

# **Preservation of the Canaanite Creation Culture in Ife<sup>1</sup>**

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For Africanists, the idea that cultures from the ancient Near East have influenced African societies in the past in such a way that their basic features are still recognizable in the present suggests stagnation and regression. Further, they associate the supposed spread of cultural patterns with wild speculations on diffusion: How can Canaan, which is often considered to be the culture of the Near East which preceeded Israel, have had any influence on Africa? They overlook the fact that the Phoenicians were none other than the Canaanites and that as a result of their expansion the Canaanite culture stretched to North Africa and to the coast of the Atlantic. In the North African hinterland it reached at least as far as the Fezzan, the most important group of oases in the Central Sahara.<sup>2</sup> Scholars of Africa pay insufficient attention to the fact that the central Sahara, similarly to the Mediterranean, with its infertile yet easily crossable plains and its often high ground water level, was more a benefit to communication than a hindrance.<sup>3</sup> Finally, they misjudge the significance of the diffusion process worldwide, which has been emphasized by world historians like McNeill<sup>4</sup>: If Europe and Asia owe essential developmental impulses to ancient near eastern influences, why should not Africa as well?

My current project, however, is not an attempt to show the integration of African peoples into ancient world history, but rather to explore the ne-

1 The following study owes its main thrust to discussions with my friend and colleague Prof. Biṓdun Adediran, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, in Bayreuth (winter semester 2001/2002). It is further based on field research carried out within the framework of a common project with Gabriele Weisser on royal festivals among the Hausa and Yoruba financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

2 Gsell 1921, II: 93-179; Ponsich 1982: 429-444; Ruprechtsberger 1997: 72.

3 Mauny 1961: 426-437 (trans-Saharan trade routes during the Middle Ages); 1978: 277-292 (routes during the Middle Ages); Lhote 1985: 45-62 (pre-Christian routes of the chariots).

4 McNeill 1991: XV-XXX, 64-69, 98-100, 412-414.

cessary social conditions in a particular African society for the long continuity of ancient world cultural practices and institutions. Perhaps then my title should end with a question mark. Assuming that there truly was a spread of cultural influences from the ancient Near East to parts of West and East Africa, as much evidence would seem to suggest, is it at all conceivable that societies in a remote part of the *oecumene*, like sub-Saharan West Africa, could preserve these cultural features for more than two thousand years?<sup>5</sup> If so, would the preservation of such an ancient cultural heritage demonstrate the vitality of the society concerned or its ossification and inflexibility?

In searching for an answer to these questions, the Hausa, given the fact that their settlement areas begin at the southern edge of the Sahara, would appear a potentially valuable case study. However, as over the centuries the influence of Islam has resulted in fundamental changes in the Hausa concept of royalty and festivals, many aspects of the cult-centred mythological tradition have been so transformed as to become unrecognizable.<sup>6</sup> It is more fruitful to concentrate on the Yoruba living further south in the tropical rain forest, where Christianity, Islam and foreign ways of life only became dominant about a century ago. Particularly in Ife, the religious center of the Yoruba, the basic characteristics of an ancient cultural pattern remain clearly identifiable.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore in Ife that it appears most rewarding to examine traditional kingship and cult life in terms of the conditions of their preservation and their actual degree of disintegration.

From a general point of view the deep rooting of the ancient cult-centered mythological pattern is the most striking observation to be made in Ife. This pattern can be found in the layout of the palace, the subdivision of its officials into factions, the composition of the council of judges and in the overall order of the clans. Other aspects of the culture of the city are now obsolete. Although the jurisdiction of the king of Ife, the *Ọ̀ni*, was limited to the city and a few surrounding villages, his religious authority was recognized by all Yoruba kingdoms and others such as

5 Lange 1999a: 109-114, 156-160; 1999b: 79-81, 138-140; 2003: 1-27; Weisser 2001: 180-181.

6 The division into two cult-mythological parties, still recognizable among the Bori spirits, can no longer be distinguished on the level of the offices of the traditional states (cf. Kühme 2003: 97-112; Lange 2003: 7).

7 Frobenius 1912: 167-351; Bascom 1919: 7-12, 29-46, 77-97; Fabunmi, 1985: 1-69, 88-97; Lange 1999b: 105-140.

Benin and Popo.<sup>8</sup> As a token of their reverence to the Oṣoni, the rulers of these kingdoms sent pages to Ife to serve in the palace.<sup>9</sup> In return, the Oṣoni sent the sword of Oṣanmiyan to coronation festivities in these other kingdoms, by which he symbolically granted the newly-crowned kings authority over life and death.<sup>10</sup>

The prominence of Ife, both among the Yoruba and some neighboring kingdoms, is traditionally based on the creation myth of the world and mankind. It may sound presumptuous that the Yoruba considered the spot where their religious capital later arose as the birthplace of the world and the cradle of humanity.<sup>11</sup> But similar claims have been made for Babylon and Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Ife, however, the idea of being the birthplace of the world is not only expressed through myths, but also through corresponding festivals and social organizations, records for neither of which exist in the aforementioned ancient cities.<sup>13</sup> This creation culture, still recognizable in many spheres of Ife, has been subject to the assaults of westernization since the beginning of the colonial era. Its last remnants will surely fall prey to the pressure of globalization in the near future.

### The King and Palace of Ife as Symbols of the Creation Religion

The Oṣoni stood at the center of the creation culture of Ife. He was a king who had little worldly power but considerable religious influence. Unlike the kings of European history, he was much less a potentate and

