

## THE CONCEPT OF ÌWÀ IN YORÙBÁ AESTHETICS<sup>1</sup>

O CONCEITO DE ÌWÀ NA ESTÉTICA YORÙBÁ

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### Abstract:

This paper aims to analyze the concept of *ìwà*, usually translated as “character”, and its possible implications for the study of Yoruba aesthetics. Starting from the Yoruba proverb that says “*ìwà l’ẹwà*”, that is, *ìwà* constitutes beauty, the text will seek to explain in what ways the category that was usually ethical, character (*ìwà*) was, in Yoruba thought and art, internally linked with the idea of beauty (*ẹwà*). The relationship between the Yoruba concepts of character and existence will also be analyzed from the point of view of Yoruba art and perception of the orishas, deities with complex relationships with the realm of existence. The paper will also discuss the relationships between beauty and character in the context of a distinction between a microaesthetic and a macroaesthetic; useful ideas for understanding the production, criticism and enjoyment of art among the Yoruba. This approach is intended to contribute to the understanding of the links between ethics and aesthetics in Yoruba Philosophy of Arts.

**Keywords:** Yoruba aesthetics. *Ìwà*. Character. Beauty. Existence.

### Resumo:

Este artigo explorará o conceito de *ìwà*, geralmente traduzido como “caráter” e suas possíveis implicações para o estudo da estética iorubá. Partindo do adágio iorubá que afirma “*ìwà l’ẹwà*”, ou seja, *ìwà* constitui beleza, o artigo buscará explicitar de que maneiras a categoria que fora usualmente como ética, o caráter (*ìwà*) esteve, no pensamento e na arte iorubás internamente vinculado com a ideia de beleza (*ẹwà*). A relação entre os conceitos iorubás de *caráter* e *existência* também serão explorados a partir da arte e da percepção iorubana dos orixás, divindades com complexas relações com o domínio da existência. O artigo também discutirá as relações entre beleza e caráter no contexto de uma distinção entre uma *microestética* e uma *macroestética*; ideias úteis para a compreensão da produção, crítica e fruição da arte entre os iorubás. Pretende-se que essa abordagem contribua para a compreensão das vinculações entre ética e estética na filosofia da arte iorubá.

**Palavras-chave:** Estética Iorubá. *Ìwà*. Caráter. Beleza. Existência.



Òrìṣà ñlá d'áró méta  
 Ó dá'kan ní dúdú,  
 Ó dá'kan ní pupa,  
 Ó dá'kan ní funfun.  
 Dúdú ni o rẹ mí,  
 O ó gbọdọ rẹ mí ní pupa.  
 Dúdú ni o rẹ mí,  
 O ò gbọdọ rẹ mí ní funfun,  
 Ìwà mi ni o kọ tètè rẹ  
 Ní kùtùkùtù Ọbariṣa  
 (AKIWQWQ, 1976)

Òrìṣànlá<sup>3</sup> prepared three dyes  
 He made one black,  
 He made one yellow,  
 He made one white,  
 Make me black,  
 Do not make me yellow  
 Make me black,  
 Do not make me white  
 Dye me with my *ìwà* first  
 At the dawn of creation

There is no doubt that the concept of *ìwà*<sup>4</sup> is crucial to the definition of beauty in Yorùbá thought. Even though most scholars who have written on, or studied the subject appear to have acknowledged this fact, the dynamic and living relationship which exists between *ìwà* and *ẹwà*, beauty, has yet to be explained (THOMPSON, 1971a, 1973a, 1973b, 1974, 1971b; LAWAL, 1974).

A Yorùbá aphorism declares: “*ìwà l'ẹwà*”, that is, *ìwà* constitutes beauty. Therefore, one obvious place to begin a meaningful study of Yorùbá aesthetics is with *ìwà*. For to overlook or under-rate this important pre-requisite for beauty, and to favour instead, external criteria or explanations, will not only further remove us from the Yorùbá aesthetic universe, but 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 increasingly less speculative, more Yorùbá-thought-oriented, and contextually relevant.

*Ìwà'* (Character) has a homophone *ìwà* (existence) in the language. This homophonous counterpart is a noun formed from adding *ì* to the verb *wà* (to exist), a normal nominalization process in the language (BAMGBOSE, 1967). What a scholar of Yorùbá traditional thought, Professor Wándé Abimbólá has shed light upon in this regard is the relationship between the two words. He contends 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 (ABIMBOLA, 1975, p. 393). A cognate aphorism says: “*Àikú parí ìwà*”, literally, “immortality completes existence” but more idiomatically “immortality is perfect existence”.

