IKENGA: REIMAGINING AN ICONOGRAPHY OF CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENT

CHIJIOKE AZUAWUSIEFE
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

The traditional concept and imaginary of ikenga encapsulates the Igbo essence of male good fortune, economic achievement, and sociocultural advancement. This paper explores ways that elements of Ada Uzoamaka Azodo's "di-feminism," with its focus on the Igbo concept of agunwaanyi, might be appropriated to signal a possible reimagining of ikenga. Through a critical reading of Azodo's theory and re-reading of the scholarship on ikenga, the paper argues that while ikenga manifests the idea of wholeness (as the attainment and realization of one's cherished aspirations) for a people whose worldview operates within a duality of ideas, objects, and existence, its gender-specific construction does not acknowledge and address the socioeconomic advancement of women within the Igbo society. To continue to exclude any gender from the reality and ambitions that ikenga represents would, therefore, amount to a diminishment rather than an enhancement of the Igbo person and the Igbo world.

INTRODUCTION

The Igbo conceive of and engage with ikenga, the cult of the right hand, as an encapsulation of the Igbo essence of male good fortune, achievement, and sociocultural advancement.[1] Even when the material culture of ikenga may no longer be prevalent in contemporary Igbo society, due to the presence and overarching influence of Christianity, the ikenga mindset still orients the Igbo worldview and approach toward success and accomplishment borne out of hard work and industry. In its iconographic representation as a carved wooden figure of a man with ram's horns on his head and holding a machete in the right hand and an elephant tusk in the left, ikenga embodies the idea that artifacts do not only illustrate an extension of the self but also constitute an extension of the human consciousness by providing some solidity to the human mind.[2]

This paper reviews the scholarship on ikenga and articulates the centrality of its conception and art form in Igbo culture and consciousness. It argues that while ikenga manifests the idea of wholeness (as the attainment and realization of one's cherished aspirations) for a people whose worldview operates within a duality of ideas, objects, and existence, its gender-specific construction does not acknowledge and address the socioeconomic advancement of women within the Igbo society. Granted, the gender specificity of ikenga does not deny the industry of women, but the ikenga imaginary nonetheless symbolizes a celebrated machismo integral to male success. In the face of the growing scholarship in literature, an-

thropology, and history by Igbo feminist scholars like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Ezeigbo, Ifi Amadiume, Nwando Achebe, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,[3] whose work continue to highlight the socio-cultural, economic, and political achievements of women in traditional and contemporary Igbo society, the paper explores ways that elements of Ada Uzoamaka Azodo's "di-feminism," with its focus on the Igbo concept of agu-nwaanyi,[4] might be appropriated to signal a reimagining of ikenga. The paper will first articulate Azodo's idea of agu nwaanyi and then set the context for the understanding of ikenga as well as the worldview that informs and sustains its imaginary. Afterwards, it will analyze the discourse ikenga has generated among scholars, consider its iconography and form as well as ritual and symbolism, before concluding that even if rooted in history, ikenga constitutes an enduring part of the contemporary conceptions of success in the Igbo world, albeit entrenched in masculine ethos.

AGU-NWAANYI: INTERROGATING IKENGA'S GENDER EXCLUSIVE QUALITIES

In keeping with a long tradition of African feminist scholars (like Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Catherine Acholonu, Ezeigbo, Mary Kolawale, Obioma Nnaemeka, and Chioma Opara,[5] whose tradition dates back to Alice Walker's "womanism," in critique of Western feminism[6]) who propound indigenous feminisms, Azodo advances her "di feminism." This twelve-point approach that represents "a blend of inclusivity, awareness, and 'open-eye' that compulsorily demands to be seen and to be heard,"[7] becomes her alternative to Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism, which advocates for a conciliatory and cooperative approach in women's relationship and engagement with men. However, more than the assertiveness that Azodo calls for, it is agu-nwaanyi (lion-woman), one of the two key concepts she employs to illustrate her theory that speaks to this paper's interest in a possible women's dimension to ikenga.

Di-feminism, Azodo states, "valorizes the indigenous Igbo concept of Agunwanyi, that androgyny that manifests a perfect blend of feminine and masculine qualities by sheer dint of acute intelligence, initiative and intuition."[8] Among other influences, Azodo acknowledges the impact of Amadiume's seminal work (*Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*) on her development and articulation of di-feminism. However, although Azodo does not make further specific reference to agu nwaanyi in the rest of her essay on di-feminism (beyond her introduction in the quoted section above), the concept nonetheless forms part of the overarching outline of her theory. "Agu nwaanyi" speaks to

the reality of (exceptionally) accomplished women, women who excel in their respective endeavors and who often, as a result, take on the added philanthropic exercise of caring for individuals beyond their own immediate families. These women are exceptions and Azodo makes the case that in order to level the playing ground for both men and women, Igbo society and culture should provide equal opportunities for growth and development for women so that all women would be set on the course toward becoming agu nwaanyi, successful women "contribut[ing] to the (re)development of Igboland, through equality in gender opportunities."[9] Part of this process, she argues, requires the normalization of women's access to wealth, for instance, as well as title-taking, so that, like men, women too can take titles, all the way to the highest level of the chieftaincy ranks.

