

Traditional Perception and Concept of Beauty in Idoma Culture

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Abstract

Tradition is one of the nubs of humanity as it cuts across all races and geographic locations. The tradition of a people defines who they are and serves as the basis of their existence, recognition and in most cases, their source of pride. This creates the generally backdrop in which their perception of what is beautiful and concept, evaluation and interpretation. Therefore, this paper looks at how the Idoma culture perceive “beauty” or what is term “beautiful”. To this end, the understanding of what is beautiful can be traditionally be rooted to the cultural acceptance and construal. In this paper, descriptive and analytical research methods are used and supported by relevant articles, books and internet sources as the secondary data. Among the findings in this paper was that what is term beautiful has a cultural acceptance, standard and it is communal. It is discovered that beauty is not the physical appearance of attractiveness but encompasses the deeper meaning and purpose from the object of esthete. The paper concludes that in Idoma culture what is perceived as beautiful is a generally agreed term which are in accordance with ethical norms and laid down guardians that serve as the standard for qualifying what is beautiful. It is recommended that ethnical standard for beauty to should be encouraged in other to bring moral standard. The acceptability and respect for the perception of how people view and perceive what qualifies “beautiful” should be respected by other culture and religion to bring understanding and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Beauty, Belief, Culture, Ethical and Traditional.

Introduction

Tradition determines the behavioural attitude of a people. These include established religious beliefs, art forms, performances, laws, and general life approach preserved with respect in an ancestral/genealogical pattern that usually presents a unique aesthetic feature for the group involved. Doina, Calin, Elena-Adriana and Anisoara (2011, p. 1494) define tradition as:

A source of life that extends human experience, conferring to it time, action, involvement, and permanency within the system of values . . . as “stylistic matrix” in the mioritic space . . . (which) implies “human nature” that is not determined by the rigidity of its biological and psychological constitution, but it is continually shaped by cultural values that are internalized, individualised, and expresses ideals that belong to different communities, ideals that may become permanent.

Tradition is the sum total of practices, doings, actions, and beliefs that differentiate communities, ethnic nationalities, societies, and individuals. This portends that beyond examining the concept in the lenses of large societies, individuals also possess practices and beliefs that are particular to them. This explicates the disparity between people. However, it is pertinent to note that, the larger society facilitates the construction of individual traditions. Hence, Linnekin (1983, p. 241) articulates that, “tradition is a priori model that shapes individual and group experience and is, in turn, shaped by it”. Linnekin’s articulation portends that as agents of tradition man also influences, defines and redefines tradition. Tradition serves as a springboard for examining societal ethos, concepts and contexts as well as the practices of a people. It is the whole gamut of their belief system. In fact, tradition binds a people. These norms and ethos on the other hand, are reconstructed by man, who is the agent of tradition. Paradigmatically, the transformation and secularization of tradition is engineered by man. Traditional performances are products of traditions. They are rooted in the norms, ethos and belief system of a people.

Kofoworola (1987, p. 2) submits that, ‘ ‘ traditional performance was borne out of the need to appeal to their sensitivity, emotions, feelings and even reasoning as perceived logical by the human thinking faculty’ ’ . In the same vein, Enekwe (2013, p. 41) in his comparison of African and Asian traditional performances with the Europeans, explains that their traditional performances are:

Designed to astonish and delight the audience – dancing, acrobatics, etc . . . this means that the actors are not interested in exact or deliberate imitation of reality . . . it is also

total, because it combines many art forms, music, poetry, dance, acting, miming, mask, painting, singing, dialogue, etc.

