

'When the Paradigm Shifts, Africa Appears': reconceptualizing Yoruba art in space and time

Review of: Rowland Abiodun , *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 409 pp., 73 b/w, 67 colour ill. \$92 cloth.

Nkiru Nzegwu

Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art by Rowland Abiodun, John C. Newton Professor of the History of Art and Black Studies at Amherst College, is an epistemological *tour de force* on art and aesthetics from within a Yoruba intellectual scheme. Writing in English though thinking in Yoruba, Abiodun marshals the deliberative methodology of the Yoruba intellectual tradition that historically comprised of leading purveyors of knowledge, such as the *oba* (rulers), high-ranking chiefs, *baálè* (town/community heads), *Ògbóni* elders as well as experts of religion and health (*aláwo*, *onísègùn*), *arókin* (historians), music, visual and verbal art professionals, and *amewà* (art experts). In conveying this knowledge, Abiodun refrains from the conventional practice of epistemologically centering the West and deploying the Western conceptual scheme and artistic vision, even as he carefully reviews Western artistic practices and the writings of Western researchers and commentators on Yoruba art. He is fully cognizant, as *Ọlásopé Oyèláràn* explains, that Yoruba 'language...is the storehouse of our essence' (2008, 75), and so draws heavily on the language and his prodigious knowledge of the culture in this study of Yoruba art.

Proceeding methodically, Abiodun theorizes Yoruba art after decades of deepening his knowledge of Yoruba artistic histories and practices and grasping their organizational logic.¹ He then deploys the analytical principle, *Èlà*, that works

¹ Demonstration of competence in any field of studies is necessary in establishing the legitimacy of one's knowledge claims and scholarly authority. The field of African studies has long been plagued by faulty reasoning that rests on Western intuitions rather than on Africa's knowledge foundations. It behooves us to ascertain the ground of a scholar's authority. Abiodun's close and critical study of Yoruba art and culture is motivated by a desire to shift the study of Yoruba art onto Yoruba cultural grounds. His study of the aesthetic universe, spanning over forty years, began at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ifè (later Obafemi Awolowo University). It consisted of reflections of lived experience, analyses of data obtained through research, critical interrogations of artistic norms and patterns, participation in Yoruba research study communities at Ifè and around the world, continuous engagement in, and reassessment of discourses on Yoruba ontology and art with Yoruba and nonYoruba colleagues in different disciplines, formal presentations of his research findings and ideas at scholarly venues, and focused publications on Yoruba art and aesthetics. Prior to this period of sustained research, Abiodun, like most Western-

with the explicative *Òwe* (dramatic figures of speech), to illumine typologies of verbal *oriki* (praise or citation poetry²), proverbs, and chapters of *Odù Ifá* (Ch.1). They analytically articulate and decompose Yoruba conception of creativity and art. He utilizes *itàn* (a dynamic-discursive mode of historical practice [Yai 1993]) to ground his theoretical framework. And for sociocultural adequacy, he draws on Yoruba cosmogony, odes to the *òrìṣà* (divinities), *àṣà* or stylistic traditions of various art works, symbolic motifs as well as Yoruba thinkers and scholars’ analyses of cultural and artistic forms, including those of local and regional *amẹwà*. Abiodun’s strategy of analytically drawing *ogbón* (wisdom) into the realm of *imò* (knowledge) promotes *òye* (deep understanding) from a Yoruba art historical standpoint (2014, 27-32). He presents his culturally-grounded analyses to a global audience as if he was in a Yoruba center of learning, deliberating with historically-informed peers and demonstrating his explicatory and analytical competence.

Firmly situated within the Yoruba conceptual paradigm, Abiodun theorizes the particularities of the Yoruba artistic tradition that translocal and transregional communities of creators and intellectuals have developed over centuries. His book embodies two main arguments: the first, speaks powerfully to the importance of language of an artefact’s culture in artistic understanding; and the second, speaks unequivocally of the relevance and explanatory power of the creators’ conceptual schemes, aesthetic concepts, and metaphysical and social values in artistic understanding. Both arguments are nuanced and deftly argued, delivering far more explanatory illumination on Yoruba artistic forms and motifs, styles and *àṣà*, artistic practices, and creative rationales than the book’s subtitle promises. Contrary to the subtitle’s modest claims, Abiodun is not ‘seeking the African,’ he is masterfully delivering an African artistic scheme through knowledgeably highlighting the Yoruba aesthetic universe as well as the full range of artistic values, epistemological insight, and cultural practices that make the art possible. Although working within the Western knowledge system for most of his professional career, Abiodun admirably refrains from the standard mistake of superimposing the West’s artistic traditions, periodizations, and philosophies of art onto the Yoruba. He understands clearly that his task is not to further expand the hegemony of Western art and art historical principles, but rather to reveal the long obscured Yoruba artistic logic and aesthetic vision.

Abiodun consummately leads readers out of the Western aesthetic paradigm

educated African scholars of his time were relatively well-versed in their cultural practices, but had spent more time formally studying, and becoming vastly educated on, Western society and its practices at the expense of their own. At the end of his formal training in Toronto, Canada, Abiodun recognized that his knowledge of Western art and foundational aesthetics were ill-suited for analyzing Yoruba art. So, he shifted gears.

² Forms of verbal *oriki* include *ẹ̀sà* (targeted discourse), *ẹ̀fẹ̀* (dramatized satire), *ewi* (*egúngún* chant), *ijálá*, and *ẹ̀kún-iyàwó* (a bride’s lament). See Abiodun, 11-12.

and its attendant epistemological scheme. He then takes us deep into the Yoruba intellectual arena where normative and meta-theoretical disputations on art, culture, and aesthetics habitually take place. In that arena, *Orí* stands as the principle of individuation, individuality and actualization, with *Òwe*, functioning as the process of exemplification, and unravelling the intricate relations between artistic object and speech, as well as between the 'active essence known' as *Òrò* (20) and instances of actual works of art concretized as physical *oríki*. *Òwe*-reasoning is not simply the unravelling of figures of speech as is generally assumed; in its deeper sense, it represents a matter or 'the subject of discussion, concern or action' (26). The contemporary journey from Western citadels of learning to this thought-system where art is visual *oríki* and the knowledge produced has a long venerable history, has been in progress for a long time. In fact, it began with the creation of African art studies as an academic field in the West in the 1950s. Hitherto, theorists and researchers of African art in Western citadels of learning (hereinafter referred to as 'Africanist art historians' or 'Africanists,'³ in short) as well as Western-trained African art scholars have aspired to do just that, but have always come up short. Just for this breakthrough alone, *Yoruba Art and Language* is a monumental scholarly accomplishment for African art studies in the West, succeeding where numerous others have failed. Most importantly of all, it successfully wrested an African aesthetic framework and a culture's art from the sticky metaphysics covering and impaling it to the Western aesthetic system.

Owing to the complexity of Abiodun's *Yoruba Art and Language*, this extensive review is conducted in four parts. The first part examines the issue of the relevant language for generating meanings and comprehending Yoruba art; the second,

³ The term 'Africanist' primarily refers to a researcher of Africa in Western academy of learning who is non-native or nonAfrican. This means that the individual or their parents is neither an African, nor has real life lived experience in some African country. This does not mean that individual has never traveled to specific countries as a tourist or for research. What essentially differentiates the Africanist from the African scholar is that the former by virtue of belongingness to his or her own society and culture, has an externalist or outsider perspective. The scholarship from such an 'outsider perspective' is only as good as the duration of the visit, the close interaction with members of the society, the learning of the language, the participation in and explanation of ceremonies, rites and rituals, the seriousness to learn, what he or she was able to learn about the values, and the willingness to live and interact with others by those values. The criteria seem like a tall order, but it is necessary to enforce a paradigm shift, necessary for truly understanding and meaningfully studying African cultures. In the absence of a paradigm shift, one is merely engaging African societies from an externalist perspective that offers little of the logic of the culture. In fact, dependence on such an externalist perspective for knowledge production is fundamentally problematic. This is because one's own cultural framework will continually intrude and interfere with one's effort at understanding another culture. This problem is magnified if that cultural framework is a hegemonic one.

highlights the appropriate conceptual scheme and orally-based historical tradition that constitute the paradigm of knowledge; the third, draws attention to the metaphysical traits of this paradigm providing intelligibility to Yoruba conception of art as *oriki*; and the last, illuminates the underlying logic of the chapters presenting the Yoruba aesthetic universe in this book. The review concludes on what readers should take away from this groundbreaking book.

The language of meaning: how did we get here?

Over fifty years after the formal end of colonialism in Nigeria, the issue of the relevant language for understanding Yoruba art is still astoundingly being discussed. That such a discussion is taking place at all demonstrates the enduring power of coloniality and the shifting underlying character of colonial racism.⁴ By 'coloniality', I mean, the interconnected political, social, and racial hierarchical orders of power of European colonialism (Quijano 2000) that endures even in postcoloniality; and by 'colonial racism', I mean a brand of racism that targets cultures rather than bodies (Nzegwu 1999) and in the process propagates singularity (Nzegwu 2016). Despite the commendable efforts of a band of intrepid Africanist pioneers to carve out a field of African art studies in the West, and despite the dedicated work of later scholars to produce a canon of literature, *Yoruba Art and Language* makes a convincing case that these past efforts of the study of African art in the Western academy and within the Western system of knowledge remains entrapped in coloniality, exemplified by the massive failure to apprehend and theorize Yoruba art and other cultures from within an African perspective.

