

In: Rowland Abiòdún, Henry J. Drewal and John Pemberton III
The Yoruba Artist: Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994
New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts

7. In Praise of Metonymy: The Concepts of “Tradition” and “Creativity” in the Transmission of Yoruba Artistry over Time and Space

Ọlabiyi Babalola Yai

As students of Yoruba art history from citadels of Western production of knowledge about others, we cannot hope to do justice to Yoruba art and art history unless we are prepared to reexamine, question, even abandon certain attitudes, assumptions, and concepts of our various disciplines, however foundational they may seem, and consequently take seriously indigenous discourses on art and art history.

One concept that needs to be questioned is objectivity, for the African art historian's claim to scientific objectivity results in portraying art as emanating from self-contained cultures within identifiable frontiers. It is doubtful, however, if such portrayals reflect the experience and intellectual stance of Yoruba artists and of those we would call “traditional art historians” in today's parlance. Admittedly our analyses invariably accommodate diverse influences on specific artistic traditions (e.g., Benin influence on Owo art, Portuguese influence on Benin, etc.). But how relevant is this very concept of influence, in its current usage, when examined in the context of the world views and intellectual traditions of African cultures? What is its epistemological or heuristic status or value? Is it indigenous to Western cultures, conceivable on their terms, or is it alien to and alienating of Africa's cultures?

When approaching Yoruba art, an intellectual orientation that would be more consonant with Yoruba traditions of scholarship would be to consider each individual Yoruba art work and the entire corpus¹ as *oriki*. One advantage of such an attitude is that it allows the researcher to answer the series of questions pertinently raised by Jan Vansina in the introduction to his *Art History in Africa* (Vansina 1984:3) and to raise new issues and inquiries, for by its nature an *oriki* is an unfinished and generative art enterprise, as emphatically stated in the following *meta-oriki*, that is, an *oriki* that is a discourse on *oriki*: *àkìkítán* (the one whose praises are endless).²

Making *oriki* a tutelary goddess of Yoruba art history studies enjoins us to pay more attention to the history dimension of the discipline's title. This in turn entails that we familiarize ourselves with Yoruba concepts of history and be conversant with the language and metalanguage of Yoruba art history.³

For a Yoruba intellectual, *oriki* as a concept and a discursive practice is inseparable from the concept and discursive practice of *itàn*. Indeed it can be argued that both are members of a constellation of basic Yoruba concepts without the elucidation of which it is almost impossible to

understand any aspect of Yoruba culture. An exploration of the concept based on its linguistic analysis is therefore in order. This is no idle exercise, for the Yoruba word *itàn* is invariably translated as “history,” a word and concept with so vast a meaning as to deserve the appellation of “continent histoire” (continent history) in contemporary European discourse. Now the *itàn* = history equivalence involves both reduction and translation, and perhaps more the former than the latter. More important, this equivalence blocks our understanding of the Yoruba concept of and attitudes toward history.

Etymologically *itàn* is a noun derived from the verb *tàn*. *Tàn* means to spread, reach, open up, illuminate, shine.⁴ The verb *tàn* and the derivative noun *itàn* are polysemic and integrate at least three fundamental dimensions. First, there is the chronological dimension through which human generations and their beings, deeds, and values are related. Second, there is the territorial or geographical dimension through which history is viewed as expansion (not necessarily with the imperial connotation that has become the stigma of that concept in the English language) of individuals, lineages, and races beyond their original cradle. In that sense it is important to observe that the Yoruba have always conceived of their history as diaspora. The concept and reality of diaspora, viewed and perceived in certain cultures (Greek, Jewish) as either necessity or lamented accident, are rationalized in Yorubaland as the normal or natural order of things historical.

In the intellectual traditions of the Yoruba, as elaborated by and handed down to us by the *babaláwo* in Ifa texts, the geographical dimension of *itàn* revolves around five cardinal axes. Wande Abimbola accurately circumscribes this element of the definition of *itàn* in the following terms:

Ifa has long ago divided the globe into five regions, namely:

- a. *Ìkọ Awúsí* (the Americas)
- b. *Ìdòròmù Àwúsẹ̀* (Africa)
- c. *Meréetélú* (Europe and Asia)
- d. *Mẹ̀sìn Àkáárúbà* (Arabia, the land of the worship of Kaaba)
- e. *Ìwónran níbi ojúmó tí í mọ́ wá* (which refers to Australasia)

As far as the Yoruba are concerned, all the above mentioned parts of the world are all lands of Ifa. Thus, when an Ifa priest wakes up in the morning, he will salute Ifa in all these five divisions of the earth (Abimbola 1983:80).

