

INTRODUCTION: RISK, ART, AND HISTORY

(*Òna ni a n sị mọna*)

It is by losing one’s way, that one finds one’s way

Yoruba proverb

“One doesn’t discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time”

André Gide

Asking directions can lead to unexpected outcomes. While researching in Benin Republic early in my career, I asked a diviner about the best road to take to reach Ile-Ife (Ife), homeland of the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria. His forehead beaded with concern and his eyes narrowed: “No one who goes there comes back to tell about it.”

“Are the local roads that bad?” I asked.

After a long pause, he quietly remarked: “No, but long ago there were holes near the roots of certain *ìrókò* trees that travelers would follow to get to Ife.” He was speaking, of course, about local beliefs concerning the route the dead historically traveled to Ife and the hereafter. Under these same *ìrókò* species (*Milicia excels*), early residents of the Abomey plateau once buried their dead. Among these populations, as well as the residents of Savé to the north, where I had first lived among the Yoruba during a two-year Peace Corps tour, Ife continues to hold important mythic and ritual associations.

To them and others, Ife is a place of great mystery, a city of both the living and the dead since those who have recently expired must pass through this center to reach the world beyond.¹ In this broader region, Ife was (and is) a place of uncertainty, a locale of spiritual primacy, a not-quite-knowable place where anything is possible

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and where present and past necessarily are cojoined. Ife, to the elderly diviner with whom I had spoken, was less important as an historic center of great art and civilization, or a city of impressive temples and palaces, or even the home of Ifá divination, but rather as a site where the living and dead, humans and deities, intersect and where on any given street corner family members and friends from earlier eras might be encountered. Ife still holds associations with mystery, uncertainty, and risk, both for those who live here and for outsiders.

Later when I began to pursue more seriously my research on ancient Ife art (**Plate 1**) and history, issues of risk also frequently came into play. I was warned about the risks of Nigeria, and even more tellingly about the difficulty of working in the purportedly “closed” Ife world. These warnings, I soon realized, were little more than distancing tropes, part of the larger narrative of mystique that long has enveloped this center, serving in part to underscore its historical élan. My memories of research here, to the contrary, are extraordinarily positive. I found Ife to be a city of unique energy, complexity, diversity, and openness, and its many citizens at once knowledgeable, warm, and supportive, individuals who readily offered information, thoughtful engagement, and enduring friendship.

ANCIENT IFE: HOMELAND OF THE YORUBA

The city of Ife (or more formally Ile-Ife) is located on a broad plain surrounded by wetlands at the intersection of forest and savanna. Situated some 250 kilometers northeast of the modern coastal city of Lagos, it lies midway between the Atlantic Ocean and the Niger River, near the headwaters of the Ọ̀ṣun and several other rivers that wind their way inland or to the coast. A rocky mount marks the city’s center. Spring-fed lands surrounding the urban core allow for year-round agriculture, the city center framed by a series of beautiful hills. Ife’s unique setting no doubt helped to foster this once (and still) thriving urban population, one of many factors that led to Ife’s historic stability and economic primacy. During the era of Ife’s greatest historic power, the twelfth to fifteenth centuries C.E., its influence spanned eastward to the Niger River and westward to what is today southern Togo (**Map 1, 2**). Ancient Ife-style potsherd mosaic flooring (referred to here generally as “pavements”) offer evidence of this center’s broader regional reach (**Plate 33**, lower right). And, when early in 2010, Ife’s current monarch traveled to what was once the Dahomey Kingdom, the place where I made my initial Ife travel plans, for his birthday celebrations, the voyage also served to reinforce the historic primacy of Ife in the larger area. Evidence of Ife’s commercial power extended far beyond, however, and examples of Ife’s famous translucent blue-green glass *ṣẹ̀gi* have been found as far away as Ghana, Mali, and Mauritania. Their high value was due in

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Plate 1. Ife. Head of Queen. Terracotta. h.241 mm. Nigeria National Museums, Lagos. Mus. reg. no. L. [illegible].58. Willett 2004 T97. Photo: Museum for African Art and Fundación Marcelino Botín / Karin L. Willis. © National Commission for Museum and Monuments, Nigeria.

part to their unique dichroism (the ability to change color in light), a feature today seen to convey their ability to promote fertility and financial increase.

