

Beyond Carvings and Rituals: Unveiling the Ikenga's Role in Modern Igbo Society

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Abstract

Purpose of the Study: This study examines the contemporary significance of the Ikenga, a crucial cultural symbol among the Igbo people of Nigeria, commonly associated with strength, determination, and entrepreneurial drive. **Methodology:** The study used a qualitative research design and employed semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to collect data from various participants in Igbo society. These participants included entrepreneurs, community leaders, cultural historians, and spiritual leaders. **Main Findings:** The research reveals that Ikenga continues to serve as a significant cultural icon, supporting entrepreneurship and symbolizing communal achievements and personal aspirations in contemporary times. Despite the challenges of globalization, Ikenga adapts to maintain its relevance, underpinning socio-economic practices and embodying the enduring Igbo values of resilience and determination. **Applications of this Study:** The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, cultural practitioners, and scholars, highlighting the importance of integrating cultural heritage into development strategies. This study encourages a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the dynamic interplay between traditional symbols and modern societal roles, offering a model for preserving cultural identity in rapidly changing environments. **Novelty/Originality of this Study:** This research contributes to the ethnographic literature by offering a contemporary analysis of Ikenga's relevance in Igbo society, beyond its traditional and symbolic interpretations. It underscores the symbol's adaptability and enduring significance, enriching the discourse on the preservation of cultural heritage in the face of globalization and modern challenges.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage; entrepreneurship, globalization; Igbo Society, Ikenga

Introduction

Culture, as a complex system encompassing knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society, plays a crucial role in shaping both individual and collective identities and behaviors (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). It functions not only as a guideline for human behavior in social interactions but also as the foundation for establishing the norms and values that govern the life of a community (Utami, Ahmad, & Wahyuni, 2023). This role of culture is particularly significant in societies rich in tradition and symbolism, such as the Igbo community in Nigeria, where culture provides the backdrop for understanding and interpreting social and economic phenomena. As one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Igbo people inhabit the southeastern and south-central regions of the country, distinguished by their unique social and cultural structure without a centralized authority or government, unlike other tribes in Nigeria. Their communal life is overseen by a council of elders, reflecting a decentralized and democratic governance system. In this context, the concept of "Ikenga" emerges as a pivotal symbol reflecting strength, bravery, and individual achievement, particularly in entrepreneurship and personal

accomplishment. As noted by Olutayo (1999), and supported by the research of Ukaegbu (2005), Ikenga is not just a physical manifestation in the form of a wooden carving presented at the transition to adulthood but also a profound philosophical symbol of inner strength and determination. This concept, as elaborated by Achebe (1964) in "Arrow of God," celebrates not only personal achievements but also signifies an individual's commitment to their community, making Ikenga an essential aspect in understanding the social and cultural dynamics of the Igbo society.

Previous studies on Ikenga, such as those by Odita (1973) and Jeffreys (1954), have laid a foundational understanding of this significant cultural artifact within Igbo society, emphasizing its symbolic representation of strength, success, and the embodiment of the right arm's power. Odita (Odita, 1973) explores the universal cults and intra-diffusion of the Igbo Ikenga, highlighting its significance not only as a cultural retrospection but also in understanding the broader African context of similar symbols. Jeffreys (Jeffreys, 1954) provides an in-depth analysis of Ikenga, termed the Ibo Ram-Headed God, focusing on its association with good fortune, success, ability, and the strength of the right arm, as represented by the carved wooden figure. These studies collectively contribute to a nuanced comprehension of Ikenga's role in Igbo culture, offering insights into its spiritual, historical, and social dimensions. The present research builds upon these foundational works, aiming to delve deeper into the preservation of Ikenga and Ofo sculptures in contemporary Igbo society, as discussed by Isiani et al. (2021). By examining the impact of modernity on these traditional symbols, this study seeks to offer a fresh perspective on the intertwining of creativity, spirituality, and societal values within the Igbo community, thereby enriching the existing academic discourse with a contemporary analysis of Ikenga's relevance and transformation in the face of evolving cultural dynamics.

