

Art in Ancient Ife, Birthplace of the Yoruba

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Artists the world over shape knowledge and material into works of unique historical importance. The artists of ancient Ife, ancestral home to the Yoruba and mythic birthplace of gods and humans, clearly were interested in creating works that could be read. Breaking the symbolic code that lies behind the unique meanings of Ife's ancient sculptures, however, has vexed scholars working on this material for over a century. While much remains to be learned, thanks to a better understanding of the larger corpus of ancient Ife arts and the history of this important southwestern Nigerian center, key aspects of this code can now be discerned. In this article I explore how these arts both inform and are enriched by early Ife history and the leaders who shaped it.¹ In addition to core questions of art iconography and symbolism, I also address the potent social, political, religious, and historical import of these works and what they reveal about Ife (Ile-Ife) as an early cosmopolitan center

My analysis moves away from the recent framing of ancient Ife art from the vantage of Yoruba cultural practices collected in Nigeria more broadly, and/or the indiscriminate use of regional and modern Yoruba proverbs, poems, or language idioms to inform this city's unique 700-year-old sculptural oeuvre.² Instead I focus on historical and other considerations in metropolitan Ife itself. This shift is an important one because Ife's history, language, and art forms are notably different than those in the wider Yoruba region and later eras. My approach also differs from recent studies that either ahistorically superimpose contemporary cultural conventions on the reading of ancient works or unilinearly posit art development models concerning form or material differences that lack grounding in Ife archaeological evidence. My aim instead is to reengage these remarkable

ancient works alongside diverse evidence on this center's past and the time frame specific to when these sculptures were made. In this way I bring art and history into direct engagement with each other, enriching both within this process.

One of the most important events in ancient Ife history with respect to both the early arts and later era religious and political traditions here was a devastating civil war pitting one group, the supporters of Obatala (referencing today at once a god, a deity pantheon, and the region's autochthonous populations) against affiliates of Odudua (an opposing deity, religious pantheon, and newly arriving dynastic group). The Ikedu oral history text addressing Ife's history (an annotated kings list transposed from the early Ife dialect; Akinjogbin n.d.) indicates that it was during the reign of Ife's 46th king—what appears to be two rulers prior to the famous King Obalufon II (Ekenwa? Fig. 1)—that this violent civil war broke out. This conflict weakened the city enough so that there was little resistance when a military force under the conqueror Oranmiyan (Fig. 2) arrived in this historic city. The dispute likely was framed in part around issues of control of Ife's rich manufacturing resources (glass beads, among these). Conceivably it was one of Ife's feuding polities that invited this outsider force to come to Ife to help rectify the situation for their side.

As Akinjogbin explains (1992:98), Oranmiyan and his calvary, after gaining control of Ife "... stemmed the ... uprising by siding with the weaker ... of the disunited pre-Oduduwa groups [driving Obalufon II] into exile at Ilara³ and became the Ooni." Eventually, the deposed King Obalufon II with the help of a large segment of Ife's population was able to defeat this military leader and the latter's supporters. In Ife today, Odudua is identified in ways that complement Oranmiyan. As Akintitan explains (p.c.):⁴ "It was Odudua who was the last to come to Ife, a man who arrived as a warrior, and took advantage of the situation to



1 Mask
Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper. Height: 33 cm
Retained in the palace since the time of its manufacture (through the early twentieth century) where it was identified as King Obalufon Alaiyemore (Obalufon II). Nigeria National Museums, Lagos Mus. reg. no. 38.1.2.
PHOTO: KARIN WILLIS, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION OF MONUMENTS AND MUSEUMS, NIGERIA AND THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART, NEW YORK

impose himself on Ife people.” King Obalufon II, who came to rule twice at Ife, is positioned in local king lists both at the end of the first (Obatala) dynasty and at the beginning of the second (Odudua) dynasty. He is also credited with bringing peace (a negotiated truce) to the once feuding parties.

POLITICAL HISTORY AND ART AT ANCIENT IFE

What or whom do these early arts depict? Many of the ancient Ife sculptures are identified today with individuals who lived in the era in which Ife King Obalufon II was on the throne and/or participated in the civil war associated with his reign. This and other evidence suggests that Obalufon II was a key sponsor or patron of these ancient arts, an idea consistent with this king’s modern identity as patron deity of bronze casting, textiles, regalia, peace, and wellbeing. It also is possible that a majority of the ancient Ife arts were created in conjunction with the famous truce that Obalufon II is said to have brokered once he returned to power between the embattled Ife citizens as he brought peace to this long embattled city (Adediran 1992:91; Akintitan p.c.). As part of his plan to reunite the feuding parties, Obalufon II also is credited with the creation of a new city plan with a large, high-walled palace at its center. Around the perimeters, the compounds of key chiefs from the once feuding lineages were positioned. King Obalufon II seems at the same time to have pressed for the erection of new temples in the city and the refurbishment of older ones, these serving in part to honor the leading chiefs on both sides of the dispute. Ife’s ancient art works likely functioned as related temple furnishings.

One particularly art-rich shrine complex that may have come into new prominence as part of Obalufon II’s truce is that honoring the ancient hunter Ore, a deity whose name also features in one of Obalufon’s praise names. Ore is identified both as an

important autochthonous Ife resident and as an opponent to “Odudua.” A number of remarkable granite figures in the Ore Grove were the focus of ceremonies into the mid-twentieth century. One of these works called Olofefura (Fig. 4) is believed to represent the deified Ore (Dennett 1910:21; Talbot 1926 2:339; Allison 1968:13).⁵ Features of the sculpture suggest a dwarf or sufferer of a congenital disorder in keeping with the identity of many first (Obatala) dynasty shrine figures with body anomalies or disease. Regalia details also offer clues. A three-strand choker encircles Olofefura’s neck; three bracelet coils embellish the wrist; three tassels hang from the left hip knot. These features link this work—and Ore—to the earth, autochthony, and to the Ogboni association, a group promoted by Obalufon II in part to preserve the rights of autochthonous residents.

The left hip knot shown on the wrapper of this work, as well as that of the taller, more elegant Ore Grove priest or servant figure (Fig. 5), also recalls one of Ife’s little-known origin myths within the Obatala priestly family (Akintitan p.c.). According to this myth, Obatala hid the *ase* (vital force) necessary for Earth’s solidity within this knot, requiring his younger brother Odudua, after his theft of materials from Obatala, to wait for the latter’s help in completing the task. Consistent with this, Ogboni members are said to tie their cloth wrappers on the left hip in memory of Obatala’s use of this knot to safeguard the requisite *ase* (Owakinyin p.c.). Iron inserts in the coiffure of the taller Ore figure complement those secured in the surface of the Oranmiyan staff (Fig. 2), indicating that this sculpture—like many ancient Ife works of stone—were made in the same era, e.g. the early fourteenth century (see below).

An additional noteworthy feature of these figures, and others, is the importance of body proportion ratios. Among the Yoruba today, the body is seen to comprise three principal parts: head, trunk, and legs (Ajibade n.d.:3). Many Ife sculptural examples (see Fig. 4; compare also Figs. 15–16) emphasize a larger-than-life size scale of the head (*orí*) in relationship to the rest of the body (a roughly 1:4 ratio). Yoruba scholars have seen this head-privileging ratio as reinforcing the importance of this body part as a symbol of ego and destiny (*orí*), personality (*wú*), essential nature (*iwà*), and authority (*àse*) (Abimbola 1975:39off, Abiodun 1994, Abiodun et. al 1991:12ff).⁶ Or as Ogunremi suggests (1998:113), such features highlight: “The wealth or poverty of the nation ... [as] equated with the ‘head’ (*orí*) of the ruler of a particular locality.”

Both here and in ancient Ife art more generally, however, there is striking variability in related body proportions. Such ratios range from roughly 1:4 for the Ore grove deity figure (Fig. 4), the complete copper alloy king figure (Fig. 15), the couple from Ita



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4 Sculpture of Ore (Olofefura; Olofefunra)
Ore Grove, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Granite; Height: 80 cm
Nigeria National Museums, Ife. Mus. reg.no. IF
63.1.6.

PHOTO: COURTESY HUNTERIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY,
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

5 Sculpture of Ore's servant or priest
Ore Grove, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Granite; Height: 1.03m
Nigeria. National Museums, Lagos. Mus. reg. no.
136/61 E. Re-registered as IF 57.1.7.