Decades after the creation of the field of African studies, post-pioneer Africanist art historians and Western-trained African scholars are still taking for granted the centrality of Western languages, Western art historical principles, Western art periodizations, Western artistic concepts, and Western-derived theories in *studying* African art. The process assimilates African art into the Western artistic scheme as if Yoruba creative expression accords wholly with Western aesthetics, but places it at a lower creative level. Abiodun's groundbreaking book challenges the validity of this assimilationist philosophy and methodology. He focuses attention particularly on the superficiality of interpretations, the nonapprehension of the Yoruba conception of art, and the shortcomings of Western languages and conceptual frameworks in *understanding* African artefacts. He raises fundamental questions about what counts as knowledge in the field of African art studies in the West, if African cultural logic is left out. He prods us to interrogate what constitutes evidence when African cultural data do not register on a theoretical scheme and

⁴ 'Colonial racism' is a terminology I utilized in discussing the character of racism in non-settler colonies in Africa. See Nzegwu, 1999.

researchers do not understand the language and norms of the culture that produced an artifact.

In the United States academy where the West defines the normative ground of scholarship for African art, the legitimacy of Abiodun's point is undermined by an unwillingness to accord it legitimacy, by venturing outside the parameters of the Western intellectual tradition and structure of knowledge. Instead, attention is deflected from this unwillingness, by attacking the idea of an African intellectual tradition, and the existence of African knowledge practices. These attacks are carefully targeted at the features distinguishing the African mode of knowledge production from the specific mode that is privileged in the West. With the latter being represented as the only valid mode of knowledge, the Yoruba intellectual tradition is disparaged for its presumed inferiority, lack of accuracy and difficulties of recoverability of historical data. The underlying idea giving legitimacy to this Western stance is that since Yoruba history is orally preserved and transmitted, the accuracy of historical data is compromised by a methodology that collapses multiple time frames, and a mode of knowledge that lacks critical reflection. An ancillary component of the contention is that, because contemporary iterations of languages differ from their earlier historical epochs, Yoruba words, ideas, and meanings of past historical epochs are different from contemporary ones. Hence, on this view, the possibility of obtaining accurate historical data is further amplified. The envisaged problem here is that although an *oriki* or oral testimony may deliver historical information, the data lack epistemic value because they embody a multiplicity of temporal moments with no definite chronological order. Therefore, there is no valid theoretical way for sorting out, deciding on the correct temporal sequence, or agreeing on the semantic accuracy of descriptions and claims of past historical epochs.

It is worth noting that such sceptical attacks on oral history have spearheaded the invalidation of African intellectual tradition and the ideas of African intellectuals' historical narratives. Such invalidation, in the face of the groundbreaking work of Ibadan Historical School and African orature theorists, continues furtively to promote the epistemic superiority of the Western system of knowledge and its viewpoints about other cultures. The continued promotion illegitimately reassures contemporary Westocentric Africanists and Africans about the epistemic legitimacy of their approach. The upshot of this stance is that because African societies putatively left no written records,⁵ the Western languages and the

⁵ I use the word 'putatively' because of the pervasive erroneous assumption that no African society had a writing system, and so left written records. Of course, we know that the assumption is false given that systems of writing existed in an array of societies from ancient times in scripts such as, Proto-Saharan, Egyptian hieroglyphs (hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic), Nsibidi, Tifinagh or Amaghiz, Vai, Merotic, Ge'ez or Ethiopic, Old Nubian, Roman, Arabic, and others. The problem is that the archives of these system are either not known in

Western methodology are the sole intellectually appropriate medium for academic work.

Isidore Okpewho, and countless oral literature and oral history experts, successfully challenged such assumptions on the ground that epistemological critiques of oral history and oral literature demonstrate lack of 'sufficiently deep understanding of and feeling for the indigenous languages' in which such literature or knowledge is performed (1992, 12). The point being that lack of linguistic competence of a culture's language does not imply nonexistence of a valid information retrieval process and system in that culture. Subsequently, recurrent interrogations of the epistemic validity of oral history and oral literature are driven by vain searches for familiar writing systems and familiar modes of written documentation, no matter the dubious nature of the documents and of the writers' interpretations. In constructing oral history as theoretically unsound, Westcentric Africanists, that is, those steeped in white superiority, are invidiously choosing to ignore the evidence and interpretations of indigenous cultural experts. However, limiting knowledge practices only to the Western value-system and Western epistemological standpoints falsely universalizes Western terminologies, objectives, epistemology, and languages, and erroneously deems them present in the languages of every culture in the world.⁶ The pseudo conceptual equivalence underwriting this universalization fallaciously underwrites the interrogation and dismissal of Yoruba language and thought as unnecessary for knowledge production. Yet, no legitimate evidence exists to warrant the validity of the Western scepticism and the Western archimedean standpoint on creativity, aesthetics, and artistic relationships that is being implanted. Thus, the conventional practice of continually invoking Western art principles, far from amplifying the superficiality of Yoruba art interpretations, actually obfuscates the art, particularly the relationship between art and creative expressiveness.

It is pertinent to underscore that knowledge in the West functions as a site for the maintenance of white privilege and superiority. For this reason, politics

the West, or hardly acknowledged or utilized when known. The point is that what does not register in the Western mode of knowledge does not exist!

⁶ Abiodun's grasp of the inadequacy and parochial nature of English/Western artistic terminologies in presenting the meaning of Yoruba artistic expression, occurred in 1982 after he accepted Akinwumi Isola's invitation to teach art history in Yoruba language in the Department of African Languages at the University of Ife in Ilé-Ifè, now Obafemi Awolowo University. This required him to give a semester long series of lectures in Yoruba, clarify points, respond to students' questions, set examinations in Yoruba, and review students' work in Yoruba. Suddenly, the parochial nature of Western art assumptions, terminologies, and periodizations became painfully obvious. The West's 'universality' quickly dissipated, revealing instead a range of ideas and viewpoints that make little sense within the Yoruba artistic and epistemic standpoint (personal communication 2/18/2018).

rather than a genuine search for knowledge undergirds Western theorizing about others societies. This politics of knowledge regulates the legitimization of African studies in the Western citadels of learning in ways that evacuates the African and African values, ethics and norms from view. What is African is routinely presented from a deficit standpoint, slickly casting Africa as a place of inferiority and illogicality.

Once the evacuation of African cultural reality and aesthetic scheme takes place, white privilege and solipsism flourishes unchecked as Africanist art historians freely rely on Western languages, archives, texts, voices, and intuitions as well as on Western-centred artistic interpretations as though Africa and African thinkers do not exist. Some of the archives and texts are seventeenth- to early twentieth-centuries white European and white American travellers' reports, anthropological writings by colonial functionaries and white Christian missionaries, and ethnocentric modern Western theories of art and psychology. By positioning these racially-charged texts as vital for theoretical construction, many fundamentally racist ideas are 'normalized' and become foundational materials for African studies. Africanist art historians are then empowered to blithely ignore the flaws in those texts as well as the longstanding exhortations of African scholars and philosophers that language is the repository of history, values, culture, concepts, and all facets of human social production and is essential for cultural understanding (Mũgo 2012, Oyèláràn 2008, Wiredu 1996, Maathai 1995, Yai 1993, Okpewho 1992, wa Thiong'o 1986, Soyinka 1977, p'Bitek 1966). It is instructive that these exhortations on the importance of African languages and perspectives in explaining African histories, cultural life, values, philosophies, and art continue to fall on deaf ears, because, in challenging the accounts of the West's knowledge about other cultures, they threaten the very foundation of Western hegemonic power.

For perceptive scholars such as Abiodun, whilst it is important to establish the causative factors behind the dismissal of African languages in artistic interpretation, and to show that these factors rest on fallacious connections between race and intelligence, it is far more useful to focus on the implications of the dismissal on scholarship. The first effect, which Abiodun brings to attention, is the epistemological and theoretical invalidity that follows the unwarranted elimination of African history and social and cultural values in explanations; and the second, is the corollary banishment of African subjectivity and ontology from intellectual purview. Abiodun makes the case that working synergetically, both processes replace Africa with nonAfrican artistic and aesthetic ideas. The switch, some of which occurs surreptitiously, obscures the fact that the West's epistemological objective is not really to promote an understanding of African arts in accordance to their artistic and aesthetic logic, but rather to recast the art and Africa in ways that make them palatable to Western sensibilities and pretensions of cognitive superiority. The inevitable refashioning of African art that follows, a signal to the

relations of power underlying coloniality, centres this colonially-manufactured, beauty-based, modernist notion of African art as 'unassailable.' It is imperative to note that this 'unassailability' comes, not from cultural validity or legitimation, but from claims that the Western system of knowledge is based uncompromisingly on 'accuracy,' 'truth,' and 'objectivity.'

Putting aside all self-serving coloniality claims, a philosophical understanding of hegemony falsifies this representation of Western knowledge claims about other cultures. Its production of knowledge of other cultures is fundamentally ideological designed to relationally amplify the inadequacy and inferiority of other cultures in a bid to undermine those peoples' truth about themselves. The reluctance to epistemologically value other cultures' account of themselves works dual harm by blocking the articulation of African philosophy and casting it aside as intellectually deficient. This, in turn, silences Africans' objections to Western misconstruals and vests theoretical value on those misconstruals. This strategy of erasure and accordance of epistemic pre-eminence to the West stems from a long enduring racist legacy of coloniality widely believed to have been repudiated. The legacy, which had underpinned the infamous 'Hamitic theory' and 'Sudanic State hypothesis,' had simply receded to a presuppositional level from whence it periodically re-emerges to shape the structures of Western academy. By influencing academic disciplines, directing trajectories of research, and determining what counts as scholarship on Africa, it portrays Africans' anti-colonial scholarship as defective. Additionally, from its deep foundational level, its racialized constructions of knowledge continually underwrite the idea that African cultures lack a conception of art, that Africans lack rationality, and that Africans do not possess the requisite intellectual distance and capacity to 'objectively' and 'knowledgeably' explain their art.

