

Gods' cults, peoples' culture

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HENRY JOHN DREWAL and JOHN PEMBERTON III, with ROWLAND ABIODUN

Yoruba: Nine centuries of African art and thought

256pp. New York: Abrams/Center for African Art; distributed in Europe by Bentveld:

Abrams. £46.50.

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This book, modestly termed a "catalogue", is one of the most beautiful and comprehensive tributes to Yoruba art so far published, embracing the whole span of Yoruba culture from its origin at Ile-Ife up to the present day. The authors explain that they include under the term "Yoruba" all Yoruba-speaking peoples historically identified with the city-states of Ife, Ijebu, Owo, Ekiti, Oyo and others.

The question of the actual historical origin of the Yoruba is difficult. According to their creation myth the world was made by Odudua at Ile-Ife; this may well be a transformation of historical fact into the mythical domain, a symbolic version of the conquest by the Yoruba king Odudua of a place that was previously occupied by the Igbos under their king Obatala. But where did these conquerors come from? Many Yoruba stories suggest that they came from the east, but scholars such as William Bascom have suggested the opposite. The authors of *Yoruba* argue that linguistic evidence supports Bascom.

This book combines immaculate visual documentation of Yoruba art with the highest standards of scholarship. As Henry John Drewal puts it: "Yoruba sacred art is the point of contact with invisible otherworldly forces. It does not depict the gods, since no one knows what they look like, but rather depicts the worshippers of the gods, usually in the act of devotion." Sometimes such worshippers may be in a state of trance, when they must be understood as showing both humanity and divinity simultaneously.

The authors approach the question of the origin of the magnificent bronze and terracotta sculpture of Ife with proper circumspection – making no allusion to the wilder theories of Leo Frobenius, who believed that they had their origins in an Atlantean civilization, or other scholars' ascription of them to some solitary genius of Africa's dark ages, a tropical Benvenuto Cellini. The intriguing soapstone images of Esie are likewise presented here in their full glory, but with their origins unexplained.

Rowland Abiodun's chapter on his home region of Owo, located between Ile-Ife and Benin City, is particularly interesting. He suggests that the life-size bronze heads of Ife may have been employed in a burial ceremony analogous to the Owo *ako* (second burial ceremonies). He claims, too, that many ivory objects from Owo have been misascribed to

Benin carvers.

One of the most remarkable periods in Yoruba history was that of the Oyo empire. John Pemberton describes its rise to pre-eminence in the eighteenth century and subsequent collapse after invasion by Fulanis from the north; he provides detailed information about the cults of various Yoruba gods and spirits, cults that survive today not only in Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, but also in Brazil and the islands of the Caribbean.

Another chapter by Pemberton, on north-eastern Yorubaland, documents the ritual context of Epa carved masks. These masks are not considered complete until they have resided for some time in a shrine receiving offerings and prayers from the elders of the house. Only when they come out from the house and move among the people of the town to the accompaniment of drums, receiving salutations, praise-names and songs, do they achieve their full being. "One must bear in mind", Pemberton writes, "that the masquerade is not intended to hide or cloak, but to disclose concealed power, to reveal another order of reality not otherwise observable." This, indeed, is the nature of Yoruba high art, an art which is central to the historical identity of this dynamic people.