

Yoruba Aesthetics: Ìwà, Ìwà Is What We Are Searching for, Ìwà

Ìwà, Ìwà là n wá o, Ìwà
 Ire gbogbo tá a ní
 Tá à bá ní'Wà
 Ire oníre ni
 Ìwà, Ìwà là n wá o, Ìwà¹

Ìwà, Ìwà is what we are looking for.
 All the good things of life that a man has
 If he lacks Ìwà
 They belong to someone else.
 Ìwà, Ìwà is what we are searching for, Ìwà. (My translation)

A Preamble: Centrality of Ìwà as a Concept

The concept of *ìwà* (generally glossed as “character”) is fundamental to the definition of *ẹwà* (generally glossed as “beauty”) in Yoruba thought. Even though scholars of Yoruba art – including this writer – have used this general definition in their work,² the real and dynamic relationship that exists between *ìwà* as “the essential nature of a person or thing” and *ẹwà* as “the expression and appreciation of *ìwà*” has yet to be explained. To date, the Yoruba aphorism “*ìwà l’ẹwà*” has also been generally rendered as “character is beauty.” But a more accurate translation would be “*ẹwà* is derived entirely from *ìwà*.”³ In Yoruba culture and metaphysics, “*ẹwà*” refers not so much to the superficial appreciation of a thing’s physical appearance as to the deep appreciation of its essential nature. In short, *ẹwà* (as a feature of an individual) is being true to one’s essential nature.



118. Fragment of a face, Ifẹ, Nigeria. Twelfth to fifteenth century C.E. Terra cotta. Height: 6 ins. (15.2 cm). Reproduced by permission of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, and courtesy of the Museum for African Art, New York, USA.

To illustrate my point, the twelfth to fifteenth century Ifẹ terra cotta bust wearing a necklace with a simian head pendant (Figure 118), which has been hitherto labeled “grotesque,” hardly represents the ideals of “beauty” in Western thought. It might qualify for a more oppositional category of the “anti-aesthetic.” But in Yoruba aesthetics, the physical or characteristic features of this terra cotta bust would not disqualify it as possessing *ẹwà* because it is the expression of *ìwà* (the subject’s character

or essential nature). Thus, we ought to question seriously the accuracy of the translation of *ẹwà* as “beauty” of its subject and its representation.

Rudiments of Yoruba Artistic Criticisms

Yoruba *ẹwà*, it should be emphasized, is not the equivalent of “beauty” as understood and used in Western tradition, although both *ẹwà* and “beauty” share some qualities, such as “embellishment” and “adornment.” Whereas “beauty” in Western thought often refers to a quality that makes a person or object seem pleasing or satisfying in a certain way, *ẹwà*, in the Yoruba aphorism *ìwà l’ẹwà*, extends to qualities not necessarily pleasing and attractive. Rather, *ẹwà* concerns the appreciation and expression of *ìwà* – one’s essential nature.⁴ This definition makes it possible for practically all the *òrìṣà*, human beings, and everything in existence to possess *ẹwà* as long as that *ẹwà* is the expression of their *ìwà* – their essential nature or character.

Yoruba artistic criticism emanates from the highest level of aesthetic consciousness. Not everyone can be an art critic or *amẹwà*, “expert or knower of *ẹwà*.” Acquiring such knowledge requires a significant and conscious effort. The market woman, the *egúngún* audience, the mother of deceased twins with her *ère-ìbejì* (twin statuettes), or even the artist will not necessarily be an art critic, even though each may have acquired some rudimentary appreciation of the Yoruba concept of *ẹwà* through encounter with a work of art or an artistic performance. To say this is not to deny, of course, that their comments may be interesting, intelligent, or even insightful.

Although there is no formal training for Yoruba critics per se, from field experience I am led to believe that most accomplished critics acquire their experience and expertise by “walking with the elders” (*bá àgbà rìn*) while pursuing another primary interest or duty. This phrase actually means “taking an interest in traditional procedures and studying them.” This kind of exposure usually starts at an early age through regular attendance at artistic performances, assisting with artistic processes and presentations, and listening to the comments of elders on finished artistic works in contexts of use. I discovered that a good number of these elder-critics are chiefs, *òrìṣà* priests or priestesses, *Ògbóni* elders, and *Ifá* priests who, by virtue of their position and profession, take part in traditional community rituals and festivals and have at their disposal a profound knowledge of the extensive cultural background⁵ (Figure 119).



119. Woman carrying an Eyinlẹ shrine sculpture in a procession during the Ọdún Ère (Festival of Images) at Ilobú, Ọ̀ṣun State, Nigeria, 191. Photo by Ulli Beier, 1957 (H. U. Beier 1957). Reproduced by permission of Ulli and Georgina Beier (*The Story of Sacred Wood Carvings from One Small Yorùbá Town, A Special 'Nigeria Magazinẹ,'* Lagos, Nigeria). Beier attributes the Eyinlẹ sculpture to Maku, who died about 1915.

Because of their position and training, Yoruba critics are reserved and will not volunteer information spontaneously in public, especially when the artist or his relatives are nearby: “A kí í t’ ojú oníka mẹ̀sàn n kà á” (It is not courteous to count the fingers or toes of a nine-digit person in his or her presence).

In his study of Yoruba Ijálá artists, Adebayo Babalọla, a renowned Yoruba literary scholar, has observed a similar attitude.

Usually the members of the audience *do not* speak out, on the spot, their opinions about the relative merits of the performing Ijálá artists. But later on, in private conversation on the subject of who is who in Ijálá-chanting in the area, each person speaks out his mind and thus the reputations of the best Ijálá artists are established.⁶

This is probably why, as Ulli Beier once reported, one never overhears “spontaneous discussion of form, proportion or expression of a piece of sculpture” in public (1963: 3).⁷ My observations in the field also indicate

that traditional artists hesitate to comment on a colleague's work in public.

For one to qualify as able to “walk with the elders,” one must possess and demonstrate these qualities at least: *ifarabalẹ̀* (calmness), *iluti* (teachableness), *imojú-mọ̀ra* (sensitivity), and *tító* (steadfastness). Other qualities, like *ojú-inú* (insight) and *ojú-onà* (design consciousness), are developed with training. All the foregoing qualities belong to *sùúrù* (patience) or *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ̀* (gentle character, imperturbability), which in Yoruba thought embody the highest, most desirable attributes of *ìwà* (essential nature) and, therefore, also incorporate the most important canons of Yoruba artistic criticism and aesthetic judgment.

Roy Sieber rightly observes that

Art is a cultural manifestation finally to be understood (as distinguished from “appreciated”) only in the light of its cultural origins. . . . Admiration in isolation easily leads to misunderstanding, and African art, its functions vaguely apprehended, has fallen prey to the taste of the twentieth century.⁸

Furthermore, he points out:

Like most art in the history of the world, African art is deeply involved in the sensible and spiritual goals of human beings. Instancing and symbolizing security, it lies at the center of a hard core of beliefs.⁹

Thus, I am persuaded that the best place to begin a meaningful study of Yoruba aesthetics is with *ìwà*. To overlook or undervalue this important prerequisite for *ẹ̀wà* and to favor instead external criteria or explanations will not only further remove us from the Yoruba aesthetic universe but also rob us of the full appreciation and understanding of Yoruba art. Fortunately, scholars of Yoruba traditional thought and literatures, with their wealth of oral data, can be of immense help to the Africanist art historian whose studies may, therefore, be less speculative, more oriented toward Yoruba thought, and thus contextually relevant.

In his work on Yoruba aesthetics, Babatunde Lawal asserts that “in man, *ẹ̀wà-inú* (the intrinsic worth of things) is frequently implied in the word *ìwà* or character.”¹⁰ The word *ìwà* in Yorùbá means essential nature. The noun, *ìwà* is formed by adding the prefix *i* to *wà* (to exist, to be), a normal nominalization process of the Yoruba language.¹¹ Wándé Abímbólá has shed light upon the relationship between the two

words. He argues that *ìwà* (character) derives from *ìwà* (existence) and says that “the original meaning of *ìwà* . . . can be interpreted as the fact of being, living or existing,” whose highest attribute or whose perfect ideal or form is immortality.¹² A cognate aphorism says *Aìkú parí ìwà*, literally, “Immortality completes existence,” but more idiomatically, “Immortality is perfect existence.”

