

## **Eruvwu: Etymology and the Aesthetics of Beauty in Urhobo Cosmology**

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### **Abstract**

*Eruvwu* is Urhobo word meaning beauty which is a subject that attracts diverse views, meaning and commentaries. There seem to be an agreement however, that one of the objectives of aesthetics is the search for beauty or the interpretation of what beautiful is and what it is not. Beauty being a subjective issue makes aesthetics an inherently controversial field. The concept of beauty differs from one culture or environment to another. The requisites of what is beautiful are predicated upon values that could be historical, socio-cultural or politically interpreted, depending from which perspective or angle the word is viewed from. The paper applies a purely descriptive and qualitative method of research. It is anchored on Immanuel Kant's concept of aesthetics which holds that in all judgements by which we describe anything as beautiful, we allow no one to be of another opinion. This paper examines the word *Eruvwu* (beauty) from the Urhobo religio/cultural perspective and focuses on the moral conception of the word as well as its etymology of the values which have sharpened the Urhobo aesthetical judgment up to date.

### **Introduction**

*Eruvwu* is an aesthetics word that provokes various reactions. Since it is a concept that necessarily invokes emotional responses, it is almost certain that there are as many responses as there are individuals. *Aesthetics* comes from the Greek word for "sense of perception" and can be defined only

within particular cultural systems (On line dictionary). Cultural insiders must be consulted to ascertain how and why aesthetic concepts come to hold value. Aesthetics is primarily associated with taste, judgment, and judgment criteria, hence aestheticism. As a judgmental instrument, it apportions value to the object of appreciation. It is a familiar term with the arts and humanities especially, where works of art (fine art, music, drama and poetry) are created and analyzed.

‘The origins of aesthetic history (if we to understand the term in its widest sense, so that it embraces the ‘implicit’ aesthetics) are lost in the mist of time and can only be settled arbitrarily’ (‘Tatarkiewicz, 1970:7).

However, during the classical period in Greece, philosophy widened its range to include problems of aesthetics. This association with philosophy helped to broaden its perspective so that it accommodates divergent views and interpretations, which has also been responsible for the diverse responses in the appreciation or assessment of works of art. Until then, aesthetics had belonged to no particular discipline and laid within the competence of every citizen who might see and listen to works of art (ibid.78). Different peoples, cultures and ages, seem to have their own aesthetic sense or judgment criteria in appreciating works of art. The greatest challenge perhaps of aestheticians over the ages is that of evolving universal standards in assessing beauty in works of art. Modern aesthetics is not limited to the arts. It is an issue in most disciplines, whether in pure or applied sciences, engineering, medicine, humanities and education, aesthetics is a relevant subject. It is so central that, successes in many of these disciplines are measured partly by the degree of aesthetic relevance.

The concept of aesthetic value is central and presumed fixed, like the concept of truth, though different ages have had different ways

of expressing their views on it, in each case, successive embodiments of the concept are constant and necessarily changeful (Lehmann, 1968:11).

This statement exposes the many sides of aesthetics. How you react to it depends on what side you can see. These viewpoints are determined by variables such as experiences, sentiments, culture, society, and environment. Sparshott (1965:3) writes that aesthetics seek to answer two questions: a) what is art, and b) what is beauty? When viewed from a broader spectrum however, is the purpose of art not the attainment of beauty? By beauty, it means what is seen, or simply as what is pleasing to the senses. (Righter, 1965:16). Boulton (1958:91), puts it as the quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love or some passion similar to it. Read (1968:4) puts it as a sense of pleasurable relations. Lehmann (ibid) argues that, the main function of aesthetics is to provide one answer: *what is art?* This question is the subject of many unresolved inquisition by philosophers, art historians and theologians since the Renaissance period. As Ziff (1966:21) noted; "One of the foremost problems of aesthetics has been to provide a definition (or an analyses, or an explication, or an elucidation) of the notion of a work of art. The solutions given by aestheticians to this problem have often been violently opposed to one another".

