

## RITUAL ENACTMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT: *IKENGA* SYMBOL IN IGBOLAND

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In the following article I shall be discussing a prominent symbol known as *Ikenga* which the Igbo<sup>1</sup> people of Nigeria associate with achievement both individual and group. Although there are records of its existence also among the neighbouring groups of Edo, Igala and Bakuba (Odita 1973: 75-82), available evidence shows that the Igbo possess the most developed concept, iconic forms and range of functions of the symbol (Jeffreys 1954: 25-40). *Ikenga* is an evocative object often carved in wood with a unique artistic and symbolic appeal. More than any other core traditional symbol, it remains very much a factor of contemporary Igbo life. In some communities where the impact of socio-cultural change has not been deeply felt, people continue to cherish the important beliefs and cult practices connected with the symbol. The annual festival of *Ikenga* is the most impressive of such ritual activities. In another light, the vogue use of the symbol by individuals, institutions and other groups in present-day Igbo society, even if no longer so much as a cult object, carries rich and nostalgic associations.

I shall endeavour to show in this paper that a good grasp of *Ikenga* art and symbolism is central in penetrating the depths of Igbo personality and cosmos. Both the ceremony of commissioning a new object and the annual festival are essential for understanding how the indigenous Igbo ritualise achievement as well as mobilise their psychic and physical energies in order to concretely realise a highly significant and dominant motif of their cultural experience. The two contexts clearly emphasize the fundamental dual aspect of *Ikenga* as a success-celebrating and a success-generating nature force. I plan to set the stage for discussing these issues by giving first some ethnographic details of the symbol, including its typology and provenance in Igbo culture area, as well as a brief review of the level of studies already carried out.

### *Typology of Ikenga Art Forms*

The indigenous Igbo idea and ideal of overall success in life, rather than a limited and partial notion of it as understood by the colonial administrator-ethnographer P.A. Talbot (1926: 141) and some others after him (Meek 1937: 173), is the central theme of *Ikenga*. While that concept is common and widespread in Igboland, its visible realisation in ritual object form varies considerably. Different sub-cultures yield different kinds of *Ikenga*

1 The Igbo people are among the largest single ethnic group in Africa. They number about 12 million people, and inhabit the tropical forest zone of Africa. They live in large numbers in different parts of Nigeria, as traders and artisans. Their traditional homeland falls mainly within the two States of Anambra and Imo. A good fraction of the indigenes of Bendel and Rivers States are also Igbo.

objects. This rich variety provides the material on which I now proceed to draw my classification based mainly on structural design and function.<sup>2</sup>

Using the first criterion, the broadest distinction that could be made is between *loose material representations and carved forms of Ikenga*. The first category includes the common practice of using one's right arm from the elbow as a symbol for *Ikenga*. The right arm with which an individual hacks his/her way through thick and thin is a favourite part of the body among the Igbo. It is generally believed to be positive, active and powerful. As such, it serves to indicate not only *Ikenga* but also such other important indigenous symbols like *Ofo*.<sup>3</sup> For the indigenous Igbo the right arm (and not hand), is the sign of a man's physical strength and personal worth. The point may be a tiny one, but it is useful in order to correct the wrong impression that *Ikenga* is the cult of the right hand (Onwuejeogwu 1972: 94).

Other things that are used as loose material representations of the symbol are live branches of a local tree called *Oha*. These are planted as part of the commissioning ceremony of new symbol objects. Pieces of "fine stone" placed at the threshold of each family also serve as the symbol. Thus, *Ikenga* exists simply as plain shrines in some parts of Igboland also.

The carved forms which are, however, regarded as the standard *Ikenga* symbol type belong to a broad category. Their multiple variety yields further divisions. Clearly, the possession of two up-thrusting horns is a prevalent feature of such carved objects. M.D.W. Jeffreys (1954: 28) was right in noting some connection between the horns assigned to *Ikenga* symbol and those of the domestic animal, ram. The indigenous people actually make such an association, correlating the pair of horns in each case with the important attribute of stubborn determination observed to be a natural characteristic of ram and said to belong at least in some analogical way to *Ikenga* spirit force.

The first classification of carved forms of the symbol is between *simplified object types and elaborately sculptured ones*. The former comprises mainly the impish stereotypes usually averaging three to six inches in height and some two inches in diameter. Each has a base of a piece of flat wood and the pair of horns. This kind, easily portable, is usually part of the travel kit of such itinerant ritual experts as diviners, medicine-practitioners and other crafts' people. It could also be kept by young boys getting ready to embark on the tough and rough road leading to achievement and distinction in society.

The elaborately sculptured forms have some other significant variations. But generally this class of *Ikenga* are large-sized, ranging from one foot to six feet in height, and are loaded with different sorts of artistic designs. The first major sub-division is, to borrow the expressions of J.S. Boston (1977: 41), between the "*abstract and highly stylised type*" on the one hand; and the "*less abstract and more humanistic type*", on the other. Although both categories are horned figures, the main distinctive feature is the body of the carved object. The body in the abstract type is often worked in the form of a cylinder or a partially reproduced human figure (with only a head and legs). The shape often resembles a conventionalised stool.

2 This delimitation implies that one could use other criteria for drawing up a taxonomy of *Ikenga* types, for example, the nature of wood used for carving the object.

