

Herbert M. Cole

EQUESTRIAN IMAGERY AMONG THE IGBO AND THEIR NEIGHBORS¹

A mounted horseman from southeastern Nigeria is among the earliest copper alloy castings from sub Saharan West Africa (fig. 1). Quite firmly dated to the 10th century AD,² along with other archaeological finds from the excavations at Igbo Ukwu, this very small equestrian has no known counterpart in this area until the 20th century, when several horsemen are documented in different materials as motifs in a number of distinct object types. This paper explores the range and nature of equestrian imagery in southeastern Nigeria, primarily among the Igbo but also among their contiguous neighbors to the north, the Igala and Idoma (fig. 2). We will look at horse and equestrian contexts, attempting to locate the theme in the world view and value system of the Igbo. Interpretations are based on the ancient casting, on documented 19th and 20th century uses for horses as well as instances of people "riding" these and other quadrupeds in works of art.

While the Igbo demand for horses in the 18th and 19th centuries (and almost certainly earlier) was very great, the horse was neither native to the region nor was it destined to live very long because of sleeping sickness induced by the tsetse fly. Abundant documentation, however, establishes

a brisk import trade in horses from the Benue valley, specifically through Igala and Idoma markets such as Ejure and Akputu, respectively, with Nkwo Ibagwa being the main Igbo market in Nsukka territory in the north, from which point horses were traded southward to Uburu and several other markets. Of course horses were extremely important among Hausa élite and in the empires of the Central Sudan beginning in medieval times, and information about horses must have been available to Igbo traders venturing to the north. The Nupe are credited with first bringing horses into Nsukka, but were later supplanted by the Igala as preeminent horse traders (Afigbo 1967: 129). Notably, Nsukka people have a kind of "praise name" for the horse that reinforces both its value and the centrality of Igala in its trade: "horse, son of the Ata (king) of Igala," *anyinya nwa Ata Igara*. Sometimes money was used for purchase, but more typically, between three and ten human beings - slaves - were exchanged for a horse.

Horses were used ritually in northern Igbo land and in many Igbo areas to the south and east. In all cases they were costly prestige goods, definite luxury items well beyond the financial reach of ordinary peo-

Fig. 1. Igbo Ukwu Horseman Hilt (Igbo Richard 350) h. 15.8 cm. Courtesy National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria. Photo by Dirk Bakker.



ple. As Afigbo says of the imported horse, "only the rich, the *ogaranya* who wanted to take titles or bury the dead could afford it." (1973: 82) These are indeed the only two certain socioritual contexts for horses in Igboland, and in some cases the two purposes were satisfied simultaneously with a single animal. A number of Igbo regions had horse titles that required the presence, if not always the riding or even the killing and eating of the animal. Meek, for example, documents a "horse killer" title taking process (at Ngbwidi in Awgu division) in which the horse was led in a procession to a market by women, followed by the can-

didate, his relatives, and the current holders of the title. They paraded around the market singing songs and firing guns, then proceeded to other markets. The horse was killed and ceremoniously shared out a few days later (Meek 1937: 172), but there is no mention of riding. In some instances a horse was not killed until after it had been used for several ceremonies, as Afigbo puts it, in "burying a chain of *Ogaranya*" in turn, whereupon it sometimes died of "sheer exhaustion or from infection with sleeping sickness" (1973: 82). Northeast Igbo clans had a "horse king" (or "king of horses") title, *eze anyinya* (Afigbo 1973: 81). The missionary author, Basden, who lived and worked primarily in the Awka area, spoke of high Ozo titles: "whenever possible a horse must be slain as part of the ceremony." The man then had the courtesy title, or praise name, "horse killer," *otibwa anyinya* (1921: 261).

There were also *eze* (king) titles in the Nsukka region that "cost" at least seven horses; one high Ozo title, in a report to Meek that he did not entirely trust, was said to have cost seventeen horses (1937: 166). The "king" title, *eze*, does not signify king as ruler, as normally defined, for several men in an Igbo community may achieve this highest rank in the title system. Governmental authority in most northern Igbo areas was not vested in a single person. Rather, executive and judicial powers were in the hands of elders' councils, groups which naturally included titled individuals. While political decentralization was the rule, Onitsha and a few other communities, influenced by Benin and Igala monarchies, had paramount leaders rightfully called kings.

Existing documentation is equivocal on both the extent to which horses were actu-

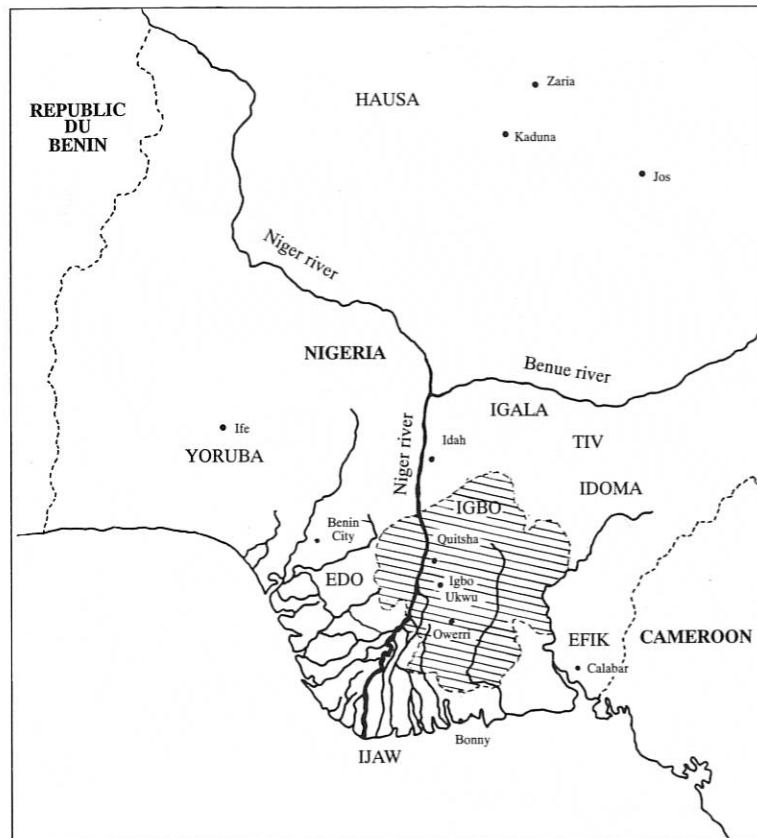
ally ridden in title and second burial ceremonies and the specific nature of horse sacrifice. Secondary evidence about riding, of course, occurs in sculpture and painting, although these images are not especially numerous in the extensive corpus of Igbo arts. I have not found descriptions of riding in actual ceremonies, however likely it was, since a major impetus for the importation of a horse in the first place would appear to have been its use in elevating the celebrant, ceremonially, above his fellows, however briefly. Such elevation - as principal - is well documented for Igbo stools, which were (and still are) prerogatives only of title holders.³ A stool or horse dramatically focuses the celebrant's superiority and thus his status, wealth, and prestige, in both physical and ideological realms, which are mutually reinforcing. The weakness and relative decrepitude of many imported horses, along with a lack of a known precedent for horse riding for the purpose of transportation, suggest that among the Igbo at least, equestrian skills were rarely called for or invoked. Value appears to have been lodged in the possession or sacrifice of a horse, or in a title taker or wealthy deceased person having mounted or been propped up on a horse for a short time. Both the horse, as a major capital outlay, and the act of riding, were fundamentally symbolic.