The third dimension of *itàn* has paradoxically and tragically been neglected by most Yoruba historians. This is the discursive and reflexive dimension of the concept. *Tàn* means to illuminate, enlighten, discern, disentangle. *Tàn* is therefore to discourse profoundly on the two dimensions earlier mentioned. The noun *itàn* for this dimension always requires the active verb *pa*.

Pa itàn (*pitàn* in contracted form) is often trivially and somewhat inadequately translated as “to tell a story.” *Pa* is also used for such nouns as *èkúrọ́* (kernel) *obì* (kola nut) = to separate the two lobes of the kola nut; *eyin*, *omọ* (egg, to hatch); *òwe* (proverb); *àlọ́* (riddle, parable).⁵ *Pitàn*

therefore means to produce such a discourse that could constitute the Ariadne's thread of the human historical labyrinth, history being equated with a maze or a riddle. *Pa itàn* is to "de-riddle" history, to shed light on human existence through time and space. No wonder Ọrunmila, the Yoruba deity of wisdom, knowledge, and divination, is called *Ọpitàn ilẹ Ifẹ* (He who de-riddles *itàn*, i.e., unravels history throughout Ifẹ territory).

We cannot hope to understand fully the art history of Yorubaland and neighboring cultures unless and until we become conversant with the intellectual climate prevalent in the region in precolonial times. Historians' histories of the area unduly inflate politics by emphasizing the hegemonic behavior of certain kings and dynasties and the unquestionably divisive factor of the slave trade, to the detriment of a strong unifying undercurrent observable among the peoples and the intellectuals of the various ethnic groups at all times, even when their rulers were at war. In this respect A. Akinjogbin's "*ẹbí* social theory" remains unsurpassed as the most reliable and convincing historical paradigm for its sensitivity to Yoruba values and its explanatory power, while his critics' argumentation lacks cultural relevance. The intellectual climate of the region was and still is largely characterized by a dialogic ethos, a constant pursuit to exchange ideas, experience, and material culture. Each city was a locus of intellectual interaction between intellectuals (*ba-baláwo*, herbalists, poets, artists, et al.), and Ile-Ifẹ was regarded as a sanctuary and the university par excellence in the etymological sense of this word.

Polyglottism was a common feature among intellectuals, and the Yoruba language in its Ifẹ and Ọyọ varieties was the preferred language of intellectual discourse of the entire region, particularly among diviners. The degree to which polyglottism and multiculturalism was highly valued, and indeed required of intellectuals, is expressed in the well-known *oríkì* of Ọrunmila, the god of divination. He is known as *Afedẹfẹyọ*, that is, "He who speaks all languages and Yoruba." Polyglottism and multiculturalism feature prominently in the divination "corpus" of the Ewe, Gun, Fon, and Aja where "lines" and sometimes entire verses of other languages of the region are found in the Yoruba Ifa "corpus" (see Maupoil 1936; Abimbola 1968).

The leading role of the Yoruba language is also documented in the accounts of early travelers, although little attention has hitherto been paid to this important aspect of the intellectual history of the area. For example, Alonso de Sandoval referred to the Ọyọ Yoruba, then known as Lucumi, as peoples whose culture was prestigious among the Bini, Arda, Mina, and Popo (Sandoval 1956:16-17).⁶ In 1640 a Jesuit missionary, Frei Colombina de Nantes, likened the status of the Yoruba language in West Africa to that of Latin in Europe: "lingua eorum est facilis, vocatur lingua Licomin et est universalis in jstis partibus sicut latinum in partibus Europa" ("their language is easy to learn, it is called the lucumi language and is universal in this area as Latin is in Europe") (Brasio 1956-68:465, my translation). Art objects should ideally be appraised with this broad context in mind.

Viewed from this perspective, the Ulm divination tray (*ọpón Ifá*) takes on a pivotal significance

ẹbí = family,
relation

for the art history of the region and the mode and mood of interaction between West African cultures. For want of a better term, the Ulm divination tray is an important “text.” It must be kept in mind that a divination tray is not just an art object or ritual paraphernalia. For a Yoruba intellectual, an *ọpón Ifá* is itself a *babaláwo*. An Ifa verse from the Eji Ogbe “chapter” (*odù*) describes the *ọpón Ifá* as one of the three main *omọ awo* (disciples) of Ọrunmila sent to foreign lands to seek wisdom and knowledge.

