

YORUBA

NINE CENTURIES OF AFRICAN ART AND THOUGHT

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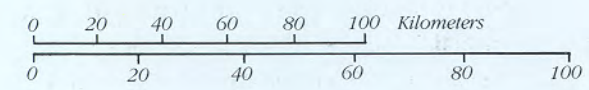
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1/The Yoruba World



Map of YORUBALAND





John Pemberton III

One of the most remarkable periods in Yoruba history was that of the Oyo Empire. From about 1680 to 1830 the capital city of Oyo-Ile (Old-Oyo), and its king the Alafin were a powerful presence shaping the course of events for almost all of the Yoruba subgroups and their foreign neighbors (Figure 156).

From at least the thirteenth century Ife had been looked upon by the Yoruba as the *ile* (home) of the Yoruba people and the Oni (the king of Ife) as “the father” of all Yoruba *obas*. But with the conclusion of the wars with the Bariba and the Nupe and the resettlement of Old-Oyo early in the seventeenth century, the Oni’s claim to paternal authority began to be challenged by the Alafin of Oyo-Ile. The invasions of the Bariba and Nupe entailed the movements of people into the region of Oyo-Ile and the establishment of outlying towns that would form the nucleus of Oyo’s new political power.¹

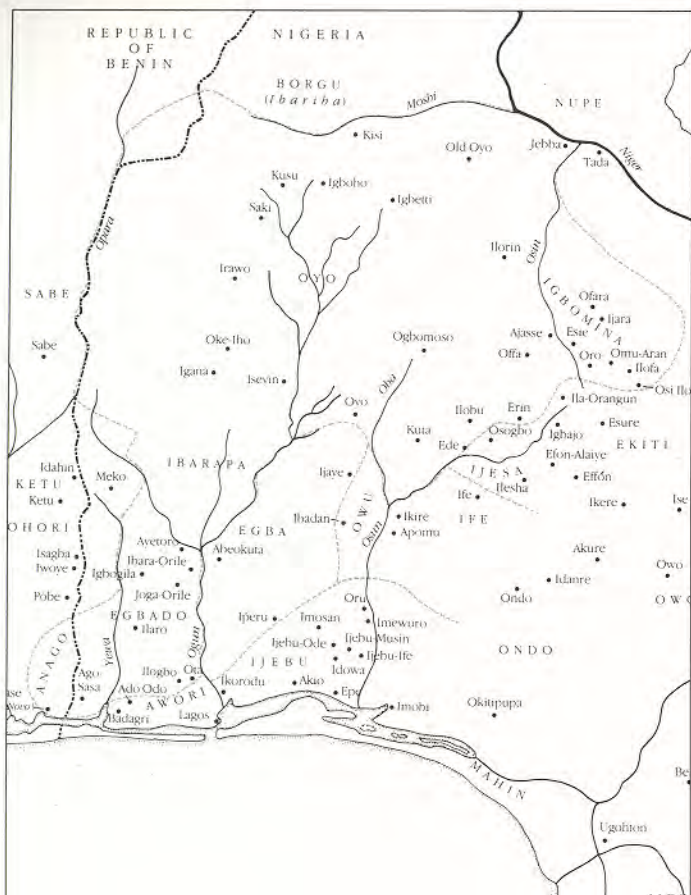
The capital city appears to have been a confederacy of *idile* (lineages), organized into wards, which were led by *oloye* (chiefs) and *baale* (titled elders).² The chiefs of seven of the nonroyal lineages had inherited titled membership in the Oyo Mesi, a council of chiefs whose power rested in their right to confirm or deny candidates for the throne and, in extreme situations, to require a king to renounce the throne and commit suicide. They shaped policy that affected the internal

life of the city and voiced their approval or disapproval on matters of state. Each of the chiefs was also the patron of one of several religious cults, whose devotees from various lineages gathered regularly at the principal shrine of their *orisa* in the compound of the chief. The Oyo Mesi, therefore, represented a definition of Oyo as a confederation of lineages both in matters of governance and of worship. While acknowledging the role of the Alafin, they adhered to the principle of decentralized authority.

In contrast, the Alafin was alternately chosen from Oyo-Ile’s three royal wards composed of those lineages that traced their descent from Oduduwa or Oduduwa’s son, Oranyan. The Alafin represented another principle of political organization, namely, the centralization of authority in the *ade* (crown) of the *oba* and in the royal court. It was the Alafin who possessed supreme judicial authority, who controlled the succession of chiefly titles and who, when he wore the veiled crown, was acknowledged to be *ekeji orisa*, meaning “next to” or “like unto the gods” of the Yoruba pantheon. Under his authority was an elaborate court organization that included palace slaves or eunuchs, whose leaders were in charge of judicial, religious, and administrative matters; slaves who served as bodyguards, messengers, and collectors of taxes; and “titled officers” who fulfilled various administrative and ritual functions.³

According to oral traditions, once the Bariba and Nupe threat from the north was ended, the struggle for power between the Alafin and the Oyo Mesi shaped the political life of Oyo-Ile.⁴ Indeed, one of the principal factors in the development of the empire was the royal court’s need to establish authority over towns outside of Oyo from which to receive revenues and man-

155. A Sango possession priestess dancing with her *ose* Sango dancewand, the emblem of her lord, whose power is evidenced in thunder and lightning. Ohori, Nigeria, 1975. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.



156. The Oyo Kingdom at its greatest extent, around 1780, according to R. Law 1977.

power, resources over which the Oyo Mesi had little or no control. This was achieved by the employment of cavalry, which the Oyo adopted from the Bariba and Nupe, against which many Yoruba towns were defenseless. Once the northern area around the capital had been consolidated early in the seventeenth century, successive Alafin met the potential threat from Benin by establishing their authority, or at least a presence, among Ijesa, Igbomina, and some Ekiti towns to the east.⁵ However, the extension of the Alafin's suzerainty to Ondo and Idanre was unsuccessful, in part due to inhospitable terrain for cavalry maneuvers.