3 For details on *Ofo* see Ejizu 1987: 459.

The second group, as its name indicates, is dominated by human features. Up to the head, it is generally a male figure with legs, hands and other parts of the body. Depending on the level of expertise of the carver and the status of the client, this group is characterised by its numerous structural features. Hence, the possibility of further classifications. One could distinguish *the group with faces resembling the classic white-faced Igbo maiden spirit masks from another type whose face features assume semi-animal appearance often carrying scarification (ichi) marks and expressing ferocity*. A further sub-division could be drawn between *standing and seated Ikenga objects*, and finally between *those with curved horns and those with uncurved horns*. The seated forms that have scarification marks on them are usually a symbol of high status, meant for men who had achieved popular recognition by working their way through the rather expensive male *Ozo* title ranks. Generally all groups of the more humanistic *Ikenga* type carry some objects in their hands. The commonest objects are a machet 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 in the left and an iron staff known as *nguagiliga* or *alo*. The two are part of the regalia of the *Ozo* titled man.

Using the criterion of function, a simpler taxonomy of *Ikenga* object types could be drawn between *private or individual symbols and public or group ones*. Both kinds are found in different parts of the region, even though individual *Ikenga* objects prevail. The group symbol, as would be expected, is generally large-sized and is usually kept either in a communal shrine or by the leader of the group. That owned by an individual varies in size and in features depending on the circumstances surrounding its commissioning.

Another classification based on function is between *Ikenga objects that are used dominantly as cult symbols and those that are mainly for ceremonial displays*. Most of the objects that are owned by individuals either as professionals or as titled persons appear regularly in cult. They receive sacrificial gifts from their owners in the forms of blood of slaughtered animals, chewed kolanut or food droppings. Sharing one's meal and other items of food and drink with tutelary deities, spirit and nature forces, is a favorite practice among the Igbo. Not only does it help to maintain the good relationship between human beings and supersensible realities, it could serve to dynamise and further enhance the efficacy of the power of the cosmic beings. On account of frequent blood and food deposits the symbol types that are used in cult often turn dark in colour and heavy in size.

The group-owned *Ikenga* objects are mainly for ceremonial displays. They are usually elaborately and stylistically carved and decorated in bright and joyful colours. A particular species of this type commonly found among the communities of the Anambra river basin deserve some further comment. Their generic name is *Ugonachomma* (beauty artifacts). In addition to the usual traits of the standard *Ikenga* type, they rise to heights of upwards of six feet, very smoothly carved and in a seated position. (Actually the one used by the Ezi-Agulu village of Aguleri for the 1983 annual *Ikenga* festival which I witnessed, measured six feet nine inches.) The classic white-faced Igbo maiden spirit (*Agbogho-mmo*) is the typical face of this group of the symbol. And many other figures including animals like leopard and police-constables dressed like white-men are schematically represented in-between the two up-thrusting horns.

### *Pattern of Distribution*

Ethnographic surveys of the vast Igbo territory east and west of the Niger river, have successfully delineated five sub-culture zones within the expansive region (Ford and Jones 1950: 10). By a culture or sub-culture zone is understood to mean a geographical delimitation of an area that possesses more or less the same dominant features and significant culture traits, complexes and patterns. The five sub-cultures are: the north-western zone which includes Umunri, Awka, Anambra, Onitsha and Nnewi areas; the north-eastern part extends to Nike, Enugu, Nsukka, Ezza and Abakaliki areas; the south-central zone covers Isu-Ama, Oratta, Ohuhu-Ngwa, Mbaise and Mbanjo areas; the south-eastern section otherwise known as the Cross River Igbo area incorporates Isu-Item, Ibeku, Edda, Ohafia, Aro-Chukwu and Afikpo on the other side of the river; and finally the mid-western or Bendel Igbo sub-culture includes Oshimili, Ndokwa, Aboh and Agbo areas.

Plotting the distribution of *Ikenga* in Igboland comes down in practical terms to determining the pattern of geographical spread in the sub-cultures of both the concept and the different structural forms. From all available evidence the idea of *Ikenga* as a ritual symbol of achievement signalled by "the right arm of strength" is known in all the sub-cultural zones. (In a few communities of the Cross River borderland like Ohafia, although the concept of *Ikenga* is known, another symbol object known as *Ite-Odo*, effectively displaces the former as a ritual symbol of achievement.)

Concerning the structural varieties, as earlier indicated, not every form is found in all parts of the Igbo region. Two kinds of *Ikenga* symbol type are in use in the southern sub-culture; namely the simplified and horned figure with flat base; and then the pieces of 'fine stone' used to represent the symbol in some Cross River Igbo communities of Isu-Kwato and Edda. The practice of planting 'Oha' live branches that grow into trees to serve as *Ikenga* is common in the north-eastern sub-culture areas of Awgu, Udi and Nkanu, while the Abakaliki areas of the same sub-culture zone prefer to erect mud shrines decorated at the top region with pieces of stone to serve as the symbol.

From evidence in the field, the mid-western and north-western zones are the cultural homeland of a rich variety of *Ikenga* structural forms. The Awka people widely reputed for their skills in carving (*Ndi Okwa nka*) belong to the latter zone. And most of the artistic designs of *Ikenga* objects in the areas are linked with them. These include the large-sized and colourful types used for public displays, the abstract type as well as the more humanistic forms carved in a standing or seated position.

### *Extent of Research*

Largely due to its evocative iconographic features *Ikenga* objects have excited considerable interest among scholars of Igbo traditional culture. Available literature on it falls into three main categories; the brief references to the object in the travellogues of pioneer European adventurers to the region, the sketchy descriptions included in works of general ethnographic nature on Igbo culture, and finally, specific writings on some aspects of the ritual symbol. Burdo (1880), and Mockler-Ferryman (1891) mentioned *Ikenga* among the

curios they observed in Igboland in the late nineteenth century. General accounts of the symbol are given in the writings of Revd. G. T. Basden (1921: 219-220), P.A. Talbot (1926: 141f), C.K. Meek (1937: 173), F.A. Arinze (1970: 16), and E. Ikenga-Metuh (1981: 70-72). Talbot's description which is the most detailed in this group mentions about three types of this symbol which the author located in some parts of Igboland. It refers to *Ikenga* as "another protective spirit ... which really signifies that part of the right arm from shoulder to elbow. It is the genius of a man's strength, and of his fortune."

