

Kings, Crowns, and Rights of Succession: Obalufon Arts at Ife and Other Yoruba Centers

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The life-size copper mask from Ife (Fig. 1), the ancient religious center of the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria (Fig. 2), is one of the most familiar, yet enigmatic, of all African works in metal.¹ It was first published in 1937 by the late king (Oni) of Ife, Adesoji Aderemi, in the journal *Nigeria*.² The king identified the mask at the time as representing Obalufon II, a legendary early ruler of Ife who is credited with the invention of brass-casting at that center. This life-size mask was said by the king to have been kept on an altar in the Omirin room of the royal palace at Ife ever since its manufacture.³ A near flawless casting in ninety-nine percent pure copper,⁴ it is one of the most beautiful

and technically accomplished of all works from ancient Ife. Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett date the mask to the twelfth through fifteenth centuries A.D.⁵

Like related Ife brass and copper heads (Figs. 3, 4), the Obalufon mask is a work of extraordinary naturalism. Except for the characteristic Ife-style almond-shaped eyes and the distinct stylization of the ears, the face of the mask shows striking physiognomic accuracy. The naturalism of this work is heightened by its fully life-size proportions, and by the fact that it was apparently intended to incorporate an attached beard, for holes have been placed around the mouth and chin areas so that a beard could be inserted.

¹ This paper was previously presented at a symposium in honor of the late Douglas Fraser held at Columbia University on April 15–16, 1983. The analysis shares Fraser's concerns with some of the more difficult questions in Nigerian art history. As with many studies of historical art traditions in Africa, the ultimate answers may never be known. The suggestions presented here, if in part conjectural, provide an alternative to the hypotheses about Ife art currently espoused. These findings have the additional advantage of conforming more closely with Ife oral traditions, royal succession rites, and religious beliefs. Future fieldwork on Yoruba Obalufon ceremonies and art undoubtedly will add further insight into traditions discussed here.

My interest in Yoruba coronation arts began in 1969–1971, when I was living in the Yoruba royal city of Savé (in the Republic of Benin). At that time, considerable discussion focused on the selection and installation of a new Savé king. My more recent interest in the topic began after viewing the exhibit, "The Treasures of Ancient Nigeria," organized in 1980 by Michael Kan and the Detroit Institute of Arts and curated by Ekpo Eyo, Director of Nigerian National Museums. As a result of that exhibit, the Obalufon mask and other Ife works came to this country for the first time.

The present essay would not have been possible without the help of a number of scholars. I wish to thank Rowland Abiodun, Richard Brilliant, Henry and Margaret Drewal, Kate Ezra, William Fagg, Jeff Hammer, Jack Pemberton, and Frank Willett, all of whom offered critical comment and shared their information and ideas. Shirley Glazer carefully checked my sources; Sarah Travis made the drawings and maps. Michael Kan helped secure photographs. My thanks to all of them. Plates 1, 3, 4, 10, 11, 12, 14 were photographed by Dirk Bakker.

² Aderemi, the Oni of Ife, "Notes on the City of Ife," *Nigeria*, xii, 1937, 3. Among the first of the Ife works to reach the West were those brought to Europe by the British colonial governor Gilbert Thomas Carter. According to Samuel Johnson (p. 647) "three of those national and ancestral works of art known as the 'Ife marbles'" were given to Carter in 1896 by Adelekan, the then recently crowned king of Ife. Johnson explains that the king gave them to Governor Carter in an effort to gain a positive decision concerning the resettlement of Modakeke residents outside the city (see nn. 68 and 69).

³ Kenneth C. Murray, "Nigerian Bronzes: Works from Ife," *Antiquity*, xv, 1941, 73; Willett, 29.

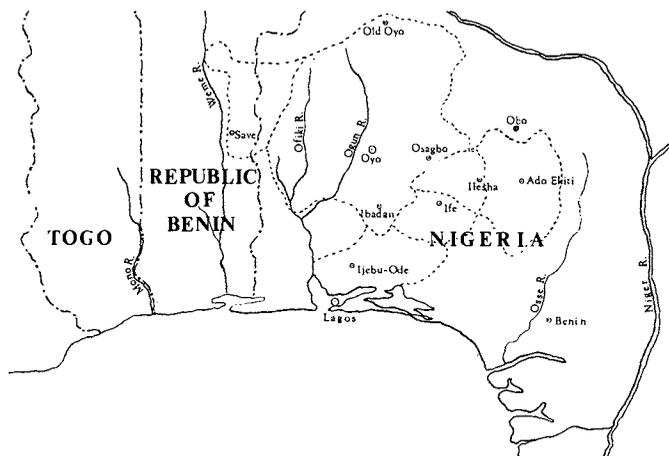
⁴ Ancient copper exploitation took place in Niger, Mauritania, Mali, Su-

dan, and Zaire (Thurstan Shaw, *Nigeria: Its Archaeology and Early History*, London, 1978, 72). O. Werner and F. Willett have published the results of spectrographic analyses of several Ife castings ("The Composition of Brasses from Ife and Benin," *Archaeometry*, xvii, 1975, 141-163), which suggest, however, that the metal may have come from Lower Saxony (in the Harz region) in Europe, where mines producing related ores were being worked during the 12th and 13th centuries. (Corresponding evidence of copper being transported by caravan across the Sahara in the 11th or 12th century [1090 A.D. \pm 108] has been found in Mauritania; Theodore Monod, "Majabat al-Koubra," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire*, xxvi, 1964, 1394-1402). During this period, the African Berbers (Almoravid and Almohad Moslems) controlled much of the Western Sahara, the Mediterranean, and Spain. Presumably it was through them that metals were traded into this area, either by way of Spain (which, as R. W. Southern notes [*The Making of the Middle Ages*, New Haven, 1953, 42], had trade contracts at this time with eastern Germany) or through Sicily (and the Holy Roman Empire) both of which benefited from trade ties with the Moslem world.

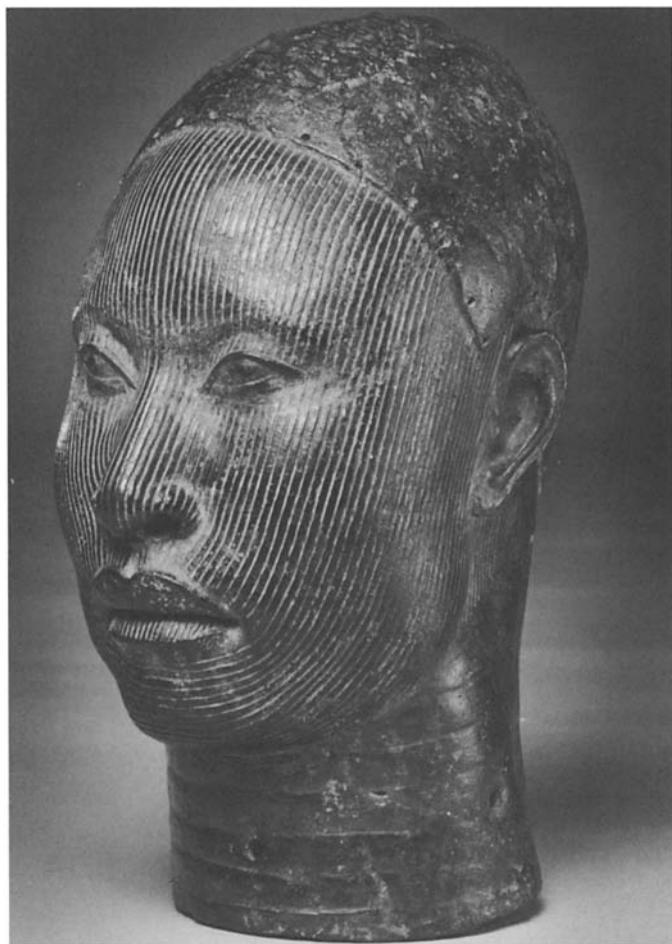
⁵ P. 93. D.H. Jones suggests ("Problems of African Chronology," *Journal of African History*, 11, 2, 1970: 160-176) that the average king's reign in similar African societies was probably thirteen years. Forty-eight kings are believed to have ruled at Ife from the time of its founding to the present. Kenyo's list (in Smith, 20) cites forty-seven kings, but since he wrote a new ruler was enthroned. Allowing an average of thirteen years per reign, Obalufon II, Ife's third king, would probably have lived some time in the 14th century. At Ife, this date is also corroborated by other evidence. First, several stylistically similar Ife works from the Ita Yemoo site have been shown to date to the 12th to 14th centuries A.D. on the basis of radiocarbon tests at that site (P.S. Garlake, "Excavations at Obalufon's Land, Ife: An Interim Report," *West African Journal of Archaeology*, iv, 1974, 146; Frank Willett, "Radiocarbon Dates and Cire-perdue Castings in Ife and Benin," *Abhandlungen und Berichte des Museums für Völkerkunde. Forschungsstelle*, xxxiv, 1975, 291-300). Two *cire-perdue* heads that are close in style to the Obalufon mask have been dated by Frank Willett and S.J. Fleming ("A Catalogue of Important Copper-Alloy Castings Dated by Thermoluminescence," *Archaeometry*, xviii, 1976, 136-37) using thermoluminescent analysis to 1440 A.D. (\pm 65) and 1490 A.D. (\pm 85) respectively. However, because the heads were found in a second burial context, which precluded the possibility of subsidiary soil analyses, these latter dates are not completely reliable.



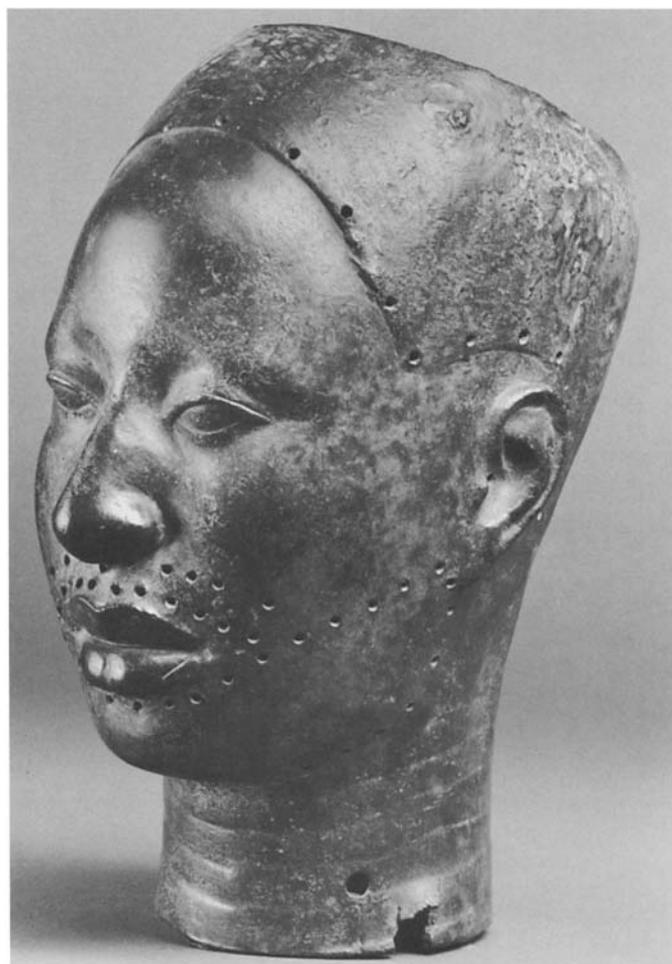
1 Copper mask said to represent Ife king Obalufon II, 12th-15th century A.D., h. 29.5cm. From king's palace, Ife, Nigeria, Museum of Ife Antiquities, No. 12



2 Map of the Yoruba area, Nigeria



3 Ife copper head, 12th-15th century A.D., h. 29cm. Traces of white pigment in corners of eyes, black on pupils, and red around eyes and on neck. From Wunmonije compound of king's palace, Ife, Nigeria, Museum of Ife Antiquities, No. 6



4 Zinc brass head from Ife, 12th-15th century A.D., h. 29.5cm. Wunmonije compound of king's palace, Ife, Nigeria, Museum of Ife Antiquities, No. 12



5 Ife terra-cotta mask from Obalara's Compound (Obalufon St.), Ife, 12th-15th century, A.D., h. 32cm. Nigeria Museum of Ife Antiquities, No. OC2

Additional holes around the hairline, Willett notes (p. 20), were probably used to secure a separate headdress, perhaps a prototype of the divine crowns worn today by Yoruba kings at Ife and other royal centers. Although close in style and decorative detail to the life-size brass and copper heads from Ife, the Obalufon mask is distinct from these, for it was intended to be worn, and has narrow slits beneath the eyes, so that its wearer could see. In addition, holes have been placed around the mask's lower edge for the attachment, presumably, of a costume or robe.