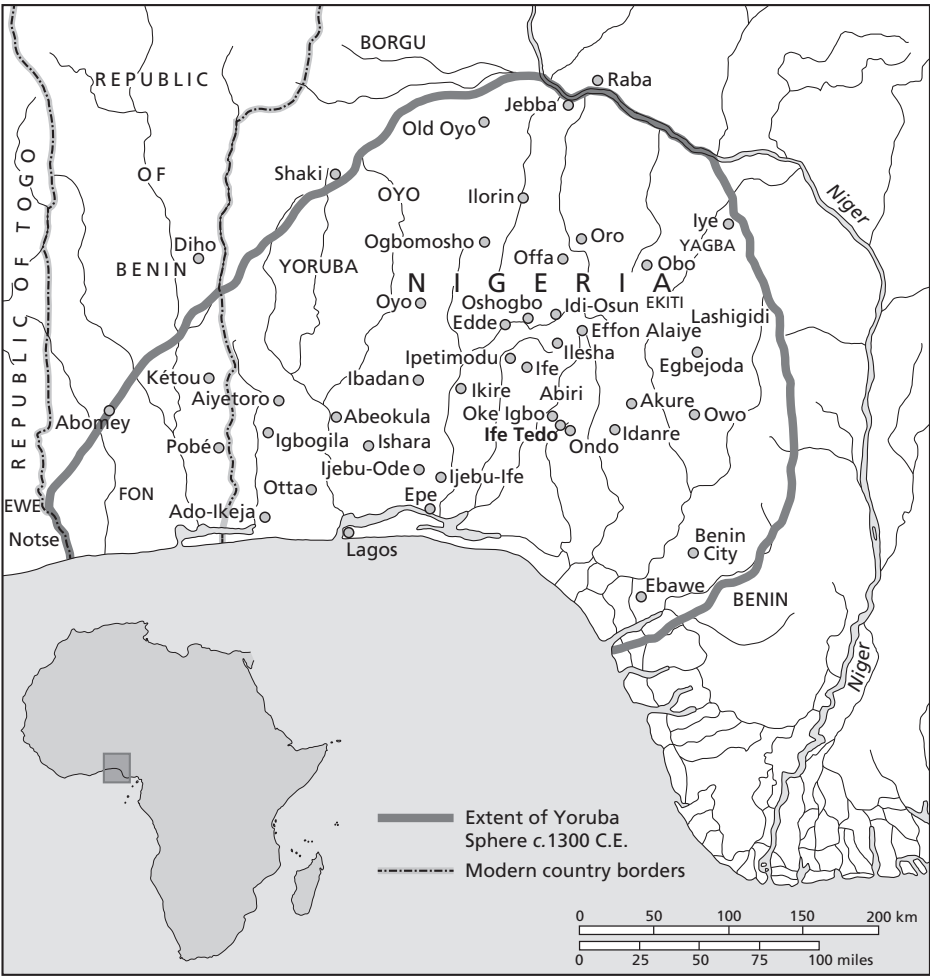
In addressing the remarkable corpus of ancient Ife artworks, one must acknowledge the importance of this center as both omphalos and paradigm for the complex networks that link members of the broader (circa 40 million) Yoruba worlds of Africa, the Afro-Atlantic, and Afro-Mediterranean regions of the globe. These art

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Map 1. Africa circa 1300 C.E. showing political boundaries and key trade routes.

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Map 2. Regional map: Yoruba sphere.

works in part speak to shared historical experiences, at once rich and painful memories, a will not only to live but more importantly to overcome difficulties and flourish. As such, Ife art forms speak to human conditions more generally and how individual initiative can impact the lives of many. Ile-Ife, the “House of Ife,” is the sacred home to all of Ife’s children, and according to myth, to humankind more generally. When one speaks of the sixteen historic Yoruba kingdoms embraced within the Ife political sphere, it is not only to this mythic primacy and the larger regional economic and diplomatic system that one is speaking, but also to the enduring imprint of Ife’s artistic legacy in the world more generally.

