

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, *dídúró*, which literally means “standing, stopping, waiting.” In this context, *dídúró* 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



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.

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-Ìbeji 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-ínú*, *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 "ẹ̀pẹ̀-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.

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 *oríkì*,¹⁴ which I believe is fundamental to the study, understanding, and aesthetic appreciation of Yoruba art. While *oríkì* has been generally translated as “praise poetry” or “citation poetry,” broadly speaking, all verbal and visual invocations qualify as *oríkì* in Yoruba culture. *Oríkì* affirm the identity of almost everything in existence. Thus, *oríkì* 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, *oríkì* 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 *òwé*, generally translated as a proverb:²⁵ “Wọ̀n ní, ‘Amúkùnún, èrù 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.

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 *iwà* (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 *òwe* “A-gbẹ́jọ́-ẹ̀nikan-dá, òṣìkà èyàn,” 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

“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

theories. More important, we should be concerned about future generations of Africanist art historians who could, by reason of a flawed training, become further removed from the language and the culture of their subject.⁶⁰ Babatunde Lawal rightly notes: “One valuable research resource not yet fully explored by students of Yoruba art is oral tradition.”⁶¹

No one doubts the pivotal role that recent academic engagement with colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary African art will play in shaping the future of African art studies.⁶² Such engagements should not, however, become a safe haven for the abandonment of African languages and thought systems. “Going global” could not have arrived sooner for scholars who would gladly want to be freed from the “burden” and often “dreaded” prospect of learning any African language. Unwittingly, the current, largely popular attraction to employing essentially formalist, self-referential, Western-modernist approaches to contemporary African art studies which, in the first place, were responsible for many of the problems confronting the discipline today, might slow down the emergence of African-derived paradigms.

Despite the sense of inclusiveness implied by the notion of “globalization” – the most prevalent mantra in “art-speak” today – Western philosophy and Western literary and art theory are still heavily privileged over and above African thought systems and languages in African art studies. Like “post-modernism” and “deconstructionism,” “global studies” have undoubtedly generated theories – most of them, theories in which indigenous African perspectives have been glaringly absent. Our problem, therefore, is not really a lack of theories but of their relevance to African art studies. Nkiru Nzegwu puts it quite succinctly, “Aesthetic and art historical literature of African works of art must move beyond bland empirical observations and Westernized speculation. Explanations must center the relevant ontological scheme of the society in the course of analysis.”⁶³ The challenge, therefore, is how not to lose this important focus as we study the arts of both the pre-colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary eras.⁶⁴ Clearly, any decision to ignore Africa’s unique perspectives and languages on art or creativity as a whole would only hasten the loss of her well-deserved place in the international art scene.

Yoruba Art as *Oríkì*

Verbal *oríkì* may take the form of any of the following Yoruba literary and performative genres: *ofò* (*oríkì*-type affective speech); *ògèdè* (empowered

oríkì-type recitation); *àyájó* (*oríkì*-based incantations); *iyèrè-Ifá* (a type of Ifá chant); *èpè* (a vocalized curse); *èsà* (a targeted discourse, a genre of *oríkì*); *emì-egúngún* (*oríkì*-based *egúngún* chant); *ékún-iyàwó* (a bride's *oríkì*-based lament); *Ṣàngó-pípè* (*oríkì*-based Ṣàngó chanting); *ìjálá* (*oríkì*-based hunter's dirge); *èfè* (dramatized satire); and *òwe* (figures of speech), among others. Ọlátúndé Ọlátúnjí writes that *oríkì* may be spoken, chanted, or sung, depending on the context of the performance. *Oríkì* can also be intoned on the drum, with speech tones reproducing the drum sounds as a kind of surrogate language.⁶⁵ (Listen to online audio: sections 6a–6d, 7a–7b, and 8a–8d.) In terms of their subject matter, *oríkì* are not limited to religious characters or events. Whether as “praise poetry” or “citation poetry,” *oríkì* does not always praise. It is oftentimes critical, highlighting flaws and imperfections in its subject.⁶⁶

And, most important, *oríkì* can be made visible through sculpture and other artistic forms according to Ọba Fášíkù, the Aláayè of Ìkèrín. Since virtually all *oríkì* evoke, or cite (*kì*) the essence or origin (*orí*) of their subject, they can be an indispensable source of artistic and aesthetic data. Without doubt, dealing with and interpreting *oríkì*, be they verbal, visual, or performed, can be intellectually demanding, but they surely always provide fresh and rich insights, as well as a channel for indigenous voices to be heard in Yoruba art scholarship. (For example, listen to online audio, section 11.)

