

New Treasures from Nigeria

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

Today, Owo is a fairly large town some seventy miles north of Benin and about one hundred miles east of Ife. Its culture is more Bini than Yoruba in character: the Olowo's (i.e., king's) regalia are similar to those of the Oba of Benin, many of the art forms parallel Bini work and most rituals and ceremonies have their counterparts in Benin City.

According to Bini tradition, Owo was at one time under the suzerainty of the Obas of Benin; the Owo people themselves maintain that they have never been conquered. However, whether Owo ever fell prey to conquest or not, it is clear in the town of today, and indeed in prehistoric times—as I hope to illustrate—that Owo was greatly influenced by Benin.

Though one of the more important Yoruba towns today, Owo is relatively obscure in recorded history, probably due to its location in the extreme eastern portion of Yorubaland. The events commemorated in the oral tradition of the western

sector appear not to have been recorded there. For example, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries a series of wars was being fought between Dahomey on one hand, and the northern Yoruba kingdom of Oyo and the Egba city of Abeokuta on the other; there was also internal strife affecting Oyo, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ijesha and Ekiti. These events do not appear to have involved Owo and other eastern Yoruba towns.

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

Various reasons are given for these migrations. In the case of Ojugbelu, it is said that Oduduwa forgot to mention him in his will because the son was away on a hunting expedition at the time the will was made. When Ojugbelu returned, he decided to leave Ile-Ife accompanied by twelve warrior chiefs and other followers. The party first settled at Ujin before moving on to Upafa, near Idanre. At Upafa, Ojugbelu 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 thunder and lightning, Imade led his people from Upafa—stopping first at Oke-Imade, a hill five miles southwest of the present town of Owo—and eventually moving on to another hill, Oke-Asegbo, where they either drove out the indigenous people, the Efene, or absorbed them into the new kingdom.

Chief Ashara says that the new settlement was called "Oghor," named for an Ifa oracle which they brought with them from Ile-Ife, but that the name was subsequently corrupted to "Owo" because the Yoruba cannot pronounce *gh*. Chief Ashara states that Imade and his followers arrived at the present site of Owo c. A.D. 1210, but we have been unable to learn his reasons for this dating.

It has been difficult to establish whether Ojugbelu, Imade's father, was one of the original sixteen sons of Oduduwa and therefore entitled to wear the beaded crown. William Bascom estimates that there are at least fifty kings in Yorubaland today who wear beaded crowns. It is reported that in 1903 the Oni of Ife, who has always been regarded as head of all Yoruba kings, counted the Olowo of Owo as one of those entitled to wear such a crown; but in 1917 the Olowo 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 Ile-Ife. However, the similarity of some aspects of Owo culture to that of Benin has blurred the nature of its relationship with the main Yoruba stock to such an extent that even Chief Ashara concedes, "The Owo speak a corrupt form of Yoruba."

The excavation which we carried out in Owo provides archaeological evidence that the town's origin can be traced to Ife, if we accept similarities of art objects as valid indicators. But we also found evidence of the influence exercised upon this outpost Yoruba town 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 Oranmiyan—either through conquest or by arrangement—the expansionist policy of Benin City from the fifteenth century onwards has made the kingdom feared and respected by its Yoruba neighbors. The Bini historian, Chief Egharevba, first mentions Owo in connection with an incident during the reign of King Ewuare the Great (who assumed the crown c. A.D. 1440). Egharevba says that Owo "rebelled" during Ewuare's time, and that Iken, a powerful chief at Uselu, near Benin City, was dispatched with a large army to quell the insurrection. "After short but severe fighting, they (Owo) surrendered." Iken himself was later killed, after sending his soldiers, captives and spoils to Benin City.