The third category of writings mainly published essays and an ethnographic monograph, deserves some attention since they touch directly on certain specific aspects of the ritual object. M.D.W. Jeffreys' "*Ikenga: The Ibo Ram-headed God*" (1954) does three things; it summarises the sketchy descriptions of his predecessors on *Ikenga*, supplements these with the results of his own research in the mid-1930s around Nri and Awka in the north-western sub-culture, and finally proceeds to derive the symbol from the Ram-God of the ancient Egyptians much in line with his avowed belief in the discredited Hamitic hypothesis. Chike Aniakor's "Structuralism In *Ikenga*: An Ethnoaesthetic Approach" (1974: 1-14), is more of an art expert's impressions of some well known structural forms of the ritual object.

Finally, Boston's *Ikenga Figures among the North-Western Igbo and the Igala* (1977) which is the longest and most sustained investigation to-date on the symbol focuses largely on the artistic designs and social functions of the object. As the title of his ethnographic work indicates, Boston did his study and wrote on the object forms that are found in a rather very small and limited area of one Igbo sub-culture area, comparing them with the types that exist among the immediate Igala neighbourhood along the Anambra riverine.

Looking at the existing literature on this important symbol, it does appear that the interest of many of the authors have not really gone beyond the levels of sweeping generalities and popular iconographic features. The number of entries of published works might appear considerable. But the kind of substantial knowledge, relating to such fundamental issues as the typology, provenance, symbolism and functions of the ritual object, which emerges from the existing writings is, to say the least, still very fragmentary. Professor Adiele Afigbo had a much similar conclusion. In an unpublished review paper titled "*Ikenga: The State of Our Knowledge*" which he presented to the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria Nsukka, during the 1983 *Ikenga Art Exhibition*, he had bluntly stated *inter alia*:

Indeed the questions about *Ikenga* are just being posed. The research which will lead to the answers is still to begin. The question is whether and when that research will be done. (Afigbo 1983: 20)

#### *Commissioning a New Ikenga Object*

It is pertinent to note that for the indigenous Igbo owners of *Ikenga*, it is really the symbolism and the role which the ritual object plays that are of primary concern rather than the structural embellishments of different structural forms. This point was repeatedly made to me in the course of my field study in 1983 and 1984. A number of informants said that "*Ikenga adighi ile abaghi na ife*" (If *Ikenga* is not effective, then it is good for nothing). This is very much in agreement with what is known about the importance of religious/ritual symbols in general and in the traditional African background in particular. Victor W. Turner

(1967: 20) had in fact referred to them as "potent storehouses of meaning and crucial factors in the activity field."

Having, therefore, sketched the typology and pattern of distribution of *Ikenga* in the earlier part of this essay, I shall now proceed to grasp its rich symbolism and its wide range of functions. It will become clear as I discuss these vital aspects that the ritual object actually encodes and represents to the indigenous Igbo some of the most important concepts and values of their traditional religious and socio-cultural experience. The description of the commissioning of a new *Ikenga* object, including the events and circumstances leading up to the actual ceremony now follows.

Actually, the Igbo field reveals two distinct patterns. In some communities of the mid and north-western sub-cultures, it is normal for a father to commission small-sized *Ikenga* (usually the horn-shaped) form for all his male children respectively, or at least for his first son. In some places this is done as part of the naming ceremony of the child (*Iba Afa*), while in some others the commissioning is part of the young adolescent initiation ceremony into the masquerade society (*Ima Muo*). The exercise for this grade of *Ikenga* is rather a simple one, and it is performed by either the father or the male elder of the kindred. Holding the carved object in front of the family altar, he rubs it through with white chalk (*Nzu*). He then sprays it with chewed kolanut (*Oji*) and alligator pepper (*Ose Oji*) saying "*Ikenga* - (name of the child) *di ile, ka idue nwata n'ezi n'uzo.*" (*Ikenga* belonging to - be effective, and lead the child successfully through all circumstances). The symbol is then gathered together with the other household ritual objects stored in the family shrine. Together with the other sacred objects the consecrated *Ikenga* receives routine sacrificial offerings of food, drink and animal blood.

The other pattern is much more common, elaborate and better known in Igboland. The individual or group to own the symbol is personally and duly involved in the various phases of the process. And the events and circumstances which lead up to the request for the symbol object are diverse, largely dependent on one's life-situation, occupation and socio-historical developments. The fact of some measure of achievement by the individual which could come in the form of a series of repeated successes or through one single but outstanding accomplishment, is generally presumed. For example, a skilled farmer, fisherman, hunter, medicine-man or carver who consistently enjoys a successful yield or practice is generally regarded as a candidate for a personal *Ikenga*. Initiation into any significant title grade normally goes with such a commissioning as a necessary component.

It belongs to the diviner to discern whether the spirit-force (*Ikenga*) has ritually manifested itself in the person's life and in some instances to determine what visible forms its enshrining will take, the particular carver to be engaged, and the nature of the ceremony of consecration (*Imacha Ikenga*). This pattern is more or less obtainable in areas noted for carved symbol types. In other places that simply have the erecting of shrines or pieces of fine stone, or the planting of live 'Oha' tree branches, the diviner is usually consulted to decide on the timing of the commissioning exercise.

The choice of whether to purchase a ready-made object or to commission the carving of a new figure according to one's specifications belongs to the candidate. The consecration exercise is publicly performed at the lineage *Obi* (the lineage elder's lounge) presided over by the head of the candidate's minimal lineage (*Okpara*). The items for the ceremony vary from place to place. But usually, the candidate supplies such things as four good yam tubers,

a cock, two gallons of palm wine, a bottle of gin and four<sup>4</sup> kolanuts. The male members of the lineage are in attendance as well as some personal friends and age-mates of the candidate.