In the Ifá literary corpus, *Ìwà* (character) 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, Ọrúnmilà whose prosperity, honor and popularity were all attributed to the presence of *Ìwà*.

It was not, however, long before Ọrúnmilà's patience ran out and he drove *Ìwà* out of his house. But soon afterwards, Ọrúnmilà was on the road searching for *Ìwà* having realized how much he had lost. He was determined to sacrifice

everything he had (money, children, houses, clothes, etc.), in order to have her back in his home. When they were finally re-united, Ìwà was not blamed; it was Ọ̀rúnmilà who was blamed for not exercising enough patience in dealing with his wife (ABIMBOLA, 1975, p. 415-416).

Resolving the conflict in this manner, and exonerating Ìwà certainly appears to contradict commonsensical rules of natural justice. But this is, in my opinion, a warning to us to learn at-the outset to distinguish between the human and the divine, between speculations rooted in ordinary human thought and the facts of Ìwà as expressed through the Ifá literary corpus.

It is significant that the original meaning of Ìwà has no denotation of morality, and it is in this light that we can appreciate Ìwà's beauty, an expression of her existence, or being. The case of Ọ̀rúnmilà, however, is different. He lacked steadiness in his being, and/or living, and he lost his wife. Like Ìwà, he needed consistency of character, even though it certainly required additional effort and sacrifice.

Ìwà is the daughter of Sùúrù (Patience) who is the first child of Olódùmarè (the Almighty God). With the help of Sùúrù, Baba Ìwà, 'Sùúrù 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 divinity, person or thing, possesses its own beauty as a necessary consequence of ìwà. Thus, the deities: Ọ̀gún (of War and Iron), Ọ̀ya (of river Niger), Ọ̀ṣun (of Ọ̀sun river), Ẓàngó (of Thunder and Lightning), Ọ̀bàtálá (the Arch-divinity), Ẓònpònná (of Small-pox), Ikú (of Death), Àrùn (of Disease), Ègbà (of Palsy), Ọ̀fò (of Perdition) and Èṣù (The arbiter in the exercise of àṣẹ for and among all sentient beings including all the ọ̀rìṣà) have their individual and imperishable ẹ̀wà (beauty), and our judgment of them (like that of Ọ̀rúnmilà's wife, Ìwà) is not bound or determined by humanly defined ethical codes or morals.

Of immediate relevance here is the Yorùbá saying: "*mọ̀ iwà fún oníwà*", literally, 'recognize existence in respect of the one existing', idiomatically, either 'concede to each person his or her own nature of existence' or 'concede to each person his or her own particular character', which, of course, may neither be like yours nor pleasing to you.

**Image 1:** fragment of a face, Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria. Twelfth to Fifteenth century C.E.  
Terracotta; Height: 6 ins. (15.2 cm)



**Source:** National Commission for Museum and Monuments, Nigeria and Museum for African Art, New York, USA.

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 *Ẹ̀ṣ̀nṣ̀nṣ̀nà*, *Ẹ̀ṣ̀ngó*, *Ògún*, *Èṣ̀ù*, *Ikú*, all of whose characters or behaviors may be perceived as immoral in human terms. The hunchback, albino, and other deformed beings, all the hand-work 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 Òrìṣà lafi í wọ àfín.*, 'We perceive the honor (divinity) of *Òrìṣà* (the sculptor divinity), in the albino'. Similarly, an insane person is appreciated for the unusual view-point he provides. *Wèrè dùn ún wò, ùgbòn kò ẹ̀ é bí l'ómọ*, 'the insane is pleasant to watch, even though no one prays to have him as an offspring.' It is not uncommon 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 beauty, *ẹ̀wà*, of ' *Ìwà*' as *Òrúnmilà*'s wife in Ifá literature. For convenience, I will place this notion of *ìwà* within what I call the Yorùbá microaesthetic order. Put simply, this order deals with the full recognition and proper appreciation of a specific object, element or fact of being, as totally distinct and different from a generalized kind, which may modify or even disregard the considerations or fact of individuality.