Unlike Ife brass and copper heads that at one time were buried (and eventually forgotten), this mask, remaining at the palace, could have retained its original identity. A recent find at Ife offers evidence that supports the identification of this mask with Obalufon. The find consists of a

stylistically similar life-size mask — this one in terra-cotta — which was unearthed on Obalufon Street, appropriately enough, twenty feet from the site of the city's Obalufon shrine. This mask (Fig. 5), like the copper Obalufon mask, was also intended to be worn, for slits are incorporated beneath the eyes. The terra-cotta mask is different from the copper one, however, in that incised striations cover the face, and both a headdress and stylized beard have been included in the modeling.⁶ Eluyemi, who published the mask, notes (p. 41) that this find does not necessarily offer conclusive proof of the identity of the copper mask with Obalufon, but it does suggest the possibility that the two may ultimately be linked. Masks in any medium are extremely rare among extant works from ancient Ife.⁷ The identification of the life-size copper mask from Ife with Obalufon II is further supported by the importance of metal masks in the corpus of later Yoruba Obalufon religious arts. It is quite possible that the copper Obalufon mask may have served as a prototype for this later Obalufon *cire-perdue* tradition.

The meaning and role of the Obalufon mask at ancient Ife have not been thoroughly explored. Only three scholars have attempted to discuss the possible function of this work. Leon Underwood was the first.⁸ He noted that "The slits beneath the eyes indicate its use . . . in some sort of ceremony." Justine Cordwell next commented that it may have had a funerary use, asserting that ". . . the life-size, naturalistic portrait mask . . . could be worn on the head of a living man, who . . . bowing and waving, thus [carried] to the ultimate the illusion of the return of the dead ruler."⁹ Most recently, Frank Willett presented two theories for its possible use (pp. 29, 150). His first theory supports Cordwell's view that the work may have been worn during funerals.¹⁰ He noted that

Unlike the other [Ife] bronzes, this is a true mask intended to be worn over the face, with slits below the eyes so that the wearer could see out . . . In the course of Yoruba funerals nowadays an *egungun* masquerader takes it upon himself to speak as the voice of the deceased, to reassure the living that he has been satisfied with his burial . . . It is possible that this mask was used in such a funeral ceremony . . .

According to Willett's second theory, the mask may have been linked to an Ife tradition in which a servant impersonating the king put on the robes and crown of state in order to prolong the ruler's reign. The mask, Willett sug-

⁶ This terra-cotta Obalufon mask, which weighs 4.52 kilograms, is the largest of the terra-cotta heads from Ife (Eluyemi, 41). Henry Drewal has pointed out (personal communication, April 9, 1984) that this headdress is similar to that depicted in several Ife sculptures identified by Willett as queens (p. 156, pl. IX). In view of the clearly defined beard and mustache portrayed on the Obalufon terra-cotta mask, Willett's identification of this headdress type exclusively with women should be reconsidered.

⁷ Only two other examples of masks from ancient Ife are known to me, one a terra-cotta fragment from Igbodo Street (photographed by Frank

Willett, Northwestern University slide collection), the other a terra-cotta identified by Willett (fig. 67) as a "masked head?" found at Igbodo Obameri,

⁸ Leon Underwood, *Bronzes of West Africa*, London, 1949, 34.

⁹ Justine Cordwell, "Naturalism and Stylization in Yoruba Art," *Magazine of Art*, 1953, 224.

¹⁰ The funerary role that Cordwell and Willett attribute to this mask is based on their theory that Ife brass and copper heads were also used in funerary contexts (see text below, pp. 394-395).

gests, might have been used in the course of such an impersonation.¹¹

Except for Underwood's very general idea about a ceremonial use, there is no real evidence to support these theories. The key to the mask's symbolism, it is suggested here, is found instead in the figure of Obalufon II himself, both as a historic ruler at Ife, and, following his death, as a deity of the Yoruba people. In this analysis the first theme will be coronation ceremonies at Ife. It will be argued that the mask is integrally associated with these ceremonies and with the related rites of rulership transition. Following this, the figure of Obalufon II and his place in the early formation of the Ife state will be discussed. The mask will be seen to symbolize Obalufon's role in assuring the future of the city-state through his association with problems of the succession of rulers and popular support for the throne. Later Obalufon religious arts and liturgies (explored as a distinct corpus here for the first time), can be seen to reinforce the identity of the mask both with themes of coronations and with the exigencies of autochthonous rule. The well-known Ife brass and copper heads as well as a number of other *cire-perdue* works from the period also may be associated with these ideas, for they, like the mask, appear to be identified with Obalufon and with succession to the throne.

The Arts and the Succession of Rulers: Ife Coronation Ceremonies and the Obalufon Mask

Present-day traditions at Ife provide us with clues as to the possible functioning and symbolism of the Obalufon mask in the city in ancient times. Contemporary evidence suggests that the mask traditionally may have had a role in Ife coronation ceremonies. M. A. Fabunmi, author of a 1969 catalogue that inventories local Ife religious shrines and ceremonies, explains in this light that during Ife coronations the royal crown was placed on "the head of Obalufon" before the new ruler was allowed to wear it (p. 11). What is meant here by the phrasing "the head of Obalufon" is not clear, but it appears to be a reference to a sculpture

from the Ife shrine of Obalufon.¹² Perhaps the ancient Obalufon mask also once had a role in Ife coronation rites. Because it is life-size, it could easily have been worn in related ceremonies. Holes placed around the hairline probably served to secure a crown. Fabunmi notes that the priest in charge of Obalufon is chief Obalara (p. 10). Obalara's descendants, this author explains, play a major part in the coronation ceremonies of the new king. The original Obalara was the son of Obalufon, and, as Eluyemi has noted (p. 41), the Obalufon priesthood to this day has remained within this family.

The possible association of the Obalufon mask with Ife coronations is reinforced by the fact that, according to the late king of Ife (quoted in Verger, 439), the crown is brought from the Obalufon shrine (a sanctuary identified with the deified Obalufon). As the late king of Ife explained it, "The Oni of Ife is proclaimed king at the temple of Odudua but he receives his crown the following day at the temple of Orisala [Obatala] where it has been brought from the temple of Obalufon."¹³ On this same day, the new king pays homage to the dignitaries and people of Ife, showing them the throne of Obalufon, according to Palau-Marti (p. 22). Additional support for this linking of the Obalufon mask with ceremonies of royal investiture is found in the fact, discussed by Ogunba, that the word Obalufe (the title for certain Ife priest-chiefs), means "king or chief at Ife" or the "the king or important person who owns Ife."¹⁴ The word "Oba" in Obalufon likewise refers to "king," implying that Obalufon was closely identified with Ife rule and, by extension, with the transfer of royal power.

If the mask was worn, as its design suggests it was intended to be, it was probably in the context of related coronation ceremonies. According to Lloyd, during Yoruba coronations reenactment scenes drawn from the early period of the city-state were often presented.¹⁵ In such performances, the indigenous inhabitants of the city had a central place. Indeed in many Yoruba cities, the event often took place at one of their compounds. In view of the im-

¹¹ Willett's most recent discussion of the mask (in Eyo and Willett, 34) suggests that today he is less sure about either of these possibilities. He notes that "the function of the mask . . . is not at all certain. . . . Whether it was used to impersonate someone during the burial ceremonies, or at some subsequent event, we simply do not know, and it seems unprofitable to guess."

¹² K.C. Murray (in Frank Willett, personal communication, March 7, 1985). Jack Pemberton III notes ("Descriptive Catalogue," in William Fagg et al., *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa*, New York, 1982, 160) that it is generally women who place the crown on the new king's head.

¹³ By maintaining control over the crown in this way, the Obalufon priests could also control those who were to be crowned, thereby assuring that a legitimate ruler was indeed coming to the throne. The importance for Ife coronations of Obatala, the deity of the autochthonous people, should not be underestimated. Not only does the coronation take place at the temple of Obatala, but the royal scepter is also associated with this deity (Idowu, 28-29). Willett suggests (personal communication, March 7, 1985), however, that the crowns were probably kept in the palace.

The coronation rites at Ife are discussed by several scholars. Fabunmi (p. 25) notes that the new king is crowned on a spot called Igbo Kubolaja

at Ideta in the Ilode quarter. According to K.C. Murray (in Willett, personal communication, March 7, 1985), the king is crowned at Ojubo Obalufon. This is near the shrine of Obatala. The king, according to Fabunmi (p. 25), must also ". . . spend a period of probation before taking up residence at the palace at Atobatele house, at present occupied by Barclays Bank, which stands to the northwest of the palace." Abraham also describes (p. 279) the coronation of the Ife king. He notes that "the coronation is a long ceremony as he has to attend rites at many of the 201 shrines traditionally believed to have been established by Odudua in Ife On another day occurs the *iwesu* ceremony wherein a stone is washed to ward off the evil influence of Esu On his appointment . . . a ceremony takes place at the Igbo-ade where he receives gifts in multiples of 201 on the day before the work of the new Oni begins." H.L. Ward Price (*Dark Subjects*, London, 1939) also discusses Ife coronations. I thank Frank Willett for pointing this out to me.

¹⁴ O. Ogunba, "Ceremonies," in *Sources of Yoruba History*, ed. S. O. Biobaku, Oxford, 1973, 99.

¹⁵ P. C. Lloyd, "Yoruba Myths — A Sociologist's Interpretation," *Odu*, 1, 1955, 25.

portant place of Obalufon in the Ife coronation rite, it is quite possible that a scene drawn from the life of Obalufon (similar perhaps to the Ede reenactment — see p. 389) may have been incorporated. A priest wearing the Obalufon mask might have had a central role in such a dramatization.

Obalufon II: A King Who Ruled Twice

In view of the apparently close association of the Obalufon mask with coronations, the question naturally arises as to why Obalufon II would have been so closely identified with the succession of rulers at Ife. The answer appears to lie in the figure of Obalufon II himself, who, as Ife's third ruler, played a decisive role in political events of the early city-state. Obalufon II is presented in Ife oral accounts as a powerful ruler who, after being dethroned, returned to power and brought the city's diverse factions into accord, thereby assuring the future of the newly emerging state.¹⁶ Three aspects of his reign will be explored here: his dethronement by Oranmiyan and subsequent return to power; second, his identity as a valiant warrior, protector of the local populace, and symbol of political harmony, and third, his association with the Ogboni society and the arts of casting. Obalufon's central role in the early Ife city-state is reinforced by the meaning of his name, which, as suggested above, incorporates the word "Oba" (king), indicating his important place in Ife rule. Obalufon II, like many Yoruba kings, also had several subsidiary names. One of these was Alaiyemore, meaning "owner of the world known as Oreluere," Ore or Oreluere referring to an aboriginal hunter who was a menace to the foreign ruler "Odudua."¹⁷ The significance of this last name will be seen shortly, in that Obalufon II played a central part in the dispute between the autochthonous peoples of Ife and supporters of "Odudua" over rule of the city-state. Since the oral accounts do not discuss any trauma or difficulty associated with Obalufon II's death, it can be inferred that he died peacefully of old age. Following his death, Oba-

lufon II is said to have been buried near the Wunmonije compound (Fig. 6) at the palace.¹⁸ It is here that the brass and copper heads that are stylistically similar to the Obalufon mask were also buried.

The events surrounding Ife's founding and Obalufon II's role in the early Ife city-state are described in some detail in Ife oral accounts. Present-day scholars of Yoruba religion such as Idowu (p. 23) and Awolalu (p. 27) see the city as developing its political and religious primacy as a result of the arrival of a militarily powerful group of foreigners who were part of a distant branch of the Yoruba people. Unfortunately the name of the leader of this group is not known, because in the accounts his identity is subsumed by that of his patron deity, Odudua.¹⁹ At the time of the arrival of this outsider and his party, Ife was occupied by an indigenous people who were under the leadership of a hunter named Ore (Oreluere). Not surprisingly, the original inhabitants of Ife do not appear to have supported this foreigner, "Odudua," in his attempts to gain control of the city.²⁰

This foreign ruler was, however, by all accounts a strong and politically effective leader. One of his most important decisions was to establish a series of marriage alliances with the local populace. Accordingly, both he and his party married indigenous women "of the land," in order to create a new generation of Ife residents who, in Idowu's words (p. 24), ". . . would be at home in both worlds . . . people who were without bitterness towards either of the opposing parties." In the course of these marriages, the new ruler fathered a number of children, many of whom eventually set out to found their own dynasties in other Yoruba states. On "Odudua's" death, one of his sons, Obalufon I (Og-bogbodirin), succeeded him to the throne. Obalufon I's reign appears to have been beset with problems. Unlike his father, "Odudua," he was a weak ruler. Indeed, the state that his father had recently formed seems already to have begun to disintegrate in the course of his reign.²¹ In addi-

¹⁶ Although there are potential problems with the use of oral traditions and mythological accounts when attempting to trace historical events and persons, there is considerable consistency among the accounts of events associated with Obalufon II's reign. Thus the oral traditions in this case appear to be well founded.

¹⁷ Adedeji, 325, n. 13; Willett, 123.