Operating sub-textually within the Western intellectual scheme is a vast corpus of racialized assumptions that limit knowledge only to white cognisors. What white cognisors know, together with the writings of white colonial functionaries, white Christian missionaries, and white adventurers and travellers (who at the time of writing, were ill-informed about the salient logic of African cultures) are elevated to canonical status. An unwavering faith in texts and documents in this cognitive system translates into blind acceptance of erroneous data, because scholarship is white, knowledge is scribal, and canonical texts are produced only by white 'experts' and the few Africans willing to validate coloniality. The global hegemony that secures white Western intellectual power guarantees white Western dominance of theory and art history worldwide. It also authorizes the construal of Africa as a *tabula rasa*, and undermines Africans intelligence, imagination, and subjectivity. By tacitly making African languages epistemologically redundant as well, this theoretical performance of hegemony makes it pointless to epistemically value African philosophies of art and the artistic

interpretations that flow from them. This means that the only credible knowledge about African art and African humanity is the one articulated by a white theorist. With the Western modernist, beauty-based notion and tradition of art reigning virtually unchallenged, Africanist art researchers are empowered to assert definitional, theoretical, and publishing dominance over African art and aesthetics.

From within the Yoruba and other African intellectual schemes and artistic universes, the superficiality of the white Western 'knowledge' on Africa is unbelievably glaring. It is astounding to local intellectuals that expertise and theoretical dominance can be claimed by those who barely speak the language, and whose purported understanding of a culture's art and intellectual traditions are naïve at best. The obscene jockeying to flatten Africans' knowledge about their cultures in order to promote theoretical hypotheses and the epistemic pre-eminence of Africanists is beyond belief. Needless to say, the theoretical problems Africanists typically raise about African art, the lack of historical accuracy of oral history, the epistemological shortcomings of Africa's knowledge processes, and the absence of critical viewpoints, all register as either non-problems or pseudo-problems that are symptomatic of ignorance. For this reason, the pronouncements about Yoruba art and its history by anyone lacking linguistic and cultural fluency lack credence. Such pronouncements are profoundly similar to a non-literate's claim to know, understand, and evaluate the scribal history of Western art simply by visually perusing art catalogues and books.

It is safe to say that Abiodun's language-matters argument re-asserts the appropriate standard of scholarship, irrespective of which culture and which artistic works are being studied. It is for this reason that *Yoruba Art and Language* foundationally and intertextually attacks specious claim to knowledge⁷ as well as the unwarranted problematization of Yoruba orally-based history. First, Abiodun's arguments perceptively addresses the fact that one cannot *mò* (know) or claim knowledge of what one neither knows nor understands, by which he means the full

⁷It is impossible to understand, let alone interpret artistic visions, motifs, meanings and practices, if one does not understand the requisite language and lacks access to the conceptual scheme of the culture under study. Because Western languages and artistic principles do not offer any access to the Yoruba universe of meanings, the only available access is indirectly through informants of various degrees of skills and competence. It is noteworthy that most informants of researchers are not necessarily intellectuals of the culture, or knowledgeable members of a professional artistic group, or knowledgeable about Yoruba history and culture, or aware of the problems of para-literate feedback, or fluent in the Africanist researchers' Western language to understand the nuances of his or her speech, or literate in the artistic theories and assumptions the Africanist researcher is deploying in reading Yoruba visual art works. In fact, to avoid pitfalls in cross-cultural translation, researchers really have to step outside the frame of coloniality to learn about the culture. In short, they have to learn the requisite language themselves.

range of epistemic forms whereby data is encoded—such as forms of *oriki*, *itàn*, performance rites and ritual-narratives); and secondly, knowledge cannot be based on an epistemology of ignorance and the mistaken interpretations that flow from it. Hence, claims by Africanists to knowing Yoruba art and to knowing the defects of Yoruba oral history are fundamentally false. The falsity lies in claiming to know what they do not really know. This is because such claims, first, require linguistic and cultural competence to ascertain how the methodological processes work; and second, how cognitively the society marks time and chronology in its system of knowledge. This is a complex matter that requires intimate knowledge of the culture, and that cannot be ascertained *a priori*.⁸

Consequently, Africanists’ superimposition of Western periodization and aesthetic formula on Yoruba art generates false, unproductive queries and artistic concerns that are not the purview of Yoruba creativity and art. While, for instance, such superimpositions lead Africanists to assume erroneously that visual beauty is the overriding goal of all aesthetic schemes and the central features of all conceptions of art as it is for modern Western aesthetics, the aesthetic rationale of Yoruba art is obscured. Consider that when the focus is on visual beauty and is driven by a notion of ‘representation’ that is a conceptual linchpin in modern Western aesthetics, the logic of Yoruba art is skewed. ‘Representation,’ in modern Western art, is semantically weighted toward similarity and realism and extols beauty and imitation of observable physical reality.

By contrast, Abiodun shows over the course of the book, that this Western meaning fails to capture an aesthetic logic oriented toward otherness, essences, and departure from physical reality. He makes the case that it is exceedingly important for researchers to acquire language competency and to gain cultural fluency. His point, of course, is not that Africanists cannot know Yoruba art, but that Africanist researchers validly cannot rely on a mode of visuality framed by Western ideas or ‘Western eyes,’ or a superficial understanding of Yoruba culture to grasp the *òwe*-driven mode of conceptual and historical analysis. Language and cultural competence are essential for the deployment of *òwe* to gain *ìmò* (knowledge) of the abstract and spiritual concepts and ideas presented. The ability to ‘apprehend’ abstract ideas, oral history, or elicited data avoids elementary mistranslations of ‘door’ for ‘lion;’⁹ avoids misidentification of ordinary citizens for an *oba*, or forestalls the

⁸ The fact is that, regardless of the methodological process of coding time, each language has a different structure and a different process of coding time. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and others are cultures with scribal methods of knowledge preservation, but their conceptions of time are differently presented in their languages and textual medium. The epistemological defects of one scribal medium does not necessarily apply to the others *a priori*. This is the same with societies that utilize oral means of knowledge preservation. The defects of one cannot be assumed to hold for all others.

⁹ This problem occurred during a study of the carvings of sculptor Olówè of Ìsè. See

channelling of research along unproductive paths. In other words, the deployment of the Western artistic paradigm in apprehending Yoruba art completely misses the specific objective and metaphysical framework that imbues Yoruba artefacts with meaning and aesthetic logic.

Time, history and the conceptual paradigm

At first reading of *Yoruba Art and Language*, Abiodun’s argument may appear simply as an exhortation of the importance of language learning; but it is far much more. Abiodun is making as well a deep translational argument about the non-equivalence of Yoruba and Western artistic schemes. Western aesthetic terminologies and ontological logic lack the relevant epistemic values to convey the meaning of art produced in the other-focused Yoruba cultural scheme. The difficulties of such an intercultural translation is not only that the complexity of Yoruba culture is obscured, but that it limits Western understanding of Yoruba art, leading to much misunderstandings. The problem here is that the Yoruba aesthetic concepts and the metaphysical configuration that should drive intelligibility and research are wrongly replaced with cognitive meanings and concerns arising from the entirely different modern Western artistic framework. Abiodun’s insistence that Yoruba meanings should drive Yoruba art historical studies derives from an unwholesome array of pseudo-explanations that pervade the field. His insistence is not a matter of special pleading but a call for compliance with the same disciplinary standards of scholarship in place for the study of art of Western societies.

In this second moment of Abiodun’s argument, *Yoruba Art and Language* operates at a meta-theoretical level of analysis. It aims too to highlight the methodology of Yoruba intellectual tradition and its mode of knowledge production. It discloses that the structure of the two produces art objects that are visual *oriki* or concretized speech. Unleashing the analytical principle of Èlà reveals that each visual *oriki* or artifact or concretized speech embodies the culture’s ontology and temporality. For instance, each *èrè-ìbejì* statue or *àkó*-effigy belongs to a specific sculptural *àṣà* or stylistic tradition that continually innovates and extends the creative range of works in space and time (Yai 1993, 35). Each *àṣà* embodies *ìtàn*, a dynamic notion of history or ‘critical historiography’ (Ibid., 30-1) with three essential features of historicity: chronology or temporal sequence of events, actors, and the values the event reflects; territory or geographical centring of traditions and intellectual heritages of the society; and awareness or illuminative processes that provoke discourses to aid greater enlightenment (1993). These dynamic qualities of *ìtàn*, which all need to come together, speak to an integrated knowledge system with precise ways for eliciting encoded data such as artists’ identities, artists’ cognomen,

time and location of creation of works, artistic objective of the works, and public reception of various types of art works. The existence of this historicity process and its principles of knowing falsifies Western coloniality assumptions about Africa, notably that African traditions and culture are static and unchanging, lack mechanisms for determining historical precision, and are theoretically inconsequential.

