

**Rowland Abiodun. 2014. *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 386pp.**

Faced with the methodological gridlock embedded in the discipline of art history, African scholars and their Africanist counterparts have continuously struggled in their effort to analyze aspects of the material and visual cultures of Africa. The problem is compounded by the often prescriptive Eurocentric models that thrive in formal analysis. It is obvious, however, that such methodological constraints have failed to check the essence of the works created within many cultures in Africa. Thus, Abiodun bring to bear these methodological issues. With a robust research career that spans over four decades, Rowland Abiodun has consistently advocated for the inclusion of the language of the people when their art is being studied. He lucidly articulates that idea, using the Yoruba aesthetic thought and language embedded in the *oriki* (praise or citation poetry) as valid exemplars.

Taken as his goal, he venture to explore new holistic perspectives for the critical interpretation of African art as exemplified by the interpretations of the visual and verbal arts among the Yoruba people of West Africa. He contends that such an approach will facilitate his enumeration of the cultural meanings and themes that have been overlooked and even forgotten in African art studies. Throughout the nine chapters of his book he clearly enunciates this idea, and supports it with actual examples of art works.

The first chapter explores the Yoruba concept and principle of "individuality and otherness" in *ori* (this consists of both *ori-inu* and *ori-ode*, physical/spiritual attributes of the head). Abiodun goes on in the second chapter to discuss the wide range of visual and verbal *oriki* (construed as art forms) that are central to or connected with *ase* (the primordial life force that inheres in all objects of consciousness, authority and power). The third chapter relies on much of the *oriki* of Osun to understanding the art forms that help in defining and illuminating the character of the *Orisa* (Osun is one of the most powerful and influential Yoruba *Orisas*). He uses verses from *ifa* to carry out an in-depth formal and contextual analysis of an *agere-ifa* (the container for keeping the *ikin*, the sixteen sacred divination palm nuts, with the horse motif) in the fourth chapter. For the fifth chapter, Abiodun examines Yoruba dress as a form of *oriki*, articulating how clothes define the status of the wearers. The gamut of Yoruba dress speaks volumes of the wearers, especially their religious and social statuses. The meaning and place of photography in Yoruba culture, especially as it relates to the *oriki* and *asa of ako* (the second burial effigies in Owo) from discussion of the sixth chapter. Chapter seven reviews the state of knowledge of selected terra cotta and bronzes from the ancient Yoruba city of Ile Ife, and offer new insights through the use of *oriki*. The eighth chapter addresses some major aesthetic concepts in Yoruba art and thought, using *oriki*, while the ninth chapter explores the Yoruba definition of style through time, using the work of selected artists such as "Olowe of Ise." Abiodun compares the work of Olowe with other artists, such as the "master of the Fowler" *agere-ifa* (from a later period), through the use of the verbal and visual *oriki*. He vacillates between these artists and show how their works relates to Yoruba art and thought. He maintain that "*oriki* is immediately important as an efficient means of capturing moments or nuggets of history that provide an indispensable body of research material for reconstructing artistic values" (p. 307), which is a necessary art historical methodology.

Throughout the book, especially with regards to the interpretation of the visual and verbal arts, Abiodun adopts the Yoruba *oriki* as a tool that offer the best analysis of the art forms and their uses within the religious and social contexts of the society. According to him, "any serious attempt to conduct art historical research in a traditionally oral society like the Yoruba must take their rich tradition of *oriki*

into consideration" (p. 23). Imbibing such characteristics, it is the hope that a better and more nuanced understanding of the art work will be facilitated; anything short of this would continuously, albeit erroneously give an inconclusive or incomplete understanding of the work under interrogation. And the central argument posited by Abiodun is that it is impossible to appreciate or even articulate the complexities and depth of the Yoruba artistic imagination, stylistic conventions and critical discourse without recourse to that vast body of visual and verbal text embedded within the *oriki*. It should be stressed that Abiodun implies that it would be immensely beneficial to the cause of sound African art research and scholarship if the proper indigenous names were employed in the identification of the art works instead of the current practice of putting them in parenthesis or omitting them altogether.

Throughout the book, the significance of the *oriki* in the Yoruba imagination has been shown to permeate religious and social aspects of Yoruba society. Despite the fear that the book might be difficult to access by a wide range of researcher, scholars, and students because of the heavy use of Yoruba words, the inclusion of a companion website with audio clips of Yoruba language go a long way to help the reader grasp the integral connection between art and language in Yoruba culture. Therefore, the book will be invaluable to scholars and students of Yoruba culture, language and visual art.

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