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The Future of African Art Studies *An African Perspective*

Rowland Abíodun

Bí òní tírì
Òlá le ma ríbeè
Ní í mú kí Babaláwo
Ó dá 'fá ororún. (Collected in Ilé-Ife, 1974)

Today's divination
May not be valid tomorrow [that is, in the future].
This is the reason Babaláwo [Yorùbá diviners]
Must divine repeatedly every five days
[that is, once in each four-day week].

The Yorùbá four-day cycle is named after four of the most powerful and influential *òrìsà* (deities in the Yorùbá pantheon), namely, Òrìsànlá, Ògún, Ifá, and Sàngó. Most market days and important meetings take place once per week. It is also significant that when okra vegetables are in season, Yorùbá farmers harvest them once per week. In between the harvesting times, new buds appear and existing ones come to maturity.

In many ways, this symposium is similar to this scenario. This paper will address the important subject of the future of African art studies from an African perspective. Like the Babaláwo, a traditional African diviner, I am very much aware of the unreliability of predictions, but take consolation that provision has been made for a periodic review of all divinations. The diviner, therefore, can never really be judged as

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incompetent, particularly as his client will rarely be able to make sacrifices to all of the deities, some of whom are very jealous and highly temperamental and therefore need to be placated before a successful divination can be assured.

I believe that in the years to come, African art will take on new dimensions that no one has yet imagined—dimensions that will not only connect it more fully and effectively with cognate academic disciplines but will also fulfill many of the yearnings and aspirations of distinguished scholars in the field. Present interest in the exploration of African art through “sight” and “sound” will include the element of “soul.” By this I mean that the current conventional anthropological and art-historical approaches—which emphasize direct representational reaction and formal analysis to the detriment of culturally based studies in aesthetics and art criticism—will make full use of the philosophies of the African peoples.

There will be renewed interest in field research, but this time around, the role and involvement of African scholars will be much greater. The goal will be to interpret African art from inside the culture that gave it birth rather than from outside. In a bid to allow the culture to speak for itself, scholars will give more credibility and importance to primary sources, which consist mainly of oral traditions, than to secondary sources, which may have become authoritative simply because they were in print. Oral traditions will become a highly efficient means of studying culture, retrieving history, and reconstructing artistic values. Used properly, oral traditions will reveal forgotten meanings that would be hard or even impossible to obtain from the most cooperative informant.

The recognition of how important African languages and literatures are to the understanding of African art will lead to a reconsideration of many “closed” issues, theoretical frameworks, and artistic concepts; a redefinition of much terminology; and a reappraisal of the present style and techniques of displaying African art objects in museums and exhibition halls. I believe that these changes will mark the beginning of a truly interdisciplinary study and lay the foundation of a joint search for those values and concepts which lie behind the creation of African art. Such a study of the aesthetics of African art can be illustrated by my current work among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria.¹

The Yorùbá people number well over twenty-five million and constitute one of the strongest and largest cultural groups in Africa south of the Sahara. Yorùbá kingdoms and settlements occupy the southwest-

ern area of Nigeria and extend beyond it into the nations of Benin and Togo. Through the slave trade, Yorùbá culture was transported across the Atlantic and has survived to be a powerful influence on Africans in the New World. In short, Africans in the diaspora constitute sizable proportions of the populations of Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America.

The Yorùbá culture—well known for its fine artistic achievements, primarily through the naturalistic life-size bronze and terra-cotta heads of Ifè—has produced a large number of the wood, ivory, bead, leather, textile, and other artifacts that we see displayed in major collections and museums of African art all over the world. Yorùbá art is among the earliest known by the West and consists of some of the best-studied African works in the field.

Rudiments of Yorùbá Artistic Criticism

Yorùbá artistic criticism emanates from the highest level of aesthetic consciousness. Not everyone can be an art critic or *amewà*, “expert on beauty.” This is something that requires a significant and conscious effort to acquire. The market woman, the *egúngún* audience, the art user, or even the artist will not necessarily be an art critic, even though each may have acquired some rudimentary appreciation of the Yorùbá concept of beauty through a random or accidental encounter with art. To say this is not to deny, of course, that their comments can be interesting, intelligent, and even insightful.

Although there is no formal training for 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 àwon àgbà rín*, 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 the finished artistic works in operative contexts. I discovered that a good number of these elder-critics are Ifá priests who, by virtue of their profession, take part in traditional community rituals and festivals and have at their disposal a profound knowledge of the complete cultural background.

It is a consequence of their position and training that the 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 onka mèsàn àn kà á*, "It is not courteous to count the fingers or toes of a nine-digited person in his presence."

In his study of Yorùbá Ìjálá artists, Adebayo Babalola 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 Ìjálá artists. But later on, *in private* conversation on the subject of who is who in Ìjálá-chanting in the area, each person speaks out his mind and thus the reputations of the best Ìjálá artists are established [italics mine]. (Babalola 1976, 51)

This is probably why, as Ulli Beier once reported, one never overhears "spontaneous discussion of form, proportion or expression of a piece of sculpture" (1963, 3). My observations in the field also indicate that traditional artists hesitate to comment on a colleague's work in public.

