

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

YORUBA ART AND LANGUAGE: SEEKING THE AFRICAN IN AFRICAN ART

Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xxvii + 386 pp. List of illustrations. Acknowledgments. Orthography and Phonological Notes. Map. Glossary. Photographic Credits. Notes. Works Consulted. Index. \$115.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1107047440.

Introduction

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This Review Forum, a new feature of the *African Studies Review*, is a space where leading scholars, representing a diversity of critical opinions, engage with a significant new book, followed by a response from the author. The constraints typical of a book review are still there—space is limited and the task of distilling broad and complex ideas into portable resonant essences is paramount. The great advantage of the forum is that it makes widely available to scholars a well-considered, lively, and multi-sided “first notice” of a book that will no doubt provide much food for thought across disciplines in many years to come. African art history is the immediate context of Rowland Abiodun’s energetic reaffirmation of the centrality of African languages to the understanding and explication of African cultural forms and practices. The significance of the issue cuts across disciplines in the study of Africa, especially in the current era, which provides almost irresistible temptations to find short cuts in the study of languages and cultures. When we are dealing with these living entities, language mastery remains an irreducible condition of understanding cultures in their broad practical, institutional, and ethical dimensions. This observation represents an abstraction of just one rich strand from the book reviewed here—there are many more, as the exchanges below make clear.

My gratitude goes to the author, Rowland Abiodun, for agreeing to participate in the forum. I am also grateful to the reviewers—Akinwumi

Ogundiran, Grey Gundaker, and Adeleke Adeeko—for enthusiastically agreeing to participate and for their cogent engagements with Abiodun’s book. Finally, thanks to John Lemly and Richard Waller, the *ASR* book review editors, for helping us bring this forum to fruition.

Comments

What does it mean to seek and find “Africa” in African art studies? Why is it necessary? What would it take to accomplish this? Three generations of scholars of African art have implicitly offered answers to these questions, some more successfully than others. For the first time, we have a book that tackles these questions head-on by focusing on the Yoruba visual arts. Here, Rowland Abiodun deftly demonstrates the centrality of language and the epistemology of orature for a deep exploration of the meanings and meaningfulness in Yoruba visual arts. In nine chapters he offers richly textured and sometimes dense case studies to illustrate that Yoruba art is the material expression of *oriki*—that affective invocation of the essence/character (*ìwà*) of a person, thing, or place. Abiodun’s indigenous theoretical framework and extensive discussion of Yoruba aphorisms, Ifá divination verses, and poetic citations provide new vistas of interpretation that refocus our imaginative gyrations toward a more coherent, contextual, and purposeful interpretation of several Yoruba art forms. The methodological rigor that his theoretical framework demands may unsettle some established scholars who are not versatile in Yoruba or any African language. But this is what it takes to decolonize the study of African art: scholars of African art must take the language and the practice of their subjects more seriously as sources of theorizing and interpretation.

Abiodun’s book is primarily about the philosophy of and the philosophy in Yoruba visual arts. It collapses not only the reified boundaries between visual and oral arts, but also those between philosophy and practice. This approach yields many novel insights. Let me cite a few examples. In chapter 4 the author presents the compelling interpretation that the horse imagery in Ifá divination objects has nothing to do with militarism. Rather, it refers to the compatibility of the itinerant nature of the Ifá priest as disseminator of knowledge and the essence of the horse for enhancing travel and movement. That is, just as horses served as a means of connecting spaces and diminishing distances, the itinerant Ifá priests connected far-flung places and helped collapse the boundaries of knowledge.

