

# Àṣẹ and the Senses in Understandings of Yorùbá Arts and Culture

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## INTRODUCTION

Our engagement with the arts is a multisensory matter. We perceive, experience, and attempt to understand the arts with all our senses, whether we are aware of this process or not. In order to highlight and analyze the crucial role of the senses in the shaping of persons, cultures, histories, and the arts, I have developed a theoretical and methodological approach I call *Sensiotics*.<sup>1</sup> This approach offers a way to deepen and enrich our understandings of arts and culture among Yorùbá in southwestern Nigeria and neighboring Benin. It provides a perspective on the central role of “performative power” or *àṣẹ*; Yorùbá ideas about the cosmos; the aliveness of artistic media—whether material or immaterial—the massing and activation of *àṣẹ* in shrines, altars, or performances; and the role of bodily (somatic) knowledge that comes from sensory experience. Here I outline *Sensiotics* and, using examples of Yorùbá art in the Newark Museum collection, illustrate how multisensory experiences of the arts that constitute elements of a Yorùbá *sensorium* can provide a deeper *sense* of the affective power and significance of Yorùbá arts for those who create them, and those who are moved by them.

## SENSIOTICS

I define *Sensiotics* as the study of the senses in the formation of arts/materials, persons, cultures, and histories, with a focus on bodily knowledge in the creative process as well as in reception by body-minds. Over the last two decades or more, there

has been a transdisciplinary turn away from cultures as texts to bodily experience—to body-minds and the senses. This is due in part to recent research on neurological discoveries concerning sensory-mirror neurons, and body-mind unities and interactions.<sup>2</sup> In sum, sensing is constitutive of cognition.

I realized the importance of multisensory experience and bodily knowledge during my first attempts at researching arts in Africa—my apprenticeship with the Yorùbá artist Sànúsí of the Àdúgbòloge Atelier in Abẹ̀òkúta, Nigeria, in 1965, and a second, mask-making apprenticeship with Ògúndípẹ̀ of Ilaro in 1978 when I made a *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀* mask for the impending festival. What I learned from those apprenticeships was that “the actions of artists teach us as much about style and aesthetics as their words.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, I gained insights into Yorùbá artistic concepts, not only in discussing them with artists and observing them as they emerged from the creative process, but even more in attempting to achieve them in my own carving under the tutelage of Yorùbá artists.

My own bodily, multisensorial experience was crucial to a more profound understanding (*òye*) of Yorùbá art, and the culture and history that shape it. This process of watching, listening, carving, making mistakes, being corrected by example, and trying again, was a *transformative sensorial experience* for me. Slowly my *body-mind* learned to carve as my adze-strokes became more precise and effective and the image in my mind took shape through the actions of my body. Yorùbá people understand this kind of experience and explain it with a sensory

metaphor: “the outsider or uninitiated usually sees through the nose” (*imú ni àlejò fi í ríran*).<sup>4</sup> This saying has two different yet complementary connotations: that an outsider understands little because she/he confuses sensing organs; and, at the same time, that understanding requires multiple senses.<sup>5</sup> With knowledge (*imò*) together with wisdom (*ogbòrín*), we struggle to achieve understanding (*òye*). And such understanding comes from the unity of body and mind as they process sensory experiences. I have been working on this insight since my apprenticeships with Yorùbá artists, and it has been working on me ever since.

I coined the term *Sensiotics* to “playfully poke” (but in a serious way) those engaged in linguistically based semiotics. Despite the fact that semiotics claims to be the study and interpretation of signs and symbols in all forms and media, it is in practice shaped by linguistics and the study of texts and then adapted to other media such as the visual arts where it has had a major impact on the discipline of art history/visual and material culture. Thus we often hear art historians speak about “reading” a painting or sculpture or photograph. Such a phrase is symptomatic of the logo-centric bias of semiotics. Even if scholars are mixing their metaphors for dramatic effect as in catachresis and not thinking about an actual “text” of written or spoken words, the use of the phrase “to read a painting” betrays a perspective shaped by language, afterthoughts of an initial sensory experience. We do not “read” a painting, we look at and see it using our sense of sight, which is quite different from reading a “text.” And when we look at a visual work of art, not only is our sense of sight engaged, but all our senses and sense memories that we bring to the perception of that work whether we are conscious of them or not—of hearing, touch, taste, smell, and perhaps others as well, depending upon our cultural background and life experiences. We think with our multisensory body-minds.

