

The Significance of Ife Art in Yoruba Tradition

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Abstract

Ife art and terracotta heads have become a point of debate among European and African archaeologists, anthropologists and art historians. As scholars attempt to proffer the meaning and explain the functionality of Ife art. Some scholars have interpreted these artefacts based on the information available to them. However, few have been able to discuss how significant Ife art is to the Yoruba tradition. The researcher collected data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources comprised observations and interviews, while secondary sources were drawn from journal articles, books, and the internet. This paper reviewed scholarly positions concerning Ife art and discussed the significance of Ife art in the Yoruba tradition. It also identified the methodological challenges and problems in understanding Ife art. The study revealed that Ife art is pivotal in emphasising the interconnectedness of history, culture, spirituality, identity and continuity of the Yoruba tradition. The study recommended that it is expedient that Ife art be reexamined through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing a deep understanding of the culture, archaeology, and textual analysis of Oriki (praise songs), oral tradition and ancient Yoruba traditional practices.

Keywords: culture, Ife art, Yoruba, tradition

Introduction

Ife art can be traced to the ancient Yoruba town of Ile-Ife, which is located in

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Southwest Nigeria. It is arguably the oldest town in the Yoruba people's ancestry and one of their largest traditional centres. Between 1910 and 1911, Leo Frobenius (a German Ethnographer) discovered terracotta and bronze, which comprised life-size representations of human heads. The town covers an area of 1846 km² and is bound by the Shasha river in the west and the Oni river in the east (Babalola, 2015). According to Blier (1985), Ife art is extraordinarily naturalistic, stylised and idealised. The bronze and terracotta possess scarifications on the faces, the heads carry crests or caps and holes are found around the forehead and mouth. Since then, many other anthropologists, ethnographers and archaeologists such as Frank Willet, Bernard Fagg, Suzanne Preston Blier, Ekpo Eyo, A.J.H. Goodwin, William Fagg and Kenneth C. Murray have recovered numerous artefacts, which include bronze figures, earthworks, glass beads, potsherd pavements, terracotta and pottery. These were excavated in sites such as Wumonije, Obalara, Odo Ogbe and Lafogido, to mention but a few.

This study hopes to solve two major problems. First, this study establishes the importance of Ife art to the Yoruba culture. Many findings have been made, but few scholars have been able to highlight the importance of Ife art to Yoruba tradition. Secondly, there have been conflicting findings and unending arguments about Ife art. This transpires when scholars compare Benin, Owo, Nok and Igbo-Ukwu to Ife art.

Literature Review

Ife Art and the Yoruba History

The Yoruba people regard Ile-Ife as a sacred city, the mythic birthplace of gods and humans, the cradle of creation and the place where divinity interacted with the earth. The city of Ile-Ife is also known as 'Ife' or 'Ilurun', which means 'the gateway to heaven' (Eluyemi, 1986). Òdùduwà is popularly believed to be the progenitor of the Yoruba people. Hence, the Yoruba refer to

themselves as “Ọmọ Ọ̀dùduwà” (meaning Children of Ọ̀dùduwà). Ọ̀dùduwà was a descendant of Lamurudu (Nimrod) who fled Mecca in Arabia after the rise of Islam in the 7th century. Ọ̀dùduwà led his group to settle at Ile Ife (Johnson, 1966). However, scholars such as Folorunsho, Johnson, Lucas, and Frobenius downplayed the theory of the Arab origin of the Yoruba (Agai, 2021).

Muhammad (2013) also argues that Ọ̀dùduwà met some Yorubas, Igbos and other ethnic groups in Yoruba land. He infers that Ọ̀dùduwà might not have been the ancestor of the Yoruba people and that Ọ̀dùduwà was not part of the apostates who fled Arabia, nor was he the leader of the seventh-century migration to Yoruba land. According to Blier (2012), Ife art and terracotta heads infer that at a point in history, Ọ̀dùduwà lived at Ile-Ife. This suggests that Ọ̀dùduwà may not be the progenitor of the Yoruba race, but became great because he succeeded in planting his footsteps as one of the great men in Yoruba history. It is a common belief among the Yorubas that the rest of the Yoruba states emerged from Ile-Ife.



