

What does it mean to seek and find “Africa” in African art studies? Why is it necessary? What would it take to accomplish this? Three generations of scholars of African art have implicitly offered answers to these questions, some more successfully than others. For the first time, we have a book that tackles these questions head-on by focusing on the Yoruba visual arts. Here, Rowland Abiodun deftly demonstrates the centrality of language and the epistemology of orature for a deep exploration of the meanings and meaningfulness in Yoruba visual arts. In nine chapters he offers richly textured and sometimes dense case studies to illustrate that Yoruba art is the material expression of *oríkì*—that affective invocation of the essence/character (*iwà*) of a person, thing, or place. Abiodun’s indigenous theoretical framework and extensive discussion of Yoruba aphorisms, *Ifá* divination verses, and poetic citations provide new vistas of interpretation that refocus our imaginative gyrations toward a more coherent, contextual, and purposeful interpretation of several Yoruba art forms. The methodological rigor that his theoretical framework demands may unsettle some established scholars who are not versatile in Yoruba or any African language. But this is what it takes to decolonize the study of African art: scholars of African art must take the language and the practice of their subjects more seriously as sources of theorizing and interpretation.

Abiodun’s book is primarily about the philosophy of and the philosophy in Yoruba visual arts. It collapses not only the reified boundaries between visual and oral arts, but also those between philosophy and practice. This approach yields many novel insights. Let me cite a few examples. In chapter 4 the author presents the compelling interpretation that the horse imagery in *Ifá* divination objects has nothing to do with militarism. Rather, it refers to the compatibility of the itinerant nature of the *Ifá* priest as disseminator of knowledge and the essence of the horse for enhancing travel and movement. That is, just as horses served as a means of connecting spaces and diminishing distances, the itinerant *Ifá* priests connected far-flung places and helped collapse the boundaries of knowledge.

In another instance Abiodun shifts the ground under the feet of three generations of scholars (including this writer) who seem to have formed the consensus that virtually all the brass figures in West Africa’s oldest city, Ile-Ife, represent royal personalities. The justification for this consensus is that since copper alloys are the most difficult medium for sculpture-making in the repertoire of Ife art, then these must have been the exclusive preserve of the highest ranking elite—kings and queens. Abiodun disagrees with this conclusion. He draws our attention to the iconographies represented on these sculptures (especially fig. 68) and notes that the paraphernalia of authority and the forms of attire represented in them are not symbols of kingly authority. Referring to the early twentieth-century photographs of Yoruba kings, he argues that the face of the king needed to be concealed, whereas the faces of these sculptures are exposed. He then concludes that those copper alloy figures are in fact representations of *Ifá* priests. This rereading of the Ife copper-alloy figures is fascinating—even if it perhaps raises more questions than it answers. For example, was there only one way to represent the royal figures and the divination priests in the Ife art repertoire between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries? Is it possible that the Yoruba sculptors of the eleventh–fifteenth centuries were engaging in experimentation with forms that would have allowed them to represent the king with exposed face and torso? Or could these figures represent specific kings whose faces were concealed in public (during commemoration ceremonies, if any) but exposed in the interior of the ancestral shrine? One hopes that Abiodun’s rich text will inspire future scholarship that addresses itself to such questions.

In another twist to the trends of identifying the figurative sculptures of Ile-Ife with past kings and queens, Abiodun (chapter 7) cautions the eager scholar who, on the basis of oral traditions, attempts to name not only the artist but also the subjects of the art dating back to the eleventh–

fifteenth centuries. In particular, he questions the validity of recent claims that associate particular sculptures with a past king of Ile-Ife, Obalùfòn. Since such claims rely on contemporary information about sculptures that derived from archaeological excavations and accidental discoveries, how can we be sure that these informants were not simply fitting these finds into their own preconceptions and narratives of the past? The methodological sloppiness of accepting such claims as gospel truth (especially when cited as information provided by a king, priest, or chief) raises questions about the misuse of oral traditions and informants.

Abiodun recognizes the adaptive and experimental nature of Yoruba art, although he does not always demonstrate that these qualities preceded the nineteenth century. Far more than ever before, his exposition high-lights the need for new studies that will explore the temporal planes and experience of time that produced particular myths, Orisa traditions, practices, and art forms in the one thousand-plus years of the Yoruba historical journey. For example, to what extent is the metaphysics of Osun, a late sixteenth-century deity in the Yoruba pantheon, relevant for the contextual interpretation of the meaningfulness of the Are crown or the Owo sculptures whose forms date to the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, respectively?

With his conceptualization of visual art as *oríkì*, we need to recognize that *oríkì* as verbal art and the materialization of *oríkì* in the visual arts intersected in particular places and times. This intersection was not always simultaneous, and one must take into account the processes of displacement, reshuffling, and recombination of the visual and the verbal. These processes are what make the Yoruba culture, with its vitality and freshness, an unending work-in-progress. For this reason, Yoruba Art and Language will serve as an enduring source of knowledge and wisdom for scholars and the general public. It will also inspire new works that seek to understand the experience of time in Yoruba visual art. Rowland Abiodun has taken us to the right place to start the next generation of scholarship on African art and Yoruba cultural history.

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