

Ways of the Rivers: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta.* Martha G. Anderson and Philip M. Peek, eds. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2002. 363 pp.

Reviewed by Christopher Slogar

Ways of the Rivers is a laudable and wide ranging study of the art and culture of Nigeria's expansive Niger Delta region—it is, in fact, the first of its kind—with contributions from fifteen scholars. This publication was produced as the catalogue to the major art exhibition of the same title held at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History in 2002. According to editors Martha G. Anderson and Philip M. Peek, the catalogue explores the “water ethos” shared by the various Delta peoples and its relationship to the arts (p. 35). To clarify the framework uniting the twenty-seven (!) individual essays included in the book, the editors explain, “By examining a range of art forms that reflect cultural borrowings, as well as distinctive traits, this volume focuses on cultural authentication—the process by which traditions derived from outside of a group are validated by the authority of political or religious leaders” (p. 33).¹ This concept is crucial to understanding the art from a region as culturally diverse as the Niger Delta. The text and numerous illustrations (the great majority of which are in color) more than succeed in conveying to readers the richness of the Delta's artistic heritage, its continuities and changes. The editors are to be commended also for the volume's emphasis on African voices, both in the selection of authors and in the way that the chapters reflect considerable field research. It will very likely remain the standard work on Niger Delta art for years to come. *Ways of the Rivers* is also a useful model for studies of artistic and cultural interaction in general.

This dense volume includes ten chapter essays arranged in three parts according to broad organizational themes. Placed between the chapter entries are thirteen brief “Interleaf” essays that focus on specific historical personalities, themes, or art forms. There are additional informative contributions for the preface (Leis), introduction (Anderson and Peek), conclusion (Anderson and Peek), and an appendix on Delta linguistics (Williamson and Eferé). There is one oversight concerning the map facing the appendix: Calabar, as the principle Efik town for some time now, should be included within the Efik-speaking region, which is thus incorrectly indicated. The catalogue's endnotes are substantive, and a comprehensive bibliography is provided.

Part one, “Early History, Trade, and Contact,” begins with a chapter on the enigmatic Lower Niger bronze industries; it reviews the main formal types and includes a detailed analysis of the British Museum's “Andoni hoard” taken in 1904 from an Obolo shrine (Peek and Nicklin). Chapter 2, by E.J. Alagoa, surveys the impact of the major external influences on Delta cultures over the last five hundred years (e.g., the slave trade, colonialism, and missionaries), concluding that, “Despite this history, the peoples of the Delta...have been able to retain much of their unique traditions and worldview” (p. 79). The Ijo “warrior ethos” and its relation to sculpture is the subject of chapter 3 (Anderson). The author notes, “Though their frequent saber rattling seldom led to open warfare, [the Ijo and their neighbors] expressed this attitude in everything

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from speech to dress” (p. 91). She also draws attention to one Bibikeala, an Ijo chief who early in the 20th century achieved nearly mythic fame through his militant actions and an escape from a British punitive expedition. Another British force of 431 men eventually caught the man they considered a pirate, but who is remembered locally as a misunderstood hero and protector. Interleaf essays in this chapter cover exploration, trade, and colonization (Anderson), merchant princes (one by Anderson and another by Eboime), the regionally widespread *ivri* sculptural “complex” (Peek), and the large-scale figures that honor Urhobo ancestors and nature spirits (Anderson).

Part two, “Environment and Cultural Confluence,” opens with Anderson’s chapter 4 on water-related imagery in Ijo art. She highlights the fundamental roles of canoes and canoeing and the various fish masquerades that honor water spirits, entertain, and protect against malevolent spiritual forces. Chapter 5, by Peek, examines the ways in which the culture and art of the Isoko accommodated—rather than conflicted with, as might be expected—their settlement in the unique watery environment of the Niger Delta after leaving drier lands in the distant past. Henry Drewal’s chapter 6 explores the complex relationships between the water spirit masquerades of the Ijebu-Yoruba and Delta peoples, particularly the Ijo. He reminds us that the form and meaning of these masquerades (and artistic expression in general) are independent and subject to reinterpretation through cultural interaction. The interleaf sections discuss water spirit shrines (Anderson), clay shrine figures (Peek), and eastern Ijo masquerades (Anderson).

Part three, “Arts and Identity,” begins with chapter 7, an examination by Kathy Curnow of the ways in which ethnic tensions and a renewed sense of nationalism became manifest in the visual culture of the Itsekiri following their loss of regional commercial hegemony during the colonial period. This has resulted in, according to Curnow, “. . . a sort of masquerade revisionism that argues the superiority of Itsekiri taste. . . Though they maintain a protective cultural posture in respect to lost dominance and glory, the challenge of defending their identity [and status] is pushing the Itsekiri to increased creativity and resourcefulness” (p. 242).

Chapter 8 explores meaning in the Ijo *ikakibite*, or “cloth of the tortoise.” Fundamental to any understanding of this cloth, as Lisa Aronson makes clear, is an understanding of the cultural significance of the actual tortoise (*Kinixys belliana*, or Bell’s hingeback) for which it is named: “[The Ijo] see in his provocative demeanor, his curious physical traits, and his liminal place within the world at large both a powerful spirit and a trickster par excellence” (p. 253).

Ogoni art is the subject of chapter 9 by Sonpie Kpone-Tonwe and Jill Salmons. The authors survey the main forms of Ogoni wood sculpture while noting the relationship of art to Ogoniland’s ongoing political struggles. The final chapter by Joanne Eicher and Tonye Erekosima offers a detailed analysis of Kalabari funerals, emphasizing the importance of providing revered elders and leaders “fitting farewells” that properly honor them and ensure their spirits’ acceptance into the realm of the ancestors so that they will treat the living with benevolence (p. 307). The interleaf essays cover Owu/Oworu masking (Peek), the various roles of Delta women and their associated arts (Anderson), a valuable addition to the literature on Obolo (or Andoni) arts, about which very little has been published (Nicklin), the work of artists Bruce Onobrakpeya and Sokari Douglas Camp (Anderson), and the spectacular boat races of the Delta (Anderson).

Note

1. On “cultural authentication,” see Tonye Erekosima and Joanne Eicher, “Kalabari Cut-Thread and Pulled-Thread Cloth,” *African Arts* 14, 2 (1981): 48-51, 87.

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