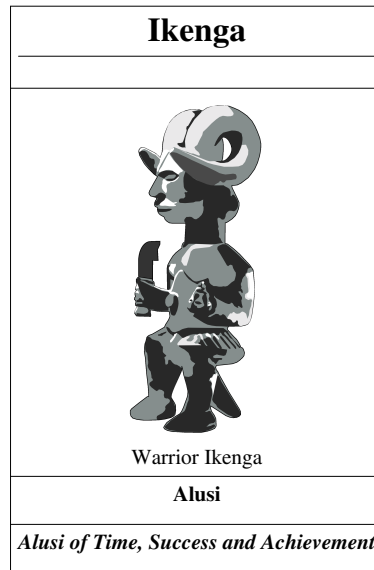


# Ikenga



**Ikenga** (Igbo literal meaning "place of strength") is a horned Alusi (deity) found among the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria. It is one of the most popular symbols of the Igbo people, and the most common cultural artifact. Astrologically, Ikenga's governing planet is Mars<sup>[1]</sup> and its sacred number is 3.<sup>[2]</sup> Ikenga is mostly maintained, kept or owned by men and occasionally by women of high reputation and integrity in the society. It comprises someone's *Chi* (personal god), his *Ndichie* (ancestors), *aka Ikenga* (right hand), *ike* (power) as well as spiritual activation through prayer and sacrifice.<sup>[3]</sup>

Ikenga is specially found among the Northern Igbos of Anambra, Enugu, Delta and some parts of Kogi State. However, its not an exclusively Igbo symbol. The various peoples of Southern Nigeria have slightly different notions of the components of an individual personality, but all agree that these various aspects can only be affected through ritual and personal effort. Some variants of it are found in Ijaw, Ishan, Isoko, Urhobo and Edo areas. Among the Isoko people, there are three types of personal shrine images: *Oma*, which represents the "spirit double" that resides in the other world; *Obo* which symbolizes the right hand and personal endeavor and the *Ivri* which stands for personal determination. In the Urhobo areas it is also regarded as *Ivri* and in the Edo areas its called *Ikegobo*.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Functions of Ikenga

### God of Achievement

Ikenga is a personal god of human endeavor, achievement, success, and victory. Ikenga is grounded in the belief that the power for a man to accomplish things is in his right hand.<sup>[4]</sup> It also governs over industry, farming, and blacksmithing, and is celebrated every year with an annual Ikenga festival.<sup>[5]</sup> It is believed by its owners to bring wealth and fortune as well as protection.

### God of Time

Two-faced Ikenga is the oldest concept of Ikenga in Igboland. It is a two-faced god, with one face looking at the old year while one face looks at the new year. This is the basis of the oldest and most ancient Igbo calendar.<sup>[6]</sup> As a god of beginnings, it has the praise name of *Ikenga owa ota*.

## Consecration of Ikenga

Ikenga requires consecration before usage. Normally, an Ikenga is consecrated in the presence of one's kinsmen or agemates by lineage head. Offerings of things like yam, cock, wine, kola nuts and alligator pepper are sacrificed to it. Consecrations are often more elaborate and occasionally less depending on the financial strength of the owner. If the owner is devoted, he feeds his Ikenga on a daily basis with Kola and wine and periodically, especially before an important undertaking, he offers sacrificial blood of a cock or ram to induce the spirit to help him succeed. Afterward, the owner also offers thanksgiving to his Ikenga for making him to achieve success. Success as believed, solely depends on their personal Chi, represented by Ikenga and the support of kinsmen.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Types of Ikenga

According to M.D.W Jeffreys, there are three types of Ikenga: *ikenga madu* (human), *ikenga alusi* (spirit), and *ntu aga* (divination objects). The first is a fully developed human figure with horns, seated on a stool. The second is a cylinder with horns. The divination objects are small and simple and come in different shapes.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Warrior Ikenga