The next move on the part of the Alafin was to the south, carefully bypassing Ile-Ife. The kingdoms of Owu and Ijebu were well-established powers in their own right, and even though the nineteenth-century Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson claims that "from the days of Sango [son of Oranyan] they have been very loyal to the Alafin of Oyo,"⁶ court traditions suggest that Owu was as an ally or friend closer to Oyo than Ijebu and that Oyo may have on one occasion asserted an influence on, without fully dominating, the internal politics of Ijebu-Ode, the capital city of the Ijebu Yoruba.⁷ Indeed, it was the kingdom of Benin that exerted the greatest influence among the Ijebu in the sixteenth century, while Oyo's greatest influence was

among the Egba in the south. Egba was called "an offshoot of the Yorubas proper" (*i.e.*, Oyo), having been settled by *Eso* (war-chiefs) of Oyo during the campaigns of Oranyan, the founder of Oyo.⁸ There is no doubt that some northern Egba towns were founded by Oyo settlers in the early seventeenth century, but Egba traditions claim that the Alafin was the youngest child of Oduduwa and was still a minor when Oduduwa died. His brothers, who were kings of other Yoruba towns, gave the child gifts to enable him to support himself, a tradition that continued. Later Alafin, however, chose to look upon the gifts as tribute and required them "as a matter of right."⁹

In the second half of the seventeenth century the royal court at Oyo-Ile extended its authority into areas of the Egbado and Anago in the southwest, and to a somewhat lesser extent among the western peoples of Ketu and Sabe. By the beginning of the eighteenth century formal rule was established among Yoruba peoples, and Oyo and its Alafin could claim an empire encompassing 18,000 square miles and perhaps a million people.¹⁰ The stage was set for Oyo's conquest of Dahomey (1726-30).

For the next fifty years the Oyo Empire dominated the lives of northeastern, central and southwestern Yoruba peoples and made its presence known in other parts as well. The organization of the slaves of the royal court, whose positions at times were of greater importance than those of many lineage chiefs in Oyo-Ile, enabled the Alafin to supervise closely the administration of the empire. Some areas were colonized, especially among the Egbado. Where long established local kingdoms existed, the capital received annual tribute or recognition through the exchange of gifts and assistance in times of war. For the most part the empire was a confederacy of *ihu-alade* ("crowned towns") and trade centers that acknowledged the primacy of the Alafin of Oyo-Ile. As in the relationship between the Alafin and the Oyo Mesi in the capital city, the same conflicting principles of political organization characterized the relationship between the royal court and the provinces: centralization of authority versus allegiance to local communities. So long as there was a strong figure at the center, such as Alafin Abiodun (reigned 1774-1789), the empire was held intact. But once the struggle for power between the Oyo Mesi and the Alafin in Oyo-Ile reasserted itself, the ephemeral greatness of the Oyo Empire was revealed. With lesser figures on the throne the center collapsed; and within forty-five years of Alafin Abiodun's death the capital city would no longer exist. The empire as a political phenomenon was over, but a powerful cultural legacy continued for another century or longer.



157. Alafin Lawani (1905–1911), King of Oyo. “Photographs of Nigeria 1907-1912.” Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Library and Records Department, London. Photograph by C. T. Lawrence.



158. A door from the palace at Oyo on display at the Commonwealth Exhibition, Wembley, England in 1924. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Library and Records Department, London.

The Capital City

We are fortunate to have an eyewitness description of some aspects of Oyo culture shortly before the destruction of the capital city. In 1826 British explorers Captain Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander visited Oyo-Ile and were cordially received by Alafin Majotu. Clapperton was far more interested in establishing a route from the coastal city of Badagry to Soccatoo than in the cultural life of the people whom he met on his journey. Nonetheless, his journals provide a good deal of information about the political life of the western and northern “Yarriba” as he called them, in the years 1825 to 1827, including references to Oyo towns plundered by the “Fellatahs” (*i.e.*, Fulani) armies. There are occasional glimpses into other aspects of Yoruba culture, including a few that are of importance to the art historian. In one entry, for example, Clapperton writes that:

The people of Katunga [the Hausa term for Oyo-Ile] are fond of ornamenting their doors, and the posts which support their verandahs, with carvings; and they have also statues or figures of men and women standing in their court yards. The figures carved on their posts and doors are various, but principally of the boa snake, with a hog or antelope in his mouth; frequently men taking slaves, and sometimes a man on horseback leading slaves. [February 13, 1826].¹¹

In other passages, Clapperton refers to the king’s female attendant who held “a handsome carved gourd, having a small hole covered with a clean white cloth, to hold his majesty’s spittle, when he is inclined to throw it away,” and he describes the king’s gift to him of a “black ebony [gooro nut] box, carved in the shape of a tortoise.”¹² He often refers to the high value placed on coral imported from the coast for use by the king and chiefs for beads and perhaps for the king’s crown (which Clapperton did not see) and mentions strands of “blue [stone] beads” worn by the king, which came “from a country between this and Benin” (Figure 157).¹³

Before departing from Oyo-Ile, Clapperton made the following observation in his journal:

The king’s houses, and those of his women occupy about a square mile, and are on the south side of the hills, having two large parks, one in the front, and another facing the north. They are built of clay, and have thatched roofs, similar to those nearer the coast. The posts supporting the verandahs and the doors of the king’s and caboceers’ [chiefs’] houses are generally carved in bas relief, with figures representing the boa killing an antelope or a hog, or with processions of warriors attended by drummers. The latter are by no means meanly executed, conveying the expression and attitude of the principal man in the group with a lofty air, and the drummer well pleased with his own music, or rather deafening noise.¹⁴

Carved motifs such as these were widely employed by carvers throughout Yorubaland in the nineteenth



159. Sango Dancewand (*ose Sango*), southern Egbado, 19th–20th century. The simplicity and elegance of this carving convey the remarkable inner composure of the devotee of Sango, whose lord often behaves in a most capricious fashion. She carries Sango's thunderbolts on her head with extraordinary ease and grace. Wood. H. 15¼ in. Richard and Barbara Faletti collection.



