



# Hermeneutics of Ikenga and its Significance in Igbo Culture

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## Abstract

*The indigenous Igbo of the South-Eastern Nigeria, possess a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in symbolic representations. This is reflected in the abundance of sacred objects that permeate Igbo culture, encapsulating their worldview. While each household has numerous sacred objects, their significance varies. The most universally significant of these objects, and the one accorded the highest status along with the Ofo, is the Ikenga. This study's hermeneutic approach seeks to answer the questions: What is Ikenga? What is the psychic and cultural significance of Ikenga? What function does it perform in Igbo culture? To do this, it extensively explores the Ikenga symbol and its place in Igbo cosmology. The study digs into the meaning, types, structures, consecration, ritual practices, and functions of Ikenga and significance within Igbo culture, thereby enhancing our understanding of this cultural artifact. In doing this, the study discovers that the Ikenga symbol holds a profound significance within Igbo culture. This manifests in its esteemed status in the cosmology and worldview of the people. It is indispensable to every household, serving as the foremost deity sought by young men at the commencement of their careers and as a source of good fortune in all their endeavours. The Ikenga epitomizes a man's physical strength, which is intrinsically linked to his future success (Arinze, 1970). As Metuh (1981) notes, "As a deity whose role is very similar to that of chi (personal god), it symbolizes the strength of a man's right hand, hence a man's right hand is sometimes referred to as Aka Ikenga" (p. 70). The study concludes by categorically affirming that the Ikenga holds substantial importance for the ancient Igbo, regarded as sacred and uniquely significant to individuals.*

**Keywords:** Ikenga, Igbo Culture, Hermeneutics.

## INTRODUCTION

Culture is particularly significant in societies rich in tradition and symbolism, such as the Igbo community in Nigeria, where culture offers the context for interpreting social and economic phenomena (Ndubuisi, 2024). Culture, defined as a complex system incorporating knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, morals, customs, and various other abilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society, plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities and behaviours (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, cited in Ndubuisi, 2024). It not only provides a framework for guiding human behaviour in social interactions but also establishes the norms and values that govern communal life (Utami, Ahmad, & Wahyuni, 2023).

In this context, the concept of "Ikenga" stands out as a vital symbol representing strength, bravery, and individual achievement, especially in entrepreneurship and personal accomplishment. As discussed by Olutayo (1999) and corroborated by Ukaegbu (2005), Ikenga transcends its physical manifestation as a wooden carving given to a young boy during his transition to adulthood, embodying a profound philosophical symbol of inner strength and determination. Onebunne (2021), referencing Achebe (1964) in "Arrow of God," elucidates that Ikenga celebrates personal achievements and signifies an individual's commitment to their community,

making it essential for comprehending the social and cultural dynamics of Igbo society. Ikenga epitomizes a man's prowess and accomplishments, symbolizing resilience, entrepreneurial spirit, and communal dedication. While not a deity, it is considered a man's chi, often embodying his destiny and playing a crucial role in realizing his aspirations (Onebunne, 2021).

It is important to note, however, that Ikenga is not an exclusively Igbo symbol (Okere, N.D). Various Southern Nigerian communities have distinct interpretations of individual personality components, yet all concur that these aspects can be influenced through ritual and personal effort. Variants of Ikenga exist among the Ijaw, Ishan, Isoko, Urhobo, and Edo peoples (Okere, N.D). Among the Isoko, personal shrine images are categorized as Oma, representing the "spirit double"; Obo, symbolizing the right hand and personal endeavour; and Ivri, denoting personal determination. In Urhobo regions, it is also termed Ivri, while in Edo areas, it is referred to as Ikegobo (Okere, N.D). Despite its broader presence, evidence suggests that the Igbo have developed the most sophisticated concept, iconic forms, and range of functions for the symbol (Jeffreys, 1954).

Thus, this study adopts a hermeneutical approach to critically interpret and comprehensively examine Ikenga as an Igbo symbol and cultural significance. It explores the meaning,

types, structures, consecration, and ritual practices of Ikenga and its functions and significance within Igbo culture, thereby enhancing our understanding of this cultural artefact.

### A HERMENEUTICS OF IKENGA

#### What is an Ikenga?

The term “Ikenga” translates literally to “a place of strength”(Umeh, 1997). Astrologically, it is governed by the planet Mars and associated with the sacred number 3 (Umeh, 1997). Typically crafted as a wooden carving from the sacred Orji or Ogirisi tree, Ikenga embodies an individual’s Chi (personal god), Ndichie (ancestors), Aka Ikenga (right hand), Ike (power), and spiritual activation through prayer and sacrifice (Okere, N.D). Although predominantly owned and maintained by men, women of high reputation and integrity in society occasionally possess it.