Oríkì can be dense, and they often are difficult to understand and translate to English. They are, however, always artistically rich and loaded with information that is not easy to discover through any other channel. The studies of leading Yoruba language scholars like Chief J. A. Ayọ̀rindé, Adéboýè Babalọ́lá, Bọ́lánílé Awé, Karin Barber, Ọlátúndé Ọlátúnjí, Ọ́lásopé Oyèlárán, Túnjí Vidal, and Ọ́lábíyì Yáì, among others, have contributed significantly to our understanding of *oríkì*.⁶⁷ The word, *oríkì*, writes Ayọ̀rindé, “is derived from *orí* (head or origin) and *kì* (to cite), and therefore means, ‘to cite one’s origin.’”⁶⁸ Given names, individual characteristics, reputation, lineage attributes, and historical data are among the kinds of vital information that can be retrieved from *oríkì*. (Listen to online audio, section 11.)

To know the *oríkì* of a person is to be intimately familiar with his or her place in society and to know the *oríkì* of the subject or an artifact is to know how it came to be. In the context of Yoruba art studies, the *oríkì* can take us beyond a superficial knowledge of the subject, illuminating

the conditions that gave birth to the art form. Indeed, *oríkì* is inseparable from the art that embodies it. Karin Barber describes *oríkì* as “collections or strings of name-like attributive epithets, ‘praises’ which are neither narrative nor descriptive but vocative. They are addressed to their subject or ‘owner,’ and are felt to encapsulate, and evoke in some way that subject’s essential powers and qualities.”⁶⁹ The following is an *oríkì* of a very successful farmer, Àyìndé, cited by Karin Barber:

Àyìndé alágbàdo-ègbo-lóko
Babaà mi agbìngbàdo èwà lótò
Àyìndé alágbàdo isáájú
Baba Ojútómorí, ni í gbani lówó ebi

Àyìndé, one who has maize for pottage in his farm
 My father who plants maize for pudding separately
 Àyìndé, “maize that ripens before other people’s”
 Father of Ojútómorí, “is what saves us from hunger.”⁷⁰

Equally instructive is Oḷábiyì’s gloss of “‘*ki*’ which is to (perform *oríkì*) and to ‘*gbé*’ or ‘*yà*’ (carve) . . . to provoke and be provoked.”⁷¹ Essentially, this means provoking one’s *orí* into action or more intense being. During my research on Ifá divination art objects in April 1974, I met Oba Fásíkù, Aláayè of Ìkèrin, near Osí in Southwestern Nigeria. (Ifá is the divination procedure used among the Yorùbá, and also the deity of divination.) The Aláayè, also an accomplished artist who had carved more than two hundred *opón*-Ifá (generally translated as “divination trays”), impressed upon me that *opón*-Ifá are more than just “trays”; their full designation, he said, is “*ohun tí a fí pón Ifá lé ni*,” meaning “that which is made to honor, cite, and provoke Ifá.”⁷² He explained further that although these are objects (usually made from wood), they are similar in their cultural function and significance to a verbal *oríkì*. Strange as it might seem, *opón*, a three-dimensional object used in divination, is conceived as a kind of *oríkì* in Yoruba thought. Figure 2 shows Ifá priests seated at a divination session. On the floor, the officiating Ifá priest holds sixteen *ikin* (sacred palm kernel nuts) in his left palm and sits directly in front of an *opón*-Ifá (Ifá tray) covered with *iyèròsùn* (a whitish camwood powder) on which *odùn* (divination marks) would be pressed.

