

Rowland Abiodun's *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* demonstrates how certain Yoruba art forms fit into a larger cultural and linguistic context. Specifically, it examines the fundamentality of *oríkì*—a word that encompasses a variety of Yoruba literary, verbal, and performance genres including recitations, incantations, chants, curses, laments, dramatic satire, and poetry. According to Abiodun, an examination of *oríkì* can provide often overlooked information about the origin or “essential nature” of a work, identify the artist of a piece, indicate the structural underpinnings of Yoruba society, and provide underlying religious or proverbial insights into the artworks. In short, Abiodun claims the oral, literary traditions of the Yoruba offer a rich source of information in explicating the meaning of Yoruba art.

Beyond linguistic contextualization, this book calls for a reform in Yoruba scholarship. Abiodun challenges art historians to reassess the Eurocentric terminology used in analyzing African art and concede that the Yoruba, like other peoples, have their own linguistic framework that when understood can reveal new layers of meaning to already “known” artworks. He insists that art historians question the adequacy of Western methodologies and languages in the study of African art and venture outside of Western paradigms to conduct their research.

Yoruba Art and Language builds upon Abiodun's long career of research and contributions to Yoruba scholarship. He was a co-author of *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Center for African Art in association with Abrams, 1989) as well as co-editor of *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspective on African Arts* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1994) and *Cloth Only Wears to Shreds: Yoruba Textiles and Photographs from the Beier Collection* (exh. cat., Amherst: Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, 2004). In addition, he authored *What Follows Six Is More Than Seven: Understanding African Art* (London: British Museum, 1995) and contributed to the Smithsonian Institution-supported film *Nigerian Art—Kindred Spirits* (1990). His new book consolidates and further develops his previously published journal articles, which have dealt with Yoruba aesthetics, the intersection of art and language, the role of *àṣẹ* in art, and the funerary arts used in a second burial known as *Àkó*.

Abiodun divides *Yoruba Art and Language* into nine chapters that deal with different aspects of Yoruba art, culture, or history. The first chapter correlates the visual arts and verbal *oríkì* to the Yoruba concept of *Orí*, or the head; it differentiates between the physical outer head, *Orí-òde*, depicted naturalistically, and the inner, spiritual head, *Orí-inú*, portrayed abstractly, often as a cone. *Orí-inú* finds visual manifestation in art forms such as *Ìbori* (shrines to the head), divination tappers, and royal beaded crowns, all which have conical elements. Chapter 2 emphasizes the spiritual power of speech among the Yoruba to invoke *àṣẹ*, the spiritual life force, and summon *èpè*, malevolent curses. While art forms illustrate how speech functions in society—for example a terra-cotta gagged head from fifteenth-century Ifè shows the need to constrain prisoners from invoking curses—art also, more importantly, depends upon the verbal for its spiritual vitalization.

Abiodun uses the third and fourth chapters to focus on the verbal *oríkì* and the visual art forms related to two principle deities: *Òsun*, the complex female deity associated with destiny and hair-plaiting, and *Òrúnmìlà*, the patron god of Ifá divination. Abiodun's examination of the role of *Òsun*, the only female deity among the principle Yoruba gods who came to earth at the time of creation, offers interesting insights into relationships among the Yoruba pantheon and into the power and role of women in Yoruba society as manifest in art. The fourth chapter examines the common Yoruba motif of a man riding a horse and its interpretations. With the support of Ifá poetry, Abiodun questions the prevalent assumption in scholarship that the horse rider is always associated with military power. He concludes that when the rider is depicted bare breasted, he represents instead an Ifá diviner, traveling for the acquisition of spiritual knowledge. Not surprisingly, such manifestations of this equestrian motif are prevalent in art associated with Ifá divination, such as *opón*-Ifá (divination trays), *iróké*-Ifá (divination tappers), and especially *agere*-Ifá (containers which hold the sacred palm nuts used in divination).