The senses are defined, classified, and understood differently by different cultures and in different eras. They tell us much about what are often sensory experiences that are beyond words, yet inhabit our bodies. *Sensiotics* considers how these senses, constituted genetically (nature) and then enculturated (nurture), shape individuals, cultures, histories, and the arts—our being in the world.

#### ÀṢẸ AND YORÙBÁ IDEAS ABOUT THE COSMOS

In Yorùbá thought, everything is alive with “performative power” called *àṣẹ*. This vital/life force is the source of everything that exists. Not only we human beings but animals, plants,

rivers, mountains, stones, tastes, smells, gestures, and sounds (whether words, songs, or drum rhythms) possess *àṣẹ*. In this Yorùbá view, nothing is “inanimate” and the notion of a “still-life” artwork would be inconceivable. Because of this inherent power, all Yorùbá arts are therefore simultaneously sacred and secular. And all individuals and artists strive in their lives to learn how to manage, manipulate, and use *àṣẹ* to better their own lives and the lives of those around them, and those who cultivate and master *àṣẹ* are known as *aláàṣẹ*.

The Yorùbá conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet interacting, interpenetrating realms—the otherworld (*òrun*) of invisible spiritual forces and the visible, tangible realm (*ayé*) of the living—all animated by the “performative power” known as *àṣẹ*. The otherworld is the abode of the deified ancestors (the gods known as *òrìṣà*), the spirits of specific sacred places (*iwin*), and the spirits of ancestors (*eégún*, or *ará òrun*). In the world of the living (*ayé*) are those who have gained knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual power during their lifetimes. They are termed *aláàṣẹ*—those who possess “performative power”—and include queens and kings, elders, priests and priestesses, diviners, initiates, artists, and masqueraders. These endowed persons can bridge and connect otherworldly and worldly realms. Crossing the permeable threshold between them are spiritual forces, like the gods who possess their devoted followers during trance ceremonies, and *Egúngún* masqueraders who embody the spirits of their ancestors during performances.

Using their inventive imaginations (*imojú mọra*) and distinctive *àṣẹ*, Yorùbá artists materialize those normally invisible ancestral spirits through masquerades such as *Egúngún*. Such masquerades incorporate both full-body costumes composed of strips of cloth (see cat. no. 64) as well as wooden masks worn with body coverings. This headdress (fig. 1) is a curious hybrid ensemble that raises many questions and few answers. The red felt cap seems to have been an added item, not part of the original carved image. The finely rendered coiffure, braided and multicolored, suggests a woman’s hairdo. Most intriguing are the finely incised lines of triangular incisions that converge in oblique lines on the forehead and radiate outward along the cheeks to the ears. I know only one other example of such an incised facial pattern, in an *Egúngún* headdress said to come from Gbòngán, a town near Ilé-Ifé. Such masqueraders are mediators who facilitate communications between the ancestors, the guardians of traditions, and their living descendants in the world. *Egúngún* are able to do this because they, like all arts (*onà*), possess *àṣẹ*.



FIG. 1. *Egúngún Headdress*, early–mid-20th century. Unrecorded Yorùbá artist; Nigeria. Wood, wool, metal, pigment; 12 × 8 × 6½ in. Newark Museum, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Paul E. Schneck, 1979, 79.210.



