

ROGER ATWOOD

Searching for a Head in Nigeria

A century ago, a German colonialist went to Nigeria and found a bronze masterpiece. Then, it vanished. Nigerians have been asking themselves what happened to it ever since.

Now they may have the answer.

A PLACE OF “LOFTY TREES . . . as beautiful as Paradise.”

So the German adventurer Leo Frobenius described the sacred Olokun Grove in Ife in 1910. For months before I arrived in Nigeria, I wondered what the grove would look like.

Now I was riding in a car to see the grove with a delegation of curators and archaeologists from the Ife museum. They had a certain ceremoniousness I had come to expect from educated Nigerians, and they were snappy dressers. While I sweated through my khakis and linen shirt, the women in the delegation wore flowered dresses and matching head-dresses, and they curtsied deeply and held out their hand coquettishly when we were introduced. The men called me “sir” and wore tailored robes with a matching cap, or immaculately ironed Western trousers and a pressed shirt and never a T-shirt or, God forbid, shorts. The Olokun Grove was on Irebami Street, near Line 3. It was a neighborhood of rutted streets and ramshackle houses, some with posters on their walls advertising Nollywood movies or displaying President Goodluck Jonathan’s jowly face grafted onto the emerald bands of the national flag. In three weeks’ time, the people of Africa’s most populous country would vote in presidential elections. Not my concern. I was going to see a place as beautiful as Paradise.

In 2011 the American magazine *Archaeology* sent me to Nigeria to report on a German archaeological excavation in the scrubby tablelands north of the capital Abuja, several hundred miles northeast of the sacred grove of Ife. From Goethe University in Frankfurt, the German researchers lived in a walled compound situated midway between the Christian

and Muslim sections of a village. Inside the German colony, the archaeologists had planted herb gardens bordered by neat rows of white stones and drank beer in the evening at long picnic tables.

“We are very careful to draw workers equally from the Muslim and Christian communities,” the leader, Dr. Peter Breunig, told me. “Otherwise they will think we are favoring one over the other.” In the cool mornings, his graduate students straggled out in Land Rovers to their study sites, gathering soil samples and shards that dated from the Nok civilization that lived in this area roughly from 1000 BC to 200 AD. Breunig had also employed some former looters, who were drawn mostly from the Christian section of town. They told me how, in the 1990s, businessmen would come from Lomé, in Togo, and hire a hundred or so local men to dig up areas where farmers had found Nok pottery. The looters would dig nonstop for days and sleep under the trees, surviving on manioc and bush meat and give all the valuable Nok ceramics they found to the Lomé men to sell to illicit collectors.

The Germans were fine hosts and I spent a week with them, hoofing out to their archaeology sites and climbing the granite hills where they filled Ziploc bags with Nok pottery and terra-cotta. They found simple iron tools, each one a cause for celebration for the Nok were among the first people in Africa to manufacture iron, around 500 years before the birth of Christ. I filled my notebooks with quotes and data.

But all the time I was thinking about Ife, that sacred grove, and the Head of Olokun, a legendary bronze artifact that was first seen by Western eyes in that grove, in 1910. The Head of Olokun disappeared around 1930. I wanted to find out where it went.

Ife, pronounced *EE-feh*, is the traditional capital of the Yoruba people of coastal west Africa, though not their political capital, as the Yoruba are spread over about half a dozen countries. The city of Ife, or Ile-Ife as it is sometimes known, lies in Nigeria’s southwest quadrant. I flew from Abuja to Lagos and took a taxi from the airport to Ife, a drive of about three hours past groves of towering palms and muddy lagoons, while I read my copy of Frobenius’ book *The Voice of Africa*. It was published in Germany in 1912 and in Britain, translated by a man named Rudolf Blind, the following year.

Frobenius was a mercurial man with a jaunty mustache and a monocle, a friend of Kaiser Wilhelm who called himself, with some accuracy, “the first ethnologist to go to the interior of Africa.” To the British press, regularly apprised of his movements by British colonial authorities,

Frobenius was simply a “traveler,” as the *London Illustrated News* called him in 1911.