¹⁸ Ekpo Eyo, *Highlights of 2,000 Years of Nigerian Art*, Lagos, 1976, pl. 15. Frank Willett, however, believes (personal communication, March 7, 1985) that this grave is identified with Lafogido rather than Obalufon.

¹⁹ Idowu, 26.

²⁰ The leader "Odudua" also appears to have suppressed the worship of the local Ife deity, Obatala. Awolalu summarizes (p. 27) the situation at Ife at this time as follows:

a) that the original inhabitants of Ife knew and acknowledged Obatala as the deity that created the earth and to whom worship was due and given; b) that at a stage in the early history of Ife, some intruders who were migrating from somewhere, came into Ife, and conquered the original inhabitants who were devotees of [Obatala]; c) that the newcomers suppressed the worship of Obatala and embraced that of Oduduwa who was possibly a female divinity; d) that at the death of the conquering leader, his followers and admirers deified him and called him Odudua

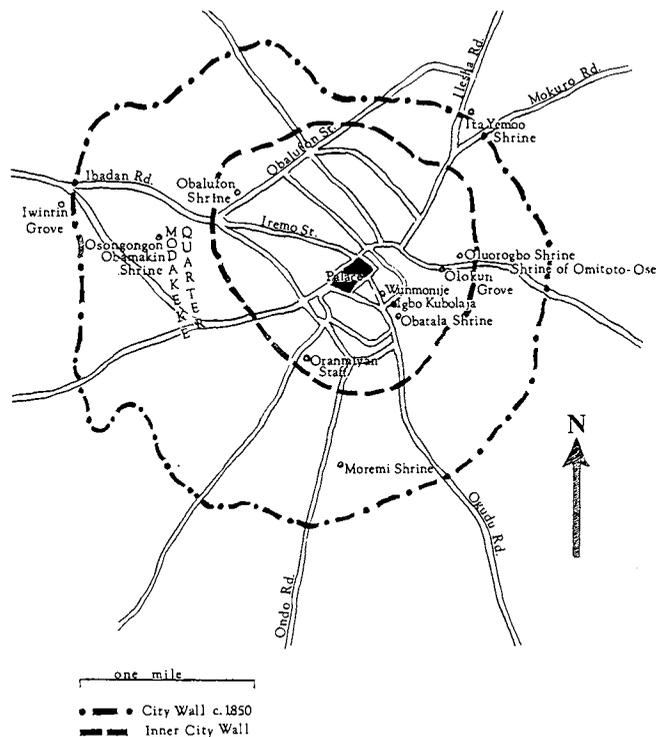
after the primordial divinity whose worship he had encouraged. Thus Odudua is portrayed as a primordial divinity and as a deified ancestor.

²¹ According to the Oni of Ife (in Verger, 141-42), Obalufon I's father, Odudua, would have preferred to leave the throne to his oldest son, the warrior Ogun. When the latter died, Odudua remarked, "I have no longer a powerful son to watch over the totality of my kingdom; Obalufon is not enough the warrior, and he will divide the lands among his diverse sons." Odudua here seems to be anticipating the breakup of the kingdom under the reign of Obalufon I. It was this division, and the question of who would rule at Ife, which, as will be seen, played a central part in the rule of Obalufon I's own son, Obalufon II. Little else is known about the reign of Obalufon I, but there is some evidence that the deity Obatala (the god of the autochthonous people — and presumably of Obalufon I's mother) may have been made a state deity around that time. This was most probably in response to the continued pressure on the new ruler by the local populace for royal support of local religious belief. Evidence for this comes from the statements of Johnson (p. 11) and Beier (p. 18) that during the reign of Obalufon I's eventual successor, Oranmiyan, an Obatala priest had a position of great importance in the palace. Presumably this priesthood had already been established by the time he came to power. As already noted, Odudua and his successors married local women, and they also may have been instrumental in bringing Obatala into the palace.

tion, during his rule there appear to have been frequent attacks against the palace by the indigenous occupants of Ife.²²

Into this insecure political situation Obalufon II was thrust when, following Obalufon I's death, he appears to have ascended the throne. So weakened was the city-state of Ife by this time, that soon after he came to power, Obalufon II was forced from the throne by a man named Oranmiyan.²³ This latter figure, a powerful warrior who is also said to have ruled at Oyo and Benin, is identified variously as Obalufon's I's brother and as his nephew.²⁴ Little is told of Obalufon II's short reign prior to his overthrow, but he appears to have already had the strong backing of the local populace, for it was he, rather than Oranmiyan, who they are said to have supported as ruler.

Obalufon II, although forced from the throne by Oranmiyan, waged a hard battle to regain control of the kingdom. In the end, his endeavors appear to have been successful, for the accounts indicate that eventually he returned to power.²⁵ In his fight against Oranmiyan to regain rule, he benefited from the support of the indigenous Ife population.²⁶ The legends portray Obalufon II at this time as an ingenious military leader. In his campaign against Oranmiyan, he is said to have dressed the local warriors in straw masks which made them appear to be spirits from another world. This disguise frightened and confused Or-



6 Map of Ife. After Willett (fig. 2) and Fabunmi (n.p.)

²² This is based on Johnson's assertion (p. 147) that the raids that plagued the reign of Obalufon I's successor, Oranmiyan, had been going on for "a series of years," thus suggesting that this situation antedated his rise to power.

²³ According to one account (Verger, 329), it was against Obalufon I that Oranmiyan fought to take over Ife rule. This account states that when Oranmiyan ". . . learned that Odudua had died and that Obalufon had inherited from his mother, and had become first king of Ife, Oranmiyan sent a message to Obalufon, menacing him with death; Obalufon fled to Ido, fifteen miles from Ife. Oranmiyan . . . stayed a certain time at Ife, then went to Oko Igboho and finally Oyo. . . ." The confusion of the two Obalufons and their respective reigns also occurs in Yoruba religious ritual associated with Obalufon (see n. 35).

²⁴ Aderemi (as in n. 2, 3); Smith (p. 19); Fabunmi (pp. 16-17). The accounts also vary as to whether or not Oranmiyan had any legitimate claim to the throne. The "official" version (Fabunmi, 16) suggests that it was Oranmiyan and not Obalufon II who had been the intended successor of Obalufon I. According to this version, at the time of the latter's death, Oranmiyan was away from court on a military campaign and could not be found. For this reason Obalufon II was crowned instead. When Oranmiyan returned, he proceeded to claim what was rightfully his.

Other evidence suggests, however, that Oranmiyan had no legitimate right, and was indeed a usurper. This evidence is that Oranmiyan is identified as the youngest son of "Odudua" (Smith, p. 34). Since Oranmiyan is said to have had many older brothers, he would not have been called on to succeed his father. Furthermore, the accounts suggest that on Odudua's death, Oranmiyan inherited none of his father's moveable properties (Johnson, 8). This view of Oranmiyan as a usurper is also suggested by Frobenius (p. 205), who notes that Oranmiyan's father was a man named Laro, and that Oranmiyan had ". . . once conquered [Ife], but was driven forth again." Ulli Beier argues in turn (*Yoruba Myths*, Cambridge, 1980, 65) that Oranmiyan may not even have been part of the royal line. He asserts that Oranmiyan is ". . . obviously representing a late immigrant with no real landrights."

²⁵ According to John Abiri (in Adedeji, 327) the defeat/return of Obalufon

II may have taken place after Oranmiyan's death during the reign of his son, Layiamisan. This, as Adedeji points out, also ". . . usefully explains the reason for Alaiyemore's [Obalufon II's] return to the throne as one of the terms of the rapprochement." This also explains Obalufon II's eventual marriage to Moremi, who in some accounts is said to have been previously married to Oranmiyan.

²⁶ Adedeji, 326. This conflict between Obalufon II and Oranmiyan over the throne parallels a conflict in religious doctrine between the followers of Obatala and Odudua, the patron gods of Obalufon and Oranmiyan respectively. This dispute, which is frequently discussed in the Yoruba literature, centers on the question of who deserves credit for creating the world. Most accounts suggest that it was Odudua who actually did so, but that Obatala (Orishanla) rightfully should have. The right was said to have been taken away from him because he was viewed as unfit (he had gotten drunk); then, while he lay sleeping (i.e., in a state of being unaware), the power was assumed by Odudua (Idowu, 23; Willett, 121-23). As Idowu points out, however, a number of accounts contradict this view, some stating not only that Obatala did not become drunk but was able to carry out the creation.

Regardless of the considerable differences between the various Yoruba myths as to which deity could claim to be the world's creator, all agree on one factor, the presence of a hunter named Ore at the time. In the most widespread account, when Odudua came down to create the Earth, he found that Ore, an aboriginal hunter, was already established there (Idowu, 23). In the major opposing legend, in which Obatala is credited with creating the world, Ore (Oreluere) is said to have come down with the first party that Obatala sent to Earth (Idowu, 20). Both versions express concern for a legitimate claim to the Ife lands (i.e., creation of) and, in turn, control over them. Though the accounts differ as to the creator (Odudua or Obatala), they both indicate that the hunter Ore (Oreluere) had rightful claim to the land. Interestingly, according to T. J. Bowen (*Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1956*, London, 1857, 267), the "great mother" of the Yoruba is worshipped under the name of Iymmodeh (Iya ommoh Oddeh) "the mother of the hunter's [i.e., Ore's] children."

anmiyan's warriors so that they were unable to fight effectively.²⁷

Eventually, however, Obalufon II's masking deception was discovered. On one of his raids, a local Ife woman named Moremi allowed herself to be taken captive by Obalufon's forces.²⁸ In her captivity, Moremi was able to learn that it was not spirits from another world but rather the original Ife inhabitants under Obalufon II's direction who were menacing the capital. When she later escaped, she went home to tell Oranmiyan of her discovery. In Obalufon II's subsequent raid, his men were met by Oranmiyan's torch-bearing warriors who soon "unmasked" and defeated the autochthonous troops.

This same Moremi helped to bring Obalufon back to the throne. She was viewed as a heroine because of her role in Obalufon's capture, and with her new status she insisted that a more permanent peace be established at Ife. With this in mind, she asked that Obalufon II, the exiled king, be returned to power. In turn, she became his wife. Moremi, as a local woman, clearly had allegiance in both camps. Accordingly, the solution that she proposed benefited both equally, and indeed, her decision to seek a more permanent peace was a critical one for the long-term stability of Ife. This move brought to the throne not only a forceful leader, but also one who had the strong support of the original Ife inhabitants.²⁹ With the return of Obalufon II to Ife, the autochthonous Ife citizens also appear to have returned to this center, and the second part of Obalufon II's reign appears to have been marked by peace and prosperity.

Many sculptures and shrines in and around Ife are iden-

tified with persons and events in this dispute. The most important are the mask of Obalufon II and a large stone "staff" associated with Oranmiyan. There are also a number of sacred areas and sculptures that refer to the family, supporters, and patron deities of these two historic figures. Many of these are described in Fabunmi's analysis of Ife shrines. One such shrine is associated with Moremi; another is identified with her son Ela. A quartz stool that is now in the British Museum is identified with another son, Alashe (Oluorogbo).³⁰ According to Willett (pl. 77), this stool was found in the Ife Oluorogbo grove. The leader of the autochthonous peoples, Ore (Oreluere), also has a shrine. At the back of this area is a stone carving representing Ore's gate man, Edena (this sculpture is now in the palace museum).

The great day in Ife history when Obalufon II was returned to the throne following his defeat is reenacted at Ife in a special yearly pageant at nearby Ede.³¹ In it, a character named Ajagemo, who simultaneously symbolizes the autochthonous peoples, the deity Obatala, and Obalufon II, dances to meet his armed opponent Olunwi who represents the newcomers, "Odudua," and Oranmiyan. In this combat, "Obalufon II" is overpowered and is taken into the palace. He is soon released, and is carried triumphantly back to the arena. This reenactment takes place during the festival held in honor of Obatala,³² the deity associated with Obalufon, and the original residents of Ife.

At the opening of this event is a ceremony dedicated to the Ogboni society.³³ This society, which is important in Yoruba art patronage today, is said to have been formed around the time of the above conflict by the followers of

²⁷ Johnson, 147; Abraham, 428; Willett, 122-23; Awolalu, 150; C. Daryll Forde, *The Yoruba-Speaking People of South-Western Nigeria*, London, 1951, 37.

²⁸ Johnson, 147; Willett, 122-23; Fabunmi, 17; Adedeji, 326-237.

²⁹ Obalufon II himself was probably the son of a local woman (see text p. 387).

³⁰ Alashe (Oluorogbo) is also said in some accounts to be Moremi's husband (R. E. Dennett, *Nigerian Studies*, London, 1910, 23; Fabunmi, 9). Other examples of Ife art of this period have been found in the Iwinrin or Igbo Grove, a sacred area closely identified with the original Ife inhabitants. In addition, both Obatala, Obalufon's patron deity, and this deity's wife, Yemo, have shrines at Ife. Odudua and several of this god's wives, Olokun and Omitoto-Ose, also have shrines. Oranmiyan's father, Ogun, and several of Oranmiyan's warriors have shrines with art of this period as well.

