

Terms for deciphering the “African” element in African arts should be located in the critical infrastructures—beginning with the unwritten, oral repositories—that provide the ground of meaning for the objects in the societies that fostered their creation and dissemination. For Yoruba art history and aesthetics, Abiodun argues that the *oriki* framework of defining, qualifying, presenting, and abstracting about the world should be the starting point. In this book, *oriki* is not only the praise discourse that it is axiomatically taken to be in Anglophone scholarship; nor is it a genre or mode. *Oriki* is the term for all attempts to abstract and express the essence of an object of attention. The much studied verbal form, Abiodun stresses further, is just one iteration of an approach to articulating perceptions. *Oriki*, he writes, “affirm the identity of almost everything in existence” and “energize, prepare, and summon their subject into action”; the spirit of *oriki* is expressed in “architectural space, dress, music, dance, the performed word, mime, ritual, food, and smell, engaging virtually all the senses” (5)—a manner of “doing” thoughts and ideas in, and as, words and things.

The analysis opens with the cone-shaped head object, the tangible delineation of *orí inú*, or “spiritual allotment” (33), which, in the sense of order proposed in the book, is one step removed from *orí-òde*, the quotidian, physical head. Heads are ubiquitous in Yoruba sculpture because they invoke the part of the body to which, in *oriki*, all social success is traced. The centrality of heads is discussed throughout the book and fully elaborated upon in chapter 6 about Ifè “naturalism.” Relying on oral traditions and printed archives, though without privileging the latter, Abiodun demonstrates that the naturalistic portrayal of royalty in Ifè art is probably a twentieth-century development that began with a specific artist, Ọlówè from Ìsè-Èkiti, and exploded in printed photographic portraits in commercial “almanacs.” This absorbing analysis illustrates how the Abiodun method of art history can be most illuminating. Besides systematizing Ifè styles, the chapter defines three distinct artistic idioms in Yorùbá visual *oriki*: *àkógraphy* (propitiating arts), *àṣẹgraphy* (invocatory arts), and *èpègraphy* (maledictory arts). These are not categories of “functions” but intermedial aesthetic expressions that are found in textile, metal, terra-cotta, wood, and ivory across regions and in spheres as diverse as divination and ludic masking. Abiodun defines each of the three idioms according to how it deploys the art’s power of inventive creativity, or *àṣẹ* (making-to-be).

The recognition and contemplation of that power in verbal arts is the subject of chapter 2. Chapter 3, anchored in gender analysis, revolves around the coral beaded comb (*òyà iyùn*) of Ọṣun, the character who animates *différance* in the canonical Ifá divination system. With a deep understanding of verbal declamations about Ọṣun in divination verses especially her primary role in the textual constitution of the sixteen principal sections of the Ifá apparatus—Abiodun argues that Ọṣun’s hair comb is not intended for motherly or womanly styling and fashioning or for beautifying quotidian being (*orí-òde*), but is the tangible representation of what existence owes to *orí-inú* (singularity). The analysis locates the defining element of Ọṣun’s hair comb in cognate head-centered adornments like crowns, hats, and head scarves, either as they are worn in real life or as depicted across the length and breadth of Yoruba land in wooden masks, terra-cotta, feathers, and beads. The fourth chapter analyzes the “thick” significance of horses and travel iconography on divination nut-holding bowls. The fifth chapter analyzes body adornments, mainly textile and beaded neckwear or necklaces. Chapter 6 presents a historical analysis of *àkó* in the Ọwò funeral practice of presenting a carved naturalist effigy of the deceased. The last chapter addresses verbal conceptions of being as art (*àṣà; iwà*) and of art as being (*iwà; ẹwà*) in the Yoruba language.

The unique achievement of *Yoruba Art and Language* lies in its sustained analysis of art objects with a hermeneutics derived from historically Yoruba intellectual and critical practices. Its interpretation of Yoruba arts engages Yoruba speech, itself not less artistic, about arts and repudiates the “point-and-shoot” approach to art history that transposes Euro-American discourses to Africa *en bloc*. The book does not stress difference for its own sake but for the sake of abstracting the insightful values that intellectual difference bears for understanding the arts. Art objects, a discerning reader cannot but note,

do not speak the historian's language, even when he or she is Yorùbá, while it is the historian who invests the object with a mouth and a language. In this book, Abiodun makes the studied art objects speak Yoruba words convincingly while acknowledging that the works exhibit qualities of beauty and meaning that are found in many places that are not Yoruba. Its contribution to comparative aesthetics from the Yoruba part of the world is very impressive.

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