

Response to Review Forum in ASR Vol. 58, No 3, Dec. 2015: 221-223

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 “À ì tè tè mó lè , olè mó ló ko”: “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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