

Introduction: On the Centrality of Africa in African Art Studies

Art scholars rarely venture outside of dominant Western paradigms, even when they analyze works from non-Western cultures. In the past, this proclivity has led to an unfortunate weakness in the study of African art because it has ignored the discovery, recognition, and analysis of African-derived paradigms. To illustrate, let us take a cursory look at two fairly well-known images: one from Europe, the other from Africa. Each one displays its significant features. Michelangelo's *David*, an Old Testament hero, is executed in marble (1501–1504), stands at seventeen feet, and embodies most of the highly extolled virtues of a Renaissance male. The Ère-Ìbejì (statuette for a departed twin) carved in wood (late nineteenth/early twentieth century), stands at about twelve inches tall and embodies some of the finest aesthetic notions in Yoruba sculpture. Though coming from different cultures – Italian and Yoruba – they fulfill the artistic intentions of their creators. This is not to say that Italian culture is representative of all Europe or even the West any more than the Yorùbá represents the whole of Africa.

Both males are focused, determined, and strong in their own ways. The figure of David displays the confident *contraposto* stance of the Renaissance period while the Yoruba Ère-Ìbejì adopts an affirmative symmetrical pose, *didúró*, which literally means “standing, stopping, waiting.” In this context, *didúró* carries the intended meaning of “not fidgeting but giving one’s undivided attention” – a powerful plea to a departed twin to stay and remain wholeheartedly with the family to bless it.¹

The more than life-size scale and idealized proportion of David clearly invoke the Greco-Roman classical ideals extolled in Michelangelo’s time. The Yoruba Ère-Ìbejì’s preference for less than life size and a different

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04744-0 - Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art

Rowland Abiodun

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Yoruba Art and Language



1a. Michelangelo, *David*. 1501–1504, Florence, Italy. Marble. Height: 17 feet. Photo by Ralph Liebermann.



1b. Ère-Ìbejì (Male Twin figure), Oro/Omu Aran, Igbomina. Wood. Height: 12 inches (late nineteenth to twentieth century). Photo by Jean David.

Introduction

3

system of proportion (often called “the African proportion”) respects and conforms to the context of its use as it emphasizes those parts of the human anatomy that are directly associated with *àṣẹ* (vital force, authority, the power to bring something to pass). In *David*, Michelangelo achieves an equally important goal by drawing our attention to the detailed styling of the hair and a meticulous description of biceps, triceps, and veins, especially on the hands and around the neck.

Though the carver of the Yoruba Ère-Ìbejì also considers the depiction of the hair or coiffure, the face, and the limbs quite important, they are highly stylized. It is, however, depicting the eyes, mouth, broad chest, and the penis with the cap (that is, the circumcised penis) perfectly that Yoruba critics may focus upon to judge the technical and aesthetic competence of an artist.² In both images, the artist’s priorities are informed by the aesthetic values of their cultures. Thus, it would be unfruitful to make value judgments on the work of one culture by the values of another.

The methodological tools that have been inherited from most of Western art history are, in my opinion, seriously inadequate to cope with the challenges of studying the art of African societies which, according to most Western definitions, are considered “non-literate,”³ and, therefore, “non-historical.”⁴ An analogy might be helpful here. In many ways, conceptual frameworks in academic disciplines, including art history, function much like “point and shoot” instant-picture cameras with fixed features such as shutter speed, aperture, and focus.⁵ I remember owning such a camera in the late 1960s, and I was always dissatisfied with my family pictures.⁶ The images of my wife, a person of European heritage, always came out fine, while I, because of my dark complexion, always looked like a black silhouette. I often could not recognize my own image. If I smiled, at least my white teeth would show.

Thus, for a while my image was *framed* literally, metaphorically, and aesthetically (that is, my image was constructed and defined) by this “point and shoot” camera – a supposedly accurate technological instrument that seemed to work for just about everybody but me. I thought this was a personal problem, until it finally dawned on me that the camera’s fixed, pre-programmed settings had been selected to recognize a version of “normality” that did not include my African complexion. Of course, one conclusion was that I simply needed a different camera or a

different light meter setting that would put me back in the picture. But that solution likely would have effaced my wife's image, which might have appeared washed out or even ghost-like. Clearly, I needed a camera with the capacity to see us both.

Very much like the “point and shoot” camera into which I had not been factored, so too are the majority of Western art historical and aesthetic theories in vogue today – African art was never a focal feature in their formulation or development.⁷ African art was not even considered art with a capital “A” until relatively recent times mainly because art was defined entirely by modernist Western scholars for whom art was “for art’s sake.” The urgent task before us is to ensure the survival and essential role of African artistic and aesthetic concepts in the study of art in Africa.⁸ Indeed, one of my arguments will be that the methodological problems in the study of African art have been created, partially if not wholly, by the conventional divisions among academic disciplines in the humanities in general, which has had the effect of concealing and even eliminating the social and religio-aesthetic foundation of the visual arts.