In her response to di-feminism, Ezeigbo (in her own rejoinder to Azodo's critique of snail-sense feminism as unacceptable strategy that "sacrifices women's respect and freedom at the altar of practicality and functionality"[10]) notes that di-feminism merely "reaffirms[s] already established practices in a rather articulate manner [without] offer[ing] new knowledge or principle."[11] Yes, the idea of gender equality is a common thread among African feminist scholars in theorizing feminism in Africa and as such not original to Azodo. But, Azodo brings a novel fierce, non-apologetic approach to it. The "open-eye" (assertive) attitude of that approach, for instance, definitely strikes one as different from preceding indigenous feminisms that seek to negotiate, accommodate, and compromise. Whether Azodo's approach is better remains a subject of debate for feminist scholars and future historians. But there is no denying the fact that she brings a different perspective to the table, as she puts it, a "radical opposition to patriarchy,"[12] that is definitely opposed to Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism approach.

However, at first glance, it is not obvious why Azodo would anchor her feminism theory on a masculinist term which appears to undermine its application as a key term for formulating the foundation of gender equality and the basis for agu nwaanyi. "Di" simply means "husband" and sometimes, for emphasis, it is rendered as "di nwaanyi," literally, "husband of the woman." Yes, as Azodo states, the "di-ness" articulates expertise and specialization in Igbo society which should not exclude women. The reality, however, applies otherwise, given that none of the prefixes of "di" for such expertise applies to women. "Di ochi" (palm wine tapper), "di mgba" (wrestler), "di nta" (hunter), "di ji" (exceptional yam farmer), "di oka" (blacksmith), "di ogu" (warrior) and all other "di" prefixed terms in Igbo language speak of only men even in contemporary times.[13]

Not even a woman who has also succeeded in those areas that women traditionally controlled, like trading, weaving, pottery, and cassava farming, had any such "di" specialized qualification attached to her.[14] Rather, such a hardworking, industrious, and successful woman is called "agbangala nwaanyi" (exceptional woman, onomatopoeically derived) or "agu nwaanyi" (Azodo's lion-woman). As a matter of fact, not only are women not called "di ochi" (wine tapper), for instance, the idea of a female wine tapper is still tabooed as "nso ala" (that which the earth forbids) in parts of Igboland; and women are even forbidden to climb palm trees. This taboo, coupled also with the fact that, still in some Igbo communities, women are also forbidden to break a kola nut, climb a kola nut tree, or even pick up the kola nut that has fallen from the tree, might undermine Azodo's theory. Even, when in exceptional cases, for example, a priestess might break a kola nut that she offers to her god, part of gender challenge that still persists among the Igbo remains that women mostly do not (certainly did not in the pre-colonial period) inherit land in their father's house. They are also easily dispossessed by their in-laws of any land gift from their husband, in the case of his death, especially if the woman involved does not have any male child. Other than in few uncommon cases where modern (educated, enlightened, and exposed) Igbo men may include their daughters as inheritors of their estate in the cities (seldom in the villages, as women are expected to marry and leave their paternal homes), this sad reality still obtains in many Igbo communities, no matter the rhetoric of gender assertiveness or the extent of the woman's educational qualifications or socioeconomic achievements. Whereas these instances appear to undermine Azodo's position, they in fact buttress her point for the unequal gender treatment in Igboland and, therefore, make her case for the need to re-engineer the patriarchal system of the culture in order to engender equal opportunities for men and women.

"Akataka," another masculinist term that Azodo deploys as the theoretical framework upon which to build the gender synergy of di-feminism raises a further concern. "Di-Feminism," she writes, "borrows light from the 'akataka' in Igbo tradition, a genre of 'mmanwu' (mmonwu or muo), a masquerade, at once in human and spirit forms …"[15] Ezeigbo disagrees strongly with Azodo on the use of the term, noting that such a violent and unruly masquerade is inadequate and "grossly unsuitable as a framework to theorize feminism or establish a model of self-fulfillment and development for women."[16] The terrifying, aggressive, disruptive, and frenetic energy of Akataka is counterproductive and as such, Ezeigbo argues, unsuitable for navigating the complex maze of gender relationship in Africa and the world. Violence of any type has not resolved any issue anywhere in the world. What is needed, she maintains, is dialogue.

Building off akataka, Azodo calls for a return to the pre-colonial "umuada" (daughters of an extended patrilineage) phenomenon. However, Azodo fails to critique the excesses that have dogged the umuada's cruel treatment of their fellow women, as she references the umuada to buttress her argument that women were as active as men in the political and economic processes of many pre-colonial Igbo communities and so could not have been as powerless as European historians and anthropologists constructed them to be.[17] In championing the power of Igbo women of that era, Azodo fails to acknowledge the abuse of that power by the same umuada, say, in the way they treated (and to certain extent still treat) the widows of their male relatives. Such umuada hide behind tradition and custom to perpetrate and perpetuate oppression and cruelty against their own kind, thereby preserving the same culture that holds women down.

Nevertheless, one can read Azodo's deployment of "di" and "akataka" in her theory as a subversion and in that case one could see within their perimeters how the "di-ness" of her feminism could be an invitation to also extend the aspirations of ikenga to women, an exercise that will eventually lead to establishing the agu nwaanyi phenomenon as the norm within the culture. If human desires, dreams, and ambitions for advancement and success are similar for men and women in the contemporary conceptions of gender, the continuing association of ikenga with men will not no longer be acceptable in a world of gender equality. Representational language, Stuart Hall[18] notes, is constructed and Azodo is saying that "di," and by extension ikenga, has been constructed in a men-dominated world to dislodge women from whatever value it represents. Nwapa, for instance, calls out Nigerian male writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka for writing strong and formidable women out of their earlier works. These male writers, Nwapa insists, would rather represent the women as prostitutes, nags, temptresses, and seducers than accord them the power and valid ambitions they truly wield. Both Ezeigbo and Ogundipe-Leslie[19] make a similar point. Decrying Soyinka's denial of agency to women in his memoir, *Ake*, for example, Ogundipe-Leslie notes that "the greatest historical disservice Soyinka does the Women's Movement [of the 1949 Abeokuta revolt] is to portray it as an unplanned, impulsive, gut reaction to contemporary maladministration [by a group of *incapable* and *non-plussed* women told what to do at their meeting by the wise Mr. Daodu]. The movement was, in fact, highly organized."[20]