Ewuare the Great was succeeded in Benin by Ezoti, and Ezoti by Ozolua, who came to the throne about 1481. Shortly thereafter, Ozolua



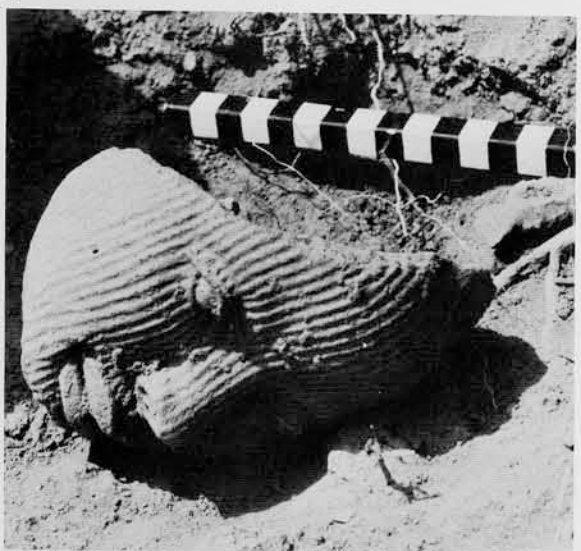
Ekpo O. Eyo (right) is Director of Antiquities of the Nigerian Government. His graduate degrees include the Diploma of the Museums Association of Great Britain and Ireland and the Diploma of London University in Conservation of Archaeological Materials. He is a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland and is the author of various articles on African archaeology and ethnology. He is shown here with James E. Lewis of Morgan State College.

marched on Owo and was surprised that the people capitulated so readily. One of Ozolua's sons was made the Owa (Olowo) of Owo. Recalling that Chief Ashara had said the name "Owo" is a corrupt form of "Ogho," it's interesting to note that Chief Egharevba explains its etymology differently. He says that when King Ozolua found the Owo people so humble and submissive, the name "Owo" or "Ogho"—which means "respect"—was given to them by the Bini.

Another important phase of Owo history has been recorded in both Owo itself and Benin City. Prince Oshogboye of Owo was sent to the court in Benin during the reign of Oba Ehengbuda (c. 1578) to learn the arts of administration. He was made one of the sword-bearers (*omo-ada*). When Oshogboye's father died in Owo, the prince ran away from court and returned home to take over the Owo throne without Oba Ehengbuda's permission. Sent for by the Oba, Oshogboye feigned illness and gained time enough to construct defensive walls around his city. When his fortifications were complete, he requested Oba Ehengbuda to validate his installation as Olowo of Owo.

Bini sources state that Oshogboye 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 manuscripts on the history of Owo, Chief Ashara records that when leopards were killed in the town, their heads were usually sent to Benin, an act of homage. He explains that Oshogboye was sent to Benin rather than to Ife because of trade relations with the former, and because Owo is nearer to Benin than to Ife. He cites an additional reason for the tie between Owo and Benin, as arising from the fact that the founder of the present Benin dynasty, Prince Oranmiyan, and the founder of the Olowo-ship were brothers. These reasons may be regarded as untenable because in all probability the Owo people migrated from Ife, as they claim, and normally could be expected to have more ties with Ife than with Benin, irrespective of distance. Owo 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 better gauge the significance of our excavation at Owo. In 1970, Chief J. D. Akeredolu 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 marker at Egberen Street in Owo town. When we examined these fragments, we became 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 going on, 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 Oronse.



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 excavation James Lewis, an art historian from Morgan State College; Miriam Alper, an American student at the University of Lagos; and six members of the Department of Antiquities: Chief Akeredolu, Patrick Okpala, Rosetta George, F. Olugbade, Pius Afedi and Amodu Baza. I wish to thank all of them, for without their contributions I would not 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 provide 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 captions 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 Ife tradition did not die out in Owo before the fifteenth century, roughly the time when Bini 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 flowed in one direction only—from Ife to Benin.

1 Excavation of Igbo Alaja, Owo, in progress. Note the two (A and B) rows of trenches, each 2½ meters square, with balks, each half a meter in width.

2 Cultural materials exposed 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 scarifications, photographed *in situ*.

5 Offering pots in Ife style except that these have everted rims. The pots, which normally contain palm wine, were left in the grove after each annual ritual.

