

Rowland Abiodun's *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* revisits the vexing question of the role of indigenous African philosophical concepts and languages in the interpretation of African art, in this instance by emphasizing the role of Yoruba language in the interpretation of Yoruba arts. Yoruba peoples are among the most historically relevant cultures in Africa and its Diaspora. Their population, estimated at 40 million, makes them arguably the largest single ethnic group, or nationality, in Black Africa. More importantly, their history and artistic practices are among the most researched of any African people. Abiodun argues that despite broad international recognition of the high quality and range of its artistic and material production, Yoruba art has been “judged primarily according to the standards and principles of Western aesthetics,” which has “led in the past to an unfortunate weakness in the study of African art because it has ignored the discovery, recognition, and analysis of African-derived paradigms” (p. 1). He suggests that methodological tools inherited from the West are inadequate to cope with the challenges of studying art from African societies; Africanist scholars of Yoruba art, as a cogent example, need a thorough understanding of the Yoruba language to understand how it shapes visual culture and aesthetics, and vice versa. The key to this understanding is *oriki*, generally translated as praise songs or citation poetry, but which encompasses a structure of verbal *and* visual invocations that virtually engages all the senses. The complexity of *oriki* and its discursive applicability, Abiodun suggests, would be “immensely useful in solving many complex theoretical issues confronting African art and especially, Yoruba art scholarship today” (p. 15).

Yoruba Art and Language consists of an introduction and nine chapters. Yoruba is a tonal language; the meaning of any word is dependent on its tone (e.g. *òkò*: stone; *oko*: farm, etc.). The book therefore begins with a section on “Orthography and Phonological notes” to instruct the non-Yoruba speaker in basic comprehension of the language (pp. xix–xxvii). It also provides an attendant online orthography and audio samples of *oriki* narrated by the author in Standard Yoruba, and in the Ekiti and Owo dialects (see www.cambridge.org/9781107047440).

The introduction (“On the Centrality of Africa in African Art Studies”) evaluates Yoruba art as an expression of *oriki*, which is fundamental to its study, understanding and aesthetic appreciation. The first chapter provides a theoretical exegesis of *oriki* hermeneutics and briefly highlights the methodological problems African art studies still faces today: it has been theorized extensively through a Western anthropological lens whose conclusions are often adopted without seriously questioning their implicit assumptions, and often apply Western theoretical frameworks, periodization paradigms, and historical approaches. Abiodun identifies efforts to counter the above thrust in the scholarship of Henry Drewal, Rene Bravman, John Picton, Roy Sieber, Douglas Fraser, Robert Farris Thompson, Arnold Rubin, and Herbert Cole. He also cites Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts among scholars whose methodologies rely on African philosophical and aesthetic concepts, which contributes to returning the “African” to histories of African art. Abiodun honors the important work of these scholars. However, he notes that a problem of cross-cultural translation complicates scholarly efforts to negotiate cultural meanings and artistic concepts. Africanist art historians, Abiodun contends, need to move beyond bland empirical observations and center relevant ontological and epistemological concepts of indigenous societies in the study of African art.

Abiodun regards the visual and verbal arts of Africa as interdependent, supporting each other through mutual reference and allusion. He therefore uses specific Yoruba *oriki* terms to theorize aspects of Yoruba art. The first seven chapters press key Yoruba concepts such as *àse*, *Òsun*, *Òrúnmilà*, *aso*, and *àkó* into service as theoretical frameworks, and interpret the famous bronze sculptures of Ilé-Ife (ca. 1100–1400) through Yoruba epistemology. The concept of *orí* (head, origin, fate) is foundational and

foregrounds Yoruba ontology and aesthetics. Àse, as affective energy, informs a four-dimensional concept of cognition in which dynamism and the element of time are dominant. Òsun, a Yoruba deity (*òrisà*), illustrates the indispensability of the feminine to any African conception of being and creativity. Òrunmilà, patron saint of Ifa, the supreme ground of interpretation in the Yoruba world, provides a critical framework for analysis of art based on Yoruba metaphysics. Aso references complex technologies developed in African art by analyzing the material, textual and symbolic significance of clothes. Àkó, in turn, evaluates Yoruba concepts of portraiture that predate photography. Abiodun also proposes Yoruba-inspired concepts (*iwà, ewà, àsà*) and terms such as Ifènaturalism, *akó-graphic àsà*, *àse-graphic àsà*, and *èpè-graphic àsà* for artistic criticism. The last two chapters analyze important critical concepts in Yoruba artistic practice and stress what Robert Farris Thompson defined as “an aesthetic of the cool” (*ara tutù, iwapèlé*), itself an ideal protocol of human behavior and creativity in Yoruba culture.

