Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought is both an intellectual and visual delight. It is published in conjunction with an exhibition sponsored by the Center for African Art in New York. This magnificent exhibition, which I have been fortunate enough to see both in New York (and attend the opening symposium) and at the Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., is rightfully heralded as the definitive exhibition of Yoruba art. In this review, however, I shall discuss the text (which stands in its own right) and its importance not just for Yoruba specialists but more particularly for scholars of African religion in general.

Considering that African societies are dominated by oral and visual traditions, it is surprising that the visual and performance arts have occupied such a marginal place in the study of African religion. This is all the more so when we consider that art historians and historians of religion alike proclaim the 'interrelatedness of the forms of cultural expression in African societies' and when both disciplines have suffered from Western assumptions of what the humanities should include or exclude, in other words, restrictive, ethnocentric definitions of both art and religion. This book has a healing quality in that regard. It is written by a historian of religion and two art historians. In addition to the benefits of such interdisciplinarity, the authors are committed to the indivisibility of Yoruba art and thought. This does not translate into a crude functionalism, whereby a particular object is identified by the function it serves, be it divination, sacrifice, royal homage, etc. Nor are we led to believe that all art is sacred. Rather it is an attempt to combine the insights achieved after years of careful and thorough fieldwork by the authors, with the valuable linguistic and philosophical knowledge of the 'insider', Rowland Abiodun, to
explore the mythological and cosmological underpinnings of Yoruba artistic achievement.

The authors have four main aims in their study which are worth outlining here (p. 233). Firstly, they are concerned to trace the history of Yoruba art and reveal its antiquity, rich diversity in media and style, and its continuity over time, thereby challenging popular misconceptions of African art as ahistorical. Secondly, they aim to question the tendency by outside observers to homogenize Yoruba culture—the idea that it is a single, monolithic whole or that it stems from a particular centre, such as Ife or Oyo. They do this by illustrating the plurality of ‘centres’ that at various points in Yoruba history and in diverse ways have significantly shaped the course of Yoruba cultural development. This is indeed reflected in the way the book is structured, with chapters for the art of ancient Ife, Esie, Owo, the Ijebu, Oyo, and the North-East and the Western kingdoms.

Thirdly, in an attempt to avoid the uncritical use of Western concepts when talking about Yoruba art (the same problem obtains for religion, also), the authors seek to understand Yoruba aesthetic perceptions and artistic creativity in terms of the linguistic and conceptual categories of the Yoruba themselves. It seems so simple and so obvious (especially to phenomenologists of religion) and yet has been painfully lacking in many studies of African art. Finally, the book emphasizes the innovative creativity of the artist in Yoruba culture, calling into question the notion that cultural tradition is dominant and places constraints on the African artist. Of particular interest here is the role of spiritual inspiration in encouraging the conformity or the freedom of the artist.

The authors rightly insist that 'the study of historical antiquity and cultural diversity are inseparable' (p. 233): In the case of the Yoruba, perceived unity in terms of the desire to establish a political heritage with Ife and Oduduwa is essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon. Likewise it could be argued that the British colonial system, with its policy of indirect rule, served to bring more Yoruba-speaking groups together under a single state structure than ever before in their history. We could point to similar parallels with the influence of Western missionary Christianity on African religious systems. Another overall thrust of the book is to persuade us that Yoruba art is not limited to Sango shrine sculpture, *ibẹjì* figures or Ife bronze heads, as some Western collec-