Despite the valuable contributions of previous research in elucidating the historical and symbolic importance of Ikenga within Igbo society, there exists a noticeable gap in the exploration of how Ikenga functions within the fabric of contemporary Igbo community life. Prior studies have primarily concentrated on the artifact's symbolic and ritualistic aspects without fully addressing its practical implications and functions in everyday societal roles and economic activities. This study seeks to bridge this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of the Igbo people, examining how Ikenga continues to influence and support entrepreneurship, community cohesion, and individual achievement in modern Igbo society. Through this lens, the research aims to uncover the dynamic ways in which Ikenga underpins not only cultural identity and spiritual beliefs but also plays a crucial role in the economic empowerment and social mobility of individuals within the Igbo community, thus providing a more holistic understanding of its significance in contemporary contexts.

This study significantly enhances our comprehension of Igbo culture by shedding light on the contemporary relevance and functions of Ikenga, thus offering a pivotal contribution to the field of ethnographic studies at large. By meticulously examining the role of Ikenga in modern Igbo society, this research not only deepens our understanding of this cultural artifact beyond its traditional and symbolic interpretations but also situates it within the broader socio-economic practices of the Igbo people today. The findings from this study illuminate how cultural heritage and traditional symbols like Ikenga adapt and remain pertinent in the face of globalization and modern challenges, providing valuable insights into the resilience and dynamism of Igbo culture. Furthermore, this research's focus on the interplay between cultural traditions and contemporary entrepreneurial practices expands the scope of ethnographic studies, encouraging a multidisciplinary approach that bridges anthropology, sociology, and economics. The

implications of this study extend beyond the Igbo community, offering a model for understanding the role of cultural symbols in other societies facing similar processes of modernization, thereby contributing to a richer, more nuanced global discourse on the preservation of cultural identity in rapidly changing environments.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the multifaceted roles of Ikenga within contemporary Igbo society. The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in providing deep, narrative insights into cultural phenomena, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the symbolic and practical significance of Ikenga in the daily lives and entrepreneurial activities of the Igbo people. This design facilitated an in-depth exploration of the cultural, spiritual, and economic dimensions of Ikenga, highlighting its enduring relevance amidst modern societal transformations.

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a wide range of participants, including Igbo entrepreneurs, community leaders, cultural historians, and spiritual leaders, to gather diverse perspectives on the role of Ikenga in entrepreneurship and community life. Participant observation was carried out in several Igbo communities, particularly during cultural festivals and entrepreneurial events, to observe firsthand the invocation and reverence of Ikenga in communal and business practices. Document analysis included the examination of historical texts, cultural records, and previous academic studies on Ikenga, enriching the study's contextual understanding of its historical evolution and current manifestations.

Participants in this study were purposively selected to include a broad spectrum of individuals who engage with the concept of Ikenga in various capacities within Igbo society. This included established and emerging entrepreneurs who identify Ikenga as a source of motivation and guidance in their business endeavors, cultural practitioners involved in creating and consecrating Ikenga sculptures, and community elders who oversee traditional rituals and ceremonies. By incorporating a wide range of voices and experiences, the study aimed to capture a comprehensive picture of Ikenga's significance across different segments of Igbo society.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method well-suited to qualitative research that seeks to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data. The analysis process began with a thorough reading and re-reading of interview transcripts and observational notes to gain a deep familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated by identifying recurring ideas and concepts related to the role of Ikenga in entrepreneurship, community cohesion, and individual identity. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the core aspects of Ikenga's significance in contemporary Igbo society. Throughout the analysis, reflexivity and constant comparison were employed to ensure the themes accurately reflected the data and to account for the researcher's influence on the research process.

Results and Discussion

1. Ikenga as a Support for Entrepreneurship

From time immemorial, the Igbo people of Nigeria have exhibited a deep-seated desire for business and independence. Their entrepreneurial talents are recognized within their communities and transcend national boundaries (Uchehara, 2009). This

entrepreneurial spirit is a strong force behind the Igbo worldview, a comprehensive socio-economic perspective that shapes their existence. Uchehara (2009) asserts that one's worldview significantly influences the desire to establish a business, which explains why the Igbo believe that the right hand of an Igbo man is known as the hand of accomplishment as it is the primary tool for taking action and conquering obstacles in life. The Igbo culture stresses the importance of praising and acknowledging meritorious prosperity, which is a practice that permeates their religious beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, festivals, folklore, and myths (Oguejiofor, 2009).