Ikenga is one of the most prominent symbols of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, recognized as a significant cultural artefact (Umeh, 1997). It is regarded as a priceless possession for an Igbo man, often featuring distinctive artistic and symbolic attributes carved from wood. It is featured in the Igbo mythology. It is associated with the spirit of the personal god, Chi which is the link to the supreme god Chukwuokike (Anibeze, 2019). and fable as a fearless warrior (1983). According to Ndi Ichie Akwa mythology and folklore, Ikenga, the son of Ngwu, was a formidable warrior and wrestler renowned for his ability to fly between Iroko trees. He earned the title Ogba-aka ari Oji (meaning: climber of Iroko tree without aid). Ikenga led the Nkwo nation in a legendary sea battle against the Edo and Ododo warriors, who were aided by mermaids and rode on sharks and crocodiles. The Edo herbalists could conjure large stones to destroy Nkwo buildings. Ikenga and his warriors used green foliage as camouflage, appearing as floating bushes until they attacked (Nwosu, 1983, cited in Azuonye, 1987).

Despite intense fighting and significant casualties on both sides, Ikenga repelled the enemy’s assault on his father’s palace. The battle’s climax saw Ikenga confront the monstrous Ajikwuakpuisi, a four-eyed, six-horned beast. The monster’s fearsome shrieks caused an earthquake, and it attacked Ikenga with a corrosive mixture of excrement and urine. Ikenga evaded the attacks using his shield and acrobatic skills, eventually leaping onto the monster’s horns. In a final, titanic struggle, Ikenga broke the beast’s neck, leading to its death. The Edo and Ododo warriors, stunned by Ikenga’s victory, retreated in disarray (Nwosu, 1983, cited in Azuonye, 1987).

More than any other traditional symbol, Ikenga remains integral to contemporary Igbo life. In communities where socio-cultural changes have not deeply penetrated, the beliefs and cult practices associated with Ikenga continue to hold significant value. The annual festival dedicated to Ikenga is notably the most remarkable of these ritual activities. Moreover, in modern Igbo society, the use of the Ikenga symbol by individuals, institutions, and groups, though

not primarily as a cult object, evokes rich and nostalgic associations (Ejizu, 1991).

Structurally, Ikenga sculptures, despite their profound cultural significance as symbols of power and strength, are often distinguished by intricate designs and unique patterns that enhance the object’s natural form (Ndubuisi, 2024). These distinctive and captivating motifs have historically contributed to defining the social structure of various Igbo communities before the colonial era in Nigeria, often without conforming to a specific pattern, unlike contemporary practices (Ndubuisi, 2024). The Ikenga is typically depicted as a carved wooden figure with a ram’s head, two horns, a machete in the right hand, and a human head in the left, symbolizing strength. Onwuejeogwu (1972) encapsulated the significance of these symbolic elements as follows:

The two tram horns mean that the owner of the Ikenga must go ahead in his business with the stubbornness of a ram. The knife in his right hand means that he must cut down any obstacle on the way and the skull in the left hand means that he must always take the lead to succeed (92).

This representation signifies that a man’s power is rooted in his intellect, thoughts, and ideas, analogous to how a ram’s strength is centred on its head (Ejizu, 1991). However, unlike a ram, a man utilizes his right hand to bring his plans to fruition. While age is highly esteemed and respected among the Igbo, individual achievements attained through personal entrepreneurial efforts garner substantial admiration (Ejizu, 1991). Ndubuisi (2024), echoing the views of Onwuejeogwu (1972) and Ejizu (1991), concurs with this interpretation, noting:

The emblematic Ikenga sculpture consists of a human figure holding a machete in its right hand and a human head in its left hand, both adorned with carved ram’s head horns, exuding a fierce expression. The significance of the ram’s horns lies in their reflection of the strength and determination displayed by rams when they engage in head-to-head combat, signifying the willpower required to overcome life’s challenges. The incorporation of a ram within the Ikenga symbol is intrinsically linked to the resilient determination of an Igbo man to attain greatness despite encountering adversities, obstacles, and economic challenges (85).

Ndubuisi (2024) further elucidates that the anthropomorphic representation of Ikenga is depicted as a sculpture of a man dedicated to advancing both his family and community. The knife, characterized by its wedged blade, symbolizes the necessary force to overcome obstacles. Historically, some Igbo communities engaged in headhunting, preserving the heads of their adversaries to absorb their strength (Ndubuisi, 2024). The human head held in the left hand of the figure serves as a reminder of the rewards for one’s actions and the dominance over opponents.