PHOTO: SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER, 2008

(opposite)

8 Royal couple shown with interlocked feet and
arms
Ita Yemoo site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper alloy; Height: 286mm
Nigeria National Museums, Ife. Registration no.
57.1.1.

PHOTO: SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER 2004



Yemoo (Fig. 8), and many of the terracotta sculptures, to roughly 1:6 for the taller stone Ore grove figures (Fig. 5) and the copper seated figure from Tada (Fig. 11). Why these proportional differences exist in Ife art is not clear, but issues of class and/or status appear to be key. Whereas sculptures of Ife royals and gods often show 1:4 ratios, most nonroyals show proportions much closer to life. In ancient Ife art, the higher the status, the greater likelihood that body proportions will differ from nature in ways that greatly enhance the size of the head. This not only highlights the head as a prominent status and authority marker, but also points to the primacy of social difference in visual rendering.

While many Ife (and Yoruba) scholars have focused on how the head is privileged in relationship to the body, what also is important, and to date overlooked, is that the belly is equally important. The full, plump torsos (chest and stomachs) of Ife figures depicting rulers and deities complement modern Yoruba beliefs about health and well being on the one hand, and wealth and power on the other. Related ideas are suggested by the modern Yoruba term *odù* ("full") which, when applied to an individual, means both "he has blessing in abundance" and "fortune shines on him" (Idowu 1962:33). A full belly is vital to royals and deities not only as a reference to qualities of wellbeing but also as markers of state and religious fullness. In his extended discussion of the concept of *odù*, the indigenous Ife religious scholar Idowu notes (1962:33) that the same term also indicates a "very

large and deep pot (container)" and by extension anything that is of "sizable worth" and/or "superior quality." This word features centrally in the name for the high god, Ol-odù-marè. According to Idowu (1962:34) the latter use of the term signifies "He is One who is superlative," *odù* here invoking his very extraordinariness. Because large ceramic vessels called *odù* were employed in ancient Ife contexts as containers for highly valued goods such as beads and art (including the Ita Yemoo king figure, Fig. 16), this idiom offers an interesting modern complement and descriptor for early Ife sculptural portrayals of gods and kings as containers holding many benefits. A complementary feature of many ancient Ife works is that of composure or inner calm (*àikominún*, "tranquility of the mind" in modern Yoruba; Abraham 1958:388). This notable quality finds potential expression through the complete repose shown in their faces of early Ife art (Figs. 1, 15, 16), a quality that increases the sense of monumentality and power in these remarkable works.

The ancient Ife arts from Ife's Ore shrine, which appear to have been carved as a single sculptural group, include a stone vessel with crocodiles on its sides (Fig. 6). On its lid a frog (or toad) is shown in the jaws of a snake. The latter motif references the contestation between Obatala and Odudua for the center's control (Akintitan p.c.; Adelekan p.c.). According Akintitan (p.c.), this design addresses the less-than-straight manner in which Odudua asserted control over Ife, since poisonous snakes are



thought not to consume frogs (and toads). The crocodile, like several other animal figurations from this grove, honor Ore's hunting and fishing prowess. Carved crocodiles, giant eggs, a mudfish (African lung fish), and an elephant tusk reference the watery realm that dominated primordial Ife. A granite slab from this same site shows evenly placed holes (Fig. 7). This work served perhaps as a real or metaphoric measuring device for Ife's changing water levels, in keeping both with frequent flooding here (referenced in local accounts about Obalufon II's wife Queen Moremi) as well as Ife origin myths in which the Earth is said to have been formed only after Odudua sprinkled dirt upon the water's surface (Idowu 1962, Blier 2004).

One especially striking art-rich Ife site that also seems to have been identified with Obalufon II and his famous political truce is Ita Yemoo, the term *yemoo* serving as the title for first-dynasty Ife queens. This temple complex lies near the site where the annual Edi festival terminates. The Edi ritual is dedicated to Obalufon II's wife, Moremi, who also at one time was married to Obalufon II's adversary, the conqueror Oranmiyan. One of the most striking works from Ita Yemoo is a copper alloy casting of a king and queen (Fig. 8) with interlocked arms and legs. The male royal wears a simian skull on his hip, a symbol of Obatala (monkeys evoking the region's early occupants) and this deity's identity with Ife's autochthonous residents and first dynasty line. The female points toward the ground, gesturing toward Odudua as both second dynasty founder and later Yoruba earth god.⁷ This royal couple appears to reference in this way not only the painful Ife dynastic struggle between competing Ife families and chiefs, but also the political and religious marriage promoted by Obalufon II between these groups as part of his truce. Interestingly, a steatite head recovered by Frobenius at Offa (Moremi's hometown north of Ife) wears a similar queen's crown. Offa is adja-

cent to Esie where a group of similar steatite figures were found.⁸ These Esie works conceivably also were identified with Moremi, the local heroine who became Ife's queen.

A second copper alloy figure of a queen from the Ita Yemoo site is a tiny sculpture showing a recumbent crowned female circumscribing a vessel set atop a throne. She holds a scepter in one hand; the other grasps the throne's curving handle (Fig. 9). Her seat depicts a miniature of the quartz and granite stools identified in the modern era primarily with Ife's autochthonous (Obatala-linked) priests. The scepter that she holds is similar to another work from Ita Yemoo depicting a man with unusual (for Ife) diagonal cheek mark (Willett 2004:M26a), a pattern similar to markings worn by northern Yoruba residents from Offa among other areas. The recumbent queen's unusual composition appears to reference the transfer of power at Ife from the first dynasty rulership group to the new (second) dynasty line of kings, here symbolized through a queen, what appears to be Queen Moremi, the wife of Obalufon II.

Another striking Ita Yemoo sculpture, a Janus staff mount (Fig. 10) shares similar symbolism. The work depicts two gagged human heads positioned back-to-back, one with vertical line facial marks, the other plain-faced, suggesting the union of two dynasties (see below). This scepter likely was used as a club and evokes both the punishment that befell supporters of either dynastic group committing serious crimes and the unity of the two factions in state rituals involving human offerings, among these coronations. This scepter mount's weight and heightened arsenic content reinforces this identity. A larger Janus scepter mount from this same site depicts on one side a youthful head and on the other a very elderly man, consistent with two different dynasty portrayals, and the complementary royal unification/division themes.

A large Ife copper figure of a seated male was recovered at Tada (Fig. 11), an important Niger River crossing point situated some 200 km northeast of Ife. This sculpture is linked in important ways not only to King Obalufon II, but also to Ife trade, regional economic vitality, and the key role of this ruler in promoting Ogboni (called Imole in Ife), the association dedicated to both autochthonous rights and trade. The work is stylistically very similar to the Obalufon mask (Fig. 1). Both are made of pure copper and were probably cast by members of the same workshop. Although the forearms and hands of the seated figure are now missing, enough remains to suggest that they may have been positioned in front of the body in a way resembling the well-known Ogboni association gestural motif of left hand fist above right (Fig. 12). This same gesture is referenced in the smaller standing figure (also cast of pure copper) from this same Tada shrine (Fig. 13). Obalufon descendant Olojudo reaffirmed (p.c.) the gestural identity of the standing Tada figure. As I have argued elsewhere (1985) Yoruba works of copper are associated primarily with Ogboni and Obalufon, consistent with the latter ruler's association with bronze casting and economic wellbeing. Another notable Ogboni reference in these two copper works from Tada is the diamond-patterned wrapper (Morton Williams 1960:369, Aronson 1992) tied at the left hip with a knot.