Within the Igbo culture, wealth is a means to attain social prominence and gain socially accepted status. The Igbo people are renowned for their entrepreneurial spirit, and they have become one of the most dispersed and entrepreneurial ethnic groups in Africa. This reputation underscores the need for Ikenga, which they believe is the source of their strength (Nwaezigwe, 2013). The concept of Ikenga reflects the Igbo belief in an open society where talent leads to enterprise, enterprise leads to accomplishment, accomplishment leads to traditional recognition, and talent is the driving force. This competitive, self-achievement-driven motivation is deeply rooted in Igbo society and symbolized by the Ikenga concept.

The enduring significance of Ikenga within Igbo culture persists into contemporary times, exemplified by the establishment of the modern entity known as 'Aka Ikenga.' According to a report by the New Telegraph (2023), Agbalanze Chike Madueke, the president of 'Aka Ikenga,' underscored the organization's commitment to promote principles. Madueke declared that the 'Aka Ikenga Awards' would stand as a preeminent occasion for acknowledging diligence, fortitude, excellence, and accomplishments within the Igbo community and among its associates engaged in business, elected or appointed positions, governmental roles, and various global spheres. The awards, as articulated by Madueke, are bestowed with the sole intent of recognizing exceptional leadership, achievements, bravery, and entrepreneurial spirit, aligning seamlessly with the fundamental values and ethos of the Igbo people.

Ikenga supports the Igbo people, aiding them in their hard work and entrepreneurship. Dike (1956) and Nwaezigwe (2013) observe that entrepreneurship leads to accomplishment, and accomplishment leads to customary privileges. Consequently, the Igbo society, with its characteristic republican values, is characterized by a highly competitive drive for personal achievement, rooted in a generative life force symbolically represented by Ikenga. This materialistic philosophy harmoniously combines the essential elements of the individual, the community, and eschatological expectations to achieve economic success. In this dialectic, the individual takes the forefront, and success is individualized (Oguejiofor, 1996). Nwala (1985) argues that this is because the production of goods in the traditional Igbo economy belongs to individuals. Consequently, the Igbo entrepreneurial spirit is intrinsic rather than a reaction to external forces. Notably, the Igbo people place immense value on achievements unrelated to heredity, which explains why the concept of Ikenga, as the foundation of entrepreneurship, is not passed down through family generations.

a) Individual Ikenga

The Igbo society operates on the principle of equality, where class distinctions based on birthright are not recognized. The Igbos believe that everyone has the same potential to achieve the highest positions within the community, irrespective of their birth. The equality of greatness is part of the Igbo sociopolitical structure, which expects individuals to contribute to the well-being of their community from a young age. As observed by

Basden (1966) and Achebe in Njoku (2013), age-grade associations, a part of the age-set framework, play a crucial role in the responsibilities assigned to individuals. Consequently, young men find themselves in constant competition with their peers. This competitive spirit, starting at the peer group level and extending to the age-grade affiliations, swiftly permeates the family, clan, village, and town levels.

In Igbo society, wealth, social status and political influence are inter-woven. Those who acquire wealth elevate themselves and their families, villages, and towns; hence, such successes are attributed to Ikenga because a man could not attain a certain level of prominence without the assistance and support of his Ikenga.



Figure 1 Individual Ikenga (with a machete in the right hand and a human head in the left)



Figure 2 Stylized Individual Ikenga.
African TribalArt

On the other hand, the Ikenga represents the spirit of enterprise within the Igbo culture, concepts of war, good fortune, and overall prosperity in life. The Igbos conceptualize the right hand as the source of positivity, and its skilful use is the key to success and adulation. A man's right hand is his primary source of power. The Ikenga embodies a cult of the right hand, symbolizing a man's journey through life's challenges and experiences. As Afigbo (1986, p. 2) explains, a man's ability to successfully navigate and survive life's obstacles is intrinsically a result of the powers in his right hand.

Structurally, the Ikenga is represented by a carved wooden figure, typically with a ram's head, two horns (Figure 2), a machete in the right hand, and a human head in the left, symbolizing strength (Figure 1). This representation signifies that a man's power lies in his mind, thoughts, and ideas, much like a ram's strength resides in its head. However, unlike a ram, a man employs his right hand to manifest his plans because while age is a thing of high honour and respect among the Igbo, individual accomplishments achieved through personal entrepreneurial endeavours receive great admiration. Consequently, to appraise an individual's worth in Igbo society, their achievements are considered before their lineage. Therefore, the embodiment of individual accomplishment and personal achievements are attributed to his Ikenga rather than inherited traits or external factors, as described by Boston (1977). Ichie Chijioke Akarigwe (Personal Communication,