The fact that the study of African art is relatively recent compared with its counterpart in the West means that it will take some time to identify and articulate all its artistic and aesthetic terms and indigenously derived paradigms for our immediate use. I have, however, endeavored to provide a fairly extensive glossary of indigenous Yoruba terms like *ìwà*, *ẹwà*, *ojú-inú*, *ojú-ọ̀nà*, *iluti*, *ìmojú-mọ̀ra*, *tító*, *ìfarabalẹ̀*;⁹ *àṣà*;¹⁰ as well as detailed explanations of newly coined, Yoruba-derived terms like “Ifẹ̀-naturalism,”¹¹ “*àkó*-graphic *àṣà*,” “*àṣẹ*-graphic *àṣà*,” and “*ẹ̀pẹ*-graphic *àṣà*”¹² in the text. There is also a substantial section on Orthography and Phonological Notes (with an accessible online audio recording).

This effort is a work in progress. It is important that Yoruba art be made more meaningful through the Yoruba language and culture in the same way that Italian terms like *contraposto* or *chiaroscuro* have, for example, been crucial to a proper understanding and appreciation of Italian art. Where Western terms like “naturalism”¹³ and “abstract” have appeared in the text, I have used them only as an *interim* measure until African language and art scholars can work collaboratively to provide appropriate indigenous and contextually meaningful equivalent Yoruba terms. For now, I try to let the contexts of use of these non-African terms determine their meanings.

Introduction

5

My goal is to explore new, holistic perspectives for the critical interpretation of African art as exemplified by the interrelationship of the visual and verbal arts among the Yorùbá of West Africa. My purpose is to lay bare cultural meanings and themes that have been overlooked and even forgotten. This approach is not meant to diminish, in any way, the contributions of many distinguished scholars who have written extensively on African art. Rather, this study is offered as a contribution to, and revision of, the conceptual tools that we need in order to meet the challenges of studying Africa's still largely misunderstood artistic traditions.

The aim of this study is to look at Yoruba art as an expression of *oriki*,¹⁴ which I believe is fundamental to the study, understanding, and aesthetic appreciation of Yoruba art. While *oriki* has been generally translated as “praise poetry” or “citation poetry,” broadly speaking, all verbal and visual invocations qualify as *oriki* in Yoruba culture. *Oriki* affirm the identity of almost everything in existence. Thus, *oriki* extend beyond our traditional categories of two- and three-dimensional arts and color. They include architectural space,¹⁵ dress,¹⁶ music,¹⁷ dance,¹⁸ the performed word,¹⁹ mime, ritual,²⁰ food,²¹ and smell,²² engaging virtually all the senses.

More important, *oriki* energize, prepare, and summon their subject into action. Put differently, Yoruba art, like most African art forms, is more like an active “verb”²³ than a static “noun.” Irrespective of whether they are sculpture, shrine paintings, poetry, or performance, Yoruba art forms are affective – they cause, they influence and transform. Many things happen, not just what one can see, hear, or comprehend at one time. Quite often, they are mnemonic devices, transformer-carriers intended to facilitate free communication between this world and the otherworld thereby providing valuable insights into Yoruba metaphysical systems, myths, lore, and thought patterns.²⁴

It is useful to give very brief but necessary background information about African art studies (with which many but not all of my readers may be familiar) to understand their link to the methodological problems still facing the discipline today. To support this move, I offer the following Yoruba *òwe*, generally translated as a proverb:²⁵ “Wọ̀n ní, ‘Amúkùnún, erù è wọ̀.’ Ó ní, ‘Ìsàlẹ̀ ló ti wọ̀ wá.’” (“People said, ‘Cripple, your load

is crooked.’ He responded that, ‘the crookedness was from the ground up.’”) (In considering a problem, one must look at the root causes, not only the manifestations.)²⁶

Most art scholars will acknowledge that because of the aesthetic, cultural, historical, and political predispositions built into the development of art history, the discipline itself has resisted non-Western approaches to the study of African art. The discipline that first demonstrated authentic interest in African art studies was anthropology. African art has, therefore, been investigated and theorized most extensively through a Western anthropological lens.²⁷ Paula Ben-Amos, while appreciating the contributions of anthropologists to the study of African art in general and the influence of their models, points out that the continuing tendency of scholars “to use them without questioning their implicit assumptions means that their problems are perpetuated as well.” She concludes that “different paradigms are necessary” and calls for studies that are “more emic, more integrative, and more comparative” and which would “generate the models so clearly needed.”²⁸

One of the most significant drawbacks to the perspective of anthropologists and ethnologists in the field of African art is that so many scholars with little expertise in art history have been the main conduit through which African art has been interpreted to the West. They also employed the theoretical frameworks that were adopted by Western artists and art theorists, and these have functioned as the dominant paradigms for well over a century. Trained art historians in the West have tended to select, as representative of African art, images that suit their preconceived theoretical perspectives. They have often been interested mainly in African art as a catalytic inspiration for the works of modern European artists such as Picasso, Vlaminck, Brancusi, Matisse, Modigliani, Derain, and Braque.