Ife has been known by various names in the wider southern Nigerian area over the course of its long history. In the Edo capital of Benin City, for example, Ife is referred to as Uhe. In the Itsekiri Yoruba area, this city is identified as Ufe. This same

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term, Ufe (Yoûfi), also is the name by which this city seems to appear in the earliest related written account, Ibn Battûta's 1352 *Voyages to Asia and Africa*, where we learn that southwest of the Mâlli (Mali) kingdom lies a country called Yoûfi (Ife) that is one of the "most considerable countries of the Soudan [governed by a] . . . souverain [who] is one of the greatest kings" (1958:409–410).² Battûta's description of Yoûfi³ (Ife) as a country that "No white man can enter . . . because the negros will kill him before he arrives" (p. 410) is consistent with the ritual primacy long associated with Ife, due perhaps to its mercantile strength (glass beads, iron and probably textiles). Among the latter items seem to have been not only cotton and raphia cloth but also silk textiles fashioned from local worms. The latter suggests that in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, Ife was part of the famous East-West silk road. This is one of many indicators that Ife was part of the larger global trading network. The need to control related goods (and technologies) is in part what gave Ife and its rulers their unique associations with secrecy and danger.

A 1375 Spanish trade map known as the Catalan Atlas also appears to reference ancient Ife under the name Rey de Organa, i.e. King of Organa (Obayemi 1980:92), although repositioned toward the central Sahara. The name Organa alludes to the title of first dynasty Ife rulers, i.e. Ógàṇṇ (Óghèṇṇ, Ógèṇṇ). The earlier Ife ruler's title of Ógàṇṇ (the current title is Òṣoni) can be seen in an important Ife annotated king list called Ìkédù.⁴ Reference to a leader with this same Ógàṇṇ title also is found in a Portuguese account from the 1480s by the seafarer Joao Afonso de Aveiro (in Ryder 1969:31). This work describes an inland ruler who played a central role in Benin royal enthronements by providing a brass crown, staff, and cross in acknowledgement of the new king's legitimacy.⁵ Although the identity of this inland ruler and state is debated, Ife is one of several suggestions proposed by Ryder.⁶ A corpus of Benin "messenger" figures from this latter site seem to reference this tradition as well.

Early Europeans reaching the Ife area for the first time in the mid-nineteenth century were cognizant of the mystery and ritual primacy of this historic center. The first were a pair of brothers, John and Richard Lander. On May 15, 1830, while exploring and charting the Niger River to the northeast of Ife, they visited the Yoruba market in Old Oyo (Katunga), acquiring part of an Ife glass beadmaking crucible, evidence of Ife's early and later economic primacy as linked to the trade of colorful sanctified glass beads. As these explorers were informed, "It was dug from the earth in a country called Iffie where according to their traditions their first parents were created and from whence all Africa has been peopled" (1832 in Lander et al. 2004:88). In 1852, David Hinderer, the first known Christian missionary to travel in the broader Ife area, was stationed eighty miles west of this center in Ibadan. Hinderer's June 4, 1851, diary impressions of Ife published by historian I. A. Akinjogbin are telling in their emphasis on Ife's religious primacy:

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Eastwards, three days journey . . . is the large and famous town of Ife. . . . Ife is famous as being the seat of idolatry, all the multiple idols of this part of the country are said to emanate from the town; from there the sun and moon rises where they are buried in the ground. . . . [A]ll people of this country and even white men spring from the town. (1992:ix)

A half century later, A. B. Ellis published the first detailed ethnographic study of Ife and the Yoruba more broadly (one of the earliest such monographs in Africa). Ellis provides an overview (1894) of the nineteenth-century civil wars that had recently devastated this city, as well as insights into both Yoruba religion and Ife’s mythic identity as the birthplace of humans. Another British traveler, C. H. Elgee, visiting in the early twentieth century, would observe similarly that: “Ife . . . is called by the natives the ‘cradle of the universe.’ From this town the whole human race is supposed to have sprung into existence. The Ife ruler, for the last 200 years at least, has been entitled the Ooni, and he is the spiritual but not the temporal head of the Yoruba nation – a sort of Pagan Pope” (1908:338). Historically, all Yoruba were under the ritual authority of the Ife King, a ruler who serves as both the political and religious leader of the broader Yoruba culture. Like the Ife king and other individuals identified with the court (**Color Plate 1**, top left, right), Ife still carries associations with religious, political, and historical primacy, along with attendant danger and risk.