How the ancient Ife seated sculpture (and other works) found their way to this Tada shrine has been a subject of consider-



9 Bowl depicting a recumbent scepter-holding queen atop a looping handle throne
Ita Yemoo Site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper alloy; Height: 121 mm
Nigeria National Museums, Lagos. no. L.92.58.
PHOTO: COURTESY FRANK WILLETT COLLECTION. HUNT-
ERIAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

11 Seated figure
Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper. Height: 53.7 cm
Found on a shrine in Tada, on the Niger River, 192 km. northeast of Ife. Nigeria National Museums, Lagos: 79. R. 18.
PHOTO: KARIN WILLIS, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COM-
MISSION OF MONUMENTS AND MUSEUMS, NIGERIA AND THE
MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART, NEW YORK

12 Possible original gesture of seated figure from Tada (Fig. 11).
DRAWING: SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER



able scholarly debate. I concur with Thurstan Shaw in his view (1973:237) that these sculptures most likely were brought to this critical river-crossing point because of the site's identity with Niger River trade. As Shaw notes (1973:237) these works seem to be linked to Yoruba commercial engagement along the Niger River "... marking perhaps important toll or control points of that trade." Specifically, the seated Tada figure offers important evidence of Ife's early control of this critical Niger River crossing point. Copper alloy castings of an elephant and two ostriches (animals identified with valuable regional trade goods) which were found on this same Tada site likely reference the importance of ivory and exotic feathers in the era's long distance trade. The goddess Olokun (Fig. 14) who spans both the first and second dynasty religious pantheons, is closely identified with promoting related commerce.

CONTESTING DYNASTIES: POLITICS OF THE BODY

Two copper alloy castings depicting royals (Figs. 15–16) offer important insight into early Ife society, politics, and history. One is the half-figure of a male from Ife's Wunmonije site, where a corpus of life-size copper alloy heads (Figs. 27–28) was unearthed. The other sculpture is the notably similar full-length standing figure from the Ife site of Ita Yemoo, the locale where the royal couple (Fig. 8), tiny enthroned queen sculpture (Fig. 9), and metal scepter (Fig. 10) were created.⁹ Based on style and similarities in form, the two works clearly were fashioned around the same time, conceivably during Obalufon II's reign. Their crowns are different from the tall, conical, veiled *are* crowns worn by Ife monarchs today. The latter crown a form also seen on the tiny Ife figure of a king found in Benin (Fig. 17).¹⁰

Based on both their cap-form head coverings and the horn each holds in the left hand, the figures have been identified as portraying rulers in battle (Odewale p.c.).¹¹ Not only are the rulers' caps reminiscent of the smaller crowns (*arinla*) worn by Yoruba rulers in battle, suggests Odewale (p.c.), but historically, antelope horns similar to those carried in their left hands were used in battle. These horns were filled with powerful *ase* (authority/



force/command), substances that could turn the course of war in one's favor. When so filled, the horns assured that the king's words would come to pass, a key attribute of Yoruba statecraft. The two appear to be competitors (e.g. competing lineages) vying for the Ife throne, references to the ruling heads of Ife's first (Obatala) and second (Odudua) dynasties shown here in ritual battle.

While these two royal sculptures are very similar in style and iconography, there are notable differences, including the treatment of the rulers' faces—one showing vertical line marks, the other lacking facial lines. There are also notable distinctions in headdress details, specifically the diadem shapes and cap tiers. The diadem of the Wunmojie king with striated facial marks (Fig. 15) displays a rosette pattern surmounted by a pointed plume, this motif resting atop a concentric circle. The headdress diadem on the plain-faced (unstriated) Ita Yemoo king figure instead consists of a simple concentric circle surmounted by a pointed plume. The rosette diadem of the king with facial striations seems to carry somewhat higher rank, for his diadem is set above the disk-form, as if to mark superior position. Moreover, the cap of the king with vertical facial markings integrates four tiers of beads while the plain-faced king's cap shows only three.

These differences both in crown diadem shapes and bead rows suggest that, among other things, the king bearing the vertical line facial marks and rosette-form diadem (the Wunmonije site ruler) carries a rank that is both different from and in some ways higher than that of the plain-faced royal.

There also are striking distinctions in facial marking and regalia details of these two king figures, differences that offer additional insight into the meaning and identity of these and other works from this center. Similar rosette and concentric circle diadem distinctions can be seen in many ancient Ife works. The Aroye vessel (Fig. 18), which displays rosette motifs and a monstrous human head referencing ancient Ife earth spirits (*erunmole, imole*; Odewale p.c.), may have functioned as a divination vessel linked to Obatala, a form today in Ife that employs a water-filled pot. The copper alloy head of first dynasty Ife goddess Olokun (Fig. 14) also incorporates a rosette with sixteen petals. Ife chiefs and priests today sometimes wear beaded pendants (*peke*) that incorporate similar eight-petal flower forms or rosettes. These individuals include a range of primarily Obatala (first dynasty) affiliates: Obalale (the priest of Obatala), Obalase (the Oluorogbo priest), Obalara (the Obalufon priest), and Chief Woye Asire (the priest of Ife springs and markets).¹² Rosette-form diadems such as these also can be seen on ancient Ife terracotta animals identified with Obatala, among these the elephant (Fig. 20) and duiker antelope heads from the Lafogido site. These rosettes suggest the importance of plants (flowers), and the primacy of ancient land ownership and gods to the Obatala group.

Concentric circle-form diadems, in contrast, seem to reference political agency as linked in part to the new Odudua dynasty (Akintitan p.c., Adelekan p.c.). In part for this reason, a concentric circle is incorporated into the iron gate at the front of the modern Ife palace. Agbaje-Williams notes (1991:11) that the burial spots of important chiefs sometimes are marked with stone circles as well. Concentric circle form diadems are displayed on the terracotta sculptures of ram and hippopotamus heads from Ife's Lafogido site. Both animals seem to be connected to the Odudua line and the associated sky deity pantheon of Sango among others (Idowu 1962:94, 142; Matory 1994:96). If, as Ekpo Eyo suggests (1977:114; see also Eyo 1974) the group of Lafogido site animal sculptures were conceived as royal emblems, their distinctive crown diadems suggest that these works, like the two king figures, were intended to represent two different dynasties and/or the gods associated with them. The king figure with vertical facial markings and a rosette-form diadem instantiates the first dynasty or Obatala rulership line. The plain-faced ruler with concentric circle diadem evokes the second or Odudua royal line.

Number symbolism in diadem and other forms is important in these and other ancient Ife art works serving to mark grade and status. According to Ife Obatala Chief Adelekan (p.c), eight-petal rosettes are associated with higher Obatala grades. That the Wunmonije king figure wears an eight-petal rosette (Fig. 15) while the Aroye vessel (Fig. 18) and Olokun head (Fig. 14) incorporate sixteen-petal forms is based on power difference. Eight is the highest number accorded humans, suggests Chief Adelekan, whereas sixteen is used for gods.¹³

13 Standing figure with top braid coiffure and Ogboni association gesture, 14th–15th century CE

Copper; Height: 56.5 cm

Found on the same Tada shrine as Figure 11. Nigeria National Museum, Enugu.

DRAWING: SUZANNE PRES-
TON BLIER



FACIAL MARKING DISTINCTIONS: IFE AS A COSMOPOLITAN CENTER

One of the most striking differences in the two royal figures and other Ife arts can be seen in the variant facial markings. Scholars have put forward several explanations for these facial pattern disparities in Ife and early regional arts. Among the earliest were William Fagg and Frank Willett (1960:31), who identified vertical line facial marks with royal crown veils and the “shadows” cast onto the face by associated strings of beads.¹⁴ This is highly unlikely, however, since many ancient works depicting women and nonroyals without crowns display the same vertical facial patterns. Moreover, of the two copper-alloy king figures (Figs. 15–16), only one shows vertical marks, and they both wear a kind of cap (*oro*) that does not include a beaded veil. Modern woodcarvings of Ife royals wearing traditional veiled crowns also do not show vertical line facial marks. Due to related inconsistencies, Willett would later retract his original shade-line theory and Fagg would not again discuss this in his later scholarship. As suggested above, the presence and lack of vertical facial marks on the two Ife king figures further reinforces the identity of these rulers as leaders of the two competing dynasties.¹⁵

An array of early and later artistic evidence supports this. Among these is a Lower Niger style vessel (Fig. 21) collected near Benin that displays a human face with vertical markings beneath the head of an elephant, an animal that in Ife is closely identified with Obatala and the first dynasty. This elephant head has its complement in the Lafogido site terracotta elephant head with a rosette-form diadem (Fig. 20), a site where a terracotta head



with vertical facial marks also was buried (Eyo 1974). Nineteenth and early twentieth century royal masks of the Igala (a Yoruba-linked group) associated with the ancient Akpoto dynasty (who are ancestors of the current Igala rulers), display similar thin vertical line facial markings referencing the early royals of this group (Sargent 1988:32; Boston 1968:172) (Fig. 22). The ancient Ife terracotta head that represents Obalufon I (Osangangan Obamakin, the father of Obalufon II) displays vertical marks (Fig. 23) consistent with the king's first-dynasty associations. Vertical line facial marks such as these appear to reference Ife royals (as well as other elites) and ideas of autochthony more generally.¹⁶ The fact that some 50 percent of the ancient Ife terracotta heads and figures show vertical line facial markings suggests how important this group still was in the early second dynasty era when these works were commissioned. The second largest grouping of Ife terracotta works—around 35 percent—show no facial markings at all, in keeping with modern Ife traditions forbidding facial marking for members of Ife resident families.

