SOME ASPECTS OF YORUBA AESTHETICS

Babatunde Lawal

AESTHETICS DEALS with the philosophy of the beautiful as well as with the standards of value in judging art and other aspects of human life and culture. Among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria the beautiful is that which possesses ewà. Ewà is the manifestation of the ‘well-made’ or the ‘well-done’. Being pleasant to behold or experience it attracts (fanimóra), eliciting admiration, honour and respect (iṣù).

To the Yoruba ewà has two realities, the outer (ewà ode) and the inner (ewà inú). Ewà ode has to do with the surface quality of things or outward appearance in general. Ewà inú on the other hand refers to the intrinsic worth of things. In man ewà inú is frequently implied in the word iwà, or character, while in objects it is implied in the word wíwíló, or functional utility. Thus in Yoruba culture ewà is synonymous with ‘good’ or dára. What lacks ewà is simply bad, burú. The physically ugly female is oburewà, while her male counterpart is simply described as ‘not good’, eni ti ko dára. The badly made object is also ‘not good’, ko dára or ko suwon.

Although the ideal Yoruba man should be tall (gun), well built (síngbonlè), good-looking and well-complexioned (light or dark), while the ideal female should have similar characteristics (except that hers should be feminine), beauty is also seen in the mean (iwontínwonsí), i.e. average height, complexion and looks. In fact 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 inú’ (The honey is sweet, but it is unpleasant in the stomach). For the Yoruba regard extremely sweet things as causing worms, and consequently stomach-ache.

Yoruba folk tales abound in instances of women who wished to marry the most handsome men; but to their disappointment and eventual ruin some of these men later turned out to be spirits in disguise. Similarly
witches, spirits and certain animals are believed to have the power to transform themselves into extremely beautiful women.

The fear of the supernatural aside, the competition for the most beautiful woman is so keen that she can hardly settle with any one man. A modern Yoruba song by the late Ayinde Bakare aptly sums up the situation:

B'òbinrin dara jù
Agbèrè à fọ ìfọrì.
Iwá àìbíkìà
At'ọjù ò gbè'bíkan o...
Wáhálà ní pe k'òbinrin dara jù
Aisinmi l'ó nìà wá l'óko o

If a woman is too beautiful
She'll practise prostitution
Will be arrogant
And unsettled...
It is a problem if one's wife is too beautiful
It brings unrest to the husband.

The reason for the frequent avoidance of the extremely beautiful can partly be sought in 'intrinsic worth'. Thus in the saying 'esùrù se ìsẹjù, o tẹ l'ówó oniyàn (the pounded-yam seller is not impressed by the attractive colour of the esùrù yam), the esùrù is ignored by the pounded-yam seller because, when pounded, it is not as pasty as the ordinary pounded yam. Therefore the most important element in the Yoruba conception of human beauty is iwà inú, or character (iwà). According to the Yoruba iwà is the very stuff which makes life a joy because not only does it please Olodumare (the High-God), it also endears one to the hearts of all men. While the appreciation of iwà ade is relative and varies from person to person, the possession of iwà is universally accepted as the sine qua non of beauty. Hence the saying: 'Iwà l'iwà' (character is beauty).

A man's character is either good or bad. If it is good, he is called omolùwàbí (the well-born); and if bad, ènià l'ásàn (a useless person) or even eranko (an animal). The pre-eminence of good character (iwà rere or iwà pele) is summed up in the following poem:

Omo t'ó dara tìkò n'iwà
Omo-langidi ni fì
Iwà rere l'èsù ènià
B'Oòbinrin dara bi Ògbárá
Bi kò n'iwà

If a child is beautiful but has no character
He is no more than a wooden doll.
Good character is the beauty of a person.
A woman can be as beautiful as the Egbára.
If she has no character
She is no more than a wooden doll.
A man may be very handsome
Like a fish in the water
If he has no character
He is no more than a wooden doll.