*Òrúnmilà* symbolizes the second notion of *ìwà*, whose meaning is *Ìwàpèlẹ̀* (gentle or good character) and falls under another category which I call the macroaesthetic order. This order is not opposed to the micro-aesthetic order but represents a much larger and varied complex, inclusive of aesthetic universes hosting all the notions of the micro-aesthetic order. *Òrúnmilà* needed to operate at a higher, more powerful and influential level of consciousness in order to accommodate and appreciate *Ìwà*, his wife, with all her so-called 'shortcomings'.<sup>5</sup> The source of this new consciousness is *Sùúrù* (Patience) the first child of

Olódùmarè, who himself was tired of being- lonely and urgently wanted offspring to reflect his attributes, all of which eventually would constitute his beauty. An Ifá poem describes this yearning for fulfillment at creation thus:

Ìwà l'ẹwà  
 Ọmọ lẹsọ ilé  
 Ọmọ-ẹni-là á-késí,  
 Ọmọ-ẹni-ni-ífi-wà-j'ọni.  
 Ọun Bí-èyàn-dára-tí-kò-ní-wà  
 Igi-oko-ní-ká-àa-fi-wé.  
 Àwọn ní wọn dá Ifá fún Ọlófin-Ọtẹtẹ  
 Tí o níwẹni tí ó jọ òun  
 Níjọ tí ó dá késekése  
 Nwọn ní nílẹ ayé  
 Kò sí ẹnikan míbẹ  
 Ó sì dá kẹsekése  
 Ọde Ọrun o ò lé èyàn.  
 Agbadagúúdú méjì ilẹ  
 A bojú raú (ADENIJI, 1974).

Ìwà constitutes beauty,  
 Children are the fitting adornment of a home.  
 It-is-one 's-offspring-that-one- can-send-on-errands,  
 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  
 Were the Ifá priests who divined for Ọlófin-Ọtẹtẹ  
 Who was in need of a creation which would reflect 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 second level of aesthetic consciousness, which I can call the macroaesthetic order, both the Creator and his creation are benefited. Ọlófin-Ọtẹtẹ (the Creator) achieves his goal of self- expression and fulfillment through *èniyàn* (man), who in turn derives his aesthetic sanction from Ọlófin-Ọtẹtẹ . Thus *ìwà rere*, good character, becomes the manifestation of Sùúru, the first and most important offspring of the Creator, Ọlófin-Ọtẹtẹ or Olódùmarè. This is implied in the saying, *Ìwà rere L'ẹsọ Èniyàn, Èhín Funfun l'ẹsọ ẹrín* 'Appropriate (not only "good") character is the adornment of a person, as white teeth are the adornment of a smile' (AJIBOLA, 1971, p. 22; 82). *Èsọ* here can also mean *iyèsí*, befitting or complementing, bringing honour, *iyì*, to a person or thing<sup>6</sup>.

Like Ọrúnmilà, the Yorúbá will give anything to be associated with Ọlófin's character, without which one may well be deserted by all and sundry. The ultimate goal is to be *omólúwàbí*, 'the child bom by Olú-ìwà - the head chief source originator of *ìwà*'.

*Ìwà, ìwà là n wá o ìwà,*

*Ire gbogbo tá a ní  
Tá à níwà  
Ire oníre ni  
Ìwà, iwà l'á n wá o Ìwà.*

Ìwà, Ìwà is what we are looking for  
All the good things of life which a man has,  
If he lacks appropriate character  
They belong to someone else  
Ìwà, iwà, is what we are searching for (ABIMBOLA, 1975, p. 397-399).

Searching for Ìwà, as Ọ̀rúnmilà did, is symbolic of its continuing importance in Yorùbá tradition.

Political and socio-economic stability and progress, artistic creativity, and criticism are all sustained through the invocation and utilization of the canons of this 'macro-aesthetic order'. The following provides an insight into how some of these criteria can be immediately relevant to human problems, irrespective of their nature, size, or severity.

*Èdá tó gbéyin lé'rí kí pàntèté  
Pèlẹ́ l'arewà irin  
Jéjé l'omọ ọlọlá í yan  
Igbá onípèlẹ́ kì í fọ́  
Àwo onípèlẹ́ kì í fàya  
Ohun tí a fèsò mú kì í bàjé  
Ohun tí a f'agbára mú, koko ní'le  
Èsò pèlẹ́ ni à á pàmúkùrù,  
A kì í kánjú tú'lú ọrán  
Pèlẹ́pèlẹ́ l'ejò ó g'òpẹ́ Ìgbín kò lówó, Ìgbín kò lésẹ́  
Èsò èsò nìgbín gbà gungì (OGUNNIRAN, 1969, p. 18).*

A person carrying eggs on the head needs alertness,  
The 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) ọrán 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 Artist as Ọ̀rìṣàńlá Devotee

The artist, especially as *onísẹ́-ọ̀nà* (worker of designs) *agbégilére* (Sculptor/wood carver), *gbénàgbénà* (designer in wood), *aláró* (dyer/colourist), or *amòkòkò* (potter/designer), is a devotee of Ọ̀rìṣàńlá (also known as Ọ̀bàtálá and

Òrìṣà), the divinity who is acknowledged as the first artist, designer and sculptor in Yorùbá traditional belief.