For one to qualify to "walk with the elders," one must possess and demonstrate these qualities at least: *ìfarabalè* (calmness), *ìluti* (teachableness), *ìmojú-mora* (sensitivity), and *ìtító* (steadfastness). Other qualities, like *ojú-inú* (insight) and *ojú-onà* (design consciousness), are developed through training.

All the foregoing qualities belong to *sùúrù* (patience) or *ìwàpèlè* (gentle character), which in Yorùbá traditional thought embody the highest and most desirable attributes of *ìwà* (character) and, therefore, also incorporate the most important canons of Yorùbá artistic criticism and aesthetic judgment.

Centrality of *ìwà* as a Concept

The concept of *ìwà*² is crucial to the definition of beauty in Yorùbá thought. Even though scholars of the subject appear to have acknowledged this fact (Thompson 1971a, 1971b, 1973a, 1973b, 1984; Lawal 1974; Drewal 1980), the dynamic relationship which exists between *ìwà* (character) and *ewà* (beauty) has yet to be explained. Indeed, a Yorùbá aphorism declares *ìwà l' ewà*, that is, "*ìwà* is beauty."

"Beauty" in this usage, however, pertains not so much to the superficial physical appearance of things as to their deep essence in Yorùbá culture and metaphysics.

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

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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. (1971, 127)

Further on, 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. (1971, 128)

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

In his work on Yorùbá aesthetics, Babatunde Lawal (1974, 239) asserts that "In man, *ewà-inú* (the intrinsic worth of things) is frequently implied in the word *ìwà* or character."

The word *ìwà* in Yorùbá can mean either "character" or "existence." The noun *ìwà* is formed by adding the prefix *i* to the verb *wà* (to exist, to be), a normal nominalization process of Yorùbá language (Bamgbose 1967). Wande Abimbola 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 (1975, 393). A cognate aphorism says *Aikú parí ìwà*, literally, "Immortality completes existence," but more idiomatically, "Immortality is perfect existence."

Abimbola's suggested relationship between *ìwà* as "existence" and *ìwà* as "character" provides a possible explanation for the use of the two meanings of *ìwà* in Yorùbá thought, particularly in the Ifá literary corpus. The following is an Ifá verse.

Òrìsànlá d' áró méta
Ó dá kan ní dúdú
Ó dá kan ní pupa
Ó dá kan ní funfun.

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Dúdú ní o re mí
O ò gbodò re mí ní pupa.
Dúdú ní o re mí,
O ò gbodò re mí ní funfun.
Ìwà mí ní o kó tètè re
Ní Kùrùkùtù Obarìsà. (Akinbiyi Akiwowo, pers. com., 1976)

Òrìsànlá 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 *iwà* first
At the dawn of creation.

We see that "Dye me with my *iwà* first" means "First give me existence" or "First create my being." The "black," "red," and "white" dyes represent the various possibilities of "character" that the individual can be endowed with at creation.

Also in this verse, we note that Òrìsànlá, the creator-divinity does the "dyeing" (that is, the imbuing) with *iwà* (meaning either "being" or "character"). But most important, his work or product is above reproach in traditional Yorùbá thought. An illustration of this last point is appropriate since we shall build more on it later.

In Ifá divination literature, *Ìwà*, an *òrìsà*, is presented as an exceedingly beautiful woman who lacked good behavior and had many dirty habits. Her negative traits notwithstanding, she was indispensable to her husband, Òrúnmlà, whose prosperity, honor, and popularity were all attributed to her presence.

It was not long, however, before Òrúnmlà's patience ran out and he drove *Ìwà* out of his house. Soon afterward, however, Òrúnmlà went searching for *Ìwà*, having realized how much he had lost. He was determined to sacrifice everything he had (money, children, houses, clothes) in order to have her back. When they were finally reunited, *Ìwà* was not blamed—it was Òrúnmlà who was blamed for not exercising enough patience in dealing with his wife (Abimbola 1975, 415–16). *Ìwà* was not blamed for the rift between herself and Òrúnmlà because (1) she was an *òrìsà*, (2) she was being herself, and (3) 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 human and the divine. Thus, true to her character as an *òrìsà*, *Ìwà*'s indispensability to Òrúnmlà is not based on whether or not she conforms to the generally accepted standards of goodness and ethics, for the issues involved here go beyond those of morality. Simply stated, the uniqueness and beauty of *Ìwà* in this story derives from her consistency with her character and the subsequent expression of it.

Similarly, Òrúnmlà has his own character (*iwà*) which though very different from his wife's must also be expressed by him at all times. Òrúnmlà's character is, however, difficult to maintain. He needed plenty of sacrifice and patience, which he did not have enough of, in his relationship with *Ìwà* and therefore lost her.