6 A beaded arm holding a bunch of sacred leaves from the *akoko* tree. These leaves are used during installation ceremonies of kings in Yorubaland. They are also depicted on a fragment of arm excavated by the writer at Lafogido, Ife, in 1969.

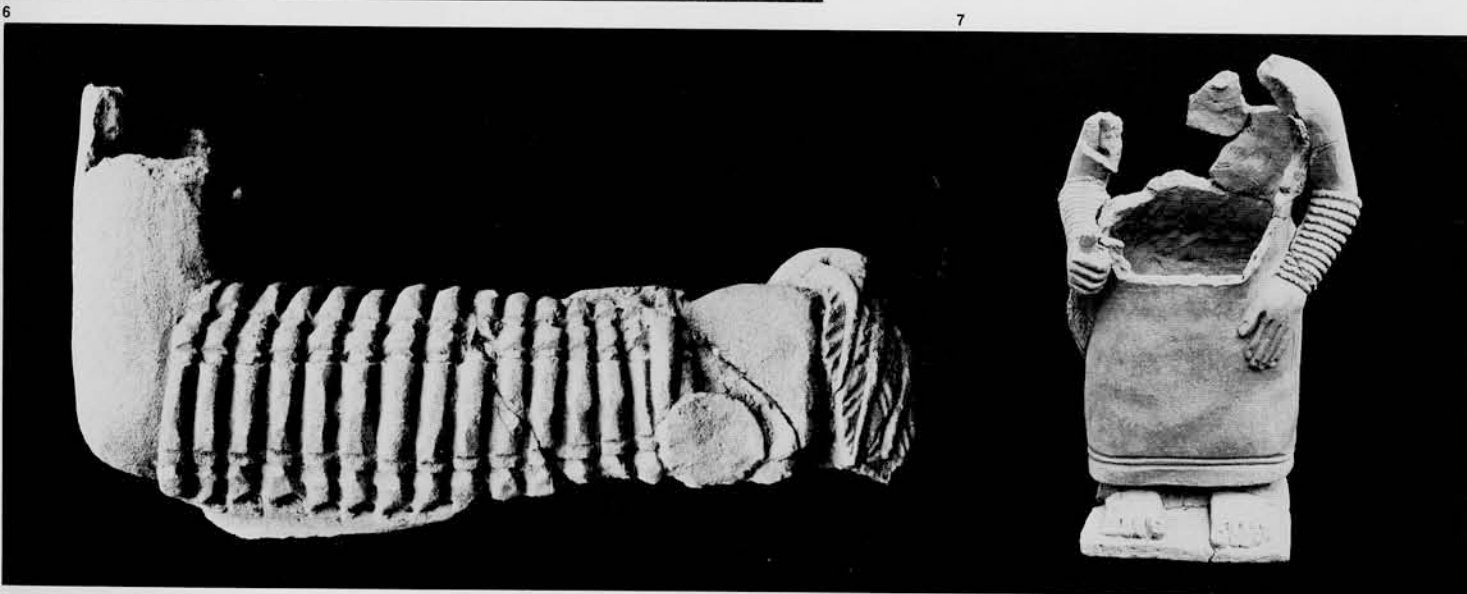
7 Standing hollow figure with a maxi dress. The hands are beaded and the right hand holds either a fly whisk or a bunch of sacred leaves.

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

9 A terracotta hand holding sacred leaves from the *akoko* tree.

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



Twelve trenches of two and one-half meters square were opened and excavated, ten centimeters at a time. The trenches—lettered A-I through A-VI, and B-I through B-VI—were separated by balks of half a meter in between the squares, so that a total area of only eighteen meters by six meters was worked. Within this area



1



2



1 The present priest of Igbo Alaja 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 Ife heads were most probably used as shrine or tomb furniture. This particular fragment, which was not excavated, was brought out by the priest from a sacred grove, three miles away from the excavated site, where it was kept and used as part of paraphernalia of the priest during annual festivals connected with Oronse or the Igogo Cult.

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

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

4 A miniature head in Ife style with scarifications.

5 Terracotta sculpture showing a broad, bearded face with snake-issuing-from-the-nostrils motif, which occurs in Ife and Benin.