Within the Yoruba intellectual tradition, experts are trained on the processes of *òwe*-exemplification, defined by a complex of richly-textured analogical reasoning and razor-sharp of analysis. As well, they are deeply versed and knowledgeable about *ìtàn* of diverse societies. They pull from a plurality of intersecting sources and traditions to triangulate historical chronology and meaning. *Èlà*-analysis produces informed understanding of historical events, social values, cultural practices, and symbolisms of visual *oríki*. Abiodun demonstrates this process in his artistic interpretation of the thirteenth- to fourteenth-century 'Obalufon' copper bronze face mask (207-229) excavated in *Ìta Yemòó, Ilé-Ifè*. For over a century after its excavation, the Obalufon mask was misrepresented as the face of an *oba*, a representation that Abiodun argues forcefully, violates longstanding Yoruba cultural logic, specifically, the concept and institution of divine rulership and mode of revering an *oba*, prior to British colonization of the Yoruba. The interpretive error that began at the very moment of excavation of the *Ifè* bronzes and terracotta works has now attained the status of 'historical fact.'

Sidelining Yoruba voices, the colonial excavators immediately pronounced that Yoruba artists were not the creators of these works, because for them, naturalism represented the highest form of artistic style, and evidenced an advanced civilization. Because Africans were represented as an inferior people, they were therefore portrayed as incapable of producing naturalistic style works of superior quality. These race-scholars then, inserted imaginary white sculptors into twelfth- to fifteenth-centuries *Ilé-Ifè* to take credit for the works. After the racist hypothesis of imaginary white sculptors was debunked, subsequent generation of Africanist researchers continue to deploy their own European or American cultural practices and social norms to explain the artistic objectives of these works. This strategy of supplanting *Ilé-Ifè* or Yoruba aesthetics with the Western one secured the theoretical and academic basis for claiming that these terracotta and bronze heads must be portraits of 'kings' (sic). This, notwithstanding that '*oba*' is a gender-neutral term, and conceptually is radically different from the European conception of rulership as male and as kings (218; see Oyèwùmí 1997, ch3). Over the years, Africanist art researchers have further buttressed these misrepresentations by claiming that the economic conditions of the time and the considerable cost associated with procuring copper and fabricating the bronze face masks and heads justified their claims. With Yoruba voices completely silenced, Africanists have continued to insist that the heads portrayed none other than the most powerful 'man' (sic) in twelfth-fifteenth-

centuries Ilé-Ifè society, the Ọ̀nì or divine sovereign.

But as Abiodun demonstrates in chapters 1, 4 and 7, that supposition is patently wrong. This is because Yoruba visual *oríkì* is not an artform in the Western sense, and these visual *oríkì* follow a logic that is different from the Western one. The supposition about the identity of the heads represents one of the many errant Eurocentric projections onto Yoruba society of the social, political, religious, and moral values of an European social system. The fact that Western rulers assert majesty and power through portraiture does not mean the same is true for the Yoruba *ọ̀ba*. Genuine cross-cultural understanding means understanding Yoruba culture, art and aesthetics on its own value scheme. The Yoruba system of knowledge provides tools for simultaneously unraveling the abstract idea encapsulated in visual *oríkì* by means of *òwè* (figures of speech), and by utilizing *ojú inú* (insight) to prod thinkers into seeing that the sculptures or visual *oríkì* are ‘concretized speech’ or ‘horses’ (*ẹ̀şin*) of discourse or knowledge.’ They can properly be conceptualized as philosophical treatises in condensed form, requiring analysis to fully unravel their meaning. Only the Yoruba intellectual framework is vital in unleashing the artistic meanings and interpretations of these *òwè*-forms or visual objects.

The illuminative processes of *itàn* ignites the kind of interrogation necessary for unveiling the different layers of encoded meanings. Once *òwè*-analysis is unleashed, it highlights the social fact that Yoruba divine sovereigns do not flaunt power, because they are not crowned they undergo deification. Upon the completion of this deification process, they automatically lose their personhood as they become an *ọ̀ba*. The dissolution of personhood is essential in becoming *alàşẹ* (one filled with *àşẹ* or energy) that transforms the being into a divine sovereign or *ẹ̀kejì òrìşà* (one who ranks with the *òrìşà*). As divine sovereign, the *ọ̀ba* projects the dreaded essence of intangibility and aura of spirituality emphasized through concealment. Before colonial rule, the awesome *orí-òde* or visage of an Ọ̀nì was never on display, which meant that, contrary to Africanist historical assumptions, thirteenth- to fourteenth-century face mask could not have been the face of an Ọ̀nì.

The epistemic cost of speculative historiography in Yoruba and African art studies is immense. It leads Africanist and African art researchers astray and prevents them from apprehending historical frames of temporality and grasping appropriate aesthetic meanings. Abiodun’s book relentlessly demonstrates the intimate connections between language, philosophy, art, history, and deliberative analysis; even as disciplinary art historical investment in hegemony prevents some Africanist and some African art historians from fully appreciating this point. This is why Abiodun anchored his book on Yoruba intellectual tradition rather than the ill-suited Western intellectual scheme. This anchoring enabled him to easily and accurately call on the history of Ilé-Ifè, the histories of Yoruba communities, their relationships to Ifè, and the relationships of Ifè’s religion and artistic traditions to

neighboring communities. Olabiyi Babalola Yai, a leading Yoruba cultural scholar, makes the cogent point that historically and ontologically ‘Ilé-Ifè was...a sanctuary and the university par excellence’ of the Yoruba (1993, 31). This premier status of Ifè in religion and education also extends to artistic production, which in turn derives from the correlative status of Ilé-Ifè to Ori, and from the centrality of the concept and divinity of Orí as crucial for human existence. In fact, Ilé-Ifè’s role as a vaunted centre of knowledge and of the naturalistic style of artistic creation is one of its ancient hallmarks.¹⁰ Oral history recounts that a group of people migrated to Òwò from Ifè in 1100 AD. Awareness of this historical account probably led Frank Willett to surmise rightly that an artistic tradition united Ilé-Ifè and nearby Òwò, Òyó, Ìjèbú, and other distant but culturally connected communities of Benin and Onitsha (184). The *àṣà* of *orí-òde* (outer heads) fabrication associated with *àkó*-effigies but given full articulation by the concept and divinity of Orí at the center of Ilé-Ifè religion, best holds the key to the meaning of the bronze and terracotta heads of Ilé-Ifè rather than European monarchical practices.

For Yoruba intellectuals, as should be the case for all scholars of Yoruba studies, cultural fluency is absolutely necessary. Fluency is marked by knowledge of Yoruba values, ideas, and histories including regional histories, histories of settlements and communities, sovereign list of *òṅni* and *òba*, lineage and family histories, and the knowledge of social practices and stylistic traditions of diverse regions of Yorubaland. This history accounts for over seven-hundred-year-old community relations between Ilé-Ifè and Òwò.¹¹ Even before the excavation in Òwò of Ifè-type terracotta heads (*orí-òde*), the connection and exchange of ideas between the two communities was very well known. This relationship goes back to the twelfth century, if not before, and testifies to the centrality of Ilé-Ifè in Yoruba culture and life. Instructively, the climate of the age fostered regional exchanges of ideas, experiences, and material culture. The bronze and terracotta heads or visual *oríkì* rested on, and accorded with the philosophical concept and of principle of Orí at the heart of Yoruba religion. The concept of Orí or Orí-Inú (inner spiritual head) correlates to its counterpart in the Yoruba pantheon, Orí-Isẹ̀ṣe or Orí the Originator, ‘the most important *òrìṣà* in *òrun*, the otherworld’ (32). Orí-Inú, depicted as an abstract cone or *Ìbòrí* when the emphasis is on spirituality, is expressively contained in, and represented by Orí-Òde (the outer physical head). In creative expression, Orí, a combination of the outer and inner heads, is represented by wood, terracotta,

¹⁰ In fact, the legacy of ancient Benin bronze making has been attributed to the knowledge that came from Ilé-Ifè.

¹¹ Oral history traces the origin of Òwò back to Ifè. Òwò, just like Oyo, was founded by one of the sons of Oduduwa, the founder of Ilé-Ifè. According to this history too, a group of people migrated to Òwò from Ilé-Ifè in 1100 AD. Evidence of this migration and relationship is evident in the arts of Òwò. Early art-historical works dating back to the fifteenth century – notably terracotta heads in the Ifè style – establish this link.

or bronze visual *oríkì*.

Abiodun's groundbreaking study of Yoruba aesthetics reveals that from ancient times, an Odù-Ifá shows that Orí occupied supreme importance in Ilé-Ifè, where it was conceptualized as the creator of being, the Òrìṣà (Supreme Being) who can change being, but nothing can change it (37). Personal shrines to Orí are indispensable to devotees for propitiating their *ori* (head) that is linked to the divinity, and for charting a successful life. Elaborate burial rites were created for Orí devotees, their relations, and well-wishers that included parading the deceased corpse around the town to inform the public and the Orí that the owner has 'slept' (37). This ancient practice of public parade evolved, resulting in the substitution of effigies for corpses, given that sometimes corpses were unavailable for a variety of reasons.¹² In cases of such unavailability, a family would commission an effigy to ensure the performance of a vital ceremony now referred to as '*àkó*' in Òwò. In Yoruba language, '*àkó*' or '*ìkó*' commonly means 'celebration of an important occasion' (170). For the funeral *àkó*-ceremony, special attention was devoted to the fabrication of the *orí-òde* of the effigy. Because resemblance to the deceased was essential, the creators and the family opted for a naturalistic or mimetic style of rendition.