No doubt, the question of what art is a difficult one if one considers the nature of art and the diverse interpretation, that art is capable of evoking. An aesthetician must justify his definition of a work of art for it to be acceptable. But even more difficult is the evaluation or appreciation, which aesthetics also seek to address. Some of the remarks made while discussing a work of art are reasons in support of a critical evaluation of the work. To evaluate a work, one must understand it, and a thorough understanding involves the gathering of sufficient information that are directly relevant only to an appreciation of it. Information gathering enables one to see either the cultural perspective, objectivity or

subjectivity of the artist and the other factors that are salient influences on the making process of art. Since judgment is impossible without bias, information gathering (when done properly and effectively) helps the aesthician to see through the eyes of the creators of a work of art on the one hand, and is able to make deductions based on the artists' biases and the actual presentation on the other. The core of aesthetics is judgment. If an art piece is said to be good, it simply means it has satisfied a sense of beauty. It is in this sense that Osborne (1965) noted that, "the purpose of aesthetics is to provide the general principles or making correct aesthetic judgments, and an understanding of the notion of beauty is the way to arrive at such principles" Righter (Ibid), presented his investigation of beauty in two ways: "first by examining the states of mind involved in the appreciation of beauty' in work of art, and secondly, by examining the objective properties in works of art that are connected with this mental state." The first is an investigation of the disposition, culture and value system of the artist, while the second is the identification of visible properties in the art works that agrees with the artists' perception. This in my opinion seems a rational way of examining a people's sense of beauty.

**The sense of beauty.**

Beauty is an ambiguous term. In order to understand it, it is essential to know what is not beauty. To begin, let us borrow Reads' impute: "The sense of pleasurable relations is the sense of beauty: the opposite sense is the sense of ugliness". There appears to be a subjective divide between what is beautiful and what is not, from Reads statement. The non-objectivity of beauty is not in doubt as it is often said that "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder". However, persons or groups of persons may accept an art piece as beautiful if it satisfies their collective sense of beauty. Beauty appeals to the senses, ugliness does not. This makes the senses a major determinant in aesthetic judgment. As simple as this seems, Read (as quoted above), implies that the power of aesthetic valuation is confined within the individual. This observation is

a main point of agreement between aestheticians, and the truth of this statement is further revealed when Read (ibid), in a critique of some African sculptures stated that “if words are to have any precise meaning, we must confess to be unbeautiful or ugly, a savage idol from New Guinea or the Ivory Coast”. Therefore, Beauty has diverse manifestations. If we take cognizance of the diverse nature of each individual however, the reactions to beauty is not out of place. Each person is unique in taste, although certain values or sensual considerations are common to groups of people because of culture, customs, training or personal inclination. To the so-called ‘savage peoples’, beauty in their sculptures is simply the extent to which they satisfy their religious or other purposes and the functionality attached to the work of art not the physical work. Obviously, this contradicts Reads sense of beauty.

The test of a true sense of beauty in anyone is in willingness to admit into the genuine manifestations of that sense (beauty) in other people, of other cultures or periods. That is, being able to look at objects of art with equal interest, irrespective of a preconceived perception of beauty. This is because all art works originates from a desire to create beauty. Making judgments based on subjective reasoning for instance, would amount to concluding that the artist of another era or culture lacked the potentials to conceive or create beauty. Two questions are readily the consequence of this submission:

- a) What are the standards of beauty?
- b) What does beauty look like?
- c)

The topic of beauty has elicited debate from an amazing array of thinkers, wherein the sensory, psychological, historical, theoretical, philosophical, political and ethical all find a place. There has to be a way to map the trajectory of the beautiful, to trace its imprint. To do so will be fruitful for considering what aesthetic choices mean in the twenty-first century. Chandes (1999:114) observes that; “It is difficult to define.

Obviously, it is something I am looking for. Beauty is like a sunset: it goes as soon as you try to capture it. The beauty you like is precisely that which escapes you”.