FIG. 2. *Pair of Figures (edan Òṣùgbó)*, late 19th–20th centuries. Unrecorded Yorùbá artist; Nigeria. Brass, iron; left: 17 × 3½ × 2⅞ in; right: 17 × 3½ × 2⅝ in. Newark Museum, Gift of Bernard and Patricia Wagner, 2008, 2008.44.6.

On the other hand, sculptures depict the followers/devotees of the gods and ancestors, not the gods or ancestors themselves, for they are invisible. Yet at the same time, their presence is implied in sculptures that show devotees in altered states of consciousness or trance—their heads and eyes swelled with divine presence to evoke those moments of heightened and intensified *àṣẹ*. Look closely at almost all the Yorùbá objects to see the visual emphasis on heads and eyes, either with size/scale, or enhanced with the color white (see cat. nos. 50, 55, and 65). For example, the eyes of the female/male pair of *edan Òṣùgbó* (fig. 2) are rendered as protruding almond shapes to express the wisdom and deep insights (*ojú inú*—literally “inner-sight”) required of these elders as they make judicial decisions affecting persons and communities.

The Yorùbá have a revealing saying about *òrun* and *ayé*. They say: *ayé l’òjà, òrun nilé*, meaning “The world is a marketplace [that we visit to do our business], the otherworld is home.” An

alternative saying likens life to a journey (*ayé l’ajò, òrun nilé*). What the Yorùbá are saying is that a person’s time in this world is short and transitory. We must try to make the most of it. We have to take action based upon careful reflection and contemplation, so that we can make the right decisions and take the correct path. When we leave this world, we go to *òrun*, our eternal home, yet Yorùbá also believe in the possibility of reincarnation, of a continuing journey. If one makes positive contributions during one’s life, a portion of the person’s performative power or being (*àṣẹ*) may come back again as a new individual with a new spiritual head or destiny. Thus, for example, a new child may be born into a family soon after a grandfather or grandmother has departed. The parents go to a diviner to determine if the child is associated with the departed ancestor. If this is so and the child is female, the young girl may be named *Yétúndé*, or *lyábò*, which means “Mother-has-come-back.” If it is a boy and a grandfather or uncle has departed, the child might

be named Babátúndé, “Father-has-returned.” Thus, there is a notion of a spiraling life cycle—life, afterlife, and partial reincarnation—that creates a new person with spiritual elements of a former life. This sequence is not a closed system but is, rather, one that is continually renewed by *àṣẹ* and expressed in the intimate, dynamic, ongoing relationship between the living and their departed, activated and celebrated in powerful multimedia and multisensorial performances like *Egúngún*.

A Yorùbá term for “art” or “evocative form”—whether in wood, clay, cloth, food, word, dance, song, etc.—is *ọ̀nà*. *Ọ̀nà* is an enhancement, an embellishment of some object, utterance, or action. When a sensitive, experienced, knowledgeable, and wise artist, a person who possesses *àṣẹ*, masterfully works her/his medium (that also possesses *àṣẹ*) something extraordinary happens, and audiences are literally, figuratively, emotionally, and spiritually *moved*. When so moved, Yorùbá persons will exclaim with delight as their jaw drops “*o ya mi l’enu!*” (*wonderful*, or, literally, *it made my mouth open/gasp*): they have experienced something special. The role and goal of such art among the Yorùbá is to open eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin—that is, “body-minds”—to evocative sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and movements, so that one experiences the cosmos of world/otherworld deeply and profoundly. And those whose spiritual heads (*orí inú*) have been ritually prepared (*adoṣù*) will embody and experience the divine from the otherworldly realm using their supra-sense-abilities during trance.