Familiarity with Yoruba history and adherence to *èlà*-logic of analysis disentangles why naturalism is important and what it means to makers and users of *àkó* visual *oríkì*. The *Àkó* ceremony of Òwò traces its roots to the ancient Orí religious practice of marking individuality and celebrating the essence of personhood of a departed individual.¹³ The excavation of fourteenth- to fifteenth-centuries Ifè-type heads in Òwò offers proof of this practice of Orí and the shared connection between the two communities in the areas of philosophical traditions, religious consciousness, artistic values, and aesthetic *àṣà* (tradition). *Àkó*-graphic *àṣà* of Ifè-naturalism is not concerned about the humanistic norms and objectives of classicism and the neoclassical style, rather it is focused on religio-socio-cultural values that give intelligibility to Orí. It is significant that both Ilé-Ifè and Òwò not only shared artistic practices they did so at the same historical period.

Yoruba Art and Language elaborates that whereas artistic practices associated with the production of the bronze and terracotta *orí-òde* or visual *oríkì* disappeared earlier in Ilé-Ifè,¹⁴ vestiges of it remained in Òwò until the 1970s in the *àkó* second-burial effigies, pivotal for the ascension into ancestor-hood of deceased family elders. Abiodun demonstrates that the *orí-òde* visual *oríkì* of the sort discovered in Ìta

¹² This occurred if the person died during a long journey or a war and the corpse was unavailable.

¹³ It is crucial to note that the *àkó* practice is not unique to Òwò and Ilé-Ifè. It has been found in other Yoruba centers such as Òyó and Ìjèbú, and in northern Yoruba towns prior to the spread of Islam and the proscription of figurative representation (Abiodun, 184).

¹⁴ There is a historical reason for this disappearance, but I will not discuss it here.

Yemòó, Ilé-Ifè were not produced in an artistic or social vacuum. They were tied to the concept of Orí and to meaningful conceptual and religio-social practices. The morphological and stylistic similarity in modeling and facial expressiveness in Òwò *orí-òde* parallels that of Ilé-Ifè and provides further justification for looking to the *àsà* of *àkó*-graphy for explanation of the meaning of the Ilé-Ifè heads. Historical records preserved by both community, Òwò families that had performed *àkó*, and the artistic tradition itself supports this research path. Collectively, these centers yield historical information and artistic insight. At the very least, they inform us that wood had not always been the medium of production of the *Àkó* effigies of Òwò. Earlier in history, a clay medium known as *àmajẹ* had been used to model faces and limbs but was later abandoned for wood (186).

Because *àkó* heads strive for resemblance, the excavated *àmajẹ* heads of Òwò reflected the same naturalistic style and exquisite craftsmanship of the Ilé-Ifè heads. With Ilé-Ifè as the religio-social cradle of the Yoruba and the place from where the centrality of Orí in religion and social life. The facial details of *orí-òde* had to conform to the artistic canon of *ifarabalẹ*, the calm, serene expressions that depicts immortality, *pípé* (completeness), and *dídán* (fine finishing touches). This artistic conformity is important because, as Abiodun explains, it is through ‘*ifarabalẹ*, [that] *orí* (head) in its physiological and spiritual sense rules the rest of the body both literally and metaphorically’ (267).

In sculptural form, portraits in *ifarabalẹ* are heads of deceased personages entering immortality upon the performance of their second funeral rites. These portraits were not created for an *oba*, who once deification was complete was no longer a person, but an *ẹkeji òrìsà* (182). Understandably, nonYoruba are oblivious of this cultural fact, which explains why early European archaeologists and colonial theorists had assumed that the excavated terracotta and bronze heads belonged to past Òṅi. As earlier noted, by the late twentieth century, this error had acquired that status of a truism and supplanted the Yoruba artistic-cum-socio-religious meanings. Nonetheless, cultural validity or theoretical superiority of an interpretation is not established by how often it is touted, or how loudly it is repeated. Though Africanist art historians still insist erroneously that these Ilé-Ifè heads or face masks are the heads or faces of past Òṅi, they do so unaware that these declarations are merely exposing their ignorance, and that their artistic interpretations are plausible only within an overreaching hegemonic paradigm.

Yoruba ontology and art as *oríkì*

In this third phase of argument, Abiodun moves to secure his idea by locating the fundamental differences between Yoruba art and Western art in their respective ontology and cultural character. Yoruba ontology shapes the conceptual framework of art and aesthetics, and the otherness goal of creativity, just as the West draws on

its conception of art and aesthetics. Artistic interpreters are cognizant of this, and always draw on the society's aesthetic principles as well as the political and social concepts of an object's *àṣà* (stylistic traditions). The creative logic of Yoruba art speaks to a fully developed ontological reality that is consistent and coherent, just as Western art does to its own consistent and coherent ontological scheme. So, when Abiodun states that Yoruba 'art is *oriki*,' what does this mean ontologically? This question takes us fully to the third major moment of his argument, the revelation of the Yoruba aesthetic scheme that fundamentally differs from the modern Western scheme of art. In the following, the reason for these differences will become clearer.

Modern Western art and aesthetics began in post-medieval Europe in a world defined by Cartesian logic, later shaped by Newtonian physics, and subsequently moulded by the philosophical ideology of positivism. Cartesian reason and rationality created a Manichean dichotomy between mind and matter, that ultimately mushroomed into a myriad of other binarisms separating nature from culture, subject from object, public from private, material from immaterial, physical from metaphysical, and the visible from invisible. These conceptual fragmentations privileged matter and made physical reality absolute; it became the sole, exclusive reality. While the reconciliation of these conceptual gaps constitute the intractable problems of Western philosophy, the privileging of empirical reality accorded normative explanatory status just to the observable physical world. Time, in this space-reality was fundamentally linear, composed of discrete parts, moving away from an event point or the past, and marching resolutely towards the future. The forward-only movement of time degrades the vitality and power of things, producing degradation, age, infirmity, and eventually death. The logic of modernity apprehends space and time as absolute: and so, the past is always prologue, the future is beyond reach, and the present is always now.

By contrast, reality or space and time for the Yoruba is differently constituted as established in the first four chapters of the book. Life is dynamic, a matrix of interconnectivity. Time is relative and illusive. The present and the future are vitally connected to the past; all are one and the same in *àṣẹ*. Anomalies, such as time folding back or spiraling, is a definitive feature of this reality.¹⁵ Departed ancestors

¹⁵ Time is apprehended as a cyclical movement, with interminable cycles of coming and going, highs and lows, births and deaths, and change and renewal. Time is also apprehended as linear, but this linearity is seen as ephemeral, and subordinate to the macro cyclical conception of time used to chronicle time. Linear time is a discrete part of cyclical time. Its effect on human life is aging, a process that is valued as it bespeaks prescience, farsightedness, and wisdom. In Yoruba conception, time delivers wisdom through longevity. What an elder apprehends sitting down, is oblivious to a youth even while standing. As Ifa literature puts it: 'The *Òrò* that drops from the elderly is stupendous' (27). The wisdom of the elders is secured after death for their descendants by a dynamic concept of ancestor-ship. The otherworld has immense potency and viability. It is a space of enduring consciousness,

(and the *òrìṣà* as well) fold back time, instantaneously cross vast spaces, and simultaneously remain vitally connected to and working collaboratively with all their descendants wherever they may be. There is no distant past in which they have been left behind. This conception of space and time is why ancestors are always contemporaneous and present, and why art objects are fabricated in pursuit of communication with the other reality, and to simplify and concretize abstract concepts and ideas. Because everyday reality is not absolute, understanding life requires apprehending the totality of existence, which is why departure from everyday reality is an aesthetic ideal.

Yoruba philosophy construes reality as much more than is visually apprehended, consisting of outer and inner aspects, and dimensions of time that are constitutively shaped by *àṣẹ*. Properly understood *àṣẹ* is life-force or energy. Reality is constituted by it, and so every form is a manifestation of that energy and everything is directly or indirectly interlinked. All life forms as *àṣẹ*-forms emerge, evolve, and transform in the dense *àṣẹ*-environment or life stream. Due to its dynamic character no Manichean dichotomies exist. The observable physical realm of human existence (*ayé*) and the nonobservable, metaphysical realm of departed ancestors and the *òrìṣà* (*òrun*) are interlinked and one. Though the ontological characteristics of the two realms differ, they are merely different manifestations of the same thing. Precisely because of the fundamental sameness of all forms of life and energy, all things are in communication whether or not they know it. People converse with departed ancestors and the *òrìṣà* and vice versa.¹⁶ The permeability, fluidity and boundarilessness of *àṣẹ* space and time allows the *òrìṣà* and deceased ancestors to be anywhere and everywhere, and to project themselves into human activities through possession, shape manipulation, thought transference, and dreams. Equally too, humans enter the state of permeability and boundarilessness after death, but while alive, they can do so through rites and rituals that imbues them with the essence of intangibility, such as when they become *èkejì òrìṣà* as do divine *oba*.

Unlike the empiricist philosophy of modern twentieth-century Western art, Yoruba conception of art and aesthetics encompasses both the physical and metaphysical realms, presupposing a reality in which the *òrìṣà*, the ancestors, and

knowledge and awareness.

