

The *Ikenga*, as Emblem of Greatness in the Cosmology of the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria are amongst the varied African traditional peoples whose specific art forms have come to be symbolized in more spiritual and religious forms than ordinarily seen. In the early days of the 20th century, they encountered rapid British colonialism which saw to the ultimate dislocation of much of their traditional norms and values. However, they have remained certain of their ritualized art forms that have continued to shape their thoughts on the world they live in till today. One such emblem that has come to represent both the social and religious force of the society, which is largely seen as a masculine strength, is the *Ikenga*. This is a ritual object that symbolizes masculine strength and the ability to achieve one's goals through one's own efforts; those are the Igbo ideals of status and success. In the Igbo traditional format, these ideals consist of a large area in which to live, a high rank in major organizations – that is political power – the possession of large yam bans and many wives and children. The *Ikenga* is in the image of a horned male figure made out of wood. In its simplest form, it consists of only a cylindrical block and projecting "horns". The horn symbolizes the aggressive, assertive, and powerful nature of the male animal. The more elaborate type of *Ikenga* is a standing or seated male figure with a fully realized head and limbs which usually holds a severed head in one hand and a machete in the other. What the paper will explore is the emblematic significance of the *Ikenga* in the social, religious and political world view of the Igbo and how, over time, the emblem of *Ikenga* has ruled the cosmological world of the Igbo.



Introduction

The Igbo live in the area that is today geographically called southeastern Nigeria. They had lived for centuries in this part of the world before the British intrusion and subsequent colonization in the twentieth century. Various myths exist with respect to the origin of the Igbo; they range from the eastern hypothesis which claims that in the beginning the Igbo were either one of the tribes of Israel or Egypt and that for some unspecified reason, they left the east, wandered across the Sudan to come and settle where we now find them. Those who hold this view rely on linguistics, ethnography and religion. This view was supported by many of the colonial interlopers in Nigeria, who arbitrarily ascribed sources of origin to the indigenous peoples, using spurious criteria. Juxtaposed to this claim of eastern origin is the claim that the Igbo were created where they are now found; a claim to autochthony. This second claim is most popular amongst the Nri of Awka, where the priest-kinships of Agukwu and Oeri have no doubt contributed to its being so well preserved.¹ Evidence from linguistics show that the Igbo language belongs to the *Kwa* language group like many other languages in Nigeria, Akan etc, and belong to the larger family of African languages known as Niger-Congo stock. The Igbo have come to inhabit their present abode over the ages, and because of the

nature of their environment, written records or plenty archaeological finds have not been available apart from the *Igbo Ukwu* finds that became a major source of dating Igbo history and culture. The excavation in the 1960s and the 1970s became a rich cultural artifact that showed that the Igbo had evolved a high-graded civilization dating from about 800 AD. The Igbo culture, religion and cosmology spin around an ordered existence involving spiritual forces and deities that have come to represent the Igbo way of life. One of such spiritual force is the *Ikenga*, the cult of the right hand of a man. This symbolizes greatness, vigor, determination, strength, success, and at times, ruthlessness. The interpretation of the *Ikenga* force is usually done on case-by-case basis that is on individual basis, for it can be represented in myriad of ways depending on the aspirations of the individual or group seeking to acquire it. The work is going to look at the *Ikenga* phenomenon in Igbo history and its place and significance in the cosmological world of the Igbo.

The Origin of *Ikenga*

The question as to the origin of *Ikenga* in Igbo history is as difficult to answer as the question about the origin of the Igbo. The many hypotheses on the origin of the Igbo, championed by western scholars and attributed to the East, seem also to have affected the questions about the origin of the *Ikenga*. These European travelers and ethnographers like M. D. W. Jeffreys, tended to believe that *Ikenga* was of Egyptian origin thereby buttressing the view and connectedness of the Igbo to the East. Here the argument is raised that the *Ikenga* “Igbo ram headed god”, was derived from the ram headed god of the Egyptians.² This Eastern connection of *Ikenga*, to scholars of Igbo extraction who have over time vehemently doubted and opposed the “Hermitic hypothesis” on the origin of the Igbo, seem very dubious and denigrating to Igbo religious and cosmological belief. Notwithstanding the avid resistance to this “oriental mirage” by the autochthonous scholars, the tendency has continued in the literature of origins and migrations of most West African ethnic nationalities, by Euro-centric scholars hemming them to the East, especially Egypt, Yemen or the Holy Land.³ Of the scholars who attempted an interpretation of the *Ikenga* symbol and its sources of origin, it was only M. D. W. Jeffreys who took a diffusionist view of its source of origin to the east. Others like R. E. Bradbury, Boston J. S. and Odita O. E maintained an autochthonous position on the origin of *Ikenga*.⁴ These writers believed that the *Ikenga* cult did not diffuse from anywhere into Igboland; at best, it is that part of the Igbo religious culture, epitomized in the spirit force and the powers of the guardian angels exemplified in *Chi*, and expressed in varied forms, which controlled the individual’s destiny and day-to-day affairs.