#### MYSTICAL MEDIA

All media, whether tangible or intangible, possess *àṣẹ* and therefore have distinctive attributes or resonances that connect them to otherworldly forces, whether gods, spirits, or ancestors. Thus, sweet water is *Ọ̀sun* or *Ẹ̀yinlẹ̀*, or *Ọ̀bà*, or *Yewa*—all names of river goddesses. Salt waters, beads, coral, and cowries are *Olókun* or *Yemoja*, goddesses of wealth and the sea. Clay is *Yemowo* or *Ìyá M̀p̀ó*, goddesses of potters; iron is *Ogún*; the wood of an *irókò* tree is *Ẓàngó*; and *omo* and *ẹ̀rinmadò* wood are *òrìṣà Ìbejì*. Intangible, spoken words—prayers, invocations, curses, etc.—also possess *àṣẹ*.

Cowries (*owó ẹ̀yọ̀*) are used as money, a medium of exchange in marketplaces. They are also used in communications between the human and the divine, as in sixteen cowrie divination (*mẹ̀rìndínlógún*) or in abbreviated consultations using four cowries, thrown for quick answers to immediate concerns. In such contexts, cowries evoke the presence of *Ẹ̀ṣù-Ẹ̀lẹ̀gba*, divine mediator, guardian of the crossroads, and principle of uncertainty as seen in this marvelous dance sculpture ensemble with

cowrie garment and strands (fig. 3). Cowries’ rich multivalences (wealth, exchange-connection, liminality, indeterminacy) are what also give a cowrie-covered garment for *Òrìṣà-Oko* its performative power (see fig. 4). *Òrìṣà-Oko* is the deity associated with agriculture, the fertility of the land and the sustenance of humanity. It also presides over such issues as anti-social behavior, barrenness, disease, wealth, and poverty. This elaborately beaded garment (*ẹ̀wù*) covered the central object on an *Òrìṣà-Oko* altar—an exquisitely forged and incised iron staff/sword made from the hoes of many farmers. Such staffs are placed in brass bowls since, like the feet of royals placed on beaded cushions, they must remain elevated and not touch the earth directly. Earth is the abode of the ancestors, and it is the earth that sustains life. *Òrìṣà-Oko* presides over the work of farmers who work the land/earth to feed humanity. *Òrìṣà-Oko* also reminds us that when we depart and are buried, we nourish the earth and thus sustain life. The somatic or sensory affect of color reveals another dimension of *Òrìṣà-Oko* whose hues are white and red. The foreheads of *Òrìṣà-Oko* devotees are marked with two vertical lozenges of these two colors, white from two ritually powerful substances—chalk/kaolin (*efun*) and red from camwood (*osùn*). White (*funfun*) is coolness, clarity, calmness, age, wisdom, hidden/inner power, and also semen. Red (*pupa*) is heat, energy, action, aggression, violence, and menstrual blood. All of these associations resonate as they evoke a kind of spiritual balance associated with right living through justice and hard work.

Leather, which requires the sacrifice of a particular animal, usually goat or cow (and thus the offering of blood containing *àṣẹ*), is the medium for encasing magical, empowering substances (*oògùn*) in amulets (*tiraa*). Examples of such amulets are the triangular ones attached to the *House of the Head* (see cat. no. 25), and they are also depicted on figures in the *Epa/Ẹ̀lẹ̀fọ̀n* headdress (see cat. no. 50). Still others are attached to the *Egúngún* ensemble (see cat. no. 64).

Metals evoke gendered attributes. Iron is associated with maleness and openly aggressive action. Brass is linked with femaleness and hidden/covert spiritual powers. Thus *ẹ̀dan Ọ̀ṣùgbó* (see fig. 2), emblematic of the elderly female and male members of a powerful judiciary society, are cast brass figures mounted on iron shafts. Both (female/brass and male/iron) must be present for judgments to have the performative power or *àṣẹ* to take effect. And in the case of the diviner-healers *opa Osun*, iron marks the presence and powers of the warrior god *Ọ̀gún* in an object that is understood primarily as a weapon (see cat. no. 57).



FIG. 3. *Dance Sculpture Ensemble with Èṣù-Èlégba Figures*, late 19th–20th centuries. Unrecorded Yorùbá artist; Igbomina region, Nigeria. Wood, cowries, leather and pigment; 20¾ × 10 × 5½ in. Newark Museum, Gift of Bernard and Patricia Wagner, 2006, 2006.39.3.