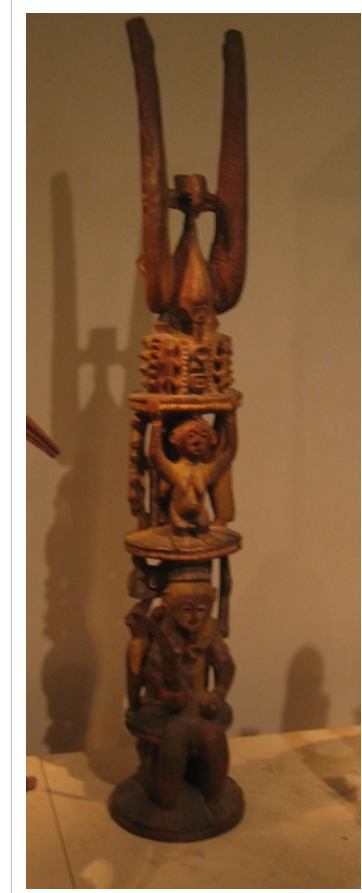
The most famous type of ikenga is probably the "warrior," depicting a well-developed human figure with horns and a fierce expression. It is seated on a stool, holding objects in both hands. The right hand holds a knife with a pronounced handle and a slightly curved blade, the left hand a tusk or more often, a severed human head with eyes, nose, and mouth bulging out of the concave face.<sup>[7]</sup> The warrior ikenga corresponds to the stage in life when men are expected to demonstrate their military prowess. Owned by many of the younger members of the age grade, it depicts the ideal young man: robust, wearing the warrior's grass skirt, and holding a knife and a severed human head. This pose used to be seen in warrior groups when they performed dances.<sup>[8]</sup>

The knife is always held in the right hand, called *aka ikenga* (the ikenga hand), and the ikenga is also called a shrine to the right hand. In recent times the overt violent element of the severed head and knife has been replaced by metaphorical way as symbols of aggression. The most characteristic of all the iconographic elements of the ikenga, the horns (*opi*), also carries this lli, also carries this connotation. The Igbo proverb says, "The ram goes into a fight head first" (*Ebuno ji ibi éjé ogu*); that is, one must plunge into a venture in order to succeed.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Community Ikenga

A second major ikenga type, an elaboration of the warrior form, has a superstructure with human or animal images, or both. The seated figure often displays a tusk in the left hand and a staff in the right. In many examples, ichi marks are represented on the face. Some of these figures, especially the very large ones, often are more than a meter high, do not belong to an individual but to an age set or a lineage segment.<sup>[9]</sup> These community Ikenga figures stand for group rather than individual achievements and prestige, and demonstrate continuity between the individual and society.<sup>[10]</sup> They are related to the display figures known as *ogonachomma* ("the eagle seeks out beauty") and display a great deal of artistic inventiveness.

In the simpler examples of this group, the superstructure on a disk base supports animal figures. Other large Ikenga have very intricate superstructures consisting of two horns that circle the sides of the head and continue upward to form another circle terminating in snake heads. Pointed protrusions occur on the lower part of the horns. Above the head are four ram heads and one or more leopards at the top.<sup>[9]</sup> The motifs on the community Ikenga tend to have complex head dress signifying collective ownership. The motifs also depicts what the community is known for, for instance whether they are known as warriors, hunters, traders or predominantly farmers. During the annual festival, all male born during the previous year are brought before the community Ikenga and thus are validated as community numbers.<sup>[3]</sup>



Wooden carving of Ikenga

## Titleholder's Ikenga

The elaborate ikenga figures, especially those with superstructures, seem to correspond to the more advanced, title-taking stages in a man's life. The three-legged stool, known as the Awka stool, was reserved for one of the highest rank of the title system, the *ozo* title. The staff indicates authority, and comes in a complex hierarchy, from a simple wooden one to a rod of forged iron with brass rings. The most common type represented in ikenga is the *nsuagilign*, distinguished by openwork on the shaft. The tusk, *okike*, held in the left hand, is used as a trumpet, *odu*. It alludes to the elephant, a widespread symbol for power and leadership. A stool and tusk, though not a staff, were often carried for persons of high title by a young boy or a girl.

