

Ifè and the Origin of the Yorùbá: Historiographical Considerations

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Among the peoples of Africa, the Yorùbá stand out as especially rich in testimonies of their past. In addition to the splendid works of art from Ifè, their traditional capital, their extensive mythical and historical traditions attracted the attention of European scholars from the beginning of the colonial period. Frobenius compared the richness of Yorùbá myths to that of the Egyptians, Baumann described the Yorùbá as the most outstanding people of 'Black Africa' with respect to their myths, and Mauny found Ifè to be the most important archaeological excavation site in Africa south of the Sahara². It is thus not surprising that the history of the Yoruba soon became the subject of numerous speculations.

According to Yorùbá mythology, the holy town of Ifè, or Ilé-Ifè, located in the middle of their land, is the centre of the universe and the origin of all mankind. It was here that Odùdùwa created the primordial oceans and the earth, and it was from here that his sons are believed to have set out to found the other sixteen kingdoms of the Yorùbá. Even today, Ifè is the home of the most respected Yorùbá king, and it is here that more festivals take place than in any other town. In fact, the people of Ifè claim that they celebrate at least one festival every day of the year. Furthermore, there are a number of stone monuments not normally found in most parts of tropical Africa, and it is from Ifè that most of the well-known Yorùbá statues of kings and gods come. Hence it is not surprising that the Yorùbá take pride in considering Ifè as the starting point of all their kingdoms and that they hold the town in honour as the profane centre of their religious universe.

But how is it possible to explain the remarkable cultural achievements associated with Ilé-Ifè ('house'/'home' of Ifè)? Were they the result of early influences from the Mediterranean civilisations, as Frobenius believed, or from Egypt, or even from the Near East, as some authors assumed? These questions, which gave rise to heated debate in the past, are today no longer taken into account. The reason for this could perhaps be found in the distinct break in African historiography, which was more radical with respect to the Yorùbá than it was with respect to other peoples. Whereas Africanist researchers in colonial times turned their attention mainly towards the advanced civilisations of the North, supposing that all cultural impetus, which led to the foundation of states and cultural development in 'Black Africa', must have spread from there, the postcolonial scholars, moved by the optimism of the early years of political independence, were fascinated by the prospect of disclosing the internal factors of development. Consequently, the postcolonial generation of Africanist historians rejected

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the concept of long-distance migrations of people coming from beyond the Sahara - the so-called Hamitic hypothesis - only admitting that people from the immediate vicinity might have introduced new ideas and new technologies. Both African and European researchers believed themselves to be more realistic than their predecessors by shortening the chronologies and limiting their inquiries to the interactions within a given society; at most, they also considered the influence of neighbouring people. To the scholars of this generation, only the stimuli engendered by long-distance trade were acceptable as foreign incentives for progress, but more often they assumed that the important cultural achievements were the result of internal developments owing nothing to the outside world. Indeed, for the history of many African peoples, paradigms were changed, but nowhere else was the research agenda so dramatically redefined as for the Yorùbá.

The Atlantis theory of Frobenius

At the beginning of this century, Leo Frobenius made a lasting impression on Yorùbá research. Following field trips to the Congo, as well as to West and North Africa, the ethnologist visited Yorùbáland in 1910, where he spent three months including three weeks in Ifè. There, his attention was mainly attracted by the Olókun grove, where he unearthed a bronze head of Olókun, the sea goddess, as well as seven terracotta heads. Furthermore, he meticulously recorded different versions of the Yorùbá myth of origin and described the court ceremonies and the palace of the king. On the other hand, he took little note of the many sacred festivals and mentioned the existence of temples and shrines only in connection with the objects he had found there. Upon his return to Germany, Frobenius claimed to have discovered the legendary Atlantis (Frobenius 1912a:323-351; id.: 1912b:347-375). He believed that, through his research, he had proven the historicity of the tales recorded by Plato concerning the powerful island city outside of the pillars of Hercules, which had sunk into the sea after a war against the Athenians (Plato 1922:35-42, 198-211). Although this claim was quite appealing to the general public, it was in the end very detrimental to the reputation of the ethnologist, since scholars began to suspect that the results of all his field research and his cultural-historical considerations were as dubious as his Atlantis theory (Becker 1913:303-312).