FIG. 4. *Sheath for Òrìṣà-Oko*, mid-20th century. Unrecorded Yorùbá artist; Nigeria. Vowries, cloth, leather, metal coins; 49¼ × 11½ × 3¼ in. Newark Museum, Purchase 1980 John J. O’Neill Bequest Fund, 80.424.



FIG. 5. *Crown (adé rílá)*, late 20th century. Unrecorded Yorùbá artist; Nigeria. Glass beads, fiber, cloth, thread; 29½ × 11 × 9½ in. Newark Museum, Purchase 2000 Life Membership Fund, John J. O’Neill Bequest Fund, and the Felix Fuld Bequest Fund, 2000.43.

Valuable stone or glass beads (*ilèkè*) are likened to a Yorùbá person’s most precious possession—children—as evidenced in the proverb “children are as precious as beads [they must be handled with great care]” (*omọ n’ilèkè*). The most important beaded regalia of Yorùbá rulers is the *adé rílá* (literally “big crown”) (see fig. 5), worn on the most momentous occasions precisely because such a crown is actually a container of concentrated *àṣẹ* in the form of magical medicines, activated by sacred incantations and then embedded inside the summit of the conical crown, that the wearer must never see. The precious beads and empowering substances are meant to protect, guide, and enhance the superhuman powers and authority of Yorùbá sacred rulers. At the same time, their presence is also a warning against misrule, for they can kill. According to Yorùbá tradition, the Òṣùgbó judiciary council of elders both make and un-make rulers. If a ruler transgresses, the Òṣùgbó sends a message saying “look inside the *adé rílá*”—and suicide must follow.

Trees are the abodes of certain spiritual forces with distinctive *àṣẹ*. The wood used to create sacred sculptures possesses this *àṣẹ*, which is then enhanced further with other herbal concoctions and ritual baths. Thus a twin memorial figure (see fig. 6), or *ère ibejì*, from the Eṣùbíyí atelier in Abèòkúta, made from *omọ/èrinmadò* wood, does its cosmic connecting work because of the performative power in the wood, together with the activating rituals of feeding, dressing, oiling, bathing, praying, singing, and dancing to celebrate a departed loved one. A twin figure is bathed and rubbed with palm oil, and camwood powder is applied to the face and torso. A protective substance, camwood (*irosùn*) is used for sacred matters such as divination as well as for preventing bee stings. Indigo or commercial bluing enhances the coiffure. Deep, rich indigo blue, the favorite color of many Yorùbá, is appreciated as “cool and bright to see.” Metaphorically, blue connotes deep wisdom that comes from age—perhaps it is the hue of a prayer for longevity directed to the god of twins?



FIG. 6. *Twin Memorial Figure (ère ibeji)*, early 20th century. Eṣùbíyí atelier, Abẹ̀òkúta, Nigeria. Wood, pigment, beads;  $9\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$  in. Newark Museum, Gift of F. Peter Rose, 1982, 82.38.



FIG. 7. *Ifá Divination Tray*, early–mid-20th century. Àrẹ̀ògún atelier, Osi-Ilorin, Ekiti region, Nigeria. Wood;  $21 \times 20 \times 1\frac{3}{4}$  in. Newark Museum, Gift of Bernard and Patricia Wagner, 2007, 2007.43.1.

A divination tray from the Àrẹ̀ògún atelier (fig. 7) is a feast for more than the eyes—it is also a sounding form. A famous carver of *opón Ifá*, Chief Aláàyè of Ìkẹrín, related to art historian Rowland Abiodun that “*opón* is designed to flatter and honor Ifá.”<sup>6</sup> The word *opón* means “tray,” something made to display or present something openly, plainly, and clearly. *Opón Ifá*, by its flattering and instructive “designs,” extends presentation to revelation. In addition, all divination trays possess one essential element: a carved hollow in the underside to amplify the sound of the tapper as it strikes the tray to summon forces to the divination session. *Opón Ifá* are *heard* as well as seen—multiple senses engaged in the perception and appreciation of evocative form, art.