Fig. 1: Head with “cat whisker” Olokun Walode site, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE. Terracotta; Height: 127 mm. Photo: Courtesy Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow. Source: Blier (2012)

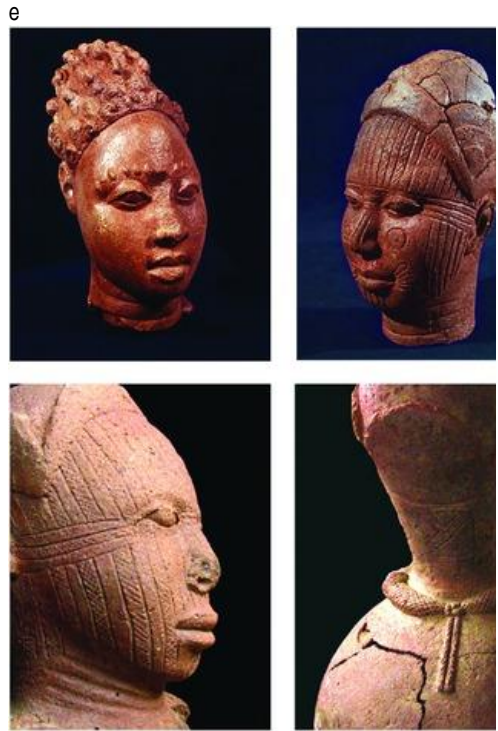


Fig. 2: Terracotta heads showing various markings and scarifications marks. Source: Blier (2015)

According to Mullen (2004), kings who rule today are said to be ancestors of these sixteen kings. The position supporting the narrative that Ife is the original point of dispersal and source of royal dynasties of other states in the region has been challenged by some scholars. Horton (1979) identifies the arguments of Alan Ryder, Denis Williams and Ade Obayemi. Ryder (1965) discards the oral tradition, asserting the Ife origin of the Eweka Dynasty. He stated that the symbolism of the Maltese cross, which signifies tokens of

Ooni's approval of the new Benin ruler, was absent in Ife's iconography. In addition, he asserts that the "cat whisker" facial marks found on Benin figures are not Yoruba marks, and the only Yoruba group that has this facial mark are the "Yagba", which have been heavily influenced by the Nupe. His arguments infer that the Benin Kings may have regarded the Ooni of Ife as their spiritual overlords, but he refutes the notion that Benin's imperial power originated from Ife (Horton, 1979).

Likewise, Williams (1974) argues against the dynastic primacy of Ife by affirming that, due to the differences in the techniques of clay preparation and bronze casting technique. Ife and Benin may have developed their art independently, as against the Oral tradition that Ife casters went to Benin to teach the craft (Horton, 1979). Similarly, Obayemi (1979) refutes the thesis that Benin and other Yoruba states emerged from Ife by suggesting that Ife may have been a great Kingdom due to its capacity to borrow skills and skilled workers from its neighbours (Horton, 1979). He states there are no corroborative indications of the events they allude to. According to Obayemi (1979), Ife's bead-making craft may have informed the patronage of other Yoruba kings and tradition alluding to Ife's dynastic primacy has been publicised for political interests. Horton (1979) affirms Ife's dynastic primacy by asserting that the use of oral evidence was selective and uncritical as utilised in the arguments of Ryder (1965) and Williams (1974). This is possible as oral tradition is expansive and may have many versions or differ from one ethnic group to another. For example, Edo (2020) records two accounts according to Ife's and Benin's oral history. Although both are similar, it is obvious that Benin's oral tradition does not present Ife as its dynastic origin.

Moreover, Horton (1979) refers to a ritual by the Oba of Benin in which the king addresses prayers to his forefathers in Ile-Ife. He also states that Maltese cross symbols were later discovered on terracotta sculptures excavated at Ife. The "cat-whisker" facial marks were observed on sculptures excavated in classical Ife sites, and motifs peculiar to Benin featured on the Ife terracotta

heads date as far back as 1000 AD. Onward. This discovery alludes to the relationship and antecedence of Ife. According to Blier (2012), roughly 5 percent of the fluorescence era Ife terracotta heads display three elliptical “cat-whisker” facial masks (see figure 2) and one of the sculptures extends the marks to the cheeks in a manner consistent with the popular “Abaja” facial mark which is very popular among the Oyo.