The Voice of Africa, his most famous book, is actually a dispiriting read. Despite its lushly poetic descriptions, its tone of racial superiority and contempt toward Africans can wear down even the most patient reader. The ethical scandals of the day involving European atrocities in Africa—Belgian abuses against rubber workers in the Congo, the British punitive expedition in Benin—seem to have had no effect on him at all and are never mentioned in his book. Frobenius later became one of Europe’s most celebrated anthropologists, developing a theory of ethnography called cultural morphology that saw the technological achievements of ancient civilizations as the outgrowth of diffusion or conquest from “higher” or superior cultures to lower ones. He founded and directed the Research Institute for Cultural Morphology, which attracted Nazi pseudo-intellectuals interested in proving how the glories of ancient Rome and Greece had, in fact, been the result of invasion from superior, Teutonic societies in antiquity, as Heather Pringle describes in her 2006 book *The Master Plan: Himmler’s Scholars and the Holocaust*. Perhaps fortunately for his reputation, Frobenius died in 1938, before the horror that his theories helped to engender was fully consummated.

During his twelve expeditions through Africa between 1904 and 1918, Frobenius and his traveling team of draftsmen and adventurers bought tons of pottery, carvings, weavings, and idols and sent them back to Germany. They wanted objects that looked anthropological or “tribal,” as he wrote. Frobenius was not interested only in acquiring, however. He fancied himself a bearer of Western civilization amongst the wretched of Africa, marching across the Congo and the Sahara in an effort to show Africans the virtues of abnegation, endurance, and connoisseurship. Yet with every journey, he grew more disillusioned that they could ever, as he wished, be more like Europeans.

“To carry the light of knowledge to these nations,” he wrote, “has proved a task beyond our Northern civilizing powers for hundreds, nay, thousands of years. It was very, very, very dark indeed in Africa.”

But there was one place in Africa that Frobenius admired, and, in particular, one object he found there. As far away as Ouagadougou, he had heard reports of a fantastically lifelike bronze sculpture of the head of a deity. Yoruba holy men kept the head buried in a sacred grove in the city of Ife, in British Nigeria. When he arrived with a team of African porters and henchmen hired in Lomé, at that time in German Togoland, a boy

led him to the grove one day, dug up the famous head, and showed it to Frobenius and his German companions. They fell into a kind of trance.

“Before us stood a head of marvelous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrustated with a patina of glorious dark green,” he wrote. “That was, in very deed, the Olokun, Atlantic Africa’s Poseidon!” Then he adds: “I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much classical loveliness.”

He continues: “Here were the remains of a very ancient and fine type of art, infinitely nobler than the comparatively coarse stone-images” that he had seen elsewhere in West Africa. In the Head of Olokun, he saw “a symmetry, a vitality, a delicacy of form directly reminiscent of ancient Greece and a proof that, once upon a time, a race, far superior in strain to the Negro, had been settled here. . . . Here was an indication of something unquestionably exotic and the existence of an extremely ancient civilization. . . . I was on the road to finding some genuine art.”

Genuine art, yes, that’s what the bronze heads of Ife are. About twenty are known today, most discovered by accident in the city of Ife since the 1930s, long after Frobenius had left. But the head seen by Frobenius was the only one known at that time to Europeans, and it happened to be one of the best preserved.

I, too, fell into a kind of trance when I saw the heads of Ife at a temporary exhibit at the British Museum in 2010. They stood all together as if in dialogue with each other, these bronze likenesses with sensual lips, perfectly shaped folds of fat in the neck, and a serene yet alert expression in their heavy-lidded eyes. They had *presence*. So realistic they seem to breathe, so finely modeled they could be human flesh turned to metal, the Ife heads are acknowledged by art historians to be some of Africa’s finest classical art. Most historians believe them to be portraits of kings or deified ancestors who lived between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Their fabrication could be seen as the zenith of two millennia of progress in metalworking in Nigeria that started with the Nok, in those brushy hills where Breunig and his team excavated, and ended with the arrival of cheap European casting techniques in the 1800s that brought metallurgy out of the realm of the elite and into ordinary people’s homes in the form of knives and building materials.

