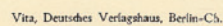


Tafel: Onipalast.



THIS ESSAY CONSIDERS one of the most important Yoruba cosmological referents, the plan of the capital Ile-Ife and its palace (FIG. 11.1), and examines a number of artworks associated with this urban center, especially at its height around 1300 CE.¹ The Yoruba cosmos has often been compared to a gourd or calabash cut horizontally so as to form a separate base and cover, with the upper half identified with the sky-linked creator god, Obatala, the lower half with the earth god and new dynasty founder, Odudua (see Lawal, this volume). The form of the gourd sometimes is used in scholarly diagrams that seek to show the Yoruba cosmos as a well-ordered layering of human and supernatural actors (SEE FIG. 12.6). In my view, however, this neatly delimited model reflects in part a Western taxonomic conception, since to the Yoruba, religious forces and persona are continually moving, intersecting, cross-pollinating, challenging, and energizing one another (and humans) across a myriad of celestial and earthly spheres. Human and sacral worlds, in short, are conjoined here.

If a palace and plan showing cardinal orientation consistent with the city plan more generally. At its most basic, Ife is a central-plan urban center, whose main avenues (originally four?) at one time pierced the city walls near the cardinal points and joined at the palace and market that delimit the center.

From Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa* (New York, [1913] 1980) v. 1, 269

There also are noteworthy historical contradictions around the identity of this calabash-form as cosmological model, particularly in its references to Obatala and Odudua. Both of these deity pantheons appear to be relatively late inventions in Yoruba religious history, emerging most likely in the aftermath of the establishment of Ife's second dynasty in about 1300 CE when many of Ife's famous early arts appear to have been made, a period closely identified with King Obalufon II. This ruler is credited not only with bringing peace to this center, and with commissioning an array of important arts (bronze casting, beaded regalia, weaving), but also with a new city plan in which the palace and market are located in the center surrounded by various religious sanctuaries arrayed in relationship to it. This plan features four main avenues leading into the city, each roughly running along a cardinal axis through what were once manned gates that pierced the circular city walls at points broadly consistent with the cardinal directions. The plan of Ile-Ife, which may have housed some 125,000 inhabitants in that era, offers important clues into early Yoruba views of both cosmology and directional primacy.²

SUN, MOON, THUNDER, AND LIGHTNING

There is compelling evidence supporting the importance of both the sun and moon in early Ife and broader Yoruba thought. Celestial light, P. A. Talbot points out, is identified by the Yoruba with the sun (male), the moon (female), and the stars (their children), all traveling each day in enormous canoes beneath the earth and across the sky.³ In ancient Ife contexts certain sculptural forms are identified with these heavenly bodies. The sun is referenced here, in part, by a tall, triangular menhir (FIG. 11.2; SEE ALSO FIG. 11.5), which seems to have served as a calendrical device. In Ife there are beliefs (taboos) about the sun's importance to the use and display of certain ancient Ife sculptural arts, in particular, the ancient terracotta head identified with the early King Osangangan Obamakín (Obalufon I), which was not supposed to ever see the sun. Ife oral histories note that this sculpture was shielded by an overturned pot to safeguard it from daylight.⁴ This practice also may have political and temporal connections to this king based on his prominent associations with the first dynasty at Ife, the era prior to Odudua's arrival and cultural enlightenment. Significantly, it was this same king (now god) who is credited in Obalufon family myths with bringing light to earth, an act that complements the use of shining, reflective mica for the diadem on the royal Ife crown (*are*) that Ife's Obalufon priest places on the head of each newly crowned king.

