



## **The Western and Yoruba Concept of Beauty: A Comparative Analysis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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, the objects of aesthetic appreciation take its roots in what Placide Tempel called vital forces, the ontological structure which permeates everything. This serves as the basis for communal values and practical reality of life. It is from this perspective that this paper attempts a comparison between the Western and African esthetical appreciation of beauty and argues the thesis that the African beauty is best appreciated by means of African standards and paradigms of aesthetics.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The notion of beauty has undoubtedly received a considerable amount of philosophic inquiry among scholars, philosophers, creative artists and so forth. Beauty simply refers to the quality that people, places or things have that make them very attractive to look at. (Bullon:2007:116). The concept of beauty arises as a result of an individual's subjective experience, and this raises some fundamental questions such as; what is beauty? What makes a thing beautiful? Can a work of art be objectively regarded as beautiful? Or must it be evaluated from a subjective point of view? How does the Yoruba conceive beauty? (ewa), are there different conceptions of Ewa?(Beauty). How is Ewa (beauty) related o Iwa (character)? What are the factors that underline the notion of beauty among the Yoruba? Are there similarities or differences between the Yoruba concept of Ewa and Western concept of

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beauty? To the Yoruba, the term Ewa (beauty) is both an aesthetic term as well as an expression of Iwa (character) a person's essential nature. But some Western writers see arts as imitation of the real. The main focus of this work therefore is to carry out a comparative analysis of the concept of beauty in two major geographical areas, namely the West and the (Yoruba) Africa. To achieve this aim, we will first examine the notion of aesthetics, the Western conception of beauty, and the Yoruba conception of beauty and finally carry out a comparative analysis of both concepts.

### **Aesthetics: A Conceptualization:**

As a branch of philosophy, Aesthetics is the philosophical study of art and the experience of beauty. In its original Greek derivation, the term aesthetic denotes the study of sense experience generally and it was not until the 18th century, following a usage introduced by the German philosopher, Baumgartner, that a particular reference to the idea of beauty in art and nature was established. Derived from the Greek word *aesthetikos*, which means, perceptive (Ogbinaka,1995: 61). Aesthetics is the study of aesthetic experience, aesthetic attitude, aesthetic quality, aesthetics value and derivatively of closely related topics such as artistic creativity, artistic standards, beauty and its opposites... (Titus, 1959:385). Aesthetics is also defined as the philosophical study concerned with the understanding of beauty and its manifestations in art and nature (Honer, 1999:175). The identification of the characteristics of what people call beautiful and the analysis of theories of arts are major interests in this philosophical area; it therefore focuses on the value dimension of certain kind of human experience. Aesthetics qualifies as an aspect of axiology, that is, the study of values (ibid). Similarly, Dogbert Runes (1996:6) defines aesthetics traditionally as the branch of philosophy dealing with beauty or the beautiful, especially in art and with taste and standards of value in judging art. Accepting these definitions as universal implies that we can and should talk about African aesthetics because the African culture according to Onyewuyi (1995: 422), has its own standard of value in judging art, its own general principles in exploring the value of any work of art. To this end, it is argued that aesthetics can best be defined within a particular cultural system, that is, to understand the value of aesthetic concepts, cultural insiders should be consulted for clarifications. This informed our consideration for Yoruba conception of beauty (Ewa) in comparison with Western concept of beauty and to show that Yoruba conception of aesthetics touches on both moral as well as the spiritual aspects of human beings.

### **The Western Concept of Beauty: An Overview**

The first analysis of beauty dates back to the classical forebears – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who formulated the basis of Western understanding of the elusive concept of beauty. Most of these philosophers associated beauty with

virtue, for example, Socrates according to Xenophon, regarded the beautiful as coincident with the good, and both as resolvable into the useful (Probert Encyclopaedia:2009:1).

Plato in accordance with his idealistic tradition, argued for the existence of an absolute beauty, which is the ground of beauty in all things. He also asserted the intimate union of the good, the beautiful and the true (Ibid). Plato's perception of beauty in this regard is a transcendental form of beauty, imperceptible, eternal, simple and unchanging. Aristotle's approach to the study of beauty is scientific or critical in nature. His philosophical postulates were in many respects opposed to those of Plato. He does not admit an absolute conception of the beautiful but he distinguishes beauty from the good, the useful, the fit, and the necessary. He resolves beauty into certain elements as order, symmetry, definiteness (Ibid) A distinction of lust and desire in the pleasure it excites. Beauty for him has no utilitarian or ethical object, the aim of art is merely to give immediate pleasure, and its essence is imitation.