The implication of this is that Òrúnmlà's character (*iwà*) is not sufficiently like that of Sùúrù (Patience), his father-in-law. Thus, becoming like Sùúrù was the only way Òrúnmlà could save his relationship with *Ìwà* and prevent loneliness. Certainly, Òrúnmlà did not consider any effort or sacrifice too great to make to gain her back. And in any case, the Yorùbá believe that *Àìgbà're k'ámá gba'bí*, "Evil and Good go together" (Lawal 1974, 239), a point that has been amply demonstrated in the person of *Ìwà*.

In Yorùbá religion, *Ìwà* is considered the daughter of Sùúrù (Patience), who is the first child of Olódùmarè (the Almighty God). With the help of Sùúrù (Bàbá *Ìwà*, or the Father of *Ìwà*, as he is also often called), Olódùmarè controls all of his numerous but diverse creations, also represented by the character of *Ìwà*. Each creation, be it a divinity, person, or thing, possesses its own inner beauty as a necessary consequence of *iwà* (being and character). Thus, the deities Ògún (of war and iron), Oya (of the Niger River), Òsun (of the Òsun River), Sàngó (of thunder and lightning), Òbàtálá (the arch-divinity), Sònpònná (of smallpox), Ikú (of death), Arùn (of disease), Egbà (of palsy), Òfò (of perdition), and Èsù (the trickster) have their individual and imperishable *ewà* (inner beauty). Our judgment of them, like that of Òrúnmlà's wife, *Ìwà*, should not be bound by human codes or morals.

Of immediate relevance here is the Yorùbá saying *Mò iwà fún oníwà*, literally, "Recognize existence in respect of the one existing," 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 Yorùbá respect this category or level of the

aesthetic and acknowledge it. This would explain the Yorùbá admiration of divinities like Sònpònná, Sàngó, Ògún, Èsù, Iḱú, all of whose characters or behaviors may be perceived as immoral in human terms. The hunchback, the albino, and other deformed persons—all the handiwork of Òbàtálá—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 *Òwò Òrìsà l’áḱfì wo Áḱín*, “We perceive the honor [divinity] of Òrìsà [the sculptor divinity] in the albino.” Similarly, an insane person is appreciated for the unusual viewpoint he provides: *Wèré dùn ún wò, sùḱbon kò se é bí l’omo*, “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 praise poems and songs composed in their honor.

All of the above examples, in my opinion, illustrate Abimbola’s original meaning of *ìwà*, as well as the inner beauty (*ewà*) of Ìwà as Òrúnmílà’s wife in Ifà literature. Put simply, this *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 it is a part.

The Yorùbá *oríkì* (praise poems/names) of òrìsà, man, and all other things play a vital role in this *ìwà*. The *oríkì* constitute a powerful verbal art form in the identification and realization of the essence of everything known to the Yorùbá. When a thing expresses the qualities attributed to it in the *oríkì*, it has fulfilled the most important prerequisite of *ewà* at that level of *ìwà*.

It is interesting that Roy Sieber has observed a somewhat similar attitude among the Igala, who share much with the Yorùbá. He describes how a tribesman once offered his critique of a mask in two words: “one [word] identified the mask, the other indicated that it was well done” (1971, 130).

In Yorùbá, a thing can lose its *ewà* and be deemed ugly (*obúrèwà*) if its character or identity is lost. In such an instance, the Yorùbá may invoke a saying like *Nígbà tí-Sìgìdì bá fé té, a ní kí won ó gbé ’ún sínú òjò*, “Sìgìdì [a greatly feared òrìsà 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* and *ewà*.

The manifestation of the “well made” or “well done” in Yorùbá aesthetics, already noted by Lawal (1974, 239), seems to correspond well

with the second part of the Igala tribesman’s critique of the mask. More important, the concept introduces the aesthetic consciousness that the artist needs to accomplish his task successfully. This aesthetic consciousness derives from the *ìwà* (character) of the artist. In other words, there is a recognition of certain character traits that the Yorùbá consider indispensable in the production of a “well-done” or “well-made” work. Like that of Òrúnmílà, the artist’s *ìwà* also calls for plenty of sacrifice and patience. “Sacrifice” as used here includes the placing of the artist’s *ìwà* over and above one’s own individual *ìwà*, which may not necessarily include patience (*sùúrù*). The artist’s *ìwà*, incidentally, is also the type that Yorùbá culture demands of chiefs, kings, diviners, and family heads for their works or activities to be considered beautiful. To maintain this *ìwà* is no less challenging than keeping the Yorùbá universe in perfect equilibrium with volatile or quick-tempered òrìsà such as Sàngó, Sònpònná, Ògún, and Èsù, all of whom express their own *ìwà*. Ordinary people who share this aesthetic consciousness are highly praised and ranked with the topmost men and women in the society.

This kind of aesthetic consciousness derives from the notion of *ìwà* as *ìwàpèlè*, meaning “gentle character,” or *sùúrù* (patience). It is not opposed to Abimbola’s original meaning of *ìwà* discussed earlier but represents a much larger complex, inclusive of aesthetic universes hosting all the notions of *ìwà*.