Sitting in front of the lineage altar in the *Obi* (lounge), the elder makes an offering of kolanut and palm wine to the ancestral and other patron spirits. He then specially invokes the *Ikenga* spirit-force, making an offering of the gifts to it. He handles the carved figure for consecration, rubs it through with phallic chalk (*Nzu*), and then sprays it profusely with chewed kolanut and alligator pepper saying:

Ikenga taa oji,  
Ikenga Ifeanyi taa oji.  
Gi ka ana amacha ka idi ile,  
Ka ichée Ifeanyi due ya n'ezí n'uzo,  
due ya Eke, Oye, Afor, na Nkwo.  
Ifeanyi si gi na ya gaa n'iru, ya enye gi ebunu.

(*Ikenga* eat kolanut, *Ikenga* belonging to Ifeanyi eat kolanut. You are being consecrated so that you become effective and protect Ifeanyi in all his life endeavours, protect him on *Eke, Oye, Afor* and *Nkwo* market days. Ifeanyi pledges to offer you a ram if you lead him to success.)

Next he kills the cock spraying the blood on the new *Ikenga* figure and on the household shrine and altar. He removes some of the feathers of the cock and sticks them on the object being consecrated. The yams are used to prepare foo-foo and the cock for soup. But before the meal is shared by all present, the officiating elder makes a final offering of some quantity of food and wine to the *Ikenga* spirit-force, ancestral and other patron spirits. He addresses the *Ikenga* again saying:

Ikenga kwu oto ka anyi cholu,  
Ka ibutelu Ifeanyi ife aku-aku  
ife enwe-enwe, ahu ike, nwunye, omumu nwoke  
na nwanyi, oba ji na ede, ka oba-li-a.  
response - Ise e!<sup>5</sup>

(We want a progressive *Ikenga*, may you bring Ifeanyi all kinds of wealth and possession, particularly health, wife and children, male and female, barn full of yam and cocoyam. May you foster him. Amen.)

The newly consecrated object is then placed beside the ancestral symbol (*Okpensí*) amidst the rich store of ritual objects in the lineage shrine. At the end of the meal, the owner of the *Ikenga* receives it with joy from the elder and takes it home. Before he finally stores 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 pu ogu pu mba* (My *Ikenga*, go forth with power and bravery).

The commissioning of the group *Ikenga* takes place much in the same way as that of the individual. The rite is usually performed in the shrine of the earth-deity (*Okwu Ala*),

4 The number is both a sacred and symbolic one, so are its multiples of eight, sixteen, etc. The Igbo Market-day week is four (*Oye, Afor, Nkwo, and Eke*). Four basically symbolizes completeness.

5 The texts are a slightly modified version of the ones given by Ichie Nchekwube Azodo (late), the chief priest of the earth-deity of Aguleri, *Isi-Ana Aguleri*, on Oct. 29, 1983 in respect of the writer.

belonging to the maximal lineage and the priest of the deity (*Isi-Ala/Eze-Ala*) presides over the ceremony.

Another noteworthy practice among the Igbo is that of commissioning *Ikenga* symbol for the spirit-force/deity known as *Agwu*. *Agwu* is a highly dynamic and ambivalent spiritual being associated with knowledge. It is the tutelary deity of all crafts-people and professionals, especially diviners and medicine-men (people with far-seeing eyes). Before a particular *Agwu* is considered due to get an *Ikenga* object, it should have distinguished itself as a favourite ally and generator of success for the owner. Thus, with the consecration of this special class of *Ikenga* symbol for the patron deity (*Agwu*), the professional now enjoys the fullest support of the spirit-force of achievement in his practice.

### *The Ritual Dimension*

A consecrated *Ikenga* of whatever structural form, is at once a sacred piece, a cult and ritual object. As a revealer of the sacred and supersensible power, it becomes an object of religious worship and veneration. And it forms an integral part of the intricate and dynamic relationship and communication between the owner/owners and the supersensible cosmic order, particularly the *Ikenga* cosmic-force.

The imposing figure of the symbol is matched by its prominent place and manifold uses in the traditional Igbo ritual dynamics. As a matter of general practice, all classes of *Ikenga* symbol serve the primary religious purpose of prayer as devotees avail of the visible figure as medium of communication between them and the supersensible being that is represented. Incantations are regularly said over the physical object. And routine as well as occasional ritual sacrifices are made to *Ikenga* (through its visible form in the symbol) in order to enhance its power and dynamic operation, or to thank it for a supportive role it had already played.

Routine cults of *Ikenga* include regular offerings of kolanut and alligator pepper, food and libations that are made to it, together with other religious symbols stored in the family shrine, in the course of such daily cultic acts as the traditional morning prayer (*Igo Ofu Ututu*) and various blessing rituals by the male elder. On the other hand, a person could, depending on circumstances, decide to make a special offering of a cock or even a ram to his *Ikenga*, twice or more in the year. The motif of success either already achieved or strongly hoped-for with the assumption of the support of the spirit-force, invariably underlies all such cases of occasional worship. Furthermore, it is normal among the traditional Igbo for professionals and skilled experts, especially itinerant diviners, medicine-men and carvers to make definite pledges to their *Ikenga* while embarking on special missions. Such pledges as offering a ram, taking a title or even marrying a wife in honour of the spirit-force. People are usually prompt to satisfy their own side of the contract once *Ikenga* is believed to have discharged its role as failure on the part of the devotee is certain to attract the wrath of the unseen forces.