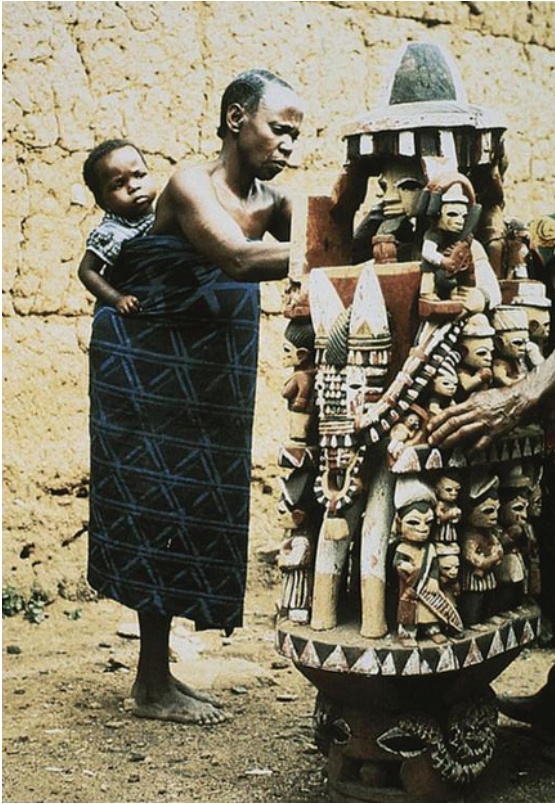
Abímbólà’s suggested relationship between *ìwà* as “existence” and *ìwà* as “character” provides a possible explanation for the relationship and use of the two meanings of *ìwà* in Yoruba thought, particularly in the Ifá literary corpus. The following is an example:

Òrìṣànlá d’ áró méta
Ò dá kan ní dúdú
Ò dá kan í pupa
Ò dá kan ní funfun.
Dúdú ní o re mí
O ò gbòdò re mí ní funfun.
Ìwà mí ní o kó tètè re
Ní Kùtùkùtù Obarìṣà.¹³

Òrìṣànlá 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 *ìwà* first
 At the dawn of creation (My translation)

We see that “Dye me with my *ìwà* first” means “First give me my essential nature” or “First create my being.” The “black,” “red,” and “white” dyes represent the various possibilities of *ìwà* that an individual can be endowed with at creation. This sets the stage for a multifaceted definition of *ẹwà*, in which all things can be fully appreciated as long as they “exist,” that is, *wà*. Thus, the Ẹpa mask shown in Figure 120 derives its *ẹwà* from its existence not only as a piece of sculpture but also from its verbal *oríkì* and dance (when performed).

This is exactly what Òrìṣànlá, the creator-divinity, gives to his creation. By dyeing them he gives them existence and their essential nature – their



120. Èpa headdress carved by Bamgboye of Odo-Ọwa for the small town of Èrìn mòpé, Èkìtì, near Ọtùn. It is called “Ọràngún,” which is the title of the ọba in the neighboring Igbomina town of Ìlá-Ọràngún. The headdress celebrates the warrior chiefs who established the “Sixteen Ekiti kingdoms.” Photo by J. Pemberton III. Reproduced by permission of J. Pemberton III.

ìwà. Thus, the expression of this *ìwà* results in *ẹwà*. But most significantly, Ọbàtálá’s¹⁴ work or product is above reproach in Yoruba thought.

In Ifá divination literature, Ìwà – Ọrúnmilà’s spouse – is personified as an *òrìṣà* and is spoken of as an exceedingly attractive woman who lacked good behavior and had many dirty habits. For example, she neglected to do household chores and never apologized for being such a terrible housekeeper. Ìwà’s negative traits notwithstanding, she was indispensable to her husband, Ọrúnmilà, whose prosperity, honor, and popularity were all attributed to her presence. It was not long, however, before Ọrúnmilà’s patience ran out and he drove Ìwà out of his house. Soon afterward, however, Ọrúnmilà went searching for Ìwà, having realized how much he had lost. He was determined to sacrifice everything he had – his money, his children, his houses, and his clothes – in order to have her back. When they were finally reunited, Ìwà was not blamed – it was Ọrúnmilà who was blamed for not exercising enough patience in dealing with his wife.¹⁵

Ìwà was not blamed for the rift between herself and Ọ̀rúnmilà because she was an *òrìṣà*, she was being herself, and she was said to have brought fame, wealth, and honor to her husband. This presentation of Ìwà as blameless appears to contradict common sense. But this story is, in my opinion, a warning to us to learn to distinguish between the Western definition of beauty and, perhaps, the Judeo-Christian concept of goodness, and *ẹ̀wà* in Yoruba thought. True to her *ìwà* and as an *òrìṣà*, Ìwà's indispensability to Ọ̀rúnmilà is not based on whether she conforms to Western or conventional standards of ethics, for the issues involved in Yoruba aesthetics go beyond those of morality. Thus, strictly speaking, a deity, person, art form, or thing is and cannot be considered anti-aesthetic simply because it appears different or is unusual. Simply stated, the uniqueness and the *ẹ̀wà* of Ìwà in this story derive from her consistency with her essential nature and the subsequent expression of it. Indeed, it demonstrates the encompassing nature of *ìwà* and *ẹ̀wà* – which is similar to the understanding that art is not just about beauty that is pleasing or “good” but about things that move us deeply, whether with awe, fear, dismay, disgust, or joy.¹⁶

Similarly, Ọ̀rúnmilà has his own *ìwà* (essential nature) which is very different from that of his wife. It just happens that Ọ̀rúnmilà's *ìwà* is a bit more difficult to maintain and express at all times. He needed the ability to sacrifice and have patience in his relationship with Ìwà (his wife) and therefore he lost her. The implication of this is that Ọ̀rúnmilà's *ìwà* is not sufficiently like that of Sùúrù (Patience), his father-in-law. Thus, exhibiting character traits like Sùúrù's (which belong to another but more accommodating category of *ìwà*) was the only way Ọ̀rúnmilà could save his relationship with Ìwà and prevent loneliness. Certainly, Ọ̀rúnmilà did not consider any effort or sacrifice too great to make to gain her back. And in any case, the Yorùbá believe that “A ì í gba're k'á má à gba'bi,” literally, “Evil and Good go together,”¹⁷ a point that has been amply demonstrated in the person of Ìwà who was physically attractive and indispensable, bringing honor, fame, and well-being, but who also possessed less than admirable personal habits.

In Yoruba religion, Ìwà is considered the daughter of Sùúrù (Patience), who happens to be the first child of Olódùmarè (Prime Mover). With the help of Sùúrù (Bàbá Ìwà, often literally translated as the Father of Ìwà, but which more accurately is “Progenitor” since Sùúrù is beyond gender like Olódùmarè), Olódùmarè controls all of its numerous but

diverse creations, which includes *Ìwà* and her kind of character. Each creation, be it a divinity, person, or thing, possesses its own *ẹwà-inú* (inner *ẹwà*) as a necessary consequence of *ìwà* (essential nature). Thus, *òrìṣà* (deities) *Ògún*, of war and iron; *Ọya*, of the Niger River; *Ọṣun*, of the *Ọṣun* River; *Ṣàngó*, of thunder and lightning; *Ọbàtálá*, the arch-divinity; *Ṣònpònná*, of pestilence; *Ikú*, of finality; *Àrùn*, of disease; *Ègbà*, of palsy; *Òfò*, of perdition; *Èṣù*, the arbiter par excellence; and hundreds of others in the Yoruba pantheon have their individual and imperishable *ẹwà* – the result of their *ìwà*. Our judgment of them, like that of *Ọrúnmilà*'s wife, *Ìwà*, is therefore not bound by human codes or morals.

Of immediate relevance here is the Yoruba saying “*Mọ iwà fún oníwà,*” literally, “Be conscious of the essential nature of each being,” or, idiomatically, “Concede to each person his or her own particular character,” which may not be like yours or pleasing to you. From this statement, it is clear that the Yorubá respect this aspect of the aesthetic and strive to achieve it. This would explain the Yoruba respect for divinities like *Ṣònpònná*, *Ṣàngó*, *Ògún*, *Èṣù*, and *Ikú*, whose appearance or behavior may be perceived as unattractive, immoral, or detrimental in human terms. The hunchback, the albino, and other deformed persons – all the handiwork of *Ọbàtálá* – receive their “license” or right to be respected and admired by virtue of their relationship with their creator, the cause of their existence, as shown in the saying “*Ọwọ Ọrìṣà l’á á fi wọ àfín*” (We perceive the honor of *Ọrìṣà* [the sculptor divinity] in the albino). Similarly, an insane person is appreciated for the unusual viewpoint he provides: “*Wéré dùn ún wò, sùgbon kò ẹ é bí l’omọ*” (The insane person is pleasant to watch, even though no one prays to have him as an offspring). It is not uncommon to find that hardened criminals and brutal hoodlums have *oríkì* and songs composed in their honor. This response and attitude is expressed in the Ifẹ terra cottas of figures such as the examples shown in Figures 118 and 121.

Whereas Figure 118 has been often described as “grotesque” or “anti-aesthetic” because it does not look like the so-called classical Ifẹ heads, in Yoruba aesthetics, it does derive its *ẹwà* from its *ìwà*. This and the image on the terra cotta vessel in Figure 121 illustrate *Abímbólá*'s original meaning of *ìwà*, as well as the *ẹwà* of *Ìwà*, *Ọrúnmilà*'s wife in Ifá literature. Put simply, *Ìwà*'s kind of *ìwà* deals with the full recognition and proper appreciation of the thing in itself, the unique qualities of a specific object, as totally distinct from the generalized kind, of which

121. Aróyè pot, Ifè, Nigeria. Twelfth to fifteenth century C.E. Terra cotta. Height: 6 1/4 ins. (15.9 cm). Department of Archaeology, Ọ̀bafẹ́mi Awolọ́wọ́ University, Ifè. Reproduced by permission of the National Commission of Museums and Monuments and courtesy of the Museum for African Art, New York, USA.



it is a part. Examples of the recognition and acceptance of difference abound in Yoruba art and culture, beginning with Ọ̀rìṣànlá's creation of three different dye colors; the validity of different *àṣà* existing contemporaneously; the Yoruba acceptance of total strangers in their society; guaranteeing a place for the wisdoms of the young and old in founding Ilé-Ifè as stated in the adage, “Ọ̀mọ̀dé gbọ̀n, àgbà gbọ̀n la fi dá ilẹ̀ Ifè”; to the recognition of different *orí* (prenatal allotment) for each and every being.

