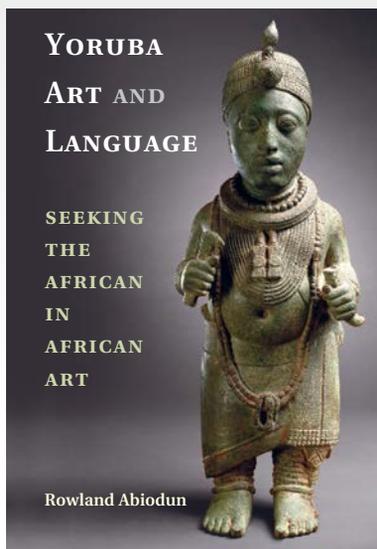


## YORUBA ART AND LANGUAGE: SEEKING THE AFRICAN IN AFRICAN ART

ROWLAND ABIODUN  
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Courtesy Cambridge University Press

What is art? Why ought we to bring the “African” into African art discourse, description, scope, and evaluation? If we take seriously the analogy with the point-and-shoot camera with which Rowland Abiódún begins this book, we can deduce that he wishes to argue that our understanding of the subject matter of African art is impacted by what tools, theories, and concepts we deploy in the task and how sophisticated they are.<sup>1</sup> To the extent that our instrument is the equivalent of a point-and-shoot camera, calibrated to flatten the object and failing to register its many hues in as close as possible to their original realization, we are unlikely to end up with an adequate, much less correct, characterization of the object of our investigation.

The alien-derived tools with which Yorùbá art has been interpreted, de-

scribed even, have meant, for instance, that “African art was not even considered art with a capital ‘A’ until relatively recent times mainly because art was ‘for art’s sake.’”<sup>2</sup> Abiódún is not advocating the incommensurability of different traditions of art, but he wants to argue that total indifference to the ways of making, valuing, and understanding art in the context of the larger cultures within which such art is produced in Africa is likely to lead to the kinds of minimally inadequate, maximally incorrect appraisals of African art that is widespread in the discourse over time. “This study is offered as a contribution to, and revision of, the conceptual tools that we need in order to meet the challenges of studying Africa’s still largely misunderstood artistic traditions.”<sup>3</sup>

The aim, then, is to insert into the discourse of African art tools that are fashioned from within the cultures that gave birth to the artistic traditions themselves. This does not mean that foreign tools may not be applied. Nor does it mean that foreign scholars have no place in the interpretation of African art. Even African scholars, who do not evince the requisite familiarization with or sophistication in the language in which the original discourse is articulated, are wont to exhibit similar stumbles as those of their foreign counterparts. The problem is not with the personnel of the interpreters; it is with the conceptual tools they bring to their task.

The reason for such outcomes is not far to seek. No doubt much art emanates from the genius of single and singular individuals. But even in those situations it requires much more than the genius of the individual artist. Our characterization of art and our evaluation of same must give a nod to the enabling community within which the art piece is named and evaluated. Art may be autonomous, but it is not free-floating.

Yorùbá art, in particular, is made up of products that are indigenous to a particular area, marked by specific discourses in their original home. Additionally, some of the objects go back to antiquity and the discourses that attach to them, the context of their emergence, and the functions that they were made to perform. The criteria of appreciation and criticism by which they have been assessed and judged

are, without exception, imbricated in a particular linguistic and cultural tradition and its associated practices. Any assessment of these objects in all their complexity that does not have the requisite grounding and fluency in the factors just listed is likely to be inadequate, if not false, but definitely problematic.

A note of caution is warranted here. There are other attempts at incorporating Yorùbá elements into the discourse of Yorùbá art. Too often, though, they are marked by what I would call *equivallencism*, under which we think all that is required is to look for equivalent Yorùbá terms for concepts derived from other traditions respecting the object of analysis. The danger with this manner of proceeding is that it takes the point-and-shoot camera as unproblematic and begins to force its object into the constricting conceptual framework it has not bothered to interrogate. There is no deep analysis of Yorùbá phenomena as such. On this view, one would take the conceptual framework of art in say, Italy, mistake it for the universal concept of art, and then look for the equivalent in Yorùbá.