Chapter 5 examines clothing and costume as a visual *oriki* to be read. It explicates the communicative power of beads and cloth and applies that explication to visual forms ranging from ancient Ifè sculpture to *egúngún* performances in order to offer insights and clarification not apparent otherwise. Chapter 6 contextualizes the art associated with *Àkó*, the funerary rights traditional to Òwò, Nigeria. Here Abiodun explores the visual relationship between portrait photography and effigies used in the second burial ceremonies of upper-class citizens of Òwò in terms of aesthetics and purpose. Although the art of ancient Ifè is discussed throughout the book, chapter 7 is solely dedicated to an examination of Ifè sculpture and the scholarship surrounding it. Abiodun uses Yoruba language and *oriki* to expand upon, amend, and sometimes redress the work of previous scholars of Ifè art. For example, in his examination of the research surrounding the copper Obalùfòn “mask,” Abiodun exposes problems in the conclusions and methods of established scholars such as Suzanne Preston Blier and Frank Willett and demonstrates how a knowledge of the language, while it does not answer all of the mysteries surrounding this piece, does better situate it in its cultural and historical context.

The final two chapters of *Yoruba Art and Language* address issues of Yoruba aesthetics and style. Chapter 8, arguably the book’s most valuable contribution to Yoruba scholarship, outlines the Yoruba criteria for art criticism. The Yoruba concept of *ewà*, which is often glossed over in translation as beauty, is more about the expression of a person or thing’s *iwà*, or essential nature, than about being pleasing to the eye. An art critic, therefore, must be an expert in the essential nature of things and have knowledge of *oriki*—often a priest, diviner, chief, or someone who has studied with them. When analyzing works, a Yoruba critic looks for insightfulness, design consciousness, composure, durability, craft, and the expression of the essence. In chapter 9, Abiodun uses depictions of Èsù, the messenger god, to discuss issues of time and change in art and culture. As a case study, he analyzes the works of master carvers Olówè of Ìsè and the “Master of the Fowler Agere-Ifá” in terms of style and situates their work in the *oriki* associated with it.

Yoruba Art and Language does not attempt to be a survey of Yoruba art, but rather to explicate previously published works in meaningful ways. However, it is not clear why certain art forms are analyzed over others; why, for example, does Abiodun examine funeral effigies, but say very little about major forms such as *gèlèdè* masks? The book is unified by its analysis of *oriki* in reference to the visual arts; but if, as is suggested, linguistic forms are applicable to all types of art, Abiodun should have made transparent why certain art forms were chosen to the exclusion of others. Additionally, the book’s images are sometimes lacking—often small and sometimes pixelated—and while each chapter is cohesive and insightful, the book lacks continuity, and would benefit from a clearer progression.

However, *Yoruba Art and Language* is strengthened by the inclusion of written and audio resources. Because its thesis revolves around Yoruba language, numerous literary excerpts and terminology are provided by Abiodun throughout the text. Such excerpts from traditionally oral *oriki* in their original language (and accompanying translations) both support Abiodun’s arguments and provide the reader with some exposure to Yoruba literature. The use of Yoruba terminology in Abiodun’s analysis of art requires an investment on the part of the reader, but rewards such efforts with a deeper understanding of Yoruba art and an acknowledgment that language carries weight. In addition, Abiodun includes an online audio component, which augments the book’s exploration of language and would be especially helpful to readers who have little experience with tonal languages (that is, languages in which the stress and pitch is used in conjunction with the phonetics to determine the meaning of words).

While the book’s scope is narrow enough in content that it would be most relevant to scholars of Yoruba art, the implications of its agenda is applicable to multiple levels of reception. For scholars of African art, Abiodun brings new levels of understanding, nuance, and insights for consideration to already familiar works and forms. Applicable to all art historians, *Yoruba Art and Language* emphasizes the need to be aware of the cultural, and specifically the linguistic, contexts in which art is made. While I am wary of the implication that only those fluent in a particular language can offer insights into the art

of a particular culture, Abiodun's book proves a valuable addition to the ongoing discussion of contextualization and the role of Western interpretations of African art.

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