The demand and high value of horses noted, let us return to the unique early leaded bronze horseman excavated in the northern Igbo village group of Igbo Ukwu by Thurstan Shaw in 1959-60. The three archaeological sites, all in the same family compound, are known to have earlier been within the Nri dominated Oreri village group, adjacent to Igbo Ukwu, land taken over by the latter people within the last few centuries. Virtually all scholars, along with

the excavator, assume the sites to have yielded ceremonial objects formerly possessed by officials of Nri peoples, whose paramount leader, the Ezenri, "king (of) Nri", a divine king, has exercised great ritual authority but little temporal power over most northern Igbo peoples for many centuries; indeed, there is still an Ezenri in Oreri and another in Aguku, although their ritual functions have diminished compared with those of earlier times. No former Ezenri appears ever to have maintained political authority over significant numbers of people beyond his own kin group. Closely allied with the moral authority of the Earth Goddess, Ane (or Ala), the Ezenri and his kinsmen, on the other hand, held the spiritual power to confer titles, especially Ozo, to cleanse abominations against the Earth, and to prepare and administer medicines for the growth and health of yam crops, yam being the principal prestige food in this region. These and other prerogatives are chartered in Nri creation stories that establish the origin of civilized life and through elaborate installation rites for Ezenri among a people - the Igbo - whose creation myths are otherwise scanty and rather unceremonious. So along with other spiritual and moral duties, the Ezenri was responsible for helping maintain cosmic balance in the Igbo world within his purview.⁴

While this is not the occasion for a lengthy discussion of either the duties of the Nri kingship and priesthood or their origins, it is valuable to establish links between Nri officials and peoples with the Igala, contiguous to the Igbo to the north, for elite Igala were active equestrians for more than only ceremonial purposes. Known as "Umueri", "children of Eri" (Eri being the founding ancestor), Nri people are concentrated in two village group clus-

Fig. 2 - Sketch Map of southeastern Nigeria.



ters. The first is on the right bank of the Anambra River (the communities of Aguleri, Nteje, Amanuke, and Igbiam), just south of Igala territory. The second, about thirty miles farther south, are Enugu Ukwu, Owerri and Aguku Nri. Traditions of origin collected among both Nri clusters point to close Igala kinship. Some say Eri was an Igala war leader. Others say Eri's second son, Agulu, was given the title of Eze, "king", by the Ata (king) of Igala at Idah (the Igala capital). Still other traditions claim that Idah was founded by a descendant of Eri, perhaps more feasible inasmuch as there is no evidence for an Igala monarchy as early as the tenth century. The several accounts agree that Eri was of divine origin, however, and that the Igala, if not Nri an-

cestors, are close relations. Many other northern communities trace descent from Igala and Idoma peoples, which helps to explain why trade relations were prevalent, complex, and peaceful between the northern Igbo and these contiguous neighbors/relatives.

For our purposes, however, it is Nri sanctioned title taking and its visible insignia that account for several aspects of the Igbo Ukwu equestrian. The rider's face bears scars known among historical Igbo as *ichi*, incised marks identifying their wearers as titled individuals, albeit of low level, in the graded Ozo system. Similar marks are found on the two known human head pendants, as well as on one of two human figures on a ritual altarstand from the Igbo Ukwu excavations (see Shaw 1970: plates 206-7, 270, 272), and on living people of the Iwollo village group (Cole and Aniakor, plate 6). Such scars, really badges of honor, are and were prerogatives only of Ozo title holders. The horseman also wears bracelets probably intended to represent ivory bangles also worn by wealthy titled people. He also carries a fly whisk in his right hand. And it is likely that the horseman, cast integrally with an intricate handle, was part of a fly whisk, or perhaps a staff, either of which would have been a title prerogative. This implement was recovered from Igbo Richard, the site of an elaborate burial, undoubtedly that of a regalia laden Ezenri or another high ranking Nri official, and which also included a skeuomorphic cast leopard skull. The adjacent repository, Igbo Isaiah, yielded numerous ritual implements, containers, staffs, and ornaments that scholars agree must be Nri related. Two small elephant head pendants, as well as an intricate casting of a leopard attached to an ornate shell, were among the finds. All the objects

excavated at Igbo Ukwu are rendered in a distinctive, highly meticulous style that has no close analogues in other early Nigerian or West African material culture.

Other aspects of this fine although diminutive equestrian are notable. The "horse" is of course not rendered at all naturalistically; the body is highly simplified. Like the rider's, the horse's head is proportionately enlarged as both are on the manifestly later series of Benin equestrian castings. At least for the human being, these emphases suggest ideological considerations documented for much African sculpture, namely, that enlarged heads encode beliefs about their importance as the locus of will, intelligence, and destiny, characteristics crucial to effective leadership. Nor is it only coincidental that the Igbo word for leader and priest is the same: *onyeisi*, "person head", or "head person." The decoration of the horse's body, an overall herringbone pattern in relief, is another non naturalistic convention very much in keeping with the intricate, delicate, fine unit patterning characteristic of Igbo Ukwu style generally.