Ife oral tradition maintains that facial marking practices were at one point outlawed. Accordingly, late nineteenth to early twentieth century art and cultural practices display a strong aversion to facial marks of any type. Most likely it was Ife King Obalufon II who helped promote this change after his return to power as part of his plan for a more lasting truce. This change, and the need sometimes to cover one's historical family and dynastic identity for reasons of political expediency, is also suggested by two masks, one of terracotta and one of copper, both identified with Obalufon II. One of these (Fig. 1) is plain-faced and the other (Fig. 24) has prominent vertical markings. Consistent with Obalufon II's role in bringing to Ife, and serving as a key early art patron, his association with masking forms that shield (cover) the identities of the once-competing Ife groups is noteworthy. Like a majority of ancient Ife sculptures with and without facial marks, these works appear to date to the same

period, underscoring the fact that different groups were living together at Ife at this time.

Like the Wunmonije king figure (Fig. 15), the bronze head associated with the goddess Olokun (Fig. 14) also has vertical facial marks and a rosette-decorated crown. Olokun, the ancient Ife finance minister and later commerce, bead, and sea god, is said to date to Ife's first dynasty. The copper alloy head now in the British Museum, with both vertical facial marks and a concentric circle diadem, appears to reference a chief in one of Ife's autochthonous lineages (e.g. a number of first dynasty elite) who lived in Ife in the early second dynasty era before the ban on facial marking took effect.

14 Head with crown
Olokun grove site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper alloy; Height: 343 mm
Nigeria National Museums, Ife.
PHOTO: KARIN WILLIS, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION OF MONUMENTS AND MUSEUMS, NIGERIA AND THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART, NEW YORK

15 Figure of a king
Wunmonije site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper alloy. Height: 370 mm.
National Museums, Lagos. Museum registration no. 13, then 79.R.9. Renumbered 38.1.1.
PHOTO: KARIN WILLIS, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION OF MONUMENTS AND MUSEUMS, NIGERIA AND THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART, NEW YORK

16 Figure of a king
Ita Yemoo site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper alloy. Height: 473 mm.
National Museums, Lagos. Registry no. 79.R.12 and L.86.58.
PHOTO: KARIN WILLIS, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION OF MONUMENTS AND MUSEUMS, NIGERIA AND THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART, NEW YORK



17 Figure of Ife king
Found in Benin palace, c.
early 14th century CE
Copper alloy. Height: 124
mm
Nigeria. National Museums,
Benin. Museum reg. no. 17.
PHOTO: COURTESY HUNTERIAN
MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, UNI-
VERSITY OF GLASGOW

18 Vessel with monstrous
face and sixteen rosette
patterns around the surface,
some with mica centers
Aroye compound, Ile-Ife,
Nigeria, c. early 14th centu-
ry CE
Terracotta; Height: 178 mm
Unregistered when photo-
graphed
PHOTO: COURTESY HUNT-
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Several Ife heads show thick vertical facial lines. These marks seem to depict individuals participating in rituals in which blister beetles or leaves (from the *bujé* plant) were employed to mark the face with short-term patterns on the skin (Willett 1967:Fig. 23). These temporary “marks” may have served as references to first dynasty elites or their descendants during certain Ife rituals (Owomoyela n.d. n.p.; Willett 1967:Figs. 13–14, pl. 23; see also discussion in Fagg and Willett 1960:31, Drewal 1989:238–39 n. 65). Interestingly, sculptures depicting these thick lines characteristically show flared nostrils and furled brows, suggesting the pain that accompanied facial blistering practices such as these. Several Florescence Era Ife terracotta heads (roughly 5 percent of the whole) display three elliptical “cat whisker” facial marks at the corners of the mouth (Fig. 25) similar to those associated with more recent northeastern Yagba Yoruba, a group who later came under Nupe rule.¹⁷ In one such sculpture, the marks extend into the cheeks in a manner consistent with later Yoruba *abaja* facial markings, indicating an historic connection between the two.¹⁸ According to Andrew Apter (p.c.), a group of Yagba Yoruba occupy an Ife ward where the Iyagba dialect is still sometimes spoken. Most historic Yagba communities are found in the Ekiti Yoruba region where early iron working sites have been found (Obayemi 1992:73, 74).¹⁹ It is possible that Ife’s Yagba population was involved in complementary iron-working and smelting activities at this center. This tradition also offers interesting insight into Benin figures holding blacksmith tools with three similar facial marks, works said to depict messengers from Ife.

A rather unusual Janus figure from ancient Ife shows a man with diagonal facial markings similar to those of historic and modern Igbo Nri titleholders, suggesting the role a similar group may have played in early Ife as well. Today it is Chief Obawinrin, head of Ife’s Iwinrin lineage, who represents Ife’s historic Igbo population during the annual Ife Edi festival. Associated rites are in part dedicated to Obalufon II’s wife, Queen Moremi, who

is credited with stopping local Igbo (Ugbo) groups attacking Ife in the era in which she lived.²⁰ Today Igbo residents also live in nearby regions south of Ife, among these communities such as Ijale (Abimbola p.c., Lawal p.c., Awolalu 1979:26).²¹ These Ife-area Igbo populations appear to be distant relatives of autochthonous Igbo families, many of whom were forced out of the city by members of the new Odudua dynasty.²² Sculptures from Ife’s Iwinrin Grove, an Ife site closely linked to Ife’s “Igbo” population, characteristically show vertical line facial markings consistent with works linked to first dynasty Ife history and autochthony.

Another 5 percent of Ife sculptures portray Edo (Benin) style facial marks (forehead keloids) or patterns today characteristic of northeastern Yoruba/Nupe communities (a diagonal cheek line and/or vertical forehead line). The remaining 5 percent of the extant Ife terracotta works show unusual “mixed” facial patterns (generally “cat whisker” motifs along with other forms). These marks may reference intermarriages (social or political) at Ife in the early years of the new dynasty. The notable variety of these facial patterns in ancient Ife art makes clear the center’s importance as a cosmopolitan city sought out by people arriving from various regional centers. Features of Ife cosmopolitanism revealed in part through these variant facial markings are consistent with Ife’s identity as a center of manufacturing and trade. Similar issues are raised in Ife origin myths that identify this city as the home (birthplace) of humans of multiple races and ethnicities.

A CORPUS OF REMARKABLE COPPER HEADS PERSONIFYING LOCAL IFE CHIEFS

A striking group of life-size copper and copper alloy heads (Figs. 27–28) was unearthed in the 1930s at the Wunmonije site behind the Ife palace along with the above-discussed king figure (Fig. 15).²³ In addition to the original corpus of fifteen life-size heads from this site, a clearly related 4.25 inch high fragment of a copper alloy head consisting of a portion of a face showing a

21 Benin (Lower Niger Style) vessel details, 17th–19th century CE
 Copper alloy; Height 5.5 mm
 Two sides of copper alloy vessel with two heads surmounted by regalia motifs. The face with vertical line facial marks is surmounted by an elephant.



nose and part of a mouth also was collected at an estate in Ado-Ekiti and has been described as “identical with those from Wunmonije” (Werner and Willett 1975: facing p. 142).

These sixteen life-size heads appear to have been created as part of the truce that Obalufon II established between the embattled Ife residents. One of the heads (Fig. 27) indeed is so similar to the Obalufon mask as to depict the same individual.²⁴ Frank Willett, who published photographs of many of the life-size metal heads in his monograph on Ife, suggests (1967:26–28) that these works had important royal mortuary functions in which each was displayed with a crown and robes of office, in the course of ceremonies following each ruler’s death.²⁵ Willett proposes further that the heads were commissioned as memorial sculptures (*ako*) consistent with a later era Ife and Yoruba tradition of carved wooden *ako* effigy figures used in commemorating deceased hunters. This theory, which identifies the corpus of life-size cast heads as effigies of successive rulers of the Ife city state, however, is premised on an idea (now largely discredited; see also Lawal 2005:503ff.) that the works were made by artists over a several-hundred-year period (the reigns of sixteen monarchs). This theory is problematic not only because the styles and material features of the heads are consistent, but also because the heads were found together (divided into two groups) and share a remarkably similar condition apart from blows that some of them received during their discovery. The shared condition indicates that they were interred for a similar length of time and under similar circumstances.