This statement typically presents the difficulty encountered in the attempt to answer questions on beauty. Beauty is something that we experience. Consequently, the analysis of beauty must deal primarily with our feelings. However, beauty does not lie entirely in the eye of the beholder as the structure of the object also helps to determine the feelings that arise from it. If we think of each individual component that makes up an object of perception as corresponding to individual feelings within us, we find that beautiful objects tend to harmonize our inner feelings. Visual beauty, or physical beauty for instance, could be said to be a harmonization, or proper proportioning, of colors, shapes, and forms. Each component part compliments, or enhances and enables, the other -causing the whole to be much more valuable than the mere sum of the individual parts.

Variations in the sense of beauty arise from the fact that component parts of perceived beauty, transmits sensations that have meanings connected to them. Meanings explain why one person may call an opera beautiful and another calls it boring. The meanings attached to the perception are different from one individual to the other. Learning about what is involved in writing music, can enhance our appreciation for the beauty of a piece of music. This makes our experience of the music richer because, in addition to the auditory stimulation, we also get mental stimulation. A great deal of the beauty in many objects is related to the interplay of the meanings (and the feelings) that are associated with the properties of the object. Since it is difficult to visualize what feelings look like, we can only assume that objects that give us satisfaction or pleasure satisfy our requirement of beauty. Objects that do not are of the opposite sense.

***Eruvwu: Beauty in Urhobo Aestheticism***

The concept of beauty among the Urhobo bear similarities with those of her neighbouring tribes; such as the Itsekiri, Isoko, Ijaw and Binis. Urhobo is made up of twenty-two socio-political units and they found in Delta state of Nigeria (Otite: 2003:21). According to the 1991 population census, they consist of about over a million people and classified among the ten major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Urhobo is one of the largest tribe from Delta state, made up of twenty-two polities; each has a dialect that is slightly different from the others. (Ekeh. 2005:9). Consequently, although their concept of beauty is the same, the dialectical variations in some Urhobo words tend to create differences in verbal reference to the same thing. Among the Urhobo, as with other African peoples, the concept of beauty is discernable from myths, folklore, proverbs, sayings, crafted works, name attributes and predestination. They believe that *Oghene* instructed the creator divinity *Oma* to create the physical body either beautiful or ugly. But the character of the individual is obtained through the process of predestination. (Ofuafo, 2013:117). This process according to Nabofa (2005:288) is in three folds. One, by declaration or degree at *Urholo* (throne of creation) and it is fixed. Two, it could be affixed at the entrance by Oghene himself (*Ada Eriwve*) and three, by kneeling before Oghene and pick one's destiny before birth. (*ovwigue*). Whichever method used, once this wish is made it is blessed and cannot be changed. The life of the person right from cradle to death thereafter becomes strictly governed by the wish. Thus beauty is associated to the Oghene.

To the Urhobo, the word *Eruvwu* (beauty), is a correlative term. It is better grasped when situated within a context of their belief system. The variety of its contextual applications makes it both exciting and challenging when attempts are made to delineate precise meanings of the word in the Urhobo language. The key to an understanding of the concept of *Eruvwu* (beauty) among the Urhobo therefore, is an understanding of its contextual applications, which is

predication on an apprehension of its correlations. This is necessarily so because the correlative terms of beauty are means of rendering more precise and apprehensible import, when reference is made to beauty in whatever form.

**The correlation of beauty.**

In Urhobo aesthetics, the correlation of beauty (*eruwvu*) is best understood in the usage, *ororurmu* or meaning good behaviour. Good here, being interpreted to mean perfect, ideal and other words that convey similar attributes. In ordinary use, *erumu* and *ororormu* share a symbiotic relationship, such that they are often used interchangeably to mean the same thing. In other words, when used ordinarily, what is good is considered beautiful and what is beautiful is good. There is also the contextual use of *erurmu* and *ororormu*, but it is necessary to fully grasp the ordinary use of the words. To do this, let us consider a few sentences in Urhobo.