The verbal and visual *oríkì* of an *òrìṣà*, human beings, and things play a vital role in the recognition of this *ìwà*. The *oríkì* constitute a powerful vehicle in the identification, expression, and realization of the essence of everything known to the Yorùbá. When a person or sculpture expresses the qualities they possess (that is, their own *ìwà*) in the *oríkì*, they have fulfilled the most important prerequisites of *ẹ̀wà* (as we have seen in the case of Ìwà, Ọ̀rúnmilà's wife). In Yoruba thought, a thing can lose its *ẹ̀wà* and be deemed ugly (*obúrẹ̀wà*) if its *ìwà* (essential nature or identity) is lost. In such an instance, the Yorùbá may invoke a saying like “Nígbà tí Ẹ̀gìdì bá fẹ̀ tẹ̀, a ní kí wọ̀n ó gbé ‘ún sínú ọ̀jò” (Ẹ̀gìdì [a greatly feared *òrìṣà* often represented by an unbaked mud sculpture] courts disgrace when it insists on being left in the rain). The mud sculpture would disintegrate, of course, making any kind of identification impossible and thus losing both *ìwà* (existence, being and living) and therefore, its *ẹ̀wà*. Unlike Ẹ̀ṣù, whose shrine is usually located in the open courtyard or space and is revered by all because of its pivotal role in maintaining balance in the universe, Ẹ̀gìdì is never displayed outside or in an open space where it could disintegrate. Its unbaked, lumpy, clay figure is deliberately

made to look odious and unwholesome. Because of its largely disease-afflicting mission, which is reflected in its *èpè*-graphic *àṣà* (discussed in the last chapter), it fits well in the category of “Ajogun,”¹⁸ malevolent supernatural powers.

The manifestation of the “well made” or “well done” in Yoruba aesthetics, already noted by Lawal,¹⁹ seems to correspond well with the aesthetic requirement that the artist needs to accomplish his task successfully. This aesthetic consciousness derives from the *ìwà* (essential nature and experience) of the artist. In other words, there is recognition of certain character traits that the Yorùbá consider indispensable in the production of a “well-done” or “well-made” work of art. Like that of Ọ̀rúnmilà, the artist’s *ìwà*, incidentally, is also the type that Yoruba culture demands of chiefs, kings, diviners, and family heads for their works or activities to possess *ẹ̀wà*. To maintain this other kind of *ìwà* (such as the one demanded of Ọ̀rúnmilà) is no less challenging than keeping the Yoruba universe in perfect equilibrium with volatile or quick-tempered *òrìṣà* such as Ẓàngó, Ẓònpònná, Ọ̀gún, and Èṣù, all of whom should and must express their own individual *ìwà*. Ordinary people who share this aesthetic sensibility are highly praised and ranked with the topmost men and women in society. This kind of aesthetic awareness, which the artist must possess, derives from the notion of *ìwà* as *ìwàpèlẹ̀* (gentle character, imperturbability) or *sùúrù* (patience). It is not opposed to Abímólá’s original meaning of *ìwà* as illustrated in Ìwà’s character (already discussed) but represents a much larger aesthetic complex that hosts all other notions of personal or individual *ìwà*.

Since the Yorùbá regard *ìwàpèlẹ̀* as the more desirable *ìwà*, its opposite would be *ìwà-lílẹ̀* (literally, “hard, unyielding character”), and the word is usually used to describe someone who is difficult and uncompromising. (The *ìwà* of Ẓàngó and Ọ̀gún belong in this category.) And, in the story of Ìwà and Ọ̀rúnmilà narrated earlier, we see how Ọ̀rúnmilà was not required to change or alter Ìwà’s character or being but rather it was Ọ̀rúnmilà who needed to abide with his own *ìwà* (another kind of *ìwà* that accommodates and appreciates Ìwà, his wife, with all her shortcomings) in order to have Ìwà back.²⁰ Adélékè Adéèkò’s comment on *ìwà* and *ẹ̀wà* is worth restating here. He notes: “Grammatically, an individual can *hù’wà* [*hu ìwà*], that is, ‘grow *ìwà*’, but in Yorùbá, we do not *hu ẹ̀wà*, that is, ‘grow *ẹ̀wà*’. Also, we cannot ‘*ṣe*’ (do or invent) either *ìwà* or *ẹ̀wà*. But one can add to (*bù sí, bù kún*) *ẹ̀wà*.”²¹ Thus, as

indicated earlier in this chapter, a person may add to or supplement his or her *ìwà* by “walking with the elders.” This need could arise if a person was elected or chosen to lead his or her community or has the aspiration of becoming an artist.

Robert Farris Thompson evokes an analogous aesthetic quality in his important work “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” when he writes:

Control, stability, and composure under the African rubric of the cool seem to constitute elements of an all-embracing aesthetic attitude. . . . Manifest within this philosophy of the cool is the belief that the purer, the cooler a person becomes, the more ancestral he becomes. In other words, mastery of self enables a person to transcend time and elude preoccupation. . . . We are in a sense describing ordinary lives raised to the level of idealized chieftaincy. The harmony of the marriage or the lineage ideally reflects the expected first magnitude harmony imparted by the properly functioning ruler to the province or nation at large. Men and women have the responsibility to meet the special challenge of their lives with the reserve and beauty of mind characteristic of the finest chiefs and kings. . . . To act in foolish anger or petty selfishness is to depart from this original gift of interiorized nobility and conscience.²²

Henry Drewal also refers to the same concept when he refers to *tutù* (coolness, not coldness) when applied to certain Yoruba *òrìṣà*, and as a trait that characterizes elderly women. With the *àṣẹ* (authority to effect change or make things happen) attributed to a major female *òrìṣà* such as Ọṣun at creation, women – especially those already past menopause – are believed to possess a form of noiseless and concealed power that they may use to accomplish any desired goal. And, because such a goal may be constructive or destructive, elaborate annual festivals like the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ are held in parts of western Yorùbáland to placate and acknowledge the power of women, who are known in such contexts as *àwọn iyá wa* (our mothers). Drewal, for example, specifically describes Ỳánlá (the Great Mother) as follows:

Ỳánlá, a deity and one primary manifestation of feminine power, is described as cool (*onítútù*) and patient (*onisùúrù*) despite her destructive potential as one “who kills without striking.” Coolness/whiteness then refers to a calm exterior which masks enormous inner strength utilized surreptitiously or covertly.²³

The source of this aesthetic consciousness in Yoruba myth is Sùúrù (Patience), the first child of Olódùmarè, who was tired of being lonely

and wanted offspring to reflect his attributes and add to his *ẹwà*. An Ifá poem describes this yearning for fulfillment at creation.

Ìwà l'ẹwà
 Ọmọ lẹsọ ilé
 Ọmọ-ẹni-là-á-késí,
 Ọmọ-ẹni-ní-í-fí-wà-j'óni.
 Ọun Bí-èyàn-dára-tí-kò-ní-ìwà-
 Igi-oko-ni-ká-maá-fi-wé.
 Àwọn ni wón dá Ifá fún Ọlófin-Ọtẹ̀tẹ̀
 Tí ó nwéni tí ó jọ ọun
 Níjọ tí ó dá kẹsekẹse
 Nwón ní nílé ayé
 Kò sí ẹnikan mbé
 O sì da kẹsekẹse
 Ọde Ọrun ò ò lé èyàn
 Agbadagúúdu méjì ilẹ̀
 A bojú raú.²⁴

Ìwà exhausts *ẹwà*.
 Children are the fitting adornment of a home.
 It-is-one's-offspring-that-one-can-send-on-errands
 It-is-one's-offspring-whose-character-can-resemble-one's-own
 Along with No-matter-the-extent-of-a-person's-physical-attractiveness,
 if-devoid-of-ìwà, that-one-should-be-likened-to-a-piece-of-wood-in-
 the-forest
 All these were the Ifá priests, who divined for Ọlófin-Ọtẹ̀tẹ̀,
 Who was in need of a creation that would resemble his character.
 All was void in the earth.
 Not a single soul inhabited it.
 All was also void in heaven
 With no inhabitants;
 Just two large empty shells;
 With nothing in them (My translation)

By this kind of aesthetic sensibility, both the Creator and its creation are benefited. Ọlófin-Ọtẹ̀tẹ̀ (another name for Olódùmarè, Prime Mover) achieves his goal of self-expression and fulfillment through *enìyan* (human), which in turn derives its aesthetic support from Ọlófin-Ọtẹ̀tẹ̀. Thus *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ̀*, also often regarded as *ìwà rere* (appropriate, not just good character in a Judeo-Christian sense), becomes the manifestation of Sùúrù, the first and most important offspring of the Creator-in-chief,

Ọlọfin-Ọtètẹ́ or Olódùmarè. This is implied in the saying, “Ìwà rere l’ẹ̀sọ eniyan, Ehín funfun l’ẹ̀sọ ẹ̀rín” (Appropriate *ìwà* is the adornment of [or what befits] a person, as white teeth are the adornment of [or what befits] a smile).²⁵ Ẹ̀sọ here can also mean *ìyẹ́sí*, benefiting or complementing, bringing appreciation and honor, *iyi*, to a person or thing.²⁶

Like Ọ̀rúnmilà, the Yorùbá desire to be associated with Ọlọfin’s character, without which one may well be deserted by all and sundry. The ultimate goal is to be *omolúwàbí*, “the child born by Olú-ìwà – the head, chief source, and originator of *ìwà*” – Suuru, *ìwàpèlẹ́*. Hence, the following Ifá divination verse:

*Ìwà, Ìwà là n wá o Ìwà
Ire gbogbo tá a ní
Tá à níwà
Ire onire ni
Ìwà, ìwà l’á n wá o, Ìwà²⁷*

Ìwà, ìwà is what we are looking for.
All the good things of life that a man has
If he lacks *ìwà*
They belong to someone else.
Ìwà, ìwà is what we are searching for.