Beyond this level of personally arranged cultic activities, many Igbo communities dedicate one month of their liturgical cycle to *Ikenga*. The period is known as *Onwa Ikenga* (the month of *Ikenga*). Although the specific schedule varies from one locality to another, it



generally occurs at the beginning of harvests.<sup>6</sup> And one traditional ritual week (a period of four days known as *Izu-muo*) is set aside for the cult of all categories of *Ikenga*. Individual owners of the symbol, professionals, skilled experts, men of various title ranks in their respective homes slaughter at least a cock, oftentimes a ram, and feast their relations and friends in honour of *Ikenga*.

In addition to the annual celebration in individual homes, some localities organise an elaborate communal festival. Communities of the Anambra riverine are noted for such an annual event. In October 1983 in the course of my fieldwork, I was privileged to witness one such celebration of *Ikenga* festival at Ezi-Agulu Aguleri.<sup>7</sup> It was truly a community affair, involving most of the members of the population (including converts to Christianity and traditional adherents), and still more significant and meaningful for the people than the Church-introduced feasts of Christmas, Easter, etc.

Some weeks before, the lineage elders had met to select one of the youthful age-grades that was judged to be the most distinguished in the year in the two main traditional occupations of farming and fishing. And the most fit and robust male from the same group was also identified. The elected age-set had the special honour of organising the year's festival, while their fittest member was to be the proud porter of the live-size, colourful and stylistic *Ikenga* (*Ugonachomma*), to be displayed in the ceremony.

The actual festival fell on twenty-ninth October 1983, and members of the community were manifestly joyful and gay. The ceremony had two major phases: the cult of personal *Ikenga* with the attendant feasting in individual homes, and the crucial events at the public square. The first phase very much resembles the practice in most other areas of Igboland, already described. The second phase began at about three o'clock in the afternoon.

A big crowd consisting of most members of the community, invited guests and visitors from other areas gathered in the square. Many of the women members of the group were dressed in fine colours. Those of them who brought their babies to the square were definitely outstanding in their outfit. The custom requires that every woman who successfully delivers in the year is to present the baby in the square on the festival day as a mark of honour to *Ikenga*. A little before that time the heavily adorned group *Ikenga* object painted in joyful and glittering colours (*Ugonachomma*), measuring six feet nine inches, had been brought and displayed at the centre of the square. It was circled round within a space of some three square yards with tender palm leaves (*Omu*).

The priest of the earth-deity arrived with his usual paraphernalia of cult. And the porter painted with bright chalk colours and holding a large pad, sat beside the encircled figure. The ritual kicked off at about four o'clock. The priest took his seat in front of the imposing figure and made an offering of food to *Ikenga*. The porter got into the ring and helped by six other members of his age-grade carried the heavy symbol object high on his head. The assembly applauded with a jubilant shout. And the women who had babies for display also

6 In the north-western Igbo sub-culture, the month of September which normally corresponds to the traditional liturgical/lunar seventh month, known as *Onwa Isa*, is for the worship of *Ikenga*, including the celebration of the festival.

7 The celebration in that particular year fell in October, because the community is said to have "lost three months of their calendar". This would probably correspond to the principle of leap year in the Western calendar system.

lifted them shoulder-high. The women, and young people with loud chants and music accompanied the *Ikenga* figure and its bearer in their trip or rather courtesy call to the four major communal shrines of the village-group. The elders stayed behind but in a state of considerable anxiety.

The movement to and from the shrines is the most delicate stage of the ritual event. It is believed that the fortunes of individual members, and the entire community in their respective occupations and endeavours for the on-coming year, are intricately bound up with the way the procession fares. A hitch-free and smooth transportation of the *Ugo-nachomma* to the four shrines and back, is a good omen. It is a sign that the supersensible beings and cosmic forces are pleased with members of the community and that future pursuits of the people are likely to turn out successful. On the other hand, if the porter experiences any such mishap as a serious stumble, or worse still a fall with the *Ikenga* symbol *en route*, it would be a bad omen, a sign of the displeasure of the gods and of a possible disaster that might befall the community.

The transportation exercise of 1983 was highly successful. The procession returned to the square amidst loud ovation and joy. And once the porter was relieved of his load, his age-mates triumphantly carried him shoulder-high into the village. With a great sense of satisfaction, people gradually dispersed to their homes to round off the feasting. Music, dancing and merry-marking went on deep into the night led by the victorious age-grade.

### *Symbolic Meaning and Function of Ikenga*

As a typical traditional Igbo dominant religious symbol object *Ikenga* is rich in its meaning-content. It is a multi-referential (rather than a uni-referential) symbol with meanings deriving from both the sensory/physical and abstract/ideological poles, to use the popular expressions of Turner (1967: 29). And the meanings that the indigenous Igbo code into and associate with the ritual object are among the cardinal beliefs, ideas and values that constitute the traditional cosmology and around which individual and community life and activities pivot.

At one level, *Ikenga* is said to refer to a man's physical strength, determination and will to succeed. These ideas are generally expressed in the artistic features of the standard carved forms.

The two ram horns means 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 preservice. (Onwuejeogwu 1972: 92)

Also at this level the ritual object is directly linked with the right arm. The full significance of this association is better appreciated when viewed against the background of the ecological environment, mental and cultural orientations of the traditional Igbo. The people inhabit the rain-forest 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<sup>8</sup> and a subject of rich symbolic associations, as earlier explained.

At the more abstract level *Ikenga*, as a core Igbo religious symbol, encapsulates multiple meanings related to different facets of experience: mythical aspect, social relations and individual life. It primarily represents the sacred and mythical realm and the fundamental relationship that is believed to exist between human beings and the supersensible order. It is worth recalling that for the indigenous Igbo the fortunes of human beings and the general well-being of their world depend greatly on the tenor of that vital relationship (Kalu 1978: 41). Specifically, the physical ritual object called *Ikenga* stands for a supersensible being of the same name. And it manifests itself as a dynamic cosmic force essentially connected with success and achievement in any and all life's pursuits leading to enhanced status and distinction in one's society and a sure hope of a blissful existence in the after-life as a glorified ancestor. This is the primary thrust and signal import of *Ikenga* symbolism, the pre-eminent motif underlying its cult as well as the central theme of its major iconographic adornments.