In Yoruba culture an *opón*-Ifá and a performed verbal *oríkì* of Ifá have as their goal the evocation of Ifá’s essential powers and qualities. Thus, the full meaning of *opón* as “*ohun tí a fí pón Ifá lé*” conveys much more relevant



2. Ifá divination rite at the palace of the Ọ̀ràngún of Ìlá. The priest holds the sixteen sacred palm nuts of Ifá in his left hand as he casts Ifá to determine the sacrifices that the ruler and the chiefs in the town must make in preparation for the king's festival (Ọ̀dún Qba). Photo by John Pemberton III.

information than its English gloss could possibly do. In the same way, the *ikin*, a set of sixteen sacred palm kernel nuts (*Elais guineensis idolatrica*), arguably the most important instrument in the Ifá divination system, are never called *èkùrò*, “palm kernel nuts.” They are always called *ikin* or identified by their more expressive verbal *oríkì* “Ikú dúdú àtẹ̀wó” (Black Death in the palm). Yoruba culture even warns against trivializing the *ikin*, as in the saying, “Ènítí ó bá fi ojú èkùrò wo Ọ̀rúnmilà, Ifá á pà á,” meaning “Whoever thinks that Ọ̀rúnmilà [the patron deity of Ifá] is no more than just palm kernel nuts, Ifá will affect⁷³ such a person negatively.”

As this statement suggests, familiarity with indigenous Yoruba terms for artworks and their *oríkì* is and ought to be a crucial part of any iconographic and iconological study. Thus, an expanded sense and meaning of *oríkì* can lead to a better understanding and appreciation of other visual art objects, namely, *ìròké*-Ifá (divination tapper), *agere*-Ifá (container for storing *ikin*), *òpá-òrèrè* (the ceremonial staff carried by Ifá priests), and *àpò*-Ifá (Ifá priests' beaded ceremonial bags), along with items worn by

the priests such as beaded vests, necklaces, wristlets, and anklets, all of which evoke the presence and power of Ọ̀rúnmilà (patron divinity of Ifá, but also often used interchangeably with Ifá).

Ọ̀rúnmilà's *oríkì* opens the path to a whole new world of the study of Ifá sculptural repertoire, and indeed, the entire corpus of Yoruba art. The Aláayè of Ìkẹ̀rín impressed upon me the need to understand Ifá divination arts as *oríkì* in 1974. And in 1994, twenty years later, Ọ̀lábíyì Yai confirmed that same notion from his perspective as a Yoruba language scholar. Yai's exhortation to Yoruba art scholars could not have been timelier. He writes, "When approaching Yoruba art, an intellectual orientation . . . consonant with Yoruba traditions of scholarship would be to consider each individual Yoruba art work and the entire corpus as *oríkì*."⁷⁴ The Yoruba concept of *oríkì* as artistic phenomenon is not limited to things we touch, smell, and taste but extends to experiences of trance and spirit possession.⁷⁵ Additionally, this expanded understanding of *oríkì* would, in fact, be immensely useful in solving many complex theoretical issues confronting African and especially, Yoruba art scholarship today.

The approach just discussed is not without its critics, however. For example, as recently as 2012, Blier declared, "My analysis moves away from the recent framing of ancient Ifẹ̀ art from the vantage of Yoruba cultural practices collected in Nigeria more broadly, and/or the indiscriminate use of regional and modern Yoruba proverbs, poems, or language idioms to inform this city's unique 700 year old sculptural *oeuvre*."⁷⁶ If this is what she chooses to move away from, it is reasonable to ask what she chooses to move toward. By disconnecting her rendition of art history in the Yoruba context from Yoruba orature, what alternative sources does she rely upon to "speak" for Yoruba culture? Her alternative itself contains an inherent contradiction for she too depends upon modern-day interviewees and relatively recent written sources.