Upon the owner's death, the personal Ikenga is ceremonially split into two and destroyed during the funerary rites, signifying that the spiritual entity has completed its role in aiding the devotee's successful life on earth (Ejizu, 1991). If an individual experiences persistent misfortunes and failures despite continuous efforts, they might choose to suspend their Ikenga or, as a last resort, burn it as a punishment for its perceived non-performance (Ejizu, 1991). Individual accomplishments and personal achievements are attributed to one's Ikenga rather than inherited traits or external factors, as described by Boston (1977). In the Igbo tradition, when a man succeeds in significant endeavours, he makes sacrifices to his Ikenga in gratitude. The Ikenga is associated with an individual's personal god (Chi or Onye-Uwa), which guides and determines the person's life from birth to death. The Okuku-Onye-Uwa ceremony is the female equivalent of the Ikenga ritual, conducted during a man's major life successes (Oguagha, 1989).

In summary, the concept of Ikenga reflects the Igbo belief in an open society where talent drives enterprise, enterprise leads to accomplishment, accomplishment results in traditional recognition, and talent is the motivating force. This competitive, self-achievement-driven ethos is deeply embedded in Igbo society and symbolized by the Ikenga (Ndubuisi, 2024). Therefore, in assessing an individual's worth in Igbo society, their achievements are considered more important than their lineage. Having outlined the essence of the Ikenga symbol, the next step is an in-depth examination of the aesthetics and structure of the Ikenga.

### Structure of Ikenga

An Ikenga figure is typically characterized by holding a knife or machete in its right hand and a human head in its left hand, with two curled horns adorning it. While this conception of Ikenga as an ideal and overarching symbol of success is a widespread and deeply held belief among the Igbo people, the Ikenga figure exhibits considerable variation in size and shape (Ejizu, 1991). Examples of these variations include a cylindrical human-ram face with two horns or a ram face with horns and facial markings. These unique designs and patterns embedded in the sculptures convey profound cultural and social meanings, and although artists might exercise some creative freedom, they generally adhere to established norms and traditions (Ejizu, 1991). In this context, Ejizu categorizes the structural design of the Ikenga into two specific forms: loose material representations and carved representations.

a) **Loose Material Representations:** In this form, the right arm from the elbow is commonly used as a symbol for Ikenga. Among the Igbo, the right arm, which an individual uses to navigate through challenges, is highly regarded as a positive, active, and powerful part of the body. Consequently, it signifies not only Ikenga but also other important indigenous symbols like Ofo. For the indigenous Igbo, the right arm (rather than just the hand)

represents a man's physical strength and personal worth. This distinction, though subtle, is important to correct the misconception that Ikenga is a cult dedicated to the right hand (Onwuejeogwu, 1972, cited in Ejizu, 1991). Other elements used as loose material representations of the symbol include live branches of a local tree called Oha, planted as part of the commissioning ceremony of new symbol objects. Additionally, pieces of "fine stone" placed at the threshold of each family also serve as the symbol. Thus, in some parts of Igboland, Ikenga exists simply as plain shrines (Ejizu, 1991).

b) **Carved Representations:** Carved representations are considered the standard form of Ikenga and can be divided into two categories: Simplified and Elaborately Sculptured forms.

The Simplified forms are easily portable and typically included in the travel kits of itinerant ritual experts, such as diviners, medicine practitioners, and other craftspeople. They may also be kept by young boys preparing to navigate the challenging path to societal achievement and distinction. These carvings are usually small, averaging three to six inches in height and about two inches in diameter, each featuring a flat wooden base and a pair of horns.

In contrast, the Elaborately Sculptured forms are generally large, ranging from one to six feet in height, and are adorned with various artistic designs. These forms can be further divided into significant variations. The first major sub-division is between the "abstract and highly stylized" type and the "less abstract and more humanistic" type (J.S. Boston, 1977; Ejizu, 1991). Although both types are horned figures, they differ mainly in the body of the carved object. The abstract type often features a cylindrical or partially reproduced human figure (with only a head and legs), resembling a conventionalized stool.

The second group, as its name suggests, is characterized by prominent human features. Typically, these carvings depict a male figure with legs, hands, and other body parts up to the head. The level of detail and complexity in these carvings depends on the carver's expertise and the client's status. This group can be further classified: some figures have faces resembling the classic, white-faced Igbo maiden spirit masks, while others feature semi-animal appearances with scarification (ichi) marks and an expression of ferocity. Further distinctions within the carved representations include variations between standing and seated Ikenga objects, as well as between those with curved horns and those with uncurved horns. Seated forms with scarification marks are usually symbols of high status, intended for men who have gained popular recognition by achieving the prestigious and costly Ozo title ranks.

Generally, all groups of the more humanistic Ikenga type

carry some objects in their hands. The commonest objects are a matchet in the right hand and a skull in the left. Both are conventional symbols of achievement among the indigenous Igbo. Other items that could be carried by the Ikenga symbol include a carved tusk on the left and an iron staff known as *nguagiliga* or *alo*. The two are part of the regalia of the Ozo titled man. With a grasp of the varied structures of the ikenga, it becomes easier to understand the next discourse, which is an examination of the types of ikenga obtainable in Igbo society.

