

Rowland Abiodun is one of the most distinguished historians of African art in the world and his latest work is a crowning achievement. He was born in Nigeria to a family steeped in traditional knowledge and his discussion of the intersection of Yoruba art and religion is informed by deep acquaintance with Yoruba language, values, and beliefs. The Yoruba are an extraordinarily influential African people due to the extensive documentation of their complex religious system and its survival and development through their enslavement in the Americas. The growth of Yoruba traditions in Africa, Brazil and Cuba—and now in the USA—has made Yoruba religion a world religion with many million adherents.

In *Yoruba Art and Language* Abiodun demonstrates that the meanings of Yoruba visual arts—so prized by collectors and museums—can and should be illuminated by the recognition of complementary verbal arts. He finds the tools of Western art history seriously inadequate to appreciate the "religio-aesthetic foundation" of Yoruba art and much can be learned by the application of indigenous categories of interpretation. For this he develops a Yoruba epistemology centered on the phenomenon of *oríkì*, "citation poetry," that pervades Yoruba life. It is knowledge of the verbal *oríkì* that complements the production and presentation of Yoruba art objects and allows the interpreter to understand their meaning and affective power. The verbal "de-riddles" the visual.

Abiodun does this masterfully throughout the volume with its 135 splendid illustrations. In example after example he demonstrates how verbal *oríkì* evoke the essential power of an object, making its referent present to those who invoke it. Nowhere is this "de-riddling" more effective than when Abiodun reviews some of Yorubaland's most famous artistic creations, the copper and terra-cotta portrait busts excavated at Ifè and determined to date from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries CE. The skill and "naturalism" of the portraiture so startled European archeologists that they could not believe that an indigenous culture had produced them. Writing in 1913 the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius attributed them to Atlantis! Abiodun shows the style of the busts to be fully consonant with Yoruba oral traditions and that their meanings lie in Yoruba traditions of interpretation. He coins terms for three overlapping Yoruba categories of meaning to understand the Western problem with African naturalism: "*àkó*-graphic" which invokes the values of burial effigies, "*àṣẹ*-graphic" invoking the creative power of the divine, and "*èpè*-graphic" invoking the verbal power of the curse. The application of these indigenous concepts to the beautiful busts frees them from inadequate Eurocentric interpretations of "divine kingship" to reveal them as performative objects of power.

Each chapter of *Yoruba Art and Language* is concerned with a different religio-aesthetic concept in Yoruba thought and how it is expressed in intertwined verbal and visual media. Ideas familiar to students of Yoruba religion such as *orí* "head," *àṣẹ* "performative motive force," *ìwà* "essential nature," and *òrìṣà* "divinity" are given new depth and application in the world of religious objects. And familiar deities such as Ọ̀rúnmilà, Èṣù, Ọ̀ṣun, Ẓàngó, and Ọ̀gún are shown to be congruent with an array of verbal and visual forms of evocation and incarnation.

Earlier versions of many of the book's chapters have appeared before, but they have been fully revised for the present volume. The total effect is a masterwork from a master scholar and the most thorough illumination of Yoruba religious art to be found.

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