Ifẹ̀ archaeology has been interpreted and written about by scholars who are by no means as old as the works they unearthed; would their conclusions then also become suspect because they use oral sources? Similarly, most scholars of Ifẹ̀ history have had to start with, and rely heavily on, oral sources because many events of historical importance were not documented in the form of writing. Should we discount their

work as well? How can we be sure that even the names of key characters like Oòduà, Ọbalùfọ̀n II, Olókun, Ọ̀bàtálá or of important sites like Ita Yemòó, Láfogído, Ọ̀rẹ̀, and Wúnmọ̀nìjẹ̀ were given to Blier by individuals who did not derive their information from oral sources? Is their information a fabrication of “later eras”?⁷⁷

For a traditionally nonwriting society like that of the Yorùbá, whose cultural practices and oral traditions are among the richest in the world, it is extremely important to pay attention to their orality – their favored means of communication, storing important information, and retrieving art historical data.⁷⁸ What really are the alternative sources of information? And how much more reliable are they likely to be? We know that even technology is not always as value-free as we might want to believe – a point that I have amply demonstrated with the trope of the instamatic “point and shoot” camera used earlier.

Certainly, the use of language and oral data can and should be improved. This is the reason we have language scholars. Blier is concerned about Ifẹ̀’ s language being “notably different than those in the wider Yoruba region and later eras.”⁷⁹ Colleagues in the department of African Languages and Literatures at Ifẹ̀ teach Yorùbá to students from the wider Yoruba regions who speak different dialects of Yoruba language all the time. Neither they nor I experience any difficulty communicating with, and understanding them. (Listen to the online audio sections 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 which I recorded in several dialects of Yorùbá.)

Blier also appears to become involved with historical linguistics vis-à-vis her reconstruction of the history of ancient Ifẹ̀. To deal with that issue, I suggest we defer to the expert opinion of Abiọ̀dun Adetugbọ̀, who has done extensive research on historical linguistics as it pertains to Yoruba history. Adetugbọ̀ makes the fundamental point that “historical linguistics itself *presupposes a thorough understanding of the present state of the language discussed*”⁸⁰ (italics mine). That should be our place of departure and our immediate concern.⁸¹ It is only after heeding Adetugbọ̀’ s statement that we would be better positioned to tackle the issue of “the indiscriminate use of regional and modern Yoruba proverbs, poems, or language idioms.” Otherwise, it becomes extremely easy to privilege any number of foreign languages, Western values, and cultural practices not connected with Ifẹ̀.

Furthermore, Blier's position of wanting to avoid the use of Yoruba language "because Ifẹ's history, language and art forms are notably different than those in the wider Yoruba region and later eras" implies that we should ignore it. This is, at least, the message one gets from her bibliography, which contains no single work written in the Yoruba language. However, in the same article, she is very comfortable with using the French term *oeuvre* ("the works of a writer, painter or the like, taken as a whole"; coined 1870–75),⁸² which is even more notably different and removed temporally and spatially from "Ifẹ's history, language and art" than what she appears to be moving away from. The Yoruba term *isẹ-onà* (which means works of art, design, and creativity in the broadest sense) might be more appropriate than the French *oeuvre* in the context of Ifẹ works of art.

Her unfair comparison of Yoruba "Ifá divination verses and praise songs" with the English *children's* rhyme "Ring Around the Rosy," which has "its roots in the traumatic circumstances of the Black Plague (c. 1348),"⁸³ is neither applicable nor helpful. It would be difficult to find any strong support for the unjustifiable comparison of "Ifá divination verses and praise songs" with English children's rhyme among Ifá priests and Yoruba culture bearers. Nor would it be easy to find any substantial backing for her position in the very rich scholarly work published on the subject of Ifá.

Using European examples as the basis for making dismissive and categorical statements about Yoruba oral literary forms and their applicability to understanding Yoruba art is clearly not a positive contribution to African art scholarship. Would Western art history disregard Western canonical literature? But perhaps even more unfortunate, is that by *mischaracterizing* "Ifá divination verses and praise songs" – the intellectual powerhouse of the Yoruba people – Blier seems not to acknowledge the phenomenal research and excellent scholarship that have taken place in Yoruba language, literary, and cultural studies for well over a century.⁸⁴

The timelessness of Ifá and its relevance to contemporary situations are clearly embraced by the Yorùbá in the following verse:

Ifá ló l'òní
Ifá ló l'òlà
Ifá ló l'òtúnla pèlú è
Òrúnmilà ló n'ìjò mètèrìn Òṣà d'ááyé