Frobenius wrote the final, farcical word on that history. Writing centuries after the disappearance of high Yoruba art, and with no evidence at all, he believed this part of Africa was colonized in antiquity by lost

Greek tribes, that its gods were Greek in origin, and that Africans were obviously incapable of making such fine objects, so therefore they must have been made by Europeans. His assumption that he had found a likeness of Poseidon owed to the fact that he encountered the head in the sacred grove of Olokun, a sea deity like Poseidon. Few people today think the head represents Olokun, much less Poseidon, and it dates from Ife's golden age of metal casting about 1350 AD, before any documented contact with Europeans. Nothing could dampen Frobenius's enthusiasm for a Greco-Roman connection. His views show how a traveler's assumptions can completely warp his understanding of a place, even a place he admires, and a lengthy stay does not necessarily overturn those biases or lead to some larger wisdom. In the head and other terra-cotta artifacts that he amassed in Ife, he swore he was finding evidence of an advanced artistic sensibility that came from the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean. Now Europe, embodied in himself, had come to redeem this lost lineage. Ife's treasures might have been made by the Etruscans (who lived in central Italy some 2,000 years before ancient Ife), Frobenius wrote, publishing pictures of artifacts from Sardinia that supposedly showed commonalities with Ife works. Or, he suggested, this could be the site of the lost continent of Atlantis.

"To-day, the noble features of the children of the Gods, fashioned in terra-cotta and bronze, are presented to our gaze in all their pathetic loveliness. The spell has been broken. The buried treasures of antiquity again revisit the sun. Europe brings up to the surface what sank down with Atlantis," he wrote.

Within a day of seeing the head, he had bought the piece from an elderly Yoruba priest for six British pounds, a bottle of whisky "and a few other trifles," and planned to ship it to the German Society for Research, which had financed the expedition.

Problems soon arose. The priest's sons complained that selling such an important work of art to Frobenius could anger colonial authorities in Ibadan if they got wind of it. So Frobenius, always scheming, arranged for a secret transfer. The priest's sons accompanied him on a nocturnal mission to retrieve the head from Olokun Grove, where, remarkably for a 500-year-old object, it was still exhumed periodically for worship on Yoruba holy days.

"It was a gloriously moonlit night," wrote Frobenius. "Overhead, that marvelously bright moon—peculiar to the tropics only—and beneath it, boles of lofty trees and the fantastic shapes of stacked banana leaves;

glow worms and flying foxes, the flower-scented air, all asleep above a pall of mist like velvet, a coverlet of earth from which the Gods stretched forth their everlasting hands in leaves of weird contour towards the dome of night.”

The priest’s sons excavated the head and handed it to him.

“Sweet was the burden of it in my arms,” he wrote. He carried it back to his bungalow, and soon members of his team sketched and photographed their new treasure. For a brief time, it was theirs.

Despite his precautions, and as the priest’s sons feared, British authorities indeed learned of the sale and barred Frobenius from taking the head on his journey. Suspecting the British wanted the prize for themselves, Frobenius indignantly returned the piece, received his six pounds back, and to the best of anyone’s knowledge, the head was reburied. Frobenius returned to Germany with steamer trunks full of Yoruba artifacts but not, he wrote, the Head of Olokun.

And then, it vanished. In 1934, priests supposedly brought the piece for safekeeping to the palace of the Ooni, the local king. But that head turned out to be a replica. There are no reliable reports of the authentic Head of Olokun after that, and the piece drifted into legend. One of Africa’s most celebrated works of art became, instead, an object of “mystic disappearance” as the Nobel Prize-winning playwright Wole Soyinka wrote in his memoir *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. The copy of the head remained in the palace, and Yoruba worshippers and European travelers continued to regard that head as the original. The worshippers presumably did not know it was a copy. But one person who, upon seeing it on a visit to Ife, immediately suspected that the original had been switched with a copy was a British sculptor who worked in bronze named Leon Underwood.

In 1948, the head (or the impostor copy of it) was brought to London for an exhibit of treasures from Ife at the British Museum, along with thirteen copper-and-brass heads dating from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries AD that workmen had discovered while digging ditches in 1938 and 1939 a few blocks from the Ooni’s palace. Underwood and curator William Fagg of the British Museum conducted a detailed inspection of those heads and the one believed to have been seen by Frobenius. They wrote in the journal *Man* in 1949 that, on the basis of their forensic tests, the head attributed to Frobenius was a modern replica. All the others were authentically ancient.