Since the Yorùbá regard *ìwàpèlè* as the most desirable *ìwà*, its opposite would be *ìwà-lìlè* (literally “hard character”), and the word is usually used to describe someone who is difficult and uncompromising. These two aspects of *ìwà* have been well illustrated in the Ìwà story told earlier. In it, we see that Òrúnmílà needed to operate at a deeper level of aesthetic consciousness in order to accommodate and appreciate Ìwà, his wife, with all her shortcomings (Abimbola 1975, 389).

Referring to this same aesthetic quality in his important work “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” Robert Farris Thompson 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. (1973b, 41-42)

Henry Drewal also refers to the concept of *tútù* (coolness) when applied to the gods as a trait that characterizes elderly women. With the *àse* (authority to effect a change or make things happen) at creation to a major female *òrisà* such as *Òsun*, women—especially those already past menopause—are believed to possess a form of noiseless and concealed power that they can use to accomplish any desired goal. And, because such a goal may be constructive or destructive, elaborate annual festivals like the *gèlède* are held in parts of western Yorùbáland to placate and acknowledge the power of women, who are known in such contexts as *awon iya wa* (our mothers). Drewal specifically describes *Iyánlá* (the Great Mother):

Iyánlá, a deity and one primary manifestation of feminine power, is described as cool (*onítútù*) and patient (*onisúúrú*) 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. (1977, 551-52)

The source of this aesthetic consciousness in Yorùbá 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 beauty. An *Ifá* poem describes this yearning for fulfillment at creation.

Ìwà l'ewà
Omo lèsó ilé
Omo-eni-là-á-késí,
Omo-eni-ní-ífi-wà-j'oni.
Òun Bì-èyàn-dára-tí-kò-ní-ìwà-
Igi-oko-ni-ká-maá-fi-wé.
Awon ni wón dá Ifá fún Olófin-Òtètè
Tí ó nwéni tí ó jo òun
Níjò tí ó dá kèsekése
Nwón ní nílè ayé
Kò sí enìkan mbé
O sì da kèsekése

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Ode Orun o ò lé èyàn
Agbadagúúú méjì ilè
A bojú raú. (David Adeniji, pers. com., May 1974)

Ìwà is beauty.
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-void-of-*ìwà*, that-one-should-be-likened-to-a-piece-of-wood-
in-the-forest.
All these were the *Ifá* priests who divined for *Olófin-Òtètè*,
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.

By this kind of aesthetic consciousness, both the Creator and his creation are benefited. *Olófin-Òtètè* (Supreme Being or Creator-in-Chief) achieves his goal of self-expression and fulfillment through *èniyàn* (man), who in turn derives his aesthetic sanction from *Olófin-Òtètè*. Thus *ìwàpèlè*, also often regarded as *ìwà rere* (good character), becomes the manifestation of *Sùúrù*, the first and most important offspring of the Creator-in-Chief, *Olófin-Òtètè* or *Olódùmarè*. This is implied in the saying *Ìwà rere l'èsó Eniyàn, Ehin Funfun l'èsó èrin*, “*Ìwà rere* is the adornment of a person, as white teeth are the adornment of a smile” (Ajibola 1971, 22, 82). *Èsó* here can also mean *iyésí*, benefiting or complementing, bringing beauty and honor, *iyi*, to a person or thing.³ Like *Òrúnmìlà*, the Yorùbá desire to be associated with *Olófin*'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*.”

Ìwà, ìwà là n wá o ìwà.
Ire gbogbo tá a ní
Tá à níwà
Ire oníre ní
Ìwà, ìwà l'á n wá o ìwà. (Abimbola 1975, 399)

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

Searching for this *iwà* as *Orúnmìlà* did is symbolic of the continuing importance of *iwàpèlè* in Yorùbá tradition.

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

Èdà tó gbéyìn lé' rí kíi pàntètè
Pèlè l' aréwà írìn
Jeje l'ómo olólá fyan
Igbá onípèlè kíí fò
Awo onípèlè kíí fàya
Ohun tí a fèsò mú kíí bàjé
Ohun tí a fagbára mú, koko níí le
Èsò pèlè ní à á pàmúkùrù,
A kí í kánjú tu 'lú orán
Pèlèpèlè l'ejò ó g'òpe
Igbín kò lówó, Igbín kò lésè
Èsò èsò nigbín gbà gungi. (Ogunniran 1969, 18)

A person carrying eggs on the head needs poise.
The physically beautiful one has need of a composed gait.
Walking gracefully adds to the beauty 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.
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.

The qualities of thought and aesthetic attitudes hinted at above are important. They constitute the basis of Yorùbá artistic criticism.

"*Iwà*" of the Critic (*Recognition of Beauty*)

Eefin ni *iwà*,
Kò sí b'a se bò ó mólè tó
Rírú ni ó ru.

Iwà is like smoke,
Which cannot be suppressed.
It comes out in all we do.