The moon finds notable reference here, too. Not only is the festival calendar a lunar one, but according to Euba, Ife rituals of divine kingship that form part of the yearly

Oduduwa festival necessarily "take place on a moonless night because the real moon in the sky must not confront the symbolic moon of 'Oduduwa,' the latter, a flat slab of stone referred to as *orun* Oduduwa, 'Oduduwa's heaven,' that is carried by the high priest round the various spots in the town where sacrifices are made."⁵ Another moon-linked stone, thought to be of quartz (or mica), was reportedly "stolen" in the early part of the twentieth century by a European visitor intent on discovering the properties of "electricity" presumed to be associated with it. This stone carries associations, Euba suggests, with the ancient thunder and lightning god Oramfe (Ora). Its name, *osupa* Ijio, "the Moonstone of Ijio," also links it to Ife Chief Obajio (Oba Ijio), the head priest of Olokun, the ancient god of large water bodies (the ocean), trade, and beads.⁶ The close link between lightning, thunder, rain, bodies of water, and the annual cycle of the seasons seems in this way to have informed this unusual now-missing object.

The early Ife god of thunder and lightning Oramfe (Oranfe/Aramfe, Ora, the precursor of Sango) is identified at once with rain (storms), royal power, and jurisprudence. E. B. Idowu identifies Oramfe additionally with control of the solar system.⁷ Euba not only describes Oramfe as Ife's once powerful "solar-thunder god," but also characterizes this "high god" as Ife's "most senior of the humanized spirits," honored simultaneously as Onile Ina, "Owner of the House of Fire," and Ooni Ale, "Owner of the Land." She also highlights Oramfe's identity as "the Olodumare of the Ife" (since both are "worshipped in the same simple way"), noting that Oramfe's Oriki praise names identify him, in turn, as the "supreme *ase*," namely Orisa. The latter creative force, she adds, is not only symbolized by "whiteness and personified as the sky god" but also evokes "the humanized *ase* emanating from the black earth," the latter also frequently linked to Odudua. There is another cosmological aspect as well, for as Euba explains: "In the Ife creation myth it is Olodumare (sometimes said to be Ora) who sent down these divinities to aid 'him' in the creation of the world and of mankind."⁸

The god Oramfe has a political role at Ife, and is said to convey to Ife kings and others the ability to attract and stop rain, to control the seasons, and to regulate the cycle of the universe more generally. Royal power also is associated with Oramfe, consistent with this god's affinity with protecting the kingdom and its rulers. Indeed, as Emmanuel Eze suggests, the act of prostration before the king reinforces this tie: "The practice of lying flat when in a thunderstorm is regarded by the early Yorubas as an act of worship of Sango [and by extension Oramfe] who becomes appeased and consequently spares the life of the worshiper."⁹

11.2
Photograph by Frank Willett
of Ita Ogun Esa "sun dial"
menhir (dating ca. 1300 CE)
located near the Obatala
Temple, Ife.





11.3A AND 11.3B
Janus depicting on one side
a standing human and on the
other a raptorial bird
Ife, terracotta, ca. 1300 CE
Museum für Völkerkunde,
Berlin

Several Ife sculptures dating to ca. 1300 CE are identified with the celestial features associated with Oramfe, among them a Janus figure (FIGS. 11.3A, 11.3B) depicting on one side a standing human and on the other a raptor. The man bears unusual diagonal facial markings¹⁰ and appears to be spitting or vomiting a stone ax (celt, “thunderbolt”), the latter a key icon of Oramfe (and of this god’s successor as thunder deity, Sango). The man depicted here grasps a club in his left hand and, in his right, what appears to be a piece of cloth or feather. The club and cloth/feather seem to signal the primacy of balance and contrast. Whereas the cloth or feather suggests the wealth, plenty, and calm that come to Oramfe devotees who follow his laws, the club signals the potential blows that are meted out to social deviants, such as thieves, who go against Oramfe’s wishes. At the rear of the man’s left shoulder is a branch of leaves, most likely *akoko*,¹¹ a plant form that figures prominently in Ife enthronement rites, perhaps underscoring the role of Oramfe in conveying dynastic power.