In another instance Abiodun shifts the ground under the feet of three generations of scholars (including this writer) who seem to have formed the consensus that virtually all the brass figures in West Africa’s oldest city, Ile-Ife, represent royal personalities. The justification for this consensus is that since copper alloys are the most difficult medium for sculpture-making in the repertoire of Ife art, then these must have been the exclusive preserve of the highest ranking elite—kings and queens. Abiodun disagrees with this conclusion. He draws our attention to the iconographies represented on these sculptures

(especially fig. 68) and notes that the paraphernalia of authority and the forms of attire represented in them are not symbols of kingly authority. Referring to the early twentieth-century photographs of Yoruba kings, he argues that the face of the king needed to be concealed, whereas the faces of these sculptures are exposed. He then concludes that those copper alloy figures are in fact representations of Ifá priests. This rereading of the Ife copper-alloy figures is fascinating—even if it perhaps raises more questions than it answers. For example, was there only one way to represent the royal figures and the divination priests in the Ife art repertoire between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries? Is it possible that the Yoruba sculptors of the eleventh–fifteenth centuries were engaging in experimentation with forms that would have allowed them to represent the king with exposed face and torso? Or could these figures represent specific kings whose faces were concealed in public (during commemoration ceremonies, if any) but exposed in the interior of the ancestral shrine? One hopes that Abiodun's rich text will inspire future scholarship that addresses itself to such questions.

In another twist to the trends of identifying the figurative sculptures of Ile-Ife with past kings and queens, Abiodun (chapter 7) cautions the eager scholar who, on the basis of oral traditions, attempts to name not only the artist but also the subjects of the art dating back to the eleventh–fifteenth centuries. In particular, he questions the validity of recent claims that associate particular sculptures with a past king of Ile-Ife, Obalùfòn. Since such claims rely on contemporary information about sculptures that derived from archaeological excavations and accidental discoveries, how can we be sure that these informants were not simply fitting these finds into their own preconceptions and narratives of the past? The methodological sloppiness of accepting such claims as gospel truth (especially when cited as information provided by a king, priest, or chief) raises questions about the misuse of oral traditions and informants.

Abiodun recognizes the adaptive and experimental nature of Yoruba art, although he does not always demonstrate that these qualities preceded the nineteenth century. Far more than ever before, his exposition highlights the need for new studies that will explore the temporal planes and experience of time that produced particular myths, Orisa traditions, practices, and art forms in the one thousand-plus years of the Yoruba historical journey. For example, to what extent is the metaphysics of Osun, a late sixteenth-century deity in the Yoruba pantheon, relevant for the contextual interpretation of the meaningfulness of the Are crown or the Owo sculptures whose forms date to the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, respectively?

With his conceptualization of visual art as *oriki*, we need to recognize that *oriki* as verbal art and the materialization of *oriki* in the visual arts intersected in particular places and times. This intersection was not always simultaneous, and one must take into account the processes of displacement, reshuffling, and recombination of the visual and the verbal. These processes are what make the Yoruba culture, with its vitality and freshness, an unending work-in-progress. For this reason, *Yoruba Art and Language* will

serve as an enduring source of knowledge and wisdom for scholars and the general public. It will also inspire new works that seek to understand the experience of time in Yoruba visual art. Rowland Abiodun has taken us to the right place to start the next generation of scholarship on African art and Yoruba cultural history.

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This book, which represents a culmination of Rowland Abiodun's decades of scholarship on Yoruba art, will leave readers looking forward to future elaborations of its theoretical positions and explorations of relationships between verbal and visual art.

Through a critical assessment of both positive and less fruitful contributions of prior researchers, the book's introduction lays out Abiodun's central argument that Yoruba art deserves engagement on its own terms, and that language and culture are so thickly interrelated that close familiarity with both is crucial for its understanding and appreciating. Throughout the book Abiodun emphasizes the role of language in Yoruba conceptual categories, Yoruba approaches to art making, and the development of artists' reputations. Academic categories, by contrast, occlude relations of differentiation, interaction, and reciprocity among the arts by preemptively separating them into "sculpture," "dance," "music," and so forth. Although Yoruba art has garnered more attention from art historians and anthropologists than all or most other African aesthetic complexes, this has also meant more filtering of this art through the terms and concepts on which these disciplines were built. Because art history emerged in concert with Northern/Western styles, genres, and materials, there is an inherent propensity for distortion outside this ambit, a problem that is compounded by interpretations that incorrectly gloss words whose meaning depends on Yoruba tonal vowels. To that end, the book opens with a helpful explanation of the Yoruba vowel system and is supplemented with an innovative website that allows readers to hear the rhythms of Yoruba speech.