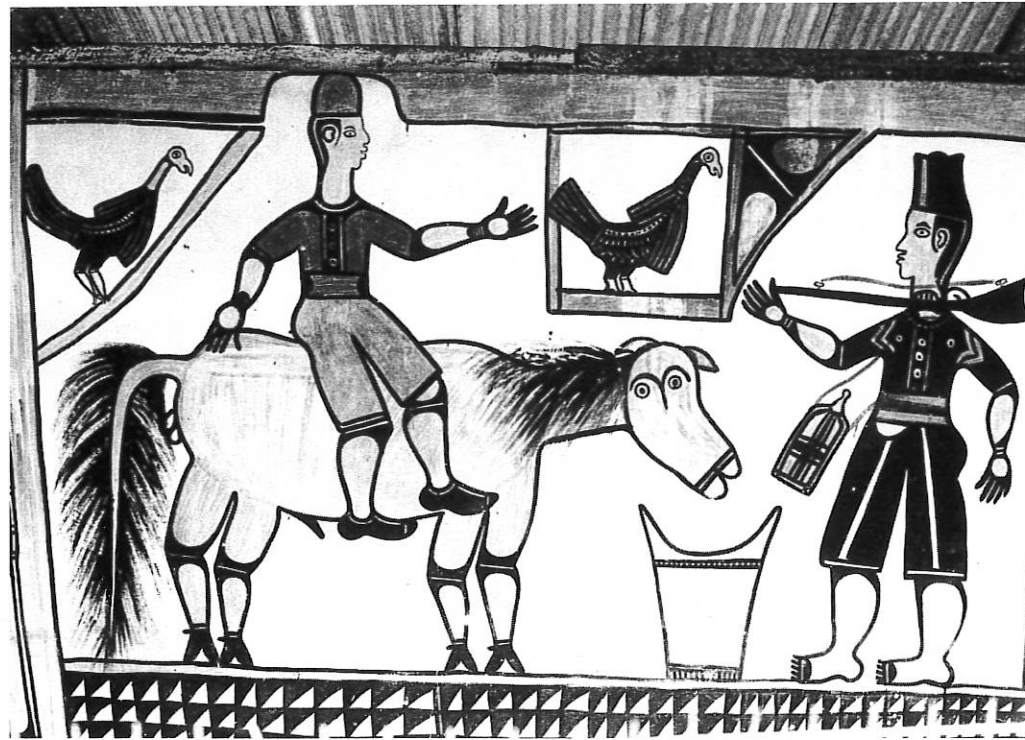
There can be no doubt whatever that the Igbo Ukwu equestrian foreshadows, by many centuries, the oral traditions about imported horses as props or sacrifices in title taking rites and elite burial ceremonies. Yet we should also leave open the possibility that during the era - a thousand years ago - when Igbo Ukwu culture flourished, if we may judge from the sophistication of its arts, the actual riding of horses might have been reasonably common. Referring to the cavalry of Benin from which horses disappeared in the nineteenth century, Isichei says: "It is not impossible that something similar happened in Igboland, and that the great importance attached to the

horse in rituals of the northern Igbo preserves a memory of it" (1976: 14). Perhaps there were no debilitating diseases affecting horses and cattle in the centuries of Igbo Ukwu's artistic glory.

Clearly, too, this horseman, particularly the mount itself, signals the existence of long distance trade as early as the 10th century, not only in horses but in other goods. Exactly what else was traded in is not firmly established, apart from copper present in these castings but not locally available and beads from as far away as India, found in large numbers in the Igbo Ukwu burial. In exchange for horses, beads, and other imports, the early Igbo traded human slaves and probably cloth, camwood cosmetics, kola nuts, and elephant tusk ivory. The probability also exists that lost wax casting technology, as well as the copper in the alloy of Igbo Ukwu artifacts, moved south into what is now Nigeria in this era, late in the first millennium AD.

Mechanisms and routes for the introduction of casting into southern Nigeria have not been established, yet Igbo Ukwu castings are the earliest examples known at this time from any sub Saharan area. Casting technology may have existed in and may have been imported from the Inland Delta region of the upper Niger, in what is now Mali, but there are no dates for its copper alloy objects as early as the 10th century. The casters and blacksmiths of Awka, who figure in Nri creation stories and have long been associated with Nri peoples as makers of title regalia, may well have produced Igbo Ukwu sculptures, for there is no evidence whatever that they were cast at any other location. Nor, admittedly, can we be certain that Igbo artists made these objects even if the most economical argument favors this hypothesis.

Fig. 3 - Horseman scene on Okwu Olokoro wall, ca. 110 cm h. (Photo by Herbert M. Cole)



If the Igbo apparently have never considered the horse to be a native animal, they have equally looked upon some riders, at least several in equestrian images, as strangers. The identity of these foreigners varies according to different representations. Ironically perhaps, the 10th century Igbo Ukwu rider is among the few who can be positively identified as an Igbo person, by virtue of his distinctive *ichi* facial marking, a type unknown elsewhere in southern Nigeria. The only two known wall paintings of horsemen are probably also intended to show Igbo people - men of high status - but some of the other riders are stranger élites, the Ata of Idah (Igala) in some instances, powerful British district or provincial officers and even cowboys in others.

The earliest of the wall paintings was executed in 1934 on a public wall in the Ngwa Igbo community of Olokoro by an Ibibio

artist commissioned to paint the entire wall (fig. 3). This includes more than twenty vignettes of everyday and ceremonial life, among them a male sitting bareback although "sidesaddle", that is, with both legs shown on the near side of the horse. His identity or specific ritual activity is not to my knowledge known, although he would seem to be another person of elevated status. The high contrast, outline style of black on white is conventionalized and lively. The second wall painting shows a machete wielding rider on a horse in motion (by virtue of one raised forefoot), with two cows tethered nearby. Its caption refers to the rider as either a priest poised to sacrifice the cows to cleanse a "major abomination" against a local deity or as "an *Ozo* candidate who wants to answer *Ogbuefi* ["cowkiller"] or *Ogbu Inyinya* ["horse killer"] after the completion of his *Ozo* ti-

Fig. 4 - Drawing after a slide by Marilyn Houlberg. Artist unknown, but the work is similar to that of Sunny Arts, the studio name of an Igbo man who works in Jos.