If one scrutinizes the evidence which Frobenius uses to support his thesis, one realises that there are a number of elements which can be interpreted as pointers to cultural influences from the Mediterranean world dating from the pre-Indo-European period. First of all, he notes the idea of the *templum*, a conception of the world divided into four cardinal directions, each subdivided again into four parts, which yields finally a sixteen-fold organisation. This structure is particularly apparent in the *Ifá* oracle, but it also seems to be reflected in the bureaucratic system, in the geographic subdivisions of the town of Ifè, and in the divine cosmos. Second, he points out the distinctive impluvial architecture, remarkable for its opening in the middle section of the house which allows in light as well as rain, which is then collected and stored in large water pots. Third, he observes that certain motifs perceived in the Ifè terracottas and bronze sculptures can also be found in old Mediterranean cultures. In particular, the so-called

Olókun head bears a remarkable resemblance to Sardinian terracotta masks (Frobenius 1912a:314-5), which have been unearthed in almost the same form in Carthage (Lipinski 1992:276). On the basis of these and other parallels, Frobenius draws the conclusion that the Yorùbá were deeply influenced by pre-classical Mediterranean culture.

It is with these sober comparisons that Frobenius attempts to prove the existence of a West African Atlantic culture, whose carriers migrated from across the seas. Given the fact that even the Carthaginian seafarer, Hanno did not know of the Yorùbá culture area at the time of his alleged journey in the 5th century BC., Frobenius concluded that contact between the Mediterranean and this West-Atlantic colony had broken down well before the Carthaginian expansion. Since, on the other hand, the cultural comparisons point to parallels with Etruscans and ancient Sardinians, he tries to construct a connection with the Sea of People of the 13th century BC. in which he sees representatives of a western Mediterranean culture. He supposes that carriers of the 'West Culture' had migrated to the Atlantic coast of West Africa where they founded Atlantis even before the Tursha (Etruscans) attacked Egypt (Frobenius 1912a:348). Frobenius thus confused things which simply had nothing to do with one another: Plato's Atlantis legend, the eastern Mediterranean Sea People, and the hypothetical 'West Culture', which, in his opinion, embraced the Druidic culture of Gaul as well as the Etruscan culture, or that of their ancestors, and that of the Libyans. The fact is that the Sea People initially proceeded from north to south and later from east to west, because the Etruscans and Sardinians are to be identified as the descendants and not the ancestors of the Tursha and the Shirdana, who are mentioned in Egyptian texts and who settled in the western Mediterranean after their defeat in Egypt.³

The strange connections constructed in Mediterranean history, which make the Atlantis thesis untenable, should not deter us from considering the possibility of cultural influences having spread from the pre-Indo-European Mediterranean region to the south. Frobenius maintained that the Phoenicians did not know the impluvial house and that they only practiced the templum religion in a degraded form (Frobenius 1912a:344). Was this really so? And how does this fit together with the expansion of glass making, the 'lost wax' method of producing bronze statues and hand looms? Without looking deeper into their origins, Frobenius presumed an early introduction of these techniques from the north, in order to support his Atlantis thesis. Moreover, he thought that Yorùbá mythical conceptions bear witness to influences from outside of Africa. In particular, Frobenius saw in the Yorùbá the descendants of Poseidon or Olókun, a name by which the earliest burial ground of Ifẹ̀ is denoted even today; it was here that he had unearthed the valuable bronzes and terracottas from Ifẹ̀. His critics understood him to have postulated a link with the Greeks, without taking into account that he had in view a pre-Indo-European population and also that the later Greeks themselves identified other peoples's sea god with their Poseidon. It is therefore unjustifiable to accuse Frobenius of ethnocentrism. Furthermore, it would have been more worthwhile for the progress of research if, instead of focusing exclusively on the identification of Olókun as the Greek Poseidon, one would have paid closer attention to the further considerations of the great ethnographer. For instance, why do the Yorùbá use the strange name Ẹ̀bolókun ('sacrifice of the sea god')

to designate the Olókun grove? And further, why is Ifè-Ifè sometimes also called *Ifè-Olókun* ('house' 'home' of Olókun)? It would have been more rewarding to explore such details on a broad mythological basis in view of the reconstruction of an earlier stage of Yorùbá culture, than to categorically dismiss all connections with the outside world.