The connection among materials and modes of performance that Abiodun explores is *oriki*: poetry that conveys the essence of a person or thing rendered orally, through tonal drumming, or through sculpture: "To know the *oriki* of a person," Abiodun says, "is to be intimately familiar with his or her place in society[,] and to know the *oriki* of the subject or artifact is to know how it came to be" (12). Abiodun situates visual art in a context similar to Karin Barber's characterization of spoken *oriki* as objects that stand alone while serving as generative hubs for continuing commentary.

For nonspecialists like me, who know Yoruba art only through museums and images, Yoruba people through conversations in English, and Yoruba culture through texts, the book is challenging but immensely rewarding:

a compressed, intensive course that provides the reader with a sense of how language in use is in constant conversation with Yoruba visual arts. For those of us who work with arts and artists in the African diaspora, the book also raises provocative questions about how a volume that homes in so closely on the specificities of Yoruba culture can enhance our work.

If we take Abiodun's points seriously, facile extrapolations from a static Yoruba "there" to an essentialized Yoruba "here" cannot but undervalue the ways in which descendants in the diaspora have made their lived circumstances meaningful through art. Just as the notion of "Yoruba" in the Americas has acquired new symbolic resonances that spur interest in the past, this fine book will inspire attentive readers to bring fresh insights to the complementary relationship between language and art. Sections of the book will be excellent additions to college and university courses, particularly those making the point clearly that whatever their permutations, Yoruba concepts and arts in the Americas have been relocalized and translated, and thus changed: still grounded in language and culture, but transformed through imposed limitations, negotiated mixtures, and transnational migrations.

Abiodun reminds us that such dialogic relationships are widespread throughout Africa; certainly the coding of proverbs and praise names in material forms, for example, bears this out. This dialog offers much for those who work in the Americas to ponder. The excellent work of such scholars as Donald Cosentino and Karen McCarthy Brown in Haiti and with Haitians in the United States, and Lydia Cabrera in Cuba, have led the way toward a better understanding of verbal-material relationships on their own terms, especially in religious practices. At the same time, much art historical and anthropological scholarship on the diaspora in the United States has ignored language-art relationships for a number of reasons: over-confidence in mutual understanding among those who have a supposed common language, English; categorical dismissal in my own field, anthropology, of salient call-and-response with transatlantic histories; and perhaps, above all, the construction of community-based African American artists as homegrown "primitives" whose work continues to be labeled with euphemisms like "naïve," "visionary," "outsider," and "self-taught." These assumptions not only decontextualize the work but also cut off links to verbal and other modes of performance. Yet, as Abiodun shows us, there are enumerable verbal-visual dialogs to explore, from jokes about "puzzle-gut" persons that beg to be sculpted, to spirituals that activate the static image of Jesus' crown of thorns into a thorny road that all must traverse, to material counterpoints to Bible verses which, as oft-repeated bits of essential wisdom, display some of the stand-alone qualities of *oriki*, swirling in commentary, which must be positioned in talk with the precision of a Yoruba proverb.

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Terms for deciphering the “African” element in African arts should be located in the critical infrastructures—beginning with the unwritten, oral repositories—that provide the ground of meaning for the objects in the societies that fostered their creation and dissemination. For Yoruba art history and aesthetics, Abiodun argues that the *oríkì* framework of defining, qualifying, presenting, and abstracting about the world should be the starting point. In this book, *oríkì* is not only the praise discourse that it is axiomatically taken to be in Anglophone scholarship; nor is it a genre or mode. *Oríkì* is the term for all attempts to abstract and express the essence of an object of attention. The much studied verbal form, Abiodun stresses further, is just one iteration of an approach to articulating perceptions. *Oríkì*, he writes, “affirm the identity of almost everything in existence” and “energize, prepare, and summon their subject into action”; the spirit of *oríkì* is expressed in “architectural space, dress, music, dance, the performed word, mime, ritual, food, and smell, engaging virtually all the senses” (5)—a manner of “doing” thoughts and ideas in, and as, words and things.