The person who is outwardly beautiful but inwardly ugly, or lacks character is called awobowà (lit. skin covers character) or ojù l'ari, osó o dé'nú (superficial beauty). The physical beauty of such a person may at first be admired, but as soon as his inner ugliness surfaces he becomes repulsive. His beauty is immediately clouded by the flames of his character: for the Yoruba see character as manifesting itself like a flame—'èffìn n'iwà'. An awobowà may be the best dancer, singer, drummer or carver in town; his inner ugliness, however, prevents people from appreciating the quality of anything he does: 'Eni l'ori rere ti ko n'iwà, iwà l'ó ma ba ori rẹ jẹ. The Omolùwàbí, on the other hand, is a beloved person. Even if he is ugly, his character is so pleasing that people are usually blind to his ugliness. Hence the saying: 'Eni aiiye nfe ko ni'abukù l'ara' (The favourite of the world is usually seen as faultless).

Apart from iwà, strength (agbára), wisdom (ogbón), sanity and good health (ílerà) enhance ewà. Conversely the weak or the lazy (ole), the daft person (omọga) and the sickly (aláílerà) are usually not admired even when they are handsome or well behaved. Thus ewà also refers to a sound mind. The sound mind glows with happiness or joy (ìdùnì). The mere possession of ewà and iwà, however, cannot guarantee happiness, which is the ultimate of not only the beautiful but of human life as well.

Being a blessing, ewà is no doubt a source of happiness. But the Yoruba do not deliberately ask for it in their prayers, partly because 'we are already what we are', and partly because ewà is not only relative but can also be got from the other comparatively more important blessings of life. Wealth (owo), children (omo) and good health (àlèsì àti Èmi gigan) are considered by the Yoruba as the three cardinal blessings. The possession
of which will to all intents and purposes generate happiness. Good character can be cultivated by the individual; hence the saying: ‘owó aye eni l’ófí tún iwa ara eni se’ (a man can improve his character by himself); but the three cardinal blessings are usually ‘given’. Hence the saying: ‘kitànkità o mólà, k’á sísé bi eró ko da’nján’ (wealth is a blessing, it is not necessarily procured by dint of hard work).

At the religious level the High-God, Olórún, is Beauty per excellence, because as the Creator (Eleda) He is the source of all that is beautiful. He is the Lord of character, Olú Ìwá. 

Yet the same Sango is described affectionately as he who ‘lends money and forgets to ask for its return’. 

Orisanló is believed to have fashioned man out of clay, after which Olórún breathed life into the image. But on one occasion Orisanló got drunk and consequently created cripples, hunchbacks and albinos. Yet Olórún breathed life into these images too. Esu is famous for his delight in mischief. None the less he is crucial to the stability of the cosmos as he is the messenger of the other orísa.

However, the orísa are believed to enforce good conduct in men and ‘will protect only those who lead moral and just lives’. The value of the orísa, therefore, can be seen in their ability to ensure order and happiness in the world. But order and happiness go hand in hand with their opposites. Hence the saying: ‘Tibi, tiri’ or ‘Aigha’re k’óndá gbá’ó’i’ (Evil and Good go together).

While Olórún is never represented in person or even by symbols, some of the orísa are. Esu, for instance, is represented in sculpture as a short man wearing a pig-tail, although his shrine symbol is a piece of laterite stone. Sango is sometimes represented as a warrior on horseback, although his most important shrine symbol is the thunderbolt.

The fact that a good majority of these orísa are anthropomorphic partly explains the presence of human representations on their altars, even when none of these figures is identified as the portrait of the orísa. In the first instance these sculptures serve to enhance the visual quality of the altar, investing it with an affective or a numinous aspect. Secondly an anthropomorphic representation on the altar presents, so to speak, a human aspect, thereby facilitating a more intimate converse between the worshipper and the worshipped. In other words, the human figure enables the worshipper to speak to or deal with the orísa in human terms, even where the particular orísa may be no more than a natural phenomenon, like a hill.