Abiódún’s book steers clear of *equivallencism* by forcing us to confront Yorùbá life and its intellectual processes as an independent, integrated whole, marked by the requisite complexity that usually attaches to civilizations that are advanced enough to not only make art, but to have criteria of definition and evaluation that often are identified with aesthetics and similar theoretical forms. When Abiódún deigned to look inward and tease out a theory of art from Yorùbá, what he found is the core of this book. According to him, the key to making sense of and judging Yorùbá art is to conceive of it as *oríki*.<sup>4</sup>

Ordinarily, *oríki* is associated with delineating the boundaries, the very essence of a thing, a person, a practice, and/or a process as well as of the many concatenations of people, things, practices, and processes. *Oríki* is standardly verbal, covering a variety of Yorùbá literary and performative genres that include affective speech, recitation, incantations, chants, vocalized curses, targeted discourse, a bride’s lament, a hunter’s dirge, dramatized satire, figures of speech, and more.<sup>5</sup> I don’t think that anyone familiar with Yorùbá dis-



Ogo Esu (Esu dance staff), Osogbo, nineteenth century. Wood, beads, cowries, cloth, leather, and iron. Height: 18 1/4 in. Courtesy William Watson, New Orleans, and Museum for African Art, New York. Photo: Richard Todd

course would deny that whatever else the phenomena just stated may be, they all, without exception, lend themselves to characterization as art—verbal art, that is.

What Abíódún has done in this book, and the most startlingly original contribution of the tome, is to claim that *oríkì* is not solely or strictly verbal; *oríkì*, he argues, is visual, too. In Yorùbá, *oríkì* is art and visual representations; the plastic arts are *oríkì*, visual *oríkì*. If *oríkì* is as central to Yorùbá life as is generally accepted, and the thesis that art is visual and verbal *oríkì*, it follows that no deep appreciation of Yorùbá art can be accomplished without more than a superficial familiarity with Yorùbá culture and its many embodi-

ments. This is what makes Abíódún's case in this book so compelling.

If sculpture is visual *oríkì*, how then do we differentiate one type from another or one movement from another and one style from another? For this Abíódún introduces another concept: *àsà* (style). Style, fashion, mode, school, tradition, and their cognates all translate the idea of *àsà*; it is the middle term between *oríkì* and its diverse realizations in various artistic embodiments. Thanks to this idea we open up new areas of discussion in Yorùbá art respecting the relation between *oríkì* and *àsà*. We find, for instance, that *oríkì* is differently realized in *àsà* such that time makes a difference to how visual *oríkì* is produced, understood,

represented, embodied, manifested, and interpreted. In this construal *àsà* is not coterminous with its usual identification with custom and tradition in translations. *Àsà*, here, is a principle of individuation among several contending ways of making art and assessing it. *Àsà* is time-bound, and although a work of art may be timeless in its appeal, it cannot but be marked by the time in which it was originally made. Time, in this context, refers to the specific temporal duration, but also to what is in vogue; the particular mode of making art that informs and frames a work is an additional temporal dimension. An *àsà* may be of short duration, but duration it must have; it cannot be fleeting.

If *oríkì* involves the invocation of an essence beyond the material through which it is presented, shaped by the *àsà*, then we have a metric with which to identify and evaluate how well the *oríkì* is realized and how true the specific instance is to an *àsà* that has been around for long enough and has become itself a movement or a tradition. Even then, within a single *àsà* there would be many sub-*àsà*, and it is their sectoral *oríkì* that would supply us with the appropriate principle of association and grouping. For example, *jùjú*, reggae, and jazz are all *àsà* of performance *oríkì* that we call music, and each of them, in turn, has different sub-*àsà*, sometimes denominated by a single innovator in the sphere. Here I would like to suggest that we have a more versatile tool for Yorùbá art and its criticism than Robert Farris Thompson's "aesthetics of the cool," one which complements the latter but manages to supersede it.

A good part of the discussion in Abíódún's book is devoted to the contention that visual *oríkì* are hardly ever separable from their context or their function in those contexts. He insists that we must acknowledge that any art comes with a lot of historical baggage and, therefore, some literacy is requisite if we are, as the saying goes, to get it. In chapters 1 through 7 Abíódún proceeds to show how Yorùbá art as visual *oríkì* can be applied to many genres in Yorùbá art. Although he limits himself to plastic arts, this has fecund implications for, say, music or dance. He takes on, for good measure, some of the existing interpretations and aesthetic appreciations in



Fragment of a face, Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria, twelfth to fifteenth century CE, terra-cotta. Height: 15.2 cm. Courtesy National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, and Museum for African Art, New York. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson

the scholarship. Even if one does not agree with his interpretations, one comes away with a new, bold, and very plausible account of Yorùbá art from the vantage point offered by Abiódún's theory.

