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Ikenga and the Igbo Influence on Benin Arts and Language

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

“Awka smith Anene Chika working at his anvil. The Igbo anvil, with its cushioned base, is considered more effective than other types, including the European model shown on his right. Bronze works are crafted in

the “workshop.” Nancy Neaher, 1976, Igbo Metalsmiths

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Ikenga / Tumblr

Ikenga (Igbo: strength of movement) is a revered horned deity among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. As one of the most powerful cultural symbols, Ikenga is widely recognized and often displayed in personal shrines. Traditionally, it is owned by men and, occasionally, by women of high social standing. Ikenga represents a person's Chi (personal god), Ndichie (ancestors), aka Ikenga (right hand), and ike (power), activated through prayer and sacrifice.

Though Ikenga is an exclusively Igbo symbol, it has spread to various



regions through cultural exchange during precolonial times. Variants exist among the Ijaw, Ishan, Isoko, Urhobo, and Edo peoples. For example, among the Isoko, personal shrines include Oma (spirit double), Obo (right hand), and Ivri (determination). In Urhobo culture, it is known as Ivri, and among the Edo people, it is called Ikegobo.

Before the 15th century, Igbo communities in Idu and Agbor profoundly influenced Benin's art and language. Several Igbo words, such as ogbe (settlement), ukwu (large), ego (money), ugbo (farm), ugo (eagle), and Nkita (dog), remain part of Benin's vocabulary. However, their use is limited compared to Igboland.

Several Igbo-descended communities, including Oligie, Ake, Igbanke, Idumuodin, Ottah, Owa, Ebelle, and Idumuoka (Awka descendants), continue to thrive in Edo State. Some titles like Okaigun, commonly used in Benin, reflect these connections. Igueben, Amahor, and other Edo communities were founded by Igbo migrants, especially Awka blacksmiths, whose smithing expertise were valuable. These early migrations and cultural exchanges established Igbo settlements in Benin long before Portuguese contact.

The concept of aka Ikenga (strength of movement) was introduced to Benin around 900 AD by Nri priests and dibias (traditional healers). The Ikegobo —Benin's version of the Ikenga altar—originated from this exchange. While the prefix Ike means strength in Igbo, it does not hold the same meaning in Benin, where Obo signifies "hand." This indicates that Ikegobo is an Igbo linguistic and cultural borrowing. Additionally, Igbo words such as ugbo (farm) and ugo (eagle) retain their original meanings in Benin but lack the linguistic depth they possess in Igboland.

According to M.D.W. Jeffreys, Ikenga exists in three main forms:

- Ikenga mmadu – A fully developed human figure with horns, seated on a stool.
- Ikenga alusi – A cylindrical figure with horns.
- Ntu aga – Divination objects of various shapes, often simpler and



smaller.

Ikenga represents personal success, achievement, and victory. It is believed that the power to accomplish tasks resides in the right hand, symbolizing industry, farming, and craftsmanship. Owners of Ikenga perform annual festivals to seek wealth, protection, and prosperity.

The two-faced Ikenga is the oldest form, with one face looking toward the past year and the other toward the future. Known as Ikenga owa ota, this duality inspired the ancient Igbo calendar and rituals marking new beginnings.

Elaborate Ikenga often bears Ichi scarifications—parallel vertical lines on the forehead and temples—indicating its use among the Igbo since at least 900 AD. These scarifications, seen on Igbo Ukwu bronze pendants, were a specialization of Awka artisans. Ichi marks distinguished noble sons and daughters or high-ranking titleholders, stressing the connection between Igbo craftsmanship and Ikenga's symbolic significance.

In short, the influence of Ikenga on Benin arts and language underlines the deep historical ties between the Igbo and Benin people, highlighting the profound cultural exchanges that shaped both regions.

The Influence of Igbo and Edo Blacksmithing and Bronze Work

The Igbo and Edo are both rich in artistic expression, especially in the art of bronze casting and intricate designs. While the Benin bronzes are world-renowned, evidence shows that Igbo Ukwu bronzes predate them, suggesting that the Edo may have drawn inspiration from earlier Igbo craftsmanship.

Before the 15th century AD, there were strong Igbo influences culturally on Benin, especially in arts and language, by the Igbo who resided in Idu and Agbor. Some of the words still in use today in Benin include ogbe (quarters), ukwu (large), ego (money), ugbo (farm), ugo (eagle), and nkita (dog). Nevertheless, their usage in Benin is more



restricted linguistically compared to Igbo.

Some of the Igbo communities still reside in Edo State, including Oligie, Ake, Igbanke, Idumuodin, Ottah, Owa, Ebelle, and Idumuoka (descendants of Awka). These communities have titles such as Okaigun, meaning they are descendants of the Awka people from Anambra. In some areas like Igueben in Edo, Igbo ironsmiths had their skills shared. The Amahor community in Edo/Benin also shares ancestral ties with the Igbo. Evidence of Igbo penetration into Benin exists in the heart of Benin City before the Portuguese arrival.

Many Igbos still remember the time they left Benin during hostilities in the 14th to 16th centuries.

Blacksmithing and Divination Across Regions

The art of blacksmithing spread from the East to the West. Historical records indicate that Lejja and Igbo Ukwu are older than both Benin and Ife, with Lejja carbon-dated to 5000 BCE, while Benin and Ife traditions are less than 1000 years old. Despite regional differences, all groups utilized the lost-wax method in bronze casting.

In Igueben, an Edo village, the Idumu-Oka community traces its origins to Awka in Anambra State. They serve as the Royal Fabricators for the Benin Kingdom, with their king titled Oka-Igun (Awka Igwe). Interestingly, the Igbo term “Igwe” for metal parallels the Edo terms “Igue” and “Igun,” indicating a shared linguistic and cultural link.

Awka Smiths and the Influence of Nri

Awka, a center of smithing skills, is part of the wider Nri culture complex. Smiths from Awka, especially the Agulu section, were highly mobile, taking their expertise to other parts of the region, such as Igala and Idoma, and even southern Nigeria. The ofo—a symbol of ancestral power produced by the lost-wax process. Awka smiths produced bronze ofo for Western Igbo clients and thus extended their influence along the Niger Delta.



The Urhobo and Isoko, both Southern Edo-speaking peoples, are closely related to the Benin but show important influence from the Igbo as well. In addition to the evidence of early Aboh to Onitsha and westward migrations, local traditions of blacksmiths and bronze-casting artisans transferring knowledge and skills across cultures helped spur Igbo-Edo exchanges.

Delta communities only needed a small amount of bronze art for religious and leadership purposes, unlike Benin City, which had a large bronze culture. Traveling smiths from Awka met this demand by making practical and ceremonial bronzes tailored to each client's needs. This was different from the specialized work of Benin's royal craftsmen.

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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