Consistent with this, Ife is known today not only for its extraordinary ancient arts (**Plate 2**),⁷ but also for its many temples and shrines (**Color Plate 2**, top left, bottom right). A number of these are identified with archaeological sites that continue to have historic identities (**Map 3**). Today Ife (**Color Plate 2**, bottom left) is the home to some 350,000 residents (c. 600,000 in its broader metropolitan area).⁸ Modern Ife also is known for its renowned center of higher education, Obafemi Awolowo University, a scholarly presence that carries a certain resonance with Ife’s longstanding identity as the home of learning. In Ife the complex regional divination system known as Ifá addressed later in the Introduction. Ife now is a tourist and religious center sought out by Westerners and many others because of its many *orisa* (gods, spirits), a number of which came to be worshipped in the Americas as a legacy of both the tragic centuries of international slave trade and recent eras of migration.

In mythic terms Ife is identified as the site not only of human origins but also world and deity creation as well. This is evoked in the city’s fuller name, Ile-Ife, literally “house (ile) of Ife,” or more precisely “The house from which humanity, civilization, divine kingship, and so on spread to other places.” The verb “fe” means “to spread or to widen.”⁹ Ife’s rich mythology often focuses on the lives and actions of its various gods – many of which are identified with prominent worldly

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Color Plate 1. Top row, left. The Ọ̀ṣọ̀ni of Ife in the palace during the annual Ọ̀lọ́jó ceremony. Photograph: Alaja Rafat Adefunke Adekonle, Funky Lady Photography, 2002. Top row, right. The Ọ̀ṣọ̀ni of Ife and the Dien of Agbor in the Ife palace during the annual Ọ̀lọ́jó ceremony. Photograph: Alaja Rafat Adefunke Adekonle, Funky Lady Photography, 2002. Bottom row, left. The Olojudo Alaiyemore, Aderemi Adadapo, King of Ido-Osun during the annual Ọ̀balúfọ̀n ceremony. Photograph S.P. Blier, 2006. Bottom row, right. The Araba (chief of Ifa diviners). Agbaye. At the palace during the annual Olojo Ceremony. Photograph: Alaja Rafat Adefunke Adekonle, Funky Lady Photography, 2002.

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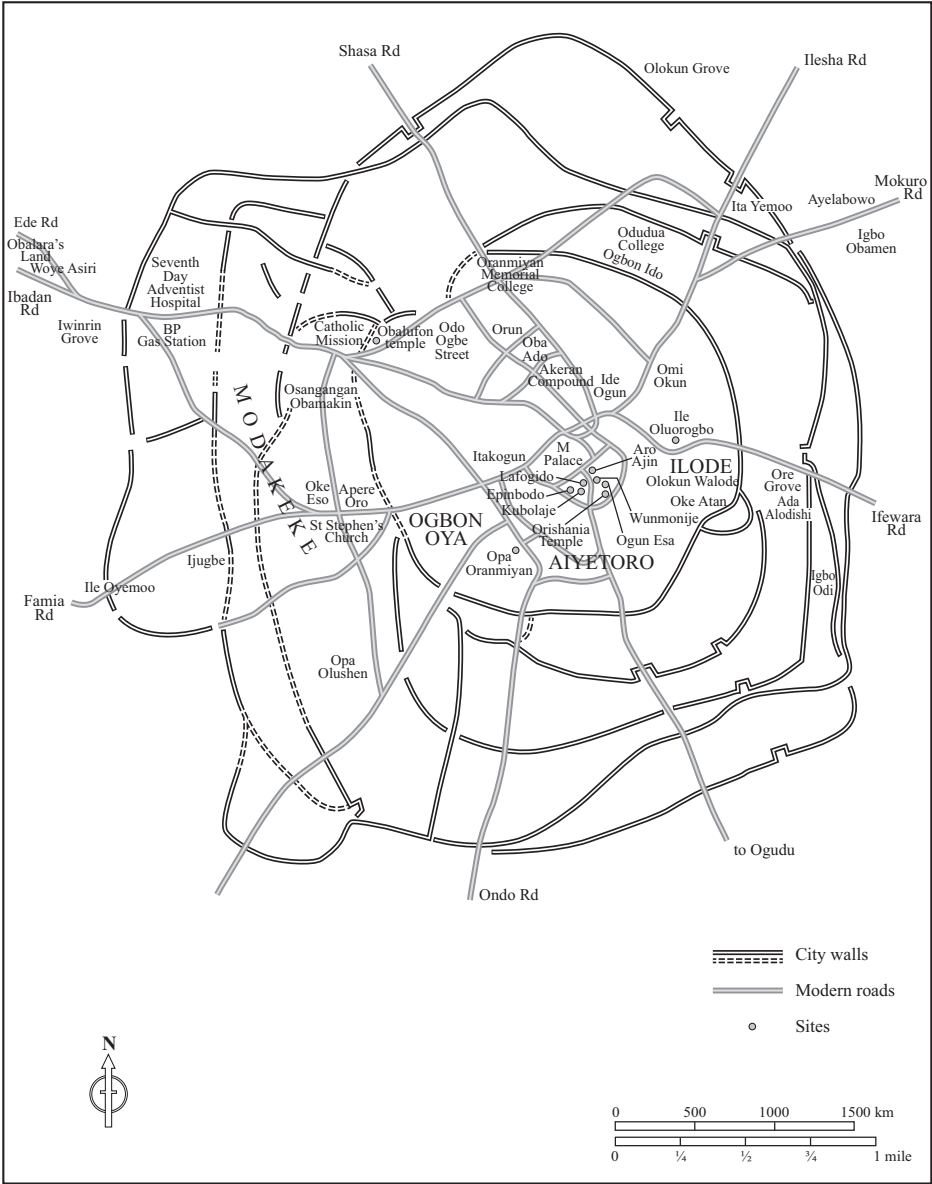
Suzanne Preston Blier

