

PART THREE

Religion, Culture, and Society

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Religion and Art in Ile-Ife

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During my first research trip in Ife, the ancient home of the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria,¹ I accompanied the priest of the ancient messenger God, Oluorogbo, into the inner sanctum of the city's Oluorogbo temple. Before entering, we removed our shoes, then I, a priest of another shrine, and an accompanying Ife resident were invited to wash our faces with a special medicated solution. This was to mitigate any danger that the act of viewing might pose. As I scooped up the solution in my hand from the terra cotta vessel and bathed it over my face, some of this water mixed with the dust and sweat I had accumulated over the course of the day and dripped into my eyes. Blinking in response to this irritating composition, I immediately grew concerned. What was in this solution? Could it permanently alter my sight?

A few minutes later these feelings dissipated and were replaced by euphoria as my eyes cleared, and I realized there was no harm. The colors and images before me now were even brighter than I had remembered on first entering the inner sanctum of the temple. I doubt that there were any chemical properties in the solution that caused this reaction. Rather my response had come from internal factors. The act of washing one's face during a temple visit as a means of protection against the unseen sets up a visual and emotional chain reaction for the visitor—curiosity certainly, but also a desire for closer scrutiny, nervousness, relief, wonderment—all of which impact what one sees and how one responds.

This aspect of empowerment comes into play in various ways in addressing early Ife religious art. One of these is evoked in the depiction of the eyes in many early art works, in particular the outlining of the perimeter of the eye with what appears to be a reference to the use of antimony (black lead—called *tiroo*) by the Yoruba. Frequently worn today as a mark of beauty, a special empowered form of *tiroo* eyeliner also is used by both men and women because of the power it conveys. This use of potent eyeliner is identified especially with chiefs, smithy heads, great hunters, wealthy market women, and others because it is believed to enhance one's extrasensory ability and supernatural

“sight.” The wearers of these rare and expensive *tiroo* eye enhancements (which are made from the charred remains of powerful animals and plants) are purported to enable one to acquire whatever one desires—positions, commissions, wealth, a lover—without the subject of the empowered gaze necessarily being cognizant of what is happening.²

Some Ife sculptures of early and more recent eras are painted to emphasize the eyes as well. One of the ancient life size copper heads incorporates red and black linear forms around the eye area in the manner of spectacles. The head in question is made of nearly pure copper, suggesting that its additive power associations are linked to ritual primacy. Bertho and Mauny observed³ that the eyes of a sculpted head in Ife’s Obalufon temple were marked in a similar way, “with two white circles traced in chalk, as if one had wanted to make a pair of glasses.” Obatala diviner Akintitan, when asked about the eye-circumscribing lines on these Ife sculptures, noted⁴ that such lines convey the sense that it “can really see,” that the figure has a surfeit of supernatural power. Obatala chief Adedinni suggested to me⁵ in turn that this eye marking identifies the work as an *imole* (sacral power). According to Chief Adedinni, Ife rulers wear face covering crown veils because as kings, they are “like an *imole*. Because of this, one can’t look at [their] eyes.” These explanations are important to understanding the risk associated with seeing certain sacral forms (religious objects or the Ife ruler). The circling of eyes in early Ife sculptures seem to reinforce the mystical power of these objects and the possible dangers they carry for those who view them.

Early Ife art works—many of which date to the early fourteenth century—appear to have functioned somewhat analogous to memorials.⁶ These art works accord special primacy to individuals of renown. These same persons—kings, queens, warriors, queens, priests, hunters, court servants, and others—became supernaturals who are part of rituals today. In many cases, key portraiture attributes are featured: facial marking, differential body proportions, weight attributes, dress, coiffures, and other details. These factors of portraiture within the Ife corpus is supported as well by oral traditions that suggest the danger some artists faced as a result of creating works with such remarkably life-like features.⁷ The individual emphasis in Ife art reinforces Idowu’s view that these sculptures have important “lineage” ties.⁸ While Idowu is speaking here of art works in contemporary Ife (c. 1960), his perspective also seems to be relevant to ancient Ife art works, with these and related shrines being a central focus of rituals through the twentieth century.

Equally importantly, many art works are seen to be living and to interact with worshippers, these art works “coming alive” (*dahun*) and “responding” (*luti*).⁹ The latter term, as Abiodun et al. point out (1991:29), also is the source for a key aspect of artistic engagement—*iluti* or “call and response,” a prominent feature also of music, dance, and etiquette. The Yoruba word for verisimilitude, *luti*, is drawn from the same source, suggesting that sculptural naturalism attracts particular types of viewer engagement. The Yoruba term *ona*, which is translated as “art,” is interesting in this context because it is seen to reference the essential nature (*iwa*) of a given subject.