Ife chief Obaluru, priest of Ife’s Oramfe temple, describes this thunder and lightning deity in ways that inform the sculpture further:

Fire comes from Oramfe’s mouth, so you cannot sit near him or else you will burn. He also has stone axes [*edun àrà*] that come from his mouth, and kills people when lightning strikes.¹²

Following one particularly active lightning storm in Ife in 2004, I was told that powerful local *babalawo* (healers, diviners) would come out to collect the fallen celts (thunderbolts) for later use in making potent medicines, pointing to connections between these celts and an array of protective or empowering medicinal forms.

COSMIC REFERENCES IN ANCIENT IFE

On the reverse side of this sculpture (SEE FIG. 11.3B) is a large-eyed bird with looping, snake-like wings. When asked about the significance of birds with this wing attribute, Chief Obaluru noted “this bird was sent to people by Oramfe when he wanted to do favors for them.” The bird, he explained, carries Oramfe’s lightning and thunder celts to earth, and will bring both punishment and favors from this god to humans.¹³ The exact species of this bird can be debated, but it may depict the owl-resembling African pennant-winged nightjar (*Cosmetornis vexillarius*). When in flight, its white flash of underfeathers is reminiscent of lightning.¹⁴ The birds, known to the Yoruba as *ase*,¹⁵ the phoneme *se* referring to a command or order, also evoke larger Yoruba notions of authority and power (*ase*) linked to Oramfe, the thunder, lightning, and omnipotent solar-linked god who safeguards society and helps to preserve effective rule. The pennant-winged nightjar also carries certain sorcery associations here, actions that Oramfe was believed to counter, connecting this sculpture to both positive (kingship) and negative (sorcery) ends.

CELESTIAL-LINKED STONE MONUMENTS

A grouping of menhirs, or tall standing stones, is among the most interesting of ancient Ife artworks that carry cosmological significance. These monuments were a major part of the Ife landscape of circa 1300 CE—and still are today. Sculpted from granite in the same period as the famous Ife copper alloy castings and terracottas, they were erected in various parts of the city, often in conjunction with temples, shrines, and groves. Many carry features that offer insight into ancient Ife beliefs about the cosmos.

One of the city’s most famous monuments is the approximately 16 feet 10 inches tall (above ground) staff of Oranmiyan, located around a quarter mile south-southwest of the palace, and identified with King Obalufon II’s main adversary (FIGS. 11.4A, 11.4B). The Oranmiyan staff is dedicated to the famous warrior and military leader who is said to have conquered Ife and forced King Obalufon II from the throne, the latter eventually returning to power and bringing peace to the then warring citizens. Before or after this event, Oranmiyan is credited with founding new dynasties at Benin and Oyo. Oral tradition suggests that this tall granite staff represents the sword Oranmiyan used to fell Ife’s citizens, a weapon he purportedly thrust into the ground before leaving Ife for good. Most likely this monument was created and positioned in Ife in the era following his departure during Obalufon II’s second reign, in conjunction with the truce he forged after Ife’s painful civil war. This was a period when many of the famous early Ife heroes appear to have been commemorated with shrines and associated sculptures.¹⁶

II.4A AND II.4B
Staff of Oranmiyan
(including detail of nails)
dating ca. 1300 CE, Ife



This staff integrates on its surface a sculpted ram horn or ax motif (evoking *ase*, or vital power/force) and a pattern of iron nails. Although various interpretations of the unusual iron pattern have been given, most likely it depicts a multi-branched staff, a three-arm version of the Y-shaped beaded staff carried by the Ooni in the course of the annual Olojo ceremony, a context in which the richly costumed and crowned king is said to attract rain. As such the Oranmiyan monument also seems to symbolize the power of kings to control storms and rain, a characteristic linked both to Oramfe (the ancient thunder god) and to Sango (the Oyo-linked god identified with Oranmiyan).