Demonstrating the difference in the portraits of women between African male writers and their female counterparts, Nwapa notes what she did differently: "In my two heroines, Efuru and Idu, I was inspired by the women around me when I was growing up. … [These] were solid and superior women who held their own in society. They were not only wives

and mothers but also successful traders who took care of their children and their husbands as well. They were very much aware of their leadership roles in their families as well as in the churches and local government."[21] Note the idea of women as care givers—tying into the idea of African feminism generally not being conceived as antagonistic to motherhood and to men. But then again, notice the framing of women as the ones who take care of their husbands in addition to running their successful trades. The concern never arose for Nwapa, even in her vanguard attempt at representing strong women (the agu nwaanyi of her time and place), to question the burden such care giving might place on women. In their role of caring for both their children and their husbands, Nwapa fails to interrogate the question of who cares for the women. To the extent that one could argue that their agu-nwaanyi-ness makes women capable of taking on such roles without paying heed to their own wellbeing, one has to also acknowledge that such a position can amount to perpetuating the subjugation that di-feminism and all other indigenous feminisms seek to emancipate women from. In order to better appreciate the import of Azodo's clamor for the leveling of gender playing field so as to create the necessary conditions for enabling every Igbo woman to become an agu nwaanyi, one has to comprehend the central position of ikenga in the Igbo conception of masculine achievement.

UNDERSTANDING IKENGA: MEANING AND CONTEXT

The representations of ikenga crystallize the male ethos in Igboland, but ikenga in itself "is by no means a simple concept, even if, as in the nature of symbols, it may have a very simple form."[22] As a famous icon which the Igbo associate with individual and group achievements, ikenga represents both a conception and material image associated with good fortune, achievement, industry, and the physical strength of the right hand.[23] Its iconography embodies, for the Igbo, meaning, significance, and symbolism beyond its formal attributes. Consisting of two compound nouns, "ike" (strength or ability) and "nga" (place), "ikenga," as it stands, could translate as "the place of strength."[24]

However, its literal translation has remained a subject of debate for scholars. Writing about ikenga in the mid twentieth century, for instance, M. D. W. Jeffreys' claim that the term "ikenga," might have its roots from Kengawa or Kenga, a northern Nigerian group.[25] E. Okechukwu Odita dismisses Jeffrey's position as tenuous and maintains that although it seems convincing, "it is objectively unsound."[26] Odita then proffers an Igbo origin of the term: "Ikenga in Igbo language means *Ike/-nji-/aga* (*ike-n-ga*): the strength/with which I/advance."[27] Odita's translation could have provided a relief for the challenges that the meaning of ikenga has

posed for both linguists and scholars of Igbo culture except that the language does not lend itself to such a contraction of syllabi and vowels. There is no evidence of other such unexplainable contractions in the language.

A war of semantics has also raged among scholars regarding whether ikenga is associated with the right arm, hand, or shoulder. Jeffreys notes the difference of usage among the early studies of social organization of the Igbo by scholars like George Basden, P. Amaury Talbot, and C. K. Meek.[28] Whereas Basden uses hand, the others, together with Jeffreys, prefer arm. Ejizu calls out another Igbo scholar, M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu,[29] for his preference for hand rather than arm. Generally believed to be "positive, active and powerful," this right arm, Ejizu argues, "serves to indicate not only ikenga but also such other important indigenous symbols like ofo"[30] (more on ofo later). One wonders however the basis for the arm-hand differentiations, since the Igbo do not draw any fine distinction when they refer to the hand (aka), especially between hand and arm.[31] Termed differently, however, the shoulder (ubu) represents the site of contact for greeting among warriors and strong men (as in "dike na dike zu n'uzo, ha were ikenga naa n'aka"), a point that is, ironically, lost on those engaged in the war of terms. Francis Arinze seems to bridge that semantic gap when he deploys "arm" and "hand" in his description of ikenga, without betraying any sort of contradiction. "The personification of a man's strength of arm," he writes, "has everything to do with his good fortune. It is a man's 'right hand' that leads him through thick and thin."[32]

No matter the privileged nomenclature, however, three categories of ikenga exist, namely "ikenga mmadu" (human ikenga), "ikenga alusi" (spirit ikenga), and "ntutu agu" (divination objects).[33] Whereas the first is a fully developed human figure with horns, seated on a stool, the other two do not have human forms. The second is a cylinder with horns while the third is often simple miniature rendering of the second in different shapes. Recent scholarship, however, follows a two-fold typology: abstract or chip-carved ikenga and anthropomorphic or smooth-carved ikenga.[34] Cole and Aniakor acknowledge that a close link connects the abstract ikenga and the naturalistic ikenga together, which makes any elaborate typology problematic. Nevertheless, they note that "literally hundreds of individual carvers' hands can be recognized,"[35] in the Igbo artistry of ikenga, an observation that has inspired further divisions and subdivisions of known ikenga figures along the lines of regional, workshop, and individual carvers' attributions.[36]

History has as well revealed more varieties of ikenga beyond Igboland, as ikenga also exists among neighboring groups like Igala in the northeast and Edo in the southwest. However, "available evidence shows

that the Igbo possess the most developed concept, iconic forms and range of functions of the symbol."[37] Odita questions the assumption of the existence of ikenga among the Edo, arguing that Edo oral tradition does not bear any evidence to the availability of ikenga objects in the culture. He sees as incidental the primary work by William Fagg[38] that is often cited in support of such a presence given that Fagg "did not illustrate his sample of Edo and Igala ikenga for purposes of comparison and close analysis; nor has he any documentation to that effect."[39] As engaging as Odita's argument appears, it does not, however, address the concern why the presence of ikenga in Edo culture should be dismissed based, as he claims, on the inconclusive methodology of Fagg's work.