8 Johnson 1921: 15; Adediran 1994: 61-66.

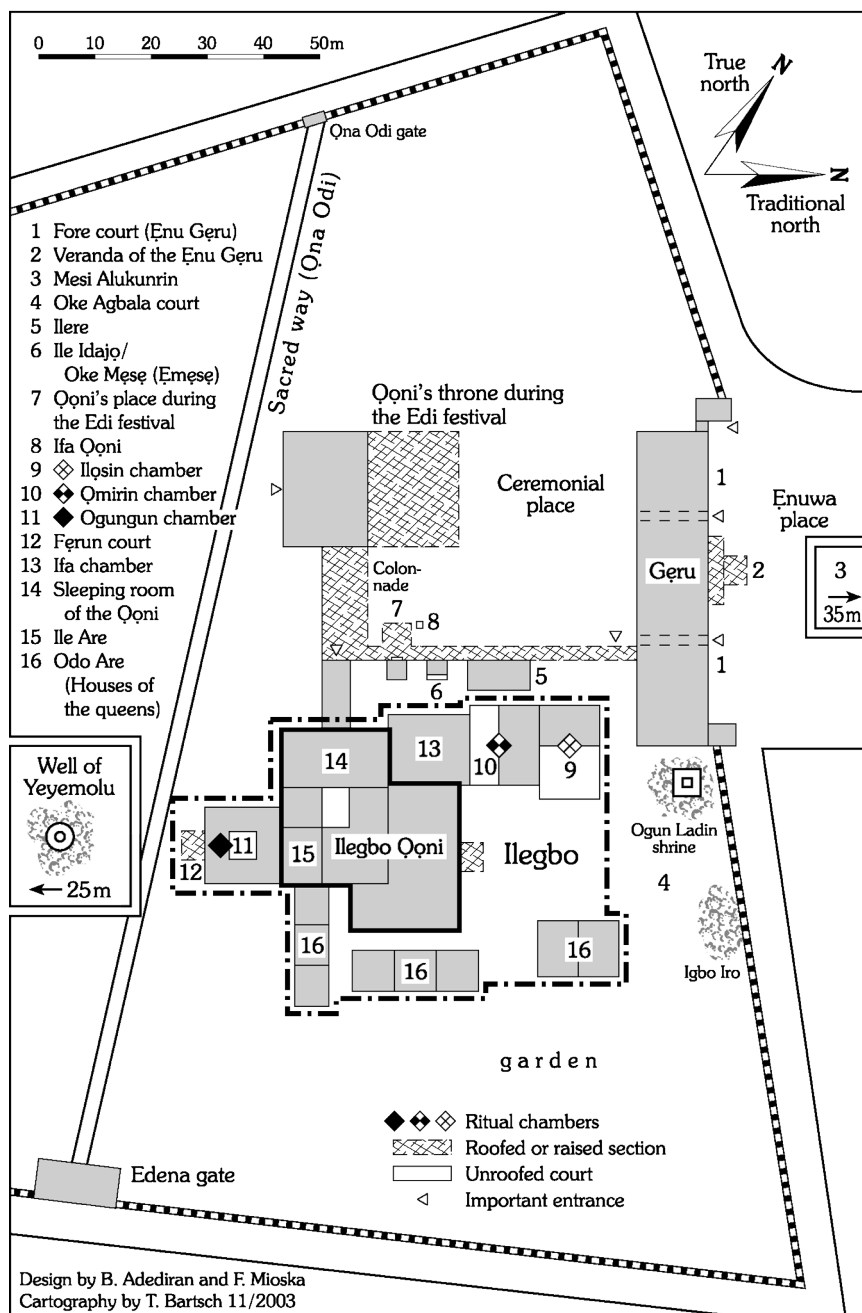
9 Fasogbon mentions palace servants of the Eṣeṣe Ilṣin, who came from Oyo, Iṣeyin and Benin (1985: 27). In Ife heads of the deceased kings of Benin were interred at the Oṣun Oba Ado (Willett 1967: 132). To the west, the Ife tradition is said to have reached to Abomey and Accra (Johnson 1921: 15-16; Bascom 1969: 11).

10 Having been brought to Ife after the death of his predecessor, the Oṣoni presented the sword to the new king at his coronation (Lokore/Oṣameri FN 02: 162). Johnson reports that the new king of Oyo was given the sword of justice from Ife in the Oṣanmiyan shrine in Oyo (Johnson 1921: 45).

11 Johnson 1921: 15 (creation of whites and blacks); Frobenius 1912: 285-288 (three creation myths), 309 (the place of origin of all humanity, including the Europeans).

12 Cf. Meissner 1925: 102-250 (*Enuma elisch*, IV, 137-138; VI, 33); Tully 2002: 1-252; Ps 87, s.

13 For their part, the ancient Egyptians considered the creation incomplete, and therefore believed that they could only guarantee the continued existence of the world through the painstaking observance of rituals and through the careful passing down of knowledge concerning the cosmic connections (Assmann 1984: 685-686).



III. 1. The pre-colonial palace of Ife: The Ilebo and the three ritual chambers.



much more a symbolic figure. Magnified by rituals and myths, he stood closer to the gods than to men. What distinguished him most from a secular king was his seclusion in the palace. His subjects were convinced that he neither ate nor drank, that he was married to a goddess, and that he took part in the meetings of the gods.<sup>14</sup> As regards the king and his residence, these concepts were expressed in the form of three ritual chambers and an oracle's chamber which surrounded his residential quarters, the inner *Ilegbo*. The three ritual chambers were dedicated to the three high gods of Ife: the primal god *Oduduwa*, the creator god *Ọbatala*, and the mediator god *Ọramfe*, whereas the fourth chamber was intended for the *Ifa* oracle.<sup>15</sup>

The arrangement of the king's residence formed the spatial basis for the organization of the palace and the state: Each of the eight high palace officials (*Mọdewa*) was assigned to one of the three ritual chambers, their hierarchy depending on the mythological significance of the respective gods they served. Each of the many palace servants was likewise affiliated with a specific ritual chamber. This arrangement of the official functions on a mythological basis was not, however, restricted to the palace officials and servants; it also applied to the members of the council of judges (*Ogboni*) and to those of the order of city guards (*Ogungbe*). The members of the three groups were mainly recruited from the progeny of the palace officials. After an official had died, three of his sons were admitted into the same ritual faction, the first into the council of judges (*Mọle/Ogboni*), the second into the order of the city guards (*Ogungbe*), and the third into the group of palace servants (*Emese*). Since the insertion into a faction was determined by birth, the transmission of the ritual and administrative functions within the palace and in the main state orders was hereditary.<sup>16</sup> Apart from their state positions, the members of the three factions continued to belong to clan-like communities, each occupying a large compound not far from the palace.<sup>17</sup>

14 Bascom 1969: 30 (eating and drinking); Fabunmi 1969: 26 (the marriage of the king to the goddess *Yeyemolu*, who had been transformed into a well); FN 02, 207, 230 (*Olu/Obatala*, *Lokore*: meetings of the gods).

15 Adediran 1976: 12-18. See also Bascom 1969: 29-38.

16 Risa/*Emese* FN 02: 89, 112. Bascom lists the order as *Ogungbe*, *Emese*, *Ogboni/Mọle* (1969: 35).

17 The clear connection between creation myths, palace organization and the clan system has to date not been properly perceived (Bascom 1969: 33-38; Fabunmi 1985: 78-87).



Ill. 2. The Itapa festival: In commemoration of the creation conflict between Ọbatala and Oduduwa the Ọbameri high priest pours palm wine on the street in order to prevent Ọbatala from returning from exile.

The fundamental significance of the three palace factions of Ifẹ for the administrative bodies of the city-state is directly connected to its creation myth, which in turn gave rise to the tradition of origin of the Yoruba.<sup>18</sup> The myth explains the events of primordial times in terms of a creation conflict which arose between two major gods.<sup>19</sup> First, the high god Olodumare charged Ọbatala with the task of creating the earth. After having indulged in too much palm wine, however, Ọbatala became drunk and fell asleep. As a result, his brother Oduduwa descended into the primordial ocean and, in his stead, began the work of creating the earth. When Ọbatala awoke, he learned of this betrayal and demanded an explanation from his brother. So began a never-ending quarrel between the descendants of the two deities and their associates over the creation. The

18 According to the legend, most of the Yoruba kingdoms were founded by sons of Oduduwa. The origin of those attached to Ọbatala is not specified (Johnson 1921: 7-8; Lange 2003: 9 ill. 4).

19 Although the descendants of Mọremi, Ọramfẹ, Ọrẹluere and Olokun insist upon the pre-eminence of their clan deity in primordial times, they do not claim that their own deity was the creator (Adepoju Ifẹtẹdo, Olopo, Ọbalogun/Ọramfẹ FN 00, 161, FN 02: 65, 77; Frobenius 1912: 308-309).

conflict continues verbally to this day, as priests of the major cult groups of Ife vehemently champion the claims of their respective gods at any occasion when the question of precedence in the act of creation arises.