As Idowu rightly points out, “Olódùmarè has committed to him (Òrìṣàńlá) the creation of the physical part of man, as also the creation of the earth and arrangement of its trappings” (IDOWU, 1962, p. 71). Having been thus granted the freedom to create as he chooses, a most rare occurrence in any artistic tradition in the world, Ọ̀bàtálá becomes the first creative artist in the truest sense of the term. It is ironic that creativity is the very quality that has been long denied the traditional artist by scholars in the field (ABIODUN, 1975, p. 129).

Òrìṣàńlá produces all imaginable forms, colours, and arrangements whose identities and/or characters are clear, distinct and honoured with his *imprimatur*, his own identity and personality, thus exploding another erroneous myth of anonymity in traditional Yorùbá art. The Yorùbá openly acknowledge that each *ẹ̀dá* (creature) on earth was accounted for in the first artistic efforts of Ọ̀rìṣàńlá. This notion is illustrated by the following example: *Kí'ṣe ẹ̀jọ́ eléyín gan-n-gan; Ọ̀rìṣà ló ṣeé, tí kò fí awọ̀ bọ́ ó* - “The person with prominent teeth is not to blame: it is the Ọ̀rìṣà who made them and did not provide a covering for them” (IDOWU, 1962, p. 72).

Demonstrating the macro-aesthetic order par excellence, Ọ̀rìṣàńlá's role as sculptor - divinity is not only to accommodate all forms of *ẹ̀wà* (beauty) in the name of *ìwà* (existence), but as the supreme expert on identity and the character of form (that is, as *amọ̀wà* at the micro-aesthetic level of being), he ensures their fulfillment through artistic process and expression. By the same token, Ọ̀bàtálá qualifies as the foremost *amẹ̀wà* (expert on beauty) since *ìwà* (character) constitutes *ẹ̀wà* (beauty).

It is against the foregoing background that we can begin to know the artist, his *ìwà* (character and identity) because he is in fact the *àwòrò* (priest/devotee) of Ọ̀rìṣàńlá the Great King-In-White-Clothing. The following *oríkì* (praise poem) of the artist is essentially the same as Ọ̀rìṣàńlá's, his chief patron:

*Èmi l'omọ agbégilére  
Omọ agbégi rebete ṣé logé;  
Èmi l'omọ asọgi d'èniyàn.  
Nígba tí a gbé'gi tán,  
Igí l'ójú;  
Igi l'ẹ̀nu  
Igi l'ọ̀wọ́  
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní'gí sì l'átàmpàkò  
Eṣe méjèjèjì ní'lè;  
Igi sì gún'mú tirẹ̀;  
Ó sì ṣe gagaga.  
Wọ̀n kun'gi l'ósùn  
Wọ̀n ṣe'gi lóge;  
Ó wa kù kí'gi ó fọ̀hùn l'áàfin Ọ̀ba  
Omọ agbégi rebete f'Ọ̀ba;  
Omọ asọgi dèniyàn<sup>7</sup> (AKINRINDE, 1978, p. 19).*

I, the offspring of the 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,  
and 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 remains for the wooden figure to speak before the Ọba (divine sovereign).  
I, the offspring of the accomplished sculptor who carves for the Ọba (divine sovereign);  
Who transforms ordinary wood into a living being.

Having transformed his raw material, the Yorùbá artist seeks to realize completely the identity and character of his subject as implied in the phrase, *sé lóge* which is 'to beautify through artistic activity.

**Image 2:** Life-size Àkó figure of Amerì Ọláşubúde (mother of Ọlátérù Ọlágbègí II, Ọlówò of Ọwò); Artist: Ọgúnléyẹ Ọlógán. Photo by William B. Fagg, 1959; Object Number PSC1986.3.1779; Image Number PCB 4823.