Archaeological discoveries provide strong corroboration with oral traditions affirming Ife's dynastic importance in their relationship with Benin and the rest of Yorubaland. In addition, the 16 life-size heads found at the Obalufon shrine at the Iwinrin grove are also associated with the sacred Yoruba city-states known as “crowned towns” (Blier, 2012). These also show the political primacy of Ife among Yoruba city-states. Furthermore, in Oyo and Ekiti, it is customary and most important for the new king to get the state sword and other materials from Ife to affirm his reign. Likewise, the king of Benin receives staff and a headpiece of shining brass in place of a crown and sceptre from Ife to signify his accession to the throne (Blier, 2012). This proves that ancient Ife once enjoyed a period of political and military dominance within the region before contact with European explorers.

Ife terracotta heads attest to the cosmopolitanism of ancient Ife. According to Blier (2012), the “Igbo” population were once a prominent group in Ife. A Janus figure from Ife’s Iwinrin grove shows a man with diagonal facial markings similar to markings on the historic and modern Igbo Nri titleholders. Blier (2012) states that 5 percent of Ife sculptures portray Benin facial marks (forehead keloids), while another 5 percent is comprised of “cat whiskers” and other forms. This may serve as evidence of intermarriage among the groups.

Ancient Ife artworks are more than works of remarkable beauty, uncommon technical feats, and visual power; they are objects that address fundamental issues of culture, tradition, politics, and history among the Yoruba.

Yoruba Aesthetics and Cultural Identity through the Lens of Ife Art

Ife art has played a vital role in showcasing the cultural heritage and identity of the Yoruba people. Ife artworks may have formed the basis for Yoruba notions of beauty, spirituality and societal values. The Yoruba concept of beauty is predicated on its thought system of the physical and spiritual. All the artistic techniques, such as modelling, casting and surface embellishment employed in creating terracotta heads and the Cire-perdue method utilised in creating Ife brass and bronze were particularly tailored according to Yoruba notions of aesthetics.

Lawal (2011) discusses Yoruba aesthetics and identifies concepts like *ewà* (beauty), *wíwúlo* (functionality), *àyàjọra* (naturalistic representation), *àròyà* (conceptual representation), *dídógba* (symmetry), *ìfarahòn* (clarity of mass), *gígùn* (relative straightness), *finfin* (meticulous delineation), and *dídán* (luminosity and smoothness). Thus, a masterpiece is regarded as one which magnetises the eyes (*fa Ojú móra*), fits the eyes (*bá ojú mu*) and compels repeated gaze (*àwòtúnwò*).

The artworks excavated in Ife, such as bronze figures, terracotta, and stone figures, were highly naturalistic. According to Meyerowitz and Meyerowitz (1939), Ife terracottas and bronzes depict diverse racial characteristics ranging from semitic to negroid likenesses. Some of the terracotta and bronze pieces found at Ile-Ife are representations of humans, including naturalistic human heads, gagged human heads, and masks. Ife art and terracotta heads sufficiently meet these criteria. For example, the terracotta heads (Figure 2), Yoruba aesthetic canons such as naturalistic representation, beauty, intricate details, and symmetry. The facial scarification on the head is almost perfect, showcasing relative straightness and meticulous delineation. Some terracotta heads possess all the aforementioned attributes but differ as they were not embellished with facial scarification, projecting smoothness and luminosity.

According to Blier (2012), 16 copper alloy heads recovered from the

Obalufon temple symbolise identified deities (Erunmole) such as Oramfe (the thunder god), Obatala (god of the autochthonous residents), Oluorogbo (the early messenger deity), Obalufon (King Obalufon II), Oranmiyan (Obalufon's adversary, the military conqueror), Obameri (an ancient warrior associated with both dynasties), and Ore (the autochthonous Ife hunter). Half of these deities had facial markings, while the other half with smooth faces with holes representing beards. These deities were once men but are now venerated as ancestors.

The cultural identity and heritage of Ife art and terracotta heads can also be associated with the relationship between the head and the body as upheld among the Yoruba. The heads are said to be ratio of 1:4 (see Figure 3). The Yoruba believe that the head is the most important part of the body. Many scholars have discussed the importance of "Ori" and its meaning among the Yoruba. According to Ajiboye, Folaranmi and Umoru-Oke (2018), the Yoruba regard the head as the most important part of the body because it houses the most essential parts that coordinate human activities. It is also regarded as the seat of wisdom and a symbol of ego and destiny. The Yoruba conceive Ori in two ways. The physical head (Ori-ita) and the inner head (Ori-Inu). The head is essentially very important to the Yoruba because of the beauty of the outer head (Ori-ita) and the spiritual significance of the Inner head (Ori-Inu). The inner head is considered the spiritual essence that contains the destiny of a man on earth. Thus, Yoruba sculptors represent the head larger than the rest of the human body (Abiodun 2014). As a result, it is not strange to see many heads or heads that are bigger in proportion to the rest of the body in Ife art.