6 Fragment of a face showing Benin traits. For example, the marks above both eyes are found on Benin terracotta and brass heads. The eyes are very prominent, like those on Benin brass and terracotta heads, which 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 Epa masks from northern Ekiti, but nowhere else in Yorubaland do they enjoy such prominent treatment as here in Owo, the inference being that this is in keeping with Bini tradition. Note that the spots are treated in the same way as those on ivory and brass leopards in Benin.



7

1 Piece of pottery showing a fish swallowing a lobster. The intertwined mudfish motif is found on a stool from Benin in the Nigerian Museum, Lagos and also on a Benin brass stool in the Dahlem Museum, West Berlin.

2 Some of the objects from Igbo Alaja suggest the theme of votive offering. For example, this photograph shows a clay model basket with fruits, prominent among which are kola nuts which are never absent in Yoruba rituals and offerings.

3 Terracotta disc with yet undeciphered motifs. It was apparently worn on the forehead of a sculpture similar to the Jebba Bowman and many Benin brass figures.

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

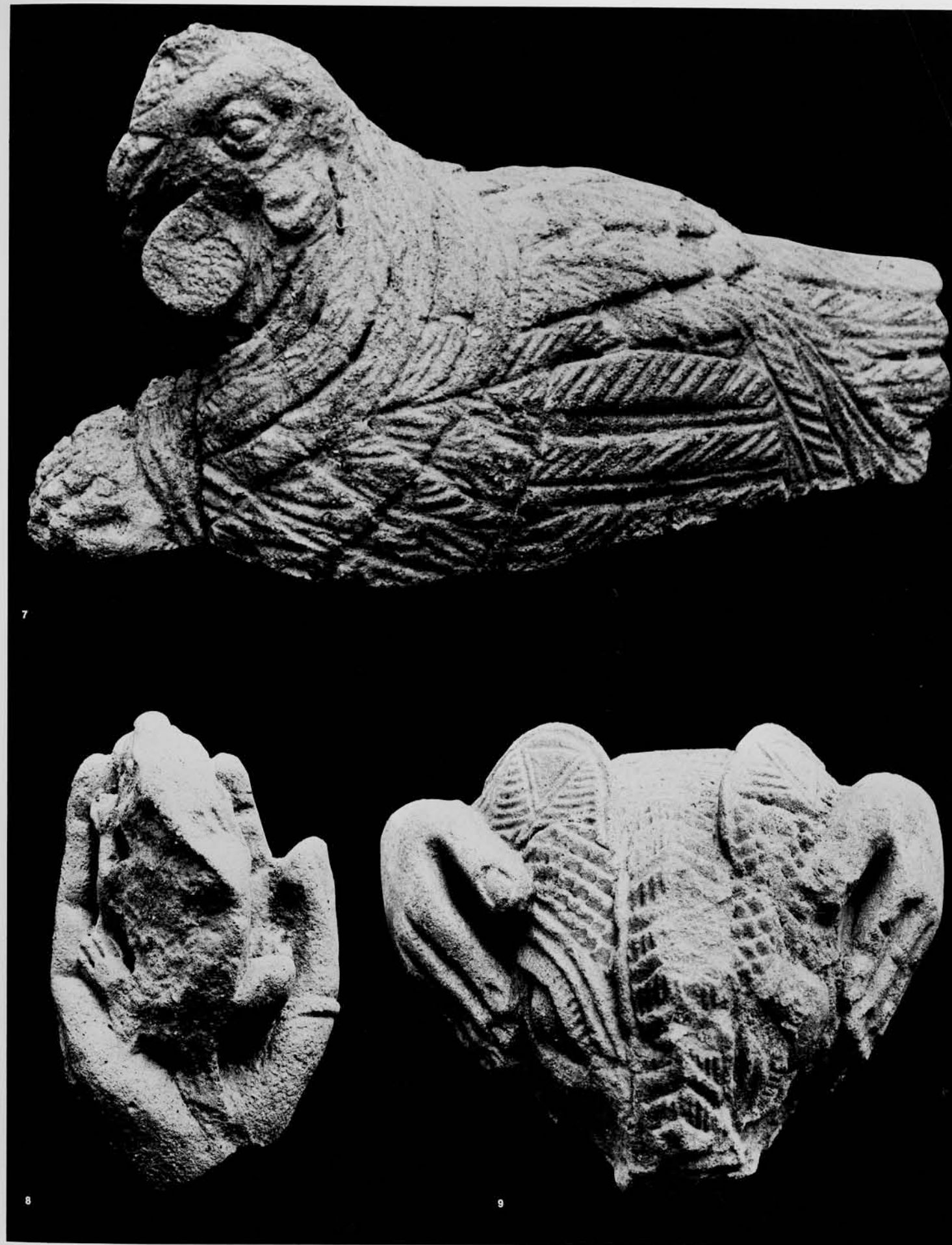
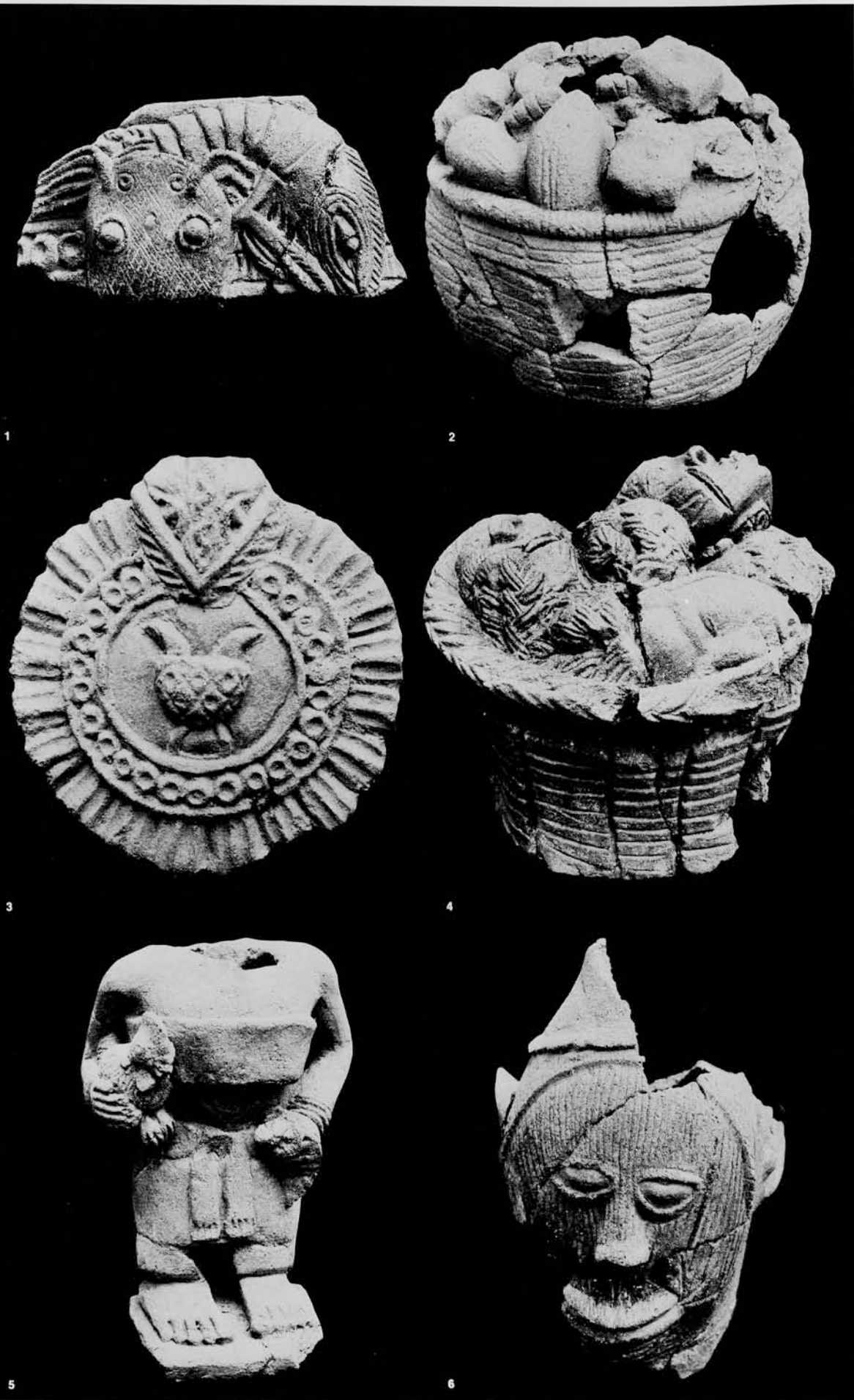
5 Still on the theme of votive offering, this photograph shows a devotee carrying a cock whose legs are tied together.