In one of his later writings, Frobenius once again expresses his views about the Atlantis thesis. Without expressly retracting this thesis, he clearly dissociates himself from his earlier views by transferring the origin of his seafaring colonists further towards the east. Besides the Etruscans, he now also mentions the Pelasgians, the Phoenicians, the West Asians and the Hamito-Semites as possible candidates for an immigration. These peoples of the so-called Poseidonic culture would have been driven out and superceded by the Greeks (Frobenius 1926:x, xi-xvi, 8-10). When renowned archaeologists today claim that Frobenius traced back the founding of Ifè to Greek colonists, it is in every respect false.⁴ It was not Eurocentrism which inspired the brilliant ethnologist to develop his Atlantis thesis, but the insight derived from his vast Africanist knowledge that Yorùbá culture cannot be fully explained from within itself.

Other theses on the origin of the Yorùbá

As early as the beginning of the 19th century, the question of the origin of the Yorùbá had already attracted the interest of Muhammad Bello, son of Uthman dan Fodio and later ruler of the Sokoto-Empire. He committed to writing the traditions, related to him by Muslims from the North, according to which the Yorùbá were descendants of the Canaanites, belonging to the family of Nimrod (Bello 1964:48; trans. Arnett 1922:16).

In precolonial times, the clergyman Samuel Johnson gathered similar versions of the Yorùbá tradition of origin. He recorded them in Òyó, in the northern part of Yorùbáland, where the inhabitants had been in contact with the Muslims for centuries.⁵ According to Johnson, Oduduwà was the pagan heir to the crown of the King of Mecca, Lámúrudu (Nimrod). After the killing of his father by the Muslims, Oduduwà is supposed to have fled with his people to West Africa (Johnson 1921:3-4). Johnson assumed, no doubt, that the original home of the Yorùbá lay in the East. He believed that the Yorùbá had adopted certain practices and traditions of the Hebrews: a primitive form of baptism, oriental clothing, a distorted version of the biblical tale of the killing of the Baal priests by the prophet Elijah (1 Kings: 18) etc. He further thought that Hebrew or Phoenician letters figured on a stone memorial in Ifè, the famous 'staff of Òrányà n' (Johnson 1921:79, 110, 144-5, 154). In the sacrifice of *Èlè* by her own mother Morèmi (Miriam), which is still commemorated today in an annual festival in Ifè, he saw a degraded form of the Christian story of salvation (*ibid.*, 147-8). The relic called *lál* among the Òyó-Yorùbá, which people took to be a wrapped-up Koran, he regarded as a rolled-up copy of the Holy Scriptures (*ibid.*, 7).⁶ He interpreted these vestiges as an indication of an earlier impact of the Christian-Coptic religion on the Yorùbá. On the basis of the traditions of origin, he reached the conclusion that the Yorùbá migrated from Nubia, where they were supposed to have lived for a long time under Phoenician rule (*ibid.*, 6-7). In spite of Johnson's extremely useful material, his historical reconstruction stands on shaky ground, because even chronologically, the Phoenicians cannot be related

to the Coptic Christians.

Likewise, the missionary Stephen Farrow regards Yorùbá religion from the perspective of the Old Testament. Several cultural parallelisms between the Yorùbá and the Hebrews attracted his attention (Farrow 1926:7). In the realm of myth, he mentions the story of the Flood and a tale about the origin of the Ifá oracle which resembles the Fall (Ellis 1894:58-64). Concerning the similarities of sacrificial practices, Farrow delves more intensively into the matter: he compares the burnt offering practiced as a purification rite with the sacrifice of the Israelites prescribed by the Levitical Code, the release of a sacrificial animal with the practice of sending a scapegoat into the bush and the sprinkling of blood on the two doorposts and the threshold during certain sacrifices with the Passover festival (Farrow 1926:97, 167). On the other hand, he is convinced that it is possible to recognise in Qbè tálá, who participated with the high god (*òlórún*) in the act of creation and who was also called the 'son of *òlórún*', ideas expressed in the New Testament about the agency of the divine *Logos* in the work of creation and the existence of a 'son of God' (*ibid.*, 167). Farrow made no conjectures about the possible historical connections, but he felt that these parallels could be more easily traced back to an early relationship with the Hebrews than to a later influence through Christianity. He thus tended to believe that the Yorùbá were immigrants with a Semitic background (*ibid.*, 44, 166-8).