The term beauty has been used in multiple contexts; these can be divided into inner beauty describing a goodness of personality, and 'outer beauty', concerned with aesthetic appearances. On the surface, disfigurement affect outer beauty, but it has been found that changes in appearance can cause anxiety, depression, grief, and a lowered self-esteem (Khoo:2009:2). These strongly affect a person's disposition. The point to note is that, defects in outer beauty can indirectly alter inner beauty.

From ancient times, outer beauty was believed to be representative of inner beauty; thus Francis Bacon argues that 'virtue is nothing but inner beauty; beauty is nothing but outer virtue (Tagard and Thompson 1884:2) Beauty is an emotional element, a pleasure of ours, which nevertheless we regard as a quality of a thing. The idea of beauty is found in almost every culture and at almost every time in human history, with many similarities. Beauty was, and still a term of great esteem, linking human beings and nature with artistic practises and works since the early civilizations. From the early cultures, beauty, goodness and truth are customarily related. Beauty here carries a double meaning, inclusive and exclusive. In the inclusive sense, beauty pertains to anything worthy of approbation, to human virtues and characters, to nobility and goodness, to hidden things and truth, to the natural and divine worlds. In the exclusive, restricted sense, it pertains to how a thing appears, their manifestations, and to the joys human beings experience when presented with beautiful things, human bodies, artefacts, natural creature and things.

### **The Yoruba Concept of *Ewa* (Beauty): An Overview**

The concept or origin of *Ewa* in the Yoruba thought system, is attributed to *Orisa-nla*, who was believed to be the moulder of man's physical feature. As it is in most parts of Africa, Yoruba thought system is interconnected and interrelated, whether to the physical or to the spirits. This is because of the

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life force or what Placid Temple in *Bantu philosophy* describes as vital force (Temples: 1959:51). Life force tends to link everything together. This is what Azenabor,(2002:62) referred to as the unitary culture of the people which shows that the society is a network of relations.

The Yoruba believes that *Orisa-nla* is the God of beauty. This is contained in the Yoruba story of creation which holds that the *Orisa-nla* was vested with the power of creation by *Olodumare*. In the process of formation, the *Orisa-nla* create kinds of people, some of who are more beautiful than the others, some are even deformed, but the Yoruba believe that, deformed people are set apart by *Orisa-nla* for himself. These set of people are regarded as the most beautiful for *Orisa-nla*.

*Ewa* (beauty) in Yoruba thought system has two meaning namely:

(a) That which is physical, also known as *Ewa-ode* (outer beauty) and  
(b) That which is behavioural, which is also known as *Ewa-inu* (inner beauty)  
*Ewa ode* has to do with the surface quality of things, that is, the physical conception of *Ewa* which appeals to the aesthetic sense of an individual. By aesthetic sense, we mean, a feeling, or an attitude of likeness towards something, the perceived object, may be material or immaterial, the Yoruba in their sense of aesthetic feelings for example say “*tomo eni badera ka wi, bi ka fi saya ko*” which means if ones daughter is beautiful and attractive, one should say it but not that one will make her one’s wife. This shows that even a father could be appreciative of his daughter’s beauty.

The second meaning of *Ewa* in the Yoruba thought system is that which has to do with human behaviour, also known as (*ewa-inu*) inner beauty which also means character. *Ewa-inu* refers to the intrinsic worth of things. A good character is associated with *ewa-inu*. Hence it is often said that *iwa lewa omo eniyan*, meaning a person’s character is his/her beauty. That is, character is the beauty of a person. It is also said that *iwa rere lesa eniyan*, which means, it is good character that is a man’s guard (Idowu, 177:156).

This implies that both material and immaterial things can be beautiful in Yoruba thought system. That means, in a sense that, the Yoruba do not conceive beauty only in art works alone, but also in human beings, especially in human character. To this effect, the Yoruba demonstrate their knowledge of beauty in art works, carved images of various types and designs to beautify their homes. They also conceive beauty in music, thus, they have traditional songs that are meant for different occasions. Hence, the Yoruba has songs for ceremonies like marriage, funeral, planting seasons, harvesting season, songs for hunting season and so forth. These songs appeal to both the senses and human emotions. The Yoruba also see beauty in nature hence their interaction, co-existence and harmony with nature (Azenabor, 2002 : 157).