161. Sango Shrine Sculpture, Ede, 19th century. By Abogunde of Ede. The works of this master achieved recognition in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The faces of his figures are always intense, suggesting the extreme concentration of the Sango devotee. As the child holds on to the mother, so the devotee grasps her *ose* while she kneels before her lord. Wood, beads. H. 21½ in. Ian Auld.



160. The Sango shrine at the compound of Baale Koso in Oyo. Hanging on the rear wall is a row of *laba Sango*, bags carried by Sango priests when searching for the stones or celt of the thunder god at a house struck by lightning. The front panels of the red leather bags are divided into four squares of a lighter color, each containing a black and white image of a dancing stick-figure which some devotees identify with Esu/Legba, the energetic bearer of sacrifices to the gods and the troubler of humans who do not observe the ritual way. Oyo, Nigeria, 1971. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



162. Sango Dancewand, Ogbomoso, 19th–20th century. This *ose* Sango was collected by Leon Underwood at the Sango shrine in Ogbomoso in 1945. It is unusual in that it lacks the double-axe symbol, which is almost always found on Sango dancewands, although the parted hairstyle of the devotee suggests the motif. The artist's sculptural skill is evident in the repetition of the volume of the head in the voluminous breasts and thighs. Wood. H. 16½ in. National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



163. Sango Dancewand, Ketu, 20th century. Beauty of line and delicacy of carving are hallmarks of the finest Ketu works. The graceful curves of the double axe symbol, depicted as breasts from which large celts emerge at the top, echo the line of the snake which lies about the neck of the kneeling devotee. The work evokes the power of woman, of Sango, and of the python at one and the same time. Wood. H. 18½ in. Jean and Noble Endicott collection.



164. Sango Dancewand, Southern Egbado area, 19th–20th century. Yoruba ritual sculpture provides images of the devotees of the gods, not images of the gods. *Orisa* Sango gives the blessing of children and is known as the protector of twins. Hence, devotees who are *iyabeji* ("mother of twins") celebrate the gift of their lord with the dancewands that they place on their shrines and carry at the annual festival. Wood. H. 19⅞ in. Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren.



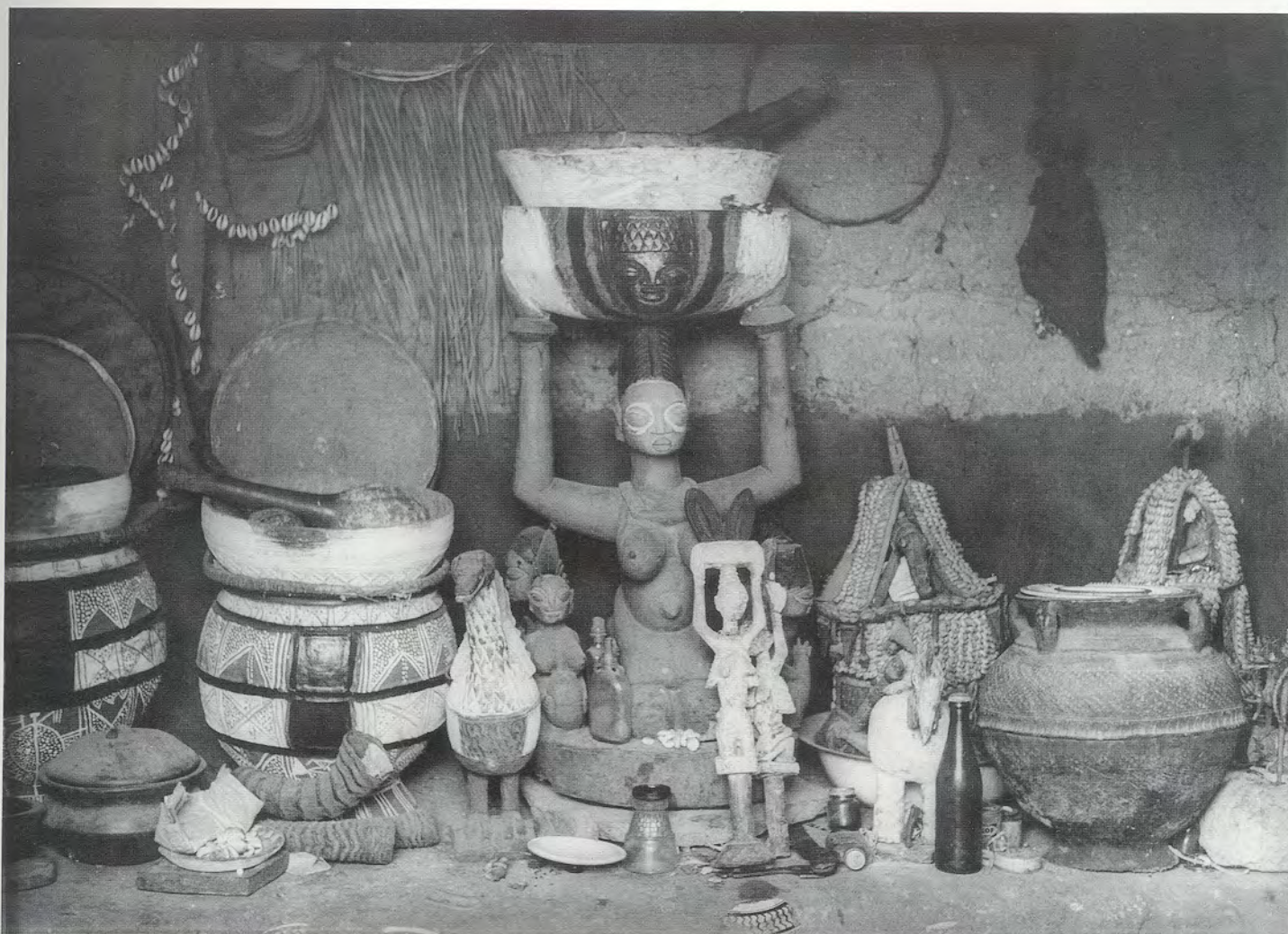
165. Sango Dancewand, Ila-Orangun, 18th–19th century. This *ose* Sango is in the style of carvers from Ila-Orangun, active in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. According to documents in Swiss archives, it reached Switzerland prior to 1820. Wood. H. 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Museum Rietberg Zurich, Collection von der Heydt.