Less influenced by Biblical ideas was Pastor J. Olúmidé Lucas who perceived the Yorùbá as Egyptian immigrants who came across the Sudan to West Africa. In support of his theory, Lucas produces extensive linguistic and other comparative material. For example, he provides Egyptian derivations for the names of forty Yorùbá gods and for more than one hundred and fifty words. His proposed etymologies are however very vague and since neither the assumed phonetic and semantic similarities are convincing, they cannot be accepted as evidence for historical reconstruction. The view held by Lucas, that the original home of the Yorùbá was in northern Egypt, from where the immigrants reached West Africa by crossing the Sudan, is therefore as unconvincing as Johnson's Coptic thesis (Lucas 1948:353).

Next we should turn to the colonial ethnographer P. Amaury Talbot whose general considerations seem at first sight to be more plausible, although they are founded on little concrete evidence. In the historical introduction to his voluminous *Ethnography of the Peoples of Southern Nigeria* he postulates a connection between the migration of the Yorùbá, the introduction of bronze technology into southern Nigeria and the domination of Egypt by the Hyksos in the 17th century BC. He supposes that soon after their arrival in West Africa, the Yorùbá founded Ifè and made it their capital. Later they became adept in the making of pottery and in iron-work. According to Talbot, the god of war and iron, Ògún, reached the Yorùbá together with the technology of iron production. He even expressed the idea that the great migration of the Bantu people right across Africa was the result of an influx of people from the Nile valley somewhat connected with the Yorùbá immigration. Rejecting Frobenius' theory of communications with pre-Carthagenians by sea, Talbot suggested that remnants of Tyrrhenian arts and beliefs had filtered through by war of the Carthagenians, who were closely allied with

the Etruscans. Although he specifically mentions examples of Mycenaean and other old Mediterranean influences in West Africa, he thinks that the principal foreign influence was that of Egypt. Contrary to the early Frobenius, he maintains that aspects of the Yoruba religion, together with the glass-ware, water-storage structures and terra-cottas came from the north-east, not from the north (Talbot 1926, vol. 1:19-22).

We are indebted to Sè bírì Bìbákú for the first and until now the only coherent treatise regarding the origin of the Yorùbá (Bìbákú 1955). This historian endeavours in the first place to distinguish between various waves of Yorùbá migrations which followed each other, thereby somewhat neglecting the cultural connections of the Yorùbá with the outside world. Relying mainly on the literal interpretation of oral traditions, he comes to the conclusion that two great Yorùbá migration thrusts have to be differentiated from one another, an early migration in the 7th century AD. and a later migration in the 10th century AD. Most decisive for this chronology is the assumption that the Yorùbá took part in the Kisra migration. Following Frobenius, Bìbákú identifies Kisra with the Persian ruler Khusrau Parviz, whose troops occupied Egypt from 619-628 AD. According to him, a second group immigrants from upper Egypt, led by Odùduwa, reached Yorùbáland and founded Ifè in the tenth century AD. Bìbákú was thoroughly convinced that all characteristic features of Yorùbá culture were introduced to West Africa by migrant groups from Upper Egypt and the Near East: polytheism tinged with Judaism, advanced arts and crafts, urban culture and political institutions (*ibid.*, 20-3).