Cloth, like beads, is likened to children. The saying, *omọ l’aṣọ èdá*, “children are our clothing [what we show to the world]” conveys the idea that children represent the pride and continuity of a family. Cloth (*aṣọ*) is also considered a symbol of immortality as expressed in the proverb “cloth only wears to shreds/threads.”<sup>7</sup> This is one of the primary reasons *Egúngún* ensembles are made of textiles. Newark’s *Egúngún* (cat. no. 64),

for example, is composed of perhaps as many as a hundred different strips of cloth, both locally made and imported, added to the costume over many years.

When such materials are transformed into artistic “evocative forms” (*onà*), their “performative power” (*àṣẹ* is amplified even more). Such creations move the body-minds of Yorùbá audiences intellectually and emotionally. The arts activate and engage the senses, provoking feelings, emotions, and thoughts that lead to actions, for *àṣẹ* is also understood as the power to accomplish something, to get something done, to make things happen. This is the somatic and mindful power of the arts to affect and shape body-minds, and lives, in profound ways.

Before Bamgboye carved his impressive *tour de force* of an *Epa/Ẹlẹ́fòn* headdress (see cat. no. 50), he had to propitiate the *àṣẹ*, the life spirit of the *irókò* tree from which it was carved. He recognized the sanctity of the in-dwelling spirit of that living thing, before he could “sacrifice” it in order to create a countless number of images of the pillars of society and the worldly forces complicating and animating the Yorùbá world. As someone working with iron-bladed tools, Bamgboye had to pray over



FIG. 8. Henry John Drewal with his master Ògúndípé offering sacrifices to Ògún before beginning the carving, 1978. Photograph by Margaret Thompson Drewal.

and feed his tools in an appeal and prayer to Ògún, god of iron (fig. 8). Only after recognizing the *àṣẹ* in these materials, and the divine presence of Ògún in iron, could he safely and successfully create the masterpiece we admire today. And too, we must remember that the carving and painting of this headdress were only the first stages in its full activation, for then it needed to be *performed*—to be carried on the head and shoulders of a physically and spiritually powerful dancer. This performer would have been “prepared” with empowering medicines replete with *àṣẹ* to enable him to leap upon a sacred conical mound of earth—symbol of settlement and society, of culture created out of nature—during annual festivals.

In another example, the clay of a potter possesses its distinctive *àṣẹ*. When the wise priestess-potter molded a “glory to Èyinlé” with her hands (see cat. no. 55), she used water from Èyinlé’s sacred stream and clay from the river bottom. She then fired the vessel with flames, smoke, and heat in a pit kiln covered with branches and leaves from the forest, and later rubbed the surface with thick indigo paste from leaves—all media possessing distinctive *àṣẹ* crucial to creating a sacred object capable of enabling and enhancing communications between devotee and deity, *ayé* and *òrun*. When she finished her creation, she put pebbles and fresh water from the stream into the vessel as she entered a trancelike state, chanting prayers and praises to her god. The vibrations of her spoken words carried *àṣẹ* into the air, vibrations that reached across the *ayé/òrun* divide, uniting the cosmos with artistry and vitality in order to accomplish her devotional task, to gain protection or support

for herself and others. Such a transaction enlivened both the vessel and the maker. The *Èyinlé pot* became an active agent, communicating like a person, and the priestess-artist became an animated object, a vessel of spirit.