Ejizu argues that much of the above scholarship has focused on outlining the iconographic qualities of ikenga to the detriment of articulating its ritual symbolism and functions. According to him, as far as the owners of ikenga are concerned, "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."[40] However, although he does a great job in highlighting the Igbo worldview that informs the material representations of ikenga, he nonetheless focuses solely on the ritual components of the object.

The Igbo worldview is infused with an ontological concept of duality, for nothing ever stands alone, an idea that remains central to how the Igbo perceive their world. This duality also drives the central phenomenon in the Igbo conception of a person's chi—one's spirit being in the spirit world.[41] Ikenga hearkens back to this dual notion of reality but then expands it to its absolute completeness of four, the duality of twos, thereby "incorporat[ing] a person's chi, his ancestors, his right arm or hand, *aka ikenga*, his power, *ike*, as well as [its] spiritual activation through prayer and sacrifice."[42] Although ikenga embodies these four key elements of the Igbo cosmology, as an entity, it has a duality of its own, ofo (a consecrated tree branch from the tallow tree, *Detarium Senegalense*), which symbolizes the customary sacred authority for justice and propriety. The use of ofo for the invocation of spiritual powers as well as the symbolism of striking it four times on the ground, points to the number four as an auspicious unit that completes ritual actions, with the ground symbolizing the Earth Goddess (Ala), custodian of communal morality. Given that the basic function of the ofo is to prove the innocence of its bearer and those who implore its intercession, its complementarity with ikenga becomes obvious for a people who depend on the land for their sustenance and advancement. The bearer (often male) who commits any offense, like murder, that is tabooed by Ala, not only violates Ala's sacredness but also diminishes both the community and the bearer, together with his social capital.[43]

The Igbo man encompasses different related tendencies. On the one hand are those obedient and moral aspects embodied in the ofo. On the other hand, are those individualistic, aggressive values represented by the ikenga. "These derive from the cultural emphasis on the freedom to act outside of the hereditary system," Eli Bentor notes, "for in the egalitarian and decentralized Igbo society, power is shared and positions of authority are attained by individual achievement."[44] However, this necessity for "an ecological balance with nature"[45] could also cast chi as the ultimate duo for ikenga. According to Aniako, in an agrarian culture where the size of one's harvest determines their wealth, "the prosperous farmer traces his success not entirely to his ability to farm but to his ancestors (ndichie), who provided the land and continued to enhance his procreative actions through his chi—hence his possession of a viable Ikenga."[46] This chi-ikenga duality is made apparent in the Igbo proverb, "onye kwe, chi ya ekwe"—when one says yes, his or her chi affirms. So, a human being, as an embodiment of life force, becomes the necessary integrating element in generating the force, with the assent of his or her chi, that makes ikenga viable. This duality that holds the opposite forces of Igbo cosmology in a creative balance approximates "an inter-penetration of the material and immaterial, of form and content, of the immediate and enduring, a controlled tension of opposites."[47]

IKENGA: ICONOGRAPHY AND FORM

Figure 1

The "warrior" form (figure 1) could be said to be the most famous ikenga. It depicts a well-developed human figure with horns and a fierce

expression. The figure seats on a stool and holds objects in both hands. In one of the prominent representations of this distinct subgroup of ikenga, the figure sits on a double-disk stool, the back of which is carved and the front, supported by the figure's legs. It holds a slightly bent-blade machete in the right hand and in the left hand a tusk or a severed human head, with bulging eyes, nose, and mouth. The figure's head is often elongated, seated on a thick neck. From the top of the head emerges a pair of horns that tapers as it rises and curves backward, sometimes making a full twist in its backward trajectory. In a second popular ikenga type, the seated figure holds instead a tusk and a staff in the left and right hands, respectively. Many examples of this elaboration of the warrior form wear ornate facial marks (ichi) for titled men. Some of the figures could be more than a meter high and are often represented to typify display figures known as "Ugonachomma" (literally, "the eagle that seeks beauty," implying a handsome man). This ikenga type together with its superstructure of human and/or animal images attest to an elaborate artistic ingenuity. In the similar way that the Igbo stress achievement and individuality, they also "encourage their artists to experiment with this art form and to demonstrate their skills, while retaining the essence of the ikenga."[48]

One can attribute the inspiration of the warrior ikenga to masquerade troupes formed by young men of particular age groups. The social relations that bound such groups operate outside of the authorities of the elder and ancestors and are driven, not by morality, but by opportunity, as individuals strive to succeed and excel. For such a youthful group that measures itself, therefore, by heroic performance it is fair to assume that it is motivated by the values of competition, aggression, and violence.[49] The period of acquiring this type of ikenga coincides with the stage in life when the community expects men to demonstrate their bravery in war. Ogonna Agu advances the war origin of the warrior ikenga when he argues that ikenga could have been created for war purposes but was reappropriated in peacetime for the archetypal masculine aspirations for success through hard work.[50]

