

This book, which represents a culmination of Rowland Abiodun's decades of scholarship on Yoruba art, will leave readers looking forward to future elaborations of its theoretical positions and explorations of relationships between verbal and visual art.

Through a critical assessment of both positive and less fruitful contributions of prior researchers, the book's introduction lays out Abiodun's central argument that Yoruba art deserves engagement on its own terms, and that language and culture are so thickly interrelated that close familiarity with both is crucial for its understanding and appreciating. Throughout the book Abiodun emphasizes the role of language in Yoruba conceptual categories, Yoruba approaches to art making, and the development of artists' reputations. Academic categories, by contrast, occlude relations of differentiation, interaction, and reciprocity among the arts by preemptively separating them into "sculpture," "dance," "music," and so forth. Although Yoruba art has garnered more attention from art historians and anthropologists than all or most other African aesthetic complexes, this has also meant more filtering of this art through the terms and concepts on which these disciplines were built. Because art history emerged in concert with Northern/Western styles, genres, and materials, there is an inherent propensity for distortion outside this ambit, a problem that is compounded by interpretations that incorrectly gloss words whose meaning depends on Yoruba tonal vowels. To that end, the book opens with a helpful explanation of the Yoruba vowel system and is supplemented with an innovative website that allows readers to hear the rhythms of Yoruba speech.

The connection among materials and modes of performance that Abiodun explores is *oríkì*: poetry that conveys the essence of a person or thing rendered orally, through tonal drumming, or through sculpture: "To know the *oríkì* of a person," Abiodun says, "is to be intimately familiar with his or her place in society[,] and to know the *oríkì* of the subject or artifact is to know how it came to be" (12). Abiodun situates visual art in a context similar to Karin Barber's characterization of spoken *oríkì* as objects that stand alone while serving as generative hubs for continuing commentary. For nonspecialists like me, who know Yoruba art only through museums and images, Yoruba people through conversations in English, and Yoruba culture through texts, the book is challenging but immensely rewarding: a compressed, intensive course that provides the reader with a sense of how language in use is in constant conversation with Yoruba visual arts. For those of us who work with arts and artists in the African diaspora, the book also raises provocative questions about how a volume that homes in so closely on the specificities of Yoruba culture can enhance our work.

If we take Abiodun's points seriously, facile extrapolations from a static Yoruba "there" to an essentialized Yoruba "here" cannot but undervalue the ways in which descendants in the diaspora have made their lived circumstances meaningful through art. Just as the notion of "Yoruba" in the Americas has acquired new symbolic resonances that spur interest in the past, this fine book will inspire attentive readers to bring fresh insights to the complementary relationship between language and art. Sections of the book will be excellent additions to college and university courses, particularly those making the point clearly that whatever their permutations, Yoruba concepts and arts in the Americas have been relocalized and translated, and thus changed: still grounded in language and culture, but transformed through imposed limitations, negotiated mixtures, and transnational migrations.

Abiodun reminds us that such dialogic relationships are widespread throughout Africa; certainly the coding of proverbs and praise names in material forms, for example, bears this out. This dialog offers much for those who work in the Americas to ponder. The excellent work of such scholars as Donald Cosentino and Karen McCarthy Brown in Haiti and with Haitians in the United States, and Lydia Cabrera in Cuba, have led the way toward a better understanding of verbal-material relationships on their own

terms, especially in religious practices. At the same time, much art historical and anthropological scholarship on the diaspora in the United States has ignored language–art relationships for a number of reasons: over-confidence in mutual understanding among those who have a supposed common language, English; categorical dismissal in my own field, anthropology, of salient call-and-response with transatlantic histories; and perhaps, above all, the construction of community-based African American artists as homegrown “primitives” whose work continues to be labeled with euphemisms like “naïve,” “visionary,” “outsider,” and “self-taught.” These assumptions not only decontextualize the work but also cut off links to verbal and other modes of performance. Yet, as Abiodun shows us, there are enumerable verbal–visual dialogs to explore, from jokes about “puzzle-gut” persons that beg to be sculpted, to spirituals that activate the static image of Jesus’ crown of thorns into a thorny road that all must traverse, to material counterpoints to Bible verses which, as oft-repeated bits of essential wisdom, display some of the stand-alone qualities of *oríkì*, swirling in commentary, which must be positioned in talk with the precision of a Yoruba proverb.

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