The analysis opens with the cone-shaped head object, the tangible delineation of *orí inú*, or “spiritual allotment” (33), which, in the sense of order proposed in the book, is one step removed from *orí-òde*, the quotidian, physical head. Heads are ubiquitous in Yoruba sculpture because they invoke the part of the body to which, in *oríkì*, all social success is traced. The centrality of heads is discussed throughout the book and fully elaborated upon in chapter 6 about Ifè “naturalism.” Relying on oral traditions and printed archives, though without privileging the latter, Abiodun demonstrates that the naturalistic portrayal of royalty in Ifè art is probably a twentieth-century development that began with a specific artist, Ọlówè from Ìṣẹ̀-Èkìtì, and exploded in printed photographic portraits in commercial “almanacs.” This absorbing analysis illustrates how the Abiodun method of art history can be most illuminating. Besides systematizing Ifè styles, the chapter defines three distinct artistic idioms in Yorùbá visual *oríkì*: *àkógraphy* (propitiating arts), *àṣẹgraphy* (invocatory arts), and *èpègraphy* (maledictory arts). These are not categories of “functions” but intermedial aesthetic expressions that are found in textile, metal, terra-cotta, wood, and ivory across regions and in spheres as diverse as divination and ludic masking. Abiodun defines each of the three idioms according to how it deploys the art’s power of inventive creativity, or *àṣẹ* (making-to-be).

The recognition and contemplation of that power in verbal arts is the subject of chapter 2. Chapter 3, anchored in gender analysis, revolves around the coral beaded comb (*òyà ìyùn*) of Ọṣun, the character who animates *différance* in the canonical Ifá divination system. With a deep understanding of verbal declamations about Ọṣun in divination verses—especially her primary role in the textual constitution of the sixteen principal sections of the Ifá apparatus—Abiodun argues that Ọṣun’s hair comb is not intended for motherly or womanly styling and fashioning or for beautifying quotidian being (*orí-òde*), but is the tangible representation of what existence owes to *orí-inú* (singularity). The analysis locates the defining element of

Ọṣun's hair comb in cognate head-centered adornments like crowns, hats, and head scarves, either as they are worn in real life or as depicted across the length and breadth of Yoruba land in wooden masks, terra-cotta, feathers, and beads. The fourth chapter analyzes the “thick” significance of horses and travel iconography on divination nut-holding bowls. The fifth chapter analyzes body adornments, mainly textile and beaded neckwear or necklaces. Chapter 6 presents a historical analysis of *àkó* in the Ọwọ funeral practice of presenting a carved naturalist effigy of the deceased. The last chapter addresses verbal conceptions of being as art (*àṣà; iwà*) and of art as being (*iwà; ẹwà*) in the Yoruba language.

The unique achievement of *Yoruba Art and Language* lies in its sustained analysis of art objects with a hermeneutics derived from historically Yoruba intellectual and critical practices. Its interpretation of Yoruba arts engages Yoruba speech, itself not less artistic, about arts and repudiates the “point-and-shoot” approach to art history that transposes Euro-American discourses to Africa *en bloc*. The book does not stress difference for its own sake but for the sake of abstracting the insightful values that intellectual difference bears for understanding the arts. Art objects, a discerning reader cannot but note, do not speak the historian's language, even when he or she is Yorùbá, while it is the historian who invests the object with a mouth and a language. In this book, Abiodun makes the studied art objects speak Yoruba words convincingly while acknowledging that the works exhibit qualities of beauty and meaning that are found in many places that are not Yoruba. Its contribution to comparative aesthetics from the Yoruba part of the world is very impressive.