Searching for *Ìwà* as Ọ̀rúnmilà did is symbolic of the continuing importance of *ìwàpèlẹ́* in Yoruba thought and artistic practice.

Political and socioeconomic stability and progress, artistic creativity, and criticism – all are sustained through the invocation and utilization of the canons of *ìwàpèlẹ́*. The following passage provides an insight into how some of these attributes of *ìwàpèlẹ́* can be immediately relevant to human problems, regardless of their nature, size, or severity.

*Èdà tó gbéyin lé’ rí kù pàntètè
Pèlẹ́ l’ aréwà irin
Jeje l’omọ olólá íyan
Igbá onípèlẹ́ kù fọ
Àwo onípèlẹ́ kù fàya
Ohun tí a bá fagbára mú, koko ní le
Èsò pèlẹ́ ní à á pàmúkùrù [tí ó bà lórí ẹ̀pọ̀n]
A kí í kánjú tu Íú orán
Pèlẹ́pèlẹ́ l’ejò ó ẹ̀dẹ
Ìgbín kò lówó, Igbín kò lẹ̀sẹ
Èsò, ẹ̀sò nìgbín gbà gungì.²⁸*

A person carrying eggs on the head needs poise.
 The physically attractive person has need of a composed gait.
 Walking gracefully adds to the *ẹwà* of the wealthy.
 The breakable plate of the careful one never breaks.
 The secret of the calm individual is never accidentally revealed in public.
 Anything carried out using brute force always encounters great resistance;
 It is with calculated patience that one kills the sand fly [that perches on one's scrotum].
 A person should never be in a hurry to collect the [tiny but delicious] *orán* mushroom.
 With considerable patience, the snake succeeds in climbing the [branchless] palm tree.
 The snail has neither hands nor legs,
 Yet it is with patience and endurance that it climbs the tree. (My translation)

The qualities of thought and aesthetic values hinted at here are important: they constitute the foundation of Yoruba artistic criticism.

“Ìwà” of the Critic (Recognition of Ẹwà)

*Èéfìn ni ìwà,
 Kò sí b'a ẹ̀ bò ó mólẹ̀ tó
 Rírú ni ó rí.*

Ìwà is like smoke
 This cannot be suppressed.
 It comes out in all we do

Because of this Yoruba belief, it is expected that the *ìwà* of an artist will not only show through his or her work but will influence that work and its execution. Thus, artists who are impatient are not likely to convey the theme of their subject effectively or execute a technically accomplished work. It is important, therefore, that the artist possess the attributes of *ìwàpèlẹ̀* (imperturbability), the *ìwà* that is closest to that of Olódùmarè, the Prime Mover, in addition to his or her own *ìwà*. With the attributes of *ìwàpèlẹ̀*, artists can demonstrate valued qualities such as “poise,” avoidance of “brute force,” “composed gait,” “grace,” “thoroughness,” “calmness,” “calculated patience,” “insight,” “endurance,” and “fulfillment” through artistic expression in his or her work. A critic’s familiarity

with these and other components of *ìwàpèlẹ́* is basic to his or her ability to recognize *ẹ̀wà* in all aspects of Yoruba art.

I shall now briefly highlight a few of those aspects of *ìwàpèlẹ́* that I believe may help in shedding more light on Yoruba artistic criticism.

OJÚ-INÚ

Ojú-inú literally means “inner eye.” It refers to insight, a special kind of understanding of a person, thing, or situation, not usually derived from an obvious source. “Imú ni àlejò fi í ríran” (The outsider or uninitiated usually sees through the nose). “Without *ojú-inú*, the outsider, like a child in ignorance, may call a medicinal plant an edible vegetable” (omọ́dẹ́ ò moògùn ó n pè é ní ẹ̀fọ́). It is the intellect with which one perceives the individualized form, color, substance, outline, rhythm, and harmony of the subject. Perception can be learned through traditionally approved sources such as chants, songs, and *oríkì*, by reference to Ifá and other divination literature, and, of course, extant examples of works of art. This sensibility is extremely important if the artist is to capture accurately the essential identity, character, and function of his subject.

It is with *ojú-inú* that the artist knows the right colors to use for the costumes or shrine of Şàngó, which is usually dominated by a juxtaposition of red and white, or that of an Òbátálá priest, which is always white. The situation is the same if the artist is a sculptor and has been commissioned to do a carving. There is a fairly wide range of preexistent *àşà* from which the artist may choose. If the carving is for an *àkó* second burial effigy in Òwò, the artist would have to work in an *àkó*-type *àşà* and proportion (which I have called *àkó*-graphic *àşà*) and aim for a high degree of resemblance to the deceased. The case would be different, however, if the artist were to produce *ère-ìbejì* (twin statuettes). Such objects never approach life size (except on the screen in an African art class) and belong in another stylistic cluster.

Because of its rich and varied iconographic interpretive possibilities, another Èşù sculpture different from the one discussed in Chapter 2, Figure 23, will be used to illustrate the Yoruba aesthetic canon of *ojú-inú*. This Èşù sculpture, it is important to clarify, does not depict Èşù but his or her devotee, and it is an integral part of the visual *oríkì* to exhibit the attributes of Èşù’s *ìwà*. The figure dons a cap of two different colors, red and indigo blue on either side – another reminder of Èşù’s two different personalities in one body – the *òrìşà* who has the



122. Èṣù dance staff, Ìlá-Òràngún, Nigeria. Photo by J. Pemberton III, 1977. Reproduced by permission of J. Pemberton III.

power to bring two opposing camps together and cause them to appreciate each other's differing essential natures (see Figure 122). This aspect of Èṣù's *ìwà* playing a pivotal role in the relationship between Ọṣun his mother and the sixteen male Odù has been discussed in Chapter 5. The carver of this Èṣù sculpture draws our attention to Èṣù's beads and cowries – signs of wealth he can shower upon those who acknowledge his power; as he indicates, Èṣù will deal ruthlessly with those who cross him, by including his fearsome lance. Èṣù's visual *oríkì* is rendered as the *òrìṣà* whose skills are absolutely indispensable to the orderliness of the universe and to successful communication among humans and the *òrìṣà*.

The following correlative verbal *oríkì* of Èṣù corroborates quite well his visual *oríkì* – the Èṣù sculpture:

Eshu turns right into wrong, wrong into right.
When he is angry, he hits a stone until it bleeds.

When he is angry, he sits on the skin of an ant.
 When he is angry, he weeps tears of blood.
 Eshu slept in the house –
 But the house was too small for him.
 Eshu slept on the verandah –
 But the verandah was too small for him.
 Eshu slept in a nut –
 At last he could stretch himself.
 Eshu walked through the groundnut farm,
 The tuft of his hair was just visible.
 If it had not been for his huge size,
 He would not be visible at all.
 Lying down, his head hits the roof.
 Standing up, he cannot look into the cooking pot.
 He throws a stone today
 And kills the bird yesterday²⁹

Thus, in this case, capturing Èṣù's *ìwà* (essence, character) and imbuing it with its *ewà* would be the first major test of an artist's *ojú-inú*. Thus, we are led back to Abímbólá's original meaning of *ìwà* as "being, living, and existing" in its visual and verbal dimensions – especially as they pertain to the definition and appreciation of Èṣù.

OJÚ-QNÀ

Literally, "eye for design," *ojú-qnà* is "design consciousness." Though sometimes considered a rare talent, *ojú-qnà* is often acquired in the course of an artist's training or by learning it from one who possesses this quality. In many cases, through proverbs, stories, and other channels, Yoruba culture provides useful hints to guide the artist.

Obìnrin kùkùrú ye oko rè lójó ijó
Obìnrin gídìgbà ye oko rè lójó èbù

A short woman is the pride of her husband on the dance floor,
 Just as a big woman is the pride of her husband in the yam-planting
 season

Innovation in design resulting from *ojú-qnà* must be appropriate to the meaning and function of the art product and not be introduced simply for its own sake. This is expressed by the saying "Ohun tó yẹ'ni ló yẹ ni, okùn ọrùn kò yẹ adìẹ, kò sì tún yẹ ẹni tí n fà á" (An action [or a design] must be appropriate [or relevant] to its context; tying

a rope around the neck of a fowl for the purpose of transporting it is not proper, and it makes the one pulling the rope look ridiculous).³⁰ Such an act would be described as *àṣàkàṣà*, literally, an aberrant and discordant *àṣà*.

Having *ojú-ṣnà* distinguishes the artist from the unskilled artist, the critic from the ill-informed or thoughtless critic, the talented artist from the untalented one. Thus, we may assemble two hundred *ẹpa* masks or *ìbejì* figures for critical examination. All may satisfy the first criterion discussed earlier, that is, *ojú-inú*, but attention is focused on the demonstration of *ojú-ṣnà*. Here, the critic – after familiarizing himself or herself with the rudiments of *ṣnà* (fitting design), which includes recognizing it and its appropriate use – professionally appraises the works before him or her, using all the faculties as hinted in the following verse.

