Society of Young Nigerian Writer

Yoruba Fact-Finder

Compilations of Yoruba History, culture and tradition

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Ife

Ife (Yoruba: Ifè, also Ilé-Ife) is an ancient Yoruba city in south-western Nigeria. Evidence of habitation at the site has been discovered to date back to as early as 600 BCE, and according to its own customary traditions, it is the planet's oldest organized community. It is located in the present day Osun State.

Ife is about 218 kilometres (135 mi) northeast of Lagos.\[1\]

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Mythic origin of Ife, the holy city: Creation of the world

The Yoruba claim to have originated in Ife. According to their mythology, Olodumare, the Supreme God, ordered Obatala to create the earth but on his way he found palm wine, drank it and became intoxicated. Therefore the younger brother of the latter, Oduduwa, took the three items of creation from him, climbed down from the heavens on a chain and threw a handful of earth on the primordial ocean, then put a cockerel on it so that it would scatter the earth, thus creating the land on which Ile Ife would be built. Oduduwa planted a palm nut in a hole in the newly formed land and from there sprang a great tree with sixteen branches, a symbolic representation of the clans of the early Ife city-state. The usurpation of creation by Oduduwa gave rise to the ever lasting conflict between him and his elder brother Obatala, which is still re-enacted in the modern era by the cult groups of the two clans during the Itapa New Year festival. On account of his creation of the world Oduduwa became the ancestor of the first divine king of the Yoruba, while Obatala is believed to have created the first humans out of clay. The meaning of the word "ife" in Yoruba is "expansion"; "Ile-Ife" is therefore in reference to the myth of origin "The Land of Expansion". Due to this fact, the city is commonly regarded as the
cradle of not just the Yoruba culture, but all of humanity as well, especially by the followers of the Yoruba faith.

**Founding of Ife, the holy city: Immigration from the ancient Near East**

According to another origin myth of Ife, Oduduwa was the son of Lamurudu, a prince from the Near East, who migrated with his people and the cult objects from Arabia to the Central Sudan where he founded the town of Ife. Oduduwa and his followers left their homeland perhaps as early as the end of the seventh century BCE. Perhaps the Yoruba were therefore the product of intermarriage between a group of invaders from the ancient Near East and the indigenous inhabitants of the forest. There is also a relation between the Ife kingdom and the even more ancient Nok culture of the savanna, recognised by similarities in the artistic and technological techniques of the two.

**Origin of the regional states: Dispersal from the holy city, Ife**

Oduduwa had sons, daughters and a grandson who went on to found their own kingdoms and empires, namely Ila Orangun, Owu, Ketu, Sabe, Popo, Oyo and Benin. Oranmiyan, Oduduwa's last born, was one of his father's principal ministers and overseer of the nascent Edo empire after Oduduwa granted the plea of the Edo people for his governance. When Oranmiyan decided to go back to Ile Ife after a period of service in Benin, he left behind a child named Eweka that he had had in the interim with an indigenous princess. The young boy went on to become the first legitimate ruler of the second Edo dynasty that has ruled what is now Benin from that day to this. Oranmiyan later went on to found the Oyo empire that stretched at its height from the western banks of the river Niger to the Eastern banks of the river Volta. It would serve as one of the most powerful of Africa's medieval states prior to its collapse in the 19th century.
Traditional setting

The King (Ooni)

The Oòni (or king) of Ife claims direct descent from Oduduwa, and is counted first among the Yoruba kings. He is traditionally considered to be the 401st deity (òrìshà), the only one that speaks. In fact, the royal dynasty of Ife traces its origin back to the founding of the city more than two thousand years ago. The present ruler is Alayeluwa Oba Okunade Sijuwade, Olubuse II, styled His Imperial Majesty by his subjects. The Ooni ascended his throne in 1980. About eight years ago it was agreed that the Ooni be the head of the Oba council and is still acknowledged as the first class Oba basically making him the king of kings amongst the Yoruba people. Owing to the formation of the Yoruba Orisha Congress in 1986, Ile-Ife and the Ooni acquired an international stature.

Cults for the deities

Ife is well known as the city of 401 or 201 deities. It is said that every day of the year the traditional worshippers celebrate a festival of one of these deities. Often the festivals extend over more than one day and they involve both priestly activities in the palace and theatrical dramatisations in the rest of the kingdom. The most spectacular festivals are those which demand the participation of the King. They include the Itapa festival for Obatala and Obameri, the Edi festival for Moremi and the Igare masqueraders, and the Olojo festival for Ogun. During the festivals and at other occasions the traditional priests offer prayers for the blessing of their own cult-group, the city of Ile Ife, the Nigerian nation and the whole world.
**Art history**

Between 700 and 900 A.D., Ife began to develop as a major artistic center. Important people were often depicted with large heads because the artists believed that the *Ase* was held in the head, the *Ase* being the inner power and energy of a person. Their rulers were also often depicted with their mouths covered so that the power of their speech would not be too great. They did not idealize individual people, but they tended rather to idealize the office of the king.

The city was a settlement of substantial size between the 9th and 12th centuries, with houses featuring potsherd pavements. Ilé-Ifè is known worldwide for its ancient and naturalistic bronze, stone and terracotta sculptures, which reached their peak of artistic expression between 1200 and 1400 A.D. After this period, production declined as political and economic power shifted to the nearby kingdom of Benin which, like the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, developed into a major empire.

Bronze and terracotta art created by this civilization are significant examples of realism in pre-colonial African art.

In his book, "The Oral Traditions in Ile-Ife," Yemi D. Prince referred to the terracotta artists of 900 A.D. as the founders of *Art Guilds*, cultural schools of philosophy, which today can be likened to many of Europe's old institutions of learning which were originally established as religious bodies. These guilds may well be some of the oldest non-Abrahamic African centres of learning to remain as viable entities in the contemporary world.

**The modern town**
Today a mid-sized city, Ife is home to both the Obafemi Awolowo University and the Natural History Museum of Nigeria. Its people are of the Yoruba ethnic group, one of the largest ethno-linguistic groupings in Africa and its Diaspora (The population of the Yoruba outside of their homeland is said to be more than the population of Yoruba in Nigeria, about 35 million). Ife has a local television station called NTA Ife, and is home to various businesses. It is also the trade center for a farming region where Yams, cassava, grain, cacao, and tobacco are grown. Cotton is also produced, and is used to weave cloth. Hotels in Ilé-Ife include Hotel Diganga Ife-Ibadan road, Mayfair Hotel, Obafemi Awolowo University Guest House etc. Ilé-Ife has a stadium with a capacity of 9,000 and a second division professional league football team.

**Exhibition**

A major exhibition entitled *Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures of West Africa*, displaying works of art found in Ife and the surrounding area, was held in the British Museum from 4 March to 4 July 2010.[9]

**References**

- Akinjogbin, I. A. (Hg.): *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980*, Lagos 1992 (The book also has chapters on the present religious situation in the town).


• Frobenius, Leo, *The Voice of Africa*, London 1913 (Frobenius stayed for nearly two months in Ife, in 1910-11).


• "Origin of the Yoruba and 'Lost Tribes of Israel'", *Anthropos*, 106, 2011, 579-595.


