YORUBA ART AND LANGUAGE

The Yorùbá was one of the most important civilizations of sub-Saharan Africa. While the high quality and range of its artistic and material production have long been recognized, the art of the Yorùbá has been judged primarily according to the standards and principles of Western aesthetics. In this book, which merges the methods of art history, archaeology, and anthropology, Rowland Abiodun offers new insights into Yoruba art and material culture by examining them within the context of the civilization’s cultural norms and values and, above all, the Yoruba language. He begins by establishing the importance of the concepts of oríkì, the verbal and visual performances that animate ritual and domestic objects, such as cloth, sculpture, and dance; and aṣẹ, the energy that structures existence and that transforms and controls the physical world. Both concepts served as the guiding principles of Yoruba artistic production. Through analyses of representative objects, Abiodun demonstrates how material culture expresses the key philosophical notions at the heart of the Yoruba worldview. Abiodun draws on his fluency and prodigious knowledge of Yoruba culture and language to dramatically enrich our understanding of Yoruba civilization and its arts. The book includes a companion website with audio clips of the Yoruba language, helping the reader better grasp the integral connection between art and language in Yoruba culture.

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YORUBA ART AND LANGUAGE

Seeking the African in African Art

ROWLAND ABIODUN

Amherst College
For Lea, Bâyò, Àíná, Wọlé,
and
My larger Òunódulágbò family
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The ideas in this book had their genesis in Òwò, my birthplace, and especially in the traditional education I received from my grandparents: Soló (hunter and farmer) and Olákólí Abiodun (a traditional midwife); parents: Adépójù and Àjoké Abiodun; grand-uncle: Ológun Ogúnleyé of Ìṣélú (famous blacksmith and carver of àkó, second burial effigies in Òwò); uncle Chief Akénúwà of Ìgbórókó quarter, an expert in the history and political culture of Òwò; Aunt Yeye Déké (a practitioner of the ërìndìnlógún divination system); Aunt Yeye Oko (traditional cloth weaver and herbalist); Aunt Dénlúkò (traditional cloth weaver and sòkòrághò music expert); and Aunt Adéyoriólà Ojómo, nee Abiodun (Olori Ojómo Adédamólà Arúlìwò II of Ìjèbú-Òwò, historian, expert in traditional procedures and oríkì performance). I am also indebted to Ojómo Kólápó Àmákà II and Ojómo Adédamólà Arúlìwò II, of Ìjèbú-Òwò; and Ojówò Olátěrù Olágbẹ̀gí II and Ojówò Olágúnọyè II, of Òwò, for always welcoming me to their palaces to attend important rites and ceremonies. Chief Ojó Elerèwè, a meticulous cataloger of history and events in Òwò, was also always ready to share with me his profound knowledge of Òwò culture. To all of them, I am very thankful for my early exposure to, and education in, Yoruba art and culture.

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At the University of Toronto, I was most fortunate to study under Professor Joan Vastokas, who was not only a brilliant scholar and
exemplary teacher but also a researcher whose interests and methodology in the study of non-Western art gave me the confidence and intellectual tools to pursue my passion in Yoruba art. It is hard to imagine writing a book like this one without her guidance and the “never give up” attitude she instilled in all her students.