During the Itapa festival, the rivaling adherents of the creator god Qbatala and the god of death Qbameri, along with other cult groups of both parties, re-enact in a cult drama certain aspects of the ancient quarrel.<sup>20</sup> On this occasion, the Qbameri high priest performs the role of a loyal general fighting for the cause of his lord Oduduwa. Oduduwa's people also take part in the festival; however, in contrast to the followers of Qbameri, they remain in the background.<sup>21</sup>

This constellation is quite similar to that of the Baal cycle of Ugarit where the creator god Baal encounters his two divine enemies in two distinct episodes, the primal god Yamm (Dôd) corresponding to Oduduwa, and the god of death Mot corresponding to Qbameri.<sup>22</sup> However, in Ife there is also a third but smaller party, that of Qramfe,<sup>23</sup> whose members, in reflecting the arbitrating function of their god in an isolated myth, perform a mediating role in the cult drama of the Itapa festival.<sup>24</sup> Since the creation story itself does not mention an arbitrating god, it remains unclear whether Qramfe was from the beginning a sort of balancing authority or whether he acquired his role as mediator at a later stage of history.<sup>25</sup> In any case, given this cult mythology, anchored in the clan

20 The characterization of Qbameri as a god of death is based on the functions of Lokore, the chief priest of the cult group, during the royal funeral (Lokore FN 00, 46, 105, 180-189).

21 Lange 2000: 3-9. Not being aware of the participation of any other cult group in the Itapa festival, Stevens limits his description of the festival to the performances of the followers of Qbatala (1966: 184-187).

22 According to the Baal cycle, there was first a conflict between Baal and Yamm (KTU 1.2 IV 7-32; transl. Wyatt 1998: 66-69) and later combat between Baal and Mot (KTU 1.4 VII 45-52, 1.6 VI 13-35, transl. Wyatt 1998: 111, 142-143).

23 The thunder god Qramfe from Ife is often considered to be an Ife-specific form of the thunder god Šango worshipped in Oyo (Idowu 1962: 94; Bascom 1969: 87). By their attributes each can be seen as an African Baal (Lange 1994: 222-223, 227-236). Qbatala in contrast corresponds to the Canaanite-Israelite Melkart/Jahwe (Lange 1999b: 106-137).

24 According to the myth recorded by Idowu, Qramfe's thundering voice brought the two combatants to their senses (1962: 94). The cultic representation of this function can be seen in the form of a cult meal on the resurrection day of the Itapa festival (Orunbató/Qbameri FN 02, 59-60) and in the Iwesu ritual at the Eṣu Qbasin shrine during the enthroning ceremony of the Oṣoni (Mackenzie 1934: 15; Eluyemi 1985: 22).

25 The beliefs of the priests of the Qramfe party, who hold that the appearance of their deity on earth preceded that of Qbatala and Oduduwa (Wyndham 1919: 58-59; Qbalogun/Qramfe FN 02, 77-78), do not preclude the possibility that historically the Qramfe worshippers came later and encountered the two other major cult groups on the spot.

structure of Ifẹ, in the palace organization and in the performances of the Itapa festival, it might seem less presumptuous when the traditionalists still claim that the creation of the world was accomplished at precisely the spot where their town was later built, and that from this point the different races began to spread out all over the world.<sup>26</sup>

Today the king of Ifẹ is still seen by the adepts of the cult groups as the caretaker of this creation conflict. His palace officials, attached to the three ritual chambers of the Ilegbo residence, send sacrificial materials to the opposing parties of the New Year's festival, thus contributing to the annual re-enactment of the primordial conflict. In the past, the strict seclusion of the king also made everyone aware that he took part in the meetings of the gods (*irunmọlẹ*) during his mortal life. In the week preceding the Ogun festival, in which the king performed the central role, his connection to the world beyond became particularly close as he, through fasting, sexual abstinence and increased seclusion, intensified his communication with the deities.<sup>27</sup> All of his official duties were based on this closeness to the world of the gods, which was reinforced by a strict calendar of festivals and cult-dramatic performances shaping the whole year. The high points of the cult activities of the king were either his public or his secret appearances during the five most important annual celebrations held in honor of the gods: the Itapa, Pokulere, Olojo, Edi and Oduduwa festivals.<sup>28</sup> People saw no contradictions in the fact that the Oṣoni, despite his divine nature, also acted as a high priest when he guaranteed the fulfillment of the cults and the performances of the annual festivals in assuring that the deities were properly placated by their humble servants.

Furthermore, there were in principle no audiences, state visits or representative displays through which the king demonstrated the power of his office.<sup>29</sup> On the contrary the king, when he appeared in public at all, largely gave the impression of a humble cult performer. He completely merged into his role as intermediary between gods and men. In upholding the ancient cults, he would never dream of disrupting the order of cre-

26 Frobenius 1912: 285 (Yemoja), 309 (Olokun); Fasogbon 1985: 3; Oyediran/Ipetu Modu, Eri/Moremi, Olu/Qbatala FN 00, 165, 169; FN 02, 20.

27 This time before the Olojo festival in October is known as *akoko Olojo*, or "period of Olojo" (Olu/Qbatala, Lokore FN 02, 207, 230).

28 His public appearances at the Olojo and Edi festivals contrast with his essentially secret participation in the Oduduwa, Itapa and Pokulere festivals.

29 The audience granted Frobenius in 1910 (1912: 279-282) is to be seen as an innovation of the colonial period (cf. Adediran 1992: 294; NA, 7).

ation. His duty, as regards earthly rulership, consisted mainly in preserving the primordial, precarious balance between the antagonistic cult groups and in ensuring the fulfillment of the ancient cults so completely and so perfectly that they would continue unchanged until the end of time.<sup>30</sup>

### **Administration in the Service of the Creation Religion**

Given the constant re-enactment of the creation myth, one might ask how the people of Ife dealt with unavoidable concrete problems: administrative and legal issues, diplomacy and warfare. Every day the palace officials sat at the forecourt of the palace (Ẹnu Gẹru), surrounded by their servants, and received supplicants, complainants, village and compound representatives, and emissaries from other kingdoms. Under the leadership of Lọwa, the highest-ranking palace official, they dealt with most matters themselves.<sup>31</sup> Every five days the town officials also came to the entrance area in order to work together with their colleagues to address any administrative and judicial issues which had arisen. On such days Ọbalufe, the chief town official, presided over the assembly. Under his leadership, the majority of necessary decisions could be made independently of the king. However, by way of Lọwa he also passed on important matters to the king. In his Ilegbo residence the Ọṣoni, surrounded by his half-priestly palace officials and closely connected to the gods, was in a good position to receive divine inspirations. After he had arrived at a decision, his authorized agents at the palace forecourt were then informed, and they saw to the practical implementation of the decision.<sup>32</sup>

At first sight this might give the impression that the town and palace officials were nothing more than subordinate administrative officers who could only decide upon secondary matters in the name of the king. The seating arrangements at festivals, with Ọbalufe to the right of the king and Lọwa to his left, would appear to imply the same hierarchical distribution of duties. This apparent court organization should not, however, distract from the fact that the members of the two groups of officials had very dif-

30 Cf. Bascom 1969: 30-31; Adediran 1992: 287-288.

31 Judging by the lengthy building at the entrance (Gẹru), it would seem likely that there were several rooms in which individual meetings could be held (see ill. 6).