#### SHRINES, ALTARS, PERFORMANCES: MASSING ÀṢẸ IN THINGS, OFFERINGS, SOUNDS, AND ACTIONS

Many of the sacred Yorùbá works embodying “performative power” or *àṣẹ* discussed above were the focus of a shrine or altar known as an *ojúbọ*, literally “the face of worship” or “where to face to worship.” The *Vessel for Èyinlé* (cat. no. 55), the sculpture of a *Ẓàngó* devotee holding a lidded bowl (cat. no. 65), the *House of the Head* topped by an equestrian figure (cat. no. 25)—all of these works would have been placed on a shrine or altar. Others were primarily meant to be experienced in performance or public display. For example, a warrior chief brandishing his beaded *udàmalóre* sword (cat. no. 56) exudes pride, confidence, and authority. The beaded gown of the Deji (cat. no. 26) amplifies his girth and physical presence to visibly assert his superhuman spiritual powers. These are the locations or occasions where cosmic communications take place, places and moments imbued with *àṣẹ*—the performative power to accomplish something effectively.

Yorùbá arts visualize such heightened moments of worship in images of devotees in trance, when humans and gods become one. It is “spiritual insight” (*ojú inú*) that enables Yorùbá people to “see” divinity when they are manifest in the entranced bodies of their devotees. Yorùbá sculptures or paintings do *not* depict

the gods or ancestors, rather they are images of human beings embodying divinity. Yorùbá sacred art forms are not “idols” being worshipped. They serve as a focus for devotions, like a Christian cross or the Ka’aba at Mecca, or a Jewish Torah. As many Yorùbá devotees have told me over many years, we cannot know what òrìṣà look like (or know for certain what “gender” they may express) for they are no longer human (èniyàn)—they have been transformed.

In addition, all such *ojúbò* or performance objects are themselves alive with àṣẹ, they are *not* inert or lifeless or unanimated—they are awakened by the prayers, the offerings, the songs and gestures, sights, smells, tastes, touches, and actions of worshippers. They are made of media that possesses àṣẹ and thus participate actively in affective, somatic devotional practices. Their very presence and activation in rituals makes them a part of and not apart from the multisensory, somatic transformations that take place in the body-minds of devotees. There is a conflation—a contiguity and continuity—between *re-present-ation* and *presence* in Yorùbá thought and action. All things (persons, objects, sounds, gestures, tastes, touches, smells) are alive with potential agency. As Karin Barber explained in her seminal article about how “man makes god” among the Yorùbá, worship is a two-way path requiring devotional action with àṣẹ on both sides of the worldly/otherworldly cosmic equation.<sup>8</sup> This is summed up by the diviner Kolawole Oshitola, who once declared to me, “If you neglect your gods, they depart.”<sup>9</sup>

#### CLOSING THOUGHTS

The symbolic significance of the arts is shaped initially by their somatic impact, their affective power on our sensing bodies, and only later by our minds as we seek meaning. As unified body-minds, our sensory experiences constitute cognition. Our feelings shape our thinking, theorizing, and ultimately our actions. If we are to understand and appreciate the omnipresence of àṣẹ in all things, and àṣẹ’s heightened presence in Yorùbá arts, whether for artists or their audiences who use their sense-abilities to engage and interact with the arts, we too must adopt a multisensorial approach to understandings of arts and cultures, whether our own, or others’.

Exiled in museums, African objects become inert, removed from the enlivening cultural contexts from which they come, and in which they *lived*. But if we recognize this deadening

disjuncture and use the empathetic powers of the sensory-mirror neurons in our body-minds to reconstruct and sensorially imagine such artistic and cultural moments, we can enrich and expand our own humanity.

- 1 Drewal 2005; Drewal in press.
- 2 Howes and Classen 1991; Howes 2005.
- 3 Drewal 1980, 7.
- 4 Abiodun 1990, 75.
- 5 R. A. Abiodun., personal communication, 2005; A. Ola, personal communication, 2005.
- 6 Abiodun 1975, 435–36.
- 7 Abiodun, Beier, and Pemberton III 2004.
- 8 Barber 1981.
- 9 Kolawole Oshitola, personal communication, 1986.

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