*Ojú là í mọ àìsí epo,
 Ẹ̀yẹ̀ké là í mọ àìsí iyò,
 Òdòró gangan là í mọ àlapà
 Tí kò ní epo nínú.*

It is by looking that we detect the absence of [red] palm oil.
 It is in the mouth that we detect the salt-less [dish].
 And it is from a distance that we spot the àlapà³¹
 Which contains no oil. (My translation)

An example of a good use of *ojú-ṣnà* can be found in the exquisite execution of the *oba*'s throne (shown in Figure 123). *Ọlówẹ*, who is most likely the carver, ensures that no one makes any mistake as to whom the throne belongs. His choice and appropriate use of motifs relate directly to Yoruba celebration of royalty. Though the use of the chair itself might be of European origin, *Ọlówẹ* covers it with enough visual *oríkì* for the foreignness of the chair to recede into the background. We see images of women who not only support the sovereign physically and metaphorically but also provide needed protection against malevolent forces. The figures of these women in their most powerful *àṣẹ*-invoking forms and positions are carved into the side and lower sections of the throne using an adze. The two birds facing each other recall the myth of *Ẹyẹkàn* on the *òṣùn babaláwo* (Ifá diviner's ritual staff) – the lone wild bird which was able to reproduce and become two birds – a fitting *àṣẹ* motif for the top of the backrest of the *oba*'s throne. It is hard to think of a more appropriate image to project the successful reign and prosperity of a Yoruba



123. Throne for a Yoruba *oba*, most probably carved by *Olówè* of *Ìsẹ*. First quarter of the twentieth century. Reproduced by permission of Jean David.



123. *Continued*

sovereign. Here, Ọlọwè tries to boost the sovereign's *àṣẹ* by visually linking it to that of Ifá – whose pronouncements always come to pass.

In the back of the chair, approximately halfway down, Ọlọwè invites us to celebrate with the musicians who intone the *ọba's oríkì* and entertain visitors in Yoruba palaces. The instruments featured are *dùndún* (double-headed hourglass tension drum), *bàtá* (double-headed, conically shaped fixed-pitch drum), flute, and what appears to be *kàkàkí-ọba* (*ọba's* trumpet). Carved in high relief, the performing figures are positioned differently to show their professional skills and interaction with their audience. It is as if Ọlọwè wants to free the musicians physically and allow them to go out to meet visitors and also recite their *oríkì* (see Figure 123).

Here, the Yoruba art critic may judge the artist's *ojú-ọ̀nà* by evaluating his level of *làákàyè* (clear thinking), *òye* (understanding), and *ogbón* (wisdom).

ÌFARABALÈ

Ìfarabalè literally means “calming or controlling the body,” or “letting reason rather than emotion control man,” or “not losing one’s composure.” Robert Farris Thompson’s work “An Aesthetic of the Cool” is very relevant to the understanding of this phenomenon.³²



124. Lamidi Olonade Fákéyẹ carving the Oduduwa statue for Ọbafẹmi Awolọwọ University, Ilé-Ife. Photo by John Pemberton III, 1987. Reproduced by permission of John Pemberton III.

Ìfarabalẹ is a prerequisite to the successful expression of *ojú-inú* and *ojú-onà*. It concerns the artist's ability to control himself or herself and the material (the mental and technical), as well as to execute a well-finished and successful work of art. According to Lamidi Fákéyẹ, a renowned traditional³³ Yoruba carver, "It is *ìfarabalẹ* that we go to learn the profession of woodcarving."³⁴ In Figure 124, Lamidi Fákéyẹ's undivided attention is focused on the carving of the statue of Oduduwa at Ọbafẹmi Awolọwọ University, Ilé-Ife, Nigeria.

Much-admired artistic qualities like *pípé* (completeness) and *dídán* (finishing touch) are both consequences of *ìfarabalẹ*. *Pípé* and *dídán* are sometimes used interchangeably as they have essentially the same goal. Although other scholars have translated *dídán* as "shining smoothness,"³⁵ I have not done so since it may include rough surfaces, as in *ẹpa* masks, which emphasize color for their "completeness," or rough-textured, handwoven cloth with attachments of ritual or decorative objects as is often the case in Yoruba *egúngún* costumes.

In most Yoruba figurative sculpture, the emphasis on a strong, vertical movement, an arresting frontal presence, and a serene facial expression seems to underscore the importance of *ìfarabalẹ̀* in Yoruba aesthetics. For the same reason, I believe, the head which is the supposed seat of reason is rendered unusually large in size, and its technical execution is often elaborate. In *ìfarabalẹ̀*, *orí* (head) in its physiological and spiritual senses rules the rest of the body both literally and metaphorically. Thus, it is not only in the faithful rendering of the anatomical details, such as a figure's muscles, that produces that feeling of power and action that one experiences from Yoruba sculpture, but the artist's intelligent, creative, and skillful combination of forms. That such a high premium is placed on intelligent action by Yoruba artists and critics is reflected in the saying "Alágbára ma m̀eró baba ọ̀lẹ̀" (A thoughtless strong man is worse than a lazy man). Yet another proverb states more clearly the value of calculated patience in achieving a set goal: "Asúrétete kò r'óyè je, arìngbèrè nì í móyéé délé" (He who walks slowly [that is, acts intelligently] will bring the title home, while he who runs [that is, acts recklessly] misses the chance of enjoying a title).

To illustrate *ìfarabalẹ̀*, we turn to the *oríkì* of a most accomplished carver from Ìlá-Ọ̀ràngún, Táíwò, who was renowned for his several palace veranda posts executed during the reign of Ọ̀ràngún Oyinlọ́lá Arójójoyè (1924–36). Apparently, there must have been a competition to determine who was the best carver of his time. The criterion applied, as we shall see, appears to have hinged largely on *ìfarabalẹ̀*. The following are excerpts from Táíwò's *oríkì* as collected by John Pemberton:

One day someone lied, pretending to be from the lineage of Ọ̀lójẹ́
 [owners of *egúngún*]
 They asked him to carve.
 The carving, they said, must depict the eyes and the mouth clearly,
 As well as a powerful chest
 The penis should have a cap on the end of it.
 He carved the wood without eyes.
 The wood had no chest.
 He failed to carve a small cap at the end of the penis.
 They said, "You are not a real son of Ọ̀jẹ́."
 Then they sent for our father to come and do it again.
 A carving with eyes, mouth, chest and penis cap.
 He carved the wood, it was perfect.

...

The carving was perfect, perfect in the eyes,
 Perfect in the mouth, perfect in the broad chest
 To crown it, he depicted perfectly the penis with the cap.
 The father [king] then spoke with authority:
 “Let the appropriate sacrifice be made for òrìṣà and
 Òrè [Táíwò’s family compound]
 Future generations shall be known for their carving skills
 And they shall continue to prosper for generations”³⁶

This *oríkì* is quite clear on the criteria for ranking the best carver. Of the utmost importance in the above verse is the line, “To crown it, he depicted perfectly the penis with the cap.” We shall explore the implication of this statement especially as it relates to the Yoruba aesthetic canon of *ìfarabalẹ̀* by turning to the *èrè-ìbejì* (pair of twin statuettes) in Figure 125.



125. Èrè-Ìbejì (twin figures), Igbomina, Ìjọmu, Nigeria. Height: 10 1/4 ins. Private Collection. Courtesy of the Museum for African Art, New York, USA.

Though this pair of *ère-ìbejì* is unclothed with minimal bodily ornament, only a few rows of stringed beads on the neck and waist, it is not unusual to find many *ère-ìbejì* with more impressive adornment consisting of brass, beads, cowries on the ankles, wrist, neck, and also the waist, and wearing beaded or cowrie-embroidered vests. This pair will, nonetheless, suffice to make our argument. *Ìbejì* are considered *afínjú-omọ*,³⁷ that is, “a lover of fashion, and especially clean environment.” Their physical appearances are not only always kept clean but are also attractive. Thus, the head, particularly the intricately textured coiffure of many *ère-ìbejì*, is painted with indigo dye (a locally produced, deep blue vegetable dye pigment), while the torso and other parts of the body receive touches of *osùn* (another locally prepared reddish cosmetic powder from the *ìròsùn* tree), and not infrequently, some white chalk. A close examination of most *ère-ìbejì*, like this pair, shows that they are executed in a way that their forms elicit touch and can be enjoyed either by performing with them in a ritual context or simply by looking at them.

In essence, *ère-ìbejì* represents departed twins and is a part of the ritual sacrifice to prevent future twins in the family from departing too soon. Their aesthetic completeness is directly linked to the notion that twins should always be together and never separated – even by death. Consider the following Yoruba saying:

Bí a bá ẹ̀jì ràjò
Tí a ẹ̀ ọ̀kan bọ
Ojú ni í dá tí'ni

When two people go on a journey
 And only one returns
 Returning without the other makes him feel very ashamed and
 uncomfortable.

It is noteworthy that the Yorùbá always refer to dead twins as “having traveled” and never as “dead.” Hence, Ifá orders the making of *ère-ìbejì* to serve as a surrogate for departed twin(s). The Yoruba aesthetic sense of completeness includes constant symbolic washing, feeding, clothing, and dancing of the *ère-ìbejì* if mandated by the diviner.