166. Sango Dancewand, Egbado, 20th century. The sensitivity of the carver is evident not only in the way in which he permits the twins, although firmly within their mother's grasp, to lean away from her body, but also depicts the *ibeji* as holding on to each other behind their mother's back. Twins are often referred to as "children of thunder" since they are not only the gift of Sango to his devotee, but are said to accompany Sango after death when he makes known his presence in thunder storms. Wood. H. 15 in. Deborah and Jeffrey Hammer, Los Angeles.

century (Figure 158). Even more elaborate carvings adorned the "Fetish houses" of the Sango cult. Unfortunately Clapperton merely refers to seeing them at the gates of the city and opposite the king's palace,¹⁵ but does not describe them or mention entering one. The Sango cult, which was closely associated with the royal court, had been an important part of Oyo-Ile's ritual life, since the reoccupation of the old capital at Oyo-Ile early in the seventeenth century.¹⁶ If the extraordinary carvings for Sango shrines in other and lesser Oyo towns in the mid-nineteenth century provide a clue, the shrines of Oyo-Ile at the time of Clapperton's visit must have been resplendent with carvings for the *orisa*. Clapperton's silence is all the more disappointing, since within a decade of his visit they would vanish.

With the failure of authority at the center, the rebellion in Dahomey and the loss of control over many of the trade routes to the coast, the weakened capital city was vulnerable to changes taking place to the north: the increasing power of the Fulani; the missionary zeal of Muslim emissaries; and the political ambition of petty chiefs in Ilorin and neighboring towns. Around 1830 Oyo-Ile was under siege by Ilorin forces, and eventually "Oyo was plundered of nearly everything. . . Jimbo



167. A Sango shrine in Idofin, Igbana. The *arugba* Sango, the large figure with bowl, is the principal sculpture found on Sango shrines in Igbomina and Ekiti towns. This carving is in the style of the workshops in Osi Ilorin in northern Ekiti. (See Figure 169.) Nigerian National Museum Archives, Lagos. Idofin, Igbana, Nigeria 1961. Photograph by P. Allison.



168. Sango Shrine Sculpture, Ede, 19th century. From the workshop of Abogunde of Ede, this extraordinarily powerful figure does not provide evidence that it was made for a Sango shrine. The necklaces of red and white beads placed by a devotee of Sango on the mother and child reveal its function. Ulli Beier photographed similar sculptures by Abogunde and his workshop on shrines for Oya, wife of Sango, in Ilobu. Wood, beads. H. 24½ in. The Art Institute of Chicago. Through prior gifts of the Alsdorf Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. James W. Alsdorf, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph P. Antonow, Herbert Baker and Gwendolyn Miller, Britt Family Collection, Gaston T. de Havenon, Mr. and Mrs. Edwin H. Hoker, Robert Stolper, Mr. and Mrs. Edward H. Weiss, Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Wielgus; through prior acquisition of the Samuel P. Avery and Ada Turnbull Hertle Endowments.



[the leader of the Ilorin forces] took away all the Egungun dress [ancestral masquerades], and forced the citizens to accept the Koran."¹⁷ A few years later, around 1835–36, Oyo troops attempted to reassert their authority over once-submissive northern Yoruba towns but were defeated. After this defeat and with the imminent threat of the Ilorin forces led by Lanloke, Oyo the great metropolis was deserted, some fled to Kihisi, some to Igboho, and some even to Ilorin. As it was not a flight from an enemy in pursuit many who reached Kihisi and Igboho safely with their family returned again and again for their household goods and chattels till one Agandangban went and told Lanloke that Oyo had been deserted, and the latter proceeded immediately to plunder, and carry away what was left by the citizens; . . . such was the fall of the great Metropolis "Eyeo or Katunga," the ancient Oyo, still [lies] in ruins.¹⁸

Archaeological Records

With the passage of time, layers of dust were deposited by the Saharan winds known as the harmattans, torrential rains wore away the clay brick houses, incised the



170. Arugba Sango lid, detail of Figure 169. The devotee lies prostrate before her lord, dancewands suspended from each shoulder, and her hands hold cocks for sacrifice to her god. The painting of the head with indigo dye is not unusual and conveys the notion of the inner head, (*ori inu*), her personal destiny which is inextricably linked to the essential nature, (*iwa*), of Sango.

169. Sango Shrine Sculpture (Arugba Sango), Osi Ilorin, Ekiti, 20th century. This *arugba* Sango is a splendid example of the skill of Areogun of Osi Ilorin. *Arugba* means "bowl carrier." In the bowl the devotees keep neolithic celts, thought to be the thunderbolts which Sango hurls in judgment upon those who do not acknowledge his authority in their lives. Wood. H. 42½. Marie-Catherine Daffos/Jean-Luc Estournel.

surface of the land, and buried in mud much of what was left standing. Brush fires, started by hunters, aided in the destruction. In 1938 seven or eight veranda posts were discovered in the area

near the main entrance to the 'palace.' . . . On these can be seen the original carving and on three which are still upright most of the original design is clear. They differ in style considerably from those generally seen to-day. The Old Oyo posts are ten or eleven inches thick, somewhat tapered, smoothly finished and carved in relief. . . . The Old Oyo posts are divided into horizontal panels, each panel decorated with a continuous 'picture' of men, birds, horses or snakes.¹⁹

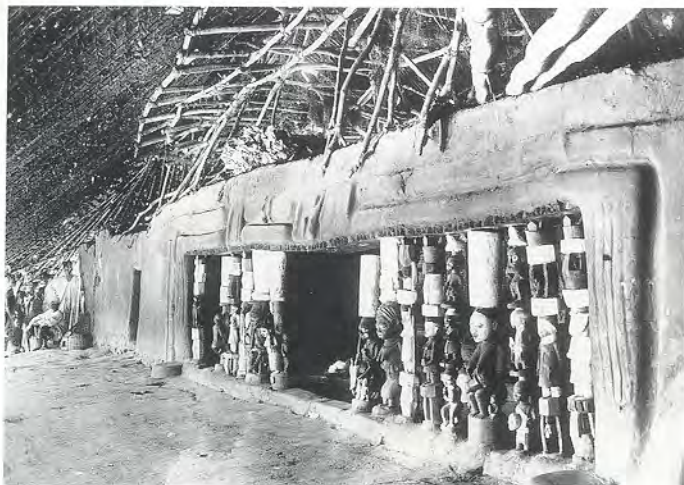
This brief description suggests that the carving style was a simple bas-relief, not the deeply cut designs or three-dimensional figures that Clapperton's observations suggest and which characterized late Oyo Yoruba carving style (Figure 158).