Also the symbol has meanings linked to the Igbo social structure. It refers indirectly to patriliney and the trait of individuality. Igbo traditional society is male-dominated and patriliney is the major principle of social integration (Uchendu 1965: 39-41). The society is equally remarkable for its republican and democratic features, free social mobility and a keen sense of competition among the populace. In most areas, only males possess *Ikenga* objects, and their achievements and wealth are publicly recognised through prestigious and expensive title societies. Furthermore, *Ikenga* symbolises the individuality of each man *vis-a-vis* his fellow men, of an age-set or lineage or clan *vis-a-vis* rival age-sets, lineages and clans.

The functions of *Ikenga* at different levels of Igbo life and experience are the immediate corollary of its dense symbolic meaning-content, and to some extent, of its rich structural forms. Firstly, the object helps to entrench, communicate and emphasize the prized values and worth of success and achievement very necessary for social recognition and distinction in Igbo society. Whether in active use in ritual contexts or standing imposingly before the ancestral symbol (*iru ndi-ichie*) in a man's family lounge (*Obi*), *Ikenga* seeks to enact and dramatise in a very vivid manner the various ingredients constituting the Igbo ideal of a highly achieved personality; such features as robust strength and healthy life, a large family (of wife/wives, male and female children), abundant and sustained agricultural harvests of yam, cocoyam, fruits, and livestock, expertise in the practice of one's profession like carving, medicine-making, divination, etc.

As a cosmic being, *Ikenga* is believed to liaise with and co-opt the active support of one's spiritual double known as *Chi*, and other supersensible entities intricately related to different aspects of human personality, including *Ukwu na-ije* (the cosmic force of travelling), *Ufo* (the cosmic force of one's name and fame), and *Ihu* (the cosmic force of one's face). This co-ordinative function of *Ikenga* at the mythical realm, which the actual commissioning and ownership of a physical symbol object is meant to acknowledge and validate, is an essential aspect of its major role as a success-generating force.

<sup>8</sup> The Igbo child is taught from the early childhood to use the right hand in eating, serving things to people. He/She is discouraged from using the left hand except for toilet purposes and removal of dirt.

More directly at the human level, by enshrining and symbolically representing the ideals of achievement and status, *Ikenga* would appear:

to issue vibrations which induce in the average Igbo man the will to make efforts of the kind that can magnetise success in life's different professions. (Afigbo 1983: 1)

Thus, the symbol stands as a veritable instrument which helps the indigenous Igbo to mobilise their psychic and physical energies, to exploit their talents in the life-long effort to define themselves as successful individuals. And it further serves to generate that healthy competition among persons and groups for which the Igbo are very much noted (Uchendu 1965: 34-38).

Boston (1977: 110-116), makes the point that *Ikenga* helps to emphasize for people that they were the architects of their own destinies and that they should not attribute too much to fate or the support of their own families and lineages. This is a tricky point to make as A.E. Afigbo observed. Actually, the balance which the indigenous Igbo work out in the matter of co-operation between external forces like *Chi* (spiritual double), *Ikenga*, parental/lineage support on the one hand, and individual talent and enterprise on the other as factors for human success in life, is rather a fine and delicate one. Both sides, although distinct, are seen as interrelated, emphasized together and duly recognised for either celebration in the event of success, or blame in the case of failure. The following popular Igbo expressions clearly make these points; *Ikenga di ile olibe ife* (If *Ikenga* is dynamic and effective it feasts and celebrates), while on the other hand, *Ikenga adighi ile akpoo ya oku* (If *Ikenga* is ineffective, it is burnt).

Normally, the personal *Ikenga* object is split into two and destroyed at the death of its owner as part of the funerary rites to signify that the supersensible being has fully accomplished its task of helping the devotee lead a successful life on earth. But, in the course of one's life, if in spite of persistent efforts and struggle, a person continues to experience misfortunes and failures, he could decide to hang away his *Ikenga* object, or as a last resort, consign it to the flames in disapproval and as a punishment for its non-performance.

### *Conclusion*

Although, the traditional practice of destroying a male elder's *Ikenga* at death meant that many carved objects were lost, the fortunes of the ritual symbol fluctuated even more drastically during the hey-days of Christian missionary evangelism in Igboland. Radical iconoclasm by both expatriate and local missionary agents resulted in the widespread destruction of *Ikenga* and many other traditional symbols and cult objects.<sup>9</sup> Only in areas where the impact of socio-religious change is not yet deeply felt, are the beliefs and ritual practices associated with the symbol still fully observed. In many other places, as M.A. Onwuejeogwu (1972: 95), rightly observed, only traditional Igbo men retain ritualised *Ikenga* objects.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the encounter of Christian Missionaries with Igbo culture in general, see Ilogu 1974; Ekechi 1971.

But the concept together with the key ideas, values and some other features closely associated with *Ikenga* symbolism have persisted in Igbo consciousness. These continue to pervade and foster certain fundamental attitudes of the people towards life, as well as underlie certain significant developments in contemporary Igbo society. The notions of individual enterprise, determination, and achievement are still the hallmarks of Igbo personality. The average Igbo, as Basil Davidson (1969: 25), states, accepts as:

an essential aspect of 'right and natural' that talent should lead to enterprise, enterprise to promotion, and promotion to privilege.

People, therefore, work very hard with determination to get to the top in the different fields of human endeavour. (There is, of course, the tendency to look on almost everything as status symbols.) Children are socialised to be independent and industrious. They are discouraged from begging or hanging on others.