The substantially heavy, firm, and pendulous breasts of the female and the well-built upper body of the male *ère-ìbejì* are evidence of a well-executed “chest” cited for praise in Táíwò's *oríkì*. The heads of the

ère-ìbejì are large and appear to be carved in broad simple planes – a quality shared in varying degrees in most Yoruba sculpture. The faces of both of these statuettes (*ère-ìbejì*) do not bear any physiognomic resemblance to the deceased twins that they represent but their facial marks aid in their identification with particular families, lineages, or ethnic groups. All of the features of the face, particularly the eyes (*ojú*), are considered very important for effective communication as the Yorùbá affirm in the saying, “*Ojú ni òrọ̀ wà*” (literally, “communication resides in the eyes”). Hence, the eyes of *ère-ìbejì* are carved with an unmistakable emphasis on the eyeballs. They are rendered larger than life-size and could even have metal studs driven into the center of the pupils to enliven them. In all, the head ends up receiving the most detailed artistic treatment – which is the reason for the important technical requirement – “perfect in the eyes [face]” as contained in Táíwò’s *oríkì* (see Figure 125).

As a rule, all *ère-ìbejì*, including these examples, are depicted standing and not moving around or engaged in any frivolous activity. Nothing, however, prevents a carver from exercising his or her *ojú-ọ̀nà*, literally, “eye for design,” “appropriateness,” and responding stylistically to the Yoruba wish that twins should stay in the family and bless their parents. In the case of *àbíkéú* (children born to die young) who, like *ìbejì*, belong to the category of special children, certain given names are intended to persuade them to live and not die – a kind of “pathetic emotional appeal.”³⁸ Thus, Yoruba names like *Rótímí*, “Don’t abandon me,” and *Dúrósímí*, “Wait, live and be old enough to bury me,” are given to children who often become ill, give their parents too much trouble and anxiety, and are neither quite well here on earth nor in the otherworld. *Dúró*, the Yoruba word for “stand,” “wait,” and “don’t go away” certainly applies to the standing posture of *ère-ìbejì*. The posture of *ère-ìbejì* also contributes to their composure – *ìfarabalẹ̀*, and expression of self-containment. Far from being cold and unfeeling, the forward-looking gaze of their eyes assures their parents that *ìbejì* are listening attentively to all the requests being made while, of course, maintaining a regal distance. And, if the Yorùbá regard twins as *òrìṣà*, which they do, then the Yoruba saying “*Àkíjé ni í gbórisàá níyì*” (It is the practiced silence of the *òrìṣà* that imbues them with dignity), underscores the *ẹ̀wà* of *ère-ìbejì* as *òrìṣà*.

We now return to what was considered the most important criterion in judging a good carving. Lamidi Fákéyè, whose father was apprenticed to Táíwò, confirmed that a good *ère-ìbejì* was judged by how well the penis cap was carved. “Even for the most skilled artists,” he said, “this is quite challenging because of its [the penis’s] shape, size, position on the body, plus the fact that it must be shown circumcised”³⁹ (see Figure 125). Though not specifically mentioned in Táíwò’s *oríkì*, it is reasonable to believe that a proper depiction of the breasts in the case of female *ère-ìbejì* must have called for a corresponding level of technical dexterity. An incomplete or damaged work is unacceptable in Yoruba sculpture, so a figure with broken penis or breast would have been rejected outright.⁴⁰

ÌLUTÍ

Ìlutí literally means “good hearing.” Used idiomatically, it refers to qualities such as teachableness, obedience, and understanding, all of which are highly esteemed in the traditional, educational, and apprenticeship systems of the Yorùbá.

In religion and art, *ìlutí* features prominently when one is considering the responsiveness of an *òrìṣà* (deity), *òḡgùn* (traditional medicine), or *iṣé onà* (a work of art). Thus, in choosing an *òrìṣà* to worship or consult for aid, the Yorùbá look for those with *ìlutí*. “Èbọra tó lutí là ní bọ” (We worship only deities that can respond when consulted). In advertising potent traditional medicines, salesmen use the slogan *ajé-bí-iná*, “that-which-responds-like-the-flint-ignited-fire,” to convince customers of the effectiveness of their product. Similarly, in judging art, *ìlutí* plays an important role. It aids the critic in determining whether the work in question is “alive,” “responding,” and “efficacious,” that is *jé* or *dáḥùn*. In essence, therefore, *ìlutí* focuses on the fulfillment of artistic intention as well as precision in the artistic process.⁴¹ The warm reception and approval given a work of art by the community is considered quite important. For example, it is common knowledge that following an unenthusiastic reception of their work, amateurs and untalented carvers have quietly withdrawn to the farm or returned to petty trading, never to carve again. Though members of the audience are not always willing to discuss their reaction openly, a perceptive researcher can usually sense the spontaneous acceptance or rejection of works at festivals and other public events.

Yoruba tradition enjoins obedience to established procedures and rules so that efficacy might result.

*Wúrúkú l'á í-yínrínká,
Gbòrò-gbòrò l'áà dóbálẹ̀
Bí ènià kò bá ẹ̀ é gégé bí a ti í ẹ̀ é
Kì í-rí gégé bí ó ti í rí.⁴²*

Kneeling-and-rolling-from-side-to-side is the woman's way of paying royal homage.⁴³

Prostrating-face-down is the man's way of greeting his superior.
If one fails to do it the customary way,
It will not turn out as well as it always has. (My translation)

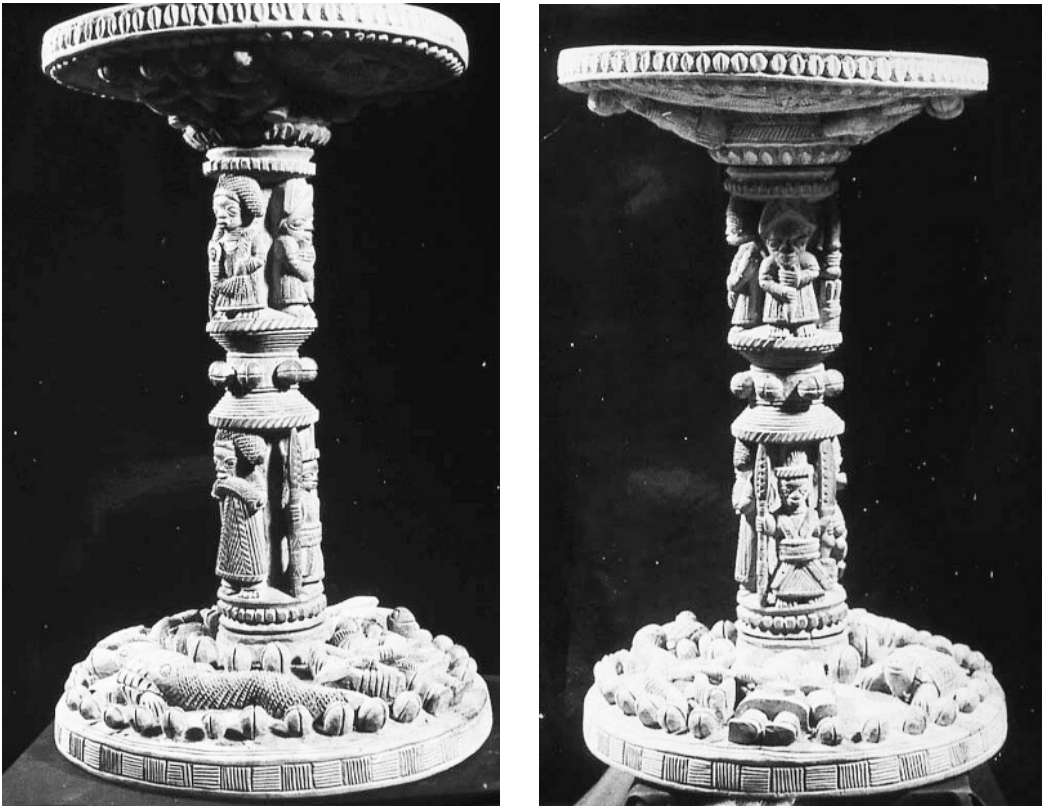
Of immediate relevance to the understanding of *ìlutí*, which can also be broadly described as a “call-response” phenomenon, is that the Yorùbá believe in the existence and intrinsic potency of primordial names of all individual living and nonliving things – a phenomenon tied to the concept of *àṣẹ*, which has already been discussed. Consequently, the concept and possession of *etí*, “ears” or “good hearing” in both its physical and metaphorical sense, are essential for efficient functioning and communication in art and life.

*Etí kò sí lóri
Orí ò di àpólà igi.⁴⁴*

With the ears missing,
The head is no more than a dumb piece of wood.

This is a critical comment whose implications for Yoruba art go beyond the physical representation of the ears. Indeed, the artist, critic, and audience all have need of *ìlutí* to be able to understand and enjoy the art object.⁴⁵ To illustrate *ìlutí*, we examine, however briefly, a traditional war chief's wooden stool called *àdójà*, carved by Bàbá Rótì of Osí, near Ilorin (see Figure 126). When I saw the *àdójà* in 1974, Bàbá Rótì, *Agbégì-ná-jà* (Who-makes-a-living-from-the-proceeds-of-his-carvings), had already ceased doing any carving and been installed the *Àgbàrà* of Osí.⁴⁶

Most likely, this *àdójà* was carved in the first half of the twentieth century and had never been used in any war. Older *àdójà*, I was told, carried more or less the same themes as this one. When seated on the *àdójà*, the *Agbàrà* literally and metaphorically was recognized as the commander-in-chief of his army. He gave orders that had to be obeyed. The sight



126. Two views of Àdójà (a war general's stool): Osi-Ilorin, Ekiti. Artist: Baba Roti, before 1960. Photos by R. Abiodun.

of the Agbàṅà (captured in his *oríkì*⁴⁷) and the *àdójà* together is power made present. This means that the *àdójà* was not just a pretty-looking stool but the site for images that were deliberately result-demanding and efficacious in battle – visual *oríkì* as they functioned in the context of war.⁴⁸ Favored themes and motifs on this *àdójà* function more or less as incantations because they evoke and provoke *àṣẹ*. The whole theme seems to depict a scene where *òdḡùn* (medicinal and psychological powers) and many other traditional weapons of war are tested as part of the preparation for battle.