2024), an elder in the Okwandu family of Ohuhu Umuahia, collaborated with the above description of individual Ikenga thus:

Certainly. The dynamic postures and distinctive features of Ikenga sculptures, such as the horned headdress, symbolize personal achievements, strength, and authority. These symbols are deeply rooted in Igbo cosmology, emphasizing the significance of individual agency and the pursuit of success within the broader spiritual framework

Each man possesses his own Ikenga, which ceases to exist upon his death. The Ikenga is responsible for planning a man's activities and life goals. Successes are attributed to the Ikenga, and in the event of repeated setbacks, the Ikenga may be re-consecrated due to perceived inefficiency or even blamed for unfavourable circumstances. The Igbo believe that a man's god, represented by his Ikenga, protects him from misfortune, attributing accidents or adversaries to a lack of Ikenga's protection. Repeated struggles without corresponding results are also associated with the inactivity of the Ikenga.

Among the Igbo, a man's success based on his abilities is recognized and highly esteemed and his Ikenga provides the impetus for a strong negotiating position, as acknowledged by Jeffreys (1954). Even if a man possesses natural strength and vigour, these qualities are attributed to the strength of his Ikenga. Similarly, if a less physically robust man prevails over a stronger individual or excels in generating wealth, the credit goes to his Ikenga and not his physical attributes.

b) Community Ikenga



Figure 3 Community Ikenga



Figure 4 Community Ikenga

The Ikenga can also be owned by an individual or a group of people. In the case of the latter, the community's Ikenga is associated with a specific group, such as a village or a community. It aligns with the collective interests and progress of the community. Contrary to the personal Ikenga, which expires upon the owner's death, the community Ikenga endures as long as the community itself.

Isiani et al. (2021) assert, communal Ikenga is typically held by a group of peers within a community. In contrast to individual Ikenga, which signifies the bearer's achievements and status in their chosen profession, communal Ikenga represents the success of the entire community in a collective endeavour. Whether in the context of war, fishing, farming, or other shared endeavours, communal Ikenga stands as a testament to the continuity of specific professions within the community. The themes depicted in communal Ikenga reflect the distinctive pursuits of the community, showcasing its identity. For instance, an Ikenga adorned with a fierce expression, carrying a human skull and a sword, portrays a village renowned for its warriors (Figure 3). Overseeing of communal Ikenga figures is shared among members of the community, specifically those who partake in the same profession.

Another form of communal Ikenga involves a wooden sculpture with representations of people, animals, or both, and is an extension of the warrior motif (Figure 4). These figures, particularly the larger ones, often exceed one meter in height and are not attributed to an individual but to an age grade or lineage segment. In many cases, these figures display marks on their faces, further signifying their communal nature. They represent group achievements and prestige rather than individual accomplishments, bridging the gap between the individual and the community, as described by Bendor (1988).

In the most straightforward examples of a group Ikenga, animal figurines are supported by a superstructure. More complex communal Ikenga may feature intricate superstructures with two horns that encircle the sides of the skull and extend upward, terminating in snakeheads. The lower portions of the horns are adorned with pointed protrusions. Above the head, one may find four ram heads, along with one or more leopards at the top, as described by Nwosu (1983, p. 8). These complex headdresses, symbolizing group ownership, incorporate motifs that represent the community's reputation, such as warriors, hunters, traders, or primarily farmers. During the annual festival, all males born in the previous year are presented before the communal Ikenga, thereby affirming their inclusion within the community, as noted by Nwosu (Nwosu, 1983).

c) Titleholder's Ikenga

The ornate ikenga figures, particularly those with superstructures, align with the more advanced and title-taking phases of a man's life. The ozo title, one of the highest ranks within the title system, is associated with the three-legged Awka stool, a symbol of power and status. The staff that accompanies the titleholder is a complex, hierarchical symbol, evolving from a simple wooden staff to a rod of forged iron adorned with brass rings. The tusk, used as a trumpet, is carried in the left hand, signifying strength and authority, often symbolized by the elephant (Figure 5). Young boys and girls would often carry the stool and tusk of high-ranking individuals, even if they didn't possess a staff.