The book concludes by reiterating the importance of *oriki-type* paradigms in African art studies, as a hedge against a Western epistemology that systematically works against the development of African-derived theoretical paradigms and Africa's ability to interpret its own art (p. 307). Four appendices transcribe Yoruba *orítí* from chapter 3 (Òsun), chapter 6 (*àkó*, and a table of *àkó* performances in Òwò district), and chapter 9 (the *orítí* of Olówè, a famous twentieth-century Yoruba sculptor). A glossary of significant Yoruba terms used in the book is provided along with substantial footnotes, bibliography and index. Abiodun emphasizes throughout that Yoruba art is an “ongoing process rather than a conclusion” and its forms and concepts often change with new developments (p. 284). He suggests that proper indigenous African names and interpretative concepts should be used to identify African artworks. To leave them out would be to create a field in which African thought and language are not considered relevant to understanding African art (p. 308).

Overall, the book is commendable: it is clear and readable despite the copious use of diacritics in transcribing Yoruba words. Abiodun's language is lyrical and his explanation of important terms and concepts is deeply learned. However, the quality of illustrations varies despite the generous inclusion of color images, some of which were taken in the early years of color photography and haven't aged well. There are also some erroneous diacritical marks, which alter the meaning of certain words and concepts.

Abiodun's effort to broaden art history by incorporating the conceptual vocabulary of African traditions suggests an alternative methodology that foregrounds linguistic and cultural paradigms grounded in embodied experience. *Yoruba Arts and Language* is therefore a significant intervention in African art history, in an era where scholarly engagement with indigenous African art is receding in favor of a focus on the contemporary. It comes at an opportune moment and provides a methodology for studying African art that is both obvious and radical. It calls on scholars of African art history to secure a deeper understanding of how African philosophy and languages can aid scholarly exegesis. In this regard, the book proves valuable to both scholars of African art and a broader general public interested in the unique workings of the arts and culture of Africa and its Diaspora.

Abiodun brings four decades of work as an art historian to bear in his research for the book and his discussion of visibility in Yoruba aesthetics is grounded in Yoruba epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. The book is therefore unsparing in its demand that readers engage the philosophical and linguistic underpinnings of Yoruba art. Abiodun's excellent transcription and translation of Yoruba *oriki* creates an immersive experience for the reader, resulting in analysis that is difficult but not alienating to read. Abiodun transcribes *oriki* using Standard Yoruba orthography, which sometimes creates a

disjuncture between its spoken and written forms. It would be virtually impossible to create certain effects of *oriki* in English, a problem common to interpretation generally. *Oriki* is chant and Abiodun notes that the only way to properly render *oriki* in English would probably be to set it to music. Words in *oriki* carry both overt and covert meanings. The spoken form relies greatly on complex meanings that emerge from a vast acoustic mélange of drawn-out vowels. Above all, the flow of *oriki* in performance is affective and calls objects and subjects into action through gestures and dances that accompany recitation.

Art objects and visual culture are texts of sorts. They carry interpretations of synchronic and diachronic data, serve as mnemonic devices and, in many cases, constitute indigenous forms of rigorous historical documentation. Given Abiodun's stress on African approaches, scholars must be fluent in local languages as a condition of their research given the widespread sophistication of language use in many African cultures, and the overall visual/verbal nexus of African art. Abiodun is not calling for the use of Yoruba language in writing art history, but for art history to base its analysis of Yoruba and African art on theories of cultural production sourced from African philosophy and languages. This distinction is critical.

Incorporating African languages and epistemologies into art history is political and it plays directly into the uneven power relations between Africa and the West, especially in discourses that assume Africa has nothing to offer in terms of theory or methodology. However, the issue at stake is not whether African epistemologies are necessary for interpreting African art, but whether scholars of African art can subvert the power relations that encourage a perception that they are unnecessary. There are specific reasons for this perception: most African art collections are located in Western museums. The bodies of knowledge built up to interpret these artworks function within Western epistemologies, and one might add, are principally directed at Western audiences. Africans are, at best, secondary subjects of this discourse.

The rigors of attaining proficiency in African languages may be among factors driving the field's recent shift to contemporary African art, which is often discussed as if African ontologies and interpretative concepts are irrelevant (go ahead: ask an expert on Seydou Keita's photographs what Mande people call a photograph in their indigenous tongue). Strangely enough, it is the discourse on contemporary art that finally provides art history with relevant tools to understand African art, which is not static and visually structured, but active, affective, multimedia and multidimensional, network oriented, and most importantly, performative.

Abiodun's *Yoruba Arts and Language* challenges art history to invest in methodologies that champion intercultural perspectives. In a small field such as African art studies, it is easy to mistake the criticism this challenge implies as personal attacks on individual scholars. Such a reading makes it difficult to engage previous research, which often reduces research on specific African art and cultures to the work of a single interlocutor. A field where extant research cannot be subjected to criticism is moribund and unprofessional, since challenges to existing orthodoxy are the only way to advance knowledge. Abiodun calls for radical interrogations of research protocols and methodologies in order to make the study of indigenous African art newly relevant to a younger generation of art historians. Such significant revision is necessary if the study of indigenous African art is to survive without as Abiodun contends, effacing the "African" from African art.

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