The *àdójà* is fashioned from a single tree trunk and shaped more or less like an hourglass; the only parts without any carved images are the top where the Agbàṅà sits, and the other end (that is, the base) which rests on the ground. The unmistakable cowrie motifs that surround the top edge of the *àdójà* allude to one of the three most important reasons



127. Àdójà: Base view of stool. Photo by R. Abiodun.

that Yorùbá go to war – *ire-owó* (riches). N. A. Fadipe writes that when enrolling in the Yoruba army, “Dane guns were arranged beside him [a recruit], and the cowries were counted out in lots of 2000. Younger soldiers of fortune each approached the leader of his choice and vowed to fight and die for him. Each was then given one lot of 2000 cowries and a number of guns.”⁴⁹ The second reason or great inducement was the prospect of “taking wives”⁵⁰ to bear children for soldiers – *ire-omọ* (which is, to be blessed with children). And the third is *ire-àìkú* (blessing of longevity).

The bottom part of the *àdójà* shows a hunter/warrior shooting a snake that attempts unsuccessfully to attack or bite a tortoise (the animal that lives longest according to Yoruba belief; see Figure 127). This composition constitutes a powerful visual metaphor that has the *àṣẹ* confer longevity on someone.⁵¹ To further strengthen and confirm this *àṣẹ*, kola nuts carved around the base of the stem serve as a border for this scene. In this instance, it would be appropriate to invoke the incantation “Oḍoḍún là á ṛ’ómọ obì lórí àṣẹ, oḍoḍún ni wọn ó ma a rí mi”

(Annually and in their season, the kola nuts appear on market stalls; similarly, I will live and be blessed every new year).

The stem of the *àdójà* is covered with images of battle-ready war chiefs, soldiers, hunters, and medicine men brandishing their weapons – both physical and psychological. Music produced from special war drums, the side-blown horn and flute that intone soldiers' *oríkì*, are all depicted to boost the morale of troops in battle (see Figure 127). Although not shown on this *àdójà*, *òmò* (metal scrotal bells) were often attached to *mòpà* (war chiefs' dress) not to make music but to announce the arrival of a high-ranking war chief. The sound created in this environment raised the soldier's morale and courage. Among the primary armaments of the Yoruba armies prominently carved on the *àdójà* are broad swords (*agèdèngbẹ* and *idà*); spears (*òkò* and *èsín*); daggers (*òbẹ*); and bows and arrows (*àkàtàm̀pó* and *orun*).⁵² Among the weapons not depicted here are catapults (*kánnákánná*); mattock-like clubs (*kùmò* and *kóndó*); and double-headed mace (*osé*, principally a ritual instrument for *Ṣàngó*).

War uniforms in the *Ọ̀pìn* area were not only meant to distinguish the ranks of warriors, namely, *Balógun*, *Aṣípa*, *Olúkòtún*, and *Olúkòsì* (in order of seniority), but are impregnated with *oògùn* (medicinal substances) to make them bulletproof and confuse the enemy in battle situations. Some of the frequently mentioned *oògùn* used by soldiers include *àsàkí-ìbọ̀n* (which prevents a gun from firing); *àbàtú-kò-ní-wolé* (which prevents a bullet from penetrating one's body); *òkígbe* (which renders a machete attack ineffective on a person); *egbé* (a magico-medicinal device which enables one to disappear in time of danger); and *isújú* (which blurs an attacker's vision). One of the ways to test the efficacy of some of these medicines is to have their makers hold a poisonous snake and not be bitten, as demonstrated by one of the figures on the stem of this *àdójà* – thus proving the crucial role of *ìlutí* of elements not only in war but also in Yoruba aesthetics.

ÌMỌ́JÚ-MỌ́RA

Ìmọ́jú-mọ́ra can be translated generally as “sensitivity to the need of the moment,” “ability to adapt and change without being formally told to do so,” “sense of propriety,” and “measure consciousness.” Because all the other qualities of *ìwàpèlẹ̀* are called into play before *ìmọ́jú-mọ́ra* can

be manifested, anyone who demonstrates it is said to possess *orí-pípé* (literally, “complete head”) – the acknowledgment of a creative mind.

Closely related to *ìmojú-mọ́ra* and perhaps falling within this aesthetic consideration is the concept of *àrà* (innovative creativity) which Adegbeba has studied.

At all events, the word [*àrà*] when used as a novelty, wonder, or new fashion basically implies uniqueness or newness, which as far as man-made objects is concerned, often results in creativity.⁵³

Ìmojú-mọ́ra is not only a crucial factor in the adoption of new *àrà*, techniques, and materials – in spite of the seemingly unchanging traditions of Yoruba art – but also a means whereby the culture has managed to survive in the new environments and under the difficult conditions and enslavement in the New World. The inventiveness of the Yorùbá in the diaspora and their effective use of substitutes in art and religion most probably derive their inspiration and sanction from *òwe* or sayings such as the following cited earlier:

*Bí a ò bá rí àdàń*⁵⁴
A à fí òdòbè sẹ̀bọ.

In the absence of the big fruit bat traditionally approved for sacrifice, Another kind, *òdòbè*⁵⁵ [house-bat which is smaller in size and lives under the eaves], may be used.

Robert Farris Thompson has done a valuable study of the creative responses and artistic ingenuity of African peoples in his book *Flash of the Spirit*.⁵⁶

Even though quite supportive of creativity, innovation, and change, the Yorùbá caution through *ìmojú-mọ́ra* on the nature, reasonableness, and limit of these qualities. For example, the following proverb would be apt when judging a sculpted figure.

Kì í sẹ pé etí kẹ́ í gùn,
Kì í sẹ pé etí kẹ́ í fẹ́,
Sùgbón èyí tó bá sẹ̀sẹ́ ré kọ́já orí,
*Ó ti di ti ehoró.*⁵⁷

It is not that ears cannot be long.
 It is not that the ears cannot be wide.
 But when ears perchance shoot past the head,
 Then they belong to the rabbit. (My translation)

And yet, in the same sculpture, the Yorùbá may not only permit but accept as beautiful a wider range of modes of artistic presentation, as is evident in this saying:

Bí a sá kéké
Aájò ẹwà là n sẹ.
Bí a b' àbàjà,
Aájò ẹwà là n sẹ.
Bí a sì fẹrèkẹ sílẹ l'óbòrọ
Aájò ẹwà náà là n sẹ.⁵⁸

If we have the *kéké*⁵⁹ facial mark,
 It is for the sake of *ẹwà*.
 If we carry the *àbàjà*⁶⁰ mark,
 It is for beauty.
 And if we leave the face unmarked,
 It is also for the sake of *ẹwà*. (My translation)

Whereas many scholars have held the erroneous notion that traditional Yoruba art and *àṣà* are static, unchanging, and repetitive, *ìmojú-mọra* contradicts such assumptions since it contains germs of change, initiative, and creativity that give dynamism to Yoruba art. The range of differing representations and artistic interpretations of Èṣù in Africa and the New World speaks to the importance of *ìmojú-mọra* in Yoruba aesthetics. (See, for example, Chapter 9, Figures 129 and 130.)

TÍTỌ

Tító refers to “durableness,” “lastingness,” “unfading qualities,” “validity,” “probity” as well as “genuineness” and “steadfastness.” *Tító* is probably the most important attribute of *ìwà*, because the Yorùbá consider the most desirable *ìwà* to be that which is “immortal” (*àìkú*). This concept is firmly linked to *òótọ́*, “truth” or “that which is true” and therefore can stand the test of time. Consequently, the most highly sought *ẹwà* is that which does not die. Hence, “*àìkú parí ìwà*” (immortality itself is unalloyed essence)⁶¹ is the logical premise from which one might attain the deathless *ẹwà*. *Tító* inspires, encourages, and supports the durability of artistic material and *àṣà*, leaving little or no room for transient incongruity and ephemeral beauty. Yoruba tradition does not, therefore, always favor change for its own sake. Within reasonable bounds, Yoruba culture respects and preserves time-honored visions whose vocabulary of

representation has been found supportive of the treasured and durable values of the society.

With art molding individual lives from birth to death and dictating the action of whole communities, we can understand the reluctance of the Yorùbá to leave to chance or frivolity the creation of art and the formulation of its aesthetic criteria.

Since we consider all of Yoruba art more or less as *oríkì*, whose *ẹwà* are intricately linked to their *ìwà* which endures, it follows that the physical decay, destruction, or looting of a Ẓàngó shrine or an Ifá divination apparatus cannot spell the end of the religio-aesthetic ideas they embody. Through rituals, music, dance, chant, and mime, the *ẹwà* not only survives but can thrive, and be reconstructed if necessary.⁶² In other words, even though the Yorùbá know and accept the practical fact that wooden artifacts, for example, are perishable, they take consolation in the fact that their concept of imperishable *ìwà* enables them to reproduce the supposedly lost *ẹwà* at another time and place.