Ejizu states that both the machete and the severed head held by the warrior ikenga "are conventional symbols of achievement among the indigenous Igbo,"[51] but offers no explanations why, particularly with regards to the head. The right hand, called "aka ikenga," the ikenga hand, always holds the machete. In some parts of Igboland, those who did kill in wars were admitted into a lower rung of the complex set of title societies known as "ogbu mmadu" (killers of people).[52] But in recent times, the plain violent dimension associated with the machete and the head has been replaced with a metaphorical explanation that stresses the aggression necessary for survival in an environment that encourages competition among individuals. Ikenga's most iconographic element, the horn,

embodies a sense of both understandings—the war aggression as well as the new meaning reflected in masculine valor. "Ebune ji isi e je ogu" (the ram charges headlong into a fight) is an Igbo aphorism that indicates the necessity for one to confront whatever challenge they face with courage and audacity. The noun "ogu" means fight as well as war which, in either case, applies very well to both the implied and the real meanings of the ikenga aggression.[53]

Related to the Igbo construction of ikenga using masculine attributes in their conceptions of a person is the complex system of titles. Titles allow the Igbo man (and to some extent, woman) to demonstrate his economic good fortune and achievements and then turn them into culturally recognized kinds of status and political power. Given that most titles are not hereditary, communities expect their upwardly mobile young men to progressively acquire higher titles, as markers of their achievement and advancement through life. In his classic novel, *Things Fall Apart,* Achebe beautifully illustrates this point, capturing the accomplishments as celebration and reward of hard work among the Igbo, when he writes: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements."[54] The reader right away locates the protagonist within a specific context of industry. Okonkwo labored in order not to end up like his easygoing father, Unoka, who, unable to engage in the conventional masculine farming occupation among his people, died a pauper, in debt, and without taking any chieftaincy title. But Okonkwo was lucky. "Among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father."[55]

So, Okonkwo worked very hard to re-author his fate. He would distinguish himself early in life by taking two titles, after he had established himself at a young age as a wealthy farmer and the greatest wrestler in Umuofia. "Age was respected among his people," Achebe observes, "but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders."[56] Life for the Igbo represents a process of individual maturity in a give-and-take relationship with others that enhances an accumulation of wealth for social mobility. A man's negotiated relationship with his chi exemplifies this process. The warrior ikenga, hence, reflects the earlier phases of this process of individual development, when men are required to demonstrate their physical strength. Gradually, "the pugnacity of peer relations is replaced by the tempered authority of a titled person. At this stage, the elaborate ikenga, with their authority symbols are more appropriate."[57]

The elaborate super-structured ikenga figures do correspond to a large extent to the more advanced, title-taking stages among the Igbo. The

three-legged stool was traditionally reserved for the members of the ozo, the highest rank of the title system. The staff is a sign of authority. Staffs and the complex hierarchy of their usage are a common feature Igbo culture. They range from simple wooden ones to rods of forged iron with brass rings. The most common type represented in ikenga and carried by the ozo titled men is the ribs' hook (ngu agiliga) so called because of its distinctive rib-like openwork on the shaft, which bulges out in the middle to form an oblong protrusion. The tusk, held in the left hand, is used as a trumpet (odu). It refers to the elephant, symbolizing power and leadership. An ozo titled man would usually have his stool and tusk carried by a young boy to public functions.[58]

Figure 2

Although many of the warrior ikenga have the maiden-spirit mask face, most of the elaborate ikenga bear the ichi sacrification pattern, which consists of parallel vertical lines on the forehead and temples. Depending on the part of Igboland, the ichi represented marks of distinction for the highest members of the title societies, mid-point in the ozo title ascendancy, or sons and daughters of the nobility. The super-structured ikenga also includes references to animals. Crouching on top of the structure is a four-legged mammal believed to be a leopard (agu), the king of the animals and a symbol of the political authority for titled men. The horns of the ram

or other animals, found on all ikenga figures, signify power and aggression.

THE RITUAL AND SYMBOLISM OF IKENGA

Ikenga can easily be acquired, either purchased in the market or commissioned from carvers. But for it to be active and potent, it has to be consecrated. In some parts of Igboland, a father could commission an ikenga for his sons, or the first son. This could be done as part of the naming ceremony or during the adolescent initiation into the masquerade society. Depending on the region, young men acquire ikenga at different ages but generally have one by the time they marry and establish their own families.[59] However, the most common form is that initiated by a man on the account of his success and achievement. In the latter case, it is a diviner, invited by the candidate, who would discern the extent of the manifestation of the ikenga spirit force on the candidate, what visible form the shrine should take, the particular carver to be contracted, and the nature of the consecration ceremony.[60]

Consecration is a public ceremony, usually in the presence of male relatives, friends, and members of the candidate's age group.[61] While Onwuejeogwu[62] situates the ceremony at the home of the candidate, Ejizu locates it at that of the lineage head (okpara). Although a diviner officiates, Ejizu and Onwuejeogwu allot that task to the lineage head. This difference, again, could be put to regional variations, as is also variations in the ritual itself. Depending on the region, the candidate would provide four kola nuts, four tubers of yam, a cock, two gallons of palm wine, and a bottle of gin. Seated before the lineage or family altar, the lineage head or the diviner prays to the gods and ancestors, offers them kola not, and pours a libation to them. Then he specifically invokes the ikenga spirit force and makes similar offerings to it. He takes the ikenga figure and rubs it with nzu (white clay), and afterwards sprays it with chewed kola nut, praying as follows[63]:

Ikenga taa oji.
Ikenga Emeka taa oji.
Gi ka a na amacha ka I di ire,
ka I chee Emeka, duo ya n'ezi na n'uzo.
Duo ya n'Eke, duo ya n'Orie, duo ya n'Afor, duo ya na Nkwo.
Emeka si na ihe gaziere ya, ya enye gi ebune

(Ikenga accept [and chew] kola nut.
Emeka's ikenga, accept [and chew] kola nut.
We consecrate you so that you become potent,
to guide Emeka through his personal and public endeavors.