To Idowu, many early Ife sculptures are “believed to be the actual physical body of the ancestor who instead of dying in the normal way had metamorphosized himself in stone.”¹⁰ Ife sculptures in this way take on the identity (and sacral authority, *ase*) of the

associated supernatural, the art works themselves being referenced merely as images (*ere*) of Orisa (supernaturals).¹¹ The modern-era Ife belief that sculptures are capable of real engagement with worshippers and other viewers is an important part of this experience. This feature also is evoked through the Yoruba term, *ase* meaning the power to bring things to pass, a form of engagement central to Yoruba art and ritual.

Ghostly Apparitions: When Sculptures Laugh and Wink Back

Idowu provides a number of other examples of early Ife artifacts in which artist engagement and interaction are key. One of these is the “Shrine of the Moon,” a slab of stone that sparkled when rubbed with another stone:

. . . the moon lay in the shape of a flat slab of stone. The visitor took a small piece of stone and rubbed hard on its surface. As he rubbed, he was sure within a short time, to observe the movement of certain shadows: these were shades of people who had departed from earth, among them, he was sure to recognize someone! He must not be startled or frightened however, or his life would be in great danger.

Recognition, danger, and the peril of seeing and response here are co-joined. Timing also was important. As Idowu has pointed out, the rubbing of the moon stone “might not be undertaken by anyone at all during the appearance of the moon as it was dangerous.”¹²

The same way that Ife residents were encouraged to “rub” the “moon stone,” the highly polished surface of the handsome copper life-size mask of Obalufon suggests that polishing was an important part of the regular care given to this work. The copper-alloy, seated Ife figure found at the Niger River site of Tada also was polished on a regular basis. Linked to the fertility of people, crops, and fish, this sculpture was taken to the river weekly to be washed and rubbed with gravel.¹³ Today Ogboni brass sculptures similarly are kept polished, suggesting that interactive tactile experience was coupled with the visual primacy of surface details and patina.¹⁴ In other Ife works, among these terra cottas and sculptures of stone, paint was reapplied to the surface for a range of iconic and esthetic purposes. This affected the surface and evidenced active engagement with these arts in the course of local rituals.

The primacy of interactive engagement with religious art in Ife is discussed by Idowu in other ways as well.¹⁵ As he explains:

A young person who was lucky enough in those days [pre-twentieth century] to be taken by his parents to Ile-Ife would approach the city with feelings which baffled analysis. He was bound to be assailed on entering the city with successive waves of emotion. He would be almost afraid to look, for at every turn might be walking or lurking, for all he knew, some divinities or ghosts.

One particularly striking example of the interactive engagement can be seen in the sculpture of Baba Sigidi (Figure 28.1) known today as an ancient warrior and healer

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Figure 28.1 Ife (Nigeria). Figure of Baba Sigidi. Photo S.P. Blier, 2004.

whose sculptural personification is perhaps early but not yet datable. Idowu describes¹⁶ Baba Sigidi as:

a Ife warrior of antiquity who, instead of dying in a normal way, converted himself into stone. He is [an] aged person wearing a raffia hat. [A] visitor would be assured that Baba still breathed faintly and winked his eyes just perceptibly and because the elder said so, he would discern faint breathing. It would be explained that in old days several of the great and strong men did not die as now but changed themselves to stone or walked through a cave to heaven.

The great warrior Baba Sigidi today is identified principally with healing. Originally a warrior under Obawinrin, he was the leader of the indigenous Igbo population at Ife. For this reason, Baba Sigidi's shrine is found in the Obawinrin compound. Fabunmi suggests¹⁷ that Baba Sigidi also was a key follower of the healer Elesije who also was part of the larger Obawinrin grouping. Important to his role at Ife today is the link between warriors and not only protection in battle but also aggression against the unseen dangers of the world.

Baba Sigidi, alas, neither winked at me nor breathed discernably when I viewed him on several occasions, but the drama of the setting where his sculpture is found is striking. His shrine is housed within a much larger roofed chamber. Nearby are a series of benches, grouped around an open space suggesting that participants in some cases were numerous. The Baba Sigidi altar itself is located behind a closed door at one side of this large hall and is visible only when the small ancillary interior chamber is opened. Constructed on an altar platform and wrapped in palm fronds and cloth, Baba Sigidi's prominent cone shape, bright two color hue, humanoid facial features, and raphia hat are enhanced by its dramatic setting.

Sequential Engagement: the Ore Grove Example

A number of other early Ife art works were displayed out of doors in special groves. One of the most striking of these locales is the Ore Grove complex which is dedicated to Oreluere, the ancient Ife hunter and fisherman,¹⁸ who is said to have been living at Ife when the founder of a new dynasty arrived here, a man named Odudua who also later became a god. Located just beyond the Ife city wall on Ifewara Road, the Ore grove is a beautifully landscaped outdoor setting at the very edge of metropolitan Ife. The position of the paths and clearings impacted ritual and viewing experience as they focused attention on a series of stopping points. Here as in other sites, Ife art works were positioned in such a way that they would be experienced progressively, one by one. The experience also was heightened by the sensorial effects of nature—not only the distinctive flickering light and coolness of the dense old growth forest,¹⁹ but also the sounds of birds and insects, and the rustling of leaves—qualities are not generally experienced in the busy cityscape of Ife.