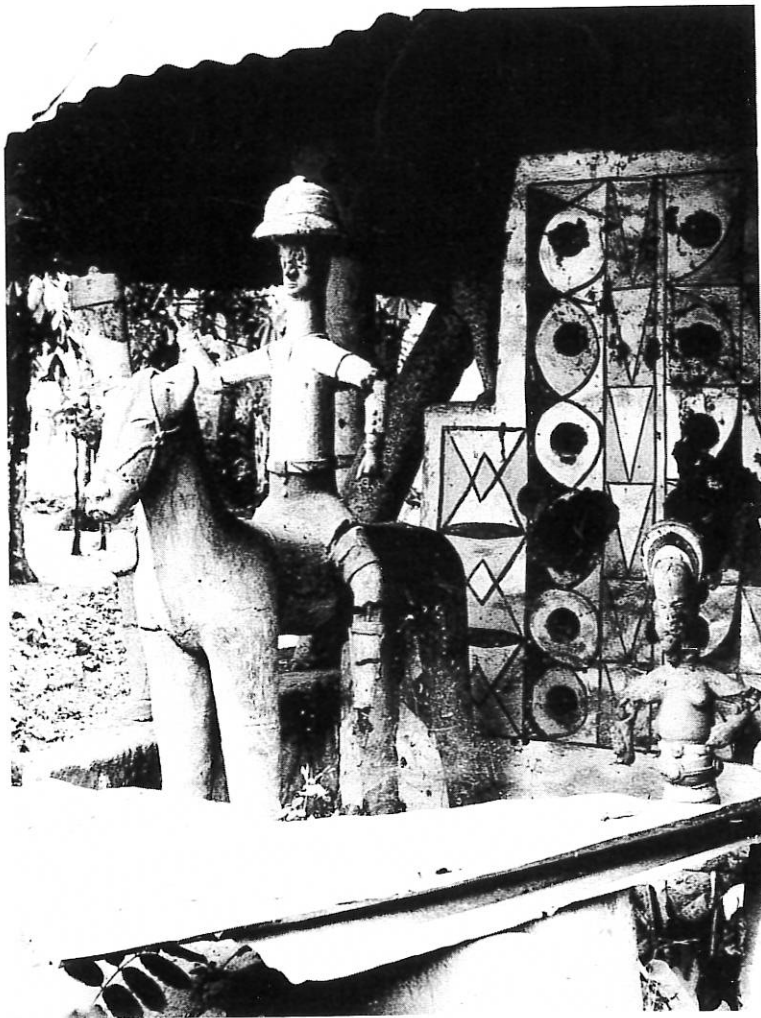
tle" (Nkwo n.p. 1984). Clearly, the author of the booklet in which this image was published was not privy to specific information about the painting (nor does he identify its location), but still I believe we may assume that the rider was intended to be a local person. Little more can be said about these wall paintings beyond their generic association with wealth and status, as is standard for equestrian representations.

Other two dimensional works such as truck paintings by self taught artists or canvases by international artists are more recent and less well imbedded in Igbo culture than the two just discussed. Probably inspired by a movie poster or advertisement, a "cowboy" scene (fig. 4) painted on the tailgate of a transport truck in the 1970s, originated well beyond Nigeria. The horse rears backward dramatically on its hind legs, its rider perched precariously, with a

second cowboy gesturing nearby. Here, it seems, we are in the realm of popular imagery disseminated widely, analogous to the Marlboro man who advertises cigarettes, sometimes on horseback. Copied from billboards or print media with creative variations on the walls of West African bars and restaurants, or on trucks as here, this up dated equestrian has become a popular icon with a life of its own. Its presence - especially on a vehicle - signals the heightened mobility and greater communication of recent decades (see Vogel 1992). Not an Igbo man, the rider in this instance is a romantic cowboy, probably visualized as an heroic outsider, out of Western movies or cigarette ads.

Occasional contemporary academic Igbo artists have painted and modeled horsemen too. Some of these men were trained in Zaria, a Hausa city where horses are a

Fig. 5 - Equestrian of an European in the *mbari* to Ala in Obokwe Obike (ca. 1934), ca. 180 cm h. (Photographed by Herbert M Cole, 1966)



fact of life. One painting by Uzo Egonu (plate 8 in Isichei 1976), called "Exodus 1966," memorializes the agonized flight of Igbo people from northern Nigeria in the wake of the 1966 massacres of Igbo residents there that helped precipitate the secession of Biafra in 1967 and the Civil War of 1967-1970. Semi abstract, the painting includes about a dozen people, several in hunched and twisted poses carrying loads away from the life threatening situation. Dominating the scene and several times larger than most figures are two riders, a

cyclist and an equestrian, positioned on a diagonal line to signal motion as they (presumably) hurry away, back to the safety of their Igbo homeland. The painter employed formal conventions adapted from Cubism and Futurism to help express agitation and speed. Obiora Udechukwu also sketched fleeing refugees in the aftermath of the Civil War; his two published examples are cyclists (Obiora 1984: plates 24 & 78).

Canvases or panels in oil and acrylic executed by artists trained in fine arts departments of universities in Nigeria and abroad of course signal the internationalism of contemporary Igbo and other African arts. Occasional riders, whatever their mounts might be, point to hosts of changed motivations and contexts. Whereas the elite person rode a horse in the early years of this century - when horses were the largest units of disposable wealth - today that person rides in a Mercedes Benz, as exemplified by the upscale coffins of the late Ghanaian sculptor Kane Kwei (see Vogel 1992: cat. 37).