32 Bascom 1969: 33-35, 38; Fasogbon 1985: 24, 33-34; Adediran 1992: 292-297.



Ill. 3. The Ọni of Ifẹ with his officials and servants. To his right are Ọbalufẹ and the town officials and to his left are Lọwa and the palace officials (Frobenius 1912: 272).

ferent functions to perform. In contrast to the palace officials who, staying mostly in the ritual chambers, were constantly close to the king, and paid homage to him every morning directly in the Ilegbo, the town officials were forbidden to enter the inner residence.<sup>33</sup> They therefore paid homage to the king at the forecourt of the palace from a great distance and without any visual contact.<sup>34</sup> Only on ceremonial occasions were they allowed to come close to the king. Corresponding to these ritual regulations, the functions of the *Mọdewa* were largely restricted to the king, the palace and the cult groups, while those of their counterparts, the *Ihare*, were oriented toward the rest of the town. While the *Mọdewa* dealt on behalf of their main deities with the three divine factions in the palace and in the town, the *Ihare* were concerned with the five districts of the town and the potential contingents of the army resulting from occasional general conscriptions.

In lieu of the “invisible” actual king, then, visitors to the city were received by *Ọbalufẹ*, whose title means “king of Ife.” His epithets *Ọṣoni ode* and *Ọṣoni ita*, “outside king,” refer to his publicly performed activities at the forecourt in front of the palace, the *Ẹnu Gẹru*. His curious title *Orunto*, “the one who straightens heaven,” and his responsibility for the cult of the dynastic deity god *Lajamisan*, however, indicate an equally mythological and ritual dimension of his office.<sup>35</sup> As regards the practical concerns of governing the city-state of Ife, *Ọbalufẹ* had greater powers than any other official except the king. He had, for example, a residence of his own, a kind of miniature palace, where he assembled with town officials for preliminary talks before council meetings. As the highest town official, he presided over the meetings held every five days at the *Ẹnu Gẹru*, at which all matters of secondary importance were decided. He could call for special meetings of the *Mọle* judicial senate and, in the event of the king’s death, he took over interim control. Further, at the enthroning ceremony the palace and town officials paid homage to the new king in the courtyard of *Ọbalufẹ*’s residence.<sup>36</sup> Like all other town offi-

33 Adediran 1992: 294. The illustrations of the king and his officials recorded by Frobenius (1912: 271) were the result of a quite uncommon reception in the Ilegbo.

34 Eluyemi 1982: 68-72; NA, 17, 46.

35 Bascom 1969: 33; Adediran 1992: 293; Olu/Ọbatala FN 02, 11 (*Lajamisan*).

36 Bascom 1969: 38 (meetings at the *Ẹnu Gẹru*); Fasogbon 1985: 24, 34 (meetings at *Ọbalufẹ*’s residence; special meetings at the *Iledi Ọṣoni/Ogboni* court); Woyeasiri/Oluyare FN 02, 236 (possibly the head of the *Iledi Ọṣoni*). Today, the majority of these functions are still performed by *Ọbalufẹ*.

cials, Qbalufẹ was forbidden to come near the king.<sup>37</sup> Therefore his designated place to the right of the king on ceremonial occasions should not disguise his actual distance from the Q̣oni. First of all this seating arrangement was, in principle, only used for the Edi festival, during which the town officials sat silently at the king's right, and the palace officials equally silently at his left. Secondly, in the palace no direct meetings between the town officials and the king took place where practical matters were discussed. The only personal contact between the king and Qbalufẹ came about once a year during the Edi festival in the form of a ritual mock battle.<sup>38</sup> The highest town official, then, was by no means merely an executive organ of Q̣oni rulership nor a sort of traditional prime minister<sup>39</sup> who, inexplicably, was not allowed access to the king, but was instead a true second king who could to a certain extent act autonomously, and who had traditional ritual functions of his own.<sup>40</sup>

Some distance from the palace was the Iledi Q̣oni, the seat of the secret Ṃọlẹ (or Ogboni) court. The highest officeholders of the town met here every sixteen days at a great assembly, at which lively debates were not uncommon. The court was composed of the eight palace officials, the eight town officials, and the actual Ṃọlẹ, who were mainly recruited from the eldest sons of the deceased Ṃọdewa. Among the members there was also a representative of the priesthood and, as one among equals, the king.<sup>41</sup> All members were obliged to undergo an initiation before entering the Ṃọlẹ society. As they were also sworn to secrecy, little is known about this institution. One author claimed that the participants remained largely anonymous at the assemblies, hiding behind palm branches.<sup>42</sup>

37 Eluyemi 1982: 68 (forbidden to come near the king); Fasogbon 1985: 34 (role in preliminary talks before council meetings); Samuel/prince FN 02, 161 (interim control).

38 Walsh 1948: 233; Olu/Q̣batala FN 01, 175; Lokore FN 02, 198. It may be assumed that Qbalufẹ represented the cult group of the Oluyare-Igbo and therefore Sanponna in the mock battle during the Edi festival (Olu/Q̣batala FN 01, 175). The same can be said for the Eesa of Q̣fa (Bukoye/Q̣fa FN 01, 181).

39 Fasogbon 1985: 24; Adediran 1992: 293.

40 Frobenius 1912: 281-283 (ill. p. 271); Fasogbon 1985: 34; Adediran 1976: 6, 13; Eluyemi 1982: 63-72.

41 The priests consisted of Q̣balogun of the Q̣ramfẹ party or Q̣balase of the Q̣batala party, which were taken on as Adeṃọlẹ in the Ogboni court on a rotating basis (Olu/Q̣batala, Ifasanu/Ṃọlẹ FN 02, 11, 35). Fasogbon and Adediran cite the king's former attendance at the court as uncommon (1985: 39; 1992: 293). According to other sources, the king attended regularly (Oyediran 1973: 374; Olu/Q̣batala FN 00, 137; Ifasanu/Ṃọlẹ FN 02, 34; Risa/Ẹmẹṣẹ FN 02, 112).

42 Bascom 1969: 36-37.



Apena presided over the society, but only the second king Obalufẹ enjoyed the prerogative to call for special meetings.<sup>43</sup> One of the most important functions of the Mọḽe court was to control the king. Other functions were connected to jurisdiction over affairs of the city and the king's court. The court was believed to be an impartial body which paid no regard to status. It was therefore called *apata ọdaju*, "a rock without mercy."<sup>44</sup> It had the power to force the king to abdicate and even to oblige him to commit suicide.<sup>45</sup> The Mọḽe court was yet another institution which cannot be described in purely secular terms. The worship of the earth god Ọlọmọ (Onile), still practiced today, appears to have been an important element of cohesion among its members.<sup>46</sup>

At the center of political power there was, given the sacred dimension of rulership in Ife, surely little room for change. What, however, was the situation for other sections of the society, for the numerous artisans, peasants, warriors and priests? What opportunities did they have to develop initiatives of their own, or to modify the existing system? We know only little about the organizational structures of the separate groups. Two principles, however, are readily apparent: heredity and clan-determined participation in religious cults.