Guide him on Eke, guide him on Orie, guide him on Afo, guide him on Nkwo.[64]
Emeka pledges to offer you a ram when he succeeds.)

After that, the lineage head or diviner kills the cock, smears the blood on the new ikenga figure and on the family alter. He plucks some feathers and sticks them on the ikenga. The yam and the cock are used to prepare a meal of pounded yam and soup from which he also offers some as well as some wine to the gods, ancestors, and the ikenga spirit force. He then addresses the ikenga again saying:

Ikenga kwu oto ka anyi choro,
ka I butere Emeka ihe aku-aku,
ihe enwe-enwe, ahu ike, nwunye, omumu nwoke
na omumu nwaanyi, oba ji an oba ede,
ka obarie.
Response: Isee!

(We desire enterprising ikenga,
so that you will bring Emeka abundant wealth,
good health, wife, male children
and female children, barn-full of yam and cocoyam.
May he prosper immensely.
And the people respond: So shall it be!)

The newly consecrated ikenga is then placed among other ritual objects on the family altar of the owner within his guest parlor (iba/obi), and the owner offers sacrifices to it in order to enhance its power, thank it for favors received through its support, or request its assistance for particular endeavors.[65] But should a man's efforts continually be met with no reward from his ikenga, his regard for his ikenga would wane and he is allowed to cut it in two and get another one. An Igbo proverb validates this type of action by indicating that an ikenga that is no longer potent becomes firewood. Achebe, with the description of the rivalry between Ezeulu and Chief Nwaka in *Arrow of God*, buttresses this point that the Igbo would discard any god that no longer served its purpose.[66] Nevertheless, once an ikenga is consecrated, it becomes "a sacred piece, a cult and ritual object" of worship and veneration that reveals the sacred and supernatural powers while at the same time forming an integral part of a "dynamic relationship and communication between the owner/owners and the supersensible cosmic order, particularly the ikenga cosmic-force."[67] At death, a man's ikenga is discarded, buried, or split in two as a sign that it has accomplished its task. It could also be kept in the family or

communal heirloom to remind the owner's descendants of the great achievements of their forbears and the motivating force behind such achievements.

The practice of destroying a man's ikenga at his death meant the lost of the preservation of its art for antiquity. That ritual destruction assumed an iconoclastic dimension in the hands of Christian missionaries and overzealous, non-compromising, intolerant Igbo converts to Christianity which resulted in the destruction of not only ikenga but also of other traditional religious objects and symbols. Nevertheless, Christianity, albeit inadvertently, contributed to some preservation of ikenga objects, as some of them belonging to Christian converts were hidden away as a result of the new faith of their owners. Since these were never acknowledged openly, they were also never brought out for destruction at their owners' death.

With regard to the material used for ikenga, that is, wood, Aniako argues that the potency of an ikenga is also dependent on the type of tree from which it is hewn. According to him, "the vital force of ikenga is sculpturally realizable only in the type of tree where its potency, *ire*, is fully concentrated—such tree as *Ogilisi*."[68] The ritual essence of this sacred tree, Aniako argues, derives from its funerary meaning. However, Ogilisi serves much more than funerary functions. It is medicinal, but more importantly, it is a staple of religious rituals, rites, and sites. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that ikenga is not always represented in its carved iconic figure, for in some parts of Igboland, it exists as plain shrines, sometimes signified with such loose material representations as live braches of local oha tree, usually planted "as part of the commissioning ceremony of new symbol objects."[69]

Once the ikenga is set up, for as long as an individual's chi is active his energy and actions would be well directed, for it is through hard work that his ikenga would be effective. He then advances in society the more he exerts his right hand and the more wealth and influence he acquires.[70] The full significance of the association of ikenga with the right hand "is better appreciated when viewed against the background of the ecological environment, mental and cultural orientations of the traditional Igbo."[71] The Igbo who inhabit Africa's rain-forest zone live largely on a land and agriculture-based economy which offers the context for accessing and assessing status, success, and achievement. Against that backdrop, the right arm, commonly referred to as the right hand of strength, with which a person hacks his way through thick and thin, whether in farming, hunting, trading, or other endeavors, understandably becomes highly significant. Since, therefore, none of these endeavors has ever being exclusive to men, it makes no sense, as Azodo's di-feminism and its promotion of agu nwaanyi imply, to exclude women from the conception of ikenga as well as the reality and imaginary it represents.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing has highlighted not only the centrality of ikenga in the sociocultural and economic conceptions of ikenga among the Igbo, but also the pertinence of its possible reimagining based on Azodo's agu-nwaanyi-focused di-feminism. Ikenga becomes a "living image or animated icon"[72] that enables the Igbo to continue to make meaning of and harness the vital forces that cohabit their ecosystem. It is through such an engagement that the supernatural becomes visible in the life of the community, making ikenga then central in the religious consciousness of the people.[73] Understanding the ikenga symbolism and imaginary remains, therefore, key to plumbing the depth of Igbo worldview, as explored and engaged by both men and women. The sense of achievement tied to an individual's strength as a result of his or her positive thrusts in life, which is central to the concept of ikenga, continues to underlie the Igbo pursuit of good fortune, success, and accomplishment. It remains an ever-integral part of Igbo sociocultural thought and philosophy, pervading their consciousness and fundamental attitude to life. The notions of individual enterprise, determination, and achievement then remain the hallmarks of Igbo personality, for an average Igbo accepts as "an essential aspect of 'right and natural' that talent should lead to enterprise, enterprise to promotion, and promotion to privilege."[74] As a result, the Igbo man and woman are driven to work hard, determined that they would excel in whatever task they set their mind on. This mindset underpins the clamor for equal gender opportunities at the core of Azodo's di-feminism and its practical manifestation through agu nwaanyi.