### Types of Ikenga

Numerous researchers have identified different types of Ikenga in Igbo land, each proposing varying classifications. According to Jeffreys (1954), there are three types of Ikenga: *ikengamadu* (human), *ikengaalusi* (spirit), and *ntu aga* (divination objects). Bantor (1988) categorizes these as warrior Ikenga, community Ikenga, and title holder Ikenga. Ejizu (1991) classifies Ikenga based on their functions into private or individual-owned Ikenga, group or public Ikenga, and those used as cult symbols or for ceremonial displays. Nwaezeigwe (2023) simplifies the classification into individual and collective Ikenga. Finally, Ndubuisi (2024) identifies three categories: individual, community, and title holder Ikenga. This paper adopts the simplified approach of Ndubuisi (2024) and asserts that although the names and structures of Ikenga may vary across different Igbo sub-regions, their primary functions remain consistent. Thus, the paper focuses on the three major types of Ikenga: individual, community, and title holder Ikenga.

### Individual Ikenga (Ikengamadu)

This type of Ikenga is personally owned by individuals, with each man possessing his own Ikenga, which ceases to exist upon his death (Ndubuisi, 2024). The Ikenga is believed to influence a man's activities and life goals, with successes attributed to its power. In the event of repeated setbacks, the Ikenga may be reconsecrated due to perceived inefficiency or blamed for unfavourable circumstances. The Igbo hold that a man's god, represented by his Ikenga, protects him from misfortune, with accidents or adversaries seen as signs of inadequate protection by the Ikenga. Persistent struggles without success are also attributed to the inactivity of the Ikenga. Among the Igbo, a man's success based on his abilities is highly esteemed, as his Ikenga provides the impetus for a strong negotiating position (Jeffreys, 1954 cited in Ndubuisi, 2024). Even natural strength and vigour are credited to the strength of one's Ikenga. Similarly, if a less physically robust man prevails over a stronger individual or excels in generating wealth, the credit goes to his Ikenga rather than his physical attributes (Ndubuisi, 2024).

The warrior Ikenga is a subtype of the individual Ikenga (Anibeze, 2019). It corresponds to the stage in life when men are expected to demonstrate their military prowess and is typically owned by younger members of the age grade. This Ikenga depicts the ideal young man: robust, wearing

the warrior's grass skirt, and holding a knife and a severed human head. Such poses were traditionally seen in warrior groups during dances (Bantor, 1988). Structurally, the warrior Ikenga depicts a well-developed human figure with horns and a fierce expression, seated on a stool, and holding objects in both hands. The right hand holds a knife with a pronounced handle and a slightly curved blade, while the left hand holds a tusk or more commonly, a severed human head with bulging eyes, nose, and mouth (Bantor, 1988).

### Community Ikenga (Ikengaoha)

This type of Ikenga is collectively owned by a village or community, symbolizing the collective interests and progress of the community. Unlike individual Ikenga, which represent personal achievements and prestige, community Ikenga figures embody group accomplishments and the continuity between the individual and society (Bantor, 1988). These objects are primarily used for ceremonial displays and are typically elaborately and stylistically carved, and decorated in bright and joyful colours (Ejizu, 1991). They are akin to the display figures known as "Ugo n'achomma" (the eagle seeks out beauty) and exhibit significant artistic creativity (Ejizu, 1991).

As expected, community Ikenga figures are generally large and are usually kept in a communal shrine or by the community leader. Unlike personal Ikenga, which ceases to exist upon the owner's death, community Ikenga endures as long as the community itself. Isiani et al. (2021) note that communal Ikenga is typically maintained by a group of peers within a community. While individual Ikenga signifies the bearer's achievements and status in their chosen profession, communal Ikenga represents the success of the entire community in collective endeavours. Whether related to war, fishing, farming, or other shared activities, communal Ikenga testifies to the continuity of specific professions within the community. The themes depicted in communal Ikenga reflect the distinctive pursuits and identity of the community. The responsibility for overseeing communal Ikenga figures is shared among community members, particularly those engaged in the same profession.

### Title Holder Ikenga (Ikenga Ozo)

A titleholder Ikenga is emblematic of leadership and communal responsibilities, representing the authority and achievements of an individual who holds a significant title within the community, such as a *Nzeh* or *Ozo*. While both the individual Ikenga and the titleholder Ikenga share the fundamental essence of Ikenga symbolism, the former represents the personal aspirations and accomplishments of an individual, serving as a spiritual companion that embodies personal success and strength. In contrast, the titleholder Ikenga shifts the focus to leadership and communal responsibilities, symbolizing the authority and achievements of a titleholder within the community (Ndubuisi, 2024).

