
Ibadan 1960

Dr Will Rea, of the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds paints a picture of Ibadan, sketching the history and describing the unique characteristics of the city, that gave rise in the 1960s to the remarkable 'Ibadan renaissance' of writers and artists.

Running splash of rust
and gold – flung and scattered
among several hills like broken
china in the sun.¹

The poet's image is of Ibadan, the rust and gold splashed, as Rome was, against seven hills. These hills within which the city of Ibadan is set are, however, the rolling deep green hills of still remaining tropical rain-forest which, fading to a gunmetal, smoky blue surround the city. The city anthem, the oriki praise poem, highlights both the space of the city and the prevailing culture of the place:

Ibadan Ilu ori oke
Ilu Ibukun Oluwa
K'Oluwa se o ni ' bukun
Fun onile at'alejo

Ibadan of the hilly structure
Blessed city
May god make you a

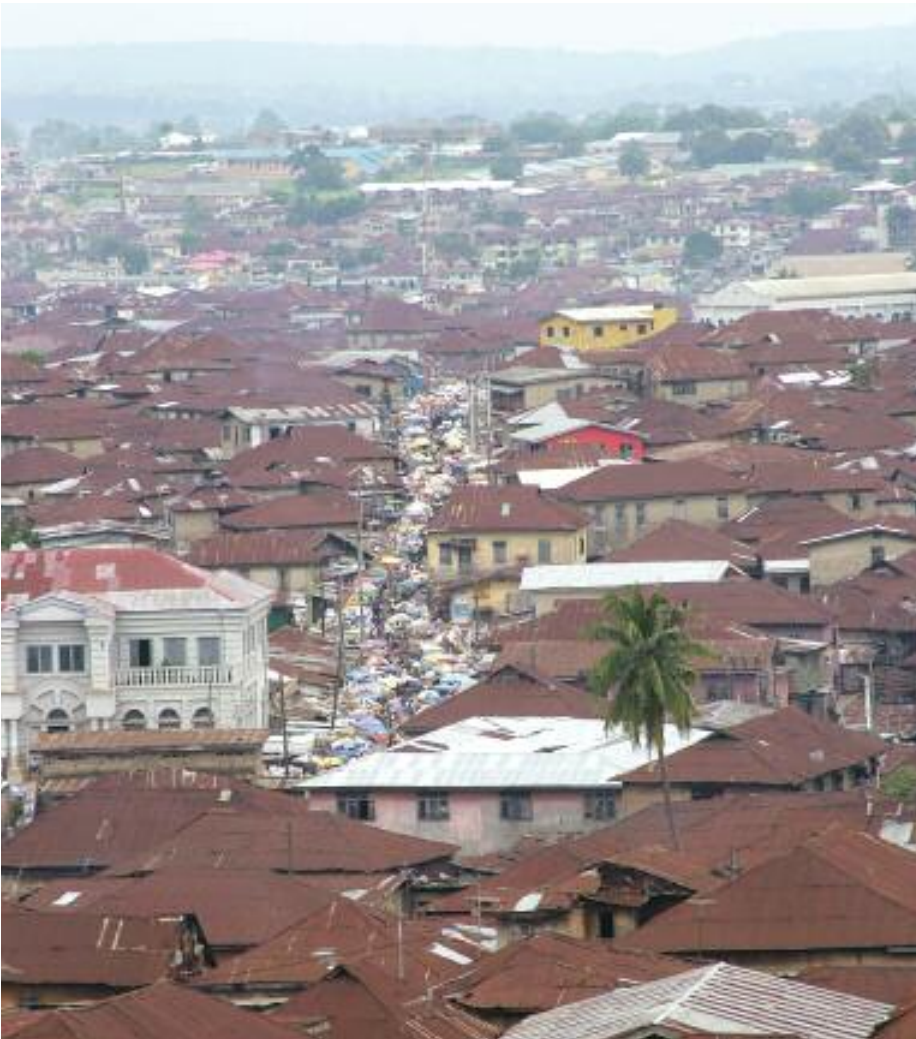
Blessing unto indigenes
And settlers alike

The city of Ibadan, located 78 miles inland from Lagos in Yoruba-speaking southern Nigeria, is a city of hills; it has multiple highpoints, each of which forms a centre around which different districts form their distinct characters, but the centre of the city falls from the tallest of the hills, tumbling down the hillside in a seemingly chaotic jumble of rusting corrugated iron roofs and crumbling mud buildings, tumbling from the building that presides over the town – Mapo Hall. This is the great architectural declaration of British colonial rule built in 1929, and designed as meeting place for the disputatious nobility of Ibadan, and as a visual statement that somehow it would be able to impose its version of order upon the city. And yet it is an order the city knows as alien and imposed; and in front of Mapo, overlooking Ojoba market as it cascades downhill, market wares seemingly sprawling

out in all directions, is a statue of Shango, Yoruba deity of thunder and tutelary deity of the Oyo, the founding genitors of the city.