Since none of the Igbo neighbours to the North and West ever made any political conquest of the Igbo, the later had lived where they are found for centuries, enjoying uninterrupted autonomy without any centralized political institution until the British conquest that began from 1902. Then it is plausible to argue that Igbo culture retained its originality in content and out look from the earliest time to the British conquest. There may have been cultural borrowings through inter-group contacts, but these could not have been too strong as to diminish the inner contents of the peoples’ culture and religion. That

the *Ikenga* cult and symbols are found among the Igbo northern neighbours of Igala and her western (here Benin and Delta) neighbours, in their varied shapes and forms, seem not to suggest that the cult symbol may have filtered into Igboland from outside. The intensity and depth of spread of *Ikenga* across the length and breath of Igboland as well as its typologies, distinguishes it from what could be found in other neighbouring culture areas. The authenticity of Igbo *Ikenga* is defined by the nature and type of wood in which they were made. This is unlike the type of *Ikenga* found in other parts of Igala land the Igbo northern neighbour; they call theirs *Okega*, and the Benin and Delta groups, bordering western Niger Igbo groups, who call theirs *Ikengobo*, *Ivri* etc. The *Oji*, *Orji*, *Ogilisi*, and *Okwe* trees are special type of trees, believed to have spiritual potency, appear to be the trees used in carving the *Ikenga*. However, the *Akanta* tree, which is a very hard wood and highly revered by carvers and medicine men across Igboland, was also used. This was not a very common tree for everybody to lay hands on; having ones *Ikenga* done on it, epitomized its possessor as a man of great valour.⁵ The network of traditional titles across Igboland, which predated the 20th century, is an indication that the institution of *Ikenga*, as a cult object meant for distinguished caliber of persons in the society, must have been of distant origin in the area. Some of these institutions like the *Ozo* are sacred institutions and its membership limited to a particular class in the society- the wealthy and prosperous; thus its activities are left only for the initiated class alone.⁶ Any *Ozo* titled man was by that title a respected personality in Igbo society and must have his *Ikenga* as the font of his achievement and success in life. It is interesting to know that of all the groups in southern Nigeria, and indeed Nigeria, it is only the Igbo that possess the *Ozo* title institution; here the Eastern and western delta Igbo.⁷ There is this firm recognition that *Ikenga* both as art form and concept is very central to Igbo cosmos.⁸ The Igbo environment and its relative isolation for centuries, when only small highly professionalized elite of native doctors, artists, traders, hunters, farmers etc,⁹ maintained what contacts that existed among the groups, was a springboard for her internal development especially in the areas of spirituality, thus constituting the *Ikenga* phenomenon in all its forms in Igbo history and civilization.

The definitions of *Ikenga* and its typologies

Varied interpretations and definitions have been rendered by scholars regarding the *Ikenga* art corpus; these scholars are domiciled in arts, anthropology, sociology and history. For example, Frank Starkweather says of the word *Ikenga* means *I-ke* strength and power. He goes on to say that the suffix *N-ga* means place of strength. No doubt, the prefix *Ike* is central to the *Ikenga* concept, but the suffix *Nga* which he argues is the place of strength is likely to be held by anyone in suspect.¹⁰ Here, the author was trying to derive a definition of *Ikenga* based on the breaking down of the prefix and suffix in the word, and assigning meanings to each. For Odita, *Ikenga* is seen as the strength with which one moves.¹¹ His interpretation of course evokes the concept of strength in any understanding that is to be made of that word *Ikenga*. P. A. Talbot defined *Ikenga* as a symbol of success in trade, war, hunting and farming.¹² In another tone, Basden viewed

