

NKEMDICHE

Why We Do Not Grow Beards

By Obiora NWAZOTA

Illustrated by Lucie Van der Elst

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Once upon a time, Southeast Nigerian Igbo women (the "we" of the subtitle) had imposing, resplendent beards. Beard trimmings—flowers and feathers, bells and shells, jeweled beads and precious metals—were an accessories empire. Women groomed, plaited, and embellished their beards communally in the village, the salon of yore, in preparation for market days and the Parade of Beards. The parade was a cross between the contemporary debutante ball and voguing, and its star was Nkemdiche (trans. mine is different), the beautiful, full-bearded maiden from Enyimba. Until she incited a kerfuffle. No spoiler alert here, but the upshot was that all women had to lose the beard, "their most treasured mark of beauty" (18). Ouch! Men quickly filled the void and grew full beards. Women found a new outlet for their creative, sacred expression: hairchitecture, which is immortalized in the "spirit-head carvings of the Igbo people, called Agboho Mmanwu" (22). Dignity and majesty were restored. *Nkemdiche*, a mere twenty-seven pages hardbound for all ages, is an outsized design statement of cultural import by several Chicagoans. Obiora "Obi" Nwazota of [Okpara House](#), a content creator preserving and sharing research on Igbo culture, wrote the folktale. Illustrator and papercut artist [Lucie Van der Elst](#) brought oral tradition alive on the page visually. Nick Adam and Bud Rodecker of [Span](#), the communication design firm, are responsible for the [award-winning cover design](#) and typesetting. A glossary of Igbo names, rites, and expressions is included. —Lisa Thaler, author of *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*, 30 June 2021