“We are fully satisfied that the head is not the original casting, but is an aftercast or facsimile reproduction from an original bronze casting,” they

wrote. It had a peculiarly granular surface, and it showed none of the polishing or chasing that Frobenius had admired. Whereas the other heads and the one seen by Frobenius were made with a lost-wax technique, this head was made with an inferior, modern sand-casting technique, they wrote.

“It appears to be a skilful replica of the head seen by Frobenius in 1910,” wrote Underwood and Fagg. The piece’s metal composition—a zinc-copper alloy with traces of lead—was similar to that of authentic heads, suggesting the forger melted down another piece to make the copy. The head showed traces of seams that would result from being molded in pieces, which would never have happened in the single-cast, wax method practiced at Ife in ancient times. The patina that would come with age was extremely thin compared to the other, indisputably ancient heads, and it had an overly uniform “and somewhat artificial look, typical of . . . modern bronzes,” they wrote. Their conclusion became the definitive word on the head’s authenticity, or lack of it, and was endorsed in subsequent years by the doyen of west African archaeology, Frank Willett, in his 1967 book *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*. Few people questioned their verdict. Soyinka, writing in 2007, called the replica “an abortion” that “any serious art or archaeology student knew to be a travesty.”

The lost original’s fate has remained a mystery. “We have no idea where the original might be. Our contribution to the final solution of the mystery is therefore no more than the evidence that the head is a modern reproduction,” wrote Underwood and Fagg.

But what if Underwood and Fagg were wrong?

I WAS SITTING IN A PEW, taking refuge from the afternoon heat, when the priest approached me in his crisp white cassock.

He introduced himself as Pastor Samson Awoyode of St. Peter’s Church, which stood in all its Anglican rectitude a few blocks from Ife’s busy main avenue. We started chatting. As with everybody I met in Ife, I told him I was looking for information about the Head of Olokun. He looked at me quizzically, and then he scowled.

“People here worship *those* gods,” he said, shaking his head in disgust. “Have they tried to bring you around to them? Show you those false gods in their heathen groves? Do not believe them. Do not.”

For days, I crisscrossed the city from one old Yoruba shrine to another, one sacred grove to another, asking after the head and getting all kinds of reactions. I went everywhere on motorcycles, which I would hail in the street like a taxi and cling to the driver’s belt as he slalomed madly

between trucks and wagons and swarms of pedestrians. People stared at me. Ife does not receive many foreign visitors. It is not mentioned in the *Lonely Planet* guide to West Africa, not a word. It has one of the most illustrious histories of any city in Africa and a good museum, yet Ife is no more on the international travel circuit than it was in Frobenius's time. In a week, I did not meet a single other non-African.

Before I came to Nigeria, I had contacted an archaeologist named Adisa Ogunfolakan of the Obafemi Awolowo University. He had lectured at colleges in the United States, including Amherst College and Harvard, and had published numerous articles and books on Ife's history, so he seemed like the right person to interview. When we met (at the entrance to my filthy hotel on the edge of town), I was surprised to see he was only in his midforties. He was dressed in a flowing, boldly patterned, perfectly pressed gown of the kind that Yoruba men wore, with matching cap, like the uniform of some funky military corps. We spent three days together as he took me to remnants of the city's crumbling walls, ancient pavements and the few remaining groves that maintained any similarity to the shaded, inviting sanctuaries that Frobenius saw.

"The others have all been destroyed. The city grows and grows. People don't care where they build anymore," he said, with a sigh. He introduced me to his colleagues at the university campus, a place of carefully trimmed lawns and boxy buildings. In the trees outside the faculty lounge, I saw hundreds of roosting bats the size of small dogs that I imagined were the "flying foxes" to which Frobenius referred.