Tító demands that performance constitute an integral part of the art process, which means seeing and defining art more as a “predicate” than a noun in order to preserve its *ìwà*, and more important, its *ẹwà*. Thus, the display of artworks in the shrine, their handling during rituals and festivals, the songs, *oríkì*, incantations, music, dance movements, and even the odors that herald their presence are not mere appendages but are considered equally potent art forms that, in many instances, are interchangeable with the sculptures and paintings, which scholars traditionally privilege in their study and analysis of Yoruba art. The aesthetic canon of *tító* in Yoruba art and Yoruba-derived art in the New World depends heavily on these nonmaterial dimensions of Yoruba art, which have survived and thrived in environments where many other artistic traditions would have disappeared. Thus, an essentially Western formalist and self-referential approach will not suffice in the study of Yoruba aesthetics.

In the photograph by Henry Drewal, a Ẓàngó possession priestess from Ọ̀hòrì, Benin Republic, is shown dancing with her *osé* Ẓàngó dance wand, the emblem of her lord, whose power is evidenced in thunder and lightning (see Figure 128). Though visually prominent and displayed by the Ẓàngó priestess, the *osé* is but one item in the complex of art forms that can be employed to invoke the power and personification of Ẓàngó. His devotees’ dance steps, movements, songs, and the satisfaction that exudes from their faces are as palpable and durable as the *osé* that



128. A Šàngó possession priestess dancing with her Šàngó dance wand, emblem of her lord, whose power is evidenced in thunder and lightning. Olori, Nigeria. Photo by H. J. Drewal, 1975. Reproduced by permission of Henry J. Drewal.

they carry. Thus, performance is the primary agency of *tító*, “preserving” art, as opposed to its “fossilization” or “imprisonment” in Western-style museum glass cases and storage rooms. The Yoruba term *itóju*, which means “to take proper care of something,” demands that artworks be performed and used in order to prolong their life and imbue them with aesthetic power.

Notwithstanding this, artists do make a conscious effort to make their work compact, strong, and long-lasting. This is evident in their choice of material, be it wood, metal, or stone. We should, therefore, see the brass and bronze heads of Ifè, and the active deployment of these works in ritual contexts, as an attempt to conform to the ultimate definition of “*Ìwà* as immortality itself”; “*Àikù parí iwà. È è gbó, è è tó*” (May you live long and remain mentally and physically sound) is the most important

prayer of Yoruba subjects for their *oba* (sovereign). Similarly, the work of art needs to be wellpreserved and medicinally potent (where applicable) for as long as possible. A sculpture should be physically intact, as indicated by the concept of *tító*, which emphasizes being well preserved. Consequently, a sculpture with a missing eye, limb, or body parts is often considered ugly or unacceptable as we have shown with Táíwò's *oríkì*.

Thus we find that among the Yorùbá, broken and unfinished works of art are not considered beautiful because their *ìwà* has been adversely affected. Such is the case with the metaphorical Sigìdì, the unbaked mud-sculpture deity that courts disgrace by insisting on being left in the rain.

Ìwà is so basic to the Yoruba aesthetic sensibility that they say:

Ìwà nìkàṅ ló sòro o
Ìwà nìkàṅ ló sòro
Orí kan kii 'burú l'ótu Ifè,
Ìwà nìkàṅ ló sòro.⁶³

Ìwà is all that is needed.

Ìwà is all that is essential.

There is no *orí*⁶⁴ to be called bad in the city of Ifè.

Ìwà is all that is needed. (My translation)

I have attempted in the preceding pages to examine six of the aesthetic considerations that are related to *ìwà* (as *ìwàpèlẹ́*) and to show how they pave the way for the artist, critic, and general viewer to participate fully in the enjoyment of Yoruba art. Indeed, it is the presence of *ìwà* that makes *ẹwà* possible. Conversely, the absence of *ìwà* may be responsible for the lack of *ẹwà*.

Ìwà in Creativity (Production of Ẹwà)

In the Yoruba pantheon, it is Òrìṣànlá whose *ìwà* comes closest to *ìwàpèlẹ́*, which embraces all the aesthetic considerations discussed. An *oríkì* (citation poem) describes this *òrìṣà* as patient, silent, and without anger,⁶⁵ that is, imperturbable – a belief that probably accounts for the identification of Òrìṣànlá with creativity specifically and artistic processes generally.

Every Yoruba artist, especially as *onísẹ-ọ̀nà* (worker of designs), *agbégilẹ̀re* (sculptor/wood-carver), *gbénàgbénà* (designer in wood), or

aláró (dyer/colorist), is a devotee of Ọ̀bàtálá (also known as Ọ̀rìṣànlá or simply Ọ̀rìṣà), the divinity acknowledged in Yoruba traditional belief as creator: the first artist, designer, and sculptor.

As Bolaji Idowu points out, Olódùmarè commissioned Ọ̀rìṣànlá to create the physical body of the human being, as well as the earth and the arrangement of its trappings.⁶⁶ Having been granted the freedom to create as he chooses – a rare occurrence in many artistic traditions in the world – Ọ̀rìṣànlá became the first creative artist in Yoruba culture. It is ironic that creativity is the very quality that scholars in the field have often denied that the traditional artist possesses.

In Yoruba myth, Ọ̀rìṣànlá is the divinity charged with the sole responsibility of producing all human forms, irrespective of whether they are physically attractive or not. He also creates the resplendent, different hues of the dye. Although sometimes called *agbokùnkùn-ṣọ̀ nà*, “one who designs in the dark” [that is, in total seclusion], Ọ̀rìṣànlá is not an anonymous creator, and neither are Yoruba artists who, by reason of their profession, also carry out creative work. The Yorùbá openly acknowledge that each *ẹ̀da* (creature) on earth was created by Ọ̀rìṣànlá’s first artistic efforts – an act illustrated by the saying “Kì ṣe ẹ̀jọ̀ eléyìn gan-gan; Ọ̀rìṣà ló ṣeé, tí kò fi awọ̀ bọ̀ ó” (The person with prominent teeth is not to blame; it is the Ọ̀rìṣà who made them and did not cover them with skin).⁶⁷

Ọ̀rìṣànlá’s role as sculptor-divinity not only accommodates all forms of *ẹ̀wà* through *ìwà* (existence). He is the supreme expert on identity and the character of form, that is, as *amòwà* (the knower of or expert on *ìwà*). By the same token, Ọ̀bàtálá qualifies as the foremost *amẹ̀wà* (expert on *ẹ̀wà*), since *ìwà* exhausts *ẹ̀wà*.

It is against this background that we can begin to know the artists, because they are in fact *àwòrò* (devotees) of Ọ̀rìṣànlá. The following *oríkì* of the artist is virtually the same as Ọ̀rìṣànlá their chief patron.

Emi l’omọ̀ agbégilére
Omọ̀ agbégì rebete ṣé lóge;
Emi l’omọ̀ asogi d’èniyàn
Nígba tí a gbé gí tán,
Igi l’ójú;
Igi l’énu
Igi l’ówó
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ nigi sì l’átàmpàkò

Esè méjèjè n'lè;
Igi sì gun'mú tirè,
O sì se gàgàgà.
Wón kún'gi l'òsùn
Wón se'gi lóge'
O wa kú kigi ó fòhùn l'áàfin Oba
Omọ agbè'gi rebete f'óba
Omọ asọgi dènìyàn.⁶⁸

I, the offspring of a carver of images
 Who makes finished statues in wood and embellishes them;
 I change un-carved wood into human figures.
 After working on a piece of wood
 It possesses eyes,
 Mouth,
 Hands,
 And mere wood now has toes
 Properly positioned on the feet
 Wood now acquires breasts
 Which are full, erect, and attractive
 Red *osùn* [camwood dye pigment] gives color to the wood.
 Fitting designs adorn it.
 It only remains for the wooden figure to speak before the king.
 I, the offspring of the accomplished sculptor who carves for the king;
 Who transforms ordinary wood into a human figure. (My translation)

In transforming their raw material, Yoruba artists seek to realize completely the *ìwà* (identity and essence) of their subject, and *se lóge* (embellish them) through artistic activity using *ojú-onà*.

In Yoruba culture, it is absolutely imperative for individuals to acknowledge each other's identity and presence – their *ìwà*, from moment to moment. There is a special greeting for every occasion and each time of the day. Like incomplete works of art, abbreviated greetings are frowned upon and are sometimes unacceptable. Greetings paint a friend's picture in a setting larger than their own life, quite often through *oríkì* (citation poetry), identifying them with all that is notable in their background. To fail to greet someone is to say that they do not exist (that is, that they lack *ìwà*) and is to liken them to *igi oko*, “the common tree in the forest.” It implies that they lack *ẹwà*, and such an implication is reprehensible in Yoruba culture.

Poverty, childlessness, physical unattractiveness, age, decay, and death cannot rob one of the *ẹwà*, derived from *ìwà*. In summary, it is indeed

the Yoruba belief that “Ìwà l’òrìṣà, bí a bá ti hùú sí ní í gbe ni” (Ìwà is a deity that favors us according to the way in which we express it).⁶⁹

Notes on Text

This work is based largely on fieldwork conducted between 1974 and 1980 in Yorùbáland. I would like to thank the University of Ifè Research Committee for providing the grant that made the investigation possible. The first version of this chapter, “Character in Yorùbá Aesthetics,” was presented at the Fifth Triennial on African Art in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 17, 1975. In 1983, it was published in the *Journal of Cultures and Ideas* 1, no. 1 (1983): 13–30. A slightly revised version titled “Der Begriff des iwa in der Yorùbá – Asthetik” was published in *Tendenzen* 146, no. 25 (1984): 62–68. A substantially updated version on the same topic, “The Future of African Art Studies: An African Perspective,” was published in *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline*, Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, 1990: 63–89.