The formal similarities in these heads have led most scholars, myself included (Blier 1985), to argue that the works were created in a short period of time and by fewer than a handful of artists.²⁶ With respect to style, as Thurstan Shaw notes (1978:134), “... they are of a piece and look like the work of one generation, even perhaps a single great artist.” These heads, I posited in this same article, were cast in part to serve as sacred crown supports and used during coronation rituals for a group of powerful Ife chiefs who head the various core first and second dynasty lineages in the city.²⁷ These rites appear also to have been associated with Obalufon since related priests have a role in Ife coronations still today.

The site where the heads were found today is identified as Obalufon II’s burial site (Eyo 1976:n.p.). Ife Chief Obalara (Obalufon II’s descendant and priest) crowns each new monarch at a Obalufon shrine (Igbo Obalara) near the Obatala temple a short distance from here (Verger 1957:439, Fabunmi 1969:10, Eluyemi 1977:41). Today, when a descendant of King Obalufon wishes to commission shrine arts in conjunction with his worship, two copper alloy heads, one plain faced, the other with vertical line facial markings, are created (Oluyemi p.c.) (Fig. 30).

Some of these ancient Ife life-size heads have plain faces. Others show vertical lines. These facial marking variables support the likely use of these heads in coronations and other rites associated with the powerful early Ife first- and second-dynasty-linked chiefs who were brought together as part of Obalufon II’s truce. The grouping of these heads, which in many ways also resemble the Obalufon mask (Fig. 1), together reference (and honor) the leaders of key families (now seen as *orisa* or gods) who had participated in this conflict. Obalufon II also created a new city plan as part of this truce, one in which the homesteads of these lineage leaders were relocated to sites circumscribing the center of Ife and its palace (Blier 2012). In the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries, when the city came under attack, the heads appear to have been buried for safe keeping near their original shrine locale after many centuries of use and their location eventually forgotten.

There are several ways that the heads could have been displayed in early Ife ritual contexts, among these earthen step-form altars and tall supports similar to one photographed with heads in Benin in the late nineteenth century (Fig. 29). The latter staff would account for the presence of holes near the bases of these works. Wooden mounts such as those known today here as *ako* were fashioned to commemorate Ife elephant hunters. These also could have been used for display purposes. A perhaps related Ijebu-Ode known as *okute* and discussed by Ogunba (1964:251) features roughly 4-foot wooden staffs with a symbolic human head. These pole-like forms were secured in the ground and “dressed” during annual rites commemorating early (first dynasty) rulers of the region.



22 Mask with vertical line marks
Igala, 19th–20th century
Wood; Height: 35 cm
Nigeria National Museums, Kaduna. After Eyo
1977:194
DRAWING: SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER

23 Head with vertical line facial marks
Osangangan Obamakin Shrine, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c.
early 14th century CE
Terracotta; Height: 140 mm
Said to represent Osangangan Obamakin. Mus. reg.
no. 30. Renumbered 49.1.18.
PHOTO: COURTESY HUNTERIAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF
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A striking terracotta vessel (Fig. 30) buried at the center of an elaborate potsherd pavement at Obalara's Land, an Ife site long affiliated with the Obalufon family, also offers clues important to early display contexts of these heads. This vessel incorporates the depiction of a shrine featuring a naturalistic head with vertical line striations flanked by two cone-shaped motifs described by Garlake (1974:145) as crowns. The scene seems to portray an Obalufon altar with different types of crowns and an array of Obalufon and Ogboni ritual symbols that find use in coronations, among these *edan* Ogboni, consistent with the use of the Ife life-size heads in chiefly and royal enthronements overseen by the center's Obalufon priesthood.

In a community outside of Ife, I learned of an important tradition that offers additional insight into this corpus of ancient Ife life size heads. In the local Obalufon shrine are found sixteen copper alloy heads. While I was unable to see these works, in the course of several interviews with the elderly temple chief, I learned a considerable amount about them. He described them as *erunmole* (*imole*, earth spirits).²⁸ This identity underscores the likely association of the heads as sacred icons honoring ongoing offices and/or titles (Abiodun 1974:138) rather than simple portraits (i.e. references to a specific person) (Underwood 1967:nos. 9, 11, 12).

Consistent with this, each of the sixteen copper alloy heads located in this rural Obalufon temple is said by the priest to have been identified with a "powerful" individual from Ife's distant past who was subsequently deified, among these Oramfe (the thunder god), Obatala (god of the autochthonous residents), Oluorogbo (the early messenger deity), Obalufon (King Obalufon II), Oranmiyan (Obalufon's adversary, the military conqueror), Obameri (an ancient warrior associated with both dynasties), and Ore (the autochthonous Ife hunter). These names harken back to important early personages and gods in the era of Obalufon II and the Ife civil war when the Ife life-size metal heads were made.²⁹ The descendants and priests of these ancient heroes still play a role in the ritual life of this center. As explained to me by the priest of this temple: "These *imole* are sixteen in number, all sixteen heads are kings [Oba, here meaning

also deified chiefs], the sixteen kings of *erunmole*." The Ogboni association, of which this rural priest also was a member, similarly comprise here sixteen core members (titled officers). Lisa Aronson (1992:57) notes for the Yoruba center of Ijebu-Odu that nearly 90 percent of the chiefs in this center are members of Ogboni. There are other connections between the tradition of Obalufon metal heads honoring historic leaders and Ogboni arts. Not only are a majority of modern Yoruba copper alloy sculptures identified with both Ogboni and Obalufon, but the "sticks" (staves) said to be secured to the modern Obalufon heads during display (Oluyemi p.c.), a ritual and aesthetic continuum extending back to the ancient Ife Florescence Era.

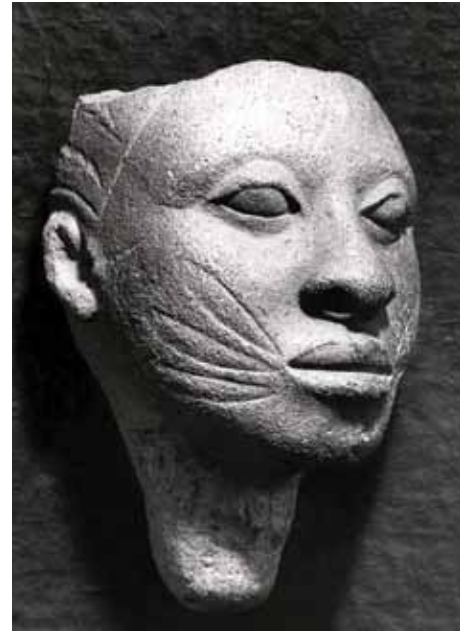
*As with the two Ife king figures (Figs. 15–16), differences in the ancient Ife life-size heads' facial markings and other features offer additional insight to their identity and meaning. Half of these sixteen life-size metal heads display vertical line marks that I have identified with autochthonous (first dynasty) elites; the others have plain faces complementing the new dynasty's denunciation of facial marking. As explained to me by the priest at the rural Obalufon temple where the grouping of copper alloy heads were housed: "there were sixteen crowns in the olden days, eight tribal and eight nontribal." In using the term "tribal" here, he is referring to Ife's autochthonous residents. Like the new city plan created by Obalufon II as part of his truce, these heads give primacy to the display and sharing of power by lineage heads of both dynasties.