**Source:** Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

To do this successfully, the artist like Ọrìşàńlá has to express relevant qualities and attributes of the macro-aesthetic order. Some of these have already been mentioned in the discussion of Sùúrù, Baba Ìwà (Patience, the Father of Ìwà, 'Character'). Thus, 'Ìwà rere' is "appropriate character" rather than just "good character" especially because it is also 'Èşó`enìyań' (the beautifier or adornment of humanity). Consider for example, the following Yorùbá saying:

*Agbe ló laro*  
*Àlùkò ló losùn*



### *Lékèlékè ló lefun*

The indigo belongs to the blue Touraco bird (the color which beautifies and confirms its *ìwà*)  
 To the reddish Woodcock bird belongs the red camwood color (which adorns and shows its *ìwà*)  
 The white Cattle Egret owns the white lime chalk (which embellishes and validates its *ìwà*)

## **Artistic Criticism**

Yorùbá artistic criticism emanates from the highest level of aesthetic consciousness, demonstrating an enlightened awareness and understanding of the two orders of aesthetic consciousness already discussed. Naturally, therefore, not everybody can be an art critic. This is something that requires a significant and a conscious effort on the part of anyone to acquire. The market woman, the Egúngún audience, the art user, or even the artist will not necessarily be an art critic, even though they may have acquired some rudimentary appreciation of the Yorùbá concept of beauty through a random or accidental encounter with art. This, of course, is not to deny 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 full-fledged critics who are first and foremost other things acquire their experience and expertise by ‘walking with the elders’, *bá àwọn àgbà rìn*. This actually means ‘taking interest in traditional procedures and studying them’. This kind of exposure usually starts from an early age, through regular attendance of artistic performances, assisting with artistic processes and presentation, and listening to comments of ‘elders’ on the finished artistic works in operation contexts. A good number of these elder-critics, I discovered, are Ifá priests who, also by virtue of their profession, take part in traditional community rituals and festivals, bringing into play, now and then, their esoteric background knowledge of most things.

It is also as a consequence of their training that critics are reserved, and will not volunteer information spontaneously in public, more so when the artist or his relatives are around. *A kì í t’ojú oníka mèsánán kà á*, ‘it is not courteous to count the fingers or toes of a nine-digged person in his presence.’ This is probably why, as Ulli Beier once reported, one never overhears “spontaneous discussion of form, proportion or expression of a piece of sculpture” (BEIER, 1963, p. 3). For the same reason, I believe an artist may hesitate to comment on a colleague’s work in public.

For one to qualify to ‘Walk with the elders’; he must possess and demonstrate at least these qualities: *ìfarabalẹ̀*, ‘calmness’; *ìlutí*, ‘teachableness’; *ìmojú-mọ̀ra*, ‘sensitivity’; and *títọ̀*, ‘lasting-ness’; Other qualities, like *ojú-inú*, ‘insight’ and *ojú-ọ̀nà*, ‘design-consciousness’, would be developed with training.

## **Aesthetic Considerations**

I shall now briefly identify some important aspects- of *ìwà* (character), and highlight their relevance to 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 to be 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, *Ọmọdé ò moògùn ó ń pèé ní ẹfọ*. It is the intellect or perception with which one conceptualizes the individualized form, substance, outline, rhythm and harmony of a subject. Such perception can be communicated through such traditionally approved sources as chants, songs, *oríki*, Ifá divination literature, and of course, extant examples of works of art. This kind of sensibility is extremely important if the artist is to capture accurately the original and essential identity, character and function of his subject. Its successful expression results in the fulfillment of the ‘micro-aesthetic’ criteria, without which the other aesthetic attributes, to be considered hereafter cannot be made meaningful and relevant.

**Image 3:** Èsù dance staff, Ìlá Ọ̀ràngún, Nigeria. Photo by J. Pemberton III, 1977.



**Source:** reproduced by permission of J. Pemberton III.

**Ojú-ọ̀nà:** This is ‘design-consciousness’, an awareness of the need for improving design, originality’. Though sometimes, considered a rare talent, *ojú-ọ̀nà* is often acquired in the course of an artist’s training or simply by learning it from one who possesses this quality.

Innovation in design resulting from *ojú-ọ̀nà* 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 ọ̀rùn kò yẹ adìẹ, kò sì tún yẹ ẹ̀ni tí ń fà á* (IŞOLA, 1985), ‘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’.