One evening we went to a men's social club, where, in the garden of a large house, Adisa and other distinguished men of Ife sat in lawn chairs, drinking judicious amounts of beer and gossiping and complaining about their wives until well into the night. There was an air of comradely warmth. I asked everyone for their theories on the whereabouts of the famous Head of Olokun. One man responded by ostentatiously throwing up his hands and laughing. Another assured me rather portentously that it would never be found. Others ran off on a tangent about some aspect of Ife's history. Or they told me about people who had come before looking for bronze heads or asking after Frobenius's prize, some of them archaeologists. "Willett excavated right over there, just on the other side of that wall," said one man. A few said they believed Frobenius spirited the head to Germany, an opinion Adisa shared. Having read *The Voice of Africa*, with its bluster and boasting about acquiring treasures, I doubted Frobenius would bag such a prize and then keep silent about it.

“I have a feeling he took it with him,” Adisa told me. “It’s somewhere in Germany. Otherwise, why hasn’t it turned up? It’s hidden somewhere in Europe.” In someone’s attic? I suggested. “Yes, in someone’s attic. Forgotten.”

At the colonnaded National Museum in Ife, created under the British in the 1930s, chief curator Bode Adesina told me he kept close tabs on local builders to know when, upon laying foundations, they found ancient artifacts. This was an almost weekly occurrence, he said. The museum’s storerooms were filled with ceramic, stone, and metal artifacts from Ife’s history that turned up accidentally.

The copy of the Head of Olokun, the one that Fagg and Underwood pronounced a modern fake in 1949, now has its home in Adesina’s museum. When we spoke in his gloomy, cluttered office, the copy that I had seen in London was in the United States with the rest of the Ife heads on a museum tour. The tour’s catalogue identified the head as “probably an early 20th Century copy of the original.”

Paunchy and graying at the temples, Adesina settled into his chair and spoke in a low, dispassionate monotone. He launched into the subject without me asking, as if often asked about it.

“The priests always buried objects in the groves, after every festival. Even today, the priests who preside over ceremonies know where such things are hidden. If they keep them in their home, they could be destroyed by fire or taken by thieves. There are always thieves,” he said. “Frobenius gets wind of this object, and he wants to see it, so they unbury the object and they show it to him. But he is forced to give it back. So the priest reburies it.”

Someone in Frobenius’s team photographed the head’s custodian. Adesina showed me the museum’s reproduction of that photograph. It revealed a very old man, perhaps in his eighties, with glassy eyes and hollow cheeks that could reflect a lack of teeth. If this man reburied the head, he could have died before telling anyone else where it was kept. Could he have taken the secret of the head’s location to his grave?

“Perhaps,” said Adesina. At some point, the priest or somebody else made an exact cast of it, said Adesina. “To make a copy as detailed as that, you must have the original. Someone made a perfectly detailed cast.”

Then his voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper.

“I have a *nagging doubt*—” he dragged out those words with great theatricality “—that this head we have, this could be the head. It could be the original Olokun!” In other words, Fagg and Underwood were

wrong, and the head they analyzed was authentic. “We are presuming it’s a copy. But if no one has seen the original, if there is no original, then is it really the copy? Why can’t anyone find it? Yes,” he said, nodding knowingly, “there are people claiming that this is the one.”

He then rose and led me to yet another copy of the Head of Olokun. It occupied a vitrine in the museum’s main gallery. A visiting Nigerian delegation came across this head in a market in South Africa, where it was being touted as the authentic Head of Olokun. “Now, this is a copy. If you made a copy of the head, this is what it would look like,” he said. Even I could see it was a shoddy imitation, grotesquely oversized and with skin that looked like melted-down sardine cans. Still, it caused a flutter of excitement in Nigeria when news of its discovery reached the country.

Other leads have gone cold over the years.

Soyinka, in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, recounts hearing that the original head had somehow made its way to a private collection in Brazil. He and a friend make a frantic salvage mission to Salvador da Bahia and manage to carry off the head in a camera bag, only to discover that it is a clay copy. Some years later, in a London basement, he finds yet another head that his intuition tells him could be the original, but, lacking proof, he decides to forget about it and go home to Nigeria.

“Best to withdraw,” writes Soyinka, “and abandon the lord of the seas [Olokun] to his overseas retreat.”