Each member of society belonged by birth to a specific clan, and each clan traced its origin back to one of the many deities of Ife.<sup>47</sup> However, the confusing multitude of clans and gods – there are generally considered to have been either 201 or 401 gods, the king being the last one of them in either case – can be reduced to three groups of clans whose priests still meet every sixteen days at the assemblies (*itadogun*) of their specific clan group.<sup>48</sup> Presiding over these assemblies are the high priests of the three chief deities of Ife: Oduduwa, Obatala and Ọramfẹ. The

43 Fasogbon 1985: 24 (calling for special meetings); Woyeasiri/Oluyare FN 02, 236 (possibly the head of the Iledi Ọṣi).

44 Mackenzie 1934: 27.

45 Mackenzie 1934: 12-13, Fayenuwo, IA, 12, Adediran, NA, 54, and for Ọyọ Johnson 1921: 173. In Ọyọ, the king did not take part in the meetings of the Ogboni held every sixteen days (Morton-Williams 1960: 363-365).

46 Olu/Obatala FN 00, 66; Ifasanu/Mọḽe FN 02, 36-37.

47 Frobenius 1912: 154-155, 164-166. Bascom overlooks the significant role of the clan gods (1969: 42-46). The king's clan, which traces its origin back to the less important figure Lajamisan (and not to Oduduwa), as well as the clans of the city and palace officials, represent exceptions to this pattern.

48 Today, at least seven clan heads still participate in the assemblies of the small Ọramfẹ party (Ọbalayan/Alafẹ, Ọbalogun/Ọramfẹ FN 02, 73-74, 78-80).



Ill. 4: The front of the palace of Ife at the time of the Frobenius expedition in 1910 (Frobenius Archiv, Frankfurt, 04-5015).

hierarchy of the three gods, and the corresponding organization of the clans and their priests, are based on the myth of the creation conflict. The Oduduwa clan group, which represents Oduduwa and his associates, considers its main deity to have been the sole creator of the earth. Likewise, the Ọbatala clan group represents Ọbatala and his followers and believes Ọbatala to have been the initially hindered but ultimately successful creator of the earth. Finally, the members of the smaller Ọramfe clan group also assume the role of their ancestor and see in him the highest god, who distinguished himself as arbiter in the conflict between Oduduwa and Ọbatala.<sup>49</sup> As a result, the entire clan system of Ife is directly dependent on the myth of the creation drama: Just as it is the most important duty of the clan priests and cult servants to re-enact and to express their chief deities' opposing claims during the New Year's festival,<sup>50</sup> it is

49 During the Itapa festival, members of the Ọramfe cult group receive Ọbameri's people at a feast, after the latter's symbolic cession of rulership (Orunbatọ/Ọbameri, Ọrabeku/Ọramfe, Lokore FN 02, 59-60, 70, 233-234).

50 At the cult dramatic performances during the festivals of the gods, both initiated members of the cult groups and some simple clan members participate (Olu/Ọbatala FN 02, 8 [Oluorogbo], 43 [Oloriṣa], 241 [Oluyare]).



Ill. 5. The Itapa festival: At the cult meal for Obameri, the two high priests of Oduduwa receive consecrated cola nuts from the hand of the high priest of Obameri.

the main function of the palace officials and servants to support this and other festivals of remembrance and re-enactment by supplying sacrificial materials and other donations on behalf of the king.<sup>51</sup> All members of the clans of Ifẹ, just as the various members of the palace organization, were born into these hereditary groups, the purpose of which was originally defined in terms of the mythology of creation. Consequently, their earthly existence gained its full meaning through their identification with their respective divine ancestor in connection with his act of creation.

How, then, was membership in the clans and creation parties expressed in practice? The vanguard of each clan was formed by a cult group, consisting of priests, cult servants, and simple initiates, organized around a temple or an assembly house (*akodi*). At the center of the cult activities, providing landmarks throughout the year, stood the annual festival in honor of the clan god. For several days clan members celebrated the great deeds of the clan's divine ancestor at the creation, or at one of the other constitutive primeval events. In addition to members of the cult group, members of other friendly groups also took part in the celebrations so that, during the various re-enactments, not only the fate of their own ancestor, but also that of others, at times even opposing clan founders, were brought to life again through strictly ritualized scenes and actions. These performances took place at various sacred sites of their own and of other clans: temples, assembly houses, groves in and outside the town, and above all the palace. The participants appeared in unison or in opposition to one another, in closed and open spaces; they ate, drank, danced and held processions that set the entire town ablaze. Some activities, mostly those carried out at night, were considered so dangerous that residents abandoned certain streets and neighborhoods in order to avoid potential harm.

To this day the inhabitants of Ifẹ shudder at the mention of certain notoriously dangerous festivals. I was even asked by some people living close to a once important shrine whether it would be advisable for them to leave the house with their children and their belongings, even though the festival has only been celebrated in a very limited manner for the last

51 In fact, the separation of the three chambers is no longer strictly observed. For example, according to the leader of the Ẹmẹṣẹ Ọmirin's list of sacrifices, it is no longer the Ilosin who bring the sacrifices for the three clan festivals of the party still celebrated – the *ọdun* Oramfe, *ọdun* Osaara and *ọdun* Alafere, – but the Ọmirin [Jimoh/Ọmirin FN 00, 172).

thirty years.<sup>52</sup> This demonstrates how re-enactments of primordial events were, independent of any written history, indelibly imprinted on the consciousness of individuals by the collective festival culture of the city. It took a massive intervention from outside to bring the people of Ife to separate themselves from this myth-based cultic foundation of their existence by no longer participating in the festivals, cult and clan meetings. This uprooting of society from its constitutional basis was achieved step by step, the first inroads having been made by Islam and later, with accelerated speed, by Christianity and colonialism.<sup>53</sup>