Having *ojú-ọ̀nà* leads to a greater appreciation and manifestation of individual and group styles. Thus, we may assemble 200 Ẹpa masks or Ìbejì figures

for examination and criticism. All may satisfy the first criterion discussed above, *ojú-inú*. Yet, attention will be focused on the demonstration of *ojú-ọ̀nà*-. Here, the critic who, after having familiarized himself with the rudiments of *ọ̀nà*, that is, 'good design' which includes the recognition of it and its use in the appropriate contexts of operation, professionally appraises the works before him.

**Image 4:** Ère Ìbejì (twin figures), Ìgbómìnà, Ìjọmu, Nigeria. Height: 10 ¼ ins. Private Collection.



**Source:** Courtesy of the Museum for African Art, New York, USA.

The Yorùbá art of criticism calls for the critic to exercise *ojú-ọ̀nà* himself in order to make an accurate and acceptable judgment.

*Ojú là í mọ̀ àìsí epo;  
Èrẹ̀kẹ̀ là í mọ̀ àìsí iyọ̀;  
Òòró gangan là í mọ̀ 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 àlapà<sup>8</sup> which contains no oil.

Similarly, the critic uses his/her aesthetic sense to identify the characteristics and completeness of a product of art. Also, in this process, he/she examines *ọ̀nà* in all its ramifications, the artist's *ojú-ọ̀nà* as well as their levels of *làákàyè*, 'clear thinking', *òye* 'understanding' and *ọgbón*, 'wisdom', all manifestations of the macro-aesthetic order.

**Ìfarabalẹ̀:** This is literally 'calming or controlling of the body', or 'letting

reason rather than emotion control man', or 'not losing one's composure'.

*Ifarabalẹ̀* is a prerequisite to the successful expressing of the two criteria already mentioned. It concerns the artist's ability to control himself and his material (the mental and the technical) as well as the thorough and successful execution of a work of art. Much admired artistic qualities like *pípé* and *dídán* ('correctness' and 'finishing completeness' are both consequences of *ifarabalẹ̀*. *Pípé* and *dídán* are sometimes used interchangeably as they convey essentially the same meaning. I have not translated *dídán* as 'shining smoothness' (THOMPSON *apud* D'AZEVEDO, 1973, p. 37) since its usage in artistic criticism would include also physically rough surfaces as in *Ẹpa* masks, which emphasize colour for their 'finishing completeness', or rough textured hand-woven cloth-with added ritual or decorative objects.

The criterion of *pípé* requires that art works in a state of disrepair need to be mended and renovated before use, and those beyond repair or badly damaged by termites are sold to outsiders or thrown away. Thus, the appeal of the 'unfinished' in certain art traditions of the West has no place in Yorùbá aesthetics.

**Image 5:** Throne for a Yorùbá *ọba*; Artist: most probably *Ọlówẹ̀* of *Ìsẹ̀*, first quarter of the twentieth century.



**Source:** Reproduced by permission of Jean David.

In the case of ritual sculptures and objects however, *pípé* would refer more to their potency and efficient functioning in their respective rites or relevant religious contexts. This is achieved through proper care for the objects, which may involve appropriate offerings, ritual bathing, regular 'feeding' and clothing, redecoration, and constant acknowledgement through the chanting of praise names to keep them ritually potent.

**Ìlutí:** *Ìlutí* literally means 'good hearing'. Used idiomatically, it refers to qualities like '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 considering the efficacy of an *òrìṣà* (deity), *oògùn* (traditional medicine), or a work of art (*iṣẹ̀ ọ̀nà*). Thus, in choosing an *òrìṣà* to worship or consult for aid, the Yorùbá look for those with *ìlutí*; “*Ebọra to lutí là m bọ*”, meaning ‘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, *ìlutí* plays an important role. It aids critics in determining whether the work in question is ‘alive’, ‘responding’ and ‘efficacious’, that is, *jẹ* or *dáhùn*. In essence, therefore, *ìlutí* focuses on the fulfillment of artistic intention, as well as precision in the artistic process<sup>9</sup>. Yorùbá tradition enjoins obedience to laid-down procedures and rules, so that efficacy might result.

*Wúrúkú l’á í-yínrìnkà,  
Gbòòrò-gbòòrò l’á á dọ̀bálẹ̀  
Bí ènìà kò bá ẹ́ é gégé bí a tí í ẹ́ é  
Kí í rí gẹ́gẹ́ bí o tí í rí (ŞOBANDE, 1967, p. 25)*

Kneeling-and-rolling-from-side-to-side is the woman’s way of paying royal homage,  
Prostrating-face-down is 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 *ìlutí*, which can be broadly described as a kind of ‘call-response’ phenomenon, is the fact that Yorùbá believe in the existence and power of primordial names for all living and non-living things. Consequently, the concept and possession of ‘*etí*’, (ears), ‘good hearing’ in both its physical and metaphorical sense are essential for efficient functioning and communication.