Getting the opportunity to teach and do research at the University of Ifè (now Ogbemù Awolowo University), Ilé-Ifè, was invaluable as it was an ideal environment for young scholars in all respects in the 1970s. The creative and intellectual energy of my colleagues – Professors Solomon I. Wangboje, J. R. O. Ojo, and Babatunde Lawal – was infectious. Required to attend and give seminar papers on one’s ongoing research before senior colleagues – not only from one’s home department but also those from other departments – was initially intimidating. But before long, I benefited from the insights and expertise of scholars like Ulli Beier, Michael Crowder, Robin Horton, Olúbí Sodipo, and Arthur Òkúnígà, who were not doing what I was doing but were very interested in my work. My next-door neighbor, Peter Garlake, shared his excitement and thoughts with me when he excavated Ogbalá’s land. In the African Studies building complex, which housed African Languages and Literatures, Music, Theater, and Archaeology, I met and interacted with Professors Wándé Abimbólá, Akinwúmi Ìṣòlá, Akin Euba, Tùnjí Vidal, Sam Akpabot, Wolé Sóyínká, Qlá Rótimi, Qlábíjí Yáì, Òłásòpè Òyèlāràn, Stephen Akíntóyè (director of the Institute of African Studies), Fátúmbí Òverger, Òmótòsò Òlúyëmbì, and Bádè Àjùwò to mention only a few. My interactions with these colleagues led to my teaching courses in some of their own disciplines. Thus, in one year, I taught a course on Yoruba art entirely in the Yoruba language, in the department of African languages and literatures, and in another year, I co-taught Aesthetics in Drama with Wolé Sóyínká. And for several years I participated in a collaborative Yoruba research project, which included mainly professors from the history department, namely, Professors Adéagbo Akinjógbin, Ségùn Òṣòbà, Stephen Arifalá, Stephen Akíntóyè, and Fémi Òmósíni – all of whom contributed immensely to my approach to studying Yoruba art and culture. I must also mention here my intellectual indebtedness to scholars like Professors Akinšòlá Akiwóò, Moses Máníké, Fémi Moràkinyò, and Barry Halen who were always eager to discuss new ideas and directions in Yoruba studies. In fact, the idea of launching the now discontinued *Journal of Cultures and Ideas (JCI)* (of which I was a founding member)
Acknowledgments

was intended to carry our conversations to a level where scholars, practitioners, and Yoruba intellectuals could contribute to topics of common interest. The Aládá Study Circle, as the founders of the *JCJ* called themselves, invited the well-known Ifá priest, Adémákínwá, Òdíkúnr of Òǹdó; herbalist, David Adéníji of Ìwò; and Chief Àkinbíyì Akiwòwọ, a cultural historian, to lead seminars in their respective areas of expertise at the university. I owe these Yoruba intellectuals a debt of gratitude.

The ancient city of Ìfè, with its numerous festivals, rites, and ceremonies, was a constant reminder that learning must extend beyond the walls of the university. There, I had new mentors and extremely knowledgeable people who introduced me to Ìfè history and culture. I am especially grateful to the late Oba Adésojí Adéremí, the Ooni of Ìfè; Chief M. A. Fàbùnmi, the Odo Atóbaçe of Ìfè; and Chief M. O. Fágógbón, Òókò Àdùmlà of Ìfè for always welcoming me and answering all the questions I asked them to the best of their knowledge. This pattern of my learning outside the academy was replicated in every Yoruba town and community where I conducted research on Yoruba art and culture. To all the oba, chiefs, elders, priests, and priestesses (too numerous to mention here), I am profoundly grateful for sharing their knowledge with me.

The preparation of this manuscript for publication has benefited immensely from the comments and criticisms of many colleagues and friends in and outside the discipline of African art studies. Among them are Albert Mosley, Adéleke Adéékó, John Pemberton III, Òmọniyi Afọlábi, José Celso Castro Alves, Doran Ross, Mei-Mei Sanford, Oluwole Fámúlè, Robert Fox, Victor Manfredi, Jacob Òlúpọ́nà, Òlásọ́pẹ́ Òyèláràn, Joel Upton, Natasha Staller, Olúfẹ́mi Vaughan, Allen Roberts and Polly Nooter Roberts, Bolaji Campbell, Jeffrey Ferguson, Kóla Abínbólà, Henry John Drewal, David Newbury, Miriam Goheen, Robert Farris Thompson, Paula Ben-Amos Girshick, Ramona Austin, Barry Hallen, Nkiru Nzegwu, and Joan Vastokas.

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(Ayòbólá) West for helping with the diacritical tonal marks on Yoruba words and texts. I am also grateful to Georgina Beier who gave me the idea of including an online recording to introduce recited orìki to those unfamiliar with the genre and for granting me permission to use passages from Ulli Beier’s Yorùbá Poetry.

Finally, I thank the University of Ifé and Amherst College for funding most of my research. Without their financial support and generous leave time, it would have been very difficult for me to complete this book.
We adopt the current practice in Yoruba orthography for purposes of transcription. For rendering the dialectal materials, however, the following conventions have been adopted (SY = Standard Yorùbá):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orthographic Symbol</th>
<th>Phonetic Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) gh ṣọɡbọ</td>
<td>ɣ̀ọ́ (SY : òwè)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ṣọɡbọ</td>
<td>ɣ̀ọ́ (SY : òjī)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) ʃ èsù</td>
<td>tf : ët ñù (SY : ëjù)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With reference to the second symbol, common Yorùbá [ʃ] corresponds everywhere to Òwò Yorùbá [ts]. For the rest, we have largely ignored the vowel harmony requirement for lax [u] and [i] in places, since we do not pretend to make a strictly phonetic transcription. For more on orthography and phonology of Yoruba words in the text, listen to the online audio for samples of recited oríkì in Standard Yorùbá, and the Òkìtì and Òwò dialects.