Since independence, the regional paradigm has replaced the transcontinental theories of the origin of African peoples. The new point of view is determined by the conviction that African peoples, like the European nation states, are best defined by their language. Yorùbá belongs to the Kwa language group and is, despite considerable cultural divergencies, closely related to its neighbouring languages. Instead of looking to the people of the Mediterranean area, be they Pelasgian, Etruscan, Phoenician, Egyptian or Hebrew, historians now only consider closely related peoples as possible candidates for particular migration movements. More attention is however devoted to the attempt to discover endogenous factors to explain cultural developments, such as the 'lost wax' technique for the casting of bronze sculptures, glass production and iron-ore smelting, that far-reaching external influences are considered, and then exclusively in the context of trade relationship. On the basis of the feedback theory developed by Henige and others, traditions of origin which point to links with places and peoples outside of Africa are generally dismissed as late inputs from written material.⁷

The archaeological age of Ifè

Historians placed great expectations on archaeological research in Ifè, where Frobenius had found at the beginning of this century, the naturalistic bronze and terracotta heads. Ifè is located in the center of all Yorùbá myths and traditions; it is here that Odùduwa is believed to have created the earth, and from here the founders of the different Yorùbá kingdoms were supposed to have emerged. Even today, people point out the place where Odùduwa descended on a chain from heaven down to earth. A number of stone monuments, as well as ritual and burial sites of the rulers of Ifè and

Benin can all be found in the town or in its immediate vicinity. Frobenius pointed out that Ifẹ was surrounded on all sides by swamps, which is why the site of the town could not be shifted (Frobenius 1912a:271-2). Therefore, it may be supposed that the earliest settlement site of Ifẹ is located more or less within the precincts of the present town.

However, the thin settlement remains make the discovery of a relatively undisturbed stratigraphy quite unlikely. Furthermore archaeologists have focused their attention on the sites in which the inhabitants of the town found art objects and not on the remains of the town as such. It was first in the seventies that Peter Garlake excavated a site in order to answer questions about the history of the town (Garlake 1977:57-96). It was then discovered that the locations where bronze and terracotta figures were most commonly found did not correspond to their primary contexts. In some cases, the objects had obviously been hidden to protect them from theft. Even today, some of the figures which 'return to life' during annual festivals are carefully buried again in specific places at the end of the ceremonies. Moreover since the present-day inhabitants of Ifẹ seldom know anything precise about the customs and practices of their ancestors, it is quite difficult to estimate the original functions and even more so the age of the pieces one finds.

The situation is quite different in Igbó Olókun (the Olókun grove), located north of the town, where Frobenius discovered the naturalistic heads and several broken artifacts. For centuries, the inhabitants of Ifẹ have been digging up glass beads as well as bronze and terracotta objects at this site. If they were lucky, they came upon burial chambers at a depth of four to seven meters in which they found urns with glass beads and terracotta figures. Furthermore, glass-making crucibles from Igbó Olókun can be found in relatively recent shrines of the city, but it seems that all knowledge of these crucibles had already been lost at the time of their reuse, because some of them were containing heads and in one case people were convinced to have discovered the 'drum of Odùduwá (Willett 1967:24-5). Nevertheless, the crucibles, the slagg and the beads from Igbó Olókun tend to show that Ifẹ was the center of a productive glass industry (Frobenius 1912a:311-2).⁸ With respect to the naturalistic terracotta heads, Frank Willett, who for many years led the excavations in Ifẹ, is of the opinion that they represent specific kings and he supposes that they were used to take the place of the kings during the second burials. In his view, the findings from two other important places in Ifẹ, the Wúnmonjẹ compound and the grove of Olókun Wálódè, were also originally from Igbó Olókun (Willett 1967:24-6). In spite of the significance of these findings, there were no excavations undertaken in Igbó Olókun, the most important primary site of Ifẹ, with the exception of a few test pits in the early days of the archaeological investigations (Fagg 1953:849). Consequently there are also no datings available for the obviously oldest site in Ifẹ. We do not know for certain whether Igbó Olókun once belonged to the Ifẹ settlement area or not.

The site of Ìta Yemòó, located in the northeast of Ifẹ, close to the old town wall, deserves special consideration. Near this site, Willett found bronze and terracotta figures, in their archaeological context, close to a particular ritual site, which still plays a major part in the Ọbà tálá festival. The figures lay on a potsherd pavement. Willett

identified the place as a ritual site enclosed by mud walls and roofed (Willett 1971b:1-35). The datings of the pavements fall between the 11th and 12th centuries; the materials underneath the pavements were dated at a time shortly before this (Willett 1971b:24; Shaw 1978:148). Since the bronze figures lay on the same type of pavement, it was first assumed that they belonged to the same period. However, two thermoluminescence datings, obtained later from fired clay remains found inside of the bronze figures, show that they only date from the 14th or 15th century (Willett and Fleming 1976:138). Despite this discrepancy, it is clear that *Ìta Yemòó* is a site belonging to the middle age.

Dates from the 15th and 16th centuries are available for three further bronze figures from *Ifè*, which were not found in their original contexts (Willett and Fleming 1976: 136-7). The pavement under the remains of a templum house excavated by Garlake, with which sherds from glass melting pots were also associated, yielded dates from the 13th and 14th centuries (Garlake 1977:72.) These various elements prove that the classical period in *Ifè* and the glass production associated with it have to be dated in the 12th to 14th centuries and that, as far as we now know, the bronze figures were produced in the 14th and 15th centuries.

On account of these dates, several authors have distinguished three periods in the history of the town of *Ifè*: an early period without pavements, a pavement period and a late period also without pavements, in which the middle of the three corresponds to the classical period (Shaw 1978:162-3; *Ọbáyemí* 1985:271). Three considerations, however, make it doubtful that this periodisation can claim general validity. First, it may be assumed that *Igbó Olókun* was once part of the *Ifè* settlement area and that it had been abandoned a long time ago; as long as there are no datings or stratigraphically well-defined findings available for the site, no valid estimation as to the age of the town can be made. Second, for the present area of the town, the dates obtained for the burial grounds of the rulers of Benin confirm that the city was already settled from the 6th to the 10th century (Willett 1971a:365-6). Since *Ifè* is older than Benin, the founding date for the former must be placed much further in the past. Third, the double figure from *Ìta Yemòó* which has most frequently been identified as the 'royal' pair could actually represent the divine couple, *Ọbà tálá* and *Yemòó*⁹, since the figure was found near the present shrine of the goddess *Yemòó* (which is the reason why the site is called *Ìta Yemòó*) (Euba 1985:9). However, there are indications that *Ọbà tálá* and *Yemòó* were originally two antagonistic deities in *Ifè* mythology.¹⁰ If this assumption is correct one would have to suppose that *Ifè*'s 'classical period' was a rather late period, in terms of the evolution of mythology. Given these elements of doubt, it seems rather risky to date the process of political centralisation and the formation of a priesthood to the beginning of the archaeologically proven 'classical period' in *Ifè* (Shaw 1978:157-9). In view of the numerous, archaeologically unresolved questions about *Ifè*, one should not rule out the possibility that the peak of *Ifè* culture has to be dated much further back in time than historians are now prepared to admit.

Concluding remarks

Since independence, Africanist historians were eager to stigmatise the cultural-historical approach as a method which has only in view to prove the validity of the Hamitic hypothesis. But in fact, by turning away from the external historical context, historians have given up considering important phenomena in African history, leaving these subjects to other disciplines. The origin of the Afro-Asiatic remnant-languages and cultures of the Chadian region were henceforth only a subject for linguists, who in turn mostly contented themselves with internal reconstructions and failed to take chronology into account; the Bantu expansion, which originated around the Lake Chad area or somewhere to the south of it, is about to become a domain for linguists who cannot be expected to consider possible links with political upheavals affecting the regions north and northeast of the Sahara. A further consequence of this demise is the blind confidence placed in archaeological findings and their interpretation by a handful of archaeologists dealing with the proto-historical period. For them, the middle Nile valley was, according to the formulation of Connah, not a corridor but a cul-de-sac (Connah 1987:24-66). Before the coming of the camel to North Africa and the rise of the regular trans-Saharan trade, the Sahara was also thought to be a strong barrier to the circulation of ideas and people (Mauny 1970:78-137). This means that most of the continent was severed from the world and regarded as a self-standing isolated entity.

The isolationist approach has the strongest effect on the problem of state foundation. Whereas earlier explanations used the idea of a common denominator to account for the similarities of African sacred kingdoms (Oliver and Page 1988:31-8), historians now see these states as totally independent entities, shooting up out of the ground like mushrooms. Vague trade relationships, an imaginary threat of an unknown enemy, or just a *clever big man*, who can be found everywhere, are in this vein thought to be enough to speed up the process of political centralisation which mutates a tribe into a state. At the time in which the euphoria of independence was making waves, it seemed imperative to assign the precolonial foundation of states to a recent period, in order to document the steady growth of civilisation in Africa, which could be continued after the gloomy chapter of colonial exploitation¹¹. Similarly, indications of regressive development and cultural decay were ignored, even if the corresponding periods might have proven to be momentary and reversible, since such considerations were out of tune in a time of inbridled Afro-optimism. At present, with the first stages of postcolonialism behind us, should not the historians dismount from their high horses and focus their energies more on the facts than on mere wishful thinking?

As far as the Yorùbá are concerned, the break between colonial and postcolonial historiography was more radical than it was for any other African people. Far away from the shores of the Mediterranean and the banks of the Nile, it seemed to the historian, interested in world history, that the ground had been pulled out from under him. Here archaeology also had its hour of glory. And indeed, with the available dating methods, it was unobjectionably proven that the classical culture from Ifè did not belong to the murky prehistory of presumed foreign influences, as Frobenius and others had believed, but to the late middle ages. In this time, glass bead production as well as

terracotta and bronze artwork flourished, and many houses and temples in the town were covered with pavements of pebbles and potsherds. No one should claim that we are faced here with a declining culture which has no prospect for revival and genuine development.

On the other hand, these momentous signals of African creativity do not rule out the possibility that basic elements of statehood, the cult of the dead, the prime mythical concepts, as well as urbanity, which formed the background of the artistic creations today admired worldwide, were rooted much earlier among the Yorùbá. Ifẹ flourished in the late middle ages, there is no doubt about that, but with the datings available to us today, the problem of the founding of the city is far from being resolved. Possible connections with cultures of the outside world in early periods of African history should in our time no longer, *ipso facto* be brandmarked as diffusionist absurdities belonging to the colonial age and thus land on the garbage heap of outdated ideas.¹² Only when the historian of Ancient Africa is prepared to acknowledge that a process of decay might precede or succeed a process of growth, will he be able to cast off the role of a professional panegyrist and instead serve enlightenment, irrespective of ideological and academic opposition.

NOTES

1. This article was originally written in German for readers with no knowledge of Yorùbá culture and history ("Ifẹ und der Ursprung der Yorùbá: Historiographische Betrachtungen." *Periplus* 5,(1995)). In the hope that the article might be useful in reviving the debate on Yorùbá origins', it has been translated into English and republished - in a slightly revised and expanded form - in this journal.
2. Frobenius 1926:199; Baumann 1936:132; Mauny 1961:182.
3. Kienitz 1982:104-8, 165-70, 197-8; Stadelmann 1984:814-822.
4. Willett 1967:14; Smith 1988:23; Shaw 1978:127-8.
5. For a biographical sketch of Samuel Johnson's career see Doortmont 1991:167-182.
6. *idī* means 'bundle'.
7. Beier 1955:25-32; Smith 1988:13-28; Law 1973:25-40; Shaw 1978:157-163; Obáyemí 1985:255-322. For a general presentation of the feed back theory see Henige 1982:81-87.
8. Shaw expresses doubts as to whether the glass itself was made locally (1978:146).
9. Willett thought that they represented the Q̄ṣ̄ni (King of Ifẹ) and his queen (1967:Pl. '10, III, p. 72).
10. For a detailed description of the festival, see Stevens 1966:184-199.
11. For more on this euphoria and its pervading influence on African historiography see Vansina 1994:111-136.
12. Concerning Yorùbá history, see the recently published article of Zachernuk 1994:427-455; for the opposite view see Lange 1994:213-328.

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