¹⁶ Ancestors come and go, resulting in names such as *Ìyábò* (mother has returned – ‘*iyá*’: mother, ‘*bò*’: has come back); or *Babátúndé* (father has returned – ‘*babá*’: father, ‘*tún*’: again, ‘*dé*’: has returned). Similarly, people know when the *òrìṣà* are present, particularly during rituals when devotees become *esìn* (horse) of a visiting *òrìṣà*. They also know when children are sent by the *òrìṣà*, resulting in names such as *Ògúnbíyì* (from *Ògún*) or *Èsúbíyì* (from *Èsù*). This mode of knowledge also extends to the fields of health, where maternal health specialists can ascertain prior to birth which child is *Aina* (wrapped by the umbilical cord), and which is *Ìgè* (descending with the feet).

departed beings participate in shaping communication and physical reality as well as informing theoretical explanations. Hence, art is a conversation between this world and the otherworld; it is also a mulilogue in which *àṣẹ* ‘evoke[s] the power and presence of...virtually everything that exists’ (55). In a certain sense, these conversations permit what may be seen as complex entanglements whereby ancestors and the *òrìṣà* are drawn into theoretical formulations that appear to outsiders as religious practices. With the past intertwined with the present and foreshadowing the future, Abiodun clarifies that Yoruba ‘art is not bound or limited by time or space,’ it is ‘infinitely generative,’ just like the culture. It ‘always adapts to current circumstances,’ and so it is ‘always contemporary’ (284). Within *àṣẹ*-spatio-temporal environment, art is more than simply about physical objects. Even the artistic deployment of flora and fauna is not oriented towards art for art’s sake or decorations or beautification. Rather, they are visual concretizations of abstract ideas that then summon ‘into action many irrevocable laws of nature to support *àfòṣẹ* (empowered utterances)’ (68).

In presenting the African in Africa art, Abiodun explains that Yoruba philosophy of art is a creative philosophy of vocative and evocative forms, with objects such as *àkó*-effigies and *èrè-ìbeji* functioning as concretized utterances that call for analysis of the abstract ideas they cloak. Creativity and creative expression prods *Òrò* to activate conversations such that visual *orìkì* (or artistic objects) become part of dialogues as humans communicate with the otherworld, and otherworld entities respond in expected symbolic ways.

The basic difference between modern Western art and Yoruba art is that the former is focused on the physical data of everyday world and experiences. It is wholly worldly, secular, antitheological, and antimetaphysical. It adheres strictly to testimonies of observation and experience, and so it is exclusively utilitarian and pedestrian. Its artistic interest and objective is beauty directed. In so far as this focus is primarily about aesthetic impact and aesthetic taste, it is limited to the observable empirical world. Yoruba art and aesthetics inherently problematizes such worldly-based explanations that do not grasp the profundity of reality, rather pre-emptively repudiates the expansive *àṣẹ*-filled reality in which Yoruba conception of art is articulated, and that commands an other-directed mode of understanding and meaningfulness.¹⁷ Abiodun asserts that visual *orìkì* are principally affective (that is, cause, influence and transform, 5) and evocative (convey strong memories, feelings, and images, 5). Hence, treating *àkó* and *èrè-ìbeji* strictly as material objects, and explaining them from an empirical ‘formalist, Western-modernist frame of interpretations,’ unravels their logic and obfuscates their full artistic vision.

¹⁷ This is why the materially-based Western theories of poststructuralism, sociolinguistics, materialism, and psychology may lack explanatory power. Their underpinning notions of the self, human being, human psychology, and art do not quite make sense.

Artistic interpretations that sever Yoruba artistic logic and place the objects in an empty spatial environment clearly do not grasp the artistic rationale or aesthetic objective of creating. Quite unlike art objects in the modern Western conceptual space, *àkó* effigies, communicate to both the living, the *òrìsà*, the newly deceased, and the rest of the ancestors in the beyond. The *ère-ibeji* do the same for the family and community as well as the deceased twin and community in the afterlife. Both visual *oríkì* act in accordance to their *ìwà* (character): ‘Ìwà l’ẹwà’ – rather than beauty. In short, their *ẹwà* (beauty) lies in how well they meet their respective characters, including being able to ‘call for the support of the ancestors [or the twins] in the otherworld’ (69).

Under the modalities of life in the Yoruba world, products of creative expression possess life force. As Abiodun contends, each art form cites its creator/artist, correctly displays its values, honors the values of its *àsà* and intellectual heritages, and provokes discourses that enlighten and generate analyses. So, when Abiodun asserts that art is *oríkì*, he is making a powerful statement that goes beyond the simple idea that an object can both be art and an *oríkì*. He is establishing that like verbal *oríkì*, visual *oríkì* are visible speech (125), or treatises that speak to a specific ontological order. Undoubtedly, he is making a more profound statement about the metaphysical and epistemological configurations of Yoruba art and aesthetics. He is stating too that visual *oríkì* can activate and actualize socio-political and religious experiences in Yoruba society (87). In short, Abiodun is unveiling a Yoruba conception of art that speaks to the essence of reality.

The logic of the chapters

The preceding explication of Yoruba ontology leads to the central concern of the section: Why are the chapters organized the way they are? In other words, what is the logic of arrangement? The question is pertinent because many of the chapters of the book had previously been published, in some form or another at various moments in time. But in choosing to bring those works into this book, it is essential to ascertain why Abiodun choose the present organizational order of the book? In what way did the order of the book contribute to the important statement he is making? And, how are the chapters deployed to fundamentally challenge the Western conception of a beauty-centred notion of creativity?

Before proceeding further, it is important to recall that with the rise of imperialism from the nineteenth century, the Western intellectual scheme deliberately misconstrued Africans, and inaccurately represented African tradition as static, unchanging, and composed of inscrutable backward practices. Equally too, African art was represented as naïve, simplistic, and unimaginative. Totally robbed of their rationality, Africans have been denied a conception of art. In the past, African scholars have rebutted these representations, rather than highlighting that

they are not really about Africans and African art as they are proclamations of Western ignorance. Knowing that hegemony creates conceptual blinkers, a pertinent question is how does Abiodun refute coloniality and its presumed ‘knowledge’ of Yoruba art?

Chapter 1, ‘Orí: No Òrìṣà Blesses a Person Without the Consent of His/Her Orí’ begins the conceptual elaboration of the Yoruba conception of art. First Abiodun expands our conception of space and time to introduce a dynamic notion of art that connects human creativity to cosmic creation, and cosmic creation to individuation and individuality. He takes us to the very beginning and source of life, to walk us through the cosmic template that establishes the Yoruba conception of art and the principles of artistic innovation and individuality as the basis of Yoruba art. Abiodun centers Orí, a divinity, the ‘primordial designator’ in the otherworld and ‘the creator of all *òrìṣà* and on whose order [these creative forces] were launched into their various location’ (38). In Yoruba intellectual tradition, Orí is simultaneously a divinity, an abstract concept/idea, an indispensable force (42), and the principle of individuation and individuality.¹⁸ It is the central feature in the definition of a person; it depicts the essence and identity of a subject and it is the distinguishing feature that gives something its distinctness. Because Orí conversely implies distinctness, otherness, and difference, it secures the principle of originality and imagination in Yoruba artistic tradition as well as upholds a supreme form of inventiveness that transcends the logic of three-dimensional reality. Creativity, under this tenet, establishes a meaningful canon of proportion that defies the logic of the empirical world, its ordering and reconstitution of reality. Orí (the physical head and seat of the divinity, Orí) is shared by all living forms. Because it occupies relational dominance to the rest of the body, just as Orí-Isèṣe or Orí the Originator does in the universe, it signifies superlative imagination. As the source and godhead, Orí fortifies the *orí* of artists, literally bestows them with divine attributes, and essentially transforms them into God-creators.

With Orí, the principle of individuality grounding artistic insight as well as the Yoruba conception of art, Chapter 2 – ‘Àṣe: The Empowered Word Must Come to Pass,’ expands our understanding of the creative space and the context of creativity. It introduces a dimension absent in modern Western art that positivistically treats artistic objects as static and lifeless. Yoruba philosophy of art presupposes a context of creativity that animates artistic objects with life. Àṣe, the life-force or energy that constitutes the physical and metaphysical worlds (87), evokes the power to bring objects into the cycle of life by summoning into action the laws of nature. It does so by activating the iconographical symbols on visual *oríkì* (art objects) and unleashing them through speech to ‘actualize and direct socio-political, religious, and artistic processes and experiences’ (87). The Yoruba

¹⁸ See discussion on the ivory Ìróké, a divination tapper, 45.

conceptualization of art is not about powerless, lifeless objects, whose value is measured by their beauty, or how much they cost. For this reason, terminologies and theoretical constructs of Western aesthetics are ill-suited for grasping that through *àṣẹ*, human-God-creators create visual *oríkì* that concretize abstract ideas make divine and human experiences possible (57). Artistic forms encapsulate *àṣẹ* that is then activated into action. Because *àṣẹ* is affective and triggers responses, the essence of an artistic form, such as an *Egúngún*, is not simply its physical ‘form’ but also its *àṣẹ* (53). Empowered art objects enter into the stream of life as living forms, which is why, *ère-ìbejì* are called children, fed, sang to, carried to market, or danced with; and *àkó* effigies are paraded through the town to formally announce the transitioning of one into an ancestor. With *àṣẹ*, Yoruba artworks come alive and make things happen. *Àṣẹ*, the empowered word, speaks objects into life, summons them to action, and highlights critical interconnection with far greater purpose, than simply being an object of beautification.