As archaeologist Frank Willett notes, the Ore Grove is one of the few shrines in the city open both to the local population and to outsiders. As he points out “[i]t is curious that Europeans should have been permitted to visit the [Ore] grove without difficulty so long ago. It is still the only grove to which Europeans are freely admitted [even though] . . . devotees carry out their private ceremonies at all times of the year.”²⁰ The relative openness of this and certain other local groves to both family worshipers and outsiders may have extended to earlier eras as well. Because Ore was considered a great hunter and healer, his grove, like that of the warriors Baba Sigidi and Ogun, had a diversity of visitors, many of them coming here for medical issues linked to Ore's identity as an ancient healer and guardian of morals. As Idowu explains (1962:23) those who suffer disease or misfortune as a result of the breaking of taboos made offerings to the Ore image.

Art works in the Ore Grove were the subject of worship here into the 1950s at which time they were brought into the palace museum for safekeeping. None-the-less, the Ore grove's winding paths are carefully cleared each year before the annual ceremonies. A plan of the Ore Grove site was published in the early twentieth century along with the locales of the various art works therein.²¹ Although said to be much smaller than in the past, due to encroaching houses, the site today is still distinguished by tall majestic trees. Even in the grove's current state, the surrounding nature shapes the ritual experience in significant ways.

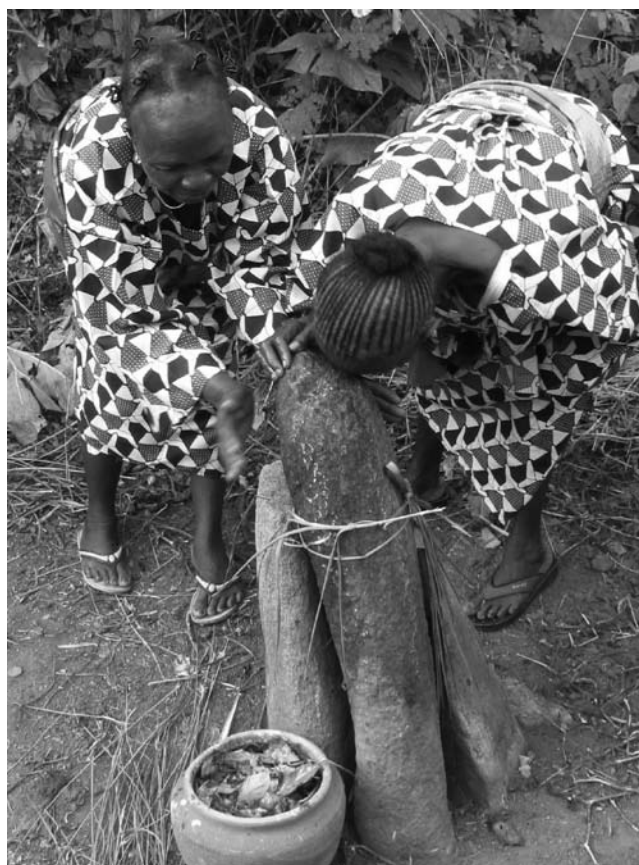


Figure 28.2 Ife (Nigeria). Figure of Olofeunra from Ife Ore Grove. 13th–14th century. From Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa* (I), 1913.

Days before the annual Ore festival that I attended, I met with Chief Olopo, the priest in charge of Ore. He noted that his family had just begun the process of cleaning the year's vegetation away from the pathways, and that it was not yet accessible. Days later when I returned for the Ore festival, I was met at the entry by one of his assistants. Proceeding along the freshly cleared path toward the main ceremony area, the priest who served as my guide and escort stopped at various spots along the way to point out the original locales of each of the grove's stone sculptures as well as adjacent altars where small stone menhirs are still in use today. Certain prayers and ritual actions are associated with each, he explained.