Mapo Hall provides the defining motif for another visual characterisation of the city, that of an *Adire* starch-resist indigo-dyed cloth that is known as *Ibadan dum* (Ibadan is sweet). The motif of Mapo would have been entirely appropriate, a reference to wealth and status, on cloth that told the wearer and the viewer that not only Ibadan was sweet, but that life too was sweet, and that life in Ibadan was the sweetest life one could have, as living in Ibadan meant living in the wealthiest and most modern city in all of the Yoruba-speaking regions. *Ibadan dum* indeed. Ibadan has always been a modern city or perhaps more accurately, a city of modernity.

Ibadan was founded in the mid-nineteenth century. The history has been well published, and the most recent account by Ruth Watson is an excellent analysis of the history of the



Above: A running splash of rust and gold
 Below: Iba Oluyole market as it tumbles down the hill from Mapo Hall



A doorway in the Old city. Note the Afro-Brazilian style of architecture

town.² It was one of several cities, including Abeokuta and Oyo, founded in the aftermath of the destruction of the major Yoruba town (and centre of the dominant Yoruba empire), Old Oyo (Oyo Ile), by the adjoining northern Fulani Empire in a jihad led by Alim al Saliah in 1835. Each of these ‘new’ cities developed in unique ways – Oyo claiming inheritance of government structure and status from the old central empire, Abeokuta developing as a conglomeration of four communities, each with their own titles and trading corporations, and Ibadan as a refugee camp that eventually developed the most feared army in southern Nigeria. Ibadan’s militarism was competitive and individualistic, status and authority was gained by individual warlords who maintained armies and retinues through the constant provision and distribution of wealth gained from military

campaigns through out the South western region of (what is now) Nigeria, most especially through the capture of slaves for the Atlantic trade. The new Oyo empire was largely constructed through the exploits of the Ibadan warlords and the city grew rich upon the spoils from the military campaigns launched from the city. As it grew rich so the town became more attractive to adventurers seeking careers in warfare and politics, in turn adding to the expansion of the city.

As it grew, so the political life of the city became ever more complex and there is still something of the anarchy and fiercely felt individualist and republican feelings within the city's politics today. The independence of Ibadan's political authority from that of the more general Yoruba model of centralised kingship, and thus its relative autonomy from the colonial model that the British tried to exert in Nigeria, meant that the city was open to individual achievement. Ibadan's openness to incomers and its awareness that its continued survival relies upon renewal by indigenes and strangers alike, means that Ibadan was, and still is, one of the most heterogeneous cities in Nigeria. This is an openness that admits and celebrates individual achievement and excellence only inasmuch as in that achievement the city itself is also promoted: individual achievement is celebrated, but the glory ultimately must belong to the city.

It is perhaps the openness of the city to innovation and achievement, the foundations of its modernity, which in the twentieth century allowed it to welcome and provide fertile ground for three key cultural institutions: the university, the publishing houses and a loose conglomeration of artists, writers and university staff that became known as the Mbari club. It was the individuals associated with these cultural institutions who were at the forefront of a period in the 1960s that has, in retrospect, come to be known as, even mythologised as, the Ibadan renaissance.

It is the imagining of the new Nigeria that the cultural institutions of Ibadan were to draw together in the 1960s and this was an

imagining not simply of the polis, but of a new ethnos, a redefinition of identity in Nigeria as a counter to both the impositions of colonial rule and the still pervasive systems of authority sanctioned by pre-colonial tradition.³ Within the university perhaps the greatest sustained re-imagining of the ethnos was within the Department of History. While the colonial regime may have thought a department of history essential to the work of the first census, under the leadership of K.O. Dike and then subsequently under J.F. Ade Ajayi, the history of Nigeria (not of western Nigeria but of Nigeria as a whole) was re-forged as belonging to and a result of the peoples that were now part of independent

Nigeria.⁴ The methodology of the Ibadan school was not confined to Nigeria, and nor were the historians only African, but it is clear that at least initially in the tracing of the historical past for the nation, the Ibadan school made a concerted attempt to overcome the limitations of colonially constructed indigeneity within Nigeria. The clarity of Ibadan however was to recognise that that indigeneity was also supplemented by other perspectives and these, such as the study of the formation of elites and role of the Christian missions in the construction of the Nigerian nation, became as much a part of the historical construction of the nation as the more formal histories.