Other features of these works also are important. A majority of the plain-faced heads, but not the striated ones, include holes around the beard line probably for the attachment of an artificial beard of beads or hair. In the twentieth century, beards in Yoruba art often identify important leaders, priests, and others by signaling senior age status and rank.³⁰ Because all the plain-faced heads include beard holes, but only a few with facial markings do, the plain-faced works seem to be linked to power and/or status different than that of the heads with vertical facial lines. The non-bearded heads conceivably reference ritual status and sacral power consistent with Obatala lineages today; the bearded



24 Mask with vertical line facial markings
Obalufon temple site (Obalara's Compound), Ile-Ife,
Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Terracotta. Height: 32 cm
Obafemi-Awolowo University. Exc. no. OC2.
PHOTO: COURTESY HUNTERIAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF
GLASGOW

25 Head with "cat whisker" marks
Olokun Walode site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th
century CE
Terracotta; Height: 127 mm
Nigeria National Museums, Ife. Mus. reg. no. 67/16
S. Renumbered IF 67.1.5.
PHOTO: COURTESY HUNTERIAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF
GLASGOW



heads instead seem to convey ideas of lineage leadership and political status consistent with the center's new rulership line.³¹

Interestingly, four of the eight heads with facial lines are—like the Obalufon mask (Fig. 1) and the two of the Tada figures (Figs. 11, 13)—cast of nearly pure copper (96.8–99.7 percent), a feat that artists of ancient Greece and Rome, the Italian Renaissance, and Chinese bronze casters never achieved. The pure copper heads in this way differ materially from the stylistically similar heads that incorporate sizable amounts of alloys along with the copper (the associated copper content ranging from 68.8–79.8 percent).³² A majority of the latter are without vertical facial lines. The five nearly-pure copper heads additionally contain no detected zinc, a mineral that in the copper alloy heads ranges from 9.3–13.9 percent.³³ Since half of the nearly-pure copper striated heads (two of the four) have beard holes, this small subset of works may have been intentionally differentiated in order to identify chiefs of both sacred and political status. One of these pure copper heads additionally displays red and black lines around the eyes (Fig. 28). This feature is said by Adedinni (p.c.) to identify a "most powerful person," someone who is also a powerful imole (sacral power). To Obatala diviner Akintitan (p.c.), these eye surrounding lines reference someone who "can really see," i.e., a person with unique access to the supernatural power that imbues one with spiritually charged insight.

Metal differences in these heads also carry important color differences that were significant to the ancient Ife patrons and artists. The pure copper works would have been redder, while those made from copper alloys were more yellow. The redder, nearly pure copper heads may have been linked to ideas of heightened potency or danger. And since casting pure copper is technically far more difficult than casting copper with alloy mixtures, the former heads also display greater skill, challenge, and risk on the part of the artist, attributes no doubt important to the meanings of these heads as well. This material feature, in short, also gives them special iconic power. The use of nearly pure copper

in these works suggests not only how knowledgeable Ife artists were in the materials and technologies of casting, but also how willing they were to take related risks to achieve specific visual and symbolic ends in these works.

DATING ANCIENT IFE ART

How do the diverse forms and meanings of Ife's early arts inform dating and other related questions? Dating ancient Ife art has posed many challenges to scholars, largely because many of these artifacts come from secondary sites, rather than from contexts that can be dated scientifically to the period when the works were made and first used (e.g. primary sites). While developing a chronology of Ife art has proven difficult, several schema have been published in recent decades. Following the late Eko Eyo, some Ife scholars have utilized the term "Pavement Era" (and concomitantly "Pre-Pavement" and "Post-Pavement" periods) to distinguish those art works that are linked to the period of Ife's famous potsherd pavements. However, because these pavements are still seen (and used) in abundance in the center today, and in some cases reveal several different construction periods, the term "Pavement Era" is problematic. Ife historian Akinjogbin instead takes up (1992:96) local temporal terms to discuss Ife chronology. Without attributing dates, he notes that one such local term, *Osangangan Obamakin*, in some situations designates Ife King Obalufon I (the father of Obalufon II) and in others the early (first) dynasty with which he was affiliated³⁴ Drewal ([1989:46] 2009:79) has attempted a temporal ordering of ancient Ife sculpture based on differences in media (stone vs. terracotta or metal) and/or assumed "expressive" qualities, but this has been dismissed by archaeologists due to contradictory evidence from related sites.³⁵

Yoruba archaeologist Akin Ogundiran (2001:27–28, 2003) provides a more scientifically grounded chronology for Ife and the broader area.³⁶ His overview of artifact remains and other sources contributes to my own Ife chronology, one that combines



27 Life-size head without facial markings, beard line holes
Wunmonije Site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper alloy; Height: 290 mm
National Museums, Ife. Museum registration, no. 9.
Renumbered 38.1.9.

PHOTO: KARIN WILLIS, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION OF MONUMENTS AND MUSEUMS, NIGERIA AND THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART, NEW YORK

28 Life-size head with thin vertical line facial marks, no beard line holes, pigment lines around the eyes
Wunmonije Compound site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE
Copper; Height: 299 mm; Weight: 6.8 kg
Nigeria National Museums, Ife. Museum registration no. 6.

PHOTO: KARIN WILLIS, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION OF MONUMENTS AND MUSEUMS, NIGERIA AND THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART, NEW YORK

29 Benin. Cast metal heads atop iron “tree.” Benin, Nigeria
VON LUSCHAN 1897:PL.515



archaeological with stylistic, oral historical, and other data. For some periods, however, I employ different terms and distinguishing features than does Professor Ogundiran. Most significantly, I have simplified this chronology into three main periods (with subgroupings) using the term Florescence (cultural “flowering”) for the period of Ife’s major artistic and cultural innovation, along with periods prior to (pre-Florescence) and following (post-Florescence) this era. An early Ife date of c. 350 BCE, purportedly based on radiocarbon (Folster in Ozanne 1969:32), cited by both Ogundiran (2002, p.c.) and Drewal (2009:80), has been rejected by Frank Willett (2004) and others for lack of supporting scientific evidence. I concur with this assessment.³⁷

The main art-producing era of early Ife, what I define as the Florescence Period (Ogundiran’s Classical Period) is distinguished by both roulette- and cord-decorated ceramics. Within a relatively short time span in this period, what I identify as Ife’s High Florescence, most of the early arts appear to have been made. One can date this period to c. 1250–1350 CE based on a range of factors, including the thermoluminescence tests of key metal works and the likely reign era of Obalufon II as delimited in Ife oral histories and king lists. It is this era that appears to mark the beginning of the “Oduduwa” or second dynasty of Ife. Associated with this High Florescence era are arts not only in “bronze” (Fig. 1) and stone (Fig. 2), but also terracotta (Fig. 24).

The above time frame is consistent with the dating for Ife and its arts by Peter Garlake (1977:72), based on his excavations at the Obalara’s Land and Woye Asiri sites, both of which are closely linked to King Obalufon II whose descendant and current priest is Chief Obalara. From work Garlake undertook at the Obalara Land site, he would publish five radiocarbon dates reflecting three likely phases. The first is an initial occupation period of circa the twelfth century CE. The second phase constitutes a c. fourteenth century occupation period identified with the laying of the pavements, the creation of an array of sculptures, along with the site’s eventual fourteenth–fifteenth century abandonment. The third and final phase at the Obalara Land site consists of Post-Florescence era finds subsequent to the main site occupation and abandonment.³⁸

Garlake’s recalibrated radiocarbon dates (1974:146) for the Ita Yemoo site layer of terracotta sculptures excavated by Willett indicate a period potentially coeval with the radiocarbon dates of the Obalara’s Land sculptures (1312–1420 CE). As Garlake observes for this important and diverse group of terracottas (1974:146): “... on the dating evidence presently available, it seems that Obalara’s Land was occupied at the same time as Ita Yemoo although it is likely, but not certain, that Ita Yemoo was first occupied at an earlier date than Obalara’s Land.” The likely period of overlap between these two sites is



1310–1350 CE, or what I posit as the High Florescence Era. Thermoluminescence dates for the clay cores extracted from two of the Wunmonije site life-size heads indicate a similar period of 1221–1369 CE (Willett 1997:28). This period also is consistent with the likely reign era of Ife King Obalufon II. This dating additionally conforms with this king's identity as the ruler who introduced bronze casting at Ife. A majority of Ife's ancient arts thus were created in a relatively short time period, within a single generation of artists, in the early fourteenth century.

An in-depth analysis of ancient Ife sculptural style by art historian Barbara Blackmun (n.d. in Willett 1994) reveals that works from a variety of Ife sites show discernable clusters of similarity consistent with artists working within the same broader time frame. Significantly, Garlake also furnishes evidence (1974, 1977) that Ife's High Florescence Era came to a relatively quick end, a change accompanied by a notable shift in pottery decoration forms, specifically from roulette to cord impressions (see also Shaw 1978:155).