In addition to vitalizing forms, the Yoruba artistic universe is also constituted by moral and existential objectives that deepen the meaning of life and extends human capabilities. Western periodization that delineates temporal phases of a linear conception of time does not conform to the cyclical notion of time marking Yoruba history and art. Chapter 3, ‘*Òṣun*: The Corpulent Woman Whose Waist Two Arms Cannot Encompass,’ introduces us to the dynamics of maternal power in art, another dimension absent in Western conception of art. *Òṣun* expresses the creative, gestating, and birthing qualities of mothers and art producers in the cosmos, in life, and the context of art. ‘[S]haring the same *iwà títù*, ‘cool character,’ with *Olódùmarè* (Prime Mover) (118), Abiodun notes that *Òṣun*, the pivotal life-giving force (‘all *Odù* are derived from her,’ 118-9) is the principle of actualization and self-actualization. In her role of actualization, she produces all manners of forms and beings, while in the role of self-actualization, she conceived and birthed all by herself, the *òrìṣà* known as *Òṣe-Túrá* or *Èṣù Èlégba* (118). This ‘hidden power of women,’ this mothering-creative principle of Yoruba ontology expresses fecundity. It is exemplified in art by artists creating and actualizing forms of embodiment, grace, and aesthetic pleasure. Art creation is gestational; it symbolizes the embodiment of *àṣẹ* in the production and multiplication of new forms. Visual *oríkì* occupies space. ‘Filling or taking up space’ is an exemplification of *Òṣun* as the principle of extension. Her command over the *Mérindilogun* (Sixteen Cowrie) divination proclaims her wisdom, knowledge, and power to instantiate unimaginable possibilities. As a centripetal rather than centrifugal force, *Òṣun* is the catalytic order that makes things happen (92). She is ‘arguably the most powerful *òrìṣà*’ after *Olódùmarè* (the Prime Mover) (118). In the context of art and aesthetics, creativity and self-actualization requires wisdom and knowledge. And so like *Òṣun*, artists are like mothers, producing visual *oríkì* that extend beyond sculpture, painting, architecture, *Ifá* verses, songs, dances, movements, ritual performances, fragrances,

natural objects, and food (88-9). Their figures on *iróké* (Ifá divination tapper), *arugbá* (bowl of ritual offering), *Ẹpa* mask, and others are images of power and reverence.

Chapter 4, ‘*Ọ̀rúnmilà: Henceforth Ifá Priests Will Ride Horses*,’ appears to focus on de-riddling, to borrow Yai’s phrase, the imagery of the mounted horse-rider on religious objects in the Ifá divination system. In actuality, however, it is making a finely-nuanced case for the presence of *ìmoju-mọ̀ra* (change and flexibility) in Yoruba art, knowledge, and metaphysical system. The ‘de-riddling’ process, which involves artistic analysis, has as its goal the illumination of the identity of the horse-rider as well as the articulation of the very artistic principle that Western intellectual standpoint deems absent in Yoruba art. The principle of *ìmoju-mọ̀ra* is enunciated through the verbal *oríkì* correlative of visual *oríkì*. In the case of *agere-Ifá*, a receptacle for *ikin* (the sixteen sacred divination palm nuts that embody *Ọ̀rúnmilà* on earth), the verbal *oríkì* offers *Ọ̀rúnmilà*’s proclamation that henceforth Ifá priests will ride horse. The idea of Ifá priests as horse riders establishes two important facts: a) that at a certain historical point Ifá priests did not ride horses; and b) that not all equestrian or horse-rider motifs in Yoruba art are royal personages or military personnel. The chapter is an instructional tool on how to ‘read’ visual *oríkì*, given that artistic forms and motifs in the artistic tradition are similar. By using context as the cue to meaningfulness, the horse-rider motifs on the *agere-Ifá* visual *oríkì* identify the rider as Ifá priests. This raises the question of when, and why, horse-riding became a chosen means of mobility for Ifá priests; a question that is answerable only by further examination of the history and geography of Yorubaland, and of Ifá tradition as well. The *agere-Ifá* (visual *oríkì* and its correlative verbal *oríkì*) ‘exist’ as dense philosophical evocations or treatises of *Ọ̀rúnmilà*’s powers and qualities (130), but also as historical ‘texts’ of the priesthood and profession that became remarkably successful from the seventeenth century onward. These ‘texts’ reveal that Ifá priests as intellectuals ride in pursuit of knowledge, wisdom and understanding (130), covering vast territories in the course of their professional work, and battling forces that undermine existential well-being.¹⁹ But carefully reading the ‘texts’ against the backdrop of Yoruba social, historical and cultural data reveal why this is the case. Abiodun’s analysis in the chapter further demonstrates that the acquisition of knowledge necessary for the art historical explanation of works requires ‘insight into the Yoruba metaphysical system, myths, and lore and into how these affect...the physical realm’ (140). *Amẹ̀wà* or art experts who engage in artistic analysis and evaluation have to command knowledge of the culture as well

¹⁹ Critical understanding of relevant sections of the *Odù-Ifá* and knowledge of the necessary symbols of Ifá priesthood – *irùkèrè* (horsetail flywhisk), *abetíajá* (cap), beads, etc., – allows the informed interpreter to identify these horse riders as Ifá priests. The accompanying verbal *oríkì* that accompanies the *agere-Ifá* (visual *oríkì*) together with Ifá verses unlock the Yoruba ontological and metaphysical systems.

as understand how *òwe* (‘the horse of discourse,’ 140) yields knowledge.

Due to its metaphysical orientation, Yoruba conception of art is engaged in matters of existence. Chapter 5, ‘We Greet *Aṣọ* before We Greet Its Wearer,’ notes that existential well-being is complicated; all is not as it seems. Existence unfolds an integrated world in which the art/non-art distinction is dissolved, and in which aesthetics extends to cloth, dance, movement, and movement or affective/royalty swagger. *Aṣọ*, signifies cloth the apparel that humans wear, the form that encases *Orí*, and the body or ‘garment’ that the embodied *àṣẹ* wear. It is also the symbols – fauna and flora – of murals, the metaphorical cloth that shrines wear. As textile cloaks nakedness so too does the head and body cover *orí* and embodied *àṣẹ*. Dance performances or motional *oríkì* showcase valuable cloths and valued bodies, concentrating attention on the rhythm of bodies enwrapped in layers of cloth. The integration of multiple aesthetic forms depends on and creates a communicative integrated aesthetics. Dance, drama, songs, chant and poetry transforms dress into visual *oríkì* as the body-in-motion vibrates to drumbeats that speak a language older than time. *Gbáriyè-onígba-awé* – ‘the garment with two hundred gussets’ flies and swirls flamboyantly into magnificent shapes (143) dissecting the air and awakening embodied memories as the body sculpts out the dance. The visual *oríkì* that is *aṣọ* is multivalent, encompassing everything one wears—beads, crowns, *filà* (caps), *gèlè* (head ties), shoes, fly whisk and more. Adornment alights and vivifies the body, radiating the body’s *ìwà* and the dresser’s *ojú-ọ̀nà* (design consciousness). In short, *aṣọ* is communicative, transformative, and regenerative. It ‘broadcasts’ identities through ideographic shapes, and demands cultural-fluency in apprehending the disseminated ideas necessary for artistic interpretations. We see this regenerative transformative meanings in the late thirteenth to early fifteenth century bronze sculptures of interlinked male/female figures (plate 68. ‘Figure of a king,’ 147) are really *Ògbóni* figures, not a royal couple.

The first stages of body transformation signals death, and subsequently raising the issue of the immortality of elders. Chapter 6 (*Àkó: Re/Minding Is the Antidote for Forgetfulness*) addresses the importance of ancestors and the role of remembrance in guaranteeing immortality. The dynamic interaction of remembrance and forgetfulness establishes the need to pursue the stylistics of naturalism in art. Resemblance is essential in remembering, in turn, it becomes a platform for the conceptualization of immortality of departed family members and extending the world of the ancestors. Africanists have long misrepresented African artists as incapable of realistic representation and Africa as devoid of naturalism. But the conception and production of *àkó* effigies, a practice in existence in *Òwò* for well over six-hundred years (184) and in *Ilé-Ifè* for over nine-hundred years, establishes that African carvers and sculptors were indeed familiar with, and skilled in realistic representation. The rationale of *àkó*-effigy creation provides justification for capturing physical likeness, bodily traits, character, and social status in a

figurative sculpture. Since *àkó* aesthetics is focused on the concept of Orí, and the journey of venerable family members toward becoming ancestors, sculptors have to meet clients exacting demands for close facial resemblance. With the face as a focal point of communication, *àkó*-effigies provide the last occasion for public engagement with the deceased, and for the family celebration of the entry of a new ancestor into the after-life. Although, the effigy is merely a visual aid, it is accurately carved (wood) or modelled (with *àmajẹ* clay) to resemble the deceased who is ‘awakened’ with family *oríkì*, and enjoined to watch over the family upon entering immortality (196). Remembrance is a crucial feature of immortality. *Àkó*-effigies must exude *ìfarabalẹ̀* or controlled calm, authoritative presence, open eyes, and a frontal posture of otherworldliness that speak to immortality. *Àkó*-effigies veer toward realism (183) because that is the ‘final appearance of the deceased in a physical, recognizably naturalistic form (197). Sculptures that do not meet the exacting demand of resemblance are rejected, even though sculptors are expected to edit out physical defects while preserving certain idiosyncratic traits that distinguish the deceased.