	Oore ń gbé	Generosity is never wasted.
	Oore ń nù	Generosity is never lost.
	È ẹ rọrà gùdò	Exercise great caution
	Kóore ó má baà ẹ gbé	That generosity may not be wasted.
5	A dífá fún Ọrunmila	Ifa divination is performed to Ọrunmila,
	Ifá ó tẹ omọ awo méta re nífá	Who initiated his three disciples.
	Ifá lo topón nífá	Ifa initiated <i>ọpón</i> [the tray].
	Ọpón sawo lo síkọ Awúsi	<i>Ọpón</i> traveled to Iko Awusi to seek knowledge.
	ọba ló jẹ	He became a king there.
	Ifá ló tẹ ajere nífá	Ifa initiated <i>ajere</i> .
	Ajeré sawo lo sÓdòròmù Awúṣẹ	<i>Ajere</i> traveled to Idoromu Awúṣẹ.
10	Ọba ló jẹ níbẹ	There he became a king.
	Ifá ló tẹbò nífá	Ifa initiated <i>ibó</i> .
	Ìbó sawo lo síwónrán ibi ojúmọṛe	<i>Ìbó</i> traveled to Iworn in the Orient to seek
	é ti í mó	knowledge.
	Níbẹ ni o gbé di ọba	There he became a king.
	Kí í mää gbé adẹṣẹ	Generosity is rewarded.
15	Kì i gbe, adẹṣẹ	Generosity is never wasted.
	Orire	Generosity.

pot w/ holes like sieve.

What this Ifa verse tells us is that *ọpón Ifá*, the divination tray, is an agent in the Yoruba mode of relating to other cultures.

That an *ọpón Ifá* from Alada is among the oldest “art works” in a European museum is no accident for Alada is often mentioned in Ifa divination literature. The name of Alada or Arada is emblematic of wealth and evoked and invoked in Ifa recitations to signify abundance of riches resulting from compliance with Ifa’s suggestions, recommendations, or prescriptions. This is ritually evoked in the following context.

Otití baba ajé	Otiti, epitome of wealth
Ọlọginingini aṣọ Àràdà	Ọlọginingini cloth originated from Alada
Àkòókótán ohun ọrọ nífẹ	Inexhaustible riches from Ife

The Ulm *ọpón Ifá* is also symbolic of the will of the West African elite to engage European cultures in a dialogue on an equal footing. The tray belonged to King Tezifon of Alada and was described

in the *Exoticophylacium* (p. 52) as "an offering board carved in relief with rare and loathsome devilish images, which the king of Ardra, who is a vassal of the great king of Benin, together with the most important officers and men of the region, uses to employ in fetish rituals or in sacrifices to their gods. This offering board was given to, and used by, the reigning king of Ardra himself" (see Ezio Bassani, this volume).

We know that about the time this was written (1659) King Tezifon of Alada had been sending emissaries to European powers. King Felipe IV of Spain responded by sending to Alada a delegation of twelve Capuchins who in 1658 brought to the kingdom a translation (into the Alada language) of Christian doctrine (Labouret and Rivet 1929; Yai 1992). We must resist the secular temptation of interpreting the decision of King Tezifon in sending his divination tray to Europe as a mere gesture of kindness from an African to a European prince. It would be equally senseless to hypothesize that the king was trying to convert his European counterparts to his religion, since proselytizing was not a feature of his religion. If, as was stressed by contemporaries, the Ulm tray belonged to the king himself, he could not possibly have sent a divination tray overseas gratuitously, given what an *opón Ifá* represented to him.

I surmise that Tezifon's gesture was one of diplomatic and cultural reciprocation. As European kings sent to West Africa missionaries who were perceived as the most representative wise men and intellectuals of their respective nations, the king of Alada, in an attempt to establish an equal cultural and political exchange, must have thought of sending to European kings a divination tray that he perceived as the perfect equivalent of the text European missionaries carried with them along the West African coast. We must not forget that most missionaries were accountable to their kings. A divination tray is always the result of the collaboration between two creative individuals, a diviner and an artist. It was a carved text par excellence. Tezifon, therefore, was engaging the contemporary European elite in a cultural dialogue, an exchange of texts or discourses. Because King Tezifon knew some Portuguese,⁷ it is possible, and indeed likely, that he might have explained the meaning of the tray to those who carried it to Europe. The iconography of the tray lends some credence to this hypothesis. The tray is an "*ológìningìni*" on wood. The word *ológìningìni*, which designates a luxury textile of which Alada specialized in producing, is an ideophone. The nature and combination of the consonants and vowels, as well as the tonal pattern of this word, together suggest to the ears of a cultured Yoruba the impression of a textile that is very rich in motifs and colors, an epitome of the baroque.