Because of this Yorùbá belief, it is expected that the *iwà* of an artist will not only show through his work but will influence his execution of it. Thus, an artist who is impatient is not likely to convey the theme of his subject effectively or execute a technically accomplished work. It is important, therefore, that the artist possess the attributes of *iwàpèlè* (the foremost *iwà*) in addition to his own *iwà*. With the attributes of *iwàpèlè*, the artist can demonstrate qualities such as "poise," avoidance of "brute force," "composed gait," "grace," "thoroughness," "calmness," "calculated patience," "insight," "endurance," and "fulfillment" through artistic expression in his work. A critic's familiarity with these and other components of *iwàpèlè* are basic to his ability to recognize *ewa* (beauty) in Yorùbá art.

I shall now briefly highlight a few of those aspects of *iwàpèlè* which I believe may help in shedding more light on Yorùbá 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, and is not usually derived from an obvious source. *Imú ni àlejò fi í ríràn*, "The outsider or uninitiated usually sees through the nose." Without *ojú-inú*, "the outsider, like a child in ignorance, may say a medicinal plant is an edible vegetable," *omode ò modògùn o n pe é ní èfó*. 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 *oríkí*, by reference to Ifá 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. Though not called *ojú-inú* among the Igala, a similar aesthetic notion

was probably intended by the Igala tribesman who offered his critique of a mask by first identifying the mask type. And Sieber (1971, 130) rightly noted that "the observation [of the Igala tribesman] was based on familiarity with a preexistent style, knowledge of a predetermined function and critical awareness of comparative excellence."

It is with *ojú-inú* that the artist knows the right colors to use for the costumes or shrine of Sàngó, which is usually dominated by red, or that of an Òbàtálá priest, which is invariably 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 styles of representation from which the artist may choose. If the carving is for an àkó second-burial effigy in Òwò, he would have to work in an àkó-type naturalistic style and size and aim for a high degree of resemblance to the deceased. The case would be different, however, if the artist were to produce *ère-ibeji* (twin statuettes). Such objects never approach life size (except on the screen in an African art class) and are generalized in representation. The successful expression of *ojú-inú* results in the fulfillment of the *iwà* of a thing (as implied in Abimbola's original meaning of *iwà*), without which the other aesthetic attributes, to be considered hereafter, cannot be made meaningful and relevant.

Ojú-onà

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

Oblnrin kùkùrú ye oko rè lójó ijó,
Oblnrin gidìgbà 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-onà* 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 ye'ni ló ye ni, okùn orùn kò ye adie, kò sì tún ye eni 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" (Akinwumi Isola, pers. com., January 1975).

Having *ojú-onà* distinguishes the artist from the nonartist, the critic from the noncritic, and the talented artist from the untalented one. Thus, we may assemble two hundred *epa* masks or *ibeji* figures for examination and criticism. All may satisfy the first criterion discussed above, *ojú-inú*, but attention will be focused on the demonstration of *ojú-onà*. Here, the critic—after familiarizing himself with the rudiments of *onà* (good design), which includes recognizing it and its appropriate use—professionally appraises the works before him, using all the faculties as hinted in the following verse.

Ojú là imo àìsí epo,
Èrèké là imo àìsí iyò,
Òdró gangan là imo àlápà
Tí kò ni epo nínú.

It is by looking that we detect the absence of [red] palm oil.
It is in the mouth that we detect the saltless [dish].
And it is from a distance that we spot the *àlápà*,⁴
Which contains no oil.

Also, it is in this process that he examines the artist's *ojú-onà* as well as his level of *làákáyè* (clear thinking), *òye* (understanding), and *ogbón* (wisdom), all manifestations of *iwàpèlè*.

Ifarabalè

This 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 most relevant to the understanding of this phenomenon (1973b).

Ifarabalè is a prerequisite to the successful expression of *ojú-inú* and *ojú-onà*. It concerns the artist's ability to control himself and his material (the mental and technical), as well as to execute a thorough and successful work of art. According to Lamidi Fakeye (pers. com., 1983), a renowned traditional Yorùbá carver, "It is *ifarabalè* that we go to learn in the profession of woodcarving." Much admired artistic qualities like *pípé* (correctness) and *dídán* (completeness) are both consequences of *ifarabalè*. *Pípé* and *dídán* are sometimes used interchangeably as they convey essentially the same meaning. Although other scholars have translated *dídán* as "shining smoothness" (Thompson 1973a, 37), I have

not done so since it may include rough surfaces, as in *epa* masks, which emphasize color for their "completeness," or rough-textured, hand-woven cloth with attachments of ritual or decorative objects.

In most Yorùbá figurative sculpture, the emphasis on a strong vertical movement, an arresting frontal presence, and a serene facial expression seem to underscore the importance of *ifarabalè* in Yorùbá aesthetics. For the same reason, I believe, the head is rendered unusually large in size, and its technical execution is often elaborate.