Another equestrian in Igbo art who is clearly a foreigner is found in *mbari* houses in the southern, Owerri Igbo region (fig. 5). Here the rider is a British colonial, a district or provincial officer. Sitting erect on his mount and wearing a pith helmet, uniform, and sun glasses, the white man in these instances is depicted as he frequently comported himself, in the eyes of the local Igbo people: dominant, powerful, and superior, although it is not clear that *mbari* artists ever actually observed British administrators on horseback. Equestrians, like other images of whites, were neither mandatory nor especially common among *mbari* motifs, but neither were they unusual. Where a horseman was found, it was but one of many themes showing the realities

of everyday and ritual life, as well as things imagined, heard about or hoped for among the Owerri Igbo.

Several other riders also occur in the *mbari* corpus: a boy riding an ostrich, a three headed woman riding a horse or goat, as well as bicyclists and motorcycle riders (see Cole 1982, plates 1, 60, and fig. 26). The ostrich rider and the three headed woman can best be interpreted as imaginative motifs thought up, or "dreamed", as *mbari* artists often credit their inspiration, to beat other artists. It was incumbent upon artists to include new, unusual subjects never seen before, as the entire *mbari* enterprise had strong components of rivalry and competition among communities. Bicycle and later, motorcycle and even airplane riders, like horsemen, are people of high status by virtue of the costliness of these machines, plus the speed and mobility they provide, but the riders are not necessarily titled people.

As I have written elsewhere (Cole 1984: 17), wheeled vehicles as "mounts held almost the same meanings as horses when first introduced. The novelist Chinua Achebe indicates in *Things Fall Apart*, for example, that the Igbo called bicycles, of course introduced and first ridden by Europeans, "iron horses". In 1905 a Dr. Stewart, riding a bicycle from Owerri to Calabar, was killed because local people believed him to be a ghost, presumably due to his "white" or light color, traditionally associated with ghosts and ancestral spirits. Stewart was killed, but more important for our purposes is the fact that "his bicycle was broken up and shared" (Wren 1980: 26, 27). Treated as if it were a living sacrificial being, the iron horse suffered a similar fate. In *Things Fall Apart* (p. 97), the white man's iron horse bicycle was tied to a sacred tree "because it looked as if it

would run away to call the man's friends".

Mbari houses were built as huge community sacrifices to local deities, usually in response to a major catastrophe, yet sometimes in thanks for blessings received. Larger *mbari* were conceived as symbolic reconstructed communities containing a somewhat random record of life in the past, present, and imagined future. Equestrians (or other prestigious riders, such as the white man riding in a litter, modeled in the earliest recorded *mbari* house, published in 1904) normally appeared only in the programs of larger *mbari*, those with upwards of thirty or forty modelled clay figures. These riders were included to help round out the picture of Owerri life in the early 20th century, which was of course profoundly affected by, and in part controlled by, British colonial power and new material goods such as bicycles and later, motorcycles, cars and larger vehicles.

The largest single group of equestrians in Igbo art is also in some ways the most problematic, those adorning the superstructures of certain classes of large masks found in central and northern areas. Numbering several dozen, these rider images, like those in *mbari* houses, are often secondary or minor within their iconographic programs. The people depicted as riders generally can not be identified by informants except as "big men", people of high status, and the animals ridden are not obviously or invariably horses. In some cases they are best called simply "quadrupeds", although some are considered leopards by local people.

Several superstructure masks, on the other hand, have equestrians (or at least animal riders) as the topmost and dominant motif. G.I. Jones photographed a white faced mask (fig. 6) from Idemili (south of

Fig. 6 - Mask called *Nne Igbo Igwe* (Mother [of the] Igbo sky) from Idemili, ca. 70 cm h. (Photographed by G.I. Jones)



Onitsha) with two cloth horsemen, on either side of an oval crest, an exaggeration of crested hairstyles formerly worn by Igbo girls. This mask, called "Mother [of the] Igbo Sky" (*Nne Igbo Igwe*), has its small wood face attached below the headdress, which is entirely of cloth over a light wood armature. A number of analogous masks, but comprised entirely of carved wood, some sections of which are pieced together, are also known from the Nsukka region, one with two figures riding a quadruped (Cole and Aniakor 1984: pl. 249), another with a rider wearing a pith helmet and holding a writing tablet (Cole 1972: pl. 5.6). The latter rider, identified by local owners of the mask as "eze", king, may represent a titled man or perhaps a deity dressed as

a white man, Because Omabe is a powerful tutelary masking spirit in the Nsukka area, Meek's statement about penalties enforced by this spirit are intriguing: "the maskers of Omabe were indeed likened to the court messengers of the present [colonial] regime, and Omabe himself to the British District officer" (Meek 1937: 152). While this may not be an Omabe mask, the idea of associating masked spirit power with the authority of colonial officers, as well as enhancing the already high status of a titled Igbo man by investing him with the foreign technologies of dress and writing, in addition to riding, all add meaning to this and similar masks.