Another important ancient Ife stone menhir comprises a 7 foot 8 inch tall work known as Ita Ogun Esa, a sculpture identified by Leo Frobenius as a “sun dial”¹⁷ (FIG. II.5; SEE ALSO FIG. II.2). This menhir is located southeast of the palace on Itapa Street near the temple of Obatala. A tall, narrow, three-sided work, the menhir appears to have had calendrical functions. As Frobenius explains, “When the shadow of this stela fell in certain directions and reached a point drawn on a circle around it, it was time for certain sacred festivals.”¹⁸ A stone sundial of this type would have been critical for determining not only festival times, but also other events. The identification of this stone with the Obatala temple complex reinforces the larger celestial associations of Obatala with both the heavens and related light.

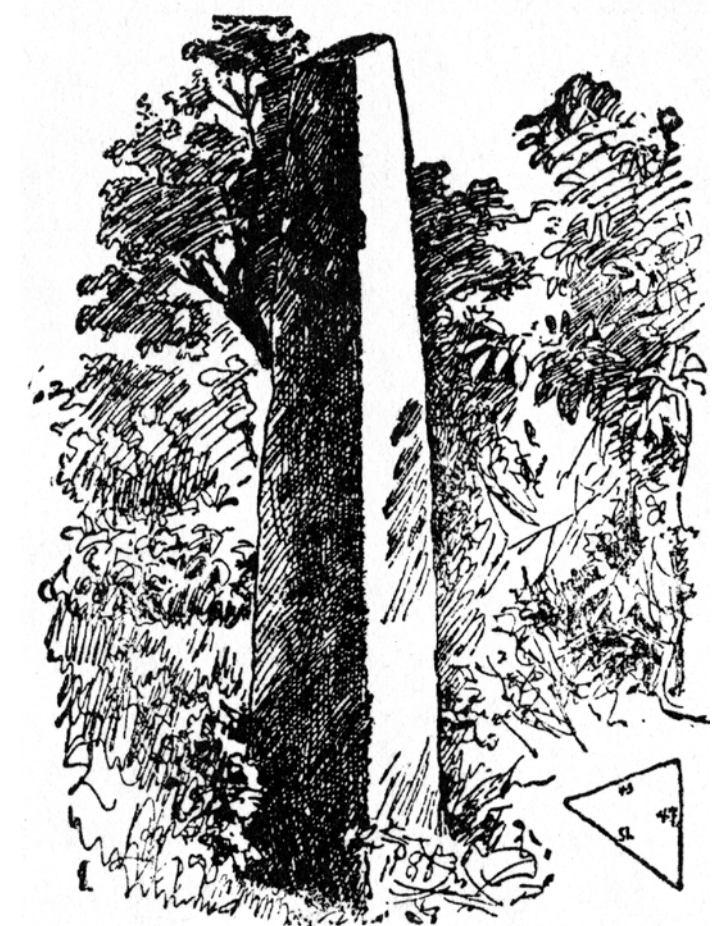
An additional stone menhir was positioned in the now-destroyed Ijugbe temple on Famia Road in the city’s western Modakeke sector, a site dedicated to the Obatala-linked agricultural deity, Orisa Teko. This work, a long, thin 6 foot 6 inch rectangle, was identified by Willett as the temple’s monument to Ogun,¹⁹ consistent with the importance of iron in agricultural (and other) tools. Orisa Teko is known in Ife today as an early yam farmer (now the god of yams), the forerunner of the Yoruba agriculture god, Orisa Oko.²⁰ Historically, the priest of the Ijugbe temple also is said to have been in charge of rain. This menhir, like the Ita Ogun Esa monument discussed above, possibly functioned as a sundial (calendar stone, gnomon), in this case probably helping to determine the best time for planting yams and other agricultural produce. This menhir, like the one identified with the Obatala temple, is thus linked in important ways to the cycle of time.