The Concept of Beauty in Idoma Culture

The concept of beauty does not have a unitary universal perception or definition as it varies from individual to group, culture to tradition, having different understanding and interpretations. The concept of beauty is rooted in culture. What constitutes beauty or the aesthetic varies from one culture and individual to the other. This clearly depicts the subjectivist and objectivist notion on aesthetics. Plato cited in Hart (2019, p. 28) defines aesthetics as *beauty, imitation, inspiration*. Aristotle describes aesthetics as beautiful regarded as a species of the Agreeable or Desirable. Hume states that aesthetic is “the standard of taste” (Costelloe, 2004, p. 89). Early scholars of aesthetics appropriated the objectivist and subjectivist aesthetic enterprise. While the objectivist philosophy on aesthetics crystallises an approach in investigating the beautiful in the object itself, the subjectivist school appropriates an approach that examines the object in the perspective of the beholder. Scholars of culture and performance such as Kofoworola (2004), Enekwe (2013), among others have also argued on the concept of beauty. According to Ibanga (2017, p. 250), “beauty connotes celebration of worth, value, quality, essence, and desirability. Hence, the concept of beauty in Africa is quite broad, and varies from one cultural community to another”. The contention on what is beautiful in the African situation differs from the Western context. For instance, while fat women are considered beautiful in traditional Nigerian cultures, the reverse is the case in the Western orientation. In the west, being skinny is attributed to being beautiful. Castillo et al. (2017) attests to this when they stated that, “the concept of beauty has a lot to do with slender features”. Hence, the multifaceted approaches to examining, investigating and evaluating the beautiful.

In corroboration of Ibanga’s statement, Carroll (2000, p. 37) articulates that, “there are many conceptions of “beauty”. Some people associate beauty with proportion and harmony; some with pleasure taken in the appearance of things; and some, more narrowly, with disinterested pleasure”. Nair (2005, p. 156) describes the concept of beauty from the Indian aesthetics tradition that beauty:

Includes complex philosophical meanings relating to perception and consciousness, establishing the term as a temporal concept of . . . joy and delight, embedded in moments in our daily life . . . in this sense, is understood as a kinetic concept engaging human perception, between the object of beauty and its subjective response, transforming material qualities into aesthetic experience.

The aesthetician is imperative in the evaluation of the object. Sircello (1975, p. 80), an advocate and disciple of the approach of Kant, in his study of the aesthetic philosophy of Immanuel Kant, submits that:

Beauty is attributed to things both in virtue of their utility (what they are good for) and in virtue of their possessing qualities according to which they are good specimens of their respective kinds. Kant admitted that the judgments of these varieties of goodness—that is, being good for something and being a good specimen of a kind—are indeed objective because they are determined by concepts, namely, the concept of the “external” purpose that a thing is good for and the concept of the kind of thing to which it belongs. To square these facts with his subjective theory of beauty. Kant distinguishes between two “kinds” of beauty: “free” or “self-subsistent” beauty, on the one hand, and “dependent,” “conditioned,” or “adherent” beauty, on the other. (Sircello concludes that) under “free beauty” Kant would include just those beauties that . . . are unrelated to goodness except in being good to look at or listen to.

Beauty, according to Higgins, Maira and Sikka (2017, p. 1) has “doubtlessly reflected its importance in people’s lives. Beauty has the power to calm, to inspire, or to drive us onward”. Amongst the Idoma people, the interpretation of what is beautiful is communal, and it is culturally rooted in Idoma tradition. Beauty is seen as the appreciation of art that appeals to the sensibility of the observer. The Idoma people collectively have the same aesthetic value for performances, the appearance of a beautiful costume, a good dancer or the dressing of a king. This has unanimous appreciation of a work of art is based on what is termed the general value of the people. “It is also important to consider that beauty ideals are culturally

constructed and not the same everywhere” (Morris and Nichols, 2013, p. 52). This connotes that what is beautiful to the Idoma is the combination of the natural and ideological factors among them. Citing Albert Vogel, Suru (2008, p. 170) states that “ beauty is not only intended to please the eyes but also to uphold moral values” . In the same streak, Kyo (2012, p. 107) avers that:

When an aesthetic judgment is made, “ the eye of the observer” is based on the sensibilities of the majority, not a specific individual’ s taste. In that sense, the determination of beauty or ugliness is always influenced by preferences of the general public.

