approved norms of beauty using the resources available in their environment. Steward in Porter, describes cultural ecology as “the study of the processes through which a society adapts to its environment.” [25]. Its focus on cultural adaptation underscores the use of Igbo local knowledge systems and cultural standards of beauty in achieving beauty and wellness. The study finds expression in the cultural ecology framework as it emphasizes the sustainability principles in the place of cultural beliefs and practices in shaping ecological systems. Understanding local beauty norms in line with the skincare practices is central to their ecological impacts.

### Research Methodology

The data were generated by means of an evidence-based qualitative approach known as ethnographic research as is common in cultural studies. This involved the collection of data from some published research findings from various disciplines particularly, dermatology, ethnobotany, pharmacology, cosmetology, and medicine. The research offers an emic perspective of the Igbo cultural beauty practices and the meanings attached. In addition, observation and oral narratives were employed to gather first-hand experience and robust data. Data from oral narratives were collected from women aged seventy (70 years) and above in three (3) out of the five (5) Igbo states of South-east Nigeria. The states are Abia, Anambra and Imo out of which Ngwa clan; Awka and Mbaise were purposively selected respectively. Questions were posed on the beauty practices, cultural beliefs and skincare ingredients of the Igbo people. In addition, information was sought on the resource

availability within the environment as a rationale for adoption of certain ingredients and products.

### Results and Discussion

Igbo standards or approach to beauty is holistic embodying a moral dimension, physical appearance, and spiritual wellness [3], [16], [26]. Their cutaneous rituals promote their cultural belief in good health marked by fertility as an indicator of feminine beauty. The major Igbo beauty practices or traditions that shape their cutaneous routines are mostly observed during festivals such as pre-marriage/womanhood initiation or post-partum care rites of passage. The beauty tradition of 'Iru mgbede' or 'Igba Nja' and 'Omugwo' are unique to the Igbo people. Basically, 'Iru mgbede' involves practices and rituals that ensure adolescent girls metamorphose into sexually mature women. 'Omugwo' on the other hand, aims at nurturing the suppler body of the woman after child birth for a glowing beauty. In both preparations, such ingredients as camwood

(uhie), kernel oil (ude aki), shea butter (okwuma) chalk (nzu) are used for body scrubs, massages and paintings for a glowing and radiant skin [27]. These practices symbolize the Igbo cultural identity ideals are greatly influenced by the cultural context.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that there is a general preference for lighter shades amongst the Igbo. The Igbo valorize fair-skin through names, epithets and figurative expressions [28] which is a distinctive feature of Igbo folklore. Different skin tones are prevalent among the Igbo people. While some are lighter shades, dark, others portray a blend of light and brown shades commonly referred to as coffee colour. Skincare practices that can clean, tone and moisturize the skin are influenced by the cultural standards that idealize lighter skin shades. These practices are sustained by the belief that skin tone can be influenced using local and natural ingredients and products.

**Figure 1. Some Indigenous Igbo Skincare Ingredients**



*Figure 1: Shea butter, camwood, palm kernel oil and native soap mixed with Uhie/camwood.*

A smooth and even-toned skin is an indicator of beauty and wellness. Cleansing of the body kick-starts specific skincare routines of the Igbo culture. Black soap known as '*ncha obo*' is derived from palm fruit stock or plantain stock which is made into ash and mixed with potash, kernel oil and other local ingredients as the case may be. This soap has both cleansing and medicinal properties and is effective in the treatment of some skin conditions. Shea butter commonly called '*ori*' or '*okwuma*' in Igbo language is another major skincare product commonly used for moisturizing the body across all age strata. Its emollient properties and richness in Vitamins A and E make it enables it to protect individual users from ultra-violet rays of the sun. It is mostly used for body massage and local spa.