Ichie Chijioke Akarigwe (Personal Communication, 2024), explains at an interview that,

the distinction between an individual Ikenga and a title-holder Ikenga lies in their respective functions within Igbo societal structures. An individual Ikenga primarily

represents the personal aspirations and achievements of a specific person. It serves as a spiritual companion, embodying the individual's success and strength. On the other hand, a title-holder Ikenga is associated with leadership and communal responsibilities. It symbolizes the authority and achievements of someone who holds a significant title within the community, such as a Nzeh or Ozo. He affirm that while both share the fundamental essence of Ikenga symbolism, the focus shifts from personal accomplishments to communal leadership in the context of a title-holder Ikenga.



Figure 5 Titleholder's Ikenga, courtesy: Princeton ArtMuseum on

The distinctive scarification pattern, featuring parallel vertical lines on the forehead and temples, is commonly found on intricate ikenga figures. Scarification was a specialized practice of experts in some Igbo community, and it identified high-ranking members of title societies and the offspring of nobility. Superstructures on titleholder ikenga frequently incorporate animal symbolism, with the leopard, or agu, representing the king of the animal kingdom and the political authority of a titled man. All ikenga figures feature a ram or other animal horns, symbolizing strength and force. Many ornate specimens depict the entire ram or at least its entire head. Other animals, such as snakes, birds, and turtles, may also appear in the figurines.

A row of pointed projections flanking the head is a recurring feature in many ikenga

figures, both warriors and titleholders. These projections often occur in threes or other odd numbers on each side. In the southern Igbo region, Ikenga may feature three knobs on a horizontal bar, as three is a significant number associated with men in West Africa. These images may represent ceremonial chalk in the form of cones that symbolize purity and protection. High-ranking individuals often require magical protection due to the envy they attract, often manifested as witchcraft (Bentor, 1988).

2. The Aesthetics of Ikenga as Sculpture

The Ikenga are figures of different sizes and shapes among the Nigerian Igbo people. An Ikenga figure typically holds a knife or machete in its right hand and a human head in its left hand, accompanied by two curled horns. The placement of these objects conveys that the right hand is the one executing actions, while the left-hand assists in carrying the outcomes of those actions, as per traditional Igbo understanding.

The emblematic Ikenga sculpture consists of a human figure holding a machete in its right hand and a human head in its left hand, both adorned with carved ram's head horns, exuding a fierce expression. The significance of the ram's horns lies in their reflection of the strength and determination displayed by rams when they engage in head-to-head combat, signifying the willpower required to overcome life's challenges. The incorporation of a ram within the Ikenga symbol is intrinsically linked to the resilient determination of an Igbo man to attain greatness despite encountering adversities, obstacles, and economic challenges. The anthropomorphic depiction in this symbol takes the form of a sculpture representing a man committed to fostering progress within both his familial and communal spheres.

The knife, with its wedged blade, represents the violence necessary to confront challenges. It's important to note that some Igbo communities once practised headhunting, preserving the heads of defeated individuals to absorb their strength. The human head in the left hand of the figure serves as a reminder of the rewards for one's deeds and their dominance over adversaries. Upon the owner's passing, the Ikenga is ceremonially destroyed and interred with them. Despite its significance in Igbo culture as a symbol of power and strength, Ikenga sculptures often feature intricate designs and unique patterns that enhance the natural form of the object. These distinct and captivating motifs have contributed to defining the social structure of various Igbo communities before the colonial era in Nigeria, often without adhering to a specific curriculum, as it might be today.

Ikenga figures from different Igbo villages may resemble ram heads with horns, cylinder-shaped human-ram faces with two horns, or ram faces with horns and facial markings. The elements common to these sculptures are the two horns, human form, and the ram's head. The totemic ram pattern of the Ikenga reflects an Igbo man's determined will to succeed in the face of challenges and economic hardships. The human form in the sculpture symbolizes an individual's pursuit of bettering their family and community, while the two horns represent the risk involved in venturing outside one's comfort zone for survival. When commissioning an Ikenga carving, a man might specify a particular design or leave it to the carver's discretion while emphasizing that the carving should reflect his social status, as argued by Arinze (1970). This practice remains consistent regardless of the artist's creativity and skill. The style and patterns depicted on an Ikenga figure may also be influenced by traditional beliefs and social practices, with the expectation that the artist will conform to these norms rather than express their ideas.