³¹ Willett, 123; Adedeji, 325-331.

³² The associated song/prayers reinforce the importance of Obatala and the indigenous Igbo at this festival. The following was recorded by Adedeji (p. 329).

Obatala
The Oba that we praise
The truly king
Who was born in the city of Igbo
And went to become king in the city of Iranje
The great Orisa
The divinity of Igbo
They showed him ingratitude

They tricked him with palm wine
They then deserted the divinity from heaven
When they had vanished
They then asked where else could the secret be found?

³³ Adedeji, 328. The relationship between Ogboni and Yoruba rulership is clear. According to Justine Cordwell ("Some Aesthetic Aspects of Yoruba and Benin Cultures," Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1952, 43), "The Ogboni society acts not only as advisor to the ruler and court of justice but in some areas actually controls the ruler and his decisions." Furthermore, both Obalufon and Ogboni are associated with the left hand. "Osi la njo ijo Obalufon" or "It is towards the left hand that you move when you dance in honor of Obalufon," say his worshippers (Awolalu, 107). A somewhat parallel ceremony is also performed at Ijebu-Ife, at which time Obalufe priest-chiefs are identified with persons having prior claim to the land, who were ousted wrongly from political power. These prior claimants are in control of many of the sacred aspects of political rule. The ritual, Ogunba suggests (as in n. 14, 99), ". . . gives the impression that the priest-chief has in fact been cheated of power and the yearly meeting and parting becomes something of an atonement for the irrevocable seizure, so that the indigenous gods of the land may not revolt against the new political overlord." Appropriately, during the festival it is the priest Obalufe who sacrifices to the Earth, a mark of his close association with it. Ogunba notes in this study (p. 99), in turn, that "priest-chiefs like . . . the Obalufe, bear names which sound more akin to the ownership of the land than the priest kings." Henry Drewal suggests (personal communication, April 9, 1984) that at this shrine, Obalufe is also the head of the Odudua association.

Obatala to fight political injustice. According to Idowu (p. 24):

Everything points to the fact that it was at this time that the Ogboni cult began. This was a secret cult formed, in all probability, to protect the indigenous institutions of the land from annihilation under the influence of the new regime. It must have been originally an exclusive organization limited to the original owners of the land.

The close relationship between Obalufon II and the Ogboni society is of considerable significance because Obalufon is said to have introduced brass casting at Ife.³⁴ Today this same society is one of the principal patrons of Yoruba brass casting arts. Unfortunately, the historical accounts provide few further details on this matter. Most probably, however, Obalufon II's close association with the Ogboni society was the basis of his identification with the introduction of brass casting. It seems very plausible that with the return of Obalufon II to the throne, the Ogboni society gained legitimacy and considerable power at the palace. Their arts presumably also flourished at this time. It was, it would appear, because of Obalufon's association both with brass casting and with peace and legitimate rule at Ife that the copper mask bearing his name came to be associated with coronation ceremonies at Ife. Further evidence that reinforces the identity of the Obalufon mask with coronations and themes of rulership is found in the religious rituals and beliefs that developed following Obalufon II's eventual death and deification. In the present era he has been, as we will see, viewed both as the god of good government and as the patron deity of the arts of beadwork, brass casting, and weaving. In addition, brass crowns and

masks form a significant part of the Obalufon art corpus.

Obalufon, a God with Many Identities: Deity of War, Peace, Prosperity, and the Arts of Beads, Brass, and Weaving

Obalufon II, like many great Yoruba rulers, was deified at his death. According to Idowu (p. 69) "Obalufon is one of the divinities worshipped at Ile-Ife and all over Yorubaland. But he began by being an ancestor." Unlike other Yoruba deities such as Shango, Eshu, Ogun, Odudua, and Ifa, this god has not been the object of any study, nor have the wealth and diversity of religious ritual and art associated with him been examined. Although today Obalufon's followers are found in many parts of Yorubaland, Ile-Ife still remains an important center for Obalufon worship.³⁵ Other places where worship of Obalufon (Balufon, Obalifon, Abalufon, Abalifon) is especially strong include towns in Ekiti where Obalufon II is said to have taken refuge during the period of his banishment. Still other major centers of Obalufon worship are identified with places where the children of Obalufon II eventually settled. Once established in these towns, his descendants are said to have set up shrines to their father. Thus Verger notes (p. 453) that ". . . at Ido Osun, near Osogbo, one finds a temple for Obalufon, it was said to me: 'Olufande, son of Obalufon, installed himself at Owaluse near Isesa, then at Igbokiti where he died. His successor . . . went to Igbo Oyao then came to establish himself here at Ido Osun.' "

Unlike most deities in the Yoruba pantheon, Obalufon is surrounded with considerable confusion in the literature.³⁶ This is particularly true in the discussions of his powers, habits, and associated symbols.³⁷ According to Fadipe, Obalufon is the god of warriors; to Farrow he is the god

³⁴ Willett, 29. According to Idowu (p. 208) at Ife there was also a house associated with the brass casters; this house was called Ile Asude, "the house of those who smelt brass." It is interesting that Obatala, the deity Ogboni had been formed to support, is frequently identified as the sculptor divinity (Awolalu, 21).

³⁵ Ulli Beier notes (*Yoruba Beaded Crowns*, London, 1982, 9), that while Obalufon is worshipped in a number of Yoruba towns, his worship is especially identified with Ife — just as Shango's worship is especially associated with Oyo. Although it is Obalufon II who is generally viewed as the ruler who is deified as "Obalufon," it should be noted that Obalufon the god seems in some cases simultaneously linked to both rulers bearing that name. Thus while Abraham asserts (p. 491) that it was Alaiyemore (i.e., Obalufon II) who is worshipped as Obalufon, Fabunmi indicates (p. 10) that the worship of Obalufon is identified with Ogbogdirin (Obalufon I). Although the assimilation of the two kings in Obalufon worship appears to be a natural outgrowth of their close association with each other (and the fact that they share the same name), most of the rituals, religious tenets, and works of art of the Obalufon association seem to be identified more closely with Obalufon II and the various attributes of his rule.

³⁶ In Yoruba Ifa divination, William Bascom notes (*Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, Bloomington, 1969, 49) that the eighth *odu* (*owonrin meji*) refers to Obalufon. But the ranking of this *odu* with respect to the total of sixteen *odu*, shows, as with the life of Obalufon, a conflict over legitimacy and place. According to Bas-

com, although *owonrin meji* is seen to be equal to *ofun meji*, in rank they are seen to fight each other for eighth place. A legend provided by Bascom explains this conflict.

Ofun meji was the first born of all the figures and the first to come to earth. He was the head of all the other figures and ruled them like a king, but because things went badly under his rule, they sent to Ifa in heaven to tell him how hard things were on earth. Then Ifa sent Ogbe Meji down to earth to take Ofun Meji's place as the head of the other figures. Ofun Meji fought [to retain his place] defeating all combinations until he reached Owonrin Meji. These two fought and fought and fought, until the others sent to Ifa in heaven. Ifa ruled that Ofun Meji and Owonrin Meji should be equal in rank, taking turns in priority. This is why Ofun Meji outranks Owonrin Meji when Ofun Meji is thrown first; but when Owonrin Meji is thrown first, it outranks Ofun Meji.

There are interesting parallels between this Ifa account and legends of Obalufon's life, and that of his own deity, Obatala (see n. 23).

³⁷ Interestingly, in the division of *orisa* at Ife between those who are followers of Obatala and those who are followers of Odudua, Obalufon (along with Agemon, Osonyin, Esidale, Obameri, Oranyon, Moremi, Obameri, Eleshije, Ija, and Olokun) is often identified as a supporter of Odudua (Forde, as in n. 27, 37; Abraham, 483).

of peace or, more specifically, peace of the kingdom.³⁸ J. Johnson (in Verger, 457) and Dennett offer a similar view,³⁹ signaling that Obalufon is the "god of the prosperous empire." Talbot (II, 60, 87) calls him the god of fortune, success, and greatness.⁴⁰ These associations with war, peace, and prosperity clearly conform with what we know about Obalufon II's life. He was known as a valiant, relentless, and ingenious war leader who never gave up in his fight to gain back his throne, and who never turned his back on the autochthonous peoples without whose support peace would have been impossible. It is Obalufon II's association with peaceful and prosperous rulership that is emphasized accordingly in the Obalufon offerings in Ilawe, Ekiti, where Obalufon is the tutelary deity.⁴¹

In addition to being closely tied with kings and the peace and prosperity of their reigns, the deity Obalufon is also associated with a number of Yoruba art forms. Thompson identifies Obalufon as the patron god of beadworking, today the principal material of the royal crowns and scepters.⁴² Verger (p. 452) and Abraham (p. 501) describe Obalufon (Balufon) as the patron deity of weaving and clothing. Obalufon is also generally viewed as the patron deity of the various brass-casting arts. William Fagg suggests that this association is fairly common throughout Yorubaland.⁴³

³⁸ S. S. Farrow, *Faith, Fancies, and Fetish*, London, 1926, 59. Obalufon, in his deification, is also associated with uprightness and high ethical standards. This appears to have partial basis in Obalufon's support of Obatala (the god identified with ethical purity) against the insurgent followers of Odudua (Adedeji, 336). Adedeji suggests accordingly that ". . . like Obatala, he is the embodiment of morals and ethics of the Yoruba." These qualities are especially important in the selection of Obalufon priests. Thus, Awolalu notes (p. 170), Obalufon worship is sometimes suspended if a priest of high moral character cannot be found. At Owu-Ijebu he explains, ". . . worship was suspended because it was difficult to get a man of high probity and integrity to preside at the shrine of Obalufon. The Oba explained to the people the high standards required of a presiding priest and added 'If a man has evil mind and still has the audacity of coming to officiate at the shrine of Obalufon such a man will not last the year.'"

³⁹ Also of significance is the fact that Ore (Oreluere), the original hunter whom Obalufon supported, is also associated with ethical standards and morality. According to Idowu (p. 23), Oreluere himself ". . . was the guardian of domestic morality and preserver of sound family traditions."

⁴⁰ Obalufon also has a place in agricultural ceremonies, particularly those linked to yams and to their harvest. Thus at Ido Osun ". . . yams cannot be eaten before one has celebrated the offering of first fruits to Obalufon in September" (Verger, 453). Obalufon's identity with agriculture seems to be founded at least in part on the mythical dispute between Obatala and Odudua (see n. 26). According to one myth (Idowu, 94), during the period of their dispute a great drought prevailed in which all crops failed and many people died. It was only after the conflict had been resolved, and peace had been restored, that the fields again flourished. It is also not surprising that Obalufon, as the representative of the original owners of the land, would play a central part in ceremonies associated with the productivity of the fields.

Like many benevolent Yoruba deities, Obalufon is also said to bring children to his followers (Awolalu, 150). The Yoruba literature suggests that Obalufon may have been the deity of speech as well (Talbot III, 87; Verger, 452). This is based on the identification of Obalufon as the first

The sculptural forms that today are found in the various Obalufon shrines also add to our understanding of the possible meaning and role of the earlier Ife Obalufon mask. Many of these works, like the original Obalufon mask, are *cire-perdue* castings. Some of the most important information on these arts comes from the town of Obo Ile which was settled by immigrants from Ife. The field notes of William Fagg document the close relationship between Obalufon and brass casting at this center.⁴⁴ At Obo Ile, the tradition itself was said to have originated at Ife. Fagg's field notes indicate that brass arts were so important in the nineteenth century that one third of the population may have been brass casters. In this town, furthermore, the king of the brass casters, Oba Legbede, is also the head of the Obalufon association. Additional support for the identification of Obalufon with the brass-casting arts is found in the fact that at Obo Ile, Obanifon (Obalufon) is used as the generic word for all works in this medium.⁴⁵

Several types of Obalufon arts from Obo Ile have been documented by Fagg. One tradition indicates that a brass object (perhaps a staff) was brought to Obo Ile from Ife. This object has the name of Obalufon. Interestingly, at Ife a brass staff is carried by Chief Obalara and other Obalufon priests.⁴⁶ Fagg also saw several brass masks associated with Obalufon when he was in Obo Ile area. He describes

man on Earth. According to Bowen (as in n. 26, 314) "the name of the first man was . . . Obbalufoh, and the name of his wife was Iye. They came from heaven and had many children . . . Obbalufoh means the King or Lord of Speech, because the first man was the first speaker; Iye . . . signifies life." Verger points out, however, that this identity appears to be a mistaken one since Bowen apparently confused Obalufon with Osalufon (or Obatala).

⁴¹ The relationship between Obalufon and prosperous rulership is reinforced in the religious ceremonies associated with this deity. According to Awolalu (p. 105), during the offerings to Obalufon in Ilawe, it was the representative of the king who brought the offerings of the people to the Obalufon priest. This royal representative knelt down before the priest ". . . and prayed for everybody and everything in the community."