In the chapter on "Ilé-Ifè: The Place Where the Day Dawns," Abiódún takes on existing interpretations of some of the more noteworthy art objects that have been found by archaeologists in the area of Ilé-Ifè. He is particularly concerned to controvert the dominant tendency to "link Ifè-naturalism with Ifè kings and rulers."<sup>6</sup> He argues that not only should this temptation be resisted, but such a link cannot be supported by the preponderance of evidence from Yorùbá language, culture, and visual *oríkì* traditions. The fundamental claim is very simple and direct: Yorùbá *oba* (kings) are *òrìsà* (deities), gifted with transcendence that is standardly reserved for deities. Yorùbá *obaship* iconography does not lend support to *oba* being represented as ordinary mortals in some of the icons that are now interpreted as artistic de-

pictions of some of them. No one suggests that Yorùbá *oba* are not imaged or represented in visual *oríkì*. After all, we have depictions of other *òrìsà* that are even superior to *oba* in the hierarchy of deities. The critical difference is that, given the near-*òrìsà* status of the *oba*, there simply are imagings and depictions that would be forbidden or, at least, not entertained for an *oba*. For instance, depictions of an *oba* in any state of undress would be highly unlikely. Were such to occur, it would leave us with the responsibility of explaining the deviation. Needless to say, this is without prejudice to new *àsà* emerging or an *oba* having fallen from grace in the estimation of his subjects and the artist seizing the opportunity to treat the said *oba* with levity, or the artist engaging in some iconoclasm. What each one of these possibilities involves cannot be sundered completely, or even in any significant fashion, from their idiomatic frameworks if we are to begin adequately to understand or analyze them. Of course, what is being said here does not even begin to pres-

ent the sophistication and complexity of Abiódún's argument in this respect. I am sure it will reward serious engagement by scholars, as will other areas of the work that I have not brought into focus here.

Chapter 8, "Yorùbá Aesthetics: *Ìwà*, *Ìwà* Is What We Are Searching for, *Ìwà*," is the one that raises the most questions for me. The core claim of this chapter is that there is a near necessary relationship between "*ìwà*" (generally glossed as 'character') and "*ewà*" (generally glossed as 'beauty') in Yorùbá thought" such that the first "is fundamental to the definition" of the second.<sup>7</sup> Although I cannot even begin to make the case here, I think that the glossing of *ewà* as "the expression and appreciation of *ìwà*" is problematic and, I would argue, implausible. This is another reason to have more than a passing familiarity with the language of the original, especially when engaging a culture where many of the artifacts and discourses are domiciled in orature. Abiódún insists that in "Yorùbá culture and metaphysics, '*ewà*' refers not so much to the superficial appreciation of a thing's physical appearance as to the deep appreciation of its essential nature. In short, '*ewà*' (as a feature of an individual) is being true to one's essential nature."<sup>8</sup>

I object to this characterization. There may be implications here that Abiódún may not want to embrace. For instance, if "*ewà* is being true to one's essential nature," except that nature is good by definition and only good nature is allowed, it should be obvious how many unsavory things and persons will, on that account, have *ewà*. Think murderers and unspeakably ugly things. *Ewà* must be something other than, and additional to, *ìwà*. Hence, we talk of "good character," which means that *ìwà* (character) is not necessarily good and, by the same token, the being of something (*ìwà*) may be good in terms of realizing its essential nature, but whether that being has *ewà* (beauty) is a separate question.

*Ewà* is a much more complex term than is realized in Abiódún's discussion. To begin with, *ewà* is not often the term we use to describe the "essential nature" of a thing or person. The word for that, I contend, is *èdà* (essence/nature). When *ewà* is deployed it is in the sense that Abiódún denies in this

chapter: a judgment of appearance. Ewà is always considered fleeting, degradable—an independent category that is sometimes adapted to particular contexts. It is a versatile concept that is applicable to things, processes, institutions, persons, practices, and so on. I look forward to future debates with Abiódún on this score, and I am sure other scholars will weigh in.

In sum, *Yorùbá Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* is a book written with wit, argued with verve, supremely confident in its thesis, and exhaustively documented. Most important, this is a breathtakingly original book that is destined to alter our understanding of Yorùbá art and aesthetics forever. Of course, its sweep and the boldness of its thesis invite engagement and, I dare say, contestations from scholars of philosophy, art, aesthetics, language, and religion. A superlative book does not discourage criticism; it provokes it. I hope other readers oblige the author with theirs.

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### Notes

Editor's note: We have chosen to omit certain diacritical marks due to typesetting complications. The author did not agree to this omission.

1 Rowland Abiódún, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–4.

2 *Ibid.*, 4.

3 *Ibid.*, 5.

4 *Ibid.*, 11.

5 *Ibid.*, 12–13.

6 *Ibid.*, 212.

7 *Ibid.*, 245.

8 *Ibid.*