Iba Oluyole's statue. Oluyole was one of the great Ibadan kings. His statue stands next to Mapo Hall and overlooks Iba market

Demas Nwoko's studio and theatre, started in the 1960s, the building was to have been an artists' workshop and theatre, but was unfortunately never completed. It is noted for its radical use of concrete as a building technology

Ibadan historiography was greatly encouraged by another factor in Ibadan's makeup – the establishment of major publishing enterprises in the city. For the historians, there is no doubt that the Ibadan History series published by Longmans between 1965 and 1983 was a major factor in the success of the school. However, it was perhaps in literature that the proximity to a thriving local publishing industry had its greatest effect. Alongside Longmans (which moved to Ikeja in 1965) Oxford University Press, Evans and, perhaps most crucially, Heinemann all had their main offices in Ibadan. Here, then, was the outlet for the extraordinary creative talent located in the university and in the city.

Perhaps the most important publishing exercise at this time was the journal *Black Orpheus*. While *The Horn*, a student magazine first edited by J.P. Clark, indicated what was to come, it was *Black Orpheus* that catered for the writers and poets of Ibadan as they came into their full maturity. Edited at first by Ulli Beier, a German ex-patriot, who arrived in Ibadan in the 1950s to teach in the University extramural department, the journal included poems and prose by Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele, Abiola Irele, Ama Ata Aidoo, Fanguwa and Chinua Achebe, amongst many others. The journal was illustrated by the work of Susanne Wenger, then Beier's wife. While *Black Orpheus* was initially published by the general publications division of the Ministry of Education for the Western Region of Nigeria and then later by Longmans, it remained firmly the property of the Mbari group of writers and artists.

It is Mbari that is firmly at the centre of the legend (or myth) of Ibadan in the 1960s. The Mbari club as a physical presence was situated in the heart of Ibadan, in a district called Gbagi, close to what was Dugbe market. Soyinka, in his memoir 'Ibadan: the Penkelemes years'⁵ describes mbari as a 'suspect breed of artists and intellectuals'.



Included in this suspect breed were many of the writers that filled the pages of *Black Orpheus* – J.P. Clark, and Okigbo, Soyinka and Mphahlele – but it was a club not confined to writers. The artists Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke had a two-man show at Mbari and in 1964 they were followed by Bruce Onobrakpeya, by then already established at Zaria, and Aig Higo who subsequently became chair of Heinemann; and playwrights and actors such as Segun Olusola and Dapo Adelugba were joined by ex-patriot academics from the University of Ibadan, such as Beier, Lalage Bown, Michael Crowder and Martin Banham.

What then is at the heart of this 'Ibadan Renaissance', this 'Ibadan 1960'? An extraordinary coming together of talented individuals offered their opportunity in the flux of the then, just then, decolonising state? Without doubt this is true, yet there is surely in the work of these writers and artists, publishers and historians, also an understanding mediated by the place that they found themselves in, a place conditioned by the times that they operated in certainly, but also and profoundly a place defined by the town of Ibadan, by its unique city structure, its openness to differing ethnicities and strangers and its engagement with modernity from its very foundation.

Dr Will Rea was given the opportunity to spend three months in Ibadan in 2006 by the British Academy through its Small Research Grants scheme. This research is part of a larger project initiated in the AHRC Centre CATH at Leeds University entitled *Ibadan 1960: Art, History and Literature*. While in Ibadan he was able to interview and talk to a number of the people that figured prominently in Ibadan's scholarly, political and social community during the 1960s. He delivered lectures to the Nigerian Field Society (*Nigerian Field* 71 45–75 (2006)) and the Centre of African Studies, University of Ibadan. In addition he was able to visit the town of Ikole Ekiti and continue his research on Ekiti Egigun masquerades. Special thanks are due to Professor and Mrs J.F. Ade Ajayi, Pat Oyelola and Professor Dele Layiwola.

Notes

- ¹ JP Clark 1991 *Collected plays and poems 1958–1988*, Howard University Press
- ² (Watson, R. 2003 *Civil disorder is the disease of Ibadan: Chieftaincy and civic culture in a Yoruba city*. James Currey, Oxford.)
- ³ Richards D. Unpublished lecture delivered for Ibadan 1960 seminar, Centre CATH University of Leeds.
- ⁴ Ade Ajayi, J.F. The Ibadan School of History in Falola (ed.) *Tradition and change in Africa: the essays of J.F. Ade Ajayi*. Africa World Press, Trenton.
- ⁵ Soyinka, Wole, *Ibadan: the Penkelemes years. A memoir 1946–65*, Minerva, London 1995:302