The first site we stopped at, positioned in a cleared area about 250 feet into the grove was dedicated to the iron, hunting, and war god Ogun, and it comprised of three or four fragments of a granite menhir that originally formed a ten-foot tall knife-form menhir.²² Today, at this location participants draw liquid from an adjacent vessel of medicinal water to wash their heads of illness and misfortune before positioning their foreheads against a menhir fragment (Figure 28.2), drawing on the power of Ogun to



Figure 28.3 Ife (Nigeria). Crocodiles and eggs at Ore Grove. 13th–14th century. From Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa* (I), 1913.

counter danger and bring well being. Some 85 feet beyond this, the path divides. On the left is another Ogun altar. A path to the right leads to a small clearing where the striking sculpture known as Olofefura (Figure 28.3) once stood.²³ This remarkable figure, which resembles a dwarf-like being similar to sculptures discussed above, was said historically to interact with viewers. Indeed this sculpture was “reputed to have the habit of hailing and welcoming visitors even from the distance with laughter and spontaneous joy as one does an old, long-missed friend. If, however, any visitor responded correspondingly, his facial features would remain permanently fixed in the contortion of mirthless laughter.”²⁴

Such actions were seen as a warning to control one’s response, or at least the outward signs thereof.²⁵

Through this Olofefura sculpture (and other Ore grove works), visitors to Ife (and this grove) were being warned that the city was a potentially dangerous place—a locale where sculptures, like the city’s royalty and gods, commanded extraordinary powers. Viewers had to control their responses to the wonders before them out of fear that they

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might themselves be turned to stone. Olofefura, in laughing at those who engage with him, underscores the belief that sculptures are capable of real interaction, bringing political benefit or harm.

The Olofefura sculpture is said by researchers to represent the deity Ore.²⁶ The squat, distorted appearance of the work suggests at first a less accomplished artist, but in view of the striking number of sculptures portraying deformity in the early Ife art corpus, this work's identity as a god seems to be correct. Also, in Yoruba courts, dwarfs and other individuals with congenital deformities were quite common. The importance of congenital conditions and disease as signifiers of deity power links to, among other things, the breaking of taboos. So too is the close association between dwarfs (and hunchbacks) with Obatala, the deity most closely identified with Ife's autochthonous residents.²⁷ The proportions of this work, with the head comprising roughly one quarter of the body is consistent with its identity as deity as well (rather than say a servant or priest)—this based on the depiction of gods and kings here often with 1:4 body (head to body) proportions in contrast to priests and other "mere" humans who seem to be depicted with 1:5 or 1:6 proportions. The 1:4 proportions privilege the head relating to the importance of this body feature in terms of power, fortune, and wellbeing.

The hole in the top center of the forehead of this sculpture, (although now said to be a bullet hole) more likely was used for the insertion of a separately carved crown diadem or additive feather similar to those shown on many other ancient Ife sculptures. A three-strand choker is carved to encircle the neck, three coils of bracelets embellish the wrist, and three pendants hang from the left hip knot. Three is a number closely identified with the earth, ancestry, and autochthony—a number linked also to the Ogboni association dedicated in part to protecting the rights of indigenous landowners. The latter hip knot and pendants appear to identify this work also with ideas of ancestry, as identified with Obatala and an early creation myth which reveals that Obatala hid the necessary *ase* (sacral authority) for the earth's creation in the textile knot of his wrapper. His younger brother, Odudua, took the other materials from him while he was sleeping, but missed this key element, and only when Obatala arrived and made use of his *ase* was the earth finally made solid. Adjacent to this dwarf figure once were two stone kola nut boxes and covers. Kola was used for divination (to determine approval of the gods), and were important gifts (as well as trade items) in this area. They are also consumed as a mild stimulant. Beside the figure also stood a granite looping handled throne, a form identified with indigenous elites—here positioned on its side along with a slab of quartz of the sort used as a back rest in several Ife shrines identified with this same group.

In leaving this area of the grove where the squat figure of Ore once stood, we retraced our steps back to the main path, proceeding from here about 40 feet passing patches of an ancient potsherd pavement, and finally arriving at another clearing where a taller and more elegant granite sculpture originally was positioned. This work, called the Edena or Idena,²⁸ is identified as Ore's servant, wife or "gateman." Clearly male (i.e. without breasts), the reference to wife more likely indicates its status as a "servant." Another label identifies this work as Ore's (Awre's) slave, *gbanna*,²⁹ the name from which Edena seems to have derived. This Ore Edena figure is a work of notable

visual power with what were once said to be spiral-form iron inserts secured into the crown of the head to suggest hair. Another long lock of hair is carved in the stone and falls in front of the left ear. This conceivably represents the dreadlocks worn by powerful hunters, of which Ore was one. The iron spiral nails seemingly reference the spiral-form hair locks as well, suggesting the power (*ase*) associated with great hunters. As such, the Ore figure's iron coil coiffure not only adds to the visual effect, but also links the work to the larger group of hunters and blacksmiths (and their god Ogun) honored in this grove.

Like the previous work, this figure wears a cloth wrapper knotted at the left hip from which hang three elegant tassels, here too evoking ideas of ancestry and the Ogboni association dedicated to the rights of Ife's autochthonous residents. Three bracelets, perhaps references to works originally of iron, also encircle the wrists. Like the above Ore Olofefura figure, the gesture of this Ore sculpture—hands clasped together beneath the waist—recall the position of individuals today in service to a deity, king, or dignitary.³⁰ Similar to Olofefura, this sculpture is said originally to have been sheltered by a small shed, renewed or repaired each year prior to the annual festival.