The Ozo title, one of the highest ranks in the title system, is symbolized by the three-legged *Awka* stool, which signifies

power and status. The staff that accompanies the titleholder is a complex hierarchical symbol, evolving from a simple wooden staff to a rod of forged iron adorned with brass rings. The tusk, used as a trumpet and carried in the left hand, signifies strength and authority, often represented by the elephant. Young boys and girls would often carry the stool and tusk of high-ranking individuals, even if they do not possess a staff themselves (Ndubuisi, 2024).

### The Consecration and Commissioning of Ikenga

Ikenga requires consecration before it can be used. Typically, this consecration is conducted in the presence of one's kinsmen or agemates by the lineage head (Okere, N.D). Offerings such as yam, cock, wine, kolanuts, and alligator pepper are sacrificed during the ceremony. The complexity of the consecration varies based on the financial capacity of the owner, with more elaborate rituals being performed by those who can afford it. A devoted owner will feed his Ikenga daily with kola nuts and wine, and periodically, especially before important undertakings, he will offer the sacrificial blood of a cock or ram to invoke the spirit's assistance. After achieving success, the owner offers thanksgiving to his Ikenga, attributing his success to the support of his personal Chi, represented by Ikenga, and his kinsmen (Okere, N.D).

According to Ejizu (1991), there are two distinct patterns for commissioning an Ikenga. In the first pattern, the father of a household is responsible for the commissioning. It is customary for a father to commission a small Ikenga, often horn-shaped, for each of his male children, or at least for his first son. In some regions, this is part of the child's naming ceremony (Iba Afa), while in others, it occurs during the adolescent initiation ceremony into the masquerade society (Ima Mud). This commissioning ritual is relatively simple and is performed by either the father or a male elder of the kindred. Holding the carved object in front of the family altar, the elder rubs it with white chalk (Nzu) and sprays it with chewed kola nut (oji) and alligator pepper (Ose Oji), invoking, "Ikenga - (name of the child) di ile, ka iduenwatan'ezin'uzo" (Ikenga of - be effective and lead the child successfully through all circumstances). The symbol is then placed with other household ritual objects in the family shrine, where it receives routine sacrificial offerings of food, drink, and animal blood (Ejizu, 1991).

The alternative pattern described is more prevalent, elaborate, and widely recognized in Igboland (Ejizu, 1991). In this pattern, the individual or group intended to possess the symbol actively participates in the various stages of the process. The circumstances leading to the request for the symbol object are diverse and contingent upon factors such as one's life situation, occupation, and socio-historical developments. It is generally assumed that the individual has achieved a certain level of success, either through a series of repeated accomplishments or a singular outstanding achievement (Ejizu, 1991). For instance, a skilled farmer, fisherman, hunter, medicine man, or carver who consistently

demonstrates success in their endeavours is often considered a suitable candidate for a personal Ikenga. Commissioning such a symbol often accompanies initiation into significant title grades.

It is the responsibility of the diviner to determine whether the spirit force (Ikenga) has ritually manifested itself in the person's life. In some instances, the diviner also decides on the visible forms the enshrining will take, selects the appropriate carver, and oversees the nature of the consecration ceremony (Imachalkenga). This pattern is typically observed in areas known for carved symbol types. In regions where erecting shrines or planting live 'Oha' tree branches are customary, the diviner is consulted to determine the timing of the commissioning exercise. The candidate has the choice to purchase a ready-made object or commission the carving of a new figure according to their specifications. The consecration ceremony is publicly conducted at the lineage Obi (the lineage elder's lounge), under the supervision of the head of the candidate's minimal lineage (Okpara).

The items required for the ceremony vary but typically include four good yam tubers, a cock, two gallons of palm wine, a bottle of gin, and four kolanuts. Male members of the lineage, as well as personal friends and age-mates of the candidate, attend the ceremony. The officiating elder offers kola nut and palm wine to ancestral and other patron spirits, specifically invoking the Ikenga spirit force and presenting offerings to it. The newly consecrated object is treated with phallic chalk (Afew), sprayed with chewed kolanut and alligator pepper, and incantations are made.

Subsequently, the cock is sacrificed, its blood sprayed on the new Ikenga figure and the household shrine and altar. Some feathers of the cock are affixed to the consecrated object. The yams are used to prepare foo-foo and the cock for soup, with a final offering of food and wine made to the Ikenga spirit force, ancestral, and other patron spirits before the meal is shared. The consecrated object is then placed beside the ancestral symbol (Okpensi) within the lineage shrine. Following the meal, the owner receives the Ikenga with joy from the elder and takes it home. Before storing it in his family altar, he sprays it with chewed kolanut and alligator pepper, urging it to go forth with vigour and strength: "Ikenga m puogupumba" (My Ikenga, go forth with power and bravery).