### **Efforts to Halt the Decay of the Creation Culture**

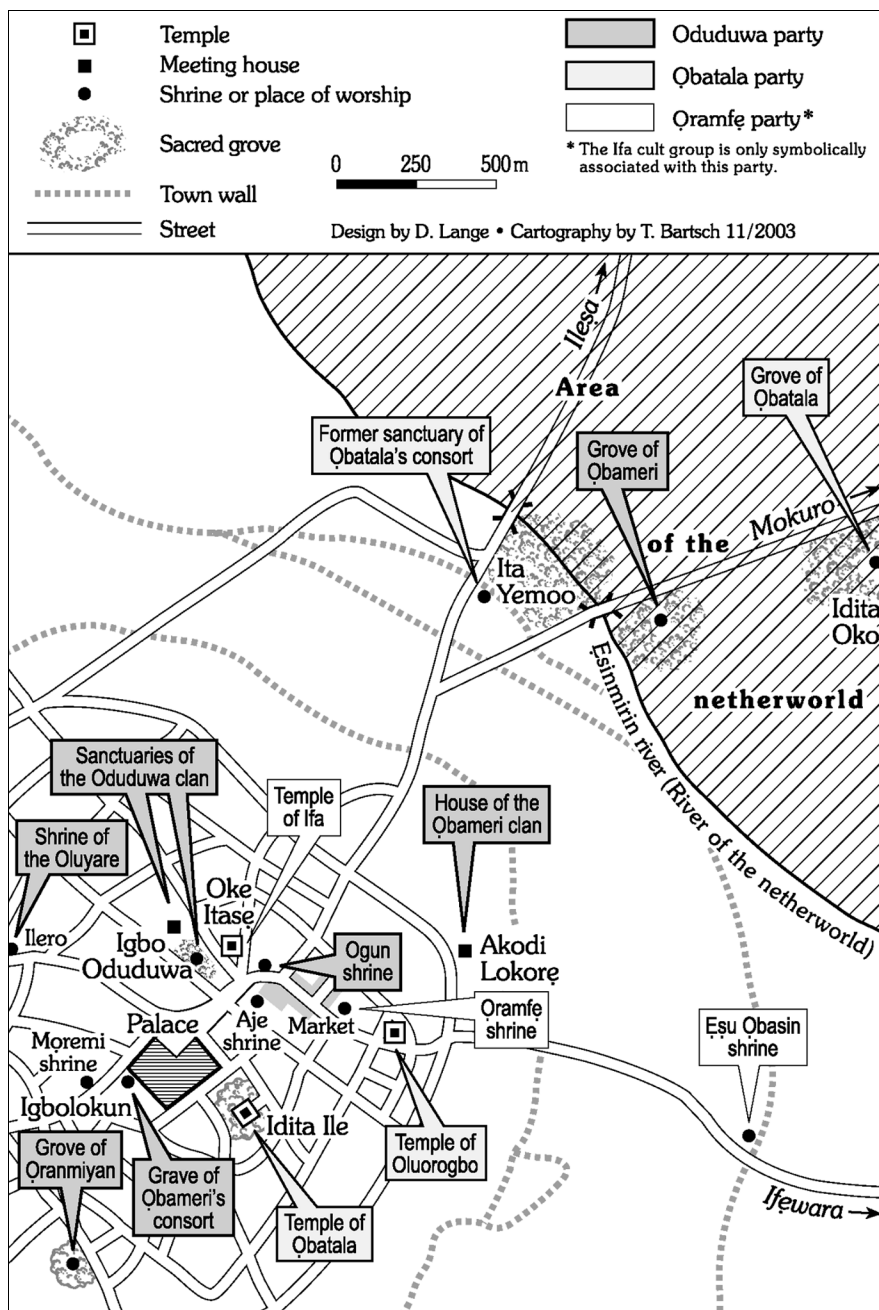
The preservation of this complex and in many ways non-functional culture was not achieved easily. It is not sufficient to refer to the alleged conservatism of African societies without considering the precise institutions and social conditions necessary to guarantee the survival of an ancient culture within the environment of the tropical rain forest.

From the work of Leo Frobenius at the beginning of the twentieth century, we know that by his time important cornerstones of the traditional palace organization had already collapsed. The palace officials, for example, were no longer chosen from the palace servants in accordance with the system of three religiously sanctioned factions, but rather from the king's lineage. The king himself only laxly followed the rules of seclusion, as for example when he was carried into town on a sedan to attend even simple judicial cases. Many of the great festivals, none of which Frobenius mentioned, also appear to have lost much of their traditional meaning by that time.<sup>54</sup> This collapse of the traditional order was doubtless the result of the numerous wars in the second half of the nineteenth

52 I am referring here to the Pokulere festival, for which the people living on the Ireṃo street and parts of the Ilode quarter left their houses during the night, as the street was required to be absolutely silent, and no-one was allowed to see the barely clad king following the masked Oluyare to the shrine of Ilero. This ritual, however, had already been abandoned by Aderemi towards the end of his reign (Fasogbon 1985: 18; Ajayi/Ife FN 00, 106; Obalogan/Oramfe, Owajan/Oluyare, Woyeasiri/Oluyare FN 02: 80, 116, 206).

53 Cf. Gbadamosi 1978: 22-73 and Peel 2000: 152-186.

54 Arriens, a member of the expedition, observed the king being carried on a sedan to a judicial case (1930: 119). Given the fact that he was housed in an estate on Eṇuwa Square from early December to mid-January, Frobenius must have noticed the extensive celebration of several Iro festivals and the Oduduwa festival (cf. 1912: 273).



III. 6. Temples and sanctuaries in northeastern Ife.

century, during the course of which Ife's enemies from outside succeeded in driving the king and his court from town, thereby disrupting the state order so badly that, for several decades, there was no duly appointed and widely accepted king heading the Ife community.<sup>55</sup> These anarchistic conditions were ended by the British intervention, though this foreign interference did not automatically lead to a return of the cultural *status quo ante*. In particular, the three religious factions of the state bodies were still not reestablished at the beginning of the 1930s. By that time Lọwa could be succeeded by any Mọdewa, irrespective of his clan affiliation and hence of his attachment to a specific ritual chamber in the Ilegbo.<sup>56</sup>

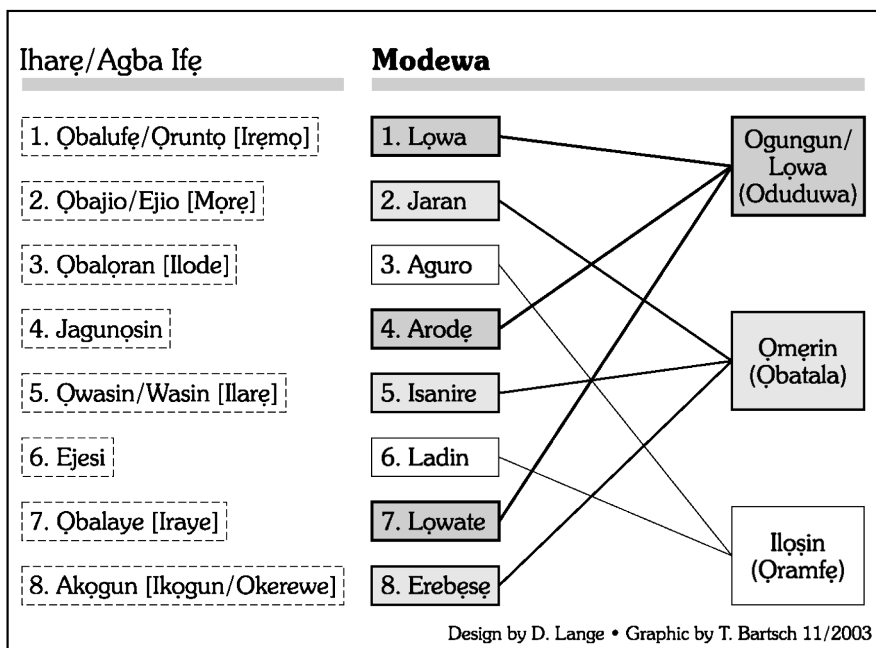
It was only during the reign of the reformer king, Adesoji Aderemi from 1930 to 1980 that things changed. As a recognized politician of national standing, who was also governor of the Western Region for a time, he was strong enough to promote the revival of traditional Yoruba culture. On the one hand, one could not expect this extremely busy, well-traveled man to reintroduce an institution such as the seclusion of the king in its earlier strict form. Nor was he content himself to observe the traditional distance of the Oṣoni from worldly affairs. And of course, he did not accept being subject to the judgments of the Mọḷe court. Instead, he skillfully used his increased power as a traditional ruler resulting from the "Native Authority System" of the British<sup>57</sup> in order to preserve the central role of the palace with respect to administration and jurisdiction.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand he also returned, without making it public, to many of the cult practices of his ancestors. He promoted, as best he could, the individual cults for the deities and did not himself hesitate to assume the role of the humble Oṣoni, who spent many nights barely clad and unseen by the general public while performing the cult activities which the traditionalists expected from their king. He strongly urged all dignitaries of the city to likewise fulfill their inherited roles in the yearly cult fes-