Apart from portions of a few houses, the foundations of the palace and evidence of the town's walls, garden plots, grinding holes, and a foundry where brass or bronze may have been cast, archaeologists have unearthed a few terracotta rain pots and numerous shards. Only one small, weathered terracotta head composed of two fragments has been found. Since it was a surface find, the head cannot be closely dated and remains problematic: "Until we have more examples of terracottas from the site we cannot trace its connections [with the Nok or Ife terracottas], though it does appear likely that there was a distinctive style of terra-cotta at Old Oyo."²⁰

The Legitimization of Authority

The imperial ambitions of Oyo-Ile were fostered by internal power struggles between the Alafin and the Oyo Mesi and by the need to control resources. The Alafin built his base of power upon the support of kings and chiefs in the surrounding communities, as well as upon the peace and revenues that their allegiance brought to the capital city. Eager to expand his sphere of influence, the Alafin recognized that political power also depended upon the control of resources that attracts or requires allegiance. Hence, the flourishing trade in slaves in exchange for European goods, which in turn funded the purchase of horses from the Hausa for the Alafin's cavalry, required the extension of the empire to the Dahomean court and the control of the trade routes.

The claim of empire, however, requires more than an effective army and the control of resources, especially when the political structure is essentially a loose confederacy of groups with an acute awareness of their own historical identities. The claim to empire requires legitimacy, the perception on the part of ruler and ruled that political power is based upon a recognized claim



171. The Agbeni Sango shrine in Ibadan. A photograph by Leo Frobenius taken in 1910 of the veranda posts that formed a screen in front of the altar. This and the following photograph are probably the earliest visual documents that exist of Yoruba Sango shrines. Ibadan, 1910. Photograph courtesy of the Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt.



172. The Agbeni Sango shrine in Ibadan from the center front. A photograph by Leo Frobenius. Ibadan, 1910. Photograph courtesy of the Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt.

to moral authority. Hence, successive Alafin of Oyo-Ile sought to establish their legitimacy. They claimed that they were descended from Oduduwa, the founder and first king of the Yoruba at Ile-Ife and that the Alafin was heir to the paternal authority of Oduduwa. This claim was also made by the Oni of Ife. One account relates that the Alafin was the youngest son of Oduduwa, but others assert that he was the “first son” of Oduduwa. These differing claims appear to mark a shift from a time of acknowledging the primacy of Ife to a time when Oyo sought to claim for itself such primacy. Other accounts argue that Oranyan was Oduduwa’s son and heir to the throne and that it was Oranyan who founded Oyo and was the first Alafin.²¹

There was also a local tradition upon which Oyo-Ile based its claim to rule. Sango, the son of Oranyan and of Elempe, daughter of the king of Nupe, moved the seat of government from Oko to Oyo,²² an account

which may “[represent] the original tradition.”²³ The extent of Oyo’s power in the seventeenth century was dubious and its effective power in the eighteenth century was limited in various ways. In contradiction, Oyo’s court histories attempted to create a fictive heritage. Oyo’s claim to an Oduduwa heritage was perceived as justifying Oyo’s aggression against other kingdoms, including those that also claimed descent from Oduduwa.²⁴

The Sango Legend: *Oba* and *orisa*

The appeal to the Oduduwa heritage was not by itself adequate as a claim to legitimacy and empire. The presence of the Oni in Ile-Ife was ample testimony to its limitations. A further source was of historical and divine legitimacy found in the person of Sango, the deified fourth king of Oyo-Ile. For the art historian, the variety of sculptural forms and the richness of iconography as well as the oral poetry associated with the worship of Sango may be Oyo-Ile’s greatest legacy to the history of Yoruba art.

Sango has been described by Samuel Johnson in 1893 as “the fourth king of the Yorubas, who. . . was deified by his friends after his death. Sango ruled over all the Yorubas including Benin, the Popos and Dahomey, for the worship of him has continued in all these countries to this day.”²⁵ While there is no historical evidence to support this description of the extent of Sango’s rule, some incidents associated with him and other early Alafin may be factual. The remembrance of Sango, however, serves later political purposes. The myths, rituals, and iconography associated with him serve to legitimize the Alafin’s political authority, while also disclosing an acute sense of ambiguity about the power of Yoruba kings.

Many of the Sango myths focus upon the cause and occasion of his death. Some accounts describe him as a ruthless tyrant. Although he was a masterful leader of his troops in war, he ruled by appealing to the envy and vanity of his chiefs, pitting one against the other. Weary of the political discord in the capital, his people turned against him. He was dethroned and sent into exile by the chiefs of Oyo-Ile. Alone, and by some accounts deserted even by his favorite wife Oya, Sango

173. Equestrian Figure, Erin, 19th–20th century. This is by Maku of Erin who was one of the great carvers for *orisa* shrines in the area of Osogbo, Ilobu and Ede at the turn of the century. He died about 1927 and his son, Toibo, an equally gifted artist, died about a decade later. This is one of Maku’s finest works. The elongated body of the warrior picks up the slender line of the spear. The warrior’s head is equivalent in size to the horse that he rides, an association of power further suggested by the indigo dye that has colored both areas. Maku defines the eyes as circles from which lines radiate, giving the face a boldness of expression that is enhanced by the thrust of the jaw. Wood. H. 38½ in. Private collection.



hung himself at a place called Koso. Ashamed and angered by the taunts cast upon Sango's name, his friends visited the neighboring people of Bariba, famed for their ability to make charms. Upon learning the art, they returned to Oyo-Ile and caused violent thunderstorms and lightning to strike the houses of Sango's enemies, setting fire to the thatched rooftops. As the storms increased in number and intensity, Sango's friends declared them to be a display of Sango's vengeance upon his enemies. They proclaimed Sango an *orisa* who required sacrifices. Thus, priests were initiated as intercessors, shrines were established in the palace grounds and at Koso, and Sango's followers chanted "*Oba koso!*" ("The King did not hang!"). (The chant entails a verbal play on the town name Koso by a change in tonality of pronunciation.)