Omo ve eruwvu (meaning the child is beautiful)

Omo vwe eruwvu (meaning the child radiates beauty)

*Omo vwe eruwvu* (meaning the child is good or beautiful)

When translated literarily, *omo ve eruwvu* means the child has beauty (beautiful). When this sentence is made, it is in reference to the physical attributes of the person concerned, that is, a consideration of the body curves, the complexion and general physical structure. The speaker expects the listener to immediately see the attributes in the person so described. *Omo vwe eruwvu* is of a slightly different sense. Literarily it means 'the child carries beauty'. The speaker implies a combination of several qualities of beauty. Although the person concerned may not be physically very attractive, it implies an inner glow, a radiance of beauty in many facets such as character, disposition, speech and so on. In contrast to *omo we eruwvu*, the speaker expects the listener to perceive the radiance, or experience it by both sight or contact and interaction. While the first, *omo ve eruwvu* is a mere comment and a request. *Omo vwe ruwvu* is translated



(literarily or otherwise) to mean ‘the child is good or beautiful’. Usually, when this sentence is used, the speaker is passing a verdict (so to speak) concerning the individuals’ character or physical attributes. It is the result of a formed opinion after a careful observation and interaction with the person in reference.

When any of these statements; *omo ve eruwvu*, *omo wve eruwvu* and *omo ro eruwvu* is used in an implied sense, the meaning varies with the context. For instance, According to Emifoniye (2003), the use of the sentence *omo ve eruwvu* in reference to someone singing could be one of two things. Either as a reference to a physical structure as already discussed or to a beautiful voice which is the present situation. The listener is expected to decipher the context as he/she listens to the singing voice, or make a physical appraisal of the singers’ bodily features. *Omo wve eruwvu*, used within the same context carries with it, an implication of a foreknowledge of the person concerned. The speaker is implying that the singer has other qualities apart from the one presently expressed. *Omo ve mamor wve* in this context means a good voice. The contextual applications of the terms of beauty are many, so also are the implied meanings within each context.

The word *omamor*, is a synonym of *emamor uruemu* which means good, but is not used in all the context possible with *uruemu*. While *uruemu* can’t be interpreted to mean both good and beauty, *omamor* simply implies good although it could be in the sense of the satisfaction derived as a result of beauty or a perceived ability to satisfy purpose due to material content. It is often used when there is a comparison of some sort, or when an opinion is sought. Let us consider an interaction between two speakers for instance.

First Speaker: *ona wve erumvu?* (is this good?)

Second Speaker: *ey omamor* (yes, it is good).

When a comparison is sought between two objects, *omamor* implies the better or more acceptable one. There is a more intricately knit correlation between *eruwvu* and *oruemu*, than there is between *eruwvu* and *omamor*. The correlation between *eruwvu*, *oruemu* and *omamor* is better appreciated when considering the opposite sense *ovweuruemu*, which is interpreted to mean ugly or bad. Taken literally, *ovweuruemu*, means spoiled, damaged or useless. There is no deliberate word in Urhobo aesthetics for ugly, which is based on the belief that there is something good or beautiful about everything.

The statement, *akpo urorornu* which means 'life is good or beautiful' is used with an understanding that life is best expressed in man, his activities and his environment. Since man is the center of life, every man is expected to live a 'beautiful life', to excel in his vocation, maximize his potentials and be at peace with his neighbors because "*akpo eruwvu*" (life is good). Where the situation is the reverse, it is *ununuren*, that is, a state of uselessness, of not being able to positively affect neighbours, friends or environment in our manner of speech as expressed in the phrase '*ugbenu nu ren*', literally translated as useless, bad or rotten mouth. It could also be an absence of qualities that arouse sensual appeal either in the bodily features or in character as expressed in the phrase; *omo nu ren ni*, meaning an ugly or bad child and so on. Although the phrase, *omo no ren in* is seldom used, it implies a hopeless situation. From the study of the contextual applications of the words, *erumu* and *ororomu*, it is possible to deduce various forms of beauty in Urhobo aesthetics, some of which are discussed here.