With regards to *Ewa* in terms of character, the Yoruba often say that “*iwa lewa*” character is beauty, but that beauty can be lost or can fade away after sometime, hence they said “*Ewa a maa sa*” which means beauty can fade, if one fails to take care of his body properly, the beauty will fade away. Also if one compromises his moral virtue, by way of engaging in immorality,

his beauty in terms of character will be conceived to be fading away. This is why the Yoruba will not lay emphasis on the physical or outward beauty alone, because it can fade away. Keeping of one's beauty therefore to the Yoruba is a continuous exercise. The concept of *Ewa* [beauty] and *iwa* (character) go together in accessing a woman; especially a would be wife, a woman of substance is one who has combination of both *iwa* and *ewa*. If a woman is good looking but her innermost self (character) is bad, she will still be called an immoral woman but a person may not be beautiful but have good character, and such person will be termed good. A woman going to her husband's house is often advised to "go with character (*iwa*) and not beauty (*ewa*)" (Hallen 2000 :116) It is also said that, *Ehin funfun lesu enu, iwa rere loso eniyan* (Akinlade:1987:138). This means that white teeth is the beauty of the mouth, good character is a person's guard. This proverb touches on both neatness of the body as well as goodness of character. In essence, this means that a beautiful woman who lacks (good) moral character (*iwa*) is of no real value (Ibid.).

This shows the importance the Yoruba places on *Ewa* (beauty) and *iwa* (character). *Ewa* (beauty) for men is not necessarily about material things or physical beauty/handsomeness; it is rather, the amount of work they can do that is regarded as their beauty. Beauty for men therefore is to be hardworking, powerful and energetic. The beautiful is regarded as that which is useful, because men, as heads of the house are expected to provide for the needs of the family, but if such a man is not hard-working, no one will be willing to marry him. The Yoruba believe that *oju ti ko wo, ina ti ko wo oorun kii se oju ti yoo ba ni kale*. This means that the eyes that can not look at the fire and look at the sun are not eyes that will last a life time (Olowookere 2004: 100). It is therefore the ability to keep a home and the extended family through patience and forbearance that is regarded as beauty for men.

Materials for beautification varies, men for instance, may dress in *agbada*, *buba*, *sokoto* and *fila* to match. They may use *ileke* (bead) during special occasions or if they are chiefs. The ideal Yoruba man should be tall (*gun*), well built (*singbonle*) good looking and well-complexioned (light or dark). The Yoruba usually have a clean shave. This is extended even to the dead before burial, for they believe that cleanness is next to Godliness, and that through cleanliness one can overcome sickness, that is, *imototo bori arun mole* (Akinlade, 1987:138). The woman on the other hand should have the same characteristics, but hers should be feminine. A woman uses "*adiagbon*" coconut oil and "*laali*" to rub the sides of the foot and hand for adornment. For the eyes, they use "*iiroo*" eye lashes, beads on the neck and some for the waist and air rings for beautification. The women also have certain marks on their body; it may be the name of their parents or their loved ones. This may be regarded as traditional tattoo. This adds to their natural beauty especially those with naturally light skin. This natural beauty is however fading away with Western cosmetics. Here Jean Jacques Rousseau's view about evil of civilization becomes relevant. In Rousseau's view,

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civilization has done more harm than good to mankind. It has corrupted morals...learning, civilization and brought moral degeneration and their advancement only succeeds in making things worse cf (Omogbe:1991:50).

Beauty of women among the Yorubas also consists in the plaiting of their hair; this is otherwise known as *irun-didi* meaning weaving of hair. Western methods of hair do have also corrupted this aspect of African aesthetics, usually hair do comes in different styles and look very attractive and pleasant to the sight. In their dressing, both men and women always want to look attractive; they use “*aso-oke, adire, and ankara*” they have the *awotele*, that is, underwear, with *gele* head gear or *fila* cap to match. They also have *iro rapa* and *buba* and *ileke* bead for their neck. The Yoruba uses *odu* leaf to beautify their houses, also with *eboto*, charcoal to rub the ground and the walls to make it shining and attractive. Most of these however, are gone with the so called Western civilization. These days, some other things are used to beautify the house and make it look attractive.

Beauty is also seen in the mean (*iwontunwonsi*), that is, average height, complexion and looks. This agrees with Aristotle’s *golden mean* which has to do with how to arrive at a kind of moderation or average between two extremes (Ozumba, 2001:76). Most Yoruba would prefer the mean because while the extremely ugly is often despised, the extremely beautiful is often held suspect. This can be inferred from the saying: *Oyin dun ni, ki i s’ore inu* (The honey is sweet, but it is unpleasant in the stomach) (Lawal,1974: 239). The Yoruba regard extremely sweet things as causing worms, and consequently stomach-ache.