Another myth relates that Sango was fascinated with magical powers. On one occasion he climbed a hill on the edge of the city, and, while preparing a mixture of *oogun ase* (materials containing powerful properties), he inadvertently caused a great storm to occur. Bolts of lightning struck the palace as well as the homes of townspeople, killing all of Sango's wives and children with the exception of Oya. In disgrace Sango left the capital with Oya. When he reached Koso, he hung himself. As in the other myth, when subsequent violent storms rained havoc on the city, Sango's followers declared that the *oba* had become an *orisa* and was avenging the indignities to his name. Thus, a shrine was created in the palace and a priesthood established for performing the appropriate rites of praise and sacrifice to the divine king.

One other myth, important to our understanding of the image of Sango in Yoruba cultural history, appears to have had its origins in Ile-Ife. Obatala, the *orisa* who creates all human bodies, was walking along a dusty road on his way to Oyo-Ile. As he passed a field, he saw a great white horse. Weary from his long trek, he mounted the animal and rode the remaining distance to the capital. The horse belonged to Sango, who, when he heard that someone had ridden it, ordered Obatala to be imprisoned, even though the elderly *orisa* had sent his apologies to the king. As the days and months passed, the rains failed and drought spread through the land. The townspeople appealed to their king to release Obatala, but Sango refused. The earth became parched. Women ceased to give birth to children. Even Sango's wives were barren. Aware of the outrage of his chiefs, Sango released Obatala, who again apologized for his offense to the *oba* and left the capital to continue his journey home to Ile-Ife. Soon the rains returned, the yams grew in the fields, and women again gave birth.

For the historian of religion all myths are true insofar as they are true for someone. The questions are: by

whom and for whom are they told? And in what ways do they inform and shape the perceptions of self and world of persons within the community in which they are preserved?

The myths associated with Sango do not present the ancient king as a noble, heroic, or even a tragic figure. As a leader, Sango is portrayed as a tyrant who is ruthless and arrogant. He is also depicted as one whose desire for power exceeds the limits appropriate to political authority: he is fascinated by magical powers that he cannot control, and he imprisons Obatala, the god whose creative work is to give shape to the human body before it enters the world. Obatala is also closely identified with the indigenous peoples of Ife. Sango is rejected by his people, dethroned by Oyo's chiefs, and dies the disgraceful death of suicide.

But Sango lives. The *oba* becomes an *orisa*, and as an *orisa* the fallen king controls the powers of nature, creating terrible thunderstorms and hurling bolts of lightning upon those who do not honor him.

At one level of interpretation, the myths are politically significant, conveying to the conquered kings and subjected peoples an image of the awesome authority of the Alafin. Among Yoruba religious groups, the Sango cult was perhaps unique in being so closely identified with a particular political system. The Mogba, senior priests of Sango at the royal shrine in Koso, initiated the Alafin's *ilari* (bodyguards and messengers) into the Sango cult, and those who were not initiated traveled with Sango priests in their entourage.²⁶ Furthermore, the cult was centrally organized, the occupancy of some of its high priestly offices limited to members of certain Oyo lineages, and the training and initiation of all Sango priests, *elegun*, confined to the Mogba at Koso.²⁷ Where compounds were struck by lightning the *elegun*, carrying large, elaborately decorated leather bags, called *laba* Sango, entered the premises to retrieve the thunderbolts represented as celts, (*edan ara*), hurled by Sango, evidence of his displeasure with the household (Figure 160). While the occupants were banned from their homes and relegated to blacksmiths' shops and similar dwellings for several days, the *elegun* performed rites for *orisa* Sango and received food and payments of considerable sums from the occupants.

The imprisonment of Obatala is a metaphor for the limits of the Alafin's authority over Ile-Ife, the place of creation, and the throne of the Oni, Odudwa's successor. At another level, the myth of the imprisonment of Obatala asserts that political power has its limits with respect to the powers of nature—the biological powers operative in the creation of plant, animal, and human life. Kings may, for politically legitimate reasons, be granted the authority to have persons put to death, but

they cannot presume to control the sources of life any more than they can employ magical practices to enhance their authority.

In spite of the close association of the Sango cult with the political power of the royal court of Oyo, as the authority of the latter declined, the cult flourished throughout the areas once part of the empire. Within a year or two following the fall of Oyo-Ile in about 1836, the royal court of Alafin Atiba and those lineages that had not settled in other northern Yoruba towns established a new capital city 75 miles to the south (see Figure 29). The political authority of the Alafin was significantly diminished. *Oba* Atiba sought with some success to check the rising power of the Oyo Mesi in the new capital by introducing the secret society, or cult, of Ogboni as an established organ of government.²⁸ The towns of Ibadan and Ijaye, however, which had once been the southern military outposts of the Oyo Empire, were now led by politically ambitious warrior chiefs; and other communities claimed their independence from the direct control of the new Alafin.²⁹ The conflicts among Yoruba towns and subgroups that had begun as early as 1793 now burst into a full-scale civil war.

For over a half century the terrible powers of Ogun, the *orisa* of iron and war, were felt throughout the land. The myths of Sango continued to be told, however, and rituals for the deified king continued to be performed. The Sango mythology and rituals articulated a deeply felt ambivalence about power, not only political power, but the power or powers that play within the human psyche. Sango was a god who disclosed a truth about the human condition that was not easily acknowledged, but that could not be denied by the Yoruba. It was a truth that Yoruba artistry expressed in song and carving.