55 Bascom 1969: 14-15; Smith 1988: 143-145.

56 Mackenzie 1934: 20.

57 From 1916 to 1949, the king assumed the position of "Sole Native Authority," thus taking away the traditional functions of the Eṣu Gẹru and Ogboni (Oyediran 1973: 376-377). For the colonial policy of the early twentieth century in southwestern Nigeria see Nicolson 1969: 68-69. For the impact of colonial rule on the Oṣoni's position see Oyediran 1973, 375-378.

58 In recognition of his contribution to the development of customary law, Aderemi received an honorary doctorate of law faculty of the University of Ife in 1967 (Eluyemi 1982: 55).



Ill. 7. The system of strict division between the three factions of palace officials re-established by Ooni Aderemi.

tivals.<sup>59</sup> In 1961, shortly after Nigeria became independent, he had the Edena gate on the east side of the palace wall, which was highly significant for the king's participation in the New Year's festival, restored.<sup>60</sup> Within the palace, he contributed to the functional restoration of the ritual chambers by reinstating the strict creation myth-oriented division of the entire palace staff into factions. He even moved his residence to the original location of the Ilegbo in order to keep the memory of the once divine status of the king as alive as possible among his people.<sup>61</sup>

There was not much more he could do. In the meantime the great world religions were increasingly undermining tradition, and schools served to make the old customs and practices seem primitive and anachronistic. Instead of re-enacting the creation and events of the primordial

59 Oyediran mentions that in 1959 Aderemi deposed five chiefs for their failure to perform in the Edi festival (1973: 383 n. 3).

60 Carved wooden posts, doors with decorative figures, and a covering of clay tiles were produced for the restoration of the gate (Ojo 1966: 90). In 1983, during the Modakeke crisis, the gate was walled off again (Risa/Emese FN 02: 103).

61 Ojo 1966: 83; Eluyemi 1982: 55, 79; NA 02, 7, 9, 21.



days within the framework of traditional cult practices on the streets and at the religious sites of Ife, people were now beginning to spend their hours of religious worship in the churches and mosques.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately the same fate befell the great Aderemi as all other tradition-conscious Yoruba kings. He found himself and his dignitaries alone in their efforts to revitalize the cultural heritage bequeathed on them by their ancestors; his own people would no longer follow him in his efforts to walk a tightrope between the practices of the past and the promise of a better future as modern citizens of the world.

His successor Olubuse, who has now been in power for over twenty years, first followed a similar policy. He also began by participating in several festivals, but then felt increasingly obliged to remove himself from the cult dramas and to try to meet his family's demands for more education, more comfort and greater conformity to Christianity. Since 2000 neither the Olojo nor the Edi festival has been celebrated. In 2002 the Ooni even publicly declared that he refused to continue the participation in the festivals of Ife because of his Christian beliefs. In spite of these clear signs of decay, members of the Ogun and of the Moremi cult groups intend to maintain their traditions, but it is still doubtful whether either of the two festivals can ever be revived.<sup>63</sup> In any case, the number of the participants had already dropped drastically in previous years. Especially with the king's absence from the celebrations a point of no return has been reached.<sup>64</sup> Other festivals, such as those in honor of Obatala, Oduduwa and Pokulere, are now held in such a limited way by the cult adepts that the majority of the people of Ife are no longer aware of them.

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to single out the manifold factors contributing to the decay of Ife's creation religion. The following are simply a few concrete points of reference with respect to the unavoidable downfall of the closely related festival culture.

62 The considerable devotion to Christianity will become apparent to any field researcher in Ife as soon as she or he attempts to conduct interviews during the usually lengthy Sunday church services.

63 For a description of how extensively these festivals were once performed, see Bascom (1987: 62-73) and Walsh (1948: 231-238). In addition to the general turning away of the people from tradition, some concrete facts make it very unlikely that the Edi in particular will ever be fully celebrated again: the vacancy of the offices of high priests for the Yekere and Eri cults, the tacit abolishment of the palace office of Tele, the dilapidation of the shrine of Moremi and – above all – the non-participation of the king.

64 I am grateful to Dr. Ajibade Oluşola for information on the most recent developments.



III. 8. Obameri priests worship Ogun in the Obameri grove (January 2000).



III. 9. When the Obameri grove was felled in August 2002, the only cult object spared was the Ogun stone.

During the world congress of the Orisha religion in Ife in July of 2001, Ọbalufe, with the support of the town officials, purposely provoked a leading high priest in order to demonstrate that the people no longer had any respect for the traditional priests.<sup>65</sup> In June of 2002 Ojilato Jimoh, the last unconditional follower of the creation religion among the palace servants, died. His death most likely marked a final end to the participation of individual members of the palace staff, if only symbolic, in the last festivals.<sup>66</sup> In August 2002 the Ọbameri grove, the most important site for the re-enactment of the creation conflict during the Itapa festival, was cut down, and a new compound surrounded by high walls was built on its former location.<sup>67</sup>

While we might regret these developments, we must also understand them in the context of the ongoing process of modernization. Why should the members of the palace staff abandon their Christian or Muslim beliefs in favor of tradition when the king himself had, behind the scenes, long ago converted the area of the holy Ilegbo into a modern swimming pool, thus marginalizing the once so important ritual chambers? Further, while a few hardliners among the population continue to resist the tides of time by keeping the old cults alive, public participation and contributions, which were the life blood of the festivals' cult dramas, are being irreparably undermined by the tighter grip of world religions on the people and the definitive conversion of members of the palace staff to either Islam or Christianity. Finally, the gradual decay of the shrines and temples and the reluctance of the relevant people to assume the priestly roles to which they were born cannot be overcome by limited financial support from the government or occasional donations from outside. The local administration supports the priests by paying them salaries (which are by

65 He tried to deny Ọbalale, one of the two Ọbatala high priests, the right to keep his *òró* cap on in the presence of the king. In fact, being also considered crowned chiefs, several *Ọba* priests have the inherited privilege of not having to uncap before the Ọọni (Yekini Ọbaluru NA, 15).

66 During the Itapa festival, as a representative of Jaran Jimoh brought sacrifices to the Ọbatala grove, performed the two public scenes of placation during the procession of resurrection, and took the part of the king in the prayers to Ọbatala after his resurrection (cf. Lange 2000: 9).