In *ifarabalè, orí* (the head, also the seat of reason) rules the rest of the body. It is not the faithful rendering of the anatomical details, such as a figure's muscles, that is supposed to produce that feeling of power and action that one experiences from Yorùbá sculpture, but the intelligent, creative, and skillful combination of forms by the artist. That such a high premium is placed on intelligent action by the Yorùbá is reflected in the saying *Alágbára ma mèrò baba òlè*, "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, aríngbèrè nì í móyèè 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."

We might surmise that *ifarabalè*, as the most powerful component of *iwápèlè*, must have influenced the Yorùbá choice of the head as a natural focus of artistic criticism and aesthetic judgment.

Ilutí

Ilutí 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, *ilutí* features prominently when considering the efficiency of an *òrìsà* (deity), *oògùn* (traditional medicine), or *isè onà* (a work of art). Thus, in choosing an *òrìsà* to worship or consult for aid, the Yorùbá look for those with *ilutí*. *Ebora tó lutí là m bo*, "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-ignited-fire," to convince customers of the effectiveness of their product. Similarly, in judging art, *ilutí* plays an important role. It aids the critic in determining whether or not the work in question is "alive," "responding," and "efficacious," that is *je* or *dábhùn*. In es-

sence, therefore, *ilutí* focuses on the fulfillment of artistic intention, as well as precision in the artistic process (see Abiodun 1976). The warm reception and approval given a work of art by the community is considered quite important. Following an unenthusiastic reception of their work, amateurs and artists 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, the researcher can feel the spontaneous acceptance or rejection of works at festivals and other public events.

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

Wúrúké l'á f-yínrinká,
Gbòòrò-gbooro l'áá dóbálè
Bí ènà kò bá se é gégé bí a ti í se é
Kí í-rí gégé bí ó ti í rí. (Sobande 1967, 25)

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

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.

Perhaps of some relevance to the understanding of *ilutí*, which can be broadly described as a "call-response" phenomenon, is that the Yorùbá believe in the existence and power of primordial names for all living and nonliving things. 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.

Etí kò sí lórí,
Orí di àpólà igi. (Sobande 1967, 29)

With the ears missing,

The head is no more than a dumb piece of wood.

Here is a critical comment whose implication for Yorùbá art goes beyond the physical representation of ears. Indeed, the artist, critic, and audience have need of *ilutí* to execute, understand, and enjoy the art product, which I have considered elsewhere as a kind of visual metaphor (Abiodun 1987).

Imojú-mora

This can be translated generally as "sensitivity to the need of the moment," "ability to adapt and change without being formally told to do so," "propriety," and "measure." Because all the other qualities of *iwà-pèlé* are called into play before *imojú-mora* can be manifested, anyone who demonstrates it is said to possess *orí-pípé* (literally, "complete head"), which is an acknowledgment of an intelligent and creative mind.

Closely related to *imojú-mora* and perhaps falling within this aesthetic consideration is the concept of *àrà*, which Adepegba 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 are concerned often results in creativity. (Adepegba 1983, 62)

Imojú-mora is not only a crucial factor in the adoption of new styles, techniques, and materials—in spite of the seemingly unchanging traditions of Yorùbá art—but also a means whereby the culture has managed to survive in the new environments and under the difficult conditions of the new world since the slave trade. 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 proverbs or sayings such as:

Bí a ò bá rí àdàn⁵
A à fi òdòbè sebo.

In the absence of the big fruit bat traditionally approved for sacrifice, Another kind, *òdòbè*⁶ [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* (1984).

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

Kí ísè pé etí kí ígùn,
Kí ísè pé etí kí í fè,
Sùgbón èyí tó bá sèèsí rékojá orí,
O ti di ti choro. (Sobande 1967, 29)

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

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 it is evident in this saying:

Bí a sá kéké
Aájò ewà la se.
Bí a b' àbàjà,
Aájò ewà la se.
Bí a sì fèrèké sílè l'óbòró
Aájò ewà nàà la se. (Sobande 1967, 35)

If we have the *kéké*⁷ facial mark,
It is for the sake of beauty.
If we carry the *àbàjà*⁸ mark,
It is for beauty.
And if we leave the face unmarked,
It is also for the sake of beauty.

Whereas many scholars have held the erroneous notion that traditional art and styles are static, unchanging, and repetitive, *imojú-mora* contradicts such assumptions, since it contains germs of change, initiative, and creativity that give dynamism to Yorùbá art.

Critics and audiences are encountering a wider and wider range of new forms and motifs, as well as old forms that have been freshly treated and presented. For those in the art process, the situation is challenging and calls for the sharp sensibilities that may be summarized as *imojú-mora*.