Yet another menhir, a work once positioned in the Ore Grove (and now located in the National Museum, Ile Ife), stands about 5 feet 2 inches above ground and incorporates the unusual pattern of four holes cut roughly equidistant from the other (and between 11 and 16 inches apart) in such a way that they run down each side of the four-sided column. Iron inserts were secured in four of the holes, only the bases of which remain.²¹ The work is thought to have had spiral-shaped inserts of iron similar to those embedded in the Oranmiyan staff. Frank Willett notes that these holes were positioned consistent with the cardinal directions,²² suggesting that the menhir is associated with cosmological order. An additional stone form with a plausible cosmological reference was housed at the palace Ogun temple, Ogun Ladin, this work integrating a pattern of four holes marking the corners of a square, at the center of which was a fifth stone, suggesting the four cardinal points and the sun at the middle. In many ways this form also suggests a schematic model of the city itself, with its historic four main entries leading through the walls into the city center where they meet at the palace and nearby market.

IFE, A CARDINAL CITY

Ife is an unusual city in many respects, not the least of which is the number of different plans that figure in its conceptualization. At its most basic, Ife is a central-plan urban center, with its (originally four?) main avenues at one time piercing

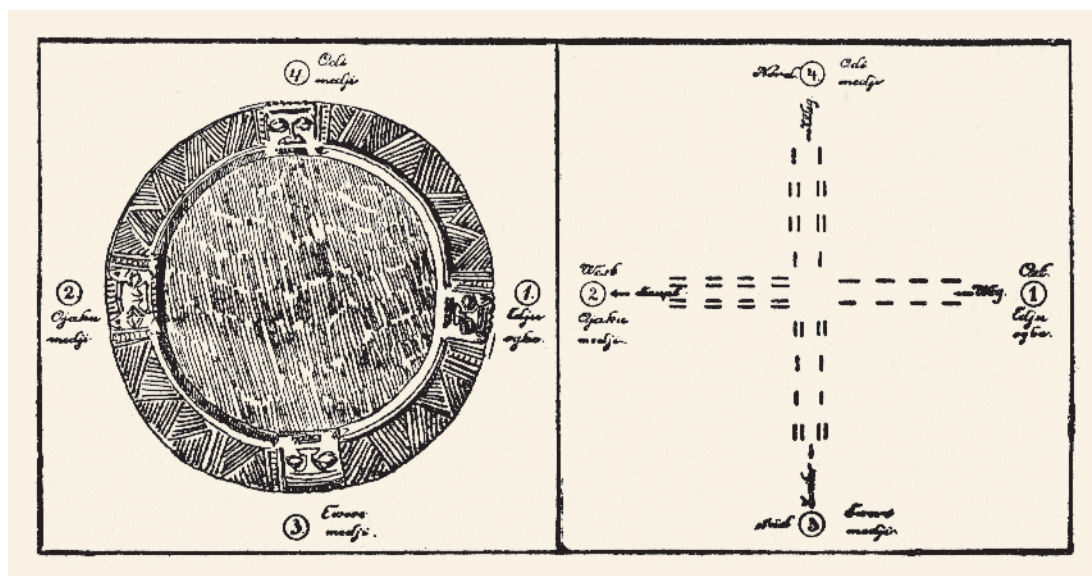
II.5
Ita Ogun Esa, a menhir
southeast of the palace on
Itapa Street near the temple
of Obatala
From Leo Frobenius, *The Voice
of Africa* (New York, [1913]
1980), v. 1, 299



11.6

Cardinal points on Yoruba objects, including divination boards.

From Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa* (New York, [1913] 1980) v. 1, 255



the city walls near the cardinal points and joining at the palace and market that delimit the center, a plan similar to many other early Yoruba walled cities. In addressing both the Ife city plan and the cardinal directions, the local Yoruba concept of north (traditional north, e.g., northwest) is employed, one that defines the directions vis-à-vis orientations several degrees off true north, probably as determined around the time of the winter solstice when the sun sets on the horizon in its most westerly position.