67 For three important cult dramatic acts of the Itapa festival, performances at the Ọbameri grove were indispensable: the consecration of the *iwò* offering before its sacrifice in the nearby Ọbatala grove, the pouring of palm wine on the path to the Ọbatala grove in remembrance of the god's failure at the creation, and the extinguishing of torches brought from the palace in the blood of a sacrificed animal to mark the end of the three days' Oduduwa-Ọbameri domination of the city (cf. Lange 2000: 8-9).

now only symbolic), and by providing modest contributions to cover the expenses of various festivals.<sup>68</sup> Since the people themselves are increasingly turning their backs on their own, supposedly pagan traditions, there is no way to reverse the general process of decay and abandonment of the old festivals and cults. Without the participation of the general public or at least its interest and tacit support the numerous performances of the ancient cult dramas, the processions, mock battles, dances, songs and cult meals, so inextricably connected to the cult mythology of an entire society, cannot survive. Certain elements will most likely endure as magical rites, as they are already performed today by some priests outside of the religious sphere, but they will no longer have any connection to an overall civil religion which once shaped the entire society from top to bottom.

### **Vitality or Stagnation?**

Before closing, let us first consider briefly the preservation of the festival culture in Ifè in terms of its vitality or stagnation. In order to better assess the degree of continuity or change within a culture, we must first ask ourselves what its original form was like and where it came from. The problem of the origin of the Yoruba creation culture can only be dealt with adequately by reference to the Phoenician-Canaanite horizon in North Africa and the ancient slave trade.<sup>69</sup> With respect to the transmission of this culture to sub-Saharan Africa, there are three possibilities: We must either assume the complete transfer of Canaanite cultural forms, a process of selective appropriation, or initiatives promoting additional creations. Concerning the original culture, it is important to recognize that, in the Semitic world, there is no record of a mediator god interfering in the creation combat between two deities.<sup>70</sup> In Ifè, the mediator god and his party are not mentioned in the mythical narrative, but they appear in

68 In 2001 American members of the Orisha Conference provided various priests with important gifts, such as television sets and video recorders.

69 Lange 2003: 4-6, 2004 (in press).

70 In the Phoenician cosmogony we find Yamm and Mot on one side and Baal or Melkart on the other (Baumgarten 1981: 112-113, 208-209; Ebach 1979: 421-434; Wyatt 1998: 39-146). None of the available texts suggests a triad of deities including a mediator god arbitrating between Yamm/Mot and Baal. For the myth of the chaos combat in the Canaanite-Israelite world, see also Stolz 1970: 12-65, Wakeman 1973: 56-138, and Day 1985: 1-61, 179-189.

the cult drama of the New Year festival, and their importance is reflected in various aspects of the social and political organization. Since, within the framework of creation culture, myth and ritual are closely related to the organizational structures of society, it would appear that the transfer of Phoenician-Canaanite cultural forms to sub-Saharan Africa, at least in this aspect, led to new developments and specific creations departing from the original model.<sup>71</sup>

Later, perhaps resulting from the Roman expansion and the progressive erosion of the Canaanite culture in North Africa, there appears to have been a break in the trading relations between the far North and South leading to an enforced encapsulation of this African form of the ancient near eastern royal and priestly culture. Owing to the overall religious orientation of all segments of society, no radical moves for reform with respect to the basic social and religious institutions are likely to have arisen from inside the culture. The main officials of the state, such as the king and all the important titleholders, likewise fulfilling functions primarily intended to ensure the goodwill of the deities and thus to guarantee the preservation of the inherited creation culture, cannot be expected to have ever developed much fervor to disturb the established order of things.

Nevertheless, there is a great difference between complete stagnation, or even regression, and the active perpetuation of a cultural heritage. The creation culture of Ife, the brief history of which we can reconstruct in broad lines after the mid-nineteenth century, shows that by the beginning of the colonial period core elements of its complex structure were in danger of vanishing, but were then restored and filled with new life in the middle of the twentieth century. Accordingly, over the course of many centuries leading up to our time, there must have been countless initiatives on the part of priests, officials and craftsmen to halt or reverse the increasing disintegration, or to attempt to correct or even improve particular aspects of the religious system legitimated by the creation myth. The medieval bronzework of Ife, based on earlier figurative works of art in

71 On the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility that elements of the creation conflict indirectly reflected in Ife at the level of the three factions of the palace officials and their ritual chambers stood behind the Phoenician-Punic offices of either two or three *sufetes* (cf. Lipinski 1992: 429). Likewise the distinction between the *Modewa-Ogungun* and *Modewa-Omirin* could be related to the biblical contrast between the Levites and the Priests (cf. Lange 2003: 25-26).



Ill. 10. Obatala and his wife Yemoo (Ita Yemoo, ca. 1420 A.D.; Willett 1967: 41).

wood, terra-cotta and stone, provides a good example of such innovative attempts.<sup>72</sup>

The need for active efforts to preserve non-functional cultures in the African milieu can be understood by considering the conditions necessary for the emergence of technologically advanced civilizations. The development of the ancient near eastern royal and priestly culture demanded not only high productivity but also manifold exchange and trade relations with neighboring societies.<sup>73</sup> As the regions of the tropical rain forest in contrast are characterized by poor communication networks and low agricultural productivity, the preservation of the culture alone under such unfavorable conditions requires a high degree of social vitality. Since this system was revitalized by internal innovations in certain phases of its history (as in its earliest African phase or in the late Middle Ages), the integration of a foreign culture into an African setting should not only be considered in terms of an active cultural appropriation, but also in terms of a remarkable continuity with additional elements of creation.

72 Frobenius 1912: 307-308; Willett 1967: 101-151; Lange 1995: 148-150.

73 In contrast to Toynbee, McNeill explains the rise of civilizations as the result of a supra-regional process of interactions and diffusions (1991: 29-245).

Given the devastating effects of globalization on the festival culture of Ife, which I have briefly referred to above, it would be foolhardy to believe that the ancient cultural tradition of the Yoruba will see a renaissance in the future. Rather in our time we are witnessing the irrevocable end of a creation culture of Canaanite provenance, which earlier had survived in spite of historical upheavals through constant efforts of regeneration. The memory of the familiar civilizations of the ancient world – Egypt, Mesopotamia, and even Canaan – the downfall of which were also to a great extent due to the influence of external forces, has been preserved in the texts and monuments they left behind. In contrast, for the festival culture of the Yoruba, their African counterpart, there is no indication that the memory of this great cultural achievement will survive in any form whatsoever. It is nearly certain that this last remnant of the deeply religious cultures of the ancient world will itself in the very near future completely and irrevocably disappear. Decried as sinister paganism by all Christian churches and Islam, the creation culture of Ife will not even leave significant traces in oral traditions, which are otherwise remarkably faithful in Africa. If it were a matter of preserving a time-honored cultural heritage much could be done, but since local religious beliefs and practices are subject to intense opposition from more powerful and globally active religious agents, nothing can halt the process of decay. It is therefore the urgent task of scholarly research to document the greatness and complexity of this last ancient creation culture before it is too late.

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