Another significant characteristic which affirms the cultural identity and heritage of the Yoruba is the representation of full, plump torsos (chest and stomachs) in Ife sculptures, which depict royals and deities. According to Blier (2012), the representation of full, plump torsos signifies well-being, extraordinariness and religious fullness. The dressing and paraphernalia of the royal elites and deities in Ife art also indicate affiliation to the Yoruba heritage.

The brass figures represent the royal elite in their attire or symbolise the paraphernalia of their office and authority. For example, one of the bronze figures from the excavation at Ita Yemoo is suggested to represent the Ooni in his royal regalia with a horn and staff in his hand, both signifying power and authority.

According to Blier (2012), the king's headdress resembles the smaller crowns, or *arinla*, that Yoruba rulers wore during the war. The Ooni holds antelope horns similar to those carried in their left hands, which were used in battle. These horns were filled with powerful *àse* substances that could turn the war's course in one's favour. Abiodun (1994) asserts that *àse* is translated and understood as the authority, power, sceptre, and vital force in all living things. However, Abiodun (2014) argues that the Brass figures in Ife are not royal elites as many scholars propose. He states that because the sculptures are copper alloys, which are the most difficult medium for sculpture making, it doesn't mean the sculptures have been the exclusive preserve of the highest-ranking elite. Abiodun (2014) analyses the *Oríkì* (praise songs) and concludes that the sculptures do not represent royalty, arguing that the paraphernalia of kings before the 21st century does not resemble the sculptures because the faces of Yoruba Kings are usually concealed. Abiodun (1994) concludes that the copper alloy figures are representations of *Ifá* priests.

Abiodun (1994) explains that ancient Yoruba kings wore crowns that covered their faces because they were considered divine rulers endowed with authority equal to the *Òrìsà* (gods). Moreover, the representation of Ooni holding horns filled with *àse* defeats his godly persona. The ancient Yoruba artist wouldn't represent the Ooni holding horns filled with *àse* because he is a god vested with divine powers. Although observing the paraphernalia of Ooni Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, some of his crowns look synonymous with the crowns on Ife copper alloy figures. However, in the 21st century, Ooni and other Yoruba kings do not always wear crowns that conceal their faces. Rather, the Ooni of Ife occasionally veils his face when he wears the *Aare*

crown during the Olójó festival and other important traditional rituals and festivals. Thus, the “figure of Ooni” depicted in the Ife copper alloy figures does not represent the cone-shaped Aare crown. Rather, Abiodun (1994) affirms that the sculptures are representations of Ifá priests. In recent times, Ooni’s dress (in Figure 3) also looks very similar to the copper alloy figure (in Figure 4). This representation of the Ooni might have been influenced by the narrative popularised by many scholars of Ife art. This may also be due to the westernisation of African art history. However, according to Abiodun (2014), in the ancient traditional Yoruba tradition, it is a taboo and abomination for an artist to depict the naturalist form of the Ooni.



*Fig. 3: Figure of Ooni of Ife.
Source: Star (2011)*



*Fig. 4: Picture of Ooni
Adeyeye Enitan
Ogunwusi. Source: Ladun
laidi (2021)*

The Ooni may only be depicted in his *oriki*, which may be representations of animals as observed on many ceremonial vessels and terracotta headpieces, such as the elephant head and Hippopotamus head. However, this finding raises more questions than it answers. These are questions that can only be answered through more research because the context in which these works of art were made is very crucial to the validity of these claims.

Sociopolitical and Religious Values of Ife Art

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Ife terracotta sculptures visually depict both human and non-human figures in conveying messages and narratives.