*Etí kò sí l’órí,  
Orí di àpólà igi (ŞOBANDE, 1967, p. 29).*

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

Here is a critical comment whose implication in the judgement of Yorùbá art goes beyond the physical representation of ears. Indeed, the artist, critic and audience have the need of *ìlutí* to execute, understand and enjoy the art product, which I have considered elsewhere as a kind of visual metaphor<sup>10</sup>.

**Image 6:** Àdójà, war general's stool. Osí Ìlòrin, Èkìtì; Artist: Bàbá Rótì, before 1960.



Source: Photo by Rowland Abiodun, 1974.

### Ìmọ̀jú-mọ̀ra

This can be translated generally as 'sensitivity', 'good perception', 'propriety' and 'measure'. It often also connotes 'good initiative', a quality that is considered indispensable to originating new ideas, styles and methods in the art process.

And because all the other qualities already discussed and many more are called into play before *ìmọ̀jú-mọ̀ra* can be manifested, anyone who demonstrates it, is said to possess *orí-pípé* (literally 'complete head'), which is an acknowledgement of a 'very intelligent and creative mind'.

Even though quite supportive of creativity, innovation, and change through *ìmọ̀jú-mọ̀ra*, the Yorùbá cautions us on their nature, reasonableness and extent. For example, the following proverb would be apt when judging a figural sculpture critically:

*Kì í ẹ̀se pé etí kì í gùn,  
Kì í ẹ̀se pé etí kì í fẹ̀,  
Şùgbón èyí tó bá ẹ̀èşì rékojá orí,  
Ó ti di ti ehoro (ŞOBANDE, 1967, p. 29).*

It is not that ears cannot be long,  
It is not that they cannot be wide,  
But when the ears per chance 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 perfectly beautiful a wider range of modes of artistic presentation as it is evident in this saying:

*Bá a şá kéké  
Aájò ẹ̀wà la ẹ̀.  
Bí a b'ábàjà,  
Aájò ẹ̀wà la ẹ̀.*



*Bí a sì fẹ̀rẹ̀ké sílẹ̀ 1'óbòró*  
*Aájò ẹ̀wà náà la ẹ̀ (ŞOBANDE, 1967, p. 25).*

If we have the *kẹ̀kẹ̀*<sup>11</sup> facial mark,  
 It is for the sake of beauty;  
 If we carry the *àbàjà*<sup>12</sup> 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 repetitive and even anonymous, *ìmojú-mọ̀ra* contradicts such assumptions, since it has in itself the germs of change, initiative and creativity, which give life, dynamism and identity to Yorùbá art.

**Image 7:** Èşù sculpture by Chris Vondrasek, Seattle, Washington, 1995; Mixed media; height: 6.5 feet.



**Source:** reproduced by permission of  
 Chris Vondrasek

Critics and audiences are ever encountering a wider and wider horizon of new forms and motifs in addition to old ones which have been freshly treated and presented. For all involved in the art process, the situation is most challenging and calls for sharper sensibilities which may be summarized as *ìmojú-mọ̀ra*.

### **Tító**

*Tító* refers to 'enduring', 'lasting', 'unfading', qualities, 'reality' as well as 'genuineness'. It stems from the first and most important attribute of *ìwà*, that is immortality, *àìkú* (IDOWU, 1962, p. 162). This quality 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 preserves time-honored and selective visions whose vocabulary of representation has been well-tested and found supportive of the treasured values and norms of the society.

**Image 8:** Unknown artist. Yoruba peoples, Nigerian. Oba's crown (adenla). Nineteenth to twentieth century. Glass beads, plant fiber, and cotton, 54 x 8 x 9 inches. (137.2cm x 20.3 x 22.9 cm). Photograph by Petergorsky/Gape.



**Source:** Reproduced by permission of Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, USA.

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 the creation of art, and the formulation of its aesthetic criteria to chance or extraneous circumstances.