Possible outside confirmation for this Ife early fourteenth century High Florescence Era is found in a well-known (but unexplored for the Yoruba) written source, namely Ibn Battūta's 1325–1354 travel account. Here we read (1958:409–10) that southwest of the Málí (Mali) kingdom lies a country called Yoúfi [Ife?]³⁹ that is one of the “most considerable countries of the Soudan [governed by a] ...souverain [who] is one of the greatest kings.”⁴⁰ Battūta's description of Yoúfi as a country that “No white man can enter ... because the negros will kill him before he arrives” appears to reference the ritual primacy long associated with Ife, in keeping with its important manufacturing and mercantile interests, among these advanced technologies of glass bead manufacturing, iron smelting and forging, and textile-production. Blue-green segi beads⁴¹ from Ife have been found as far west as Mali, Mauritania, and modern Ghana, suggesting that Battuta may well have learned of this center in the course of his travels in Mali.

There also appears to be a reference to Ife on a 1375 Spanish trade map known as the Catalan Atlas. This can be seen in the name Rey de Organa, i.e. King of Organa (Obayemi 1980:92), associated with a locale in the central Saharan region. While the geography is problematic, as was often the case in maps from this era, the name Organa resonates with the title of early Ife rulers, i.e. Ogané (Oghene, Ogene; Akinjogbin n.d.). The same title is found in a late fifteenth-century account by the Portuguese seafarer Joao Afonso de Aveiro (in Ryder 1969:31), documenting Benin traditions about an inland kingdom that played a role in local enthronement rituals. While the identity of this inland ruler also is debated, Ife seems to be the most likely referent (see Thornton 1988, among others).



30 On vessel from Obalara's Land, Ile-Ife, Nigeria
Terracotta
Detail of shrine showing head with vertical line facial marks, flanked by two conical forms
PHOTO: COURTESY HUNTERIAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Ancient Ife art works, as we have seen, are works not only of great visual power, striking beauty, and rare technical accomplishment, but also objects that speak to core issues of history and politics in this early center. As such these sculptures offer unique and critical insight into the social fabric of the city. Looking at the complex visual codes of these remarkable objects through details of body form and proportion, gesture, facial marking, material properties, regalia form, animal symbolism, site locations, oral history, mapping and traveler accounts, as well as modern day Ife beliefs and rituals about this center and its arts allows us to see these ancient Ife works as a vital part of the city's early history. The artists of these works clearly were interested in the sculptural meanings being known, and through an in-depth analysis of the variant symbolic formula at play, we now have a much better understanding of both this important early city and its arts.

SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER *is*

Notes

This article is drawn in part from a forthcoming book on Ife art, *Art and Risk in Ancient Yoruba: Identity and Politics at Ife, c. 1300 CE* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) framed in part around questions of art and risk at this ancient center (Blier 2012). I wish to thank the Center of African Studies at Harvard University for travel support and partial image funding and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study where much of

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1 In addition to scouring archives in Europe and the US, I also undertook a number of short focused field research trips to Ife from 2002 to 2008. Prior to this I had lived and worked for two years in a Yoruba community (Savé in Benin Republic) while in the Peace Corps. My earlier Yoruba experiences are addressed in several articles (Blier 1988, 2001, 2011b). My research on various aspects of early Ife art are taken up in a diversity of publications (Blier 1982, 2004, 2010, 2011a, 2012a–b, forthcoming).

Scholars who have undertaken research within the metropolitan Ife area on these ancient arts have included, most importantly, Leo Frobenius, William Bascom, Frank Willett, Ekpo Eyo, Peter Garlake, Dierk Lange, and Babatude Lawal. Yoruba scholars David Doris and Moyo Okedede have done research at Ife on more recent art traditions. Other scholars also have published on early Ife artistic traditions, among these, Robert Farris Thompson who has explored historic crown traditions and other forms (1970, 1971). Henry Drewal (1973, 1989, 2009) draws largely on research in the Yoruba center of Ketu while he was a PhD student at Columbia University's Teacher's College program as well as later work in the Ijebu area with research partner Margaret Thompson Drewal for his Ife writings for his Ife writings (2009 [1989, 1998]). Edith Platte, the late specialist in Hausa cultural practices, integrates her insights of German traveler Leo Frobenius in her analysis (2010) of an object in the British Museum. Jacob Olupona's recent book (2011) on Ife religion provides insight on this culture. Alisa LaGamma has brought ancient Ife art into a broader discussion (2011) of African leadership. In many ways, Leo Frobenius' early Ife scholarship still remains important despite his problematic collection practices and Atlantis claims; more recently Dierk Lange (2004) has sought to link ancient Ife to the Canannites for which evidence seems similarly lacking.

2 Not only are these forms often multivalent, but proverbs, like other verbal arts, are formulated at specific places and times to address related issues and contexts. This is also true for both Ifa divination verses and praise songs. To take but one comparative example, the English rhyme "Ring Around the Rosy" has its roots in the traumatic circumstances of the Black Plague (c. 1348). To use this rhyme indiscriminately to address flower motifs in art works from early (or later) eras would be problematic.

3 Obalara's Land(?). In other words, the lands identified with the king (Oba) of Ilara. The latter perhaps is a reference to the important archaeological site situated to the west of Ife which was excavated by Peter Garlake (1974, 1977).

4 P.c. designates "personal communication" and references specific interviews undertaken by the author in Ile-Ife. I have included this list with the bibliography.

5 Murray and Willett identify this figure as Ore's servant (1958:140). Hambly refers to the larger Ore figure, the so-called Idena figure, as Olofefunra.

6 Several Yoruba scholars have suggested that ideas of beauty closely parallel character (*iwa*, "essential nature": Abimbola 1975:393–95, 1976:393; Drewal et al. 1989:38, 42; Lawal 1996) and specifically the relationship with outer and inner beauty (*ewa ode* versus *ewa inu*) in Yoruba aesthetics. Others, among these Jacob Olupona (p.c.), have questioned this, based in part on word translation.

7 Discussions with Peter Morton-Williams (p.c.) offer confirming evidence for this reading of the Ita Yemoo couple. Independently a similar conclusion for this sculpture's referents was made by Lange (2004).

8 Plausibly these Esie works were commissioned in this era to honor Moremi both as Offa's native daughter and as Ife's famous Queen and new dynasty mother.

9 Part of the clay cores of both figures were tested through thermoluminescence. Reflecting these findings, Willett and Fleming (1976:142) would date the Ita Yemoo works to "an early fourteenth century dating..."

10 Willett 2004:M.73a, b. This figure is said to have been sent to the Benin court by an Ife ruler as a model of casting expertise (Fagg 1950; 1982:16). On the face of this tiny royal figure, snakes appear to be shown emerging from the nostrils, a motif sometimes associated with Obalufon in related later era arts.

11 This interpretation contrasts with that of Ife's monarch, King Adesoji Aderemi, who, on viewing the royal figure from Ita Yemoo, identified it as a ruler in coronation attire (Willett 1959:189).

12 Significantly, today Obatala is included within the sky god group, however, in many ways this deity is more closely associated with ancient land control. This is also true for the Ife Obatala-linked gods such as Woye Asiri (springs and markets), Orisa Teko (agriculture), and Baba Sigididi (healing and war).

13 The number sixteen here and in other contexts suggests divine authority, as seen not only in the number of principal Yoruba gods, Ifa divination signs (*odu*), and early sanctified Yoruba city-states.

14 Schildkrout (2009:12) employs this same argument, though without citation, in her recent theory. She uses the presence of a black bead in a facial hole of one of the copper alloy heads as support for veil theory concerning facial marking. However, not only is this a later era (post-Florescence) bead, but its presence here more likely references the added bead-decorated beard or crown. Schildkrout notes (ibid.) that "... no Ife works show attachments for headgear with veils or face coverings, to the contrary, however, all of the life size metal heads have holes around the crown line where beaded elements could easily have been secured. Within the larger corpus of "traditional" African art, including that of the Yoruba, the depiction of facial "shadows" is never seen. Moreover if these facial lines on early Ife sculptures were intended to evoke ideas of "divine kingship," as is argued in this volume, one wonders why these same lines also are seen on many non-royal persona in Ife art. Were facial lines important to minimizing reflection, as also has been asserted, why are these lines shown on terracottas? Conversely, why do some equally "shiny" copper alloy cast heads not have these marks? Frank Willett's argument (1967:Figs. 13–14, pl. 23) that these vertical facial striations represent either Ife-specific "tribal marks" or the grouping of Ife royals seem more plausible. The dynastic interpretation that I offer is more consistent with this latter view.