Excerpt

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Plate 2. Drawings of Miscellaneous Ife Terracotta Heads: **a.** Ife. Head with facial striations and richly decorated headdress. Unknown site. Terracotta. H: 210 mm. Private collection (Willett 2004:T745C). **b.** Ife. Head with richly textured coiffure; no facial markings. Unknown site. Terracotta. H: 127 mm. Private collection (Willett 2004:T871). **c.** Ife. Head fragment without facial marks; tall bead-decorated crown. Unknown site. Terracotta. Maximum H: 294 mm. Private collection (Willett 2004:T906). **d.** Ife. Head with facial striations and wide brimmed hat. unknown site. Terracotta. H: 175 mm (Willett 2004:T867). **e.** Ife. head with facial striations and tall headdress. Unknown site. Terracotta. H: 187 mm. Private collection (Willett 2004:T869). **f.** Ife. Head with facial striations. Unknown site. Terracotta. H: 222 mm. Private collection (Willett 2004:T733). **g.** Ife. Head with facial striations. Iwinrin Grove site. Terracotta. H: 9.5 ins. Nigeria. National Museums, Ife. Mus. reg. no. 21 (Willett 2004:T7B). **h.** Ife. Plain faced head with plaited coiffure. Unknown site. Terracotta. H: 200 mm. Private collection (Willett 2004:T857). **i.** Ife. Head with facial striations and wavy hair. Identified with Imesi Lashigidi. Lashigidi site (Ekiti) 27 miles from Ado-Ekiti on Ikare-Ado Road. Said to have been found at the base of the Okuta-Monjioro rock in the “bush of Imesi” where it is said to have been part of a full figure that was partially buried. Terracotta. H: 133 mm. Nigeria. National Museums, Ife. Unnumbered (Willett 2004:T844). **j.** Ife. Head with facial striations, wavy hair and bun-like terminus. Unknown site. Terracotta. H: 240 mm. Private collection (Willett 2004:T895). **k.** Ife. head with facial striation; Ridged coiffure. Unknown site. Terracotta. H: 145 mm. Nigeria. National Museums, Benin. Benin Mus. reg. no. 843 (Willett 2004:T739). **l.** Ife. Head with facial striations and cap. Terracotta. Willett identifies this work as a “calabash bottlestopper.” More likely this tiny head was created separately so that it could be inserted into a figural body. Unknown site. H: 89 mm. Nigeria. National Museums, Ife. Mus. reg. no. 170/61 Renumbered IF 61.1.17 (Willett 2004:T749).

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Map 3. Plan. Major archaeological Sites, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. After Frank Willett 2004 and Paul Ozanne 1969.

or natural attributes – the sky (Ọ̀bàtálá), the earth (Odùduà), iron (Ọ̀gún), and thunder (Ọ̀ràmíṣẹ, and later Ẹ̀ṣàngó). All of these are under the authority of a supreme god, Olódùmarè.

One of Ife’s main myths of origin points to the seminal role of two deities in creation: Ọ̀bàtálá and Odùduà. According to a schematic version of this myth: