Recent excavations in western Nigeria conducted by the Department of Antiquities of the Government of Nigeria indicate that the town of Uno—situated between Ila and Benin—may provide long-sought clues to the puzzling interrelationships which link these two famous art centers. Though our analysis is not yet complete, the quality and quantity of the finds must now place Uno on the archaeological map of Nigeria together with such better-known sites as Nok, Igbo-Ukwu and Benin.

Today, Uno is a fairly large town some seventy miles north of Benin and about one hundred miles east of Ila. Its culture is more Binin than Yoruba in character: the Yoruba’s (i.e., king’s) regalia are similar to those of the Obas of Benin, many of the Yoruba gods have Binin names and most rituals and ceremonies have their counterparts in Benin City.

Uno’s traditions date back to Binin tradition. Uno was at one time under the suzerainty of the Obas of Benin. The people of Uno are Binin in origin, and most rituals and ceremonies have their counterparts in Benin City.

The local Ovao historian, Chief M. B. Ashara, says that the Ovo people branched out from the main Yoruba stock about A.D. 1100 when they migrated from Ille-Ife, where, as the Yoruba believe, they and all mankind were created. The migration is said to have been led by Ojokubelu (sometimes called Araye), youngest of the sixteen sons of Odudua, father of all the Yoruba people. According to tradition, Odudua came down to Ille-Ife from Egypt or the Sudan, or following the Yoruba creation myth, descended from heaven. The Yoruba all agree that he settled Ille-Ife, and that from Ille-Ife all his sons migrated to found other Yoruba kingdoms.

Various reasons are given for these migrations. In the case of Ojokubelu, it is said that Odudua forgot to mention him in his will because the son was away on a hunting expedition at the time the will was made. When Ojokubelu returned, he decided to leave Ille-Ife accompanied by twelve warrior chiefs and other followers. The party first settled at Ulim before moving on to Upata, near Ijebu. At Upata, Ojokubelu died and leadership of the party fell to his eldest son, Imade.

Because of frequent attacks on their colony by earlier settlers, and because of constant threat from neighboring tribes, the inhabitants led their people from Upata—starting first at Oke-Imoda, a hill five miles southwest of the present town of Owo—and eventually moving on to another hill, Oke-Asepo, where they either drove out the indigenous people of Etoni, or assimilated them into the new kingdom.

Chief Ashara says that the new settlement was called "Ogbeligo," named for an Ille-Ife oracle which they brought with them from Ille-Ife, but that the name has since been corrupted to "Owo" because the Yoruba cannot pronounce "gh." Chief Ashara states that Imade and his followers arrived at the present site of Owo about A.D. 1210. But we have been unable to learn his reason for this dating.

It has been difficult to establish whether Ojokubelu’s, Imade’s father, was one of the original sixteen sons of Odudua and therefore entitled to wear the beaded crown. William Bascom estimates that there are at least fifty kings in Yoruba today who wear beaded crowns. It is reported that in 1903 the Ovin of Ife, who has always been regarded as head of all Yoruba kings, counted the Owo of Owo as one of those entitled to wear such a crown; but in 1917 the Owo was not listed among the crown wearers by the Governor of Lagos. The implication appears to be that the exact relationship between Ife and Owo has been vague for some time.

Our present evaluation throws some light on this question. We believe there should no longer be any doubt that the Owo people are a sub-group of the Yoruba and that they migrated from Ille-Ife. However, the testimony of some aspects of Owo’s culture to that of Benin has blurred the nature of its relationship with the main Yoruba stock to such an extent that Chief Ashara concludes, "If Owo speak a corrupt form of Yoruba".

The presentation which we carried out in Owo provides archaeological evidence that the town’s origin can be traced to Ife, but we accept similarities of art objects as weak indicators. But we have also found evidence of the influence exercised upon the outlying Yoruba towns by the powerful kingdom of Benin.

Benin Kingdom is made up of Edo-speaking peoples, and although the present Benin dynasty is said to have been established by a Yoruba, Prince Omoregbe—either through conquest or by arragement of a Yoruba expansionist policy of Benin City from the fifteenth century onwards has made the kingdom foremost and respected by its Yoruba neighbors. The Benin historian, Chief Egharevba, first mentions Owo in connection with an incident during the reign of King Aghie (who assumed the crown c. A.D. 1440). Egharevba says that Owo “rebelled” during Eunwu’s time, and that King Eunwu, a powerful chief at Ubulu, near Benin City, was dispatched with a large army to quell the insurrection, “for they, Owo (succeeded).” Eunwu himself was later killed, after sending his soldiers, captives and spoils to Benin City.

Eunwu the Great was succeeded in Benin by Essa and Estokh by Odusola, who came to the throne about 1481. Shortly thereafter, Odusola marched on Owo and was surprised that the people capitulated so readily. One of Odusola’s sons was made the Owa (Olowo) of Owo. Recalling that Chief Ashara had said the name “Owo” is a corrupt form of “Ogbeligo,” it is interesting to note that Chief Egharevba explains its etymology differently. He says that when King Odudua found the Owo people so humble and submissive, he changed their name “Ogbeligo” or “Ogbeligo,” which means “respect” — which was given to them by the Binin.

Another important phase of Owo history has been recorded in both Owo itself and Benin City. Since Osogboye of Owo was sent to the court in Benin during the reign of Oba Eghenuwa (c. 1578) to learn the arts of administration. He was made one of the sword-bearers (cmono-adia). When Osogboye’s father died in Owo, the prince ran away from court and returned home to take over the throne of Owo without Eghenuwa’s permission. Sent for by the Owa, Osogboye lingered ill at ease despite the efforts of some of his compatriots and was received by the Governor of Owo. His fortifications were completed, he requested Oba Eghenuwa to validate his installation as Olowo of Owo.

Benin sources state that Osogboye was cautioned, confirmed and left alone; Owo sources say that the troops which marched against the new Olowo were defeated. Whichever version is correct, it should be quite clear that Benin exercised some authority over Owo. Otherwise, why should it have been necessary for an heir to the throne of Owo, a Yoruba town, to receive his training in the court of an Edo kingdom? Why was it necessary that the Oba of Benin confirm an Olowo on the throne? Furthermore, in his revised manuscript on the history of Owo, Chief Ashara records that when messengers were killed in Owo before the Oba of Benin, an act of homage. He explains that Osogboye was sent to Benin rather than to Ife because of Osogboye’s birth relations, and because Owo is nearer to Benin than to Ife. He cites an additional reason for the tie between Owo and Benin, as an attempt by the founder of the present Benin dynasty, Prince Onraimy, and the founders of Benin to win the support of the Benin dynasty. These reasons may be regarded as untenable because in all probability the Owo people migrated from Ife as they claimed, and normally could be expected to have more ties with Ife than with Benin, irrespective of the dynasty. Osogboye could have come under the suzerainty of Benin in normal circumstances, but it is probably true, as Robert Smith suggests, that an Edo never sat on the Owo throne.

Against this historical background, we can bullet evidence that the significance of our excavation at Owo. In 1970, Chief J. D. Akereolu of the Nigerian Department of Antiquities reported that some fragments of terracotta sculpture in Ife style were dug up by a surveyor planting a building. Subsequently, the fragments were excavated at Egbewa in the Owo area. When the fragments were examined, they were convinced that they were indeed of Ife style. We succeeded in stopping the building operation, but our excavation did not start until January, 1971. While excavation was in progress, it was discovered that the site was a former Igbo Alaja, a sacred grove used for worship by one of the most important Owo cults connected with the goddess Orunmeri.
Excavation of Igbo Alaja, Nigeria. Sequence of the two A and B rows of terracotta finds 1.5 meters square, with balks, each half a meter in width.

2. Cultural materials excavated but left in situ after the balks were removed.

3. Close-up of some of the sculptures still lying in situ. Note the leopard's head and claws and a fragment of human leg with beaded ankle.

4. Fragment of sculptured face in terracotta with incisions, photographed in situ.

5. Offering pot in Ife style except that there were everted rims. The pot, which normally contain palm wine, were left in the grove after the annual rituals.

6. A seated arm holding a bunch of sacred leaves from the okroko tree. These leaves are used during installation ceremonies of kings in Yorubaaland. They are also placed on a fragment of arm excavated by the writer at Lafogda, Ife, in 1969.

7. Standing hollow figure with a mask dress. The head is beaded and the right hand holds either a fly whisk or a bunch of sacred leaves.

8. Fragment of arm with elongated fingers holding a fragment of a pot with hangingbone decoration. The elongation of the figures is a style which can be paralleled in Ife.

9. A terracotta head holding sacred leaves from the okroko tree.

There may have been a return flow as well, since the Ife Empire, at the height of its power, could well have influenced its neighboring kingdoms, including Benin. Such a possibility may account for the fact that works of art in Ife styles have also been recovered from Ife.

The importance of the Owo finds lies in the fact that, when they are fully analyzed, some more light will be shed on the difficult question of the relationship between the arts of Ife and Benin. Already, Owo provides a bridge which appears to link the two centers.

We discovered so much material that if we had excavated a larger plot, we might well have found ourselves with more than we could handle.

I had as my associates on this expedition: James Lewis, an art historian from Morgan State College; Miriam Alpern, an American student at the University of Lagos; and six members of the Department of Antiquities: Chief Akaredolu, Patrick Odkula, Rosetta George, F. Olugbade, Pius Adefi and Arruwa Bala. I wish to thank all of them for their contributions which I would have been able to have a successful operation, and I hope I shall again have the services of at least some of these colleagues in next year's expedition to Owo.

Professor Lewis has accepted my invitation to return and provides his special expertise which was so valuable in the original Owo dig.

