



BOOK REVIEW: *YORUBA ART AND LANGUAGE: SEEKING THE AFRICAN IN AFRICAN ART*, BY ROWLAND ABIODUN.  
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409, ISBN: 9781107047440).

In his latest book, Rowland Abiodun, Professor of Art History at Amherst College, intends to show that Western aesthetic paradigms of art are not universal, and are often inadequate in evaluating traditional African artifacts as works of art (1). He likens the use of western paradigms on African art to the images produced by point-and-shoot cameras on dark skins. The exposure settings appropriate when the subject is white are different from the appropriate settings when the subject is black. He uses the contrast between Michelangelo's David and the Yoruba Ère-Ìbejì to illustrate the sculptural products of different aesthetic paradigms. While the David sculpture gives primary attention to the precise anatomy of the human body, the Ère-Ìbejì statue emphasizes those part of person that have most social significance.

Abiodun enjoins us "to look at indigenous art forms and aesthetics from the user's point of view." And from the point of view of their creators and users, Yoruba artifacts were not static things, but ways of becoming. They were meant to induce transformation, and facilitate participation more than contemplation (7). Abiodun provides us with an array of terms used by the Yoruba to describe and critically evaluate Yoruba artifacts: *iwà, ẹwà, ojù-ọ̀nà, ilutu, imọju-mọra, tito, ifarabalẹ, àşà, àşẹ, orí, orikì*. These concepts show that pre-literate Yoruba people not only used but reflected on the artifacts they produced. Abiodun wants to show clearly that "absence of Yoruba art criticism or of a self-conscious Yoruba aesthetic is a myth" (22). Traditional beliefs about the role of artifacts have been retained in Yoruba oral sources (15). Yet oral sources such as the *oníşẹ̀gùn, işẹ̀-ọ̀nà*, and Ifá divination are often ignored because foreign investigators have usually lacked sufficient familiarity with the Yoruba language (17).

For the Yoruba, art is the expression of *orikì*, which facilitate communication between the world of the living and the world of spirits, and evokes the essence of the situation under consideration. The *orikì* provoke "one's *orí* into action or more intense being" and serve to transform and motivate (11-13). Within the Yoruba aesthetic, visual, acoustical, and kinesthetic *orikì* were critically evaluated as to whether they embodied "*àşà*—a dynamic concept of style and creativity" (18).

In Chapter 1 (Orí) Abiodun presents a traditional Yoruba genesis account: Olódùmarè, the prime mover, created Ọgbón (wisdom), Ìmò (knowledge), Òye (understanding) and Èlà (explanation) through Òwe (proverbs, analogies) and other *Orikì* (dance, drama, song, poetry) in order to communicate with humans (29). The spiritual world is approached through *orikì*, and the

spiritual essence of a subject or situation (*ori*) is made manifest through *oriki* (31). *Ìbọ̀rì* are a form of visual *oriki* (24) that invoke messages between the spiritual and material world. *Òwè* are a form of verbal *oriki*, such as proverbs and metaphors, that point to the essence of the matter under discussion (26).

Chapter 2 (*Àṣẹ: The Empowered Word Must Come to Pass*) begins with a 12th–15th century terracotta figure of a criminal, perhaps facing execution. The man is gagged, denying him the ability to curse or bless. For Abiodun, the impact of the figure is not in its ‘form’ but in its *àṣẹ*, the energy it embodies (53). Producing *oriki* requires using the inner eye to make *àṣẹ* manifest (59, 72). *Oriki* evoke *àṣẹ* and make possible shared experiences beyond the ordinary: ecstasy, rapture, and possession. *Àṣẹ* is the energy that makes divine social experiences possible (57). *Oriki* imbue sound, space, and matter with *àṣẹ*, the energy that restructures existence and summons spiritual and social interpenetration (87).