⁴² Robert Farris Thompson (*Black Gods and Kings: Yoruba Art at U.C.L.A.*, Los Angeles, 1971, 8:1) explains accordingly that, "Men like to be different. The deity Obalufon therefore invented beads and strung them in different colors on bracelets and necklaces so that gods, and men who follow them, might stand in proud distinction. . . ." In other Yoruba areas, however, beadwork is more often associated with Olokun.

⁴³ William Fagg, personal communication, Jan. 1982.

⁴⁴ William Fagg, field notes, Feb. 8 and 18, 1957-58.

⁴⁵ Henry Drewal notes (personal communication, April 9, 1984), however, that some of these works are not necessarily associated with the worship of Obalufon.

⁴⁶ See Hambly, pl. CLIV, fig. 1, and William Fagg and Margaret Plass, *African Sculpture*, London, 1964, pl. 60. Hambly suggests (p. 400) that these staffs resemble the Benin *uxurhe* staffs published in Pitt Rivers (*Antique Works of Art from Benin*, London, 1900, pl. 11, figs. 66-72). Another figured brass staff identified with Obalufon has been observed in the southern Yoruba area by Henry Drewal (personal communication, April 9, 1984). Willett notes (personal communication, March 7, 1985) that other Ife chiefs also use brass staffs.

the masks as modern castings, oval in shape, and roughly five to six inches in height.⁴⁷ One of these masks also was called Obanifon (Obalufon).

At Isare, Fagg's information suggests that Obalufon arts have a clear royal identity. Here it is the local Alare (king/ chief) who is head of the Obalufon (Onifon) association. The emphasis both on brass masks and on ideas of rulership in these traditions suggests important secondary support for the identity of the classic Ife copper mask with Obalufon and with coronations. This parallel, in turn, offers evidence for a possible thematic continuum in Obalufon arts extending from the present era back to the time when the Ife Obalufon mask was made.

In addition to brass masks and scepters, Obalufon is also associated with brass crowns. Several of these have been documented; one is illustrated by Thompson (p. 10). This Obalufon crown (Fig. 7) is from Obo-Aiyegunle, Ekiti. It incorporates central and side faces around its base, and is surmounted by a bird. Frank Willett photographed another brass crown associated with Obalufon (Obanifon) at Obo Aiyegunle (Thompson, p. 13, personal communication from Willett). The identification of these brass crowns with Obalufon suggests another parallel with Ife Obalufon tra-

ditions, for in these, it will be recalled, crowns and coronations were all-important concerns.

Figural traditions in brass are also associated with Obalufon.⁴⁸ The only example of an Obalufon brass sculpture that has been published to date is in the Nigerian National Museum at Lagos (Fig. 8).⁴⁹ This work is one of a pair of Obalufon brass sculptures from Ijebu-Ode.⁵⁰ A distinctive attribute of this sculpture is the portrayal of fistled hands placed parallel to the ground in front of the body.⁵¹ The work appears to portray serpents issuing from the nostrils, a feature very unusual in Ogboni brass sculptures but occasionally found in ancient Ife art and in Benin brass-casting traditions.⁵²

The corpus of Obalufon-related arts is, as we have seen, quite diverse. Several features of these sculptures, however, suggest that they may have parallels with the Obalufon mask from ancient Ife. These attributes include the predominance of brass in Obalufon art in general;⁵³ second, the importance of crowns and masks among these *cire-perdue* works, and third, an emphasis on rulership and coronation themes in the rituals and religious forms of Obalufon worship. These more recent Obalufon works clearly reinforce the identification of the ancient Obalufon mask

⁴⁷ William Fagg, personal communication, April 10, 1983. Possible parallels with these masks should also be noted. Denis Williams has published two brass masks from Oyo, probably of the 19th century, which were used in conjunction with Shango, the patron deity and first ruler of Oyo ("Art in Metal," *Sources of Yoruba History*, ed. S.O. Biobaku, Oxford, 1973, 163-64). These were worn at the annual Bere festival, a ceremony that, like many of those of Obalufon, took place at the yam harvest. The name of these masks, *alakoro*, derives from the word, *akoro*, meaning chief's headgear. Thus these masks, like that of Obalufon, may be ultimately identified with crowns. One of these Oyo *alakoro* brass masks has three markings converging at the lips (Williams, 61) a motif similar to that found on a number of Ife works. Several small brass *alakora* masks also appear on a Shango drum documented by Thompson (as in n. 42, 1/18). I thank Henry Drewal for pointing this out to me.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Parrinder, in his description of the Obalufon shrine at Ibadan, notes (*Religion in an African City*, London, 1953, 30) that the door of that shrine could not be opened by the uninitiated for fear that they would be struck blind, suggesting to Parrinder that the work inside could have been of brass, a material whose shine might have been identified with such a response.

For a discussion of Ife stone and terra-cotta sculptures associated with Obalufon, see nn. 65 and 90.

⁴⁹ This Obalufon sculpture is also published by Denis Williams, both in his 1964 article (pl. IIb) and in his 1974 book (*Icon and Image: A Study of Sacred and Secular Forms of African Classical Art*, London, pl. 168). The mate of this figure, which is also in the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos, is portrayed seated on a stool whose top curves upward.

⁵⁰ Other Obalufon sculptures that Denis Williams mentions (but unfortunately does not illustrate) include *edan Obalufon*, which presumably have certain characteristics similar to *edan Ogboni*, and, perhaps, distinctive Obalufon features of their own. A pair of *edan* identified with Obalufon is in the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos. Another pair of Obalufon *edan* has been photographed by Henry Drewal (personal communication, April 9, 1984).

⁵¹ Similar fistled hands are found on the 18th-century bronze head from the city of Benin which is in a style characteristic of works from the Yoruba

town of Ijebu.

⁵² The motif of the serpent issuing from the nostril is also found on Benin "Spirit" heads and Agwe masks, on the headdress of the "Tsoede" warrior figure, and on several works from ancient Ife.

Stylistically, the published Obalufon brass figure shares closest ties with face bells from the Yoruba area around Ijebu-Ode. These bells, Thompson notes (79, n. 13), are identified with royal lineage chiefs. This similarity is reinforced by the fact that the head of the published Obalufon brass figure is cast separately from the body, so that the head, when seen alone, looks remarkably like these bells. A spike that extends from this head is inserted into the hollow brass torso, the two parts then being strapped together.

⁵³ Several wood carvings associated with Obalufon have also been documented. P.A. Talbot observed (II, 60), but does not illustrate, Obalufon wood carvings from Ijebu. Kevin Carroll publishes (*Yoruba Religious Carving*, London, 1966, pls. 126-27) several Obalufon (Obanifon, Onifon) carvings that came from Isare near Osi-Ilorin. Three of these works he estimates to have been made prior to 1866; the carver(s) unfortunately are unknown. The early date of these works suggests, among other things, that the worship of Obalufon at Isare goes back several centuries. Carroll's description of the Obalufon carvings is as follows: "Even in their decayed condition they show an unusual beauty and refinement. They stand about three feet tall and are carved from *iroko* wood and still show traces of red pigment. The carvings represent two kneeling women in ceremonial dress with elaborate hairstyles and a warrior carried on the shoulders of a priest." A single sculptural replacement for these figures was made at Isare around the turn of the century. This figure is also published by Carroll in his 1966 study (pl. 128). The work portrays a kneeling female figure whose arms rest on the shoulders of two female assistants, one carrying a covered calabash, the other a white cock. The surface of the work is dotted with white, black, ochre, and yellow pigments on a red base. Like the brass Obalufon sculpture (fig. 8), the wooden Obalufon sculptures illustrated by Carroll have elaborate multi-peaked coiffures.

A carved mask associated with Obalufon has also been documented (Awolalu, opp. p. 176). This mask, which is from the Yoruba town of Ilawe, is worn with a long straw or raffia costume. The photograph shows the chief of Ilawe praying before this image.



7 Obalufon brass crown from town of Obo-Aiyegunle, Ekiti. After photograph by R. F. Thompson (pl. 10)

with Ife rulership transition.

Obalufon and the Head of Lajuwa: A Terra-Cotta Identified with a Tale of Court Intrigue

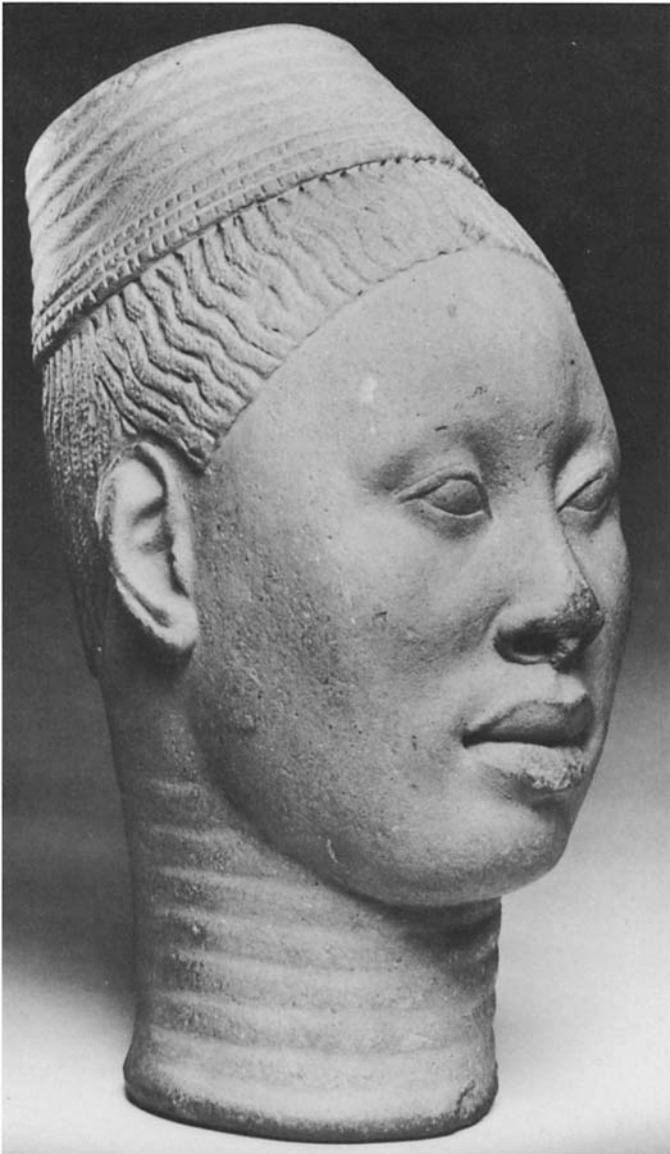
Visual and thematic evidence suggests that the Obalufon mask may be associated with the ancient Ife terra-cotta head of a court servant named "Lajuwa" (Fig. 9). The terra-cotta head that is said to represent Lajuwa was published by the late Ife king, Adesoji Aderemi, at the same time as the Obalufon mask. Although the dating of the king identified with Lajuwa is open to some dispute,⁵⁴ this terra-cotta head was clearly made around the time of both the Obalufon mask and the life-size brass and copper heads. In style, Willett suggests (p. 58) that it "is almost identical with the *Wunmonije* bronzes and could well have been made by one of the same artists." The two works also appear to be closely tied because they were kept in the same chamber at the palace. Both sculptures, Willett suggests, may have been associated with an incident in Ife history in which a servant assumed the role of a king in order to extend his rule. At Ife and other Yoruba city-states, certain court servants had the right to personify the king. We know from Johnson (p. 59) that at Oyo on a number of occasions, surrogates of the king would represent him by assuming his robes and crown. Here, according to Talbot (III, 569), it was a eunuch with the title of *Olosi* or *Osi'efa'* who took on the king's



8 Obalufon brass figure from Ijebu-Ode, 19th-20th century A.D. h. 12 in. Lagos, Nigerian National Museum (59.26.1)

identity during judicial proceedings, battles, and certain affairs of state. This *Olosi* had considerable power in the palace, for he was one of the principal advisors of the king, and had a major role at each coronation. As Johnson suggests (p. 59),

⁵⁴ Aderemi (as in n. 2, 3) identifies this king as *Aworokolokin*.



9 Ife terra-cotta head said to represent Lajuwa, 12th-15th century A.D., h. 32. 8cm. From king's palace, Ife, Nigeria, Museum of Ife Antiquities, No. 20 (79.R.10)

The *Osi'efa* or *Olosi* . . . represents the king in all occasions and in all matters civil as well as military. He sometimes acts as commander in chief in military expeditions, he is allowed to use the crown, the state umbrella, and the *kakaki* trumpet, and to have royal honors paid to him. On such occasions, he is privileged also to dispense the king's prerogatives.