Aniakor (1973) posits that "the artist must sacrifice individualism to conformity

because his scope for innovation and experimentation is therefore narrow and limited." Consequently, the artist becomes a conformist, with their renown, creativity, and area of expertise confined to the ability to replicate the exact figure requested by the customer. As per Ottenberg (1959), the great school of sculpture comprised artists who, generation after generation, adorned the daily life events of the community, leading to their recognition.

Aesthetically, an Ikenga figure is usually portrayed as a complete human figure, adorned with horns, displaying a fierce expression, and holding various objects such as a stool. However, some variations of Ikenga include a cylinder-shaped human-ram face with two horns or a ram face with horns and facial markings. These unique designs and patterns embedded in the sculptures convey deep cultural and social meanings, and while artists might have some creative freedom, they often adhere to established norms and traditions.

3. Social Functions of Ikenga

Unsurprisingly, Ikenga objects predominantly portray a male-centric culture within Igboland, as duly noted by Ejizu (1991), given that men are the primary possessors and users of Ikenga. The Ikenga carvers share common functions across various Igbo cultures, crafting these objects in diverse shapes, patterns, and sizes depending on the owner's social status.

Ikenga is also emblematic of the innate entrepreneurial spirit inherent in Igbo people. While men individually own these sculptures, unlike other assets that can be passed down to their children by way of inheritance, Ikenga is inalienable and perishes with its owner. This practice, as observed by Afigbo (1986), stems from Igbo cosmology's belief in reincarnation. Therefore, when the owner of Ikenga dies, the Ikenga is not handed over to the owner's child, rather it guides the deceased to the hereafter.

The Ikenga symbolizes a cult of strength, perseverance, and advancement in life. The practice of Ikenga is just one facet of the rich visual culture, ceremonies, and traditions found within Igboland (Onyibor, 2016). Owners of Ikenga, in some Igbo communities, partake in annual Ikenga festivals, believing that appeasing the Ikenga brings prosperity and good fortune. The varying characteristics and ornamentation of each Ikenga lies in its personal guidance and regulator of personal activity towards the owner and his fellow humans regional beliefs, customs, or other factors (Onwuejeogwu, 1972) 1972).

On occasion, an owner might choose to replace their existing Ikenga with a new one, especially in the face of life's setbacks. For instance, a newly titled man may opt to exchange his old Ikenga for a new one that signifies his status as a titleholder, substituting the knife in the right hand with a staff and replacing the human head in the left hand with an elephant tusk. The strength or weakness of a man's Ikenga is often used to gauge his progress at different life stages. When faced with challenging situations, men often express their gratitude to their Ikenga by proclaiming, that their Ikenga is strong in the village square. Conversely, when misfortune befalls them, they might also attribute it to their Ikenga Nwaezigwe (2013).

When a man prospers, he reveres his Ikenga, offers sacrifices to it, and displays it prominently atop his dwelling. Conversely, when in distress, he lowers his Ikenga from its place of honour and leaves it neglected on the ground. The Ikenga does not warrant unwavering devotion; it serves as both a deity and a servant, expected to enhance a man's prosperity and contribute to his rise in status. If the deity fulfils this role effectively, it

earns respect, but if it fails, it faces resentment.

A man's interaction with his Ikenga about his life's progress also reflects the deity's role as a means of introspection. The Igbo understand that leading a fulfilling life requires a perpetual quest for improved ways of living, and they actively apply the lessons learned from such self-reflection in their lives. In this respect, the Ikenga institution embodies the Igbo people's contemplative and profoundly philosophical approach to life, as noted by Basden (1966). The concept of living a good life through self-reflection, eventually contributing to communal well-being (as exemplified by the community Ikenga), underscores this philosophy.

For the titleholders, the Ikenga symbolizes honesty, strength, and power, rather than morality and other aspects of ethics typically attributed to it. Ikenga represents a god whose purpose is to bestow wealth and prosperity upon the family. The institution of the Ikenga reflects Igbo philosophy, where an individual's prosperity coincides with communal well-being. People express their aspirations through prayers and offerings to the Ikenga, articulating them in earnest and solemn supplications, and then take proactive steps to turn their dreams into reality. Through the outcomes of their endeavours, they assess the power and efficacy of their Ikenga.