In general, Western-trained art historians have often applied their own periodization schemes (e.g., “Gothic,” “Classical,” “Baroque,” “Modern,” etc.), with all their conceptual assumptions, whether or not these terms are applicable to the study and analysis of African art.²⁹ As Monni Adams notes, “An art historian is not anyone who ‘studies art,’ but a scholar who has been educated in certain, very specific techniques and beliefs.”³⁰ The unfortunate result is that most of these beliefs and methodologies have been applied as “universal.”³¹ Thus, for almost a century, in Europe and the United States, Africanist art scholars have employed primarily Western art historical approaches to the study of African art.

Introduction

7

To varying degrees and in different ways, prominent Africanist art scholars and historians in the United States and elsewhere have tried to counter these misguided notions of African art even as they have labored to build new methodological “cameras” of their own. William Fagg, more than any other single person, defined the place of Yorùbá within African art studies; John Picton, through photographic documentation and collection of works that had fallen into disuse worked on the characteristic features of the history of Yorùbá (art historical studies) with suggestions of areas for development; and Reverend Father Kevin Carroll’s timely intervention was, arguably, the single most important reason for the survival and continuation of traditional Yoruba carving today.³² Roy Sieber principally addressed questions of style, history, and connoisseurship; Douglas Fraser, by means of the practice described as “motif chasing,” focused on recurrent symbols of ideas and social relations; and Robert Farris Thompson made what was perhaps the most radical and important shift in perspective by seeking to look at indigenous art forms and aesthetics from the users’ points of view.³³ Equally noteworthy are the scholarly output of Arnold Rubin³⁴ and Rene Bravman,³⁵ who focused on the ways in which styles have been determined by contact, migration, war, and trade routes; Herbert Cole’s search for meaning;³⁶ and Leon Siroto’s analysis of culturally specific imagery.³⁷ Much credit should be given to these pioneers and their students for their attempt at redesigning the methodological camera.³⁸

Though the list of scholars who mention African concepts in their work is growing, those who actually allow it to inform their methodology are relatively few. In this respect, I would like to cite Allen and Polly Nooter Roberts’s essay, “A Fellowship with Objects” in their *A Sense of Wonder: African Art from the Faletti Family Collection*.³⁹ There, the concept of *imà* (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8) enabled them to escape the Euro-American bias that would attribute all agency to human actors when, if we are to return the African to “African art,” a different sense of shared agency not only explains the “work” of works of art, but permits a different sense of personhood to emerge.

However, since Africanist art scholars also deal with the problems of cross-cultural translation and have to shuttle between two different artistic cultures – Africa and the West – the perennial problem remains how such translations can be done fairly and accurately.⁴⁰ It is my considered opinion that scholars need to be more conscious of, and demonstrate in

their work, the principle implicit in the Yoruba *òme* “A-gbẹ́jọ́-ẹ̀nikan-dá, ò̀sìkà è̀yà̀n,” meaning “He-who-decides-a-case-after-hearing-only-one-side [is] the dean of wicked persons.”⁴¹ I believe that negotiating artistic meaning and aesthetic concepts between two linguistically different cultures cannot be done only from an outsider’s language and point of view.⁴² Unfortunately, the already entrenched and palpable effect of the printed word has made it extremely easy to recycle and reinforce the same old errors, not only by field researchers but also by field informants, who provide much of the data for our study.

The philosopher Gene Blocker tried to confront this problem in *The Aesthetics of Primitive Art* (1995), wherein he urges Western scholars like himself to consider “not only our own point of view as Western scholars and connoisseurs of primitive art [African art included], but also the point of view of those who originally made and used such objects.” Blocker affirms that a good use of descriptive term “A” to describe an art object or phenomenon “X” in a society other than our own must meet the following three criteria: (1) X fits our category A [that is, Western], (2) X fits their category B [that is, non-Western], and (3) A and B mean the same thing. Thus, he calls for a “modified objectivist approach,” which judges an object not only “by our own standards” but also according to “how the indigenous society may regard it.” Pointing specifically to Picasso, he warns that to do otherwise “is to adopt a highly subjective account which is misleading in its implications regarding the beliefs of the indigenous society and arrogant in its lack of concern for their point of view.”⁴³