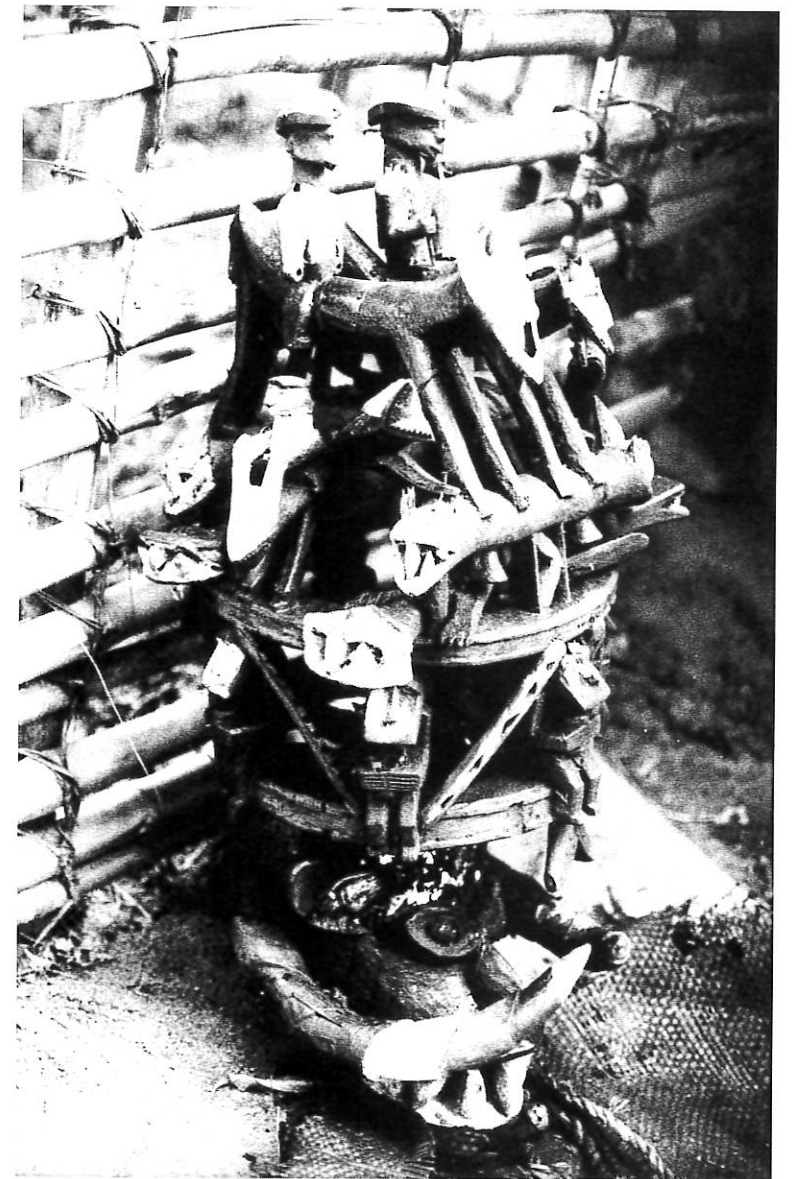
The riders on a few of these Nsukka masks were identified to me as the Ata (king) of Idah. The Igala capital, Idah, is only about thirty miles from northern Igboland. Not only does the Igala king ride a horse, especially on ceremonial occasions, only he and certain ranking chiefs and councilors had the privilege of horses, along with the right to wear bright red imported *ododo* cloth that is also worn by some powerful masked spirits (Boston 1968: 66; see below).

The masks on which riders appear are about both worldly and supernatural power. One class, generically called "time of the brave" (or power, *ike*), *mgbedike*, includes the largest and most awe inspiring masks (except for *ijele*; see below) danced publicly in their areas (Cole and Aniakor 1984: 131, 132). They are huge, heavy, dark colored masks with aggressive teeth and horns, owned by male groups rather than individuals and danced by middle aged men considered to be at the height of their own powers. Many have tiered superstructures three feet in height, some featuring riders of schematically rendered bush animals,

usually leopards, quintessential symbols of the mysterious, dangerous bush (fig. 7). Like the elaborate mask tableaux themselves, these riders are metaphors of power. Such masks, especially in the Anambra valley and Awka areas, are analogous to large *ikenga* figures, shrines to masculine success and accomplishment. Whereas most *ikenga* are commissioned and owned by individuals, the largest and most complex ones, with tiered superstructures comprised of horns, birds, antelope, pythons, and occasional riders on animals, were made for whole communities (see Cole and Aniakor 1984: pl. 46). They were displayed, honored, and sacrificed to at communal festivals by men generally, especially warriors.

These masks embody intimidating, fearsome spirits; some masqueraders are restrained by their followers during their outings but are nevertheless capable of inflicting harm upon anyone in their path. Both the masks and the dancing masqueraders, like the community *ikenga* that were sometimes carved by the same artists, crystallize an ethos of masculine aggression and supernatural mystery, projected with an aura of bluff and majesty. Leopards, like powerful men, radiate a mystical energy, called *ibobu* in the Igbo language, that has a portentous, imminent quality. Certain elders and leaders are said to reincarnate in leopard form, just as some men have the ability to transform themselves into spirits by donning a masquerade costume. The Igbo compare masking transformations to snakes shedding their skins. The patterns of python and leopard skins, like the "skins" of certain strong masks, exude *ibobu*: terror, beauty, and power. To carve a mask with a figure on a leopard is to invoke an exceptionally powerful Igbo metaphor: riding power, which by implication is controlling or

Fig. 7 - *Mgbedike* mask, Umuefi family of Umuazu Nise, ca. 90 cm h. (Photographed by Herbert M. Cole, 1966)



channeling mystical energy at once threatening and beautiful.

To properly frame the power associations in these dynamic, mobile works of art we must consider the critical governmental and judicial roles of masking in Igbo culture, especially before the imposition of colonial rule which began the erosion of

Fig. 8 - *Ikenga* (detail), full h. 118 cm. Artist uncertain, but perhaps Ebelide of Awkuzu. (Collection of Jacques Kerchache, Paris, who kindly supplied the photograph)



the powers held by important masks. Henderson (1972: 364) quotes a missionary, who spoke in 1886 of certain masqueraders as those "impostors with wooden heads":

The [masked spirits] are... the highest and supreme authority to legislate, execute, enact and repeal all laws binding the people as a nation... in this one regard [the king of Onitsha] is inferior to the [masked spirits] and is himself bound to abide by the decision and judgment of them in any political matter. In fact, the [masked spirits] can control him, repeal his laws and dethrone him

and appoint a successor of their choice if needs be. The king in such a circumstance is not above the law but the [masked spirit] has no superior and is under no human law.