Johnson further notes (p. 163), that "The *Osi-efa* is always the first as well as the last in the king's chamber. If the king

⁵⁵ At Ife, similarly (according to Abraham, 279), "the [inner chiefs] . . . conduct sacrifice for the [king] and serve as his personal advisors and his representatives in affairs outside the palace." Willett asserts (p. 57) that it is odd that Lajuwa not only would have been commemorated by a sculpture for his part in this deception, but also that he would now be considered the patron deity of the palace servants. However, if Lajuwa, as the king's deputy, was the first and last in the king's chamber, and if,

is ill, he takes his place on state occasions, putting on his robes and crown; in war he appears as the king's deputy, invested in all the paraphernalia of royalty."

Perhaps related to this practice of a court figure being asked to portray the king for certain state events is a tradition at Ife described by Idowu (p. 208) and Willett (p. 150) in which it is said that a particularly beloved king died, and one of his servants decided to hide his body and pretend that he was still alive by wearing the royal regalia himself. The hoax worked for a time, but eventually it was discovered. The new king, furious that he had been kept from the throne, ordered the servant and the palace artists to be killed. The court servant who is said to have masterminded the deception is identified as Lajuwa, the chamberlain of King Aworokolokin. Lajuwa, Willett notes (p. 57), is now identified as the patron deity of palace servants. Interestingly, Hambly, in his description of the Lajuwa head (p. 465) identifies it as "Lajuwa, the messenger of Onis," suggesting that Lajuwa's role at Ife may have been more that of a representative/advisor than a servant per se. He may have acted as a trusted aid and surrogate of the king.⁵⁵ The Obalufon mask, as Willett has noted (p. 150), could easily have been worn by someone intending to impersonate the king. It is tempting to suggest in this light that the Obalufon mask may also have been worn by designated court officials in their roles as representatives of the king. Yoruba crowns today incorporate a long fringe of beads that hide the ruler's face. Sculptural portrayals of ancient Ife crowns (see Fig. 10) show no such fringe, suggesting that a naturalistic mask might have been an important part of the representative's costume. Possibly the Obalufon mask, through its identity with royal investiture, also had a secondary role in masking those at court whose duty it was to serve as royal personifiers.

Ife's Life-Size Brass and Copper Heads: Evidence for Their Identification with Obalufon

The copper Obalufon mask is also stylistically related to the ancient Ife brass and copper heads (Figs. 3, 4) that were unearthed in the Wunmonije compound near the palace. The Obalufon mask is close enough to one of them to be a portrait of the same person. Frank Willett, who published many of these naturalistic copper and brass heads in 1967 in his work on Ife, presented a theory as well of their possible use and meaning. This theory, which had originally been suggested by William Fagg and then supported by Justine Cordwell, suggests that the heads probably played a central role in the Yoruba institution of *Ako*, a tradition in which memorial figures were constructed to represent the deceased.⁵⁶ The life-size brass and copper heads, this theory

in war, on state occasions, and when the king was ill, he wore the king's robe and crown, he also may have represented the king following his death as a means of assuring political stability during the period when the new king was being selected.

⁵⁶ Willett (pp. 26-28); William Fagg, "De l'art des Yoruba," in *L'art negre presence africaine*, x-x1, 1951, 118 (trans. and repub. in William Fagg, Jack Pemberton III, and Bryce Holcombe, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa*, New York, 1982); Cordwell (as in n. 33, 38-39).

suggests, were incorporated into memorial figures that served as surrogates for deceased Ife kings during funerary commemorations. At Owo the documented use of a naturalistic wooden Ako memorial figure was seen to offer a contemporary counterpart for this tradition.

This theory, though still held by most African art historians, has been brought into question by several scholars. Kenneth Murray in a letter to *Odu* was the first to raise doubts about this view, basing himself primarily on the stylistic congruity of the works involved.⁵⁷ He notes that these cast life-size heads appear to have been produced within a relatively short period, probably by one or two artists working within a close-knit school. Indeed, according to Murray, ". . . it might be argued that only one artist, working perhaps for only a couple of years, made the majority of the heads."

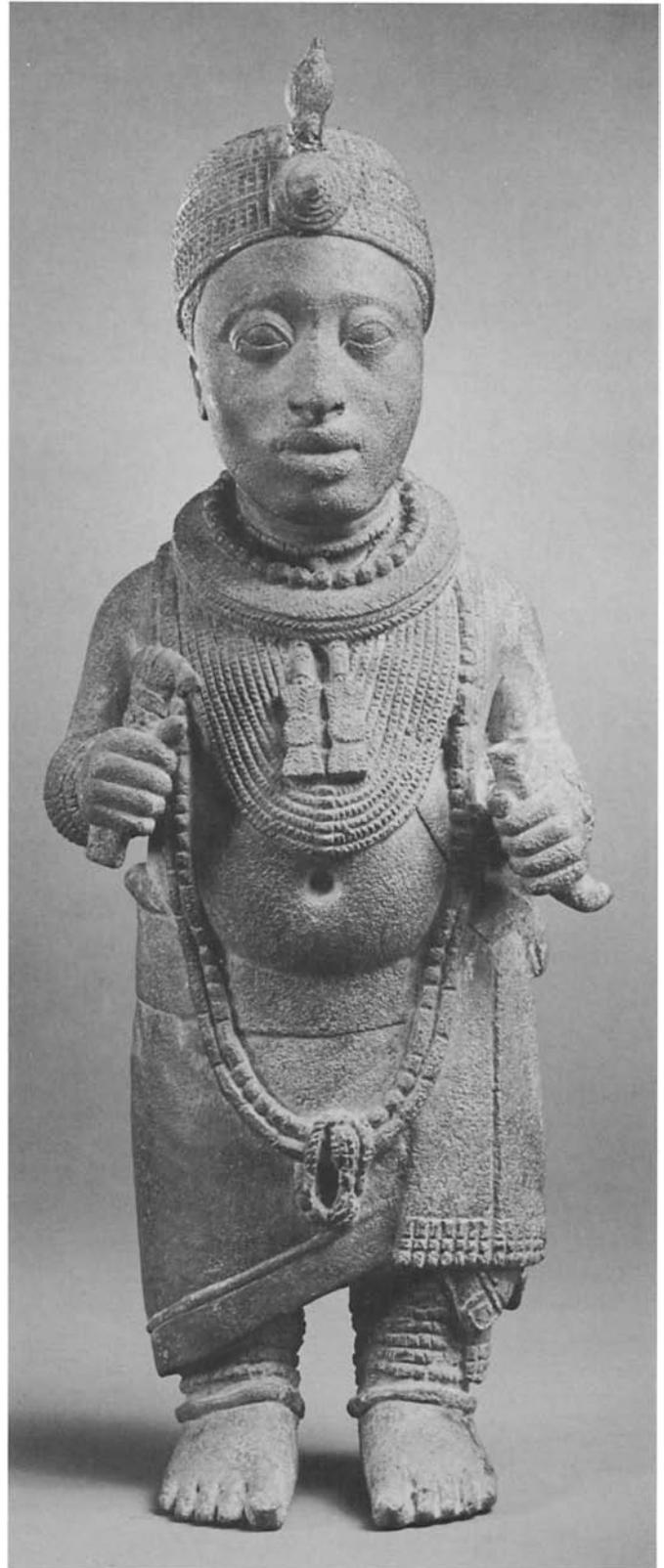
The stylistic congruity of these works would thus rule out the possibility that the fifteen heads were commissioned as funeral memorials for successive Ife kings. To the contrary, the probable average reign of twenty years which Willett suggests for the Ife kings (p. 130), or one of thirteen years now considered to be more realistic, would stretch their execution over two or three hundred years (i.e., twenty, or thirteen, years times fifteen heads). This time span is far too long, since they show remarkably few stylistic or formal elements of variance.⁵⁸ Equally problematic is the fact that the heads are all in a somewhat similar condition (apart from blows that some of them received) suggesting that, rather than having differential lengths and places of burial, they were probably all buried for about the same length of time, under the same or similar conditions.⁵⁹

Furthermore, if we look at sculptural forms elsewhere in Africa, it is clear that artistic traditions show very significant stylistic changes over comparable periods of time. At the royal city-state of Benin, for example, Dark notes that there is an enormous stylistic difference in the bronze heads made over the course of several centuries. Garrard has shown that brass "gold weights" from the kingdom of the Ashanti in Ghana during the same time span show equally striking changes. Great differences can also be seen, as Rosenwald points out, between the early and late commem-

⁵⁷ Kenneth C. Murray, "Ancient Ife (Letter to the Editor)," *Odu*, ix, 1963, 71-80.

⁵⁸ If, as Willett suggests (p. 26), the heads were buried at royal funerals, then rediscovered one at a time and brought back to the palace, it is surprising that additional life-size heads have not turned up in the various archaeological digs around Ife, for undoubtedly not all would have been brought into the palace by the time of the Wunmonije burial.

⁵⁹ Willett's interpretation of the holes around the bottom of each neck also is difficult to support. These holes, Willett suggests, were used to attach the work to a secondary, impermanent structure. The memorial figure theory serves well to explain these holes. However, it is equally possible that the holes were made in the course of manufacture for some other purpose altogether. A number of the heads from Benin (the Osun head and the Udo style heads among others) have similar holes either at the front or at the back, and there has been no suggestion that these heads were used for similar *ako* purposes.



10 Ife brass figure of a king, 12th-15th century A.D., h. 47.11cm. From the Ita Yemoo site, Ife, Nigeria, Museum of Ife Antiquities, (79.R.12)

orative figures of the Kuba kings, even though they were made over a much shorter period.⁶⁰

Willett was aware of the problems in the several hundred-year period of manufacture that his memorial theory necessitated. He suggested accordingly (p. 130) that Ife kings may have been ritually killed after a short reign of only seven years. There is, however, no evidence for the ritual killing of kings in any of the accounts of Ife history, nor in the other Yoruba city-state histories. The only evidence that Willett cites as support for his contention is an account given by Ulli Beier coming from the southern Yoruba city of Ijebu, which refers to traditions about events assumed to have taken place in Ife.

Even if we were to accept a seven-year reign for the kings of Ife, however, this would still indicate a period of manufacture of roughly 112 years, a span of time still too long for these stylistically similar works. Willett also appears to have been aware of this difficulty, for he suggests (p. 130) that the heads may have portrayed not only kings but also palace retainers — i.e., those who would have been killed to accompany the king at the time of his death. The possibility that any of these copper and brass heads represented court servants, however, is extremely slight, in view not only of the scarcity of copper and brass at Ife at this time, but also because, as Willett notes, each head appears to have been intended to wear a crown.

More recently Rowland Abiodun has raised further questions about Willett's memorial theory for these heads. Abiodun points out that ". . . if the 'effigy represents the dignitas of the office itself,' it is strange that we have not yet found a single instance where the *ako* effigy has been made specifically for [a king]. . . ." He goes on to note that

. . . if [kings] are honored as seconds of the gods . . . and if 'it is dangerous to stare at his naked face' . . . and if at his death there is even greater secrecy and mystery surrounding his person, would it not be incongruous to carve an *ako* or even to make any image of him in the characteristically naturalistic style and parade the town with it the way the known *ako* are treated?⁶¹

Murray and Abiodun have not, however, suggested any alternatives for the possible meaning and use of these heads.

⁶⁰ P.W. Dark, *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology*, Oxford, 1973, fig. 1; Timothy Garrard, *Akan Weights and the Gold Trade*, London, 1980; Jean B. Rosenwald, "Kuba King Figures," *African Arts*, vii, 3, 1974, 31.

⁶¹ Rowland O. Abiodun, review of *African Art and Leadership*, ed. Douglas Fraser and Herbert Cole, in *Odu*, N.S. x, 1974, 138. Abiodun also expressed doubt that the heads represented kings.

⁶² The identification of these heads with a deity (*orisha*) also conforms with traditions at Ife concerning these finds. Works of bronze (or other metals) as well as works of stone are said by more recent Ife residents to be gods. Accordingly, William Bascom notes ("Brass Portrait Heads from Ife-Ife, Nigeria," *Man*, xxxviii, 201, 1938, 176) that when the Wunmonije heads were first unearthed, they were said to be *orisha* (gods). Interestingly, a number of other Ife finds also suggest parallels with deities rec-

ognized by the Yoruba today. At Woye Asiri, Garlake notes (as in n. 5, 94), ground stone axes were unearthed. These, as he suggests, ". . . are today a characteristic offering at Shango shrines." Garlake reports further that at Obalara's Land (one of Ife's primary sites) iron staffs similar to those used by present-day diviners were recovered.

It is just such an alternate theory that the above discussion of the Obalufon mask may now permit. I propose in this light that these heads, like the life-size copper mask, may have been identified with Obalufon II and with his later worship as a god.⁶² There is considerable evidence to support this view. First, all the brass and copper life-size heads from Ife were found in the Wunmonije compound (Fig. 6),⁶³ a part of the capital that is said to be near the place where Obalufon II himself was buried. According to Fabunmi's map (n.p.), this is also near the place where the new kings of Ife are crowned.