That haggard resignation, that view of the disappearance as a mystery best left unsolved, was what I encountered every day in Ife. Life had moved on, and the copy had been around so long that it was invested with the meaning of the original. The copy now *was* the original. People’s feelings about the loss of the original Head of Olokun seemed to reflect their resignation at the loss of the old Ife, the urban epicenter of Yoruba society. It struck me as significant that the original head was lost and replaced by a copy precisely as Ife was losing its traditional architecture and way of life. Frobenius, in 1912, described an almost utopian order to the town, extolling “the beautiful high roofs of the great Yoruba houses which were thatched with leaves” on their timber beams, and how the town center “resolves itself into a definite number of astonishingly large compounds all of which are severally built on a clearly organized system and in themselves again give expression to a extended powerful, systematic and social ideal.” He could be describing Bauhaus, an ideal all the more notable considering the squalor he sees everywhere else in Africa. Photographs from that era show rows of large thatched homes with walls made of mud

that has been polished to a sheen, held up with erect wooden posts.

In the three decades that followed, these old structures were razed and replaced by colonial, British-style houses with verandas and large windows with wooden shutters, now decaying in the tropical damp. The precolonial buildings are almost all gone. The city's traditional herring-bone pavements, made from meticulously laid rows of ceramic shards and one of ancient Ife's most distinctive cultural features, also disappeared. Ojoyin Street was the first thoroughfare in Ife to be entirely laid out and constructed in the European fashion, Adisa told me. Today its blocks of crumbling mansions built in the 1930s and '40s are occupied by farm animals, clotheslines, car shells, and grimy bars.

It may look squalid, but Ife, according to Yoruba myth, is the center of the world. The city is "the cradle of the earth," says its anthem, sung at ceremonies today, "home of culture, customs and all religions." Yoruba shrines abound, some of them public monuments like an eighteen-foot stone phallus called the Staff of Oranmiyan and believed to date from Ife's earliest days, and others in musty private homes and accessible only by permission or payment of a few *naira*. When artifacts turn up during road or building construction, it's usually impossible to tell how old they are since the contextual data that archaeologists rely on to ascertain age has been so disturbed by continuous human settlement. In 1957, workmen digging ditches found an exquisite, copper-alloy sculpture of an elaborately dressed regal couple standing arm in arm, their legs intertwined. Eleven years later, two schoolboys found a terra-cotta head in a rain gutter. As in Rome or Jerusalem, Ife's past is a kind of continuous, eternal present.

"Ife is itself a living antiquity," Adisa told me one day. "The city has never shifted place. We continue to build and build on top of the past."

There is no evidence for Adisa's view that Frobenius secretly took the Head of Olokun to Europe. But a strange passage in his 1912 account makes you wonder.

After buying the sculpture, Frobenius feared correctly that colonial authorities would stop him from taking it home. So he went to the Ooni, whom Frobenius said had already given his approval for the purchase, and demanded he sign an agreement granting Frobenius permission to take the original head with him and giving the Ooni an exact copy. Frobenius speaks with barely disguised contempt for the Ooni, the city's king, sneering at his "fat face" and passivity as the Germans finagled cherished artifacts and packed them away. But then a member of Frobenius's party,

in writing the agreement, deliberately switched its terms so that Frobenius would have the *copy* and the Ooni would have the *original*. Frobenius intended, of course, to take the original. But the agreement would be fudged in order to deceive the Ooni and the British into thinking that the German explorer was carrying a mere copy—or, as Frobenius wrote, “to smooth the road of negotiation.”

Thus the original and the copy were scrambled from the very moment of their discovery. Frobenius spent three weeks in Ife, probably enough time to make a metal cast, and his team definitely made clay casts from other objects they found. In any case, by his own account, the switch never happened because Frobenius was forced to return the head to the Ooni.

A new Ooni took the throne in 1930. So, when the head was brought from Olokun Grove to the palace in 1934, the king may not have recognized the original from Frobenius’s visit a generation earlier. We cannot know if the Ooni received the original or a copy, but, as a British Museum publication says, “at some point a copy replaced the original.”