In the same way, the Ulm tray is a supremely loaded text (Bassani, this volume; H. J. Drewal 1983). It abounds in symbols of political and spiritual power and authority. The variety of the motifs represented (human beings of both sexes and various ages, animals of various order, plants, Eṣu's head with magic gourds, a divination chain, etc.) and their syntax seem to suggest that the artist and his patron deliberately sought to portray the Alada polity as one, diverse, and wealthy.

Who was the artist? Was he a Yoruba? Can the Alada-Ulm tray still be considered as a Yoruba

art work? Are these questions meaningful in the context of the area in the seventeenth century? Ezio Bassani has convincingly demonstrated that the Alada-Ulm tray shows some morphological and stylistic similarities with a group of statues collected in the Benin Republic and Togo. The same morphological and stylistic features can be identified, I may add, in modern appliqué textiles in Alada and Abomey, which seem to suggest that there exists some permanence of style in the region. But the Alada-Ulm tray is unique in one important respect: it creolized the cardinal types of Yoruba and Fon divination trays. While divination trays can be either circular or quadrangular in Yorubaland, the preferred shape in Fon-speaking areas is the quadrangle (Maupoil 1936). The Alada-Ulm tray inscribes, so to speak, a circle within a quadrangle. The artist, if a native of Alada, was conversant with Yoruba religious and artistic traditions. There is good reason to believe that his style, far from being an aberration, was paradigmatic of artistic and intellectual traditions in the Alada kingdom, for Olfert Dapper in his *Description de l'Afrique*, originally published in Dutch in 1686, said concerning Alada: "C'est une chose fort singulière que ces Nègres méprisent leur langue maternelle et ne la parlent presque point, pour en apprendre une autre qu'ils ont toujours à la bouche, nommée Ulcumy." (It is quite remarkable that these Negroes disdain their mother tongue and hardly speak it, in order to learn another language that they always speak called Ulcumy [i.e., Yoruba]) (Dapper 1989:225, my translation).

If the Yoruba language was spoken by the Alada people without it being imposed,⁸ to the point that Dapper was shocked by what must have appeared to him as alienation, we can infer that other aspects of Yoruba culture, artistic traditions included, were also well known and practiced in the kingdom of Alada. Dapper's unjustifiably neglected observation raises fundamental issues concerning the modes of relating Yoruba artistic traditions in time and space. How could the Alada peoples and their elite have accepted that which in many, perhaps most, historical circumstances would have necessitated some measure of imperialism? How does one account for this paradox of *deliberate alienation*? I would like to offer, not a definitive answer to the enigma, but a few hypothetical suggestions. It is hoped that they will provoke contributions from as many angles as possible, for it is only through a diverse and collective approach that Yoruba culture, a perfect Harlequin robe, is best apprehended.

Since the paradox, far from being accidental, appears to be characteristic of Yoruba cultures whenever they are in permanent contact with other cultures, an examination of some tenets of Yoruba philosophy could perhaps prove useful. We must keep in mind that the ideal artist in the Yoruba tradition is an *àrè* (itinerant). Lagbayi, the legendary Yoruba sculptor, lived as an *àrè*. An *àrè* is an itinerant, a permanent stranger, precisely because he or she can be permanent nowhere. Being an *àrè* is therefore being an individual exponent of *itàn* as defined in the first part of this essay.⁹

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.¹⁰

Even deconstruction theory and idiom, often praised as the most advanced mode of criticism, lacks the vocabulary needed to account for Yoruba attitudes toward "representation," since its "decentering" concept presupposes a center. In the Yoruba world view the best way to recognize reality and artistically relate to it is to depart from it. An entity or reality worth respecting is that from which we depart or differ. Thus the essence of art is universal bifurcation. Yoruba verbal art, *oriki*, abundantly displays this bifurcation ethos as do the visual arts, which, as we now know, are modalities of *oriki*.

The language and metalanguage of the Yoruba verbal and visual arts predictably overlap, and perhaps critics should be more sensitive to them. The key concept in this domain is *yà*, as in the expression *yà ère* (to carve), *yà àwòrán* (to design, paint). Similarly, in the verbal arts, in *ìjálá* for example, the following metalinguistic and critical verses punctuate any performance:

Orí kan nù un nì
Ìyàtò kan nu un ni

Here is one orí,
Here is one departure/difference.

These two emphatic métalingual and critical "lines" are used to signal the "fluidity, boundarilessness and centrelessness" of the constituent parts of an *oriki* performance (Barber 1991:249).

It is no accident that the key Yoruba concepts of *orí* (individuality) and *ìyàtò* (difference, originality) are prominent in these lines. This is because oral and visual *oriki* are essentially vocative discourse in which dialogue is an essential ingredient. But *oriki* is also evocative and provocative.