Tító

Tító refers to "enduring," "lasting," "unfading qualities," and "reality," as well as "genuineness" and "steadfastness." *Tító* is the most important attribute of *iwà*, because the Yorùbá consider the most desirable *iwà* to be that which is "immortal" (*àikú*). Hence, *àikú pari iwà*, "immortality itself is perfect existence" (Idowu 1962, 162). *Tító* inspires, encourages, and supports the durability of artistic material and style, leaving little or no room for transient innovations and ephemeral beauty. Yorùbá tradition does not favor change for its own sake. It respects and pre-

serves time-honored visions whose vocabulary of representation has been found supportive of the treasured 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 the Yorùbá conceive of the arts more or less as *òwe*—that is, as a metaphor that conveys an idea or concept whose *ìwà* is immortal—they do not believe that the physical decay, destruction, or looting of a Sàngó shrine or an Ifá divination apparatus will spell the end of the religio-aesthetic ideas they embody. Through channels such as drama, music, chant, and mime, the ideas live on and the lost work can be reconstructed (Abiodun 1987). In other words, the Yorùbá have no illusions that wooden art is imperishable, so the culture makes provision for their continuity through periodic replacements.

Notwithstanding this, artists do make a conscious effort to make their work compact, strong, and durable. This is evident in their choice of material, be it wood, metal, or stone. One should see the brass and bronze heads of Ifè as an attempt to conform to the ultimate definition of “*ìwà* as immortality itself,” *àìkù parí ìwà*.

È é gbó, è é tó, “May you live long and remain mentally and physically sound,” is the most important prayer of Yorùbá subjects for their *oba* (king). Similarly, the work of art needs to be well preserved and medicinally potent (where applicable) for as long as possible. A sculpture should be physically intact, as indicated by the concept of *thító*, which emphasizes being well preserved. Consequently, a figurative sculpture with a missing eye or limb may be considered ugly or unacceptable.

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

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

Ìwà nìkàn ló sòro o
Ìwà nìkàn ló sòro
Orí kan kí 'burú l'ótu Ifè,
Ìwà nìkàn ló sòro. (Idowu 1962, 155)

Ìwà is all that is needed.

Ìwà is all that is needed.

There is no *orí*? to be called bad in the city of Ifè.
Ìwà is all that is needed.

This is the reason I have tried in the preceding pages to examine six of the aesthetic considerations that are related to *ìwà* (as *ìwàpèlè*) and to show how they pave the way for the artist, critic, and general viewer to participate fully in the enjoyment of art. Indeed, it is the essence of *ìwà* that makes all things beautiful. Therefore, the absence of *ìwà* may be responsible for the lack of beauty.

Ìwà in Creativity (Production of Beauty)

In the Yorùbá pantheon, it is Òrìsànlá whose *ìwà* (as character) comes closest to *ìwàpèlè*, which embraces all the aesthetic considerations discussed above. An *oríkì* (praise poem) describes this òrìsà as patient, silent, and without anger (Beier 1970, 27), a belief that probably accounts for the identification of Òrìsànlá with creativity specifically and artistic processes generally.

The artist, especially as *onísé-onà* (worker of designs), *agbégilére* (sculptor/wood-carver), *gbénàgbéna* (designer in wood), or *aláró* (dye/colorist), is a devotee of Òbàtálá (also known as Òrìsànlá or simply Òrìsà), the divinity acknowledged in Yorùbá traditional belief as the first artist, designer, and sculptor.

As Bolaji Idowu (1962, 71) points out, Olódùmarè commissioned Òrìsànlá to create the physical part of man, as well as the earth and the arrangement of its trappings. Having been granted the freedom to create as he chooses—a rare occurrence in many artistic traditions in the world—Òrìsànlá became the first creative artist in Yorùbá culture. It is ironic that creativity is the very quality that scholars in the field have denied the traditional artist as having.

In Yorùbá myth, Òrìsànlá is said to be the divinity who is charged with the sole responsibility of producing all human forms, irrespective of whether they are physically attractive or not. It is also he who creates different hues of dye. Although sometimes called *agbokùnkùn-sonà*, “one who designs in darkness” [that is, in total seclusion], Òrìsànlá is not an anonymous creator, and neither are Yorùbá artists who, by reason of their profession, also carry out creative work. The Yorùbá openly acknowledge that each *èda* (creature) on earth was created in the first artistic efforts of Òrìsànlá. This action is illustrated by the saying *Kì se ejó eléyín gan-n-gan; Òrìsà ló seé, tí kò fi awo bò ó*, “The person with prominent teeth is not to blame; it is the Òrìsà who made them and did not provide a covering for them” (Idowu 1962, 72).

Orisànlá's role as sculptor-divinity not only accommodates all forms of *ewà* (beauty) in the name of *ìwà* (existence), but—as the supreme expert on identity and the character of form, that is, as *amòwà*—he ensures their fulfillment through artistic process and expression. By the same token, Òbátálá qualifies as the foremost *amewà* (expert on beauty), since *ìwà* (being or character) is *ewà* (beauty).

It is against this background that we can begin to know the artist, because he is in fact the *àwòrò* (priest/devotee) of Orisànlá. The following *oríkì* of the artist is virtually the same as Orisànlá's, his chief patron.

