

Abiodun, Rowland. 2014. YORUBA ART AND LANGUAGE: SEEKING THE AFRICAN IN AFRICAN ART. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$109 (cloth).

Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art provides a seminal and authoritative work pertaining to Yoruba art and languages of Nigeria. Rowland Abiodun, the John C. Newton professor of art, the history of art and black studies at Amherst College, is an astute art historian, researcher, and culture activist, whose work will withstand the test of time and critical appraisal.

Over the years, one of the strongest criticisms of historical studies of African art has been that the bulk of its scholarship is done by those who are describable as intimate outsiders. They include scholars who may have traversed the continent, mingling and researching its cultural wealth, yet their analyses and conclusions, at best, remain shallow, misdirected, and farcical; however, this does not imply that there have not been laudable efforts by a select group of researchers, like Rene Brayman, Kevin Carroll, Herbert Cole, William Fagg, Douglas Fraser, John Picton, Arnold Rubin, Roy Sieber, Leon Siroto, Robert Farris Thompson, and others (as acknowledged by Abiodun), who have presented their findings and analyses through untainted lenses and unbiased perspectives, though the seeming inadequacy of reinterpretation of facts weakens and detracts from the quality of the products of their endeavors.

Abiodun's artistic background and traditional education, as recounted on page xv of the book, prepared him well for this project, together with decades of research experience and collaborative works with other scholars, culture workers, and resource individuals, in both academia and the larger society; however, the major difference between this book and many other studies of Yoruba art history, as stated on page 1, lies in looking beyond prevailing Western paradigms in analyzing and appreciating works from non-Western cultures.

Abiodun here challenges the inappropriateness of basing value judgments of Yoruba artworks on extraneous yardsticks and demonstrates the benefits that abound in employing the innate properties common to the visual and verbal vestiges of the Yoruba people as encoded in their artworks, proverbs, and praise poetry (in different forms), all of which qualify as *oriki* in Yoruba culture. *Oriki*, as Abiodun states, is not limited to the verbal range as traditionally held, but encompasses other forms, such as architectural space, dress, music, dance, the performed word, mime, ritual, food, and smell, which engage virtually all the senses, and it is a tool for answering varied complex theoretical issues confronting today's Yoruba.

Abiodun proposes not only the study of Yoruba language as a prerequisite to appreciating and interrogating Yoruba artworks (since some of the codes required for their understanding are embedded in verbal *oriki*, such as *owe*, *esa*, *ijala*, *ekun iyawo*, and so forth, but also the elevation of such Yoruba aesthetic terms as *iwa*, *ewa*, *oju-inu*, *oju-ona*, *iluti*, *imoju-mora*, and *tito ifarabale asa*, to which he adds new coinages, like *Ife-naturalism*, *akographic asa*, *ase-graphic asa*, and *epe-graphic asa* to be on a par with aesthetic terms from other climes, such as the Italian *contraposto* and *chiaroscuro*, which have gained global currency and acceptability. In essence, the reliance on and the inappropriateness of anthropological methodology for the study of African art, which resulted from the pathfinding role and early attention of anthropologists to African art studies, are identified as a major setback and a reason for misunderstanding and misinterpreting this art, coupled with the application of incompatible Western periodization schemes (Gothic, Classical, Baroque, Modern, and so forth).

In chapter one of the book, the interdependence of verbal and visual arts is demonstrated with a conical twelfth-to-fifteenth-century *Ife* art piece. Relying on *oriki* as captured in *ifa* poetry, Abiodun interrogates the piece, establishing deep-rooted similarities between it and the *odu ifa*, which confirms the injustice Yoruba artworks have faced in the hands of scholars whose narrow knowledge of their provenance and lack of the appropriate tools, such as language, for their understanding have deprived

them of their rightful placement in art historical studies. In chapter two, Abiodun challenges scholars' current practice of limiting interest to form at the expense of content. He draws attention to the reality and preeminence of the fourth dimension in African artworks, expressed as the "energy, life force, or soul" of the work. He equates this life force with *ase*, a mysterious action force in Yoruba art and culture, which has interested many scholars of Yoruba culture globally and whose continuity and resilience—especially in the diasporas, despite debilitating blows, such as transatlantic slavery—make it stand out as a religio-aesthetic phenomenon. He therefore advocates a thorough and all-encompassing approach, which combines the verbal and the visual, the formalistic and the contextual, so that Africanness will not be removed in the process of analyzing African art objects.