A granite mudfish once was positioned in front of this taller Ore figure. As with this sculpture's hair, pieces of spiral form iron are inserted into the eyes for visual effect and perhaps to convey empowerment through reference to Ogun. The mudfish (African lung fish) is noted for its supplementary lung system that permits it to survive both in water and on land, qualities important to ideas of the Ife origins, but also to myths about the creation of the world more generally at Ife in which a mudfish is seen to have played a seminal role. In this context, the mudfish is identified as having carried (safeguarded) the sacred "calabash of existence" (the *igba-iwa*)³¹ believed to hold the power of the universe and its many secrets, a vessel which also is linked to female creative energy. This vessel also is closely identified with the earth's origins at Ife, and is said to be used to carry annual offerings to the gods to assure Ife's wellbeing.³² The identification of the mudfish with the earth's creation and with rituals that preserved life more generally is consistent with the mudfish's natural seasonal transition, not only the beginning of the dry season when the mudfish begins its estivation cycle (the fish equivalent of hibernation), but also the arrival of the rains when the fish is said to have vomited water into the dried river beds and springs, thereby assuring adequate moisture to meet the needs of local inhabitants. The mudfish, with its unusual ability to estivate, that is to survive in a hibernation-like state in dried spring or river beds using its ancillary lungs, seemingly comes back to life after rain again fills the pool or river bed with water. As such this fish is a particularly apt referent to the cycle of life with which Ore the hunter is closely identified.

Nearby were positioned two granite crocodiles (Figure 28.4), one of which is now missing, along with two "dropstones," the latter suggesting eggs, perhaps in reference to the era of creation at Ife.³³ The crocodiles are consistent both with Ore's identity as a great hunter and with the mythic identity of Ore as the inhabitant of Ife when it was still covered with water. Crocodiles also serve as messengers of water deities, a theme important in Ore worship as well.³⁴ Nearby also were found an array of other works, among these terra cotta palm wine containers. Several kola nut boxes also were observed by Frobenius near this figure.³⁵

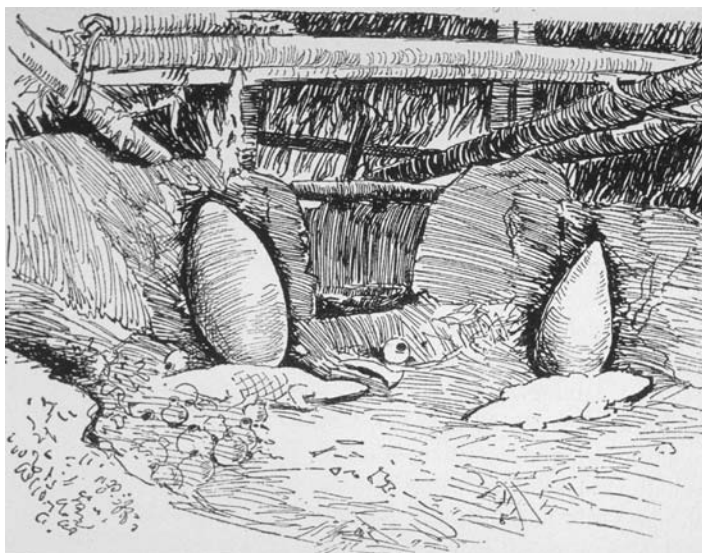


Figure 28.4 Ife (Nigeria). Ore family women at Ogun altar during annual Ore festival. Photo S.P. Blier, 2004.

Behind this taller Ore sculpture stood two stone menhirs. The first of these is said to represent the shield (*asa*) of Ore. This rectilinear work integrates a set of five holes roughly an inch in diameter along its length. The number 5 seems to refer to humans in Ife myths (five fingers) as well as the world's creation, evoking among other things, the five-fingered chicken said to have scattered the particles of earth to the four corners of the universe when the earth was being formed. This sculpture also may have functioned as a means of measuring the Ife water level, a role in keeping with both the history of flooding at this site and an occupation that reflects close association between Oreluere, Ife's creation, and later era of floods at Ife.³⁶

The second menhir is a curving form ending in a point. This granite work is said originally to have stood at least 10 feet in height. It has been identified variously by researchers as an elephant tusk, phallus, and door bolt.³⁷ An elephant tusk is the most likely identity, both because of Ore's identity as hunter and because of his ties to Ife's autochthonous Obatala-linked population for whom the elephant is a key avatar. Interestingly, during the twentieth century, deceased elephant hunters received special funeral rites in an area atop a hill across from the Ore grove. Here, following the death of a famed local elephant hunter, a wooden sculpture carved to recall the deceased was set up to honor this man.³⁸

Elgee has noted³⁹ that during his visit to the Ore grove a number of earthenware pots were positioned in proximity to the stone carvings. One of the pots that he illustrates is a globe-shaped vessel with a narrow elongated neck, consistent with modern-era palm wine containers. Vessels of the same shape exist in fluorescence-era contexts and suggest that drink consumption and religious ritual in Ife have a long history. Bushes which grow nearby furnish the fresh whips used in these annual rituals as well.