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Response from the Author

It is gratifying to note that all three reviewers appreciate and endorse the primal place and use of African languages and literature in African languages for African art studies. The prevailing academic reality is, however, very different. Researchers in the field are more likely to be amply rewarded for demonstrating fluency in a colonial language as opposed to the language of the people whose art they study. Scholars and researchers are conditioned to acknowledge this in practice, so they work hardest at expressing African meanings in colonial languages—a less-than-subtle indication of the privileged status of those languages over African languages. This supposed superiority of colonial languages has effectively discouraged even indigenous Africans from incorporating their mother tongues in their research, lest they be chastised as “nativists,” incapable of expressing themselves, and less-than-global in their thinking. Academic advisors and

mentors are prone to encouraging African students to prioritize a high proficiency in Western languages so that their work might be given more recognition. This is partly responsible for the decision of many Africanist art scholars to work on their reading and writing skills in foreign or colonial languages rather than taking seriously the acquisition of African language skills as foundational to their professional scholarship. This situation is also not unconnected with the current drift from precolonial to postcolonial and contemporary art studies, from which scholars can currently derive international recognition.

There is no reason that the bar for academic excellence in African art studies should be lower than what is acceptable in Western art historical studies. Undoubtedly, it can be impressive for an African art scholar to claim to be an expert on the art and culture of every society and country on the African continent. But this is very much like claiming to be a specialist in all of the arts and cultures of China, the United States, Europe, and other culturally diverse countries, as if they were all somehow the same. We do know, of course, that today this claim cannot be entirely true, given the diversity and antiquity of the arts, cultures, and languages in a continent as big as Africa. Such universalist claims may have been considered impressive in the scholarship of the colonial past when researchers catered to, and fulfilled, the expectations of their Western audiences. But they also did irreparable damage to the discipline of African art studies because of their authors' superficial or insufficient grounding in the languages and cultures of the people studied. Language competency must go beyond sprinkling a text with African proverbs (which themselves are often used in an inappropriate context or cited without an acknowledgment of their origins and translators). Such competency is particularly important for a scholar whose mother tongue is not African.

Also, too often the question is still asked: why do African cultures not have terms or concepts for art, aesthetics, style, and so on? Scholars repeat this stereotypical concept to justify their avoidance of becoming involved with African languages. It is only the exceptional few who invest sufficient time and effort to master African languages and incorporate them meaningfully into their work. The real issue, to my mind, is analogous to the message in the Yoruba saying “Àtètè mólè, olè mólóko”: “If one is tardy to catch the thief, the thief will turn on the property owner and accuse him of being the thief.” This is the reason that my work has focused on Yoruba art, the language (and dialects) of whose creators I can speak, write, and understand without the aid of an interpreter. (See page xxvii in the book for reference to the companion audio clip.)

What my study does not do, therefore, is privilege the use of Western languages in theorizing African art. Thus far African art scholarship has been operating more or less like a one-way traffic system—and this is its greatest pitfall as an academic discipline. We can only imagine the kind of response that Leo Frobenius's 1913 book *The Voice of Africa* (which was published and widely distributed in the Western world) would have received

if it had been accessible to Yoruba language speakers and read by Yoruba intellectuals. He writes,

Here were the remains of a very ancient and fine type of art. . . . These meager relics were eloquent of symmetry, vitality, a delicacy of form, directly reminiscent of ancient Greece and proof that once upon a time, *a race far superior to the negro has been settled here* (see Abiodun 2014:207; italics mine).

Frobenius's work is full of similarly outrageous statements. Further on, for example, he writes that "Ifá is nothing but the expression of the need of searching for a final cause, of the endeavor to find a concrete idea of a universe which *transcends native intellectual capacity*" (see Abiodun 2014:131; italics mine). He could get away with such inappropriate remarks and inject them into his academic discourse on Yoruba art because he knew that he was not addressing the Yoruba people, but rather a captive Western academic audience, some of whom still applaud him today. The survival and active continuation of the Frobenius kind of scholarship can still be seen in works by some prominent scholars of Yoruba and Ife art in particular. Disseminating knowledge of African art through non-African languages has become the norm, a safe haven for the commission and perpetuation of serious misunderstandings and outright conceptual errors, and it has taken more than a century to address them.

In high schools during the Nigerian colonial era, students speaking their indigenous languages at any time on school property would be punished with several strokes of the cane. Today, advocating the quintessential role of African languages for African art studies is still regarded as an impractical and unnecessary burden by some members of the academic community. Does this mean that the colonial legacy lives on?

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