**Yoruba Language and Selected Readings of Yoruba oríkì on online audio**

I have benefitted immensely from Ulli Beier’s important work on Yoruba poetry and Olúṣẹ́p Oyéláràn’s research and insights on Yoruba oríkì. Also, I want to thank Georgina Beier who first suggested that I include the online audio with this book.

Yorùbá is a tonal language. That is, each word has to be pronounced with its proper tone pattern, since tone is as much a property of the vowel as any phonetic feature of each sound unit. Thus, each syllable or vowel that actualizes the syllable can have a high (H), mid (M), or low
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(L) tone. The current common orthography conventionally indicates the high (H) with the rightward ascending acute accent marker “/”; it leaves the mid (M) unmarked, and marks the low (L) with left to right descending marker “\” over the vowel, as in (1):

1a.  r í  (H) – to see
    b.  ri (M) – to sob inconsolably
    c.  r ì  (L) – to submerge

A complex syllable has a sequence of two or more phonetically identical or phonetically disparate vowels, where the vowels in each sequence may bear the same tone register or different tone registers, as in (2):

2a.  f é  \é  (H H) – imperceptible breath
    b.  f éú  (H H) – quality of being clean cut, as severing with a sharp razor or blade
    c.  r ëú  (L H) – in a slovenly manner

In a tone language such as Yorùbá, a change in tone register may produce a “nonce” or a non-occurring form, or even a word with a totally different meaning and function, as in (3):

3a.  ì k ó  (L M) – a rap on the temple with bare knuckles
    b.  ì ko (L M) – raffia fiber
    c.  iko (M M) – a nonce, non-occurring form

Words with two or more syllables but with phonetically identical sound units become different words with a change of a tone register, as in (4a), (4b), (4c), and (4d):

4a(i)  k ók ó  (H H) – a knot
    (ii)  k ók ó  (H L) – cocoyam
    (iii)  k ók ó  (L H) – cocoa (bean, pod, or tree)
4b(i)  ì l ú  (L H) – a town
    (ii)  ì l ú  (L L) – a drum
    (iii)  ì lu (L M) – gimlet
4c(i)  ãgbó̃n (L L) – the chin
    (ii)  ãgbó̃n (L M) – coconut
    (iii)  ãgbó̃n (M H) – wasp
    (iv)  ãgbó̃n (M L) – basket
    (v)  ãgbó̃n-õn (L H L) – the heat of pepper
4d(i)  òkò (M M) – husband
    (ii)  òkò (M H) – a hoe
    (iii)  òkò (M L) – a vehicle
    (iv)  òkò (L L) – a spear
Phonoesthetic words present particular problems to translators who must wrestle with how to convey the subtle variance of meaning with which the language endows minuscule change of tonal melody of each speech event. Items in (5) illustrate this:

5a. kólokólo (H H H H) – stealthily
   b. kólokólo (H L L M) – circuitously
   c. kólokólo (L L H H) – without transparency, muddy
   d. kólokólo (L L L L) – fox; characterized by guile

Language surrogates, such as the drum and whistling, replicate the pitch pattern or the perceived tonal melody of speech events. Such replications present one-to-many mapping between a given melody and plausible speech events in a tone language. When, therefore, the ace drummer beats out the English signature tune of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service: “This is the Nigerian Broadcasting Service,” the Yoruba mother-tongue monolingual is struck by the approximation of Nigerian English-speaker tonal melody of the tune: H H L L H H M H M L as could be hummed with the following:

6a. düdú düdú düdú, düdú düdú
   H H I L H HH H M L
   b. Bólúbádáń bá kú, tání ó joyè?

When the Olúbádáń (Ruler of Ìbádáń) dies, who will be his successor?

Other versions were

   c. Ó jógéjé düdú, inú ñta bón unicode
      He ate unripe banana, and now he has belly trouble.
   d. Kó sólósi nibí, lọ sílé kejí
      There’s no good-for-nothing person here; go to the next house.