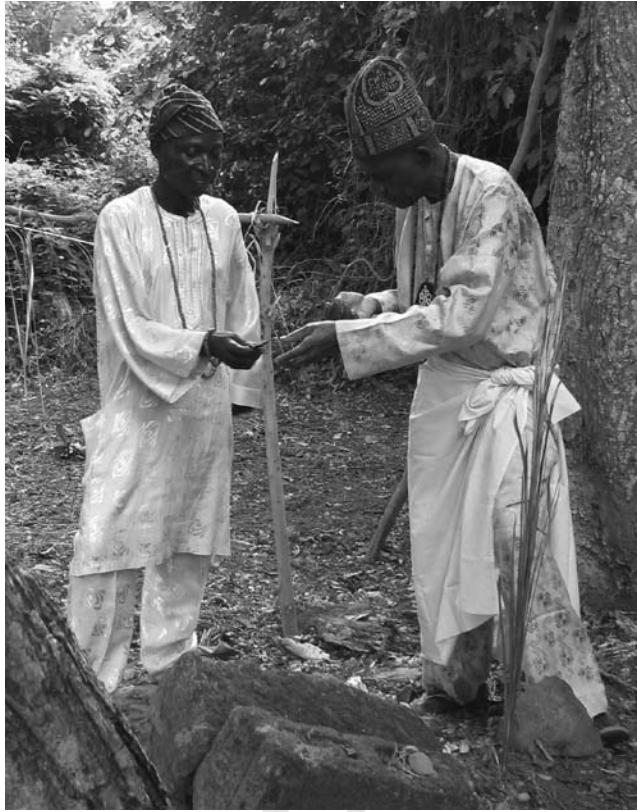


Figure 28.5 Ife (Nigeria). Chief Olopo making offerings in the Ore Grove during the annual ceremonies. Photo S.P. Blier, 2004.

These whips are employed by young boys of the family in a short display of combat and pain endurance near the end of the Ore Grove celebration, contests that call to mind ancient male puberty rituals.

At the rear of the area where the sculptures were positioned is where “cooking” is undertaken for related rites. It was here, during the Ore festival that I observed, where key offering rituals took place including the sacrifice of a goat, prayers, and special songs dedicated to Ore (Figure 28.5). Plant leaves and other materials are transported here by Chief Priest Olopo in his special antelope-skin bag, which also seems to honor of Ore’s identity as a hunter. In related offerings, the left hind foot and left ear were cut, the blood poured into a small boat-shaped pottery vessel and then poured by Chief Olopo on his left foot before being offered to Eshu as messenger to the gods. Fish is consumed as part of the meal. Whereas the emphasis on the left foot suggests Ore’s identity with the autochthonous deities (and Obatala supporters) who are identified with the left (as opposed to new dynasty royals linked to the right), the boat shaped offering vessel and the fish seem to reinforce Ore’s identity with Ife’s mythic beginnings (when the earth was covered with water). Only men and postmenopausal women are allowed to participate in this rite.

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Figure 28.6 Ife (Nigeria). Ore Grove, Chief Olopo at the end of the annual Ore festival. Photo S.P. Blier, 2004.

Behind this open-space area stands a modern-era cement structure that has been painted with a vivid multi-color tableau representing different parts of the ritual. Seen here as well are worshippers positioned in front of the figure of a seated priest (Olopo?) in a tall conical crown. Near this area the sculpture of a dog was found⁴⁰ consistent with the importance of dogs to Ogun, god of iron, war, and the hunt and also reflecting the primacy of dogs as sacrifices to this god. When the Ore rites concluded, women of the family greet the Olopo with song near the entry to the grove. Here other members of the quarter, along with drummers, jubilantly accompany Chief Olopo and other priests back to the Olopo's home adjacent to this grove (Figure 28.6). These rituals—like others—serve in part to renourish and reactivate the forces of the past that figure so prominently in the lives of ongoing Ife residents.

Temples and Interactive Engagement

Shrines in which related ancient art works were found included the interiors of palaces and temples, public altars, and forest groves situated throughout the city. Archeological evidence suggests that shrine construction as well as related furniture and offerings were varied. Shrines included small thatch-roofed structures sometimes with walls of

earth (the Ita Yemoo site), open-walled structures supported by corner posts (the Ore and Lafogido sites), altars set up in courtyards, as well as interior chambers within larger architectural complexes (Baba Sigidi and Obalara's Land). Potsherd and stone pavement areas distinguish many of these settings, sometimes bearing semi-circular cut-away areas where earthen altars were constructed for the display of various objects and offerings (among these vessels, pieces of iron, and beads). The ancient copper Obalufon mask and terra cotta Lajua head provide another interesting example. Both were housed in the palace Omirin room with royal and ritual viewing of these works presumably limited to those with inner court access—the king, his family, certain courtiers, and priests.