Kyo in his aversion democratizes the aesthetic judgment. To contend that the beautiful is predicated on the appeal it has on the majority might be fallacious. Bias and prejudice for an object could also influence the judgment of an aesthetician. Kyo’ s position is a politicisation of the aesthetic process and this is a limitation to his approach on evaluating the beautiful. The Medusa or the Monalisa portrait might not generate the same applause by an African aesthetician as it does Western aestheticians. The mask of Idia, the portrait of Imaguero, and the art sculpture of Nana of Itsekiri would generate positive and constructive review from African audience, due to their attachment to the aesthetic object. Hartman (1919, p. 13) posits that:

Beauty is an abstract, substantive entity which transcends the many particular instances of its manifestation; that things are not beautiful in and by themselves, but that they become beautiful to the extent in which they share or participate in abstract, transcendent beauty; and that the what of beauty is either Mind, Truth, Perfection, or Meaning.

The above statement elucidates on the *beauty is in the eyes of the beholder* maxim which is also the subjectivist approach to evaluating the beautiful. Various types of beauty abound. The perception depends on the intention of the beholder.

Types and Value of Beauty

There are numerous types of beauty and the values attached to them. So, things are beautiful for a person and the purpose of it, some for the use and others for the way it has been instituted.

In this paper, beauty have classified into the following three main categories:

- i. Human beauty – these includes the human body shape, colour and the general physic as created by God;
- ii. Nature beauty- this includes all things considered to be beautiful that are not created by humans e.g. Language, weather, topography, animals, and so on; and
- iii. Man-made beauty- these are all things that are considered beautiful and created by man which consist of arts works, habit, culture, engineering constructions, clothings and so on.

To the Idoma people, the term ‘ beautiful’ varies. There are general perspectives in which beauty can be perceived and translated either in human or object reference. In fact, Damme (1996, p. 62) asserts that “ a work of art, . . . has on the one hand a message, a content, which can only be completely comprehended within the society that produced the work” . There are cultural icons that symbolise as the standard in judging Idoma concept of what is beautiful. In Idoma culture and language; “ *Ebity ochohi*” is a saying in Idoma language qualifying the giraffe as the queen of beauty because of the length of its neck. A woman with long neck is regarded to be very beautiful; likewise, a woman with folds or rings around her neck or with dimples on her cheeks. A well dyed blue-black traditional cloth or a combination of bright colours of red, yellow and indigo are acknowledged as a splendid combination of beautiful colours to the Idoma people.

Furthermore, in Idoma culture, beauty is accompanied with morals and value. Eaton (2000, p. 27) affirms that, “ beauty is a contextual property deeply connected to factual beliefs and moral attitudes” The object/subject of beauty must have its own moral and traditional standard to be considered to be beautiful. On the other hand, the view and interpretation determining the factor of what is beautiful is seen from the angle and purpose for which it is produced. All traditional elements, aids and performances have distinguished identities that are the result of how it is aesthetically perceived. What is “ beautiful” must

have the required cultural backing to have the needed aesthetic value by the people. This in turn gives it the known cultural aesthetic right on how beauty is perceived.

Conclusions

Conclusively, the Idoma culture and tradition sets the standard for what is considered as beautiful. The general perception of what is beautiful is a general agree term in Idoma culture which are in accordance with ethical norms and laid down standard for qualifying what is “beautiful”. The Idoma have respect for what is beautiful as it is harmony with the choice of the people. This will go a long way in making people appreciate and respect the beauty of other culture and tradition.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that culturally accepted standard for beauty to should be encouraged in other to bring moral standard of beauty in line with the people’ s culture and tradition. This paper also suggests that there should be mass campaign by stake holders in local, state, federal arms of government and other stake holders for the need, acceptability and respect for the perception of how other people understand, portray, view and perceive beauty or beautify and what qualifies it. This will bring understanding, peaceful coexistence respected among people, culture and religion.

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