Verbal and Visual Imagery in Sango Worship

The imagery in the Sango myths is echoed in the *oriki* chanted by Sango's devotees. *Oriki* celebrate in rhythm, rhyme, and word-play the *iwa* (status, essential character, fundamental nature) of the person or god whose praise is heralded. As in every performative utterance, the singer of an *oriki* not only acknowledges the presence and power of the subject of praise, but through verbal imagery evokes the reality that she or he praises.

On the occasion of the annual festival for Sango, female devotees sing lengthy *oriki* known as Sango-pipe.³⁰ The singing entails a special modulation of the voice, producing a rattling, but sonorous, quality. The tonalities of the Yoruba language permit word-play and rhythmic patterns that echo the sharp staccato sounds

of the *bata* drum. The poetic form consists of a rapid outpouring of similes and metaphors that present a strange juxtaposition of images: the refrains punctuate and bond the total performance together. As she chants, the devotee will grasp a dancewand, called an *ose* Sango, and, in response to the verses she chants, she will cradle it in her hands, thrust it in the direction of bystanders, or shake it violently above her head (Figure 155).

Sango-Pipe

Oba Koso. I hope you awakened happily. Ooooo.
My lord, save me from trouble. Ooooo
Did you awaken happily?
You have fire in your mouth, fire in your eyes, and scorch
the metal roof tops.
I awakened happily.
I greet Olu, your messenger, but he did not answer.
Olu is lord in Egberé.
When I awakened, I knelt and greeted Awo, your
messenger.
Awo is a lord in Likii-land.
When I awakened, I greeted Sango, but he did not answer.
I greeted Sere Aboogunde.
I greeted Ose Ogbodoro, who slept without concern.
I greeted Laba, one with a robe of honor.
I greeted the lord of three stars.
I greeted the male.
I greeted the female.
It was they who gave birth to Sango
Sango enters Oyo loudly.
He opened a calabash and withdrew something oily.
Sango, I hope you awakened happily. Ooooo
Sango is as tough as a dried yam.
When he enters the forest, he strikes with his thunderbolts.
Sango, I hope you awakened happily
Leader of devotees. Ooooo.
He strikes a tree and shatters it.
He plunges a hot iron into his eyes.
The husband of Iyamonja.
Orilaku, who overturns the tables of traders.
One who adds stones to the light load of a person. Eeeee.
One who is as light as an asa board.
Do not add more stones to my load.
One whose teeth are like large bones.
The talkative create trouble in the house.
Sango is always willing to talk.
I hope you awakened happily,
Balogun at Ado. Ooooo
I hope you awakened happily
Igbabagobi-iro. Ooooo.
When he is angry, he hurls a person into a stream as
though brushing away a fly.
One who casts stubborn people into boiling water.
Sango, who hurls the stubborn into boiling water,
Do not put my head into hot water.
One whose teeth are like large bones.
The talkative create trouble in the house.
Sango is always willing to talk.
One who knows what you want from him.
One who knows what you are thinking.
Balogun at Ado. Ooooo





174. The Agbeni Sango shrine in Ibadan. A water color by Karl Arriens, who accompanied Leo Frobenius on his visit to Ibadan in 1910. The accuracy of the drawing is confirmed by Frobenius' photograph. Frobenius remarked that he was "struck dumb" by "the originality of the building" and "the row of brightly painted columns." Photograph from Arriens, 1928.



175. A portion of the screen of veranda posts at the Agbeni Sango shrine in Ibadan. 1971. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



176. A portion of an *orisa* shrine in the Ijebu town of Oke Orundun. The black terracotta pot at the left is for *orisa* Erinle, deity of hunters whose cool waters from hidden forest streams and pools bless his followers with children. *Orisa* Sango's presence is identified by the large pot painted with red and white patterns. It holds ram's horns containing the power (*ase*) of the god and the crown of Banyani, the "sister" of Sango. *Ibeji* figures are placed in front of Sango, who is the protector of twins. Oke Orundun, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

177. Ritual Pot, Oyo area, 20th century. The equestrian figure on this ritual pot suggests that it was created for use on a shrine for *orisa* Sango. Pots of this shape, however, are more often found on shrines for *orisa* Erinle, a hunter deity associated with forest glades and streams. In the Oyo and surrounding areas Erinle pots have two intersecting arches that constitute the iconographic motif on the lid, and the pots are usually blackened. Hence, this pot presents a fascinating puzzle and suggests an innovative artistic creation in Sango shrine artifacts. The comb motif embossed on the lower portion of the lid may be associated with *orisa* Osun, which only raises more questions about its origin and use. Whatever the answers may be, the equestrian figure and his attendants are rendered with simple forms, yet possess considerable power. Terracotta. H. 24 in. James Willis Gallery, San Francisco.

*One who is angered as one who is asked for a contribution.
When he enters the forest, he strikes with his thunderbolts.
One who uproots an iroko tree.
His fiery eyes are like those of Ogun.
When he enters the forest, he strikes with his thunderbolts.
Balogun at Ado. Ooooo
One who throws away the tray of the sellers of palm
kernel oil.
One whose eyes are terrifying to behold.
One who smashes the calabash into pieces.
Ibiyemi, who has medicine for abiku.
Erigitola, who publicly accuses the police and the chief
clerk.
One who chases the king and the householder.
Sango is the almighty power who blesses a sensible person
and maddens the fool
The orisa who have followed you to today's festival are
countless.
All of them have assembled.³¹*

The entire poem consists of nine parts and several hundred verses. It begins with a salutation to the god, followed by a series of descriptive images which refer to Sango's *iwa*. He is the one who has fire in his mouth and his eyes and scorches the metal rooftops; who does not answer when he is greeted; who is as tough as a dried yam; who strikes indiscriminately with his thunderbolts; who shatters trees and uproots the great *iroko* tree; who plunges a hot iron into his own eyes; who overturns the tables of traders; who adds stones to the light load of a person; who tosses the stubborn into boiling water; who pursues kings and commoners.