an *Ikenga* as “exclusively a man’s god”; without the *Ikenga*, he said, “no householder would rest in peace, its absence would be considered fatal.”¹³ Meek on his own part observed that the “*Ikenga* is the personification of a man’s strength of arm and consequently of his good fortune”.¹⁴ Chukwuezi, defines *Ikenga* as “the cult of the right hand which identifies with a man’s diverse field of endeavour, provided his *chi* (guarding spirit) agrees fully with his aspiration. It guarantees good fortune in farming, hunting, trading, war, creative arts, ritual and title taking events.”¹⁵ All these definitions in their respective ways capture the meaning of *Ikenga* for an Igbo person. To an average Igbo man, *Ikenga* is the cult of the right hand of a man with which he hazards his way through the thick and thin of life; it is an aggressive masculine cult of the right hand which defines the realms of endeavour and achievements of the individual owner with a cosmic force that directs one’s destiny on earth.

Understanding the nature and representations of *Ikenga* is important for a proper appreciation of how the typologies reflect the purposes and contents of the *Ikenga* force in Igbo world view. Here there are sculptured and unsculptured *Ikenga*. In the first category, it is sculptured in wood in Igbo areas while in the Benin area; it could be executed in metals. For those sculptured in wood, there is an abstract highly stylised type, and then a less abstract and more humanistic type. In the former, the body is reduced to a cylinder, in its simple form and a pair of horn sprouts from a cylindrical block. In more elaborate form, this type of *Ikenga* is given a head and it may also be given legs, but no arms. In the second type, the human figure is reproduced more fully and less schematically; and a typical *Ikenga* of this type is represented by a seated male figure holding a machet in one hand and a severed human head in the other and crowned with a pair of horns. Here all the limbs are shown and given rounded, less regular form, the proportions of the human figure are observed.¹⁶ There is also the tiered and non-tiered *Ikenga*; the later exists among the Igala, the northern Igbo neighbours. It is called tiered *Ikenga* because it embodies figures arranged in two or more groups placed one above the other.¹⁷ This category of *Ikenga* was not common among the Igbo; theirs had an aggressive iconography which depicts the man-like valour and fearlessness attributed to masculinity. Then the unsculptured *Ikenga* could be in the form of live trees consecrated by the *dibia* (Priest), for the individual, family or group. This was not very widely distributed in Igboland, but was evident in Awgu areas of northern Igboland and the communities to their south, particularly the Isukwuato Edda group. Some *Ikenga* especially those found in Igboland also depict genitalis. This makes reference to procreativity. Such type of *Ikenga* symbolized procreation and fertility. The status of a man as a father of a particular family unit is determined by having many children who ensure the continuity of a man’s lineage and his proper reception in the land of the ancestors. Some are also carved in a vulture form signifying the cult the owner belongs to.

Looking at the concept of *Ikenga*, its types, as well as the criterion of function, the whole range of *Ikenga* objects, based on available evidence, fall into two groups. The ones used to celebrate individual achievements, as in the case of the majority of places where the concept and symbolism occur, and that used to celebrate group achievements. These categories reveal different purposes for which *Ikenga* is acquired by any individual or group. Based on the directive of a diviner or a *dibia*, an *Ikenga* can be executed for an unborn child in a manner and form so chosen by the *dibia*, and directed by the result of

divination. In other words, there is no end to the form and shape which an *Ikenga* figure must possess, what matters is the purpose for which it was executed.

