



Ikenga Male Figure, Nigeria, Igbo people, c. 19<sup>th</sup> century, wood

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1) Cole, Herbert M. and Chike C. Aniakor. *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History at the University of California, 1984. p. 24

Sculptures called ikenga are used in male cults that address the powers, successes, and failures of an individual. Among the several southern Nigerian peoples who have this or a related cult and art, the latter is most highly developed among the Igbo. Igbo success in material, social, even spiritual and political terms ultimately rests in moral determination and physical strength. The prevailing ideal has been an excellent yam farmer who accumulates wealth and prestige, titles, a large family, and finally, an honored place among prosperous and respected ancestors. This will to succeed is institutionalized in personal shrines, ikenga, maintained by men in most regions and only occasionally by women.

These images are found in the shrines of individual diviners and corporate tutelary cults and as representatives of age-grades and communities. Drums owned by villages (or village-groups) repeat basic ikenga imagery. Many Igbo villages are called ikenga, and while the reason for this is not clear, their existence proves the importance and antiquity of the concept.

2) Visona, Monica Blackmun, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris. *A History of Arts in Africa*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001. p. 296

Men among several ethnic groups commission (or used to commission) personal altars, to be dedicated and consecrated to their personal strength, success, and accomplishments, and sometimes as well to their protection. Warriors, farmers, traders, smiths, and others prayed and sacrificed to these altars before

important undertakings, offering further gifts after meeting with success (or sometimes berating the altar after failure). The Igbo, who have the greatest numbers and most variable forms of personal altars, call them ikenga, the Igala know them as okega, and among the Edo of Benin the term is ikengobo. That these names are cognate virtually proves a historical relationship, even if scholars are uncertain which of the three groups originated the idea.

Personal altars among these three groups are dedicated to the hand, specifically the right hand (and arm) among the Igbo and the Igala. Strong hands and arms are agents of physical prowess, necessary for success in such activities such as hunting, farming, and warfare. The iconography of many altars reflects these associations. Igbo ikenga, for instance, typically show a horned warrior holding a knife in his right hand and a human trophy head in his left, symbols probably established a long time ago when the Igbo were active head hunters.

3) Cole, Herbert M. and Chike C. Aniakor. *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History at the University of California, 1984. p. 24

The basic Igbo ikenga image is a human with horns, sometimes rendered very simply as an abstract head-and-horns-on-base. Larger, more elaborate examples include fully realized males seated on stools, holding and wearing various symbols, and with more or less complex headdresses determined in part by horns and often including several other motifs.

Ikenga, as shrine, symbol, and idea, incorporates a person's chi, his ancestors, his right arm or hand, aka ikenga, his power, ike, as well as spiritual activation through prayer and sacrifice. Young men acquire ikenga at varying ages in different regions but commonly have one by the time they are married and have established a family. The images are frequently carved, usually from "male" hardwoods such as iroko, oji. Normally an ikenga is consecrated in the presence of one's lineage and/or age-mates.

Onwuejeogwu recounts a rite that took place before the former, with the lineage head officiating. Offerings of yam, a cock, wine, and kola were provided by Okafor, the recipient. The headman prayed over the kola. The headman then killed the cock, dripped blood on the ikenga, pulled feathers from the fowl, and stuck them and four lumps of cooked yam on the image.



4) Cole, Herbert M. and Chike C. Aniakor. *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History at the University of California, 1984. pp. 26, 30

Food was shared among the guests, and the headman later poured a libation of palm wine on the image, praying: 'Health, good fortune are what we are seeking for. We are searching for an upright ikenga. The primary diagnostic of all ikenga is a pair of horns, and the primary meaning of horns to the Igbo is power, especially masculine power. As essentially male shrines, these images betray manifold aspects of power-spiritual, economic, social, military, and political- that are amplified and specified by other symbols present, especially the recurrent knife and head, and of course by ritual.

Ikenga horns are often identified as those of a ram, and some look very much like them. Rams fight only occasionally, and the ram paradigm in Igbo thought includes restraint as well as determination; thus the expression, 'The unexpected is the test of heroes; the unexpected also makes heroes. In ritual contexts rams are not meant to show any pain, thus the strong man must also be stoic. The man with an "upright ikenga" is forthright and open, not covert.

5) Cole, Herbert M. and Chike C. Aniakor. *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History at the University of California, 1984. p. 30

The ram's aggression explicit in the above saying is reinforced by the common occurrence of a long-bladed knife and a severed trophy head, expressing superiority and success in warfare, which are (or at least were) part of the male ethos, but by no means its only dimension. Knives are highly valued- one of Chineke's four primordial gifts to man- on practical levels, of course, but on ikenga they are symbolic: the knife of action, the extension of the hand and mind as willpower, power itself, and the sharp cut of decisiveness.

The knife is a means; the end is the head, the trophy which is a symbol of accomplishment. Only the naïve would strictly equate the heads on ikenga with trophies and head-hunting, though some Igbo were headhunters and did take them as trophies. Rather, the head is achievement, the result of hard-fought effort. Bravery is explicit, but beyond that and more implicit is the courage to respond to whatever challenge one meets and with the help of one's chi, ancestors, and the alusi, to succeed. Success in farming, trading, or blacksmithing is the accomplishment implied by ikenga; the head as trophy recedes into the background.

6) Bantor, Eli. "Life as an Artistic Process: Igbo Ikenga and Ofo." *African Arts*, Vol. 21, No. 2, UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center, February 1988. p. 71

Numerous ikenga, both the warrior and the titled person's types, as well as some masks, have a row of pointed projections flanking the head, usually three or another odd number on each side. Ikenga in the southern Igbo area have three knobs on a horizontal bar. The number three is associated with males throughout West Africa.

In Benin, the king has three hidden tufts of hair as protective charms, and doctors wear amulets that resemble these projections during public appearances. Alternatively, these projections may stand for nzu, cone-shaped pieces of chalk, suggesting purity and protection, is sometimes applied to the eyes and temples. High-ranking people need magical protection because they are often objects of envy, which is commonly expressed by witchcraft.

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