Chapter three throws light on Osun, the only female *orisa* (deity) of the seventeen *odus* from Olodumare, and the role of women in all things, as a tempering force, capable of ensuring normalcy, orderliness, progress, and so forth, without which success is difficult to attain. The physical attributes of Osun as a personification of elegance and visual delight and her voluptuousness are given. Her place as the preeminent hair-plaiting expert is connected by Abiodun to Yoruba sculptural pieces with elaborate coiffeurs. Mention is made of the place of women, variously described as *awon iya*, *aje*, *eye*, or "our mothers," symbolically represented by a bird. The frequency of horse riders in Yoruba art, particularly Agere Ifa, is examined in chapter four. This, according to Abiodun, becomes more puzzling, since horses were associated with wars, and Ifa priests were not known to engage in wars; however, Abiodun reveals that Ifa demands that his priests travel constantly to interact with other priests and enhance their knowledge, and since horses were the means of transportation, this may have led Yoruba artists to use the horse symbolically in connection with the Ifa priest, as a medium which made it possible for knowledge to be acquired. Ifa verses are quoted to substantiate this position.

The importance of body adornment (clothes, beads, crowns, and so forth) is examined in chapter five. Clothing often emphasizes the attractive properties of colors and the enhancement they confer. Certain patterns are associated with certain social classes. For example, a king's attire differs from that of his subjects; also, kings are usually differentiated with beaded crowns, which drape over the face, and elaborate clothing. Abiodun uses this fact to debunk the attribution of an Ife artwork (figure 68) as an *ooni* (king). He argues that with the mode of dressing for royalty in traditional times, which required that the king's head, face, and body be covered, the subject of the sculpture, whose face and belly are bare, could not have been a king. Instead, he insists that the subject could have been an *ifa* priest, who by virtue of *ifa* priests' inheritance from their father, Orunmila, would be an owner of beads and other sacred objects associated with royalty.

Abiodun argues that other Ife artworks—such as those of figure 76, which have always been referred to as a king and a queen because of the way they bond—could have been *ogboni* members, citing aspects of their clothing and Yoruba history to validate this claim. Yoruba culture forbids open display of affection by kings, who are not supposed to be seen eating, drinking, or sitting with their spouses. Also, a variety of clothing items and their component parts, occasions for use, and suitability are examined, including the Egungun costumes and shrine murals, considered a form of clothing for shrines. In chapter six, the importance of *ako*, a verbal and visual *oriki* in celebration of worthy departed parents, is examined. *Ako* is the second burial ceremony performed in Owo to ensure safe passage for the deceased into the ancestors' world. The display and posture of the carved *ako* effigy during the celebrations, Abiodun reasons, may have influenced the tradition and postures for traditional photographic portraits in Owo and other parts of Yorubaland.

Chapter seven examines the "ancient city of Ife, the ancestral home of the Yoruba," and laments the dearth of research and data since the time of Leo Frobenius, in the early twentieth century, and the recycling of previous analyses and conclusions on Ife art, despite their obvious inadequacies. Researchers—intimate outsiders, as Abiodun calls them—tend to alienate the indigenous people whose culture is being researched, including their language, creating a gap that cannot but lead to half-truths

and misrepresentations. Also, earlier positions and contestations about the authorship of Ife artworks and their ascription to a superior culture because of its eloquent naturalism are seen as not only insulting, but born of arrogance. Some scholars' tendency to rely on hearsay to reconstruct the puzzles inherent in Ife art, thereby arriving at careless misinterpretations while neglecting vital sources, such as *oriki*, comes under Abiodun's scrutiny. His proposal of three variants of Ife naturalism to explain the stylistic traits of Ife art breaks new ground. *Ako-graphic asa* (a term built on *ako*, Owo second burials), are artworks that appear from their features to have been used in second burials. *Ase-graphic asa* invoke the power that a figure or a thing embodies, rather than its literal or pictorial representation of such power, and they may resort to symbolic representation of the essence of the thing being referred to. *Epe-graphic asa* are vivid and unsparing portrayals of subject matter in ways that the identity of the subject is clearly identifiable; such works dwell on defects and negativism that may arise from falling on the wrong side of the societal ethos: according to Abiodun, they are commonly used to represent "criminals, those suffering from incurable diseases, and those who violate community laws and regulations." They are oriented toward punishment, their subjects being condemned to an unhappy or ugly death. Examples of this are shown in Ife works depicting severed heads in a basket and the figure of a man suffering from elephantiasis of the scrotum. Abiodun's claims are not mere conjectures, as he delves into *owe*, *odu*, *ifa* verses, and the repertoire of *oriki* to back his thesis.