Source: Star (2011)

Star (2011) provides valuable insights into various aspects of Yoruba society, including social hierarchy, spirituality, and cultural practises. According to Blier (1969), the Obalufon copper mask is associated with rituals relating to the rights of succession of Kings. During the Ife coronations, the royal crown is first placed on the head of the Obalufon mask before the new ruler is allowed to wear it. The ritual continues as the crown is brought from the Obalufon shrine, and the new Ooni is proclaimed king at the temple of Òdùduwà and the crown is finally received at the Orisanla (Obatala) temple. Then, the king pays homage to the dignitaries and people of Ife by showing them the Obatala throne. Blier (1985) suggests that the Obatala throne may be related to a quartz throne associated with Moremi's son and the autochthonous Ife people. This mainly points to the importance of the Obalufon mask in the spiritual and political life of Ife. According to

(Blier 1985), another political undertone of the Ife head is revealed in the discovery of a terracotta head recognised as the “Lajuwa” by the Late Ooni Adesoji Aderemi. The head is associated with servants or *Osi-efa*, who serve as surrogates representing the kings by wearing their paraphernalia. Lajuwa (figure 5) is seen as a messenger, representative or advisor of the Oni. This discovery reveals a political dimension of how the Oni is sometimes replaced by these surrogates when he is indisposed or unavailable. Ife art and terracotta heads connect with Yoruba cosmology, mythology and ritual practises.



Fig. 5: Terracotta heads from Ife dated between 12th and 15th century; heads of Ife dignitaries. Source: Samuel (2022).

They also serve as channels of communicating with ancestors and honouring them. Blier (2012) asserts that by closely observing Ife bronze heads, some of the bronze heads have eye-circumscribing lines, which indicate a higher power. The circling of eyes in early Ife sculptures seems to reinforce the mystical power of these objects and the possible dangers they carry for those who view them. Such lines convey the sense that the sculpture “can really see.” Hence, beyond looking at the sculpture, they are believed to possess supernatural power. Thus, it is not right to look into their eyes because they are gods. Like the Ife rulers who wear face-covering crown veils, because they are

“like an imole, no one can look at their eyes. (Blier, 2012).



Fig. 6: Vessel with monstrous face and sixteen rosette Patterns around the surface, some with mica centers Aroye compound, Ile-Ife. Nigeria, c. early 14th century CE. Source: Blier (2012)



Fig. 7: Gagged head. Osángangan Qbámákin, Ifè. Source: Abiodun (2021)

Abiodun (1990) also points out the role of these heads in rituals. The sculptures are seen as “coming alive” (dahun) and “responding” (luti). This reinforces the belief that the sculptures are alive spiritually and underscores the notion that they interact with the believers. Supporting this assertion, Blier (2012) asserts that the heads of kings, queens, warriors, queens, priests, hunters, court servants, and others became supernaturals who are part of rituals today. The figures are identified with “powerful” individuals from Ife’s distant past who were subsequently deified, among them Oramfe (the thunder god), Obatala (god of the autochthonous residents), Oluorogbo (the early messenger deity), Obalufon (King Obalufon II), Oranmiyan (Obalufon’s adversary, the military conqueror), Obameri (an ancient warrior associated with

both dynasties), and Ore (the autochthonous Ife hunter). The descendants and priests of these ancient heroes still play a role in the ritual life of the shrine. Severed heads and gagged heads (in Figure 7) in terracotta represent those who were decapitated and sacrificed to ward off evil (Abiodun, 2014). This is a representation of human sacrifice in ancient Ife. Thus, in rituals and religious ceremonies, sacrifices are made to appease the gods.

Ife's pottery is one of the most common archaeological materials recovered from Ile-Ife. For example, the Aroye vessel (in Figure 6) displays rosette motifs and a monstrous human head, referencing the ancient spirits of Ife. The vessel may have served as a divination object linked to Obatala. The vessel incorporates sixteen-petal forms based on power differences. This symbolises the importance of the vessel in the worship of the gods, as eight is regarded as the highest number for humans, while sixteen is associated with the gods in Yoruba land (Blier, 2012). Ife art shows evidence of use in the religion of Ife through the iconographical representations observed on the heads and ritual vessels.

Methodology

This study employed the qualitative research method. The researcher collected data from both primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources comprised observations and interviews, while secondary sources were drawn from journal articles, books, and the internet. Unstructured oral interviews were conducted with art scholars, Yoruba scholars, scholars in African traditional Yoruba religion, artists, and practitioners of the Yoruba traditional religion.