Ifá is the master of today
 Ifá is the master of tomorrow
 Ifá is the master of the day after tomorrow
 To Ifá belongs all the four days
 Established by Òḍṣà on earth.⁸⁵

Bluntly put, Blier's stance on Yoruba language is not just troubling but also resembles, even if remotely, studies which (as described by Barry Hallen) show that "the indigenous African intellect was somehow *qualitatively different* from its generalized Western counterpart. The variety of adjectives used to [identify by] type or to distinguish it in this regard themselves seemed to share something in common: *uncritical or pre-critical, unreflective or pre-reflective, proto-rational or proto-scientific*"⁸⁶ (italics mine). She appears to ignore the long and rigorous training of Ifá priests (which could be as long as twenty years), their lifelong pursuit of knowledge after graduation, and the reasons that "Ifá divination verses and praise songs" still remain highly respected and heeded by the Yorùbá and their descendants in the diaspora.

We should also address Blier's concerns about the "the *indiscriminate use* of regional and modern Yoruba proverbs, poems, or language idioms" (italics mine). From my experience in the field, the Yorùbá are their own harshest critics on the inappropriate use of their language.⁸⁷ They detest the "indiscriminate use" of the spoken word in all its forms. Hence, they unequivocally condemn such practice as is evident in the following saying: "Bí òwe kò bá jọ òwe, a kì í pa á" (If an *òwe* [hitherto generally translated as "proverb"] does not apply to a situation, one does not use it).⁸⁸ In other words, if a speech act is not a trope, one does not propose it as a figure of speech.

This study demonstrates that Yoruba verbal and visual art forms, though different, have always been interdependent, supporting each other through mutual references and allusions. Starting with Chapter 1, I try to show that this interdependence dates back to at least the thirteenth century C.E. with works from Ifẹ̀. Yoruba language and relatable cultural superstructure and practices may be perceived as a continuum, characterized by referential congruity and mutual reflection. They evolve within the notion of *àṣà* – a dynamic concept of style and creativity that incorporates tradition and innovation in Yoruba art and culture.⁸⁹ No doubt, a more-than-average proficiency in Yoruba language is necessary to be able to make and appreciate this argument.

Let us consider for the sake of argument a possible scenario in which a truly indiscriminate use of Yoruba language might occur. And it is, indeed, more common than we think. More often than not, it happens with nonnative speakers of the Yoruba language who are unprepared to devote the time and effort it takes to learn the subtle but significant tonal differences intrinsic to Yoruba language.⁹⁰ Changes in tone, we know, can make huge differences in the meanings of words, terms, idioms, and even entire propositions. For examples, listen to online audio: sections 1a–c, 3a–c, 4a (i–iii), 4b (i–iii), 4c (i–v), 4d (i–iv), and 5a–d.

Imagine a researcher of Yoruba art who is interested in gender. He or she is fascinated by the ceremonial staffs of Òrìṣà Oko (deity of the rustic). But with only an elementary knowledge or superficial understanding of Yorùbá, this researcher prefers to translate Òrìṣà Oko, “deity of the rustic,” as “deity of the penis” (Òrìṣà Okó). Both terms are spelled exactly the same way except that the last “o” in “okó” has a high tone mark and is therefore pronounced differently. Òrìṣà Okó suits the researcher’s interests and thesis. So, he or she summons every imaginable theory on gender in the universe to support the notion that Òrìṣà Oko is, indeed, all about male sexuality. To complicate matters, the researcher, who (for the sake of our argument) is tonally challenged, does not think it important to add the diacritical accents to “Orisa Oko” in his or her publication because such marks do not occur in his or her own language.

An audience that is knowledgeable about neither the Yoruba language nor how tone functions in it might be quite impressed by a researcher’s technical foreign terminologies and theoretical constructs that have absolutely nothing to do with the Yoruba art forms being studied. So, via the magic of print, the so-called researched work becomes authoritative. Other scholars will then have to spend precious time and energy debunking this researcher’s spurious theories instead of encouraging the researcher to learn the language, or at least to work with colleagues who are scholars of the Yoruba language. Disparaging the use of the Yoruba language as an essential instrument for understanding the culture is counterproductive and can only re-entrench mistaken perceptions of Yoruba art.