Perhaps, the highest single development which clearly manifests the characteristic attitude towards life inherent in the *Ikenga* symbolism is the way in which the Igbo have carried out their rehabilitation and reconstruction since the cessation of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970. The thirty-month civil war was staged mainly in the Igbo territory and most towns were literally levelled to the ground. Back from the war, the Igbo confronted the problem. And largely through sheer hardwork and individual enterprise, they have been able to rehabilitate themselves and reconstruct their homes, institutions and towns to a level exceeding that of many other parts of the country.

As if in tribute or in recognition of the continuing significance of the symbolic import of *Ikenga*, there is a noticeable current wave of interest in the object among the Igbo. This includes the vogue practice of erecting *Ikenga* figures of different sizes in public places, naming of important establishments and organizations after the symbol and using the image as official logo by institutions and individuals.<sup>10</sup> This growing interest may no longer involve the religious rituals that are traditionally associated with the symbol object. But it certainly suggests the enduring relevance and intricate connection between *Ikenga* and Igbo personality traits.

Both as concept and as work of art *Ikenga* is certainly a fascinating indigenous Igbo cultural reality. The rich and stylistic iconographic designs of the carved types make it one of the best products of the people's aesthetic sense and art creative ingenuity. And its vital symbolism and wide range of functions make it one of the most significant cultural assets of their experience and life. *Ikenga* clearly marks a highly successful integration of aesthetics, conception and cosmology achieved by the indigenous Igbo.

10 Three outstanding examples could serve to illustrate the developments; A giant size *Ikenga* figure was erected in 1986 by the Imo State Government near the governor's office in Owerri. The Anambra State Government named its newest ultra-modern hotels at Akwa and Nsukka towns after *Ikenga* in 1987; the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, has *Ikenga* figure as its official logo as well as the name of its Journal.

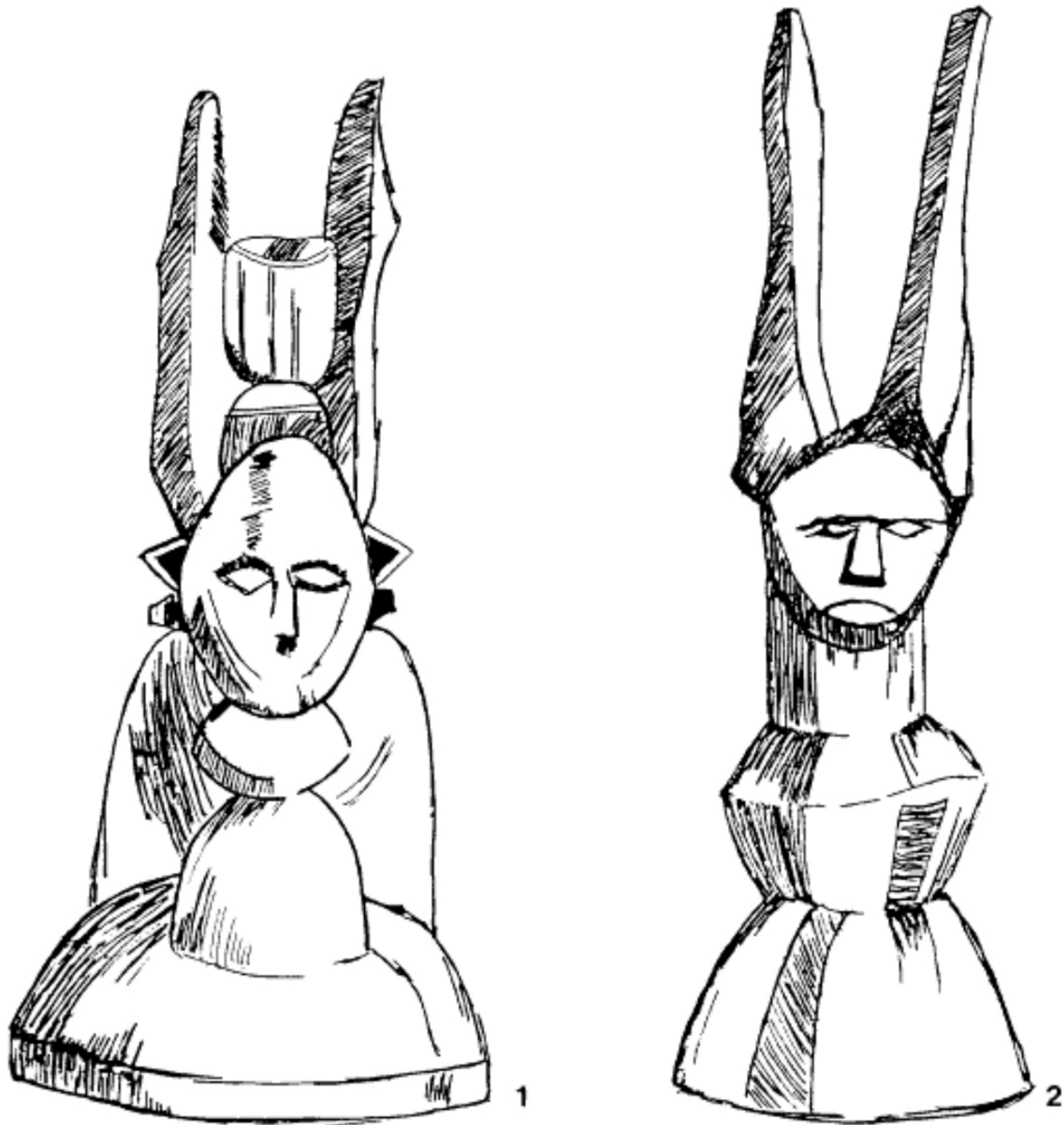


Fig. 1: This is a picture of a sculptured *Ikenga* object type. It is fitted with two horns and partial human features. It belongs essentially to the simplified and impish class of *Ikenga* object type.