Most of the elaborate ikenga bear the ichi scarification pattern, consisting of parallel vertical lines on the forehead and temples. Scarification was a professional specialization of experts from the Awka community. The ichi marks were used to distinguish the highest-ranking members of the title societies, as well as sons and daughters of the nobility. A superstructure usually also consists of references to animals. One prominent animal used on the titleholder ikenga figures is the leopard, *agu*, the king of the animals and an emblem of the political authority of a titled man. The horns of the ram or other animals, found on all ikenga figures, signify power and aggression. Many elaborate examples display a whole figure of a ram, or at least a full head. Snakes, birds, and turtles may also be included on the ikenga.

Numerous ikenga, both the warrior and the titled person's types, 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. Besides being associated with Ikenga, the number three is also associated with males throughout West Africa. These projections may stand for *nzu*, cone-shaped pieces of chalk used in rituals. This native 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.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Mythology and Fables Featuring Ikenga

According to *Ndi Ichie Akwa Mythology and Folklore Origins of the Igbos*, Ikenga was the son of Ngwu, and was a bold warrior and fantastic wrestler. He was reputed with the ability of flying from one Iroko tree to another. He was the first living man in living memory to earn the title *Ogba Aka Ele Oje* which meant a climber of ikoro tree without the aid of strings. Ikenga led the Nkwo nation in the first and famous river of sea battle ever undertaken by any nation in the Oji country. Mermaids came to fight for the Edo people and many Ododo warriors rode on the backs of mammoth sharks and crocodiles. Edo herbalists had the power to conjure large stones to fly and ram on the buildings of the Nkwo nations to destruction. The war was intense and lasted one month. For the first time, the use of green foliage camouflage was introduced by Ikenga and his warriors so that they appeared as floating bushes on the seas, until they came close enough on their targets to rout the Edo and Ododo enemies.

Many of the will-o-wisps sent by Edo country were destroyed. When the Edo and Odo warriors saw that they were being defeated and were forced to retreat back to their territories they made a final desperate lunge to grab the only Ndi Ichi Akwa in Ngwu's possession. Ikenga rallied around his father's palace to repulse Ododo and Edo stalwarts. Many casualties were sustained by both sides until Ikenga came face to face with the four eyed monster called *Ajikwu akpu isi* who had six horns.

*Ajikwu akpu isi* belated out his fearsome shriek which thundered through the jungle in repeated echos that the verdure quivered in ominous pulses. The monster roused his fierce rage by scampering round his position as a means of revving up his momentum and sharpening a deadly attacking pulse. The vibrations burgeoned into a nauseating earthquake in the area. He mixed his excrement with urine and splashed the corrosive mixture in Ikenga's direction. Ikenga used his *ekpeke* shield and in a series of athletic diving and feigning withered the ferocious onslaught. In the same split second however *Ajikwu akpu isi* had charged towards Ikenga as he snorted and roared. Ikenga sprang onto an overhead tree branch like a huge cat and somersaulted round it to suspend atop on his hands like an acrobatic gymnast.

As *Ajikwu akpu isi* thundered underneath in his charge, but missed Ikenga's backside by centimeters, Ikenga flung himself on the top horns of the monster. The two combatants hurtled through jungle flora and fauna in mortal battle. Ikenga mustered the last gram of strength in a titanic muscle flex as he twisted the neck of the beast which broke with such nerve shattering crack. There were few groans and whimperings followed by death thrubs and ghostly silence pervaded the vast jungle. The Edo and Ododo warriors were stupefied by the incredible spectacle and in a momentary recovery they retreated in disarray.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Proverbs and Prayers Associated with Ikenga

- "Ikenga chim nyelum, taa oji" (Ikenga, gift of my chi, participate in the offering)
- "Ikengam kwalu otu, njee mge ona mmuo" (As long as my Ikenga is active I can wrestle in the land of the dead)
- "Ikenga adigh ile, azilaa ya nku" (An Ikenga that is inactive, cut it for firewood)<sup>[10]</sup>

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# Article Sources and Contributors

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