In Chapter 3 (*Ọ̀ṣun*) the goddess *Ọ̀ṣun* is described as “The Corpulent Woman whose Waist Two Arms Cannot Encompass.” Clearly not the ideal European dimensions for a desirable woman (88). *Ọ̀ṣun* is the wife of *Ọ̀rúnmilà*, and represents female related attributes: beautifying, healing, and cooking (95, 100). The hair-plaiter produces visual *oriki* of *Ọ̀ṣun* (91). “Without *Ọ̀ṣun*’s cooperation, no healing can take place, no rain can fall, no plants can bear fruit, and no children can come into the world” (100). Unlike the witches of European mythology, Yoruba women with supernatural abilities (the *àjé*) were not portrayed as intrinsically malevolent and evil (102). Rather, the hidden power of women was a metaphor for the concealed power of the ancestors (107, 110). *Ọ̀ṣun*’s *àṣẹ* is the energy needed to transform the physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of the universe (107). *Ọ̀ṣun* is the mother of *Èṣù* who is responsible for maintaining the balance between good and evil forces.

In Chapter 4 (*Ọ̀rúnmilà: Henceforth Ifá Priests Will Ride Horses*) Abiodun recounts how mounted warriors expanded from the western Sudan beginning in the 11th century (121, 130). From that time forward, horses occupied an important place in Yoruba iconography (123). Consultation with *Ifá* diviners was a recurring necessity for those seeking success in their endeavors. Many traditional *Ifá* diviners showed exceptional skill using *Ifá* to enlighten their clients. They were widely known and their services were eagerly sought. *Ifá* priests were never depicted in military garb, yet they were given as much respect as warriors (140). The horse carried both warriors and diviners, and became an icon of harnessing the power of that which is stronger. Diviners use verbal and visual *oriki* in order to illuminate the situation at hand (131). The Zollman Agere is an impressive *oriki* icon carved from a single elephant tusk. The horseman, like the *Ifá* diviner, must remain in calm control of the situation. For Abiodun, the horse/rider *oriki* is an example of how knowledge is constructed in non-literate form (136). He reminds us that appreciating Yoruba artifacts as art requires familiarity with Yoruba history, culture and language (140).

In Chapter 5 (*Aṣọ: “We Greet Aṣọ before We Greet its Wearer”*) we are introduced to the concept of *aṣọ*, transformation of the self through performance, using dress and dance (142). For the Yoruba, inappropriate dress is offensive. To be well-dressed expresses “one’s *ojú-ọ̀nà*,” or “eye for design” (163). Abiodun gives an impressive description of the use of beads, head-dresses, horsetail fly-whisks, indigenous makes of cloth, female *gèlè* wraps and male *agbádá*,

costumes, and dances used to effect self-transformation (165-177). In Chapter 6 (Àkó: Re/Minding is the Antedote for Forgetfulness), Abiodun presents *àkó* rites and effigies as verbal and iconographic *oriki* commemorating the dead. Effigies of the deceased were carved in wood, often dressed in the clothes of the deceased (187). In modern times, the effigies have often been replaced by photographs of the deceased (201). In all cases, the effigies had to be appropriate to the subject and the subject-matter.

In Chapter 7 (Ilé-Ifè: The Place Where the Day Dawns) Abiodun discusses the art of the royal city of Ilé-Ifè, the ancestral home of the Yoruba people. For the Yoruba, Ilé-Ifè is where life on Earth began and where the dead will return. It is the abode of the ancestors (223). Frobenius and other European specialists on African art speculated that a race superior to that of contemporary Negroes must have produced the terracotta and bronze works of 14th century Ilé-Ifè (207). Because most Western scholars do not know the Yoruba language, they have no access to indigenous commentary and sources of reflection (243). Western scholars have also failed to appreciate that women were also rulers in Yoruba history (218). Abiodun enjoins scholarship on Ifè art to move beyond Frobenius. Yoruba artifacts must be explained and understood from within Yoruba culture rather than by means of foreign aesthetic notions.