Beauty for material things among the Yorubas are durability and usefulness. A thing is beautiful if it is useful to the individual and if it contributes positively to the overall well being of the society. This shows the pragmatic attitude of the Yorubas, for they believe that a thing is beautiful only if it has cash value, if it can be used in solving human problems. The Yoruba people also have aesthetic feelings towards music. It finds an important place in their worship and other ceremonies. According to Pa Adedokun Iyanda, the music may be solemn, loud or even noisy; it depends on the kind of worship or ceremony being observed. Thus we have such music as *Bata, Gangan, Gelede, Apesi* etc. Whenever the beauty of the song or drum actually gets into their senses, Pa. Adedokun stated, the Yoruba dance and sing with vigour, which shows that the spirit of the drum and song has engulfed them. The Yoruba get fascinated not only with the drum and song, but also with the content of the song and its significance gets into their sense of beauty or aesthetic attitude.

Another point to note about the Yoruba conception of beauty is the fact that they often associate beautiful people with the supernatural. This is an aspect of Platonism in Yoruba thought system. For Plato, the essence of beauty or the universal idea of beauty from which all individual things that are beautiful derive their beauty and of which they are only reflections (cf Omogbe,1990:96). In most cases, there are stories and myths among the Yorubas to show this. They believe those who are very beautiful may not be

human beings but wild animals or dead people or evil spirits in the forest who come out occasionally to buy things in the market or to kill or harm some people before going back to where they came from.

Such people are believed to have taken their beautiful form from the supernatural and as soon as they finish their mission they will return the beautiful form. Thus, the Yorubas are of the view that if a man sees a beautiful woman, he should take caution not to quickly get married to such a woman, but make some investigations about her origin, her parents and people. By this, he will know whether that woman is a witch or one of the dead who has taken human form to lure people with her beauty.

## COMPARISON

The study of beauty as it is conceived in the West and in Africa can be explained easily when linked to the cultural experiences and world views of the two geographical areas. The Western cultural world view is quite distinct and different from the African cultural world view. It is possible for a person in the Western culture to limit his field of enquiry and focus attention on a specific point or issue but it seems impossible and a futile effort for any one to do so when it comes to African cultural experience without destroying the vital relations and unity among things. For anyone to understand African aesthetic experience one must understand properly and deeply African mythology, religion, ontology, language, social and political doctrines as well as the African theory of knowledge, hence to understand the concept of beauty among Yoruba people, one must have the background knowledge of their culture.

The Yorubas do not see the world as something separate and detached, rather; they see the world as a whole, a coherent unit where the spirits, the ancestors, the living and the dead interact. The universe according to Momoh, (1998:30) is permeated with both the visible and the invisible beings such as God, man, ancestors, reincarnation, life after death, beliefs, institutions, practises and so forth. Similarly, .Dukor argued that Africans believe that everything that exists is a force and that none of them exists in isolation, (1994:20) For them there is a life-force that tends to link everything together, there is no way one can talk of any issue in particular as distinct from another issue, the African mode of cognition is said to be holistic. The ontological order is according to Mbiti, anthropocentric, it is a complete unity... an ontological holism (1969:15). The Western mode of cognition is analytic in outlook, in that, things are separated from each other, for example, the mind / body distinction.

The African outlook towards aesthetics and the aesthetic experience is quite different from the western idea about aesthetics. The Yoruba culture in particular tends to influence, to a large extent, the works of art. This is contrary to some aspect of Plato's philosophical postulates which see the art

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as imitation of the real (cf Omoregbe 1991 : 40 ). Art to the Yorubas is not an imitation; they always have a purpose for creating a particular work of art.

Yoruba aesthetics depicts Yoruba culture and is quite different from the Western aesthetics. Although it is often said that the Yorubas and even Africans as a whole have lost some of their cultural heritage due to influence of foreign cultures on African's traditional systems, yet, there are some traits that survived. Culture is the distinctive way of life of a people, their complete design for living. In another, sense culture refers to the gamut of the knowledge, beliefs, customs, traditions and skills that are available to the members of a society. The term culture really embraces a great deal; every culture is unique and peculiar in its own way. Culture can be transmissible but the distinct and symbolical traits are quite noticeable.

The Yoruba artist working with the themes peculiar to his culture and customs may not express just any form of sensation whether visual or auditory. Art in the African culture express symbols of the mythical world into unique and concrete art works which are not only aesthetical, but also meaningful. The Western philosophers have their own conception of beauty, to them; beauty is regarded as the quality of a thing or anything that gives pleasure to the observer.