My experience has been that scholars of African languages and literatures can be immensely beneficial to our work and analysis in the field of African art studies. Ọlábíyì Yai, for example, makes a pertinent remark

about the vexing issue of representation in Yoruba art and its translation to the English language:

In a culture where *orí*, the principle of individuality, is perceived as a deity that informs and shapes the world view and behavior of persons, it is simply “natural” that the privileged idiom of artistic expression, indeed, the mode of existence of art, should be through constant departure. The English word, “representation,” with its assumption of and intrinsic bias toward similarity, cannot do justice to Yoruba traditions of aesthetics and modes of relating to otherness.⁹¹

Yai’s observation is immediately relevant to our understanding of the reason for the wide range of styles – recognizable *àṣà*, to be more exact – which we encounter in Yoruba art, each *àṣà* of carving being distinct and specific to its own artistic context. Consequently, the prevalent *àṣà* of carving an *èrè-ìbèjì* (twin statuette) is clearly distinguishable from the *àṣà* of carving employed in *àkó*, second burial effigies in *Òwò* (see Chapter 6), while the *àṣà* that designates *Orí-inú* (prenatal allotment, or the “inner spiritual head”) should never be confused with that of its earthly human counterpart, *Orí-òde* (the outer, naturalistically looking head), discussed in Chapter 1. This fundamental consideration in Yoruba art and aesthetics is extremely important if we are to avoid the popular pitfall that there is only one Yoruba *àṣà*.

In Chapter 1, “*Orí*: No *Òriṣà* Blesses a Person without the Consent of His/Her *Orí*,” I explore the concept and principle of individuality and otherness in *Orí* (generally used to refer to both *Orí-inú* and *Orí-òde*). In Chapter 2, titled “*Àṣẹ*: The Empowered Word Must Come to Pass,” I discuss a wide range of visual and verbal *oríkì* (art forms) that are central to or connected with *Àṣẹ* – the primordial life force that inheres in all objects of consciousness: authority and power. In Chapter 3, “*Ọṣun*: The Corpulent Woman Whose Waist Two Arms Cannot Encompass,” I rely as much as possible on her *oríkì* to understand the numerous art forms that help to define and illuminate the character of *Ọṣun*, a most powerful and influential Yoruba *òrìṣà*. (Listen to online audio: sections 9 and 10.)

Karin Barber suggests that the Yorùbá use *oríkì* as mnemonics and goes on to explain that “*oríkì* are like objects – signifying objects which exist in their own right and to which narrative explanations are attached as it were externally.”⁹² This observation strengthens the premise that *oríkì* is a logical place to begin the study of Yoruba art. So,

in Chapter 4, “*Òrúnmilà*: Henceforth, Ifá Priests Will Ride Horses,” I use verses from Ifá to carry out an in-depth formal and contextual analysis of an *agere*-Ifá (the container for keeping *ikin*, sixteen sacred divination palm nuts) with the horse motif. Chapter 5, “We Greet Aṣọ before We Greet Its Wearer,” examines Yoruba dress as a form of *oríkì*. In Chapter 6, “*Àkó*: Re/Minding Is the Antidote for Forgetfulness,” I explore the meaning and place of photography in Yoruba culture by focusing on the *oríkì* and *àṣà* of *Àkó*, secondburial effigies in *Ọ̀wò*. Chapter 7, “*Ilé-Ifẹ̀*: The Place Where the Day Dawns,” reviews the state of our knowledge of selected terra cottas and bronzes from the ancient Yoruba city of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* and offers new insights through the lens of *oríkì*. (This is discussed fully in Chapter 7. Listen also to online audio, section 13.)