Fig. 2: The abstract *Ikenga* type with the body worked somehow in a cylindrical form.

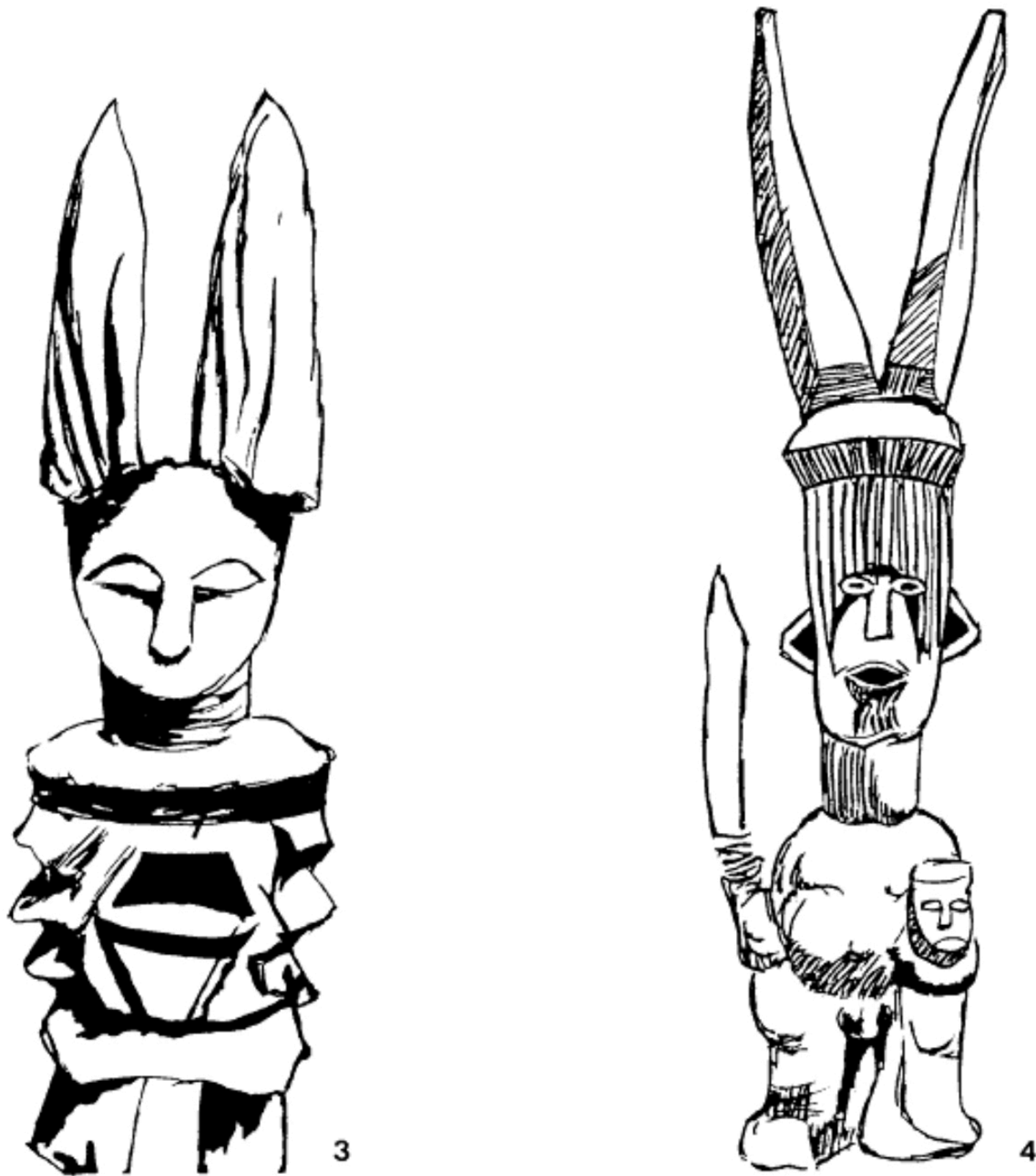


Fig. 3: This is yet another form of the abstract *Ikenga* symbol form.

Fig. 4: This is a figure of a typical *Ikenga* symbol object belonging to the broad class of "less abstract and more humanistic type". Notice the sitting position of the human figure, the scarification marks (*ichi*) on the face, the matchet and the human skull in the right and left hands respectively.



- Fig. 5: The picture of the energetic porter of the heavily adorned *Ikenga* object used for the annual festival for 1983 as he arrives at the public arena accompanied by members of his age-grade.
- Fig. 6: The picture of the live-size, colourful and stylistic *Ikenga* object type (*Ugonachomma*). The designated porter sits beside the art object awaiting the commencement of the solemn procession. This particular *Ikenga* form is the figure of a seated titled elder. The object's head is loaded with all kinds of semi-human figures. Different colours of ribbon used for decoration conceal a lot of the artistic designs of the object.
- Fig. 7: The priest of the earth-deity (*Ala*) makes an offering of food and drink to the *Ikenga* spirit-force on behalf of the community while some other priests and elders attend.





Fig. 8: The procession of *Ikenga* to the public shrines of the four major deities of the community is in progress. The porter with the *Ikenga* object is accompanied in the journey by his age-set and a fairly large crowd of people.



Fig. 9: Women who got babies in the year jubilantly display their children at the festival as a mark of honour to *Ikenga* (the spirit-force of success and achievement).



Fig. 10: The picture of a huge *Ikenga* art form recently erected at the Imo State capital of Owerri. The artistic and symbolic significance more than the religious aspect seem to have influenced the construction.

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