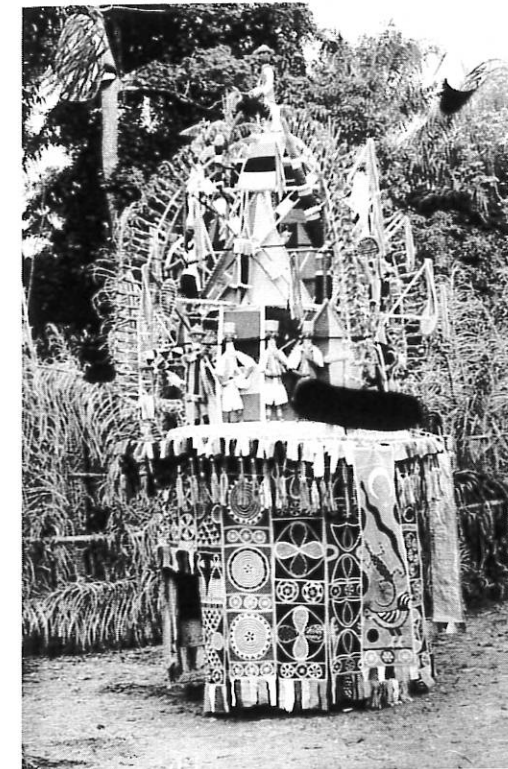
The sorts of masked spirits being referred to in this passage are "night" or "bad" spirits or "tall ghosts" referred to as hooded cobras in Onitsha because they were believed to be able to deliver a deadly blow, capriciously, to a bystander. These maskers, called *egwugwu* or *mmuo afia*, wear a red Igala cloth covered conical projection, a kind of "snout" which they rest on their escorts' shoulders because the projections are heavy and because the ancestral spirits, as incarnate dead, are very old (Henderson 1972: 349). These are the most powerful masks ever reported among the Igbo. They were rarely seen in public, did not dance as entertainers, and were altogether serious; these cleverly devised instruments cloaked the decisive acts of the most powerful group of Onitsha men, often acting for the ancestors, under the anonymity of concealing costumes.

It is notable, as Kasfir has pointed out (1979: 267-269) that the Idoma also have an exceptionally powerful masked spirit, *Egwu Afia*, with a similar cloth projection and a similar name, *ekwu afia* (*Egwu* and *Mmuo*, and *Ekwu*, are the Igbo and Idoma words for "ghost" or "spirit," respectively). The Igala have an *egwu afia* mask as well, with a cognate name too although its form is not similar. What is fascinating for our purposes is that the former Idoma mask ensemble, as Kasfir reports, "becomes a horse and rider, with the elaborate [cloth] covering corresponding to the trappings of a horse" (Kasfir 1979: 268), while Henderson indicates that the analogous Onitsha form is of Igala origin. Here is an in-

stance of attaching the name of a powerful icon, the equestrian, to a mask form that bears only a remote physical resemblance to the named signifier, on the basis of the highly valued cloth worn by the masker. The cloth costume of the Igala mask, and the Igbo one as well, is a sacred embodiment of ancestral power, and thus dangerous (Kasfir 1984: 165; Henderson 1972: 349). This red cloth, called *ododo*, was imported from Europe and thus very costly; it was worn otherwise only by important Igala chiefs and councilors, as we have seen, and sometimes when these men rode horses. All these factors contribute to its powerful aura.

The apotheosis of public or display masking among the northern Igbo, as well as the largest mask known from the African continent, is *ijele* (fig. 8). This stately mask is an exceptionally rich and complex symbol of leadership and ancestral spirit power, although in terms of social control, it appears never to have been as instrumentally powerful as the Onitsha *Mmuo Afia*. Normally commissioned for the second burial festival mounted to honor an exceptionally prominent deceased man, the mask is constructed, in secrecy by a team of tailor artists, of cloth covered wooden parts that are further decorated with grass or foam filled cloth sculptures, as well as "branches", "flowers", tassels, and appliqué cloth panels. All the felt, cotton cloth, and yarn, as well as the mirrors adorning an *ijele*, are imported. The mask has many symbolic allusions to natural and human fecundity and growth, to the wisdom and judiciousness of gifted leaders, and to supernatural powers lodged in the earth and sky, including sacred anthills and venerated trees (see Henderson and Umunna 1988). Its vibrant appliqué patterns and colors are further ex-

9. *Ijele* mask in Umuigwedo. Photographed by John Boston. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum, Lagos)



amples of the radiance and danger of *Ibobu*. Finally, and not unlike earthbound *mbari* houses built a hundred miles further south, *ijele* appear to be architectonic symbols of a vibrantly renewed world. Populating the branches of this tree of life are many miniatures of daily life in the community as well as other local masked dancers considered ancestral spirits, powerful animals such as elephant, leopard, python, and eagle, and above them all, and larger, an equestrian (figs 9 & 10).

Why an equestrian, we may ask, and why its high position and scale as the largest among the various human and animal motifs populating the *ijele*'s "branches"? Not, we may be certain, because horse riding is an essential or even a familiar activity in this region. Eagle feathers in the caps of some of these horsemen establish them as

Fig. 10 - Ijele mask in Aguleri (detail of upper section). (Photographed by Herbert M Cole, 1983)



eze, kings or titled men, which is of course consistent with the use of horses in ceremonies conferring high status. But who is this man? No one I know of has yet associated the image with a specific individual, say the king of Onitsha who, as the most prominent king (or titled man) in the Ijele using region, would be the most logical choice.

The horseman is a crowning, larger than

life emblem in an already exaggerated *ijele* construction. The equestrian, like the host mask, is a conflation of several complementary metaphorical ideas about earthly and supernatural power. The rider remains unnamed by its Igbo constituents, I think, because it is ultimately unnamable, almost as if it refers to the ineffable soul or quintessence of power. The horse is the expensive, imported animal employed to validate the highest titles and bury the most prominent dead. Strong and fast, the horse is of course the largest domesticated animal in the area. The human image stands for collective ancestral truth, wisdom riding back into the community as witness. The equestrian unit echoes too the superiority, seemingly boundless wealth, and decisive strength of British colonial officers, those culture bringers whose actions and material goods so transformed the Igbo world. Like chiefs and titled men, Europeans were called "owners of the sky" by virtue of their mysteriousness and all embracing might. Placed high in the lofty branches of an *ijele* tree of life, an ordinarily earthbound horseman becomes transcendent, human perhaps in outward aspect but in fact superhuman, supernatural, perhaps more aligned with Chukwu, the remote Igbo high god, than with nearer and more approachable nature deities. And in performance, of course, the equestrian unit is activated along with the rest of the mask, yet paradoxically, it stands immobile.