Chapter 8, “Yoruba Aesthetics: *Ìwà*, *Ìwà* Is What We Are Searching For, *Ìwà*,” addresses some major aesthetic concepts in Yoruba art and thought using *oríkì* as an indispensable resource. Chapter 9, “Tomorrow, Today’s Elder Sibling,” explores the Yoruba definition of style (*àṣà*, to be more precise) through time focusing on *Ọ̀lọ̀wẹ̀* of *Ìsẹ̀*, comparing him with another carver, “Master of the Fowler *Agere-Ifá*” from a later period. Using verbal and visual *oríkì*, I move back and forth invoking the place of yet another legendary sculptor, *Àrẹ̀*, *Làgbàyí*, *ará Ọ̀jọ̀wọ̀n*, *Làgbàyí*, the itinerant citizen of the city of *Ọ̀jọ̀wọ̀n* who lived probably in the early 1800s and whose works, sadly enough, are no longer available for us to see.

While the *oríkì* of artists abound, their full names in Yorùbá were not always revealed to strangers or made public. One reason that the Yorùbá may not publicly or openly associate specific art forms with the names of their authors is perhaps because names given at birth are closely linked to and identified with the essence of one’s personality and destiny (called *orí-inú*, or “inner spiritual head”), which in Yoruba religious belief determines a person’s success or failure in this world and directs his or her actions. Though the act of calling out a person’s given names generally functions to differentiate individuals, in the Yoruba religious thought system, it is also believed to have the ability to arouse or summon to the surface a person’s spiritual essence and cause him or her to act according to the meaning of those given names or in some other way desired by the caller. This is the basis of the Yorùbá saying, “*Orúkọ a máa ronì*” (One’s name controls one’s actions).

If specific works of art are attributed to a particular artist, the connection is usually acknowledged only discreetly and usually through *oríkì*. Over time, therefore, a notion developed in the West that Yoruba artists were largely anonymous.⁹³ However, artists' identities have always been discernible in their verbal *oríkì*. Chief J. A. Ayorinde explains that “all chiefs and prominent personalities have *oríkì* describing their character and achievements, which serve, as it were, as their ‘signature tunes’ to announce their approach or presence,” and indeed that “no child is given a name without being given an *oríkì*, which is an important adjunct to any name.”⁹⁴ Just as the absence of Yoruba art criticism or of a self-conscious Yoruba aesthetic is a myth that developed over time, the conventional wisdom about anonymity in Yoruba art is simply inaccurate.⁹⁵

The fact that a Western art scholar has not been trained to recognize the place of *oríkì* in the retrieval of artists' names and their histories should not lead us to conclude that Yoruba artists are anonymous. A Yoruba *òwè* points us in the right direction:

Àńkì í
Ànsà á
Ó ní òun ò mẹnì tókú
O ńgbó “íkú mérù
Ọpàgá
Abisutabiòdòdó
Alábàòkà
Arokoféyẹjẹ”
O ní “Àgbẹ̀ lókú ni tàbí ònájà?”

Translation:

We recite someone's *oríkì*
 We intone his attributes
 But an ignorant person says he does not know who has died.
 He hears “Death has taken a renowned man,
 A titled man,
 Whose-yams-spread-like-petals
 Who-possesses-a-barn-of-corn
 Whose-fields-are-a-bounty-for-birds,”
 The [ignorant] person still asks, “Is the dead man a farmer or a trader?”⁹⁶

As this *òwè* conveys, only the foolish (or perhaps, uninformed) person does not see what is right before his eyes. This implies that any serious

attempt to conduct art historical research in a traditionally oral society like the Yorùbá must take their rich tradition of *oríkì* into consideration.⁹⁷ Ọlasopé Oyèláràn sums up our duty as scholars of the Yoruba art and thought system with the proverb “Kí a ti ibi pẹ̀lẹ̀bẹ̀ mú ọ̀dọ̀lẹ̀ jẹ; a lè ti ibi oríkì bẹ̀rẹ̀ ìwádíí jìnlẹ̀,”⁹⁸ which he translates as “To do a thorough job of eating *ọ̀dọ̀lẹ̀* [a most delicious Yoruba meal prepared from skinned black-eyed peas, wrapped in leaves and steamed], we must begin by eating the thin and flat pieces in the crevices – the tastiest part of *ọ̀dọ̀lẹ̀*.” Similarly, he adds, “If we want to do a thorough job of explicating Yoruba thought systems, we need to start with *oríkì*” – a reference to the thin flat pieces that are the extensions, the sweetest parts, the small bits that carry the flavor of the whole – its fundamentals.