In Part II of the *oriki* reference is made to Sango as an *oba* at Oyo and a *balogun* (warrior chief) at Ado. The allusions presume to locate Sango in Yoruba history, but it is not the historicity of the figure that is important. Instead it is the reality of what Sango represents for Yoruba political experience generally. The *ase* of a Yoruba king, said to be "like that of the *orisa*," includes the power over the life and death of his subjects. Kings, however, are prone to the abuse of their authority, and the awe and adulation which Yoruba kings receive is tempered by a deep suspicion toward their use of power.

Parts III through VI of the poem herald the praises of *orisa*: Osun, deity of medicinal waters and in some myths a wife to Sango; Esu, the guardian of the sacrificial way; and Ogun, god of iron and war. Sango himself is thus proclaimed an *orisa* among the great gods of the Yoruba pantheon.

In Parts VII through IX the singer again praises Sango and refers to various places, families, and persons that are devotees of Sango, including the singer herself, who chants:

*Here is my head before you,
The head that is eating eba,
The head that is eating fish,*

*The head that is eating snails,
The head that is eating ram.
Sango, to you I return.
Olodumare mi! (My Almighty One!)*

To hear Sango-pipe and to see an *ose* Sango (dancewand) in the context of a festival for Sango is to be confronted with a conflict of imagery. While the singer focuses upon the god's hot temper, capricious behavior, and destructive power, the carver of an *ose* provides us with the figure of a woman who kneels in quiet supplication before her lord, effortlessly balancing upon her head the twin thunderbolts of Sango (Figure 159). The *ose* is a visual representation of the one who holds it, as Abogunde, the great carver from Ede, knew so well (Figure 161). The *ose* depicts the *iwa* and the *ori inu*, of the worshipper of Sango. To be a follower of Sango is to suffer the power of an unpredictable deity. It is to bear the burden of the ancient celts of the god, who hurls them with crackling lightning in the midst of thunderstorms. As lightning is said to be drawn to an object, yet strikes with apparent caprice, so Sango descends upon the world of humankind. His followers "praise" him with the song:

*The dog stays in the house of its master
But does not know his intentions.
The sheep does not know the intentions
Of the man who feeds it.
We ourselves follow Sango,
Although we do not know his intentions.
It is not easy to live in Sango's company.
Rain beats the Egungun mask, because he cannot
find shelter.
He cries: "Help me, dead people in heaven! Help me!"
But the rain cannot beat Sango.
They say that fire kills water.
He rides fire like a horse.
Lightning—with what kind of cloth do you cover
your body?
With the cloth of death.
Sango is the death that drips to, to, to,
Like indigo dye dripping from a cloth.³²*

The unpredictable, capricious, self-serving *orisa* is also the one who imparts his beauty to the woman with whom he sleeps. He is the giver of children, (Figure 162) and protector of *ibebi* (twins) (Figures 164, 166). Thus, he is praised again by women in song:

*Where shall I find Jebooda, my husband?
He dances, as he sings with us.
He-who-destroys-the-wicked-with-his-truth....
He-who-spends-a-long-time-in-Oya's-grove;
The mighty one that shakes a town like rain.
For, when we wake up,
You who serve the whole world, father of Adeoti,
I will pay homage to you, my father.
Acting without paying due homage ruins one's efforts;
Acting after paying due homage brings one success.
We see marks on our palms but we do not know who
made them there.³³*

Another sculptural form found on Sango shrines in the Igbomina and Ekiti areas is the *arugba* Sango (Figure 167). *Arugba* means bowl carrier, and these large sculptures (often 3 to 3½ feet high) depict a female figure, either kneeling or seated, holding a large bowl above her head. The bowl contains the thunder celts of Sango and portions of kola nuts and other offerings made weekly to the deity. As in the *ose* Sango, where the celts protrude from the devotee's head, the bowl carrier bears the evidence of her lord's power, recalling the *oriki* in which Sango is referred to as the one who "adds stones to the light load of a person."

Figure 169 illustrates a superb example of an *arugba* Sango carved by Areogun (about 1880–1954) of Osi Ilorin in northern Ekiti.³⁴ In this sculpture Areogun has captured the graceful posture of a woman as she kneels to lift the heavy load that she has carried to the market. As a woman raises her arms in order to lift her load and place it on the ground, those around her will say: *Isokale anfani!* ("We wish you a good delivery!", meaning success in unloading). It is a phrase that is also used to address a pregnant woman who is approaching the time of giving birth.³⁵ Hence, Areogun has taken a well-known scene and transformed it into a revelation of a devotee of Sango. As a line from a Sango-pipe puts it: "The gentle son, who observes the actions of his wife. / The wife, who looks like an *arugba* Sango."³⁶ In the strength of her composed face, beautifully framed by her upraised arms, and in the apparent ease with which she balances the large bowl above her head, Areogun conveys the *ase* of the devotee.

The iconography of the great bowl is of considerable interest. Faces are embossed on the front of the bowl and its lid. When making offerings to Sango, the devotee will touch his or her own forehead and then one or both of the faces on the bowl with the kola nut offering or the head and blood of the sacrificial victim. The faces are painted with dark indigo coloring, as is the face of the figure who lies prostrate on the lid (Figure 170). In an Ifa verse the suppliant is instructed to desire to be colored "black," (*dudu*), which means to be possessed of the deep knowledge, (the *awo*), of Ifa. For the wisdom of Ifa is like looking into an indigo dye pot; its hidden depths cannot be seen.³⁷ The figure clutches in each hand a cock for sacrifice to the deity, and *ose* Sango hang from the outstretched worshipper's shoulders. On either side of the face on the lid are scenes carved in bas-relief of persons offering rams to Sango. In the scene to the right, Areogun has added the flute-playing figure of Esu. The remainder of the lid is decorated with a series of embossed *ose* Sango, and celts protrude on either side just above the hands of the