The only way to attempt to render Yoruba poetry properly in English would probably be to set it to music, although the English equivalent words would not have the same number of syllables and so the tonal patterns could not be reproduced exactly. It would be virtually impossible to re-create the effect of statements like

7a. Olójú orógbó ó ó
   He who has eyes like bitter kola nuts

Or

   b. Ojùmò mó, nkò gbò poro, poro odó
      I did not hear the sound of a mortar in the morning.¹
Note the high, mid, and low tones in the following Ifá verse for Òrísàná (same as Òbátàlá) – the tonal counterpoints represented by the creative deployment of

8a. dúdú (H H)
b. pupa (M M)
c. funfun (M M)
d. Òrísàná d’áró méta
   Ò dá kan ní dúdú
   Ò dá kan ní pupa
   Ò dá kan ní funfun
   Dúdú ní o rè mí
   O o gboðo rè mí ní pupa
   Dúdú ní o rè mí
   O o gboðo rè mí ní funfun
   Ìwà mí ní o kó tète rè
   Ní kútúkútú Òbariṣà
   Òrísàná prepared three dyes

   He made one black
   He made one red
   He made one white
   Make me black
   Do not make me red
   Make me black
   Do not make me white
   Dye me with my ìwá first
   At the dawn of creation

Oríkì is the fundamental epistemological building block of basic form of Yoruba poetic discourse. We deploy it for accounts of all objects of consciousness, and of our worldview. Nothing is exempt from it; kings, gods, towns, animals, and plants. Thus, “The young bride who rubbed her body with camwood” is one of the oríkì of cassava; “cassava and maize are your poor relations” is one of the oríkì of yam. The oríkì of Europeans is “a pair of shorts that can worry a large embroidered gown.” Oríkì are frequently recited on the drum. They are sung or recited by the akéwi, the citation performers at a king’s court. Similarly, the oríkì of an oríṣà (Yoruba deity) would be sung or recited by his or her worshippers; and that of an animal or plant by hunters.
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A short oriki of Ṣun:

9. Ọsun, Ọṣẹọṣẹ
    Olọọyà iyùn
    Adagbadèbu Onímọlẹ odò
    Elètùù Édèbò Èkò
    obinrin gbàdá mú, obinrin gbàdá mú
    Obinrin ti kọ ẹ gù gbà lègbè mú

Ọsun, embodiment of grace and beauty
The preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb
Powerful controller of the estuary
Propitiator-in-chief of Èkò (the City of Lagos)
A corpulent woman
Whose waist two arms cannot encompass

The following incantation is for ẹ̀rò, a psycho-medicinal “softening” agent to eliminate friction and tension, reduce heat, and improve the lot of an unfortunate person. Note the inclusion of water and fan – both of which allude to Ọsun’s power.

10. Bì ooru bá mú
    Abèbè nì ẹ bẹ̀
    Bì iná bá ń jo koko
    Omi là á fi i pa à
    Ògèrè, iná mà nílé omi ọ̀
    Ògèrè
    Bì iná bá ń lé omi
    Ti kọ padá léyín omi
    ẹ̀rò pètè
    Ògèrè, iná mà ní lé omi ọ̀
    Ọ̀sẹ̀
    Iná kò gbodo le ọ̀sẹ̀
    Kó le wọ ní odò

When the weather is blazing hot
It is the fan that pacifies it
When there is a flare-up
We use water to quench it
Defiantly, fire chases water
Sweeping past
If fire chases water
And does not turn back,
Propitiation is the answer
Sweeping past, fire is chasing water
Even with all its flare
Fire does not chase its glow
Into the river

The following is an excerpt from the oríkì of Òlòwé of Ìsè, who is widely acclaimed as the finest Yoruba sculptor of the twentieth century. It is rendered in Èkíti dialect:

11. Òlòwé, ọko mi káre
Àsèrí Àgbálíjú
Elémọsó
Ajuru Ágada
Ó sun ó tẹgbétẹgbẹ
Elégẹ̀ bì ọnì sàà
Ó p’úròkò bì ọnì p’ugbá
Ó m’èọ ròkò dáun șe
Mà a sin ó, Òlòwè
Òlòwè kẹ e p’úrókó
Òlòwè kẹ e șonà
Ó ọl úléc Ógógà
Ódún mèrín ló șe líbẹ
Ó șonó un
Kú o bá ti d’le Ógógà
Kú o bá ti d’ówò
Usè ọkọ mi è è líbẹ
Kú o bá ti d’Kàrè
Usè ọkọ mi i líbẹ
Kú o bá ti d’Lègèdè
Usè ọkọ mi è è líbẹ
Kú o bá ti d’ Õkùtí
Usè ọkọ mi i líbẹ
Kú o li Òlòwè l’ógbàgí
L’Usè
Usè ọkọ mi i líbẹ
Uléc Òkù
do mi susè líbè l’Ákùrè
Òlòwè susè l’Ogótún
Ikìniùn
Kòn ọn gbé ìlò sílú Òyibó
Òwò rè ló mú șe
Òlòwè, my excellent husband
Outstanding in war
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Emissary of the king
One with a mighty sword
Handsome among his friends
Outstanding among his peers
One who carves the hard ìròkò tree as though it were as soft as a calabash
One who achieves fame with the proceeds of his carving
I shall always adore you, Òlòwè
Òlòwè, who carves ìròkò wood
The master carver
He went to the palace of Ògògà
And spent four years there
He was carving there
If you visit the Ògògà’s palace
And the one at Òwò
The work of my husband is there
If you go to Ìkàrè
The work of my husband is there
Pay a visit to Ìgèdè
You will find my husband’s work there
The same thing at Ìkárti
His work is there
Mention Òlòwè’s name at Ògbàgì
In Ùsè too
My husband’s work can be found
In Déjì’s palace
My husband worked at Àkúrè
My husband worked at Ògòtun
There was a carved lion
That was taken to England
With his hands, he made it.  

The following oríkì could be recited or sung in the context of àkó, second burial ceremony in Òwò, rendered in Òwò dialect:

12. Ọ̀nà ọ̀lá mà gbé bà mì gwò o
Kórí bà san mí
Ọ̀nà ọ̀lá mà gbé yè mì gwò o
Káyé bà san mí
Ọ̀ma là ọ̀jọ̀mà rè o
Ọ̀ma là ọ̀jọ̀mà
Ọ̀ma yọ ọ mọ́títà okùn ròrì bí
Ọ̀ma là ọ̀jọ̀mà
Tolá, tolá, ọ̀mèn ròjógun o
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È  è  è
Tòlà, òlà, ọ men rí bà mi o
Olùdá ìràmìn o
Bábá o
Orónnaiyé o
Wá á ná ire
Wá á bérò tòlì o
Olùdá ìràmìn
Èlèélé malúwayè
Má mà yóko lìgbòjojò
Má á mà mòsè peninè
Má’sò ọlònà perùkù o
Ayé bá rɛ ọ rɛ mi
Agàdà mixì yɛ rɛkùn éjè
Uròghò òlá
Bà mi lé sùlè o

Qìma’wòtòn, wò’sìn Òghò
Uròghò òlá, bà mi lé sùlè o
I will carry my father through the path of honor
If I am fortunate enough
I will do my mother great honor
If I reach a position of honor in life
This is a child born different
Some children are born different from others
This is a child born into royalty and great wealth

People always honor the hero
È-è-è
People always honored my father
The possessor of the great sword
My father
Orónnaiyé o
May you be fortunate
May your fortunes last
You, who have the great sword,
Greetings, child of Olúwaiyé
Do not go to the farm when it is raining
Do not let the grass wet your feet with early morning dew
Wear your most costly attire to travel on the dusty road

I admire your father’s life which was perfect
The sharp sword that draws blood
The one of great fame
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My father is the great one being celebrated
A popular man of Òwò

Great men of Òwò
My father is the great one being celebrated\(^{11}\) (R. Abiodun, 1976)
The following greeting is typically reserved for a Yoruba òba (sovereign).

Note that the òba is addressed as both father and mother:

13. Kábiyèṣí
   Aláṣẹ
   Èkeji òrìṣà
   Ikú
   Bàbá-Yéyé

   One whose authority cannot be challenged
   Who is endowed with ìṣẹ
   And ranks only with the òrìṣà
   Death, the embodiment of finality
   Ultimate Father-Mother\(^{12}\)

The companion website (www.cambridge.org/9781107047440) contains audio clips of the Yoruba language to help the reader better grasp the integral connection between art and language in Yoruba culture.
Map of Yorùbáland