### **Etymology of beauty.**

1. ***Eruwvu re ewen*** (beauty of the mind). This is the purest form of beauty in Urhobo aesthetics. Literarily, '*eruwue re ewen*' means beauty of the mindset, or beauty is in the mind. The later translation conveys the importance attached to this form of beauty. For a better understanding, it is imperative to consider its correlation; *omamor ewen* and *ewen fua fo*, both

of which places *eruwvu nu re ewen* in a clearer context. *Omamor ewen* implies a good mind, while *ewen fua fo* refers to a pure mind or literarily translated 'a white mind', used with an understanding that white symbolizes purity and chastity. The belief that man is the creation of a pure and perfect God (*osonobruwhe*), whose expectation of his best creation: man, is the expression of beauty in such a way that it affects his neighbours and environment in a positive way, is reinforced in *omamor ewen* and *ewen fua fo*. One who is described as having *ewen fo fon* for instance, is believed to have a tested and proven character and disposition. He is seen as a good example of *osonobruwhe* creation, and can be trusted in many ways. A good mind is reflective of a humble personality, kindness, gentleness, thoughtfulness and peace loving characteristics. It is the quality that prospective suitors seek after when they make enquiries from neighbours of the would be bride. Thus, the phrase: '*owe erumu ro wvie enwen fua fo e*', meaning there is no beauty better than a clean or beautiful mind, depicts the relevance attached to the beauty of the mind. The clean mind of the wife it is believed can protect her husband from evil. Also the phrase: '*eruwvu ne nuye dja*', used as a form of greeting but translates as, 'let beauty continually be in you', refers to a beauty that is beyond the physical. It is the beauty of the mind, and an advice or encouragement to the addressee to maintain a disposition of humility and goodwill.

**2. Omamo oma** (bodily beauty). '*Omamo oma*' refers to the beauty of bodily features. Literarily, it means a good or well-formed body. Although, an attractive or well-formed body is seen as a gift from *osonobruwhe*, it is not highly rated in anyone except such a person also possesses a beautiful character. The phrase; '*ugbenu wvia wvia me nzi are re erumu*', meaning it is a bad mouth that spoils a beautiful woman, explains the conditional importance attached to bodily beauty. The Urhobo considers beauty without character a waste and a punishment from Oghene.

**3. *Omamo uriri*** (beautiful voice). A beautiful voice is considered a rare gift from *Osonobruwhe* (Almighty God). In Urhobo myths, the beautiful voice is a feature that attracts help from the gods, ancestors as well as humans, in favour of young maidens in distress or captivity. There is a strong connection between a beautiful voice and a beautiful mind. It is believed that pleasant sound comes from a good heart. The phrase; '*omamo uriri me re enwen fua fo*', meaning it is a good voice that comes from a good heart; buttresses this point, and also emphasizes the belief that the essence of beauty is the display of goodness, purity and humility.

**4. *Omamor ota*** (beautiful speech). Closely related to a beautiful voice is '*omamo eme*', which means a beautiful or good word / speech. While '*omamo uriri*' emphasizes the sensuality or voice quality as expressed in songs, '*omarno enie*' highlights the content of spoken words, that is the substance of the speech, and the power of persuasive delivery as in oratory. '*Ornamo eme*' is best emphasized in the word *otota*, meaning 'he who talks'. It is an expression used for the skills of oratory and poetry. The *otota* is usually a fluent speaker, who has the ability to pass across information using words of deep import and precise meanings. So important is the skill that, those who possess it become the spokesmen for kings, families and even the community.

**5. *Omamor e mamor*** (beauty of crafted works). '*E mamor*' refers to crafted works in the sense of three-dimensional objects such as sculpture, pottery and crafts. The value of beauty as it relates to crafted works is in favour of its functionality rather than an attractive appearance although it is also acknowledged. Collaborating this view, Filani (1994:24) observed that the principle of pleasure in art has much to do with environmental and innate qualities, rather than the superficial glamour of sensuousness. The statement highlights the relevance of function in aesthetic consideration. An attractive craft for instance, is not considered good if its structure does not aid a fulfillment of its function.