To date, the materials from the Igbo Alaja have not been studied in any great detail, but the cists on the photographs point out resemblances between these finds and the stylistic hallmarks of Ife and Benin art. The obvious inference would appear to be that when the Owo people migrated from Ife, they took with them the art of making terracotta sculpture in Ife style, and that after they settled in their present location, because of their contact with Benin, they introduced Bini styles and motifs into their art. The objects which display motifs not found in either Ife or Benin indicate a freedom from the two art styles and an independent expression which we call Owo style.

Classical Ife art has been dated as coming from the ninth century A.D., and the Benin classical period from the fifteenth century. The earliest date obtained so far from Owo is 1435. So we know that life tradition did not die out in Owo before the fifteenth century, roughly the time when Benin classical art tradition began on its home ground. Indeed, it might well be that Bini tradition actually was introduced from Ife through Owo. William Fagg of the British Museum believes that the Obas of Benin, after subjugating the Owo people, may have used Owo craftsmen in their court to make ivory carvings; many of these carvings in Owo style have been recovered in Benin. If this theory is correct, it's not unlikely that such craftsmen, and others working in different media—e.g., terracotta and brass—would also have introduced new techniques into the Bini court. All of this does not mean that the current flow in one direction only—from Ife to Benin.
1. The present priest of Oba Aja wearing a terracotta head. The head was most probably found by accident, a hole drilled in it, and used as a pendant. Such use is of later development, for Owo-like life heads were most probably used as shrines or tomb furniture. This particular fragment, which was not excavated, was brought out by the priest from a secret grove, three miles away from the excavated site, where it was kept and used as part of paraphernalia of the priest during annual festival connected with Owo or the Igbo Cult.

2. Terracotta head in Ibo style with scarifications and "monopod" eyes. The nose, however, is wrong for Ibo and the corners of the mouth are dimpled. The chin is rather abbreviated.

3. Another terracotta head in Ibo style which should be compared with one of the brass heads from Wumoniye Compound. However, unlike heads from Ibo, this mouth is open.

4. A miniature head in Ibo style with scarifications.

5. Terracotta sculpture showing a broad, bearded face with snake issuing from the mouth, which occurs in Ibo and Benin.

6. Fragment of a face showing Benin traits. For example, the marks above both eyes are found on Benin terracottas and brass heads. The eyes are very prominent, like those on Benin brass and terracotta heads, while William Fagg considers to belong to the middle and late periods of Benin art.

7. Leopard in a crouched position with a human leg in its mouth. Leopards appear in some Yoruba art forms, for example, the Ede masks from northern Ede, but more often in Yoruba land do they enjoy such prominence, treated as heras in Owo, the influence being that it is in keeping with Yoruba tradition. Note that the spots are treated in the same way as those on ivory and brass leopards in Benin.
1. Piece of pottery showing a fish and a cow from Benin in the Nigerian Museum.

2. Some of the objects from Ife satisfy the theme of votive offerings. For example, this photograph shows a clay ritual basket with fruits, prominent among which are kola nuts which are shown in Yoruba rituals and offerings.

3. Terracotta dies with undeciphered motifs. They were apparently worn on the forehead of a sculpture similar to the Debba Bow- man and many Benin bronzes found.

4. Clay model of a basket containing heads of sacrificial victims. Note the braided hair, the tribal marks and the split wounds.

5. Still on the theme of votive offerings, this photograph shows a devotee carrying a goat whose legs are tied together.

6. A throny modelled head, stylized but having scarifications like those on the work. The head has whisker marks which are said to be tribal marks of the Nupi people.

7. Another votive offering, another cock with legs tied together.

8. Another presentation piece, this time a hand with a ringed thumb presenting a rat. Chief Ashara records that during the ceremony of the cult of Oriocoa, two hundred rats are usually offered. Note that in the picture it is common to find the second foe wearing a ring in the same way as the thumb in this photograph.

9. An animal variously identified as a ram or an elephant, held by two human hands on the sides of the head in a position for presentation.
1. Two hands with interlocked palms. One hand wears a bracelet. The modelling of the muscles shows how careful was the artist's observation of human anatomy.

2. Highly decorated ceremonial pot, the only such pot so far found in West African archaeology. The open mouth is continued down three-quarters of the height of the pot with a cylinder hanging down inside like a stalactite. There is also a spout or hole at the side, apparently so that the liquid poured in through the main mouth could be poured out through this side opening; the stalactite funnel preventing the liquid from coming out the same channel it went in.

3. Half figure which shows only one side characteristic, the eyes. Other characteristics appear to belong to a distinctive style which may be called Owo. Note the elongated lower lip, the elaborately-carved necklace, the plain round cap and the gentle smile.

4. A modelled clay head which must be regarded as entirely Owo style since it falls outside the styles of both Ife and Benin.

5. A bearded, mustached, and capped mid-aged man with wide eyes and wide, flaring nose and a wave of expression across his forehead. This also is a distinctive Owo art style.

Suggested Reading

Credits
All photographs, Eko O. Eko.