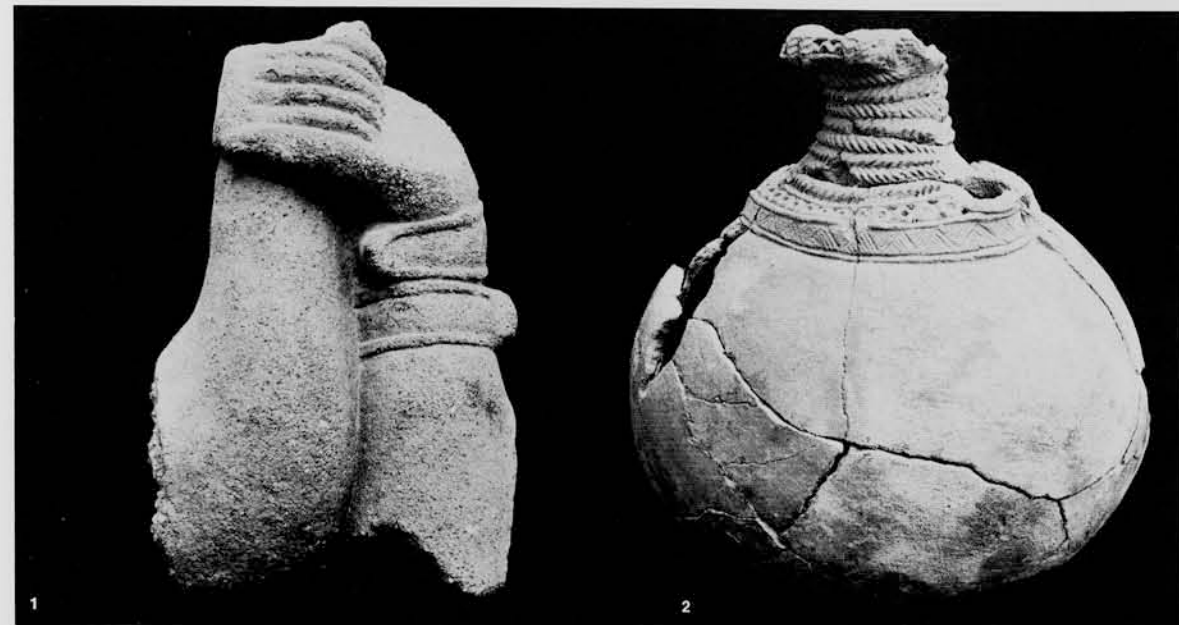
6 A thinly modelled head, stylized but having scarifications like those on Ife work. The head has whisker marks which are said to be tribal marks of the Nupe people.

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

8 Another presentation act, this time a hand with a ringed thumb presenting a rat. Chief Ashara records that during the ceremony of the cult of Oronse, two hundred rats are usually offered. Note that in Ife it is common to find the second toe 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 depth 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 Ife characteristic, the eyes. Other characteristics appear to belong to a distinctive style which may be called Owo. Note the elongated lower lip, the elaborate neckpiece, the plain round cap and the gentle smile.

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

5
A bearded, moustachioed and capped middle-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

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Credits

All photographs,
Ekpo O. Eyo.