6. ***Eruvwu akpo*** (Good world). The word referred to the physical world created by God which is supposed to be beautiful, hospitable and enjoyable. Hence the Urhobo would say *emamor akpo* or *akpo vwe eruvvu*. Which mean beautiful world or peaceful world. A wealthy person is believed to have a *emomor akpo* (Good life) while a poor man is said to have *erare akpo* (bad or wasted life)

### **Relationship of Urhobo concept of Eruvwu with other cultures (Yoruba)**

Eruvwu (Beauty) is an important phenomenon in human life that cannot be ignored. Even the sceptics and the agnostics are at breast with this term. Just as one hears of Greek philosophy, Indian philosophy, African philosophy we also hear of Aesthetics, that is the study of beauty. This could either be from Western, Eastern or African perspectives. This tends to suggest that like philosophy, Beauty is culture-relative or relative to culture. The subject of aesthetic appreciation in Western culture for example is preserved in museums, whereas in African culture, such as the Yoruba and Urhobo, the objects of aesthetic appreciation take its roots in our belief system, linguist expression and the ontological structure which permeates everything in the cosmos. It is linked with contact with the supernatural being, the creator and culture. This serves as the basis for communal values and practical reality of life. (Moses. 2011:286). It is from this perspective that an attempts would be made the relationship between the Urhobo and Yoruba esthetical appreciation of beauty. The Urhobo concept of Eruvve (beauty) is best appreciated when compared with other cultures most especially the Yoruba.

A compelling concept of Yoruba aesthetics is *ashe*, or life force, possessed and conveyed by all art forms, from visual to narrative to performative. Furthermore, *ashe* provides a tangible contact with the Orisha deities of the Yoruba spiritual pantheon. *Ashe* is intrinsically related to the essential nature of creativity called *iwa*, perceptible to those who have "walked with the ancestors" and thus acquired critical and

discerning eyes. For the Yoruba, as well as the Urhobo, the beauty of objects, performances, or texts lies not only in what catches the eye but also in the *ashe* derived from the work's completeness. From these elements one can then discern the artwork's *iwa*, or essential nature, and finally its *ewa*, or beauty.

Another critical concept of Yoruba aesthetics is *ara*, the "evocative power" of visual, verbal, musical, and performance arts associated with the ability to amaze (Roberts and Roberts, p. 27 cited by Moses). *Ara* signifies creativity, wonder and thunder. As the Yoruba philosopher Olabiyi Yai states, art is always "unfinished and generative" Cited by Moses (Robert. 107). Yoruba visual and verbal arts are also linked through *ori*, individuality, and *iyato*, difference and originality, and Yai argues for a definition of art that is "an invitation to infinite ... difference and departure, and not a summation for sameness and imitation" (ibid . 113). The tradition-creativity binary posed for so many cultures is thereby dissolved, and "innovation is implied in the Yoruba idea of tradition" (Ibid. 113). The phrase "iwa l'ewa" is significant to our understanding of Yoruba aesthetics. *Iwa* refers to the "essential nature" of an object thing or person; it is a specific expression of *ase*, the life force given to everything by the God Oludumaare. *Ewa* means beauty. Therefore when art signifies the essential nature of something, the work is considered beautiful. This brings us to an understanding of what "iwa l'ewa" means: "essential nature is beauty." However, this essential nature is not limited to objects pleasing to the eye, as it is in the Western culture, terrifying and ugly objects also capture the essential nature of a subject and therefore are beautiful.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of beauty in African and especially in Urhobo aesthetics, is analogous with the concept of good. An understanding of beauty as a concept in aesthetics is impossible without the appreciation of good. The physical appearance is considered less important than the mental or

emotional status of any man. Beauty is both in born and attainable, and good is the channel of making beauty both tangible and attainable. As earlier observed, beauty is good, and good is beautiful. To the Urhobo, Beauty therefore is the revelation of good.

This study is by no means' exhaustive. The variations and applications of beauty in Urhobo aesthetics are vast and require a larger format, although it is doubtful if all the facets and dimensions of beauty can be exhaustively treated. This is because; the concept of beauty is the concept of man, his purpose, culture, sentiments etc.

**Notes -**

1. The statement is a common notion. Its origin is not clear.
2. Man is used here in the plural context, to include both male and female gender

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