Unfortunately, throughout the book, Blocker continues to make uncritical use of the term “primitive” to describe the arts of Africa, Amerindia, and Oceania. This designation invented many years ago in the West was invoked to disparage or, with modern artists like Picasso, to praise – in either case without considering “the point of view of those who originally made and used such objects.” As Suzanne Blier rightly observes, to some, this manner of designating African art is a minor and essentially semantic problem. But the myths and errors perpetuated by this term continue to have a deleterious influence among both Africanist and non-Africanist art scholars.⁴⁴

Blocker expresses a preference for the more “primitive” tribal art of Africa over the elaborate courtly art of the kingdoms of Ifẹ̀, Benin, and the pre-classical Meso-American (which to him resemble the more

Introduction

9

“classical” or “naturalistic” styles of the West), although he acknowledges politely that this preference is “purely personal.”⁴⁵ Blocker’s “primitive” then appears somewhat inconsistent, since his exclusion of Ifè art, with its universally appealing “naturalism,” would be contrary to his “primitive” versus “classical/naturalistic” dichotomy. Nevertheless, his continued use of the term “primitive” demonstrates *the powerful hold of a biased art-historical paradigm* on a scholar who, even today, attempts to repudiate it.

To understand how Blocker’s theory fits into the conceptual framework of the West, it might be helpful to review some of the definitions of “primitive” in its connotative and denotative meanings. The notion of the “primitive” is not new in the study of art history. Painters and sculptors of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, for example, were labeled “primitive,” even though they have since been given more historically relevant designations in the history of Western art. But Giorgio Vasari’s notion of the term, by which he meant the barbarous and the savage, seems to have survived in Western scholarly discourse on African art.⁴⁶ According to Henry Moore, the word “primitive” (a term that he himself condemned) was used in reference to cultures “outside of European and Great Oriental Civilizations” to suggest “crudeness, incompetence, [and] ignorant groping rather than finished achievements.”⁴⁷

Waldemar Deonna, in his leading essay “Primitivism and Classicism: Two Faces of Art History,” defined “primitive” as “a work that is useful rather than accurate or beautiful” and in which “aesthetic concern is subordinate . . . [or] even absent.”⁴⁸ As Blier rightly noted, these “on-going myths of the primitive” in African art and in art history “are nowhere more evident than in H. W. Janson’s [1986] standard text [*The History of Art*].”⁴⁹ For this reason we ought to question the value of many African art publications, with their seductively beautiful photographs but grossly misleading texts about the “primitive” and the “exotic.” With such persistent prejudices informing the study of African art for over a century, it is hard to see how any formal or stylistic analysis, “a cardinal technique of art historians,”⁵⁰ could possibly correct the marginal status – the dark-silhouetted image – already imposed on African art.

Of course, some contemporary or “post-modernist” Africanist art historians may argue that no theory should be considered superior to any other, and that in this sense, Western theories derived from anthropology

and art history are as valid as others. The main argument against such a marketplace of theories is that the premise should be righted first. More than enough damage has already been done to the image and study of African art through the domination of inaccurate and dismissive paradigms. It is time for scholars to acknowledge that African peoples have their own aesthetic theories that can contribute to a meaningful study of their arts.

Claude Levi-Strauss implicitly endorsed this proposition when he wrote about the Yoruba people of West Africa that they “seem to have been able to throw more light than ethnologists on the spirit of institutions and rules which in their society, as in many others, are of an intellectual and deliberate character.”⁵¹ As more scholars of Yoruba art and culture, who are not native speakers of Yorùbá, make the effort to use and give Yoruba thought systems and language priority in their work, their methodology and conclusions are bound to be more credible than those who do not do so.⁵² Most important, they will have, in varying degrees, affirmed Levi-Strauss’s assertion.⁵³

It is true that English is quickly becoming a global lingua franca. But just as we would expect a scholar of French Impressionism to read works in French and be reasonably fluent in the French language, or scholars of Japanese or Chinese art to know Japanese or Chinese, so should Africanist art scholars have competence in the language of those whose art they study. The philosopher Kwasi Wiredu poses a relevant question: “Why should the African uncritically assimilate the conceptual schemes embedded in foreign languages and cultures?”⁵⁴

In the case of the “non-literate” societies of Africa, any study of their art and aesthetics should consider the meaning of artistic works and themes in the context of local languages and their oral traditions. In Nigeria, several universities have, for decades now, been running successful undergraduate and graduate programs that continue to produce many distinguished scholars of Yoruba language and literature. Among them is Karin Barber, a Briton whose work has been indispensable to the new understanding of Yoruba art that I present in this book.

Fortunately, there is now a rich and substantial body of literature published in Yorùbá and English on Yoruba culture,⁵⁵ history,⁵⁶ philosophy,⁵⁷ religion,⁵⁸ and literature,⁵⁹ all of which would benefit the study of Yoruba art history and aesthetics. Done properly, collaborations with Yoruba language scholars would not only give a voice to the Yorùbá whose art we study, but also lend more credibility to our analytical models and