Beauty in Yoruba thought system is not conceived as the quality in a thing that pleases the observer or the standard for measuring something beautiful. The African artist make symbols that are meaningful, coupled with aesthetic appreciations, any form of art that is not meaningful to them is not beautiful. Thus, in African art, one is not expected to talk about the sense of beauty which is derived by sense perception alone, one is also expected to talk about that which embraces their world view about the world, mythology, religion, and so forth. The outward beauty seems not to matter as such to Yoruba people but the meaning, the significance and the usefulness to the individual and to the society at large. This is why they lay more emphasis on the inner beauty rather than the outward beauty.

In another sense, if carefully examined, there are some views about the Yoruba's concept of beauty that fit well into that of aesthetics. The Yoruba conceive the relativity of beauty just as in aesthetics. They believe that what is beautiful for one person may not be beautiful for another person. This is in terms of the physical beauty and even in the internal aspect a person's behaviour or character which may be pleasant to one person and may be unpleasant to the other. This individuality of aesthetic attitude explains the common dictum that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There is a Yoruba proverb which says, "*eyi wun mi eyi o wu o ni n mu omo iya meji jeun lotooto*" meaning that, the notion of choice made two siblings eat separately. It also means that, for something to be good it does not make it beautiful for everybody. One cannot say that because something is beautiful for him then, it must be beautiful for another person. One cannot make a categorical assertion about the beauty of anything, it depends on individual taste. This is a typical example of the relativism of the Sophists, especially that of



Protagoras of Abdera who argued that “man is the measure of all things” (cf Omoregbe, 1991: 26).

Beauty in philosophical discourse is not based on the physical features alone but also internal features. Beauty therefore is expected to be internalized in the sense of character and usefulness. The conception of beauty by the Yorubas has to do with the functions of the object or the usefulness. This has great influence on the practical life of the people in so many ways. In the first place, the emphasis on the internal beauty has helped to promote good behaviour. Having known that beauty alone does not make everything, those who are naturally beautiful will not be proud and think they are all in all. And also, those who are not beautiful as such will not think that they are not fit into the system of the society. With good behaviour, they can still win people to their side. This is also reflected in their choice of wife. They consider the behaviour of the lady as well as her outward beauty, her family background and relationship with other members of the society.

The Yoruba conception of “*Ewa*” (beauty) cannot be separated from that of the modern aesthetics; in the sense that they share certain things in common. For instance, usefulness and purposefulness are also considered by the Yorubas as beauty. Plato also shares the same view. He argued that any work of art that fails to bring good influence to the society in the moral sense of it should not be regarded as beautiful and should not be allowed (Probert Encyclopaedia, 2009:1). For Plato, beauty and morality go together and anything that lacks morals is not regarded as beautiful. The Yoruba’s conception of beauty, also fits well into that of aesthetic in the sense that, it also considers the inner beauty to be very important. In the Yoruba context, “*Iwa*” that is, good character, is the beauty of anybody and even if the outward beauty is there and there is no inner one, such a person will not be regarded as beautiful.

The difference between the Yoruba and the Western conception of beauty is that, what is primary to the Yoruba is secondary to the modern aesthetics. To the Yorubas, the inner beauty which is ‘*Iwa*’ (character) is predominant and primary to them. The physical is secondary. Without the inner character, the outer beauty will not be recognised. In the modern conception of beauty, what is primary is the outward or physical beauty. Though they also cherished the inner beauty, but it is secondary to them.

Furthermore, the primary objective of aesthetics appreciation in Western culture is removed from everyday life and preserved in museums as objects of contemplation. They are valued in proportion to how much they reflect the creativity and uniqueness of particular individuals. In contrast, the arts within the Yoruba thought system are intimately involved with communal values and the practical realities of daily living.

## CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in this paper to show some areas of agreement and disagreement between the Western and the African conception of aesthetics. We have tried to show that individuality and uniqueness are not necessarily the basis for aesthetics appreciation. Aesthetics appreciation in our view must be culturally based for it to be meaningful. In this regard, African conception of aesthetics, in our view, presents a richer and more dynamic picture of aesthetics appreciation than that of the Western thought. It presents a picture of African works of arts as a functional community based and sectionalized aesthetics. This is different from the Western conception of aesthetics which is a representation of the value and emotion of the artist, which does not relate to the cultural environment or some historical fact of the people.

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