These ideas developed over the ten centuries that intervened between recent masks and paintings and the ancient small copper alloy casting from Igbo Ukwu. How they vectored over this vast period is mostly lost to us. But interactions with Igala and Idoma peoples and ideas must have had some effect. Certainly major changes occurred

with the advent of British colonial power and material goods around the turn of this century. There is much we do not know about these horsemen, yet we do know that they are less common or prevalent as root symbols in Igbo life than leopards, eagles, elephants, and pythons, perhaps because the latter animals are truly autochthonous and thus deeper and richer as metaphors. In some of its appearances, however, as in *ijele*, the equestrian comes to dominate even these apparently more important animal symbols (all of which are also usually present in *ijele*). This superiority appears to hinge on the horse as both an import and as the largest single unit of disposable wealth, as it surely was in the early twentieth century and during the tenth century when the horseman made its first appearance. So when the horse is coupled with varied elements of ancestral and other supernatural power, as it is in the two exceptionally important Igbo institutions of title taking and masquerades, the equestrian becomes an icon of remarkable strength and great, even transcendent, value.

(Santa Barbara, CA, 9.30.1994)

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to Mr. Gigi Pezzoli for the invitation to participate in this volume. I would also like to thank the Igbo peoples among whom I have had the opportunity to work at various times since 1966. Their help has been generous and their patience with my odd questions remarkable. I have addressed this topic in several previous publications, but without the Igbo as a focus, as here. See Cole 1984, Cole 1989, and Cole Forthcoming.
- ² Most scholars accept the radiocarbon dating reported on extensively by Shaw (1975, 1978). The most persistent and vociferous critic of the dates has been Babatunde Lawal (1973), who believes the 9th-10th century dates to be too early.
- ³ An exception to the use of stools as prerogatives for only titled people (titled women also have stools in some areas, such as Awkuzu) are the low and for the most part undecorated stools used by women in domestic compounds and at markets.
- ⁴ The area traversed and "serviced" by Nri ritualists is roughly the northern half of what is now thought of as Igboland. It should of course be acknowledged that the linguistic classification of "Igbo speaking people" does not constitute an historically cohesive ethnic group. As I have written elsewhere (Cole 1988) many clans or village groups (e.g., Ahoada, Ndokki, Ekpahia) still resist being called "Igbo".

Bibliography

- ACHEBE C., *Things Fall Apart*, London 1958.
- AFIGBO A.E., "Precolonial Trade Links between Southeastern Nigeria and the Benue Valley", *African Studies*, 4(2), Summer 1967.
- AFIGBO A.E., "Trade and Trade Routes in Nineteenth Century Nsukka", *Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3(1), 1973, pp. 79-90.
- AFIGBO A.E., "A Prolegomena to the Study of Igbo Art History", in Ogbalu F.C. and Emenanjo E.N. (eds.), *Igbo Language and Culture*,

Ibadan 1975.

ANIAKOR C. C., "The Igbo Ijele Mask", *African Arts* 11(4), 1978, pp. 42-47, 95.

BASDEN G.F., *Among the Igbo of Nigeria*, London 1921.

BOSTON J. S., "Notes on Contact between the Igala and the Ibo", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2(1), 1960, pp. 52-58.

BOSTON J. S., *The Igala Kingdom*, Ibadan 1968.

BOSTON J. S., *Ikenga Figures among the North West Igbo and the Igala*, Nigeria and London 1977.

COLE H. M., "Ibo Art and Authority", in Fraser Douglas F. and Cole Herbert M. (eds.), *African Art and Leadership*, Madison, Wisconsin 1972.

COLE H. M., "The History of Ibo Mbari Houses: Facts and Theories", in McCall Daniel F. and Bay Edna G. (eds.), *African Images: Essays in African Iconology*, New York 1975.

COLE H. M., *Mbari: Art and Life among the Owerri Igbo*, Bloomington 1982.

COLE H. M., *Riders of Power in African Sculpture*, Los Angeles 1984.

COLE H. M., "Igbo Arts and Ethnicity: Problems and Issues", *African Arts*, XXI, 2, 1988, pp. 26-27, 93.

COLE H. M., *Icons: Ideals and Power in the Art of Africa*, Washington, D.C. 1989.

COLE H. M., "Equestrian Statuary in West Africa", forthcoming.

COLE H. M. and ANIAKOR, Chike C., *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, Los Angeles 1984.

Henderson R., *The King in Every Man*, Connecticut, New Haven 1972.

Isichei E., *The Ibo People and the Europeans*, London 1973.

Isichei E., *A History of the Ibo People*, London 1976.

ISICHEI E., *Igbo Worlds: An Anthology of Oral History and Historical Descriptions*, Philadelphia 1978.

KASFIR S. L., *The Visual Arts of the Idoma of Central Nigeria*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, London 1979.

KASFIR S. L., "Masks from the Towns of the Dead: The Igbo-Idoma Borderland", in Cole Herbert M. and Aniakor Chike C. *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, Los Angeles 1984.

MEEK C.K., *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*, London 1937.

NKWO M., *Igbo Cultural Heritage*, Nigeria 1984.

NORTHROP D., "The Growth of Trade Among the Igbo Before 1800", *Journal of African History*, 8, 1972, pp. 217-236.

OBIORA, *Obiora Udechukwu: Selected Sketches 1965-83*, catalogue of an exhibition held at the National Council for Arts and Culture, Iganmu, Lagos, March 23 - April 6 1984.

ONWUEJEGBU M.A., *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*, London 1981.

SHAW C. T., *Igbo-Ukwu: An Account of Archaeological Discoveries in Eastern Nigeria*, Ibadan 1970.

SHAW C. T., *Unearthing Igbo-Ukwu: Archaeological Discoveries in Eastern Nigeria*, Ibadan 1977.

SHAW C. T., "Further Light on Igbo-Ukwu, Including New Radio-Carbon Dates", proceedings of the 9th Pan-African Congress on Prehistory, Jos 1983.

SHELTON A. J., *The Igbo Igala Borderland: Religion and Social Control in Indigenous African Colonialism*, Albany (New York) 1971.

VOGEL S. M., *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, New York 1991.

WREN R. M., *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels*, Washington DC 1980.