While these dynamics are well-recognized, Igbo traditional religious practitioners sometimes overlook the fact that, when evaluating an Ikenga, the owners simultaneously assess themselves on a spiritual and psychological level. It resembles the act of pointing fingers; while one finger may be directed at the Ikenga, the others inevitably point back at the owner of the Ikenga or the person beseeching the deity. Referring to the findings of Jeffreys (1954), it is established that Ikenga holds a position of reverence and acknowledgment within Igbo culture, distinct from the characterization of idols, as perceived in current Christian contexts. In Igbo households, the triumphs of an individual are commemorated by expressing gratitude to their Ikenga through praises. In some instances, this recognition extends to organizing elaborate festivals, celebrating the accomplishment of the individual's destiny.

Discussion

This research elucidates the enduring significance of Ikenga within contemporary Igbo society, highlighting its pivotal role in fostering entrepreneurship, symbolizing communal achievements, and epitomizing individual aspirations and successes. Through a qualitative analysis that incorporates semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, the study reveals that despite the onslaught of globalization and modern influences, Ikenga remains a vital cultural symbol that adapts to maintain its relevance. The establishment of 'Aka Ikenga' and its associated awards exemplify this adaptability, emphasizing the symbol's continued importance in promoting excellence, leadership, and service within the Igbo community. This research not only builds upon previous studies by offering a contemporary perspective on Ikenga's practical implications but also underscores the symbol's contribution to the preservation of cultural identity and the promotion of socio-economic empowerment in the face of changing societal dynamics.

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted role of Ikenga in contemporary Igbo society, serving as a linchpin for personal achievement, entrepreneurship, and spiritual power. This resonates with the work of Okeke et al. (2017), who highlighted the importance of individual spiritual entities like Chi and Ikenga in Igbo culture, emphasizing the reverence for ancestral spirits. Similarly, Isiani et al. (2021)

delve into the creativity and spirituality that envelop Ikenga, mirroring the societal values deeply embedded in Igbo culture. Our research aligns with these studies, further illustrating how Ikenga's significance permeates the socio-economic fabric of Igbo society, particularly in the context of entrepreneurship. The resilience and growth of Igbo entrepreneurship post-Biafra war, as explored by Nnadozie (2002), further attest to the cultural and economic importance of Ikenga, showcasing its role not only in spiritual and personal domains but also in the broader socio-economic revival and empowerment of the Igbo people.

Contrastingly, historical and anthropological studies have often concentrated on the broader religiosity within Igbo society, exploring themes such as sacrifice, divination, and sacred authority (Chuku, 2018a). These studies, while shedding light on the multifaceted religious practices, do not specifically dissect the contemporary relevance of Ikenga in the entrepreneurial spirit and community cohesion. However, the spiritual force of male achievement embodied by Ikenga, as noted by Chuku (2018b), underscores its cultural influence beyond Igbo territories, hinting at a universal appeal and adaptability. This broader cultural influence is echoed in the scholarship of Oditia (1973), who discusses the universal cults and intra-diffusion of Ikenga among different ethnic groups. Our study, while focusing on the contemporary implications of Ikenga, bridges these historical perspectives by demonstrating how the symbol's spiritual and cultural significance has evolved to support modern entrepreneurial and societal structures. This discourse suggests that while Ikenga's roots are deeply traditional, its application and relevance continue to adapt, reflecting the dynamic interplay between culture, spirituality, and socio-economic practices within and beyond Igbo society.

The enduring significance of Ikenga in contemporary Igbo society, as illuminated by the study conducted by Isiani et al. (2021), reflects a broader phenomenon of cultural resilience and adaptability amidst globalization and changing socio-economic landscapes. This research serves as a testament to the deep-rootedness of cultural symbols and their ability to evolve, maintaining relevance in modern contexts while supporting traditional values and practices. The dynamic role of Ikenga, bridging the spiritual with the entrepreneurial, underscores the integral relationship between culture and economic development, highlighting how traditional beliefs can empower individuals and communities in the face of modern challenges. This reflection on Ikenga's contemporary relevance not only emphasizes the importance of cultural heritage in shaping identities and fostering resilience but also signals a broader discourse on the sustainability of cultural practices, their transformation, and their impact on social and economic empowerment in societies undergoing rapid change. Through this lens, the study of Ikenga becomes a microcosm for examining how cultures worldwide navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, offering insights into the mechanisms through which cultural symbols are preserved, adapted, and leveraged for community development and individual achievement in a globalized world.