Orientation toward the cardinal directions appears to have been important as well. Deity temples and pavements often face north-south or east-west, as do interior altars and the arts associated with them. In a fluorescence-era example with possible ramifications for other artifacts, the Ita Yemoo copper alloy king figure was found lying on its back facing skyward, its head oriented roughly toward the east.⁴¹ The east-west position of the figure suggests that orientation was linked to use and signification. Impressing viewers with the splendor of art also was important in some fluorescence-era Ife sites, among these Wunmonije, where an extraordinary corpus of copper-alloy sculptures was found with life-size cast heads, a half figure of a king, several crowned heads with integrally cast crowns, a scepter mount with a gagged head, bracelets, and other works. While some Ife scholars have assumed that this site comprised objects brought in from other locales, it is just as likely that these works were housed here prior to their burial and/or served as altar furnishings. The visual impact of such an extraordinary corpus of works when seen both individually and together would have been remarkable.

The massing together of large numbers of impressive sculptures for display in order to make a bold impression is likely present in other contexts as well. According to Bernard and William Fagg,⁴² Ife's Iwinrin grove "is the richest in sculpture of all the Ife sites so far known . . . [F]ragments [having been] recovered from part of at least eight or ten terra cotta figures, most of them practically life-size." The number of works and their life-size scale—including an enormous two-thirds life-size multi-person terra cotta throne sculptural grouping—would have left a striking impact. Because many of the terra cotta heads collected by Frobenius in the early twentieth century came from the Iwinrin site, originally this locale was even more remarkable. In addition to naturalistic terra cotta heads and figures and cone-shaped forms, the Iwinrin Grove also housed a fragment of a figure with snakes.

The interactive nature of art as part of ongoing rituals at Ife is heightened by acts of ongoing image covering and revelation. In mid-twentieth century contexts, some early Ife sculptures were kept hidden (or buried) during most of the year and brought out for viewing only during ceremonial contexts. The modern era act of burying sculptures between ceremonies extends back to the fluorescence era period when sculptures were positioned at the Obalara's Land site. This is so that, as Eluyemi notes⁴³ the "*orisa* does not 'sleep.'" At the Ife site of Osangangan Obamakini, the fluorescence-era terra cotta head that represents this king/god accordingly was kept buried below overturned vessels when not in use. The unveiling of this work for closer scrutiny featured in preparations for the annual rites. Several of the copper alloy castings found at Ita Yemoo were

discovered inside a large terra cotta pot⁴⁴ of the sort traditionally used at Ife to store valuables for safekeeping. During the Ife Obatala festival today, stone figures representing Obatala and his consort Yemoo are covered with a white cloth and bound tightly with cord before being transported to a special shrine across town. Here, after being unwrapped, the works are placed in a “niche” where they are the focus of prayers by prostrating participants. These examples suggest the interdependence of religious ritual and viewing, as well as the unique qualities of viewer–object interaction with associated individuals experiencing works through an enhanced sense of religious primacy and emotional and esthetic anticipation. These contexts of viewing sometimes (as here) followed a carefully choreographed parading of the wrapped art works. Their subsequent revelation (uncovering) and ritual painting suggest that viewing was shaped in part by visual anticipation.

As we have seen, the viewing of religious art in early Ife is defined by a range of factors. Related settings include small and larger forest groves, intimate interior shrines, raised pavement altars, and larger temple complexes, and suggest the care with which viewing is shaped for maximum visual, ritual, and emotional impact. Regular, as well as empowered and interactive viewing, defines Ife art engagement in important ways. Even the simple act of hiding a work through much of the year and then revealing it for a brief period to a select group of observers promotes a unique viewing context in which the work of art is discovered anew over the course of its lifetime. Aspects of movement (of body, light sources, performance) are important to this as well. “Seeing” works of art here is necessarily dependent on what each viewer brought to art viewing: prior expectations, state of mind, ritual considerations each play a part in shaping this experience.