Both the cult and the iconography of ikenga are therefore driven by the one continuum of achievement, success, and enhanced social status that would ultimately lead to a dignified afterlife—for both men and women. In that case, in addition to generating a healthy competition among individuals and groups, the symbol of ikenga stands as "a veritable instrument"[75] which enables the Igbo to mobilize their spiritual and physical energies, to exploit their talents in the life-long effort to define and affirm themselves as successful individuals. Hence, in its various forms and symbolism, ikenga articulates the way in which the Igbo culture defined and still defines, albeit with less material representations in contemporary time, the processes through which its members mature as human beings within the community as well as maintain their individual identity. Even with the public diminishment of the religious rituals that were traditionally associated with ikenga owing to colonialism, Christianity, Western education, and urban migration among the Igbo, the enduring significance of its iconography remains evident in its contemporary manifestations in popular culture, street art, individual titles, institutional

brand names, corporate logos, and academic journal titles.[76] Given this reality, then, it diminishes rather than enhances the Igbo person, as well as the Igbo world, to exclude anyone, on the basis of gender, from the reality and aspirations that ikenga represents.

NOTES

[1] See F. Chidozie Ogbalu, *Omenala Igbo: The Book of Igbo Custom* (Onitsha: University Publishing Company, 2006).

[2] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyl, "Why we need Things."
https://llk.media.mit.edu/courses/mas714/fall02/csik-things.pdf

[3] Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1966), Flora Nwapa "Women and Creative Writing in Africa, in *Sisterhood: Feminism Power – From Africa to the Diaspora*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (Asmara & Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1998), 89-99; Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1979), Buchi Emecheta *Head Above Water* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1986); Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, *Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminist Perspective* (Lagos: Vista Books, 1996), Akachi Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model*. (Lagos: University of Lagos, 2012), Akachi Ezeigbo, "Unity in Diverse Indigenous Feminisms," in *African Feminisms in the Global Arena: Novel Perspectives on Gender, Class, Ethnicity, and Race*, ed. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo (Glassboro, New Jersey: Goldline & Jacobs Publishing, 2019), 64-75; Ifi Amadiume, *African Matriarchal Foundations: The Igbo Case*. London: Karnak House, 1987), Ifi Amadiume, Ifi, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society,* 2nd ed. (London: Zed, 2015 [1987]); Nwando Achebe *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), Nwando Achebe, *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "We Should All Be Feminists," TedxEuston, video, 29:28, Filmed December 2012), https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions," *NollyCulture*, https://nollyculture.blogspot.com/2016/10/adichies-feminist-manifesto-teach-her.html.

[4] Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, "Di-Feminism: Valorizing the Indigenous Igbo Concept of 'Agunwanyi,'" in *African Feminisms in the Global Arena: Novel Perspectives on Gender, Class, Ethnicity, and Race*, ed. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo (Glassboro, New Jersey: Goldline & Jacobs Publishing, 2019), 7-61.

[5] Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed., Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1985]), 21-36; Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994b); Catherine O. Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri: Afa Publications, 1995); Ezeigbo 1996, 2012; Mary E. M. Kolawale, *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997); Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood: Feminism Power – From Africa to the Diaspora* (Asmara & Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1998); Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way." *SIGNIS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, 1 no. 2 (Winter), 2004, 359-385; Chioma Opara, "On the African Concept of Transcendence: Conflating Nature, Nurture and Creativity," *M&Lintas* 21, no. 2, 2005, 189-200.

[6] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1983).

[7] Azodo 2019, 47.

[8] Ibid., 7.

[9] Azodo, 2019, 55.

[10] Azodo, 2019, 32

[11] Ezeigbo 2019, 68.

[12] Azodo 2019, 54.

[13] See also Ezeigbo 2019.

[14] The statement on women cultivating cassava in no way diminishes neither the quality of that enterprise nor the value of the crop. Nwapa (1998), for instance, makes the point of the strength of cassava, a crop often derogated against for being a woman's crop but which actually plays a more active role in the life and sustenance of Igbo communities than yam, the so-called king of the crops and a man's crop.

[15] Azodo 2019, 47.

[16] Ezeigbo 2019, 70.

[17] See also Amadiume 2015 [1987].

[18] Stuart Hall, "Representation, Meaning and Language," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 15-74.

[19] Ezeigbo 2019; Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, "The Representation of Women: The Example of Soyinka's *Ake,*" in Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994 [1981]), 101-110,

[20] Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 106; see also p102.

[21] Nwapa 1998, 92.

[22] Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos (*Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1984), 30.

[23] See Christopher I. Ejizu, "Ritual Enactment of Achievement: Ikenga Symbol in Igboland," *Paideuma*, 37 (1991), 233-51; M. D. W. Jeffreys, "The Winged Solar Disk or Ibo Itsi Sacrification, *Africa* 21, no. 2 (1951), 93-111.