The Symbolism of *Ikenga* in Igbo Cosmology

It appears that it is in the area of symbolism that *Ikenga* art objects validate the Igbo notions of status, success, and achievements. The *Ikenga* art images are adorned with an array of symbols reflecting the representation of what the individual, community or age-grade owner (s) aspire, and these symbols appear in animal forms like deer, leopard, lion, snake and motifs; horned symbols, human heads and figures. The Igbo no doubt believe in supernatural forces, their belief in ancestral worship led to the establishment of personal shrine images like the *Ikenga*, through which they have spiritual contacts with their ancestors. *Ikenga* is known as one of the symbols of power and authority in Igbo culture; it is believed to serve as a link between the dead and the living- a cult of the right hand which is linked to ones *chi*, (guardian spirit). This force is reputed to have mediated in the affairs of men and assists its owners to achieve success in their chosen endeavours. *Ikenga* is mostly maintained, kept or owned by men and occasionally by women of high reputation and priestesses, especially in the northern Igbo areas of Uzo-uwani, Ogurugu, Igah, Ojoh, and Ifite-ogwari. The possession of *Ikenga* depicts high status, accomplishment, wealth and integrity in the society. However, it is mostly owned by warriors and great men; but individuals aspiring for upward mobility in life and the poor also could own it and look upon it for breakthrough in life. In some parts of Igboland, especially in the Mbaise area, custodians of *Ikenga* must either be great titled men *Onye Nze*, *Onye Ozo*, *Eze Okonko*, *Eze Ala*, *dibia*, hunters, farmers, traders, or warriors, who have made remarkable achievements in their communities. The Igbo generally repose all powers on *Chukwu* (the Supreme Being) who is too powerful to be approached directly; thus lesser gods (guarding angels), serve as intermediary between man and the great god. The same *Chukwu*, at the time of birth, gives to each person a particular portion of his or her divine essence *chi* which guides the person all through his life.¹⁸ For the Igbo, ones *chi*, can positively interact with the *Ikenga* to produce wonderful results of accomplishment in ones life.

Ikenga is seen in Igbo world view as an object, shrine, symbol and an idea; it combines ancestral powers and authority as well as symbolizes mobility. It is tied to the notion of authority and prestige within the family unit and the entire community. It comprises someone's personal *chi* (smaller god), his ancestor, cult of the right hand, *aka Ikenga*; power, *Ike* as well as spiritual activation through prayer and sacrifice. Attached to this view is the individualistic, pushy, achievement-oriented nature of the Igbo. Their egalitarian social structure ensures that social mobility is open to any enterprising person. This entails personal intensive effort and competitiveness as the individual struggles to succeed. The individual's *Ikenga*, reinforces this aggressiveness in him. The Igbo believe in personal endeavour which will reflect strength of positive thrust in life and that will also lead to success, achievement, promotion and enterprise. This world view could be seen in the corpus of *Ikenga* art work which is highly proliferated in various parts of Igboland and which reinforces the societal belief which generated them.¹⁹ In every success in Igbo world view, ones *chi* is responsible for it, and a combination of ones *chi*

in harmonious interaction with *Ikenga* and ancestors in the affairs of a man, produce untrammelled success. It is a common belief in some cases that the ancestral spirits could come back in subsequent reincarnations to influence the *chi* of a new born baby. Thus the *Ikenga* cult forms an integral component of Igbo cosmic order and belief which it reinforces.

The Igbo are by no way in doubt about the functions and significance of *Ikenga* in their cosmic life and existence. Considering the nature of their environment where farming has been over time a major source of livelihood; consequently land was tied to success through yam cultivation as the king of all crops. The cultivation of yam is linked to *Ahianjoku*, *Ifejioku*, or *Ajanjoku* (the god of yam), as the case may be; and any successful farmer has to abide by the norms required by not only the *Ajala* (the earth goddess), but also *Ahianjoku* (the god of yam), for success. The formulation of social ethos or *Omenani*, *Omenala*, is for general conduct of living and daily affairs of the society. Daily life thrives on the exploitation of land through agriculture; thus farming was the orbit upon which an individual's enterprise, achievements and the quest for status in the society revolved. A wealthy man was a yam farmer, because the society recognized farming as the ultimate source of wealth and this was demonstrated by the possession of vast yam barns, and the concomitant initiation into the *Eze ji* or *Di ji*, (king of yam) society. One's *Ikenga* and *chi* combined, which propelled him to hard work, perseverance, and determination were responsible for the individual's success, and the belief in this cosmic ordering of life, is what shaped the Igbo way of life. In Igbo cosmic world, the right hand and a man's god of fortune known as *Ikenga*, symbolizes the male principle in Igbo life and the ability of the individual to strive to achieve on the basis of *akala aka*, (talent), whether in trade, hunting, farming, warfare, etc. However, the given of talent or *akala aka* by one's *chi* does not ensure success all the time for the individual; it is only the transformation of talent *akala aka* on the basis of hard work, personal enterprise such as in farming aided by spiritual sanctions by one's *chi*, that leads to success and achievement for the individual.²⁰ This is enshrined in these Igbo sayings- *Onye kwe, chi ya ekwe*, meaning (if one says yes, the gods respond with their own support), and *Chi onye na edu ya*, (One's *chi*, guides him or her). Man in Igbo cosmos in pursuit of the Igbo ideals of status, success and achievement is well certified by the cult of his right hand and the god of fortune –*Ikenga*, his male vitality; his life force and individuality. This enables him to make positive thrusts in life, the ultimate fulfillment that finds expression in material and spiritual plenitude.²¹