Another major skincare ritual of the Igbos used for beautification is camwood powder (*uhie* or *ufie*). This local recipe has the potential of brightening the skin, tones and removes blemishes, blackheads and enhances a radiant and healthy skin. The Igbos apply a mixture of camwood and honey, lemon, lime as scrubs for a glowing skin. Camwood beautification is a major component in fattening room rituals for new brides and nursing mothers. Other skin care products locally sourced include palm kernel oil (*ude aki/mmanuaku*), or coconut oil used for keeping the skin hydrated and protection from excessive dryness especially during the dry harmattan weather. An invaluable product, an animal fat product from the python known as '*abuba-eke*' is used for the removal of scars and spots on the body. Similarly, the Igbos use body art made from a

type of dye to decorate the body. This product is a status/wealth marker when the adornment is in the form of tattoo (*nki*). Both the art of decoration with chalk (*nzu*) and dye (*uri*) also symbolize beauty, spirituality, fertility, and chastity. Just like the camwood, '*uri*', '*nki*' and '*nzu*' resonates traditional rites of passage and festivals. Whereas camwood (*uhie/ufie*), and *nki* were mostly used for women, '*uri*' and '*nzu*' were used for both men and women with '*nki*' as a major indicator of wealth.

Weather conditions dependent on the geographical landscape affected the availability and choice of certain natural ingredients and recipes. The Igbos are found in the tropical rain forest region of Nigeria. The region is characterized by high rainfall with rainy season lasting from March to November with slight variations every year with rich and diverse plant and animal species. This natural environment is characterized by bio-diversity in plant and animal resources. The adoption of local natural ingredients is supported by their availability within the environment. The cultural ecology framework aptly described this process of cultural adaptation that shapes the Igbo choice of these ingredients as a result of their availability. Products like shea butter, palm kernel oil and coconut oil were predominantly used in the dry season to moisturize the skin and keep it hydrated. Research [29], [19], [30] has shown that these natural ingredients abound in the region. Camwood and shea butter are primarily sourced from the North-central parts of Nigeria. This is an age-long product shared by most ethnic nationalities in Nigeria.

**Table 2. Traditional vs. Chemical Skincare Practices**

|                                      |                                    |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Natural ingredients as local recipes | Chemical and synthetic ingredients |
| Shea butter for UV protection        | Retinols for sunscreen             |
| Native black soap for cleansing      | Steroids for skin-lightening       |
| Camwood for exfoliation              | Chemical exfoliants (AHA)          |
| Kernel oil for hydration             | Moisturizers (Petrolatum)          |
| Healthy                              | Harmful                            |
| Eco-friendly                         | Negative environmental impact      |

**Source:** Author's Fieldwork.

Corroborating previous studies, the hallmark of traditional recipes for beauty and skincare is sustainability and wellness [15], [19],

[20]. Beauty traditions of the Igbos are non-toxic and ensure human and environmental health. Their nature predisposes them to safety,

wellness, and sustainability principles. The growing adoption of indigenous cosmetic recipes has been linked to the absence of toxic elements in them. Previous studies have shown that the local recipes have no negative consequences on human health [15], [19], [20].

The study also found that apart from the medicinal properties of some of these natural/local recipes they were widely believed by the Igbo to possess spiritual components. The chalk (nzu) made from clay is one product that depicts holistic purity. This feature enhanced the total well-being of the people while ensuring a radiant skin. The cutaneous rituals have been sustained in Igbo beauty tradition because of resource availability and composition of non-harmful elements. The sustainability of these practices lies in the climate-responsive and environmentally friendly nature of the ingredients to nurture the body's firewall. Awareness of the potential health hazards associated with chemical components of cosmetics drives the demand/return to clean, safe natural skincare ingredients.

### Conclusion

The use of local natural ingredients in skincare procedures in Igbo culture is shaped by the cultural standards of beauty. The cultural standard prioritizes lighter, even toned and radiant skin, smoothness, flawlessness, and bodily and spiritual health. These reflect the cultural beliefs, values and ideals of beauty amongst the Igbo people. In the present work, we employed a qualitative data to examine the ways in which specific skincare practices of the Igbos define their cultural beliefs and beauty norms. The study contributed to the understanding of beauty traditions of the Igbos by demonstrating the healthy cutaneous rituals. The findings show a plethora of skincare products and practices of the people. This supports the cultural ecology framework and the methodology adopted in the present research. The current study provided an understanding of the link between traditional cutaneous practices and the recent interest in the adoption of natural ingredients in cosmetics. The study found that these indigenous natural and plant-based ingredients have medicinal properties, are non-toxic and sustainable. In

addition, beauty traditions are a source of inspiration to the global beauty industry and give insight to culturally inspired beauty products and practices that engender a healthy skin, lifestyle, and environment. The study recommends a shift to organic, non-toxic and environmentally friendly trends in the global beauty and wellness landscape.

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