The center of Ife is dominated today by the Ooni’s palace, an imposing white mansion protected by high walls and surly security guards in cheap suits. People explained to me that the Ooni is chosen from among Ife’s five ruling families, who live in labyrinthine compounds of alleys and hidden courtyards. I wandered through those family compounds but they seemed oddly empty, as if the families had left. The few people I encountered glared at me mistrustfully. The whole city seemed a place of intrigue and secret ritual, impervious to the outsider, unfathomable. At the palace, a young man by the entrance told me that it would be impossible for me to interview the king. “He is an old man, more than eighty years,” he said. “He is very rich. He has everything, even his own helicopter. He has been rich forever.”

A DAY OR TWO BEFORE I left Ife, I finally saw the sacred grove, the place of glorious trees where Frobenius saw the Head of Olokun. I had been unable to find the grove on my own, so I was grateful when the museum curator Adesina offered to send his staffers to accompany me.

The grove proved to be a plot of banana and papaya trees and bushes, smaller than a football field, hemmed in with cinder blocks and a few strands of barbed wire. Mats of rubbish covered the ground, and here and there were signs of small fires. Chickens clucked about. It looked more like a vacant lot than a place of worship, but there was no doubt this was the

place. A sign erected by Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) announced that "this is the site where German ethnologist Leo Frobenius recovered the famous Olokun Head in 1910."

The museum's deputy curator, Ademola Adesiyun, unlocked the padlock on the gate leading into the grove, although we could just as easily have stepped over the cinder blocks. I began to wonder if the head might still be here, underneath this layer of refuse, in the spot where it was reburied after being taken from the crusty explorer in 1910. I asked the deputy curator, could it be?

"The belief is that there are still archaeological remains here, yes," he said. Has anyone run a metal detector here? No, he said. "We watch the place, keep people from settling here. If we don't take care of it, people will come and build houses," he added. There were no plans for fresh excavations in the near future, he said. The Head of Olokun might be there but it would stay there, he told me rather firmly, as if I had suddenly become in his eyes the returned spirit of Leo Frobenius.

Doubts have grown about Fagg and Underwood's view that the head shown in London in 1948 is a modern forgery, in particular their assertion that the piece was sand-casted. Back in London, I wrote to two people I had interviewed before I traveled to Nigeria, Julie Hudson of the British Museum and Enid Schildkrout of the Museum for African Art in New York. Both said new tests on the head at the British Museum suggested that it was not a copy after all. Hudson wrote, tantalizingly, that she would be "pleased to talk to [me] about the tests but still need to get approval from the DG [director general] at NCMM (they commissioned them from us)." Two years later, that approval had not arrived, but I sensed that an announcement was coming. I came across an article that Fagg wrote in 1951, in *Nature*, suggesting he was already doubting the assertion he and Underwood made two years earlier that it was a fake. "Science has yet to say the final word on the authenticity of what is probably the most famous of all West African bronzes," Fagg wrote.

"The head is with the exhibition, and the label still says it's a replica. But we are not certain now that it is a replica," Schildkrout told me, referring to the traveling exhibition in the United States. She was the curator of that show and had inspected the Frobenius head many times. "Where is the original? Great question. You'd certainly think it would have surfaced by now."

She suggested that the august British Museum might be reluctant to publish the results of its latest tests on the head because they would reveal

that what it had been calling a fake for so long was, in fact, authentic. Such a correction would be a strange role reversal for a museum; they are more accustomed to facing assertions that supposedly authentic pieces are fake than the inverse. "There are a lot of suggestions that this is the original and that it's not a reproduction," she said. "Maybe the British Museum doesn't want to rewrite its own history."

They needn't be so coy, she said. "Science changes. You get new information and facts change. I think that's what we're looking at."

So it seems the head was authentic after all. If so, then Fagg and Underwood were wrong, and the many people who looked at the head and saw a travesty, as Soyinka said, were wrong. It may have been a grand case of group-think. And the old German bastard had told the truth. Despite all his efforts, he had not been able to spirit the Head of Olokun to Germany so his students could stroke its bronze cheeks and dream of Aryan superiority. It was here all along, among the Nigerians, who had been made to doubt the authenticity of their own heritage.