In the Igbo world view, *Ikenga* retained its stature as a religious or cult object capable of veneration and worship. Incantations and sacrifices were offered by the *dibia* on behalf of an intending devotee, either to make it more powerful and active in its role as a support for the physical thrusts of its devotee, or to thank it for a supportive role it had already played.²² *Ikenga* has been viewed as a clear evidence of the essentially manipulative character of the cosmos and cosmological ideas of the Igbo people.²³ For them, *Ikenga* occupied a prominent position in their world view, and has been seen as a source of Igbo spirit of tenacity and success. The Igbo have over the ages, accepted as an essential aspect of right and natural that talent should lead to enterprise, enterprise to promotion, and promotion to privilege.²⁴ The place of *Ikenga* in the art, culture, religion and history of the Igbo cannot be overlooked. More scholarship is required to interpret and more deeply the cosmological significance of Igbo *Ikenga* in the overall life and history of the

Igbo prior to colonial rule. *Ikenga* is celebrated in dance form by the devotee in a consecration procession or thanksgiving for all of its enablement. *Ikenga* reigned in the universe of the Igbo like a deity reigns until colonial rule and Christianity combined to dislocate its essence in the society.

Conclusion

The speed, with which the *Ikenga* cult/art declined in Igboland after the colonization and subsequent Christianization of the area, is most shocking. Under a century, the Igbo *Ikenga* disappeared from the homes and ancestral shrines across Igboland, and found a new home in the museum interior. The dearth of written materials on *Ikenga* is an evidence of the lack-luster approach the Igbo gave in the preservation of the age-long culture and tradition of a people, thereby losing a big chunk of their past. Igbo forebears relied on the potency and efficacy of the *Ikenga* in ordering their individual and collective lives; but western Christianity, education and negligence, created this huge gap in scholarship of *Ikenga* and its significance in the culture and cosmology of the Igbo. What one has done here is merely to scratch the veneer of the problem, attempting to look at the *Ikenga* from its many angles, and adopting a position that, for sure, the *Ikenga* was a significant force in Igbo culture and tradition and even shaped the ways and levels of successes individuals and groups attained in Igboland during the pre-colonial periods. What contemporary scholarship needs to do is to reinvent and reinvigorate the study, and culture of *Ikenga* among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria.

Notes

¹ . A. E. Afigbo, *An Outline of Igbo History*, (Owerri: Rader Publishing Company, 1986), 1-2.

² . A. E. Afigbo, *Ikenga: The State of Our Knowledge*, (Owerri: Rada Publishing Company, 1986), 1.

³ . A. E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, (Nigeria: University Press Limited, 1981), 5-6.

⁴ See Bradbury R. E., "Ezomo's Ikegobo and the Benin Cult of the Man", (August 1961), Boston, J. S., "Notes on Contact between the Igala and the Ibo", (Ethnographica, 1977), and Odita, O. E., "Universal Cults and Intra-diffusion of *Ikenga* Arts", *African Studies Review*, Vol. 16 (1973), 75-82. These works lend credence to the autochthonous theory

on the origins of Ikenga amongst the Igbo and their immediate Northern and Western neighbours.

⁵ . Osita Agwuna, “Ikenga defined in terms of form and concept”, *Ikoru*, Vol. Nos. 1 & 2, (July, 1984), 54.

⁶ . Nwaezeigwe Tony, *The Igbo and their Nri Neighbours*, (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 2007), 128.

⁷ . Angulu Onwuejiogwu, *Igbo Civilization: The Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*, (London: Ethiopie Publishing Co, 1981), 50.

⁸ . Chike Aniakor, “Ikenga Art and Igbo Cosmos”, *Ikoru*, Vol. V, Numbers 1 & 2, (July), 1984, 62.

⁹ . A. E. Afigbo, *Ikenga: The State of Our Knowledge*, 4.

¹⁰ . Frank Starkweather, Traditional Igbo Art, (Ann Arbor Michigan: Michigan State University, 1968), quoted in Chike Aniakor, “Ikenga Art and Igbo Cosmos”, *Ikoru*, Vol. V, Numbers 1 & 2, (July), 1984, 62.