In all the foregoing nuances, Abiodun's goal, as stated and illustrated, is to show the richness of Yoruba *asa* and creative works as uniquely Yoruba, which should be interrogated with Yoruba instead of Western canons. Abiodun notes that it has been more than a hundred years since Frobenius excavated locations at Ife and brought out works whose authorship he doubted as being indigenous while ascribing myth-like interpretations to them. Therefore, he urges that ancient Ife art should be explained from the inside and not left to the mercy of outsiders, whose understanding of their purpose, inspiration, and functions is based on foreign values and yardsticks. Chapter eight examines the concepts of *iwa* and *ewa*, key indices of Yoruba aesthetics. Abiodun argues that *iwa*, literally translated as "character," and *ewa*, literally translated as "beauty," go deeper than previously thought. *Iwa* refers more to the essential nature of a thing, rather than its physical appearance; *ewa* "is not the equivalent of beauty" as understood and used in Western tradition. A person going by Yoruba aesthetic valuation may not be physically attractive but may still possess *ewa*, as long as it is the expression of the person's *iwa*. The place of experience acquired by "walking with elders" (*ba agba rin*) is discussed as the training ground for Yoruba critics, who are restrained not only in passing criticism on art works publicly, but in the presence of the artist, because as Abiodun asserts, *A kiitojuonikamesan n kaa* (You do not do the counting of a nine-fingered hand in the presence of the owner). Values such as *ifarabale*, *iluti*, *imoju mora*, and *tito* (*calmness*, *teachableness*, *sensitivity*, and *steadfastness*) are crucial to walking with the elders.

In chapter nine, the last chapter, Abiodun looks at Yoruba art in contemporary times, taking into consideration the vagaries of changing materials and adaptations occasioned by globalization. Citing a contemporary recreation of the Esu deity with wood, Coca-Cola bottles, and a clarinet, he drives home the point of Esu's universal relevance and timelessness. The itinerant nature of Yoruba carvers, which exposes them to styles of artists from other regions, underscores the importance of travelling, knowledge accruable from such ventures, and the possibilities of transformation in that process. Furthermore, this chapter examines Olowe of Ise, a foremost Yoruba carver in the early twentieth century, his practice, artistry, social status, and fame. The transformations in his work as a result of external influences are discussed, as is the need to consider the oral traditions of not only the Yoruba, but of other people and cultures, in understanding their artworks to prevent such fallacious conclusions as are assigned to African art. These conclusions, as Abiodun observes, are capable of not only misrepresenting African art, but impeding scholarship. He likens contemporary African art to a dead elephant, which attracts different kinds of knives and machetes for its dismemberment, with the knives

and machetes representing incompatible foreign theories and methodologies. In conclusion, he recommends the use of what he sees as proper indigenous names by African art scholars and researchers, instead of putting them in parentheses or omitting them altogether.

The contents of this book open up new vistas in the contemplation, appreciation, and analysis of Yoruba art. The depth of its elucidations can be exhaustively addressed only with similarly deep analyses, and not in abbreviated versions, as required by this review. Abiodun has taken the wind out of the sails of those who can be described as charlatans in the duty of interrogation of and discourse on African art. Going by the novelty and profundity of his ideas and positions, which combine gains of his artistic and cultural training with researches in Ifa poetry, proverbs, *oriki*, and so forth, we can infer that Abiodun has not only *ba agba rin* (walked with the elders), but has become a confirmed *omo agba* (son of the elders). He has illustrated the need for more in-depth consideration of all factors contributory to the making of Yoruba art forms by advocating an understanding of the Yoruba language and verbal properties before proceeding to the analysis of Yoruba art.

Above all, Abiodun's thesis can be summed up with a Yoruba proverb, *enu onikan latingbo pon un* (the noise of the breaking of the garden egg should be heard from the owner's mouth)—implying that the duty of true and unalloyed representation and interpretation of Yoruba art is best performed by Yoruba researchers, or at least researchers who have gone the extra (but required) mile of acquiring the basic tools, such as the Yoruba language, *oriki*, and aesthetic properties such as *ifarabale*, *iluti*, *oju inu*, *oju ona*, *imoju-mora* (composure, teachableness, inner eye, artistic eye, sensitivity) and so forth, with which the messages coded in Yoruba art can be deciphered. Until this is done, it can only be expected that *omoonile a tejeje*, *ajeji a tegirigiri* (the owners of the land tread with caution while strangers walk around with reckless abandon) and so, while stakeholders or owners of an article will go all-out to protect and ensure that the right thing is done to it, others (outsiders) may feel unconcerned and treat the article anyhow. It is this tendency, by nonstakeholders and strangers to treat and interpret Yoruba art howsoever they will, that the author seeks to correct in his book, a publication that will very much benefit specialists and general readers conversant with Yoruba language and art.

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