It is also possible that these heads may have originally been housed on an Obalufon shrine, on the analogy that at other Yoruba centers, brass crowns, masks, and figures are frequently found on shrines identified with this deity. The only other major shrines specifically associated with brass sculptures are those of the Ogboni and Agemo societies. The placement of these heads on the Ife Obalufon shrine would also conform to the Yoruba tradition that identifies Obalufon as the patron deity of brass casting, and attributes to Obalufon II the introduction of the casting arts. Furthermore, if the heads were intended, as Willett suggests, to be seen with actual crowns, and if, as stated above, these crowns were kept on the Obalufon shrine, it follows that the heads and the crowns would have been kept together.

The association of these heads with Obalufon also emerges from the probable circumstances of their late burial in the Wunmonije compound in the palace. When the works were brought into the palace for interment, which Willett suggests (pp. 27–28) probably took place sometime before the early nineteenth century, it seems likely that this was done with the intention of protecting them from further attack. With this in mind, the place selected for their burial undoubtedly would have been chosen with considerable care. Assuming this to be the case, it would follow that the heads would be buried in a palace area closely associated with the patron deity in whose shrine they had originally been found. Since the heads were buried near the assumed grave of Obalufon II, it seems likely that originally they had also been associated with this ruler.⁶⁴

The placement and history of the Obalufon shrine in Ife offers still additional support for the identification of the

⁶³ The Wunmonije compound is situated on Lafogido Street about one hundred yards behind the palace. According to Bascom (as in n. 62, 176) the heads discovered in 1938 were found in two groups about ten feet apart at a depth of no more than two feet. In 1939, four more bronze heads and the upper part of a male figure were found at this same site.

⁶⁴ It is also possible, however, that when the heads were brought into the palace for protection, their place of burial became known as Obalufon's "burial" because the works placed here had been brought from his shrine. See also n. 18.

heads with Obalufon. This shrine⁶⁵ is situated on Obalufon Street in the northwestern part of the city, close to one of the principal city gates, the one that leads to Ibadan.⁶⁶ The finding of a life-size terra-cotta mask near this shrine suggests, as already remarked, the possibility that this area was also the site of the Obalufon shrine during the earlier Ife period. The oldest published reference to this Ife shrine is by Frobenius (pp. 294-96). He notes that the Obalufon shrine was unlike other Ife shrines, in that it was a full scale building constructed in a cleared area (rather than a grove).⁶⁷ Frobenius' description of this unique structure suggests that at some point during the late period the original Obalufon shrine was destroyed and then rebuilt. The destruction would have been most likely during one of the several sieges of Ife by the residents of the Modakeke⁶⁸ quarter of Ife, which was established in the western part of the city by Ibadan and Oyo migrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During at least one of these attacks, the residents of Ife abandoned the city.⁶⁹ Interestingly, several of the brass and copper Ife heads show damage that could have occurred at this time. The most probable occasion for the transfer of the heads into the palace for safekeeping would be after such an attack. In

view of the location of the Obalufon shrine near both Modakeke and the Ibadan gate, it seems plausible that there is a connection between the damage done to the heads, the destruction of the Obalufon shrine, and the later building of a more permanent structure on this site. Even though the proximity of this shrine to Modakeke and the Ibadan gate would appear to be the primary reason for singling out this shrine for destruction, it is also quite possible that the attack had been intentionally aimed at Obalufon because he was known to have been the opponent of Oranmiyan (Oyo's founder) and was, by the same token, the deity most closely associated with Ife rulership.

It is also of some significance that the area where the Obalufon shrine is situated has been associated with the excavation of many of the city's finest works of art. Modakeke (whence many of Frobenius' finds came), Iwinrin Grove, Obalara Land, and Osongongon Obamakin are among the many sites in this part of the city where works of the classic period have been unearthed. Ita Yemoo, the other major site with ancient sculptures, is found near the opposite end of Obalufon Street, along the road that leads to Ilesha. The proximity of the Obalufon shrine to Modakeke, Obalara Land, and the Iwinrin Grove sites, in par-

⁶⁵ William Fagg has informed me (personal communication, April 15, 1983) that the site of Osongongon Obamakin, which lies in northwestern Ife, is also associated with Obalufon. In the list of Ife kings reconstructed by John Abiri (in Adedeji, 324, n. 8), Osongongon Obamakin (also known as Nimosoye) is identified as an Obatala worshipper who was able to wrest Ife control from "Odudua" for a time during his reign. Thus he, like Obalufon, is closely associated with legitimate rule and autochthonous rights. In the Ife Osongongon Obamakin shrine excavated by Fagg in 1953, a head was found that was identified by the contemporary inhabitants of Ife as that of Obalufon. A number of other sculptures from this site represent persons suffering from various deforming diseases. When Fagg excavated the shrine, he observed that it was still being used by Ife residents as a place where diseases such as smallpox were being treated. In more recent Yoruba traditions, persons suffering from deforming diseases are also said to be sacred to Obatala (the deity of both Obalufon and Osongongon Obamakin) (Johnson, 27; Awolalu, 21). According to Johnson (p. 165) persons with disfiguring illnesses — hunchbacks, albinos, lepers, prognathi, dwarfs, cripples, and the like — often served as priests and priestesses of Obatala. Interestingly, Ore, the "original hunter" who presumably also worshipped Obatala, is described in oral traditions as a skillful doctor who cured the daughter of "Odudua" (Idowu, 23).

The only other description of an Obalufon shrine found in the literature is that which Parrinder provides for the shrine at Ibadan. This temple, he explains (as in n. 48, 30), is small, and appears to have been used only infrequently. Its door is kept shut, and to reinforce this idea, two wooden figures of Eshu (the Yoruba trickster god) are secured in the wall beside it to help protect the building from entry.

⁶⁶ This shrine would appear to lie just inside the older of the two wall ramparts that once enclosed the city. Though the date of the earlier wall has not yet been established, the more recent wall, which includes a larger area than the other, is said to have been built by the Ife king Abeweila sometime between 1837 and the time of his death (William Fagg and Frank Willett, "Ancient Ife: An Ethnographic Survey," *Odu*, viii, 1960, 21).

⁶⁷ Hambly, who visited the Obalufon shrine in Ife in 1929-30, provides (p. 465) a different description of the building; he notes that it was a small hut. J. Bertho and R. Mauny describe ("Archaeologie du pays Yoruba et du Bas-Niger," *Notes Africaines*, lvi, 1952, 104) the Obalufon shrine in their later visit as consisting of a narrow dark room situated in a house in the northwestern part of the city. The above descriptions of the Ife Obalufon shrine indicate that it changed considerably over the

course of the last century. The mosque-like Obalufon structure visited on this site by Frobenius in 1910 was, it would seem, first replaced with a small shrine (a structure more characteristic of Yoruba religious architecture); then (between 1929 and 1952) this in turn was replaced by a specially designated chamber within a house. Frank Willett believes (personal communication, March 7, 1985), however, that this shrine was not rebuilt.

⁶⁸ Johnson suggests (p. 231-3) that Modakeke, an Ibadan and Oyo refugee settlement at Ife, had, by 1884, a population of 50,000-60,000 inhabitants. Palau-Marti presents (p. 19) a good deal of background information on this settlement. During the 19th century, she notes, Peul (Fulani) mounted warriors conquered much of the northern Yoruba area, destroying several towns including old Oyo. During this time, thousands of Yoruba refugees from the north moved into the more heavily forested Yoruba communities farther south. A large number of these refugees settled at Ife, but they were not well received. Indeed, they were often required to perform menial tasks such as cutting wood and carrying water for the other Ife residents. Tension between the original Ife citizens and the newcomers was considerable, and remained so even after the Ife king, Adegunle, created Modakeke as a separate refugee settlement.

During this period, Palau-Marti notes (p. 19), Peul warriors also attacked a number of Ife settlements in the area. However, the Peul were never able to penetrate the capital itself.

⁶⁹ Several historical traditions at Ife support the idea that the Modakeke residents were able to wrest control of the capital from the traditional Ife residents several times, forcing the Ife citizens to abandon the city (Smith, 153-54, 180; Palau-Marti, 19; Willett, 102). One abandonment is believed to have taken place between 1850 and 1854, and seems to have been widespread since the Modakeke supporters, once in power, are said to have retaliated for past wrongs (see n. 68) by selling local citizens into slavery, and bringing Ife women into their own settlements as wives. Modakeke's control over Ife was finally ended, according to Palau-Marti (p. 19), when the king of Ibadan decided to help restore Ife to its former position as first city, and asked that the Ife women and their children be returned to the capital. Tensions at Ife still appear to have remained high, however, and Ife's long-held desire to remove the Modakeke residents from the environs, once and for all, was of such importance to King Adelekan, the ruler in 1896, that he gave three Ife works of art to the British colonial governor (see n. 2) to assure that the Modakeke residents would be resettled elsewhere.

ticular, is of considerable interest since, according to Fabunmi (p. 22), the Iwinrin Grove is the original land of the autochthonous peoples of Ife. Thus the location of the Obalufon shrine in this part of the city reinforces the identity of Obalufon with these peoples. The association of this area with Ife's finest works of art gives further support for the thesis that the brass and copper heads may originally have come from this part of the city.

Still another factor to be considered in the identification of the life-size Ife heads with Obalufon is the unusual quantity of heads constituting this group. It is probably no coincidence that, including the Obalufon mask, there are sixteen⁷⁰ of them. Sixteen is an extremely important number for the Yoruba, and is identified, among other things, with the original number of Yoruba "crowns," that is, sacred Yoruba city-states.⁷¹

The identification of these heads, symbolically at least, with the founders of the sixteen Yoruba royal city-states might in turn account for their stress on naturalism.⁷² The possible association between the heads and the Yoruba city-states owing allegiance to Ife is further supported by a tradition that the right to wear the crown in the various Yoruba centers came from Ife.⁷³ Each Yoruba king was, as Smith points out (p. 109), the wearer of a crown bestowed on his ancestor from Ife, and his town was accordingly defined as *ile alade*, "crowned town" or capital. In Oyo and Ekiti the custom that the state sword and other materials were sent to the new king from Ife offers support for this thesis.⁷⁴ The arrival of these Ife materials is, according to Akinjogbin (in Smith, 200, n.4), "The most important ceremony at the coronation of any Alafin." A similar tradition was documented by Joao de Barros⁷⁵ at the court of Benin in the sixteenth century. He writes that,

In accordance with a very ancient custom, the King of Beny, on ascending the throne, sends ambassadors to the Ogane . . . with rich gifts to announce that by the decease of his predecessor he has succeeded to the Kingdom of Beny, and to request confirmation. To signify his ascent, the Prince Ogane sends the King a staff and a head-piece of shining brass, fashioned like a spanish helmet, in place of a crown and sceptre.

According to Bradbury, the term Ogane in the above description is a reference to the king of Ife.⁷⁶ Related to this tradition is another cited by Susan Vogel, in which rings portraying scenes of rulers and sacrifice may have been sent to Ife from the various Yoruba city-states after a king died ". . . to signal the legitimate transfer of rule."⁷⁷

What these various traditions suggest is that legitimization ceremonies of some form were carried out at Ife when new rulers of the associated city-states came to power.⁷⁸ What the roles of these heads could have been in Ife legitimating ceremonies is impossible to determine, but perhaps they, like the Obalufon mask "head," were intended to serve in some way as sacred crown supports on these occasions. Like the crowns, which, as Pemberton suggests, were viewed as gods (*orisha*), these heads may have represented the deified founders of the city-states, symbolizing the sanctity of the kingship itself.⁷⁹ Appropriately, these heads appear to have been in use long after the time of their manufacture. Willett notes (p. 28) that a thread of later date was found on one of them; a trade bead was attached to another. If the heads had indeed been associated with legitimating ceremonies at Ife for successive Yoruba kings, it is not surprising that a late thread would have been present on one of them.⁸⁰

⁷⁰ Willett notes (p. 20) that "Of these . . . bronzes, no less than sixteen are life-size. . . ." He suggests (in Ekpo Eyo, *Two Thousand Years: Nigerian Art*, Lagos, 1977, 116) that Ife sculptures in terra-cotta and stone (which are far more numerous than those in bronze and brass) were being made earlier and for a longer time than these *cire-perdue* castings.

⁷¹ William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, New York, 1969, p. 11. Today there are more kings who are associated with legitimate crowns. Originally, however, it is said that there were either sixteen or first seven and then sixteen crowns.

⁷² The naturalism of these heads is further emphasized by the fact that several of them have traces of black paint on the pupils, white on the eyes, and red around the neck (Eyo and Willett, 95). One of the heads also bears red and black lines encircling the eyes, suggesting perhaps, facial painting applied in the context of ceremonies.

⁷³ The Obalufon coronation context that I am proposing does not necessarily rule out the possibility that the heads may also have been associated in some way with funerals, for indeed coronations, in principle, only take place when the previous king has died or has left the throne. If there was a funerary component in the use of the heads, however, it must have been subsidiary to the main purpose for which the heads had originally been cast, for the evidence does not support the possibility that the heads were individually cast in conjunction with successive kings' deaths. They appear instead to have been commissioned as a group. It is highly unlikely that such a large grouping would have been commissioned in anticipation of the deaths of future Ife kings.