P. A. Talbot provides additional insight into Yoruba views of the cosmos and how issues of shape and directionality figure in them. He notes that the Yoruba identify the earth as square and that their names for the cardinal directions reflect this understanding: the east is known as *ila orun* (appearing of the sun), the west as *iwaraw orun* (the sinking of the sun), the north as *igun keta* (third corner, or *ariwa otun ila orun*, the coming to the right of the earth), and the south as *igun kerin aiya* (fourth corner of the world). Leo Frobenius provides a version of the Yoruba creation myth that speaks directly to this dynamic,²³ noting that a cardinal plan is identified with the earth's creation, a process said by Idowu to have taken four days.²⁴

Frobenius also identifies each direction with a specific god (deity complex): the east as Edju/Eshu, the west as Sango, the north as Ogun, and the south as Obatala²⁵ (FIG. 11.6). A complementary sculptural form can be seen in the double Janus (four-headed) figure documented by Idowu²⁶ at the Odudua temple. This unusual Ife sculptural work, like several others, references the four faces (directions) of the Ifa oracular divinity Orunmila (FIG. 11.7). Other motifs on this sculpture represent eternal knots, double-headed serpents, an Odu head, and figures of the messenger god, Eshu. The unique shapes of Yoruba Ifa divination boards (rectilinear, circular, a half circle, or

a combination thereof) underscore ideas of cosmological organization as well. While rectilinear forms evoke time and space as delimited by the cardinal points, the circle suggests round celestial bodies and ideas of perpetuity. According to Idowu, when a worshipper creates a circle of ashes or white chalk on the ground, in the center of which he places an offering, the circular form is seen to reference eternity.²⁷

The cardinal directions clearly constitute one of the key means through which the Ife space, planning, and time are delimited and experienced, a factor reinforced through the array of ancient potsherd or stone and potsherd pavements that mark this center and its past. These are largely oriented approximately northeast to southwest or to northwest to southeast, consistent with an overall cardinal direction primacy. In the historic Ife city plan, the palace is at the center (SEE FIG. 11.1). Each grouping of gods also has its place consistent with their religious and cosmological associations. In the section of the city broadly to the east of the palace are the shrines of Ifa (Orunmila), the god of divination, located atop Ife's highest hill (Oke Tase). Also east of the palace is the main Edju (Eshu, Esu) shrine, dedicated to the Ifa divination-linked messenger god. The temple of Olurogbo, the ancient Ife messenger between humans and gods is located in this sector as well,²⁸ as is the Ife shrine to the moon goddess. These Ife temples seem to share an association with heavenly communication, consistent with the positioning of the king's residence (bedroom) on the eastern side of the palace.

West of the palace are temples linked especially to rain and storms, including not only that of Oramfe, the ancient Ife deity of thunder and lightning (Ife's precursor to Sango) and Ogbon Oya (Sango's wife), but also the Ife god of agriculture, Orisa Teko. At this latter temple, also sometimes called Ijugbe, were observed stone seats, a large copper alloy frog pierced by an arrow, and a ram fashioned from quartz, the latter used for offerings during the annual March festival cycle.²⁹ The military conqueror and cultural hero, Oranmiyan, who is identified variously as the father or son of Sango in Oyo (Yoruba) contexts, has his monument west of the palace as well.

In the northern quadrant of the city is the main Ogun temple, dedicated to the powerful god of war, iron, and the advancement of civilization. Also found in Ife's northern quadrant is the temple of Orisa Akire, the autochthonous Ife warrior god.³⁰ Another temple, this one dedicated to King Obalufon II, founder of Ife's second dynasty and the main king/deity credited with enlarging Ife's road system and establishing its city plan, is sited in

11.7

Figure referencing Orunmila and the four faces (directions) of the Ifa oracular divinity.

From Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa* (New York, [1913] 1980) v. 1, Pl. 1 [facing p. 284]



the city’s northern sector as well, not far from the western city wall and gate leading toward Ibadan. Both the Ife palace and the Obalufon temple face north (northwest), the direction important to Ogun. In the southern quadrant of Ife is another grouping of Ife sanctuaries. These are identified with Obatala (the sky god), Olokun (the sea god, also Olokun Walode), and an array of royal burial sites or shrines (Wunmonije, Lafogido, and Igbo Odi).