¹¹ . Oditia E. O., “Individual cults and intro-diffusion: Igbo Ikenga in cultural retrospection”, in *African Studies Review*, Vol. 16, (1973), 73-82.

¹² . Talbot P. A., *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, (3 Vols.), (London; Oxford University Press, 1926)

¹³ . Basden G. T., *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1966), 45.

¹⁴ . Meek C. K., *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1937).

¹⁵ . Barth Chukwuezi, “Ikenga Object among the Uzo-Uwani Igbo and some Manifestations of Belief”, in *Ikoru*, Vol. VI, No. 2, (July 1985), 30.

¹⁶ . John Boston, *Ikenga Figures among the north-west Igbo and the Igala*, (Lagos: Federal Department of Antiquities, Nigeria, 1977), quoted in A. E. Afigbo, *Ikenga: The State of Our Knowledge*, 5.

¹⁷ . John Boston, *Ikenga Figures among the north-west Igbo and the Igala*, (Lagos: Federal Department of Antiquities, Nigeria, 1977), 87.

¹⁸ . Ilogu E., “The problem of Christian Ethics among the Igbo of Nigeria,” *Ikenga*, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2, 1975.

¹⁹ . Barth Chukwuezi, “Ikenga Object among the Uzo-Uwani Igbo and some Manifestations of Belief”, in *Ikoru*, Vol. VI, No. 2, (July 1985), 34.

²⁰ . Chike Aniakor, “Ikenga Art and Igbo Cosmos”, *Ikoru*, Vol. V, Numbers 1 & 2, (July), 1984, 63.

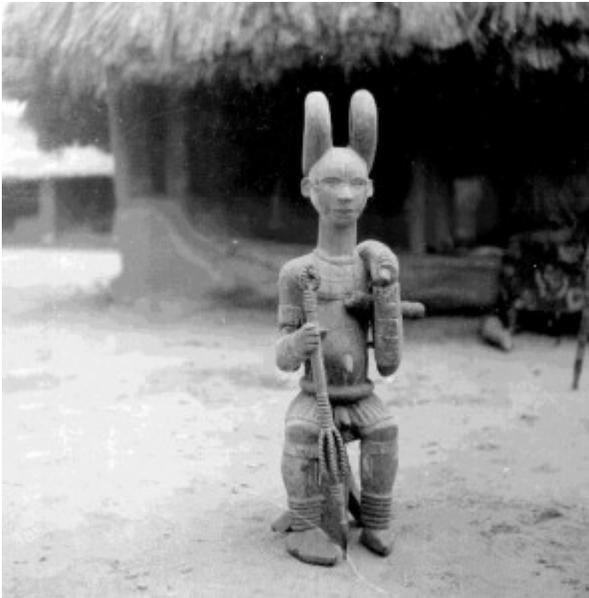
²¹ . Chike Aniakor, “Ikenga Art and Igbo Cosmos”, *Ikoru*, 64.

²² . A. E. Afigbo, *Ikenga: The State of Our Knowledge*, 8.

²³ . A. E. Afigbo, *Ikenga: The State of Our Knowledge*, 9.

²⁴ . Basil Davidson, *The Africans: An entry to a cultural History*, (London: Longmans, 1969), 95.

Ikenga Images from G. I. Jones, *Photographic Archive Southeastern Nigerian Art and Culture*.



This *Ikenga* depicts status and powers, looking at the staff in the right hand of the *Ikenga* figure the wrings on the two legs. It also has a kind of fly whisk, symbolizing affluence and authority. From Ikenga Achalla, Nri-Awka Igbo.



From the above *Ikenga* images here, one can see that the one in the centre has a weapon on the right hand and a severed head on the left, depicting strength and power. The three are from Nimo, Nri-Awka Igbo.



This *Ikenga* symbolizes authority and affluence. It is having a matchet on the right hand and an ivory tusk on the left. It is also wearing an ivory rings on its two legs symbolizing affluence and title and leadership. It was got from Nri-Awka Igbo, the putative spiritual centre of Igbo the Igbo.

The Ikenga figure below, is ram-headed with a set of horns, bears machet on the right hand, and severed human head on the left. It depicts victory and represents a warrior's cult of the right hand in Igbo culture.