The commissioning process for the group Ikenga closely mirrors that of the individual counterpart. Typically conducted within the shrine of the earth-deity (Okwu Ala), which pertains to the maximal lineage, the ceremony is presided over by the priest of the deity (Isi-Ala/Eze-Ala). Additionally, an observed tradition among the Igbo involves commissioning the Ikenga symbol for the spirit force or deity known as Agwu. Agwu, characterized as a dynamic and ambivalent spiritual entity associated with knowledge, serves as the tutelary deity for craftspeople and professionals, notably diviners and medicine men, esteemed for their visionary abilities. Before a specific Agwu is deemed

deserving of an Ikenga object, it must have demonstrated its efficacy as a trusted ally and facilitator of success for the owner. Consequently, through the consecration of this specialized class of Ikenga symbol dedicated to the patron deity (Agwu), the practitioner gains the complete support of the spirit force, augmenting the efficacy of their practice.

In essence, irrespective of its structural form, a consecrated Ikenga functions simultaneously as a sacred artefact, a cultic object, and a ritual instrument (Ejizu, 1991). As a conduit to the sacred and metaphysical realm, it assumes a central role in religious worship and reverence. It forms an indispensable component of the intricate and dynamic relationship and communication between the owner or owners and the transcendent cosmic order, particularly the Ikenga cosmic force. The symbolic prominence of the Ikenga is matched by its multifaceted utilization within traditional Igbo ritual dynamics. Across all classes of the Ikenga symbol, the primary religious function involves prayer, as devotees utilize the visible figure as a medium of communication with the transcendent being it represents (Ejizu, 1991). Incantations are regularly recited over the physical object, and routine, as well as occasional ritual sacrifices, are offered to Ikenga, manifested through its visible form in the symbol, either to augment its power and operational efficacy or to express gratitude for its supportive role in previous endeavours (Ejizu, 1991).

### Rituals and Practices Associated with Ikenga

Regular religious observances involving Ikenga encompass the customary presentation of offerings such as kolanut, alligator pepper, food, and libations, alongside other sacred symbols housed within the family shrine. These acts form part of routine cultic practices, including the traditional morning prayer (Igo OfuUtutu) and various blessing rituals performed by the male elder (Ejizu, 1991). Alternatively, individuals may opt to make occasional special offerings to their Ikenga, such as a cock or a ram, on multiple occasions throughout the year. The underlying theme of these occasional acts of worship invariably revolves around the motif of either attained success or fervently anticipated prosperity, with the assumption of support from the spirit force.

Moreover, it is customary among traditional Igbo practitioners and skilled professionals, particularly itinerant diviners, medicine men, and carvers, to make specific pledges to their Ikenga when embarking on particular endeavours. These pledges may include offerings such as sacrificing a ram, acquiring a prestigious title, or entering into matrimony as a homage to the spirit force. Compliance with these pledges is promptly observed, as failure to fulfil one's commitment to Ikenga is believed to provoke the ire of unseen forces (Ejizu, 1991).

Expanding beyond individualized cultic practices, many Igbo communities designate one month of their liturgical calendar to honour Ikenga, known as OnwaIkenga (the month of Ikenga). While the precise timing of this observance

varies among localities, it typically aligns with the onset of harvest seasons. During this period, a traditional ritual week, comprising four days known as Izu-muo is reserved for the veneration of all categories of Ikenga. Owners of the symbol, along with professionals, skilled artisans, and individuals holding various title ranks within their households, ceremonially sacrifice at least a cock, often a ram, and host feasts for their relatives and associates in reverence to Ikenga (Ejizu, 1991).

### Functions of Ikenga in Igbo Culture

The functions of Ikenga in various aspects of Igbo life and culture stem from its profound symbolic meaning and intricate structural forms (Ejizu, 1991).

1) Communication Instrument: Ikenga serves as a medium to convey and reinforce the highly valued ideals of success and achievement, which are crucial for social recognition and distinction in Igbo society (Ejizu, 1991). Whether actively used in rituals or prominently displayed before the ancestral symbol (irundi-ichie) in a family lounge (Obi), Ikenga vividly represents the components of the Igbo ideal of a highly accomplished individual (Ejizu, 1991).

2) Connector: As a cosmic entity, Ikenga is believed to facilitate the support of one's spiritual double, known as Chi, along with other supersensible forces related to different aspects of human personality, such as Ukwuna-ije (the cosmic force of travelling), Ufa (the cosmic force of one's name and fame), and Ihu (the cosmic force of one's face). This coordinating function in the mythical realm acknowledged and validated through the commissioning and ownership of the physical Ikenga object, is essential to its role as a success-generating force (Ejizu, 1991).