Notes

- 1 Sections of this article are taken from two works, Blier 2009 and Blier in press.
- 2 Odewale personal communication.
- 3 Bertho and Mauny 1952:104.
- 4 Akintitan, Personal Communication.
- 5 Adedinni, Personal Communication.
- 6 See Lawal 1977.
- 7 Idowu 1962:208. E. B. Idowu’s 1962 monograph entitled *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* is a key source on Ife religion. While the book’s title suggests a broader engagement with Yoruba religion, the bulk of his research and analysis focuses on ritual forms and related cultural practices in Ife. In addition to the core data included in this volume, the book also makes clear how different in many ways Ife religious traditions are from those of other Yoruba regions, even if overlaps exist. As such Idowu’s volume offers a caution to studies that seek to understand early Ife art from the vantage of Yoruba religious form more broadly. Idowu’s research additionally makes clear how Ife’s religious life is intimately tied to the history of this city. Other sources that offer insight into Ife and area rituals and shrines include Fabunmi (1969), Parratt (1985), and Adediran and Arifalo (1992) and Olupona 1991.
- 8 Idowu 1962:132.

- 9 Abiodun et al. 1991:13.
- 10 Idowu 1962:13.
- 11 Idowu 1962:66.
- 12 Idowu 1962:11–12.
- 13 Willett 1967:51.
- 14 See also Blier 2004.
- 15 Idowu 1962:11–12.
- 16 Idowu 1962:13.
- 17 Fabunmi 1969:10.
- 18 Chief Adedinni adds (Personal Communication) that Oreluere (Ore) was a servant of Obalufon. But he also points out that Ore was from the larger Obalufon family.
- 19 Among the other trees in this grove are Peregun, Akoko (linked to coronations, and Oro, a yellow fruit bearing tree, which is also linked to Oramfe, the indigenous god of thunder and lightning.
- 20 Willett 1970b:308.
- 21 Dennett 1910.
- 22 Willett 2004:S1.
- 23 This figure once was sheltered by a low enclosure of branches and palm fronds. Similar small open-fronted shrines with a palm frond canopy are shown in a vessel from Obalara's Land. This structure was built anew at the onset of each Ore annual ceremony (Murray and Willett 1958:138). Frobenius who saw the work half a century earlier, noted (vol. 1: 298) that the figure "was housed in a badly damaged little hut whose thatch almost hid it." These small structures when they were first built served to direct the viewers gaze, to focus one's attention directly on the object at hand.
- 24 Idowu 1962:11.
- 25 This feature suggests analogy with what Alfred Gell references (1999) as the role of artworks as traps.
- 26 Dennett 1910:21; Talbot (1926 II:339 and Allison 1968:13. Chief Olopo identified the work to Murray and Willett 1958:140 as Ore's servant.
- 27 Verger 1957:481.
- 28 Dennett 1910:22; Allison 1968:13. The name Idena was first provided by Frobenius (1913:90ff. and in passing), who attempted to abscond with its head (Murray and Willett 1958:138). Fabunmi suggests (1985:14) that the name Edena and the biblical Eden may be linked, an idea in keeping with Ore's association with the origins of life at Ife. This name, following Western biblical traditions, is in keeping with Ore's identity as Ife's first man, a man said to have lived at Ife before the time of a great flood here.
- 29 Talbot 1926:vol. II:339.
- 30 Odewale, personal communication.
- 31 Fasogun (1976 paper p.1) also identifies her as the keeper of Igba Iwa. This term also appears in the general reference to the time of creation, i.e. *igba iwa se* (Adediran "The Early Beginnings of the Ife State" 1992:81).
- 32 Adediran 1992 "Early Beginnings":81; Fasogun n.d.1. This same *igba-iwa* vessel is said to have held the necessary Ife offerings conveyed to the heavens each year in exchange for wellbeing and plenty (Fabunmi 1985:194).
- 33 Hambly suggests (1935:465) however that they depict stone anvils (Hambly 1935:465) referencing perhaps the importance of iron technology to hunters in the creation of related tools; a similar drop stone in iron was found in the Ogun Mogun shrine.

- 34 Dennett 1910:111. Found nearby was a rectilinear stone box cover, also showing a snake grasping a frog, along with a 10.5 inch tall form (Willett 2004:S11) which appears to be a skeuomorph of a scepter. Shown on the ground in front of the larger Ore figure in Frobenius' illustration is a palm wine vessel.
- 35 Frobenius 1913, I:296. See also Willett 2004:S9.
- 36 Elgee noted (1908:342) that during his visit a number of earthenware pots were positioned in proximity to the stone carvings, these in keeping with palm wine consumption in related rituals. Bushes that grow nearby furnish the fresh whips used in the annual rituals. These whips are employed by young boys of the family responsible for Ore worship in a short display of combat and pain endurance that takes place towards the end of the Ore Grove celebration, contests that call to mind ancient male puberty rituals in this center.
- 37 Willett 2004: S-1; Dennett 1910:22; Frobenius 1912, I:326; Talbot 1926, II:340.
- 38 Willett 1965:8.
- 39 Elgee 1908:342.
- 40 Willett 2004: T317.
- 41 Willett 1959b:189.
- 42 Fagg 1960:113.
- 43 Eluyemi n.d.:43.
- 44 Willett 1959b.