I would like to suggest that the Yoruba mode of artistically engaging reality and their way of relating to one another, to the *òrìṣà*, and other cultures is more metonymic than metaphoric. To "ki" (perform *oriki* verbally) and to "gbé" or "yà" (carve) is to provoke and be provoked.¹¹ Art is an invitation to infinite metonymic difference and departure, and not a summation for sameness and imitation.

In such a culture, the perennial question in art history regarding the relation between tradition and creativity is less tragically posed, solved, and lived, for to a large extent the tradition/creativity binary opposition is neutralized. "Tradition" in Yoruba is *àṣà*. Innovation is implied in the Yoruba idea of tradition. The verb *ṣà*, from which the noun *àṣà* is derived, means to select, choose, discriminate, or discern. *Ṣà* and *tàn* are semantically cognate. Hence *àṣà* and *itàn* are inextricably related. Something cannot qualify as *àṣà* which has not been the result of deliberate choice (*ṣà*) based on discernment and awareness of historical practices and processes (*itàn*) by individual or

collective *ori*. And since choice presides over the birth of an *àṣà* (tradition), the latter is permanently liable to metamorphosis.

One can therefore easily understand Muraina Oyelami, a prominent Oṣogbo artist, when he affirms that he loses a piece of himself with every painting. Similarly one has no difficulty understanding the irritation and anger of another member of the same school, Rufus Ogundele, when called “the Picasso of Nigeria.” His insistence that “Rufus is Rufus” is Yoruba and traditional (H. U. Beier 1992:15, 48). The perception of tradition as iteration of individual and collective *ori*'s, acts based on choice in an infinite figure of contiguity, is also perceptible in the often heard and seemingly paradoxical statement by Yoruba artists: “Our tradition is very modern.” A paradox in the English language, this statement squarely resists translation into Yoruba, for *àṣà* is both the “traditional” and the “modern.” It is one of those pronouncements that is not admissible in the Yoruba language and can only be rendered at the risk of being tautological. Indeed, it is a pronouncement invariably meant for and directed to non-Yoruba people.

This ability to reconcile opacity and difference and openness in an unending movement of metonymic engagements might explain the success and popularity of Yoruba culture in the New World where it has greatly contributed to cement and creolize African and non-African cultures, despite a social climate of intolerance and invitation to mimetism. As the Yoruba themselves believe and say emphatically: “Orúko tó wu ni làà jé lèhìn odi” (Outside the walls of your birthplace, you have a right to choose the name that is attractive to you).

Notes

1. Expressions such as “Ifa literary corpus” and “*oríki* corpus” are nonsensical from the point of view of Yoruba culture because of their assumption of closure.
2. In this regard, the title of Karin Barber’s book, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow*, could not have been more appropriate.
3. We are all victims of the imperialism of writing, with its pejorative attitude toward oral cultures. As a consequence, most Africans conduct their research with an implicit assumption of a discursive and meta-linguistic *tabula rasa* in the cultures being studied. The epistemological poverty of this attitude need not be elaborated. Fortunately, Yoruba art scholars are increasingly going against this grain, resulting in more perceptive analyses.
4. As it sometimes happens in the Yoruba language, the verb *tàn* has a mid-tone pseudo homophone, *tan*. They belong to the same semantic range. *Tan* means to relate, to belong to the same family.
5. For a systematic exploration of the concept encapsulated in the verb *pa* and its relation to other concepts used in Yoruba metalanguage and literary/artistic discourse, see Adeeko 1991.
6. “Los lucumies, gente no menos en numero que en consideración” are Sandoval’s words.
7. He was sent to São Tomé in his younger years because his father wanted him to master the secrets of the European’s might. But the Europeans wanted to convert him to Christianity, which he resisted (Labouret and Rivet 1929; Lombard 1967:48).

8. It is only in 1698 that Oyo made military incursions in Alada, according to Dalzel (see Lombard 1967:49).

9. *Àrè* used to be quintessentially laudatory in meaning to the point that it sounds like a "chieftaincy title," for example, Are Lagbayi. Sadly enough, with colonization and the erosion of Yoruba values, *àrè* nowadays in certain quarters has acquired a pejorative connotation. An *àrè* nowadays is more of a vagabond than an itinerant poet or artist.

10. Margaret Thompson Drewal points to the difficulties encountered in this domain by Western scholarship on representation and new ways of coming to terms with conventional views of repetition by advocating a "repetition with critical difference" (M. T. Drewal 1992:3).

11. For a brilliant discussion of this approach to art and creativity, as equally brilliantly represented in Yoruba modern letters by Wole Soyinka, see Fioupou (1991:491-518).