

TOPIC ESSAYS

IGBO ART IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

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A man with his own *ikenga* (right) and that of his father. Nnokwa, 1966. Photo by Herbert M. Cole.

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Ikenga is a male altar or shrine dedicated to a person's right arm and hand, which are considered instrumental to his personal power and accomplishment. Married men throughout most of Igboland establish *ikenga*, normally ordered from a professional carver and consecrated with the blood of a fowl. Horns, as seen on both *ikenga* here, are their diagnostic attribute. Many feature a seated warrior holding a knife in the right hand and a trophy head in the left, symbols, respectively, of decisive action and success. Others, like the *ikenga* on the right, show a horned head above a geometric, spool like carving that stands for a body. The standing

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carving that stands for a body. The standing *ikenga* to the left is a variant of full figure, warrior versions; it includes the image of a turtle who in folktales is a crafty trickster and here, probably, a symbol of wisdom.

A man sacrifices and prays to his *ikenga* either daily or once every fourth day, as well as before any important or dangerous undertaking.

In some communities, life-size *ikenga* are (or were) collectively owned by men of young middle age, the warriors; these shrines were of course invoked prior to battle, and danced to (or chastised) after victory (or defeat). Overall, the *ikenga* exemplifies the male ethos of aggression and the importance of physical accomplishment and success—in yam farming and formerly in warfare—expectations of all able-bodied Igbo males.

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