Each cluster of Ife gods thus is identified with a different quadrant of the city, consistent with its cardinal and broader cosmological associations: east (with life and renewal: Ifa, Eshu), west (with dark skies and storms: the thunder and agriculture gods: Oramfe, Orisa Teko), north (with power, war, and technology: Ogun), and south (with creation, fertility, and the ocean: Obatala, Olokun). The importance of the sun and moon within the city landscape and the cardinal orientation of the four main avenues and palace show that space in Ile-Ife carried sustained cosmological significance.

Taken together these diverse sculptural, architectural, and ritual forms point to the high degree of early and ongoing Ife interest in cosmology, issues referenced not only in the primacy of cosmological attributes (the sun, the moon, lightning) but also in an array of important calendrical features (stone menhirs functioning as time markers), as well as roads, pavements, palaces, and temples linked to the cardinal directions.

NOTES

1. The dating of ancient Ife culture, the era when many of its famous terracottas and bronzes were created, is based on a wide variety of evidence that I lay out in my forthcoming book on Ife art. Other elements also are explored in Blier 2012. The time frame is identified with a brilliant ruler named Obalufon II (Obalufon Alaiyemore), who also is credited with the creation of a new city plan, the one that figures prominently in this analysis. It was in this ca. 1300 CE era, too, that the Odudua origin myth at Ife appears to have been created, in large measure, to promote a new political and religious identity for the Ife second dynasty.
2. My Ife research is based in part on various periods of fieldwork undertaken in this center from 2002 through 2008. For other insight into Ife cosmology, see Frobenius [1913] 1980; Bascom 1969a; Bascom 1969b; Idowu [1962] 1995; Euba 1985. On Yoruba cosmological themes more generally, see Ellis [1894] 1966; Talbot 1926; Drewal and Pemberton 1989.
3. Talbot 1926, 2: 961. The link between the yearly

cycle and ritual space is also suggested in the close interrelationship between these four powerful deities and the days of the Yoruba week. As Frobenius [1913] 1980, 256, has noted, each of the above deities is identified with one of the four designated market days, that is, *ode-fe* (Ifa’s day), *adje-badju* (Sango’s day), *iremo* (Oshalla), and *nikogun* (Okun). A fifth day, *adje-oshe*, Frobenius identifies simply as a “holy” day. Here, too, concepts of space and time are closely interrelated.

4. Willett 1967, 43, pl. 21.
5. Euba 1985, 9.
6. Ibid. See also Idowu [1962] 1995, 11, 14.
7. Idowu [1962] 1995, 94, 119.
8. Euba 1985, 2.
9. Eze 1998, 164.
10. These diagonal facial markings suggest complements with *ichi* lines identified with both early Igbo Ukwu forms (ca. ninth–eleventh century CE) and later era Igbo Nri traditions, consistent with the importance of certain Igbo-linked lineages in Ife’s early and later history.
11. Willett 2004, T715.

12. Personal communication, Chief Obaluru (A. Orafisayo, Chief Priest of Oramfe) Ife, 2002, 2004.
13. Personal communication, Chief Obaluru (A. Orafisayo, Chief Priest of Oramfe,) Ife, 2004.
14. Fraser 1975; Willett 1988; Blier 1998, 65–66.
15. Abraham 1958, 71, 759.
16. Blier forthcoming.
17. Frobenius [1913] 1980, 299, 304, fig. 1.
18. Ibid., 304.
19. Willett 2004, S80.
20. Fabunmi 1969, 15; Eluyemi 1986, 53.
21. Willett 2004, S85.
22. Ibid.
23. Frobenius [1913], 1980, 283–85.
24. Idowu [1962] 1995, 19.
25. Ibid., 255.
26. Ibid., Fig. 3a.
27. Ibid., 142.
28. It has also been suggested that the local Ife saying that the sun and moon rose from the east (*ibi oju ti imo wa*) was too literally translated to suggest that key figures originated in the east. Akinjogbin 1992, xii.
29. Willett 2004, S81.
30. Fabunmi 1969, 15.

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