Verisimilitude in art opens up a discussion of a variety of naturalistic styles and traditions that are as ancient as Ilé-Ifè. Chapter 7 (Ilé-Ifè: The Place Where the Day Dawns) examines three stylistic idioms that Abiodun refers to as Ifè-naturalism – *àkó*-graphic *àsà*, *àsẹ*-graphic *àsà*, and *ẹ̀pẹ*-graphic *àsà*. The artistic objectives of Yoruba or Ifè-naturalism differ from the Western one. Centring the Yoruba aesthetic scheme reveals that though *àkó*-graphic *àsà* produces ‘the *most positive* and often *flattering*’ image of a deceased (Abiodun’s emphasis, 226), it is never done for an *Ọ̀nì* whose deification dissolves personhood and transforms his or her into an *òrìsà*. The Yoruba intellectual tradition also goes further to provide historical insight on the owners of some of those heads, in the process unveiling the nature and character of ancient city of Ilé-Ifè. First, it reveals that the striation marks running down the faces are not Yoruba facial marks as early theorists and some Africanists have all too readily assumed. Second, it presents a cosmopolitan picture of ancient Ifè, with residents of other ethnicities, some of whom had similar facial scarification like that of Igbo Nri chiefs and priests (229) and who may have been devotees of Orí and whose elevated status in Ilé-Ifè had clearly earned them the right to a distinguished *àkó* ceremony (229). While the artistic objectives of *àkó*-graphy reveal this complex history, that of the second idiom – the ‘highly schematized and reconfigured’ *àsẹ*-graphic *àsà* – speaks to the beneficent deployment of *àsẹ* (authority or power) to charge objects into life. Products of *àsẹ*-graphy do not seek to capture nature the way *àkó*-graphy does. The schematic shapes, though natural, depart from mimesis. But schematics is not the objective of the last stylistic idiom, the ‘uncompromisingly mimetic’ and ‘most unflattering manner’ (241) *ẹ̀pẹ*-graphic *àsà*. Because its objective is to produce ‘curse’ motifs, *ẹ̀pẹ*-graphy shares the same principles that govern the verbal equivalent of curse.

So how can the abhorrent be considered art given that art is about beauty and the beautiful? This question raises two important issues – a) what is art; and b) what is the relationship of beauty to art? Chapter 8, ‘Yoruba Aesthetics: Ìwà, Ìwà is What We are Searching For, Ìwà’ provides an answer to this Western-manufactured quandary by highlighting the key fundamental differences between Yoruba and Western art. A recurring theme throughout Abiodun’s book is the idea that *ìwà*, the essential nature of an object defines its character. Here, he again refocuses attention on Yoruba philosophy of art, and engages a panoply of necessary artistic terminologies. The concept *ìwà* or ‘character’ is of critical importance in Yoruba so too is its relationship to a cluster of aesthetic concepts – *ẹwà* (beauty), *ojú-inú* (insight, 260), *ojú-ọ̀nà* (design-consciousness, 262), *ìlutí* (good learner, 271), *ìmojú-mọ̀ra* (adaptability and change, 275), *tító* (durability, long lasting, 277), *ìfarabalẹ̀* (calm and controlled, 265). Although *ìwà* seems geared toward ethics and moral issues, it plays a pivotal role in Yoruba art, given its dialectical relationship to *ẹwà*. The relationship of the two concepts is an ontological one in which existence is necessary for any understanding and appreciation of art. Precisely stated, the relationship of *ìwà* (character) to *ẹwà* (beauty) asserts that beauty lies in the expression of the intended character of an object. In which case, an *ẹ̀pẹ̀*-graphic object that accords with and fulfills its *ìwà* is beautiful. It meets the conditions for appreciation of its *ẹwà*, regardless of the fact that its physical appearance is revolting or terrifying and does not accord with conventional definitions of beauty. Thus, in Yoruba art and aesthetics, *òwe*-reasoning establishes that there is beauty in ugliness. Aesthetic concepts must respond to an object’s approximation to its *ìwà* as that is the basis for artistic adjudication and ultimately of aesthetic appreciation. But for this to occur, knowledge, probity, and prudence are essential in grasping this point, and in apprehending the ‘ìwà’ of artifacts that produce ‘ẹwà’ in creativity.

Bringing the discussion to a close, Abiodun returns to the very beginning of art, originality and individuality to artfully undermine the pervasive, yet wrong-headed notion that Yoruba art is unchanging, static, devoid of master-artists; and that unlike Western art, it fails to privilege originality, authenticity, and innovation. Chapter 9, ‘Tomorrow, Today’s Elder Sibling,’ examines how Yoruba artists are open and receptive to change, and incorporate new ideas into their art. They innovate, ‘sign’ their innovations with distinctive carving style, and create new stylistic forms by adopting new materials, new forms, and fresh ideas. These technical introductions re-energize and re-engage *àṣà* (stylistic tradition) and result in the production of artistic expressions that are fresh and contemporaneous with the times. Changing styles produce innovation, new norms, and values. Yoruba aesthetics welcomes multiplicity, multifocality, and change as demonstrated by the varied manifestations of *Èṣù* (285), created under the the principle of *ìmojú-mọ̀ra* (adaptability and change). Yoruba artistic tradition continually transforms in light of contemporary circumstances. Over the course of history, the morphology and

stylistics of forms were reshaped as concepts too were reinterpreted in accordance with the principle of transformation. Change, in Yoruba conceptual scheme, is exemplified by the *iwà* of Èsù, and four other powerful *òrìṣà* in the Yoruba pantheon – Òrìṣànlá, Ògún, Ifá, and Sàngó (289). But, it is worthwhile to underscore that change and transformation meaningfully occur always within the context or background of a tradition. In Yoruba art, definitions of style and *àṣà* (stylistic tradition) always incorporate the current fashion of the time, and so embody temporality, stylistic shifts, new forms, and new artistic ideas. Artistic tradition are always dynamically changing. They are never static as shown by the works of famed nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Yoruba sculptors Ọlówè of Ìsè (d. 1938), Àrè, Làgbàiyí ará Ọjowòn, and Lamidi Ọlónàdé Fákeye.

In summary, *Yoruba Art and Language* makes a convincing case that Yoruba art studies can no longer proceed as it did previously, where Yoruba history and culture are swept aside and ignored. Yoruba art and aesthetics must engage and be grounded in its culture, history and language, the exclusion of which discombobulates the meaning and object of the art. Serious studies must, therefore, go beyond superficial formalistic analyses that are the result of limited understanding of the thought and belief-systems of the culture. A paradigm shift is required for the necessary cultural fluency for understanding and interpretations to occur.

Conclusion: the take away

Abiodun’s explanations in *Yoruba Art and Language* highlight the theoretical and philosophical shifts that occur when the Yoruba cultural framework and philosophy of art occupy the necessary conceptual space. This occupation speaks purposefully, though implicitly, about the philosophical foundations of the Western conception of art that for over a century was presented as the absolute form of human creativity. While art as a genus is universal, its specific manifestations are not. Each culture produces art in light of their social and cultural sensibilities and concerns. The main problem is that the Western mode of thought, aesthetics, form and artistic values were, and are still, globally represented as universal, with the imprimatur that any deviation from its epistemological and ontological order marks inferiority and sub-humanity. But as Abiodun clearly demonstrates the meaning and objective of any artifact resides in a coherent body of knowledge that consists of overlapping, interpenetrating, interrelated and interdependent fields of knowledge – ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Abiodun’s point, which he persistently drives home in each chapter, is that despite the present global dominance of Western languages, and what some see as immense benefits in theorizing in English or other Western languages, Yoruba artifacts are not properly explicable with the theoretical constructs of these languages underpinning modern Western art (56). A lot about

those art forms are lost in translation when Yoruba artistic and aesthetic objectives are supplanted by modern Western artistic norms and sensibilities as the normative aesthetic order. This routinely happens when an Africanist outsider imperiously assumes to know without actually knowing the culture.

In challenging hegemony and hegemonic displacements, *Yoruba Art and Language* repudiates the idea that the Western artistic and aesthetic vision is the sole, universal yardstick for all cultures.²⁰ The take away is that the assumed benefits of privileging Western languages, Western periodizations, and Western artistic values and criteria evaporate once we fully grasp that the philosophical foundations of modern Western art are antithetical to Yoruba art and aesthetics. Western languages not only lack appropriate terminologies, but they resist the Yoruba meanings and metaphysical assumptions crucial for grasping the aesthetic vision of the works. Hence, the Yoruba artistic vision, which should drive explanation is illegitimately devalued, resulting in the retranslation of Yoruba meanings and 'worldsense,' to borrow Oyěwùmí's term, to accord with the definitions and assumptions of a hegemonic Western scheme. It is crucial to state that Abiodun is not claiming that Africanists cannot understand Yoruba art. What he is asserting is that Yoruba art is multitextured, multilayered, and multidimensional, and that it must be understood on its own terms. In offering a synthetic vision of a Yoruba philosophy of art, *Yoruba Art and Language* sets in place the necessary framework, ontology and epistemology of a theory of art that responds to the sociocultural conditions of an African reality.

Nkiru Nzegwu is Professor of Africana Studies at Binghamton University, New York. She has published widely in the areas of critical African women's studies, African and African diaspora art, and African philosophy.

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²⁰ I am quite aware that the insistence that cultural and linguistic fluency is vital to understanding raises a pertinent question: What should scholars who do not speak or have lived experience of Yoruba culture do? But this is a pseudo question, couched as if addressing a genuine practical problem. Scholars who find themselves in this situation should do what people of other cultures do when learning Western art. They should acquire the experience and collaborate with scholars and informed experts of the culture in the field.

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