In Chapter 8 (Yoruba Aesthetics: Ìwà, Ìwà is What We are Searching For, Ìwà) Abiodun relates *ìwà* (character) with *ewa* (beauty). One exhibits *ewà* by being true to ones self. Each artist must express the ‘*ìwà*’ of the character he is presenting (255). All things should be appreciated for what they are, their character, so long as they exist. Ìwà, Òrúnmilà’s spouse, had many bad habits (disorganized, bossy,...). But despite these faults, Òrúnmilà came to appreciate that Ìwà had strengths he valued and did not want to be without (250-53). The moral is that we should concede to each being its particular character and right to be respected. The artist attempts to express the *ìwà* of his subject. Even the grotesque has a unique character that can be expressed by a great artist (245-46). Iyánlá, the Great Mother, has a cool, patient, and imperturbable character (256). But the *ìwà* (the character) of another *òriṣà* may be hard and unyielding. Thus, when Èṣù is angry, he hits a stone until it bleeds (261). Òriṣànlá was the first Yoruba creative artist, creating beings with different characters (278-79). Òriṣànlá “transforms ordinary wood into a human figure” (282). Yoruba art are *oriki* which display the inner character of the subject at hand. Access to traditional aesthetic concepts requires “talking with the elders,” spending time to learn their perspective (247).

Chapter 9 (Tomorrow, Today’s Elder Sibling) is introduced by an *ifá* verse warning that today’s divination may not be valid tomorrow. Everyday is different and affects us in different ways. Divination must be done regularly as a way of helping us adapt to current circumstances (284). *Ìmoju-mọra* is the ability to adapt and change, as the dancer exhibits movement and counter movement to changes in the music and in other dancers (288, 292, 301). Abiodun uses Èṣù’s different manifestations in Africa and the diaspora to illustrate *imoju-mora* as “a Yoruba based rationale for considering new issues” (289). It shows how indigenous Yoruba people valued artists as agents of change and transformation.

Abiodun presents examples of the work of great Yoruba carvers, including Làgbàyi, Olówè, and Fákéyè. Ògún is venerated by sculptors because they used handcrafted iron tools to

carve wood into designs that otherwise would have been impossible. African artists use their mastery of *oriki* to reveal their *ori*, “their unique prenatal allotments and intellectual capabilities” (308), “each person’s *ori* is not only fundamentally different from another’s but also deserves to be celebrated” (301). Abiodun shows that traditional Yoruba thought was not static and limited to repeating the past (306). *Aṣà* introduces new ways and styles that express the exigencies of the time. Abiodun cautions that if we ignore African aesthetic points of view, we ignore what is African in African Art. And we reinforce the image that pre-literate African art is a western concept, an invention of colonialism (Appiah 1997; Blocker 2001).

Rowland Abiodun has done us a great service by exhibiting over 135 astonishing photographs of Yoruba art from the 11th century to the present. This alone is enough to merit the book. But Abiodun also gives us a sense of how the Yoruba thought about their art, and how indigenous concepts were used to construct their moral and aesthetic frameworks. His notion of *ìwà* (character) is central to his reconstruction of the Yoruba aesthetic, and has drawn comments from philosopher Barry Hallen (2000), who has explored Yoruba value theory as presented by Yoruba *oniṣẹ̀gùn*. This discussion of the relationship between morality and aesthetics points toward future developments for African philosophy. By showing how the Yoruba used their metaphysics to elucidate works of human creation, Abiodun disproves the view that pre-literate African cultures did not reflect on the aesthetic qualities of their artifacts. Yet he is careful not to propose that Yoruba aesthetic reflections on art serve as a paradigm for all the cultures of Africa. While it may be unlikely that any one aesthetic orientation will apply in all African cultures, Abiodun has clearly shown that the Yoruba people produced indigenous metaphysical and aesthetic paradigms.

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## References

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