3) Motivating Force: Ikenga acts as a powerful instrument that helps the indigenous Igbo mobilize their psychic and physical energies to harness their talents in the lifelong pursuit of success. It also fosters healthy competition among individuals and groups, a characteristic trait of the Igbo (Uchendu, 1965).

4) Introspective Instrument: Interaction with Ikenga regarding one's life progress highlights its role as a means of introspection. The Igbo recognize that leading a fulfilling life necessitates a continuous quest for self-improvement, applying insights gained from self-reflection. The Ikenga institution thus embodies the Igbo's contemplative and philosophical approach to life (Basden, 1966, cited in Ndubuisi, 2024). This philosophy emphasizes living a good life through self-reflection, ultimately contributing to communal well-being, as exemplified by the community Ikenga.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF IKENGA IN IGBO CULTURE.

A comprehensive analysis of the discourse reveals the profound significance of Ikenga in Igbo culture. Ikenga chiefly represents the Igbo spirit of adventure and enterprise (Nwaezeigwe, 2023). As a quintessential religious symbol

in traditional Igbo culture, Ikenga is rich in meaning and significance. Its meanings are derived from both its physical form and its abstract or ideological connotations (Turner, 1967, cited in Ejizu, 1991). The meanings that the Indigenous Igbo attribute to this ritual object provide a holistic view of the fundamental beliefs, ideas, and values that underpin the traditional cosmology around which individual and community life revolves (Ejizu, 1991). Given the prominent place of Ikenga in the Igbo worldview, its significance can be examined through both physical and metaphysical, or sociological and religious, lenses.

From a physical perspective, the importance of Ikenga in Igbo culture is expressed through the artistic features of its standard carved forms (Ejizu, 1991). It primarily symbolizes the Igbo spirit of determination, associated with good fortune, personal ability, warfare, and general success in life. Ideologically, it is connected to a man's right hand. Onwuejeogwu (1972) offers a fitting interpretation of the significance of these standard carved forms of the Ikenga, thus:

The two ram horns mean that the owner of the Ikenga must go ahead in his business with the stubbornness of a ram. The knife in his right hand means that he must cut down any obstacle on the way . . . Every Ikenga must be carved straight and rigid because straightness is the sign of exactitude and rigidity means perseverance (92)

In Igbo cosmology, Ikenga is intrinsically connected to the right arm (Ejizu, 1991). Afigbo (1986) aptly describes it as the "cult of the right hand with which a man hacks his way through the jungles of sweat and bitter experiences known as life." This connection stems from the belief that a man's fundamental strength resides in his right hand, which symbolizes positivity. The ability to effectively utilize this hand towards a specific goal positions an individual for success and recognition (Nwaezeigwe, 2023).

An Igbo man's right hand is considered the hand of accomplishment, as it is the primary agent of action in confronting and overcoming life's challenges. Ikenga symbolizes its owner's right hand, representing his potential for success and control over his destiny. It embodies his chi (personal god), ndichie (ancestors), and ike (power). Thus, the Ikenga becomes the essence of the individual's identity while also serving as a clear marker of his dedication to society and the broader environment. Ejizu (1991) succinctly summarizes the physical significance of Ikenga in Igbo culture and how it is expressed through the cultural perception of the right hand thus:

The full significance of this association is better appreciated when viewed against the background of the ecological environment, and mental and cultural orientations of the traditional Igbo. The people inhabit the rainforest zone of Africa and depend largely on a land and agriculture-based economy

that provides the context for defining status, success and achievement. Against that background, the right arm (commonly referred to as "the right arm of strength"), with which a person hacks his way through thick and thin, whether in hunting farming, trading, etc., understandably becomes highly significant and a subject of rich symbolic associations, as earlier explained (242).

From a metaphysical perspective, which encompasses the abstract significance of the Ikenga beyond its physical form, the Ikenga stands as a core religious symbol within Igbo society. It encapsulates multiple meanings related to various facets of experience, including mythical aspects, social relations, and individual life. Primarily, it represents the sacred and mythical realm and the fundamental relationship believed to exist between human beings and the supersensible order. For the indigenous Igbo, human fortunes and general well-being are significantly influenced by the quality of this vital relationship (Kalu, 1978, as cited in Ejizu, 1991).

Specifically, the physical ritual object known as Ikenga symbolizes a supersensible being of the same name. It manifests as a dynamic cosmic force intimately connected with success and achievement in various life pursuits, leading to enhanced status and distinction within one's society and offering the hope of a blissful afterlife as a glorified ancestor. This is the primary thrust of Ikenga symbolism, the central motif of its cult, and the principal theme of its iconographic adornments (Ejizu, 1991).