15 While some scholars (for example, Adepegba 1976) argue the reverse (that the works with vertical line scarification reference new dynasty royals), my reading of a range of evidence indicates that this is not the case.

16 These vertical lines are so fine that most likely they were incised on infants. As a child grows older, skin keloiding (the thickening of the epidermis around a cut) often occurs, leaving the facial markings thick and broader.

17 In part in reference to this, Clapperton (1826, in Johnson 1921:6) observes vis-à-vis facial marking patterns here that "Upon the whole, the people of Yarba [Yagba] are nearly of the same description as those of Noofee [Nupe]."

18 Interestingly, the military leader, Oranmiyan, also may have had Yagba and/or nearby Nupe family

connections.

19 The Yagba living today in the Ekiti area, like Ife Elu lineage members, are identified as "strangers" (Apter 1992:69), even though this group in both areas is recognized as being among the earliest residents. Apter also has taken up important issues of Yagba religion and politics (1987, 1992).

20 Yoruba tonal variations of the word *igbo* reference at once a "grove" and a bird species. A ritual site outside Ife called Igbo Igbo (the "Igbo grove") suggests, however, that the term also may delimit an ethnicity, as does the term for Ife's earliest era, Igbomokun ("the dawn belongs to the Igbo").

21 According to Edo anthropologist Joseph Eborieme (p.c.) the Igbo also are important to early Benin history and city planning. Victor Manfredi notes in turn (p.c.) that in Edo, the term for slave, *igbon*, alludes to the Igbo population in a form of punning or word association.

22 Interestingly, the ancient Ife Ikedu oral tradition identifies early Ife society as having two main divisions, the more populous being known as Ehele, and the other identified as Igbo (Akinjogbin n.d.:12). Among the Yoruba-related Urhobo to the south, the Ehele reference a once powerful warrior group.

23 Parts of this section are taken from Blier 1985. Willett (2004) has critiqued both my and Drewal's writings on these heads; I provide counter evidence in my forthcoming book.

24 Most of these life-size heads and other Ife copper alloy sculptures were published in Underwood 1949, employing the numbering system still largely in use by scholars today.

25 This theory was elaborated even earlier by Fagg (1951:118), Bertho and Mauny (1952:108), and Justine Cordwell (1953). Neither Willett nor later Ife scholars have addressed the roles of these earlier scholars in the development of this theory.

26 In several cases, the heads appear to have been fashioned after the same individual, reflecting the possible use of a shared model—conceivably a living relative of a closely allied lineage or family. In a similar way in Ife today, the two main Obatala lineage priesthoods are represented by a single lineage head, one line having died out.

27 Drewal offered yet another theory (1989:66–67) that seemingly amplifies, without citation, my 1985 *Art Bulletin* article on the heads that had been forwarded to him for review. He additionally incorporates Beier's 1982 study of modern crown rituals in Okuku, a kingdom some distance from Ife.

28 The identification of these heads with supernaturals conforms with Ife beliefs at the time they were unearthed (Bascom 1938:176).

29 An elderly Obalufon priest at this center explained that this grouping of sixteen heads is housed within the Obalufon temple, each kept "in its own separate apartment."

30 While it is possible that these beard forms differentiated male from female persona, it is more likely that the beard references served as markers of age or status among males, since most of the names provided for the Obalufon related copper alloy heads are identified with male heroes and lineage leaders.

31 Drewal disagrees (2009:162, 172, n.157) that the lower facial holes shown on the life-size heads reference the male beard line, arguing instead that these holes were employed to "... attach a beaded veil for the lower face" because, according to him, "... the face of a sacred ruler was not to be seen on ritual occasions" (Drewal and Schildkrout 2009:162, Fig. 33). This theory is problematic since the sets of hole lines on these life-size heads outline specifically the mouth, mustache, and beard areas in such a way that makes little sense for a

veil because gravity would make the lower holes redundant. Moreover, if the holes were meant to attach a veil, it is curious that the eyes were not covered as well, since the Yoruba king's veil today is believed to protect the populace from dangers of the Oba, his eyes as much as his mouth. In his theory, Drewal (2009: 172 n.156) cites the work of Fagg and Willett 1962 (*sic*). Fagg and Willett (1960:31), however, do not concur with Drewal's conclusions.

32 Werner and Willett offer (1975) a correction to Barker's earlier analysis, noting that Head no. 4 is "brass" with 13.5 percent zinc content and "practically no lead."

33 The lead quantities used in these heads vary as well, from 0–1.2 percent for the nearly pure copper heads to 4.4–15.9 percent for the others.

34 The late Ife archaeologist Omotose Eluyemi proposed (1980:16) a chronology based on terms drawn largely from Ife oral tradition. While both archaeological and artifactual evidence are lacking for this chronology, the local era names included poetic temporal complements that convey something of local perceptions of how history, time, and cosmology at Ife are interlinked.

35 This rather Western-centric developmental teleology that also integrates purported style distinctions in Ife sculptures lacks not only archaeological but also art historical grounding and has met with notable criticism from Ife archaeologists Peter Garlake (2002:134–35) and Frank Willett (2004). As Garlake points out (2002:tk) vis-a-vis Drewal's attempts to document stylistic changes here based on artifact findings at the Ita Yemoo and Obalara's Land sites: "... there is very little if anything to suggest the sites are not contemporary." Garlake (1974, 1977) also questions the Ita Yemoo chronology offered by Willett, a site whose dates Willett also would later revise. While Drewal states (2009:138) that Obalara's Land is "... slightly later than Ita Yemoo and perhaps Lafogido," the scientific evidence, Garlake points out (1977:92), also does not support this statement. The single radiocarbon result for the Lafogido site is considered not sufficient enough to serve as a accepted date marker. There also is no archaeological or stylistic evidence that objects carved in stone are earlier in date than those of bronze or terracotta.

36 Ogundiran's chronology delimits Ife history (2001:27–28; 2003) in a series of phases: an Early Formative Phase (500–800 CE, characterized by iron use and village structure), a Late Formative Phase (800–1000 CE, increasing political centralization); a Classical Period (1000–1400 CE, urbanization); an Early Intermediate Phase (1400–1600 CE, regional power centers); an Atlantic Period (1600–1800 CE, Atlantic slaving); and a Late Intermediate (1800–1900 CE, massive population movements following Old Oyo's collapse). I have chosen not to use the term "Formative" as a period label because no works have yet been found that suggest a developmental art style at this center. Because the word "Classical" is so deeply grounded in European art traditions (referencing ancient Greece and Rome) and carries related, long standing cultural and historical associations in the West, I also have not employed this term.

37 As important as the Pre-Florescence Era appears to have been in Ife, we have little by way of scientific or material evidence from related excavations, much of this data coming instead from undated local artifacts, regional excavations, and Ife oral histories.

38 At Woye Asiri, Garlake (1974, 1977) has identified a main occupation period with shrine offerings based on radiocarbon test results within the time span of 1250–1400 CE at the earliest and 1310–1430 CE at the latest, suggesting a likely fourteenth-century occupation defined by a relatively short period of building. Garlake adds that "the main occupation is certainly placed in the

fourteenth century," based on "recalibrations of the radiocarbon calendar suggest[ing] an even shorter time span" in which "[t]he twelfth century dates probably mark early thirteenth century calendar dates, and the fifteenth century dates represent fourteenth century dates."

39 The name Youfi also is in keeping with name variants in southern Nigeria for the Yoruba city of Ife, i.e. Ufe (among the Itsekiri) and Uhe (among the Bini or Edo populations).

40 Battuta occasionally employs the name Youfi to reference unknown sites, but the editor of this later volume points to its likely location north of Ife in what is today southern Niger Republic. The editor also suggests a possible identity with the Nupe kingdom.

41 The wide distribution and high value of these beads was due in part to their unusual dichroism, that is, their ability to change color in light—as a feature today reinforced by the association in Ife itself with fertility and financial benefits.

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