The study's findings shed light on the diverse roles that Ikenga plays in Igbo society, going beyond its traditional religious significance to include entrepreneurial spirit and community cohesion. This highlights the close interrelationship between cultural heritage and socio-economic development. The adaptability of Ikenga reflects the resilience and resourcefulness of the Igbo people, demonstrating how traditional symbols can stimulate modern societal empowerment and economic growth. Thus, it emphasizes the vital need to preserve cultural heritage in the face of globalization, underscoring the critical role of cultural symbols in strengthening identity, resilience, and economic empowerment in contemporary societies. These insights suggest that policymakers and practitioners should

integrate cultural understanding into development policies and practices, and support the conservation and revitalization of cultural symbols like Ikenga to enhance societal well-being and economic resilience. Moreover, this study prompts a reconsideration of the role of traditional cultural practices in present-day socio-economic contexts, urging policymakers, cultural practitioners, and scholars to explore how such symbols can address modern challenges while conserving cultural identity and heritage.

The study findings reveal that Ikenga is an essential symbol of personal achievement, entrepreneurial spirit, and communal identity in the Igbo culture. This highlights the interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary societal dynamics. The significance of Ikenga in modern Igbo society persists due to the Igbo people's values of resilience, innovation, and community cohesion, which have historically underpinned their social and economic structures. This cultural continuity showcases the ability of cultural symbols to evolve while retaining core meanings and functions, even in the face of globalization and modern challenges. Such resilience and adaptability are crucial for maintaining cultural identity and cohesion, providing a sense of continuity and belonging, and empowering individuals and communities to navigate and thrive in a rapidly changing world. Therefore, the enduring relevance of Ikenga reflects the dynamic nature of Igbo culture and exemplifies the broader human capacity to adapt and sustain cultural traditions that anchor and guide societies through periods of change and uncertainty.

In light of recent research on the significance of Ikenga in Igbo society, it is crucial to develop initiatives that preserve and integrate cultural symbols like these into modern societal development. Stakeholders such as cultural heritage organizations, policymakers, educators, and community leaders should collaborate to promote understanding and appreciation of Ikenga and other traditional cultural symbols. This can be achieved by incorporating cultural education into school curricula, celebrating and revitalizing cultural practices through community programs, and supporting policies that integrate cultural heritage into economic development strategies, which can lead to socio-economic empowerment of communities. Furthermore, research institutions should conduct further studies on adapting cultural symbols in other societies, leading to a global dialogue on preserving cultural heritage amidst globalization. By following these steps, we can ensure that cultural symbols like Ikenga continue to thrive and adapt, contributing to the cultural richness and socio-economic resilience of communities in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

The Ikenga is a symbol of great significance in the cultural fabric of the Igbo society of Nigeria. It represents resilience, entrepreneurial spirit, and communal dedication. This study emphasizes the multifaceted role of Ikenga, not just as a physical artifact but as a profound embodiment of individual potential, personal empowerment, and societal commitment. It serves as a symbol of strength and determination, deeply ingrained in the socio-economic practices and philosophical underpinnings of the Igbo people. Ikenga is unique in its representation of success and its role in fostering an open society that values competition and self-achievement, transcending its physical form to influence the path to prosperity, guide introspective self-evaluation, and contribute to the collective well-being of the community. This research highlights the dynamic nature of Ikenga as both a sculptural object and a philosophical concept, reflecting the intrinsic link between personal success and communal prosperity, and affirming the enduring values of hard work and determination within the Igbo culture.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its conceptual exploration of Ikenga,

highlighting its dynamic function as a source of personal empowerment, entrepreneurial motivation, and communal cohesion. This research extends the discourse on Ikenga beyond its traditional interpretations, positioning it as a pivotal element in the contemporary Igbo societal framework that bridges the gap between ancient cultural practices and modern economic and social structures. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study enriches the ethnographic literature with detailed, narrative-driven insights into how cultural symbols like Ikenga continue to influence and reflect the evolving identities and values of communities in the face of global changes.

However, this investigation acknowledges certain limitations, including its focus on a specific cultural symbol within a single ethnic group, which may restrict the applicability of its findings to other contexts. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, while offering depth and detail, limits its ability to generalize across the broader Igbo population or other cultural groups. Future research directions could encompass comparative studies of similar cultural symbols within different societies to explore universal themes and divergent adaptations of traditional symbols in contemporary life. Furthermore, integrating quantitative methods could offer complementary perspectives on the socio-economic impact of cultural symbols like Ikenga, providing a broader statistical foundation to support the qualitative findings.

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