⁷⁴ Johnson, 10, 402; Williams, 152, n. 18.

⁷⁵ In Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology*,

London, 1960, 96.

⁷⁶ R.E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom, (Ethnographic Survey of Africa, xiii)*, London, 1957, 20. Although A.F.C. Ryder rejects this identity ("A Reconsideration of the Ife-Benin Relationship," *Journal of African History*, vi, 1, 1965) based on the grounds of a misstatement of the direction of Ife from Benin, there was clearly early contact between the two centers, for an Ife-style casting of a king in the robes of state was found at Benin.

⁷⁷ Susan Vogel, "Rapacious Birds and Severed Heads: Early Bronze Rings from Nigeria," *Art Institute of Chicago Centennial Lectures (Museum Studies, x)*, Chicago, 1983, 350.

⁷⁸ The Yoruba scholar Akinjogbin compares (in Smith, 108) the relationship of the king of Ife to the other Yoruba kings to that of a family, *ebi*, which has a senior leader. More important, he notes that the Ife king's control over the other kingdoms was defined primarily through his role in the consecration of these rulers.

⁷⁹ Pemberton (as in n. 12, p. 58). Robert Thompson explains (p. 10) that the crown itself, ". . . serves, in part, as a supernatural check against the conduct of the king," for it is believed to contain powerful substances that are used to this effect. It is interesting in this light that the king of Ijebu-Ife told Thompson (p. 15) that "the face upon the inherited crown stood for the first king of the settlement." Beier (as in n. 35, p. 24) offers additional insight on this face, noting that in some accounts this image is identified as the face of Obalufon.

⁸⁰ The bead was found on head number nine and was identified by W. G. van der Sleen (in Willett, 205-06) as an Indian trade-wind bead. On head number four, a nail was found on the left temple which may have been used to affix the crown (Willett, 28).

Other Ife Works Identified with Obalufon and Ife Royal Succession Ceremonies

The identification of the life-size brass and copper heads with coronation and rulership succession is reinforced by the importance of coronation themes in the larger corpus of brass and copper *cire-perdue* sculptures at Ife. This corpus, it is important to note, is small and select. In all, Eyo and Willett suggest (p. 30) that only about thirty *cire-perdue* castings have been found in the various Ife sites. Like the Obalufon mask and the fifteen life-size brass and copper heads, many of the remaining sixteen or so castings appear to be identified with themes of coronation. Among the works that involve this theme is a small brass figure from the site of Ita Yemoo (Fig. 10).⁸¹ This sculpture was identified by the late king of Ife as depicting the king at the time of his coronation.⁸² According to the king, the ruler in this sculpture is shown holding the two principal emblems of rulership. The king observed that in the figure's left hand he carries a horn,⁸³ and in his right a bead-embroidered cloth wrapped around a wooden core. This latter item, the king explained, "is carried from the accession of the . . . [king] to his coronation."⁸⁴ Another well-known Ife sculpture portraying a coronation scene is the half-figure of a king that was buried with the *cire-perdue* heads in Ife's Wunmonije compound. This figure holds the same emblem of coronation (the horn) in one hand; the other hand is missing. Similar iconography is found in the royal couple (probably a king and his queen) from the Ita Yemoo site. The male of this couple, Willett notes, holds a horn in his left hand and an axe-like object in his right.⁸⁵ The female holds an object resembling a horn.

Many of the remaining dozen or so brass and copper objects from Ife also seem to incorporate coronation imagery. These sculptures include several small heads wearing crowns, and a number of scepters and maces.⁸⁶ In addition, there is a tiny figure of a king (Fig. 11) wearing a crown and carrying a scepter (similar to those mentioned above) shown curled around a throne-shaped vessel.⁸⁷ A similar

throne of quartz, it will be recalled, is associated with Morem's son and the autochthonous Ife people. This throne is perhaps also related to the stone "throne of Obalufon" that the new king displayed during installation ceremonies. The *cire-perdue* "enthroned" figure thus appears to be closely identified both with royal installation and with Obalufon. In view of the small quantity of Ife *cire-perdue* works, it is not surprising that many of these sculptures display themes of royalty, in particular images identified with the installation of rulers. As a group, they also may have been linked in some way to Obalufon, for he was the patron deity not only of coronations but also of the various brass- and copper-castings arts.

The final evidence that supports the identification of the life-size brass and copper heads both with Obalufon and with the theme of coronation comes from a vessel unearthed at the Ife site of Obalara Land. This terra-cotta vessel, which was published by Eyo and Willett (Fig. 30), may portray an Obalufon shrine with the associated rituals of coronation. It shows a naturalistic Ife head and two stylized conical heads placed inside a small shrine. The naturalistic head resembles the life-size *cire-perdue* castings; one of the stylized conical heads bears a resemblance to a modern stone sculpture of a figure wearing a crown. This sculpture (Fig. 12) has an oversize conical crown, barely demarcated features, and no torso.⁸⁸ Headdresses of a similar conical shape have been worn in recent times by Ife chief priests.⁸⁹

The small staff-like forms on this vessel appear, in turn, to be associated with the Ogboni society, which, as suggested above, may have been introduced at the time of Obalufon's reign, and probably had a part in Ife ceremonies of coronation. Two somewhat related vessels were found in the Osongongon Obamakini and Koiwo Layout shrines at Ife. These vessels, like the Obalara Land vessel, incorporate horns, themes of sacrifice, Ogboni staffs, and in one case, a head with serpents issuing from the nostrils — a motif also found on the more recent Obalufon sculpture (Fig. 8).⁹⁰ Like the Obalufon mask, the life-size brass and copper

⁸¹ The Ita Yemoo site is also associated ultimately with Obatala, for Yemo is said to have been his wife.

⁸² In Frank Willett, "Bronze Figures from Ita Yemoo, Ife, Nigeria," *Man*, LIX, 1959, 189.

⁸³ Eyo and Willett describe (p. 97) the horn as one filled with magical substances.

⁸⁴ According to the king of Ife (in Willett, 23), the bead-embroidered cloth is carried by the future king only from his accession to his coronation. At this time it is replaced by a beaded cowtail flywhisk (*irukere*, "ram's beard"), a prestige item more generally carried by the king. Eyo and Willett refer (p. 97) to this bead-embroidered cloth as a royal scepter.

⁸⁵ Willett (as in n. 82, 190).

⁸⁶ As Willett points out (p. 50), a number of the staff and mace heads appear to portray victims of human sacrifice. Such sacrifices were sometimes associated with Obalufon and indeed according to Farrow (as in n. 38, 99) the last Yoruba public sacrifice of this type took place in Abeokuta in 1891 in an Obalufon ceremony.

⁸⁷ Although Willett identifies this figure as a queen, based, it would appear, on the figure's multi-tiered crown, the work appears to portray a king. As suggested in n. 6, multi-tiered crowns seem to have been worn

by both men and women at Ife. Furthermore, this figure has no apparent breasts and wears jewelry over its chest similar to that of the standing Ife king figures. The identity of this figure as a king is further reinforced by the fact that it is shown holding a (royal ?) scepter.

⁸⁸ Frank Willett identifies (personal communication, March 7, 1985) this figure as coming from an Odudua grove near Igbodio.

⁸⁹ Hambly, 467; Fagg and Plass, as in n. 46, 60. Peter Garlake who excavated at Obalara Land also suggests that the flanking heads on the Obalara Land vessel may be crowns ("Excavations at Obalara Land: An Interim Report," *West African Journal of Archaeology*, 1974; 4: 14).

⁹⁰ There are other descriptions of Obalufon sculptures at Ife. Hambly describes one such sculpture (p. 465) as ". . . a clay statue about 50 cm. in height. . . ." It is possible that Hambly mistook the stone material of this sculpture for clay, for as Bertho and Mauny state in their later description of the work (as in n. 67, p. 104), the room was very dark, and the figure wore a cloth covering. The palace Obalufon shrine contained a terra-cotta ram's head. In some respects, this ram's head (which is published by both Frobenius [p. 315] and Willett [pl. 43]) is similar to animal head forms which have been found in other excavations at Ife. These heads probably symbolize animal offerings (Fagg and Willett, as in n. 66, 26).



11 Ife brass figure of a king holding a scepter, curled around a throne-shaped vessel, 12th-15th century A.D., h. 12.4cm. From the Ita Yemoo site, Ife, Nigeria. National Museum, Lagos (L92.58)



12 Modern stone sculpture with crown from the Odudua grove near Igbodio. After photograph by Frank Willett

heads, and many of the other *cire-perdue* castings from Ife, these vessels appear to share an identity with and concern for legitimate rulership and rituals of succession.

Conclusions: The Obalufon Mask in Ife Art and History

The key to understanding the symbolism and function of the Obalufon mask, it was suggested here, is found in the figure of Obalufon II himself, first as a historic ruler of Ife, and, following his death, as a deity of the Yoruba people. The overthrow of Obalufon II soon after he came to power, and his long battle to regain the throne, came to symbolize the problem of the legitimacy of rulership at Ife. Obalufon II's identification with the early Ogboni society, which was founded to guard the rights of the autochthonous peoples, was probably also the basis of his association with Ife brass casting — the technique not only of the Obalufon mask but also of the various related heads, figures, and scepters. The fact that Obalufon worship is associated with ideals of good government and prosperity also suggests the importance of this Ife king as a symbol of Yoruba rulership.

What the Obalufon mask and related arts show addi-

tionally is a concern for and identification with autochthonous participation in local rulership. The process of Yoruba state formation that was associated with the early leader "Odudua" and his numerous sons appears to have presented great problems in this regard. Not only were they foreigners, but they attempted to establish their own deities and to wrest the rulership of these lands from the local peoples. Understandably, the problems that the early rulers faced with the local populace were considerable. Significantly, it appears that Obalufon II came to symbolize the mediation of the two seemingly antithetical concerns. On the one hand he himself was a ruler and descendant of the Ife city-state founder "Odudua"; on the other hand, he represented and supported the legitimate rights of the local Ife population in the state rulership structure. For this reason, Obalufon II, like the arts associated with him, was identified with the legitimacy of the very kingship on which Yoruba political stability was based.

The mask that portrays this ruler shows him as a robust and handsome man of middle age. We know too little about Obalufon II to attempt to read aspects of the personality of this ruler in the work, but it is tempting to suggest that

some of Obalufon II's energy, calm resolve, and inner strength have been captured by the artist. What is also remarkable in the portrait is the degree of naturalism that is achieved. The precision with which key anatomical features are depicted and the careful rendering not only of flesh texture but also of skeletal and muscular structure are found nowhere else in African art. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the possible sources of naturalism at Ife; suffice it to say that it is very unusual. What role Obalufon II might have had in determining the mode of the image portrayed is unknown. However, at Ife there seems to have been an early interest in preserving the memory of important figures of the city-state both in oral history and in art. That these portrayals reached new levels of artistic and technological achievement suggests how conducive the early Ife social and cultural climate was to artistic innovation and excellence. Obalufon II, who later became identified as the patron deity of brass casting, beadworking, and weaving, undoubtedly had a significant role in fostering artistic expression during this formative period.

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Brocade Patterns in the Shop of the Master of Frankfurt: An Accessory to Stylistic Analysis

Stephen H. Goddard

Defining the extent of anonymous early sixteenth-century Flemish painters' workshops poses difficult problems that often cannot be adequately resolved by traditional stylistic analysis. The identification of the repertory of composi-

tions, figures, and motifs specific to a given workshop helps clarify conclusions reached by the necessarily subjective study of artistic style. In the present study the large workshop of the Antwerp painter known as the Master of Frank-

The rudiments of this article first appeared in chapter 5 of my doctoral dissertation. I thank my parents for providing a summer of study in Europe (1979), when the mechanical repetition of brocade patterns in the shop of the Master of Frankfurt first occurred to me, appropriately, in Frankfurt a.M. This study grew to maturity during a year of research in Belgium (1981-82) funded by the Belgian American Educational Foundation, to which I am forever grateful. Much of the research was carried out at the Centre National de Recherches 'Primitifs Flamands,' in Brussels. The author has benefitted from brief but informative conversations with

numerous specialists: G. Delmarcel, R.S. Field, N. Goetghebeur, M. Koller, E. Maeder, C. Périer-d'Ieteren, L. and M. Serck, J.-P. Sosson, J.R.J. Van Asperen de Boer, E. Vandamme, E. van de Wetering, and R. van Schoute. This study would not have been possible without the assistance of the museum personnel who took the time to measure the brocade patterns discussed here. My warmest thanks to all. A "G" followed by a number refers to the catalogue number in my catalogue of paintings by the Master of Frankfurt and his shop (Volume II of my doctoral thesis, with illustrations). All measurements are in centimeters.