Results and Discussion

By examining Ife art and the Yoruba history, Yoruba aesthetics and cultural identity through the lens of Ife art, the study has been able to depict how individuals act based on the meanings associated with objects, how interaction

occurs within the ancient Ife and Yoruba context, how meanings attached to Ife art emerge from interactions with others and society, and how the meanings attached to Ife art are continuously created and recreated. Despite the different views on Ife art and its place in Yoruba tradition, it is clear that the significance of Ife art in Yoruba tradition cannot be overstated because it is one of the physical evidence through which arguments relating to the origin and history of the Yoruba race can be established. Many scholars argue on several points, holding different arguments on the history, meaning, and function of these artefacts in the Yoruba tradition. Overall, Ife art serves as physical evidence which can be used in reassessing, proposing, rewriting and defending the history of the Yoruba people.

Ife art is perhaps the earliest archaeological evidence attesting to the artistic creativity and aesthetic prowess of the Yoruba people. Archaeological evidence of Ife art further strengthens the resolve that Ife is the cradle of Yoruba civilisation and has political primacy over other Yoruba city-states. This ancient material culture enhances an understanding of the political and socio-cultural nomenclature of Ife and helps scholars establish relationships with other communities within the region. The dressing and facial marks on Ife art and terracotta heads point to how the material culture reflects the way of life of the Ife people. Scholars can also synchronise rituals, norms and oral traditions of the Yoruba people with the terracotta heads to understand the Yoruba history more through artistic representations of various aspects of daily life, societal values and religious practise displayed on the artefacts. Through these artefacts, cultural development and innovation among the Yoruba can be traced. It also shows the possibility for scholars to engage in an unending search to discover new facts about the Yoruba people. Ife art comprises beautiful works of art that are crucial to historical documentation, which reveal the belief system, artistic achievements and political structure of the ancient Yoruba kingdom. It continues to inspire and provide a connection to the past of the Yoruba.

Ife art shows evidence of the application of Yoruba aesthetic concepts, spiritual beliefs in the importance of the human head and full torsos, facial markings and “Oriki”. Ife art represents the cultural identity and heritage of the Yoruba tradition and links the ancient Ife with contemporary Yoruba practises, and also shows how these practises have changed over time. Terracotta heads, which show people with unique physical characteristics connecting to numerous ethnic groups, portray the variety of cultural influences and diversity that moulded ancient Ife. The religious importance of Ife art cannot be disregarded as bronze heads, ritual pots, terracotta decapitated heads, and gagged heads (Figure 7), as well the location where they are discovered and their function points to how crucial these artefacts are to rituals, and ceremonies, and ancestral veneration among the Yoruba. The artefacts play an important role in understanding and identifying the religious practises of the Ife both in ancient and contemporary times. Ife remains the major religious and spiritual centre for the Yoruba people, and some of its shrines are still in use. The shrines and worship centres of these gods and the function of the revered objects as a bridge between the material and spiritual world are connected, and they reveal the significance of the art forms to ancestral worship and other religious practises. Ife naturalistic bronze and copper heads also reveal three idioms which are integral to Yoruba art and tradition, namely, *asa*, *epe* and *ako*, thereby creating a more in-depth discourse around these three idioms and their place in Yoruba religion and tradition. The works are not just naturalistic or stylistic but hold significant meanings which allude to the tradition of the ancient Ife as well as other Yoruba city-states.

Conclusion

Core issues of politics and history are explored, thereby revealing animal symbolism, complex visual codes, oral tradition and ancient and modern traditional beliefs embedded in Ife art. These marvels made in various media, ranging from stone, bronze, copper, brass and terracotta, create awareness of

the artistic ability and rich cultural legacy of the Yoruba. They have consistently enthralled researchers and art enthusiasts and continue to generate an unending discourse around the religious, spiritual, political and cultural symbolism of the ancient African civilisation and their artistic accomplishments.

It is expedient that Ife art be reexamined by anthropologists, ethnographers and archaeologists in light of ancient Yoruba traditional practises. Thus, interpretations of artefacts and submissions of various respondents in research relating to Ife art and other art traditions should be backed with or derived from a holistic method which includes an in-depth understanding of the culture, textual analysis, comparative analysis, myths, legends, historical accounts and religious texts. In addition, implementing an interdisciplinary approach which involves a combination of art history, archaeology, anthropology, and religious studies will guarantee a more accurate interpretation of Ife art and other African art traditions.

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