Furthermore, the Ikenga signifies the Igbo belief in reincarnation (Isinai et al., 2021). Unlike the *Ofo*, which is inherited by the eldest son upon the death of the family head, the Ikenga is individually owned and buried with its owner. This practice is rooted in the belief that the Ikenga guides the deceased into the next world, thus preventing its transfer to the next generation (Isinai et al., 2021). This means that the Ikenga is personal and non-transferable. Unlike the *Ofo* the eldest son of a family inherits at the demise of the paterfamilias (and continually inherited through generations) the ikenga is not inherited. Each person goes beyond with theirs.

Another cultural significance of the Ikenga lies in its role as a symbol of equality. Igbo society is founded on the principle of equality, rejecting class distinctions based on birthright (Ndubuisi, 2024). Known for its republican and democratic features, free social mobility, and competitive spirit, Igbo society believes that everyone has the potential to achieve the highest positions within the community, regardless of their birth. This egalitarian ethos expects individuals to contribute to communal well-being from a young age (Ndubuisi, 2024). Unlike the hereditary *Ofo*, the Ikenga is given to every male child, symbolizing that an individual's fate is in his own hands, regardless of his family position (Nwaezeigwe, 2023).

As a result, young men engage in continuous competition with their peers, with this competitive ethos extending from

peer groups to age-grade affiliations, and permeating family, clan, village, and town levels (Ndubuisi, 2024). In assessing an individual's standing in Igbo society, their achievements take precedence over their lineage. Consequently, the embodiment of individual accomplishment and personal triumphs is credited to the Ikenga rather than inherited traits or external circumstances (Boston, 1977). For those not privileged to inherit the authority associated with the *Ọfọ* or significant wealth from their fathers, the Ikenga serves as a potent ideological motivator (Nwaezeigwe, 2023).

Ikenga symbolizes attributes like honesty, strength, and power for the title holders, rather than moral virtues typically ascribed to it. It represents a deity whose function is to confer wealth and prosperity upon the family. The Ikenga institution reflects Igbo philosophy, emphasizing that an individual's success is intertwined with the community's overall well-being (Ndubuisi, 2024). Individuals express their aspirations through prayers and offerings to the Ikenga, articulating them earnestly and solemnly, and then taking proactive measures to realize their dreams. Through the outcomes of their endeavours, they gauge the potency and efficacy of their Ikenga (Ndubuisi, 2024).

In all, the profound significance of the Ikenga in Igbo culture is perhaps most vividly illustrated by Onebunne's (2021) reference to Chinua Achebe's novel, "Arrow of God." In this work, an altercation between two characters, Akukalia and Ebo, culminates in Akukalia insulting Ebo by breaking his Ikenga. Devastated by this act, Ebo retaliates by killing Akukalia with his gun. Despite the severity of Ebo's offence, the village elders find themselves unable to punish him. In Igbo society, the sanctity of an individual's Ikenga is inviolable; no one has the right to defame or destroy it under any circumstances. This tragic incident underscores the pivotal role of the Ikenga in Igbo cosmology.

### CONCLUSION

Upon reaching maturity, an Igbo male may ritually receive an Ikenga, which becomes a treasured possession to be revered throughout his life and an integral part of his identity (Onebunne, 2021). While men traditionally serve as the custodians of the Ikenga in Igbo culture, women may also possess this significant symbol, underscoring its importance across gender lines (Onebunne, 2021). This highlights the Ikenga's essential role in Igbo life.

As both a concept and an artefact, the Ikenga represents a captivating facet of indigenous Igbo culture. The intricate and stylistic iconographic designs of the carved forms showcase the people's aesthetic sensibility and artistic creativity. The Ikenga's profound symbolism and multifaceted functions make it one of the most significant cultural assets of the Igbo experience and life. It exemplifies a successful integration of aesthetics, conception, and cosmology achieved by the indigenous Igbo (Ejizu, 1991).

This study, which approached the Ikenga object hermeneutically, exploring its meanings, myths, structure,

types, functions, and significance in Igbo culture, reveals its profound richness. Although the symbol of the Ikenga may face erosion in modern Igbo society due to rapid global changes, its role as a driving force that inspires and sustains the industrious and entrepreneurial spirit of the Igbo people remains vibrant and active. Gaining insight into Ikenga art and symbolism is crucial for understanding the essence of Igbo identity and worldview. The rituals of commissioning a new Ikenga and the annual festival are pivotal in comprehending how the Igbo people celebrate achievements and harness mental and physical energies to embody a profoundly important and central aspect of their cultural experience (Ejizu, 1991).

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**Citation:** Dr. Ratzinger E. E. Nwobodo, "Hermeneutics of Ikenga and its Significance in Igbo Culture", *Universal Library of Arts and Humanities*, 2024; 1(3): 16-24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulahu.2024.0103003>.

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