Emi l'omo agbégilére
 Omo agbégi rébété sé lóge;
 Emi l'omo asogi d'èniyàn
 Nígbà tí a gbé gi tán,
 Igi l'ójú;
 Igi l'énu
 Igi l'ówó
 Bèè ni gi sí l'átàmpàkò
 Esè méjèèjì n'lè;
 Igi sí gun'mú tirè,
 O sí se gagaga.
 Wón kún'gi l'ósùn
 Wón se'gi lóge;
 O wa kú kí gi ó fohùn l'áàfin Oba
 Omo agbé'gi rébété l'oba;
 Omo asogi d'èniyàn. (Akinrinde 1978, 19)

I, the offspring of a carver of images
 Who makes finished statues in wood and beautifies them.
 I change uncarved 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 human figures.

In transforming his raw material, the Yorùbá artist seeks to realize completely the identity and character (*ìwà*) of his subject as implied in the phrase *se lóge*, "to beautify through artistic activity," by using his *ojú-onà*.

In Yorùbá culture it is absolutely imperative for individuals to acknowledge each other's identity and presence 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 his own life, quite often through *oríkì* (praise names) identifying him with all that is notable in his background. To fail to greet someone is to say that he does not exist (that is, lacks *ìwà*) and is to liken him to *igi oko*, "the common tree in the forest." It implies that he is not beautiful, and such an implication is reprehensible in Yorùbá culture.

Poverty, childlessness, physical unattractiveness, age, decay, and death cannot rob one of the beauty derived from *ìwà*. In summary, it is indeed the Yorùbá belief that *ìwà l'òrìsà, bí a bá ti hùú sí ní í gbe ni*, "*ìwà* [character] is a deity that favors us according to the way in which we express it."

Conclusion

We no longer can confess to ignorance of African art studies or say we are unable to address the grossly understudied aspects of African arts, primarily the unity of verbal, visual, and philosophical elements. The field of African art studies needs to extricate itself from the still prevalent "primitive art" mentality that most of our readers and supporters expect African art to conform with. Also calling for our immediate attention is the widening gap between the dry and often recycled texts (sometimes with the same old errors) on the one hand and those fine and irresistible field photographs on the other—a practice which now characterizes the majority of our publications.

Furthermore, it would be immensely beneficial to the cause of sound African art research and scholarship if in our work more proper native names were employed in the identification of African art objects instead of the current practice of putting them in parentheses or leaving them out altogether. In the same vein, many indigenous terms that embody

important artistic and aesthetic concepts should be given prominence in our studies. To leave out these African names and terms, for whatever reasons, is to make future research in African art difficult if not impossible. But, perhaps, a much worse repercussion would be the creation of an African art field in which African thought and language no longer are considered relevant in understanding African art. By then, we would have unwittingly removed the "African" from "African art," which I believe is the very opposite of our goal.

Expressing his concern over the state of African art studies, Father Kevin Carroll, who has been studying traditional Yorùbá carvings for several decades, noted:

It is not possible at present to offer an assured interpretation and analysis of Yorùbá carving as an expression of the people's philosophy and religious belief. African carvings have frequently been interpreted in abstract terms without any attempt to discover the people's own interpretation. In Yorùbá country, study of such interpretation has scarcely begun. (1973, 168)

Ralph Altman's (1973, 184) observation that "aesthetic norms elude us in nearly all instances owing to a lack of information on the aesthetic criteria of the people" is further confirmation of this unsatisfactory state of affairs that now calls for our urgent attention.

William Fagg's remarks are diagnostic and get to the bottom of the problem.

The study of meaning in African . . . art is at a rudimentary, not to say primitive, stage. . . . It is a pity that full and detailed accounts of the philosophies of tribes are almost universally absent from the many excellent anthropological monographs which have appeared in English since the war. . . . It is a little disappointing that there seems as yet to have been little help forthcoming from African students of traditional African philosophy among peoples known for the practice of visual art. (1973, 161)

These comments are a challenge not only to the African scholar but to the whole field of African art studies. We need a new though not entirely unfamiliar approach that promises a deeper understanding and more meaningful appreciation of African art.

Notes

1. This work is based largely on fieldwork conducted between 1974 and 1980 in Western Yorùbáland. I thank the University of Ifè Research Committee for providing the grant that made the investigation possible.

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2. I attempted in the earlier stages of my investigation to translate the concept of *lùdà* in Yoruba thought as "charact(ery)." In the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, edited by C. F. Onions, vol. 1, 3d ed. (1965), "character" or "charactry" has as one of its meanings "delineation of character."

3. Wande Abimbola, pers. com., March 1980. *Èsò* means "guardian." *Sò* is the verb "to watch." Hence, the guardians of the royal palace in Old Oyó are known as *èsò*.

4. A type of Yorùbá food made from steamed, ground cowpeas and melon seeds.

5. *Eidolon helvium*.

6. *Desmodus* sp.

7. *Kéké* is a traditional facial mark among the Yorùbá. See Abraham 1970, 300-301.

8. *Abàjà* is another kind of facial mark among the Yorùbá. See Abraham 1970, 300-301.

9. I have modified the translation by Bolaji Idowu (1962, 162). For example, *orí* can be translated as the "essence of one's personality." See also Abiodun (1975) and Morakinyo and Akiwowo (1981).

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