[24] Eli Bentor, "Life as an Artistic Process: Igbo Ikenga and Ofo," *African Arts*, 21, no. 2 (1988), 66-71, 94.

[25] M. D. W. Jeffreys, "Ikenga: The Ibo Ram-Headed God," *African Studies* 13, vol. 1 (1954), 25-45.

[26] E. Okechukwu Odita, E. O, "Universal Cults and Intra-Diffusion: Igbo Ikenga in Cultural Retrospection," *African Studies Review*, 6, no. 1 (1973), 79.

[27] Ibid.

[28] G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London: Seeley, 1921); P. Amaury Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria,* 4 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1926); C. K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937). Before the ethnographic studies of Basden and Talbot among the Igbo, late nineteenth century European travelogues of Adolphe Burdo, *The Niger and the Benueh, Travels in Central Africa*, trans. Mrs. George Sturge (London: R. Bentley, 1880) and Augustus F. Mockler-Ferryman (*Up the Niger*, London: Cassell & Co., 1891), for instance, mentioned ikenga among the curios that intrigued them in Igboland.

[29] M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu, "The Dawn of Igbo Civilization in the Igbo Culture Area," *Odinani,* 1 (1972).

[30] Ejizu 1991, 234.

[31] See E. Okechukwu Odita, "Universal Cults and Intra-Diffusion: Diffusion of Ikenga Art," *African Studies Review*, 16 (1973b).

[32] Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion,* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970).

[33] See Jeffreys 1954.

[34] John Boston, *Ikenga Figures Among the Northwestern Igbo and the Igala* (Lagos: Federal Dept. of Antiquity, 1977). See also Cole and Aniakor 1984.

[35] Cole and Aniakor 1984, 23.

[36] Bentor 1987. See also Basden 1921; S. R. Smith, "The Ibo People" (PhD Dissertation, Cambridge University, 1929); P. Amaury Talbot, *Tribes of the Niger Delta* (London: Sheldon Press, 1932), 98.

[37] Ejizu 1991, 233; see also Boston 1977; Cole & Aniakor 1984; Jeffreys 1954; Odita 1973).

[38] William Fagg, *Nigerian Tribal Art* (The Art Council of Great Britain, 1960).

[39] Odita 1973, 75.

[40] Ejizu 1991, 237.

[41] Chinua Achebe, "Chi in Igbo Cosmology," in *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (Garden City, new York: Anchor Press/Doubleday1975), 159-175.

[42] Cole and Aniakor, 1984, 24-25.

[43] See Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart,* (London: Heinemann, 1958).

[44] Bentor 1988, 71.

[45] Basil Davidson, *The Africans: An Entry to Cultural History,* (London: Penguin, 1969).

[46] Cole C. Aniako, Cole, "Structuralism in Ikenga: An Ethnoaesthetic Approach to Traditional Igbo Art," *Conch*, 6, nos. 1-2 (1974), 1-14, 2.

[47] Davidson 1969, 25.

[48] Bentor 1988, 69.

[49] Bentor 1988. See also Simon Ottenberg, "Ibo Receptivity to Change," in *Continuity and Change in African Culture*, eds. W. R. Bascon and M. J. Herskovits (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 130-43.

[50] Ogonna Agu, "The Ikenga as an Archetype of the Hero in the Igbo Cultural Tradition," in *The Hero in Igbo Life and Literature*, ed. Donatus Ibe Nwoga and C. Azuonye (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 2002).

[51] Ejizu, 1991, 235.

[52] Basde 1921; Talbot 1926; Bentor 1988.

[53] Helen O. Chukwuma, "The Oral Tradition of the Ibos," PhD. Dissertation (University of Birmingham, 1974).

[54] Achebe 2010 [1958], 5.

[55] Ibid., 8.

[56] Ibid., 8. See also Chijioke Azuawusiefe, "Telling Africa's Story: Chinua Achebe and the Power of Narratives," in *Chinua Achebe and the Igbo World: Between Fiction, Fact, and Historical Representation*, eds. Chima J. Korieh and Ijeoma Nwajiaku (2020, forthcoming).

[57] Bentor 1988, 71.

[58] Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1974); Agbaogu, "The Art of Nri." B.A. Thesis (University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1974); M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu, *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony* (London: Ethnographica, 1981); Nwankwo T. Nwaezeigwe, *The Igbo and their Nri Neighbours: A Study in the Politics of Igbo Culture and Origins* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2007).

[59] Cole and Aniakor, 1984.

[60] Ejizu, 1991.

[61] Richard N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Social Life and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

[62] M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu, *The Social Anthropology of Africa: An Introduction,* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

[63] This invocation and the subsequent ritual descriptions follow closely Onwuejeogwu's 1975 rendition.

[64] Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo are Igbo weekdays, constituting the four market days of the Igbo week.

[65] See Ejizu 1991; Onwuejeogwu 1975; and J. U. Tagbo Nzeako, *Omenala Ndi Igbo* (Enugu: Longman, 1979).

[66] Achebe 1974.

[67] Ejizu 1991, 240.

[68] Aniako 1974, 5.

[69] Ejizu 1991, 234.

[70] Onwuejeogwu 1991.

[71] Ejizu 1991, 242.

[72] W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Images Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[73] Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[74] Davidson 1969, 25.

[75] Victor Chikezie Uchendu, *The Igbo of South-East Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinchart and Winston, 1965).

[76] See for, instance, *Ikenga: Journal of African Studies*, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.