These six general aesthetic considerations: *ojú-inú*, *ojú-ọ̀nà*, *ìfarabalẹ̀*, *ìlutí*, *ìmojú-mọ̀ra* and *títọ̀* are all rooted in *ìwà* and pave the way for the artist, critic and appreciator to participate fully in the enjoyment of art. Indeed, it is the essence of *ìwà* to make all things beautiful. Therefore, its absence may be responsible for the opposite.

*Ìwà nìkàn ló sòro o*  
*Ìwà nìkàn ló sòro*  
*Orí kan kì í 'burú l'ótú Ifẹ̀,*  
*Ìwà nìkàn ló sòro o* (IDOWU, 1962, p. 155).

Ìwà is all that is needed,  
 Ìwà is all that is needed,  
 There is no Orí<sup>13</sup> to be called bad in Ifè of Origins  
 Ìwà is all that is needed.

Understandably, in Yorùbá culture it is absolutely imperative for individuals to acknowledge each other's identity and presence. There is a special greeting for every occasion and each time of the day, and abbreviated greetings are frowned upon and are sometimes unacceptable. Greetings paint a friend's picture in a larger setting than his own life, quite often through *oríki*, '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 and is to liken him to *igi oko*, 'the ordinary and useless wood in the forest'. It implies that he is not beautiful and that is reprehensible in Yorùbá culture. One does not have to be physically attractive to be beautiful. Poverty, childlessness, physical unattractiveness, age, decay, and death cannot rob us of the beauty derived from *ìwà*.

In summary, it is the Yorùbá belief that *ìwà l'òrìṣà, bí a bá ti hùú sí ni í gbe 'ni*, 'ìwà is the deity, which, depending on the degree of our devotion to it, blesses us (with its beauty)!!

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<sup>3</sup> Òrìṣàńlá, Ọ̀bàtálá or Òrìṣà refer to the same deity who is the first sculptor/artist and has been charged by Olódùmarè to mould humans and design their features the way Òrìṣàńlá wishes.

<sup>4</sup> The author attempted in the earlier stages of his investigation to translate the 'Concept of Ìwà in Yorùbá thought as "charact(e)ry". In the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, C.F. Onions, ed. Vol. 1, 3rd edition, (1965), 'character' or 'Delineation of character'.

<sup>5</sup> (ABIMBOLA, 1975, p. 389): "Ifá . . . knows the history of the earth and heaven and mastered the moral and physical laws with which Olodumare governs the universe". Thus, Ọ̀rúnmilà the deity of Ifá was expected to be in firmer control of the situation that led to Ìwà's departure.

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<sup>6</sup> Wande Abimbola, Personal Communication (March, 1980) says: “Èṣṣò means ‘guardian’. Ṣò here is the verb ‘to watch’. Hence the guardians of the royal palace in old Oyo are known as Èṣṣò.”

<sup>7</sup> Compare this praise poem with that of Òrìṣàńlá in Bolaji Idowu, (1962) op. cit. p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> A type of Yorùbá food.

<sup>9</sup> For a practical application of this aesthetic consideration, see Rowland Abiodun, “A Reconsideration of the Function of Ako, Second Burial Effigy in Owo”, *AFRICA, Journal of the International African Institute*. No. 1, 1976, pp. 4 - 20.

<sup>10</sup> Rowland Abiodun, ‘Mythical Allusions in Yorùbá Ritualistic Art: Ori-Inú, Verbal and Visual metaphor’ in *Verbal and Visual Arts in Africa*, Dan Ben-Amos, ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Forthcoming.)

<sup>11</sup> Kéké; A kind of traditional facial mark among the Yoruba. See R. C. Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba* (London: University of London Press, 1970), pp. 300 - 301 for illustrations.

<sup>12</sup> Àbàjà: Another kind of facial mark among the Yorùbá. See also R. C. Abraham, (1970) op. cit. pp. 300 - 301.

<sup>13</sup> I have modified the translation by Bolaji Idowu, op. cit., (1962), p. 162. For example Ori can be translated as ‘the essence of one’s personality’. For more discussion on Ori, see Rowland Abiodun in Dan Ben-Amos, ed., op. cit. See also Rowland Abiodun., ‘Ifa Art Objects: An Interpretation based on Oral Traditions’ in *Yoruba Oral Tradition*, Wande Abimbola, ed., (Ile-Ife: Department of African Languages and Literatures; 1975), Chapter 10; and Olufemi Morakinyo and Akinsola Akiwowo, ‘The Yoruba Ontology of Personality and Motivation: A Multidisciplinary Approach’, *Journal of Social Biol. Struct*, 4, (1981), p. 19-38.

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