It must be noted, however, that this is no ‘idol-worship’. For even if prayers are addressed and libation is given to the image, the ultimate
SOME ASPECTS OF YORUBA AESTHETICS

‘receiver’ is the orisa. The sculpture to which it is literally given is no more than a vehicle, linking the visible world of the living with the invisible realm of the orisa. But by itself the sculpture has no life of its own. Indeed at a more secular level it is regarded as nothing but a piece of wood, which is easily discarded and replaced when destroyed by termites. At any rate in so far as it still functions on the altar religious sculpture is regarded as sacred, because, as a religious symbol, it ‘participates in the power of the ultimate to which it points’.19 Altar figures are not the ‘messengers’ of Olorun, as was once believed by the Christian missionaries. Neither are they the portraits of the orisa.

Since Yoruba anthropomorphic religious sculpture seems to hint at the humanity of the orisa rather than their physical reality, the sculpture need not be naturalistic. Conscious of the human and yet divine essence of the orisa, the carver only suggests humanity (èntà) in the sculpture. He proceeds by a method of ‘selective realism’, emphasizing only the most important parts of the human body. For instance the head (ori) is the biggest part of the sculpture because in real life it is the most vital part of the body. It contains the brain (ṇpolo)—the seat of wisdom and reason; the eyes (ojù)—the lamp with which man wades through the dark jungle of life; the nose (inù)—with which he breathes and which is a source of ventilation for the soul (emù); the ears (etò)—with which he hears; and the mouth (enu)—with which he eats in order to keep body and soul together. To lose one’s head is either to be insane or to be virtually dead. So important is the head in Yoruba culture that it has become the object of a cult, representing human destiny. A good ori ensures a happy and prosperous life, while a bad one condemns the individual to a life of failure.20 Hence ori is actively worshipped. This focus on ori in real life is reflected in the sculpture. For it is on the head that the carver concentrates his skill and energy. The facial features, though stylized, are painstakingly delineated, while the rest of the body is merely abbreviated.

The naturalism of the Ife bronzes and terracottas must be cited here. The fact that some of them have been identified with past Oni kings of Ife shows that they are memorial portraiture rather than religious symbols. The ‘selective realism’ of the altar figure, on the other hand, alludes to a spiritual state. Thus the stylistic difference between the two sculptural modes seems to lie in a functional or contextual difference.

Artistic criticism is based on whether a piece of sculpture looks Yoruba, both facially and stylistically. Emphasis is on mere ‘human resemblance’ (jiìì ìntà), rather than on photographic likeness.21 Even the Ife bronze and terracotta portraits are idealized. Photographic likeness is avoided on the ground that it makes the model vulnerable to evil magic.

BABATUNDE LAWAL

Other canons of artistic excellence include relative straightness (øjógùn), good composition and symmetry (didoṣà), clarity of mass (jifòròhòn), clarity of line (fifùn) and relative luminosity and delicacy (didòn).22 A piece of sculpture that fails to meet these standards is rejected by the customer, and the carver would be obliged to improve upon it. Artistic criticism, however, ends in the workshop of the carver. Once consecrated and placed in the shrine the sculpture is no longer criticised. By and large sculpture is judged in terms of its visual appeal rather than character because, as one informant remarked, ‘it can neither speak not act’. This again shows that a typical Yoruba sculpture cannot be labelled a ‘fetish’ or ‘idol’ which is believed to have magical power of its own.

As in human life and religious sculpture, beauty is also sought in dress, in utensils and in architecture.

Although the modern Yoruba frown on nudity, it is uncertain when the Yoruba started wearing clothes. It is possible, however, that they have been doing so for several centuries, as some of the Ife bronzes and terracottas (which are now believed to have been made in the early part of the Christian Era)23 wear dresses, although these differ from the modern Yoruba dress.

Like many other cultural groups, the Yoruba see clothing as something which ‘adds to a person’ (bùyì kòmù), apart from the fact that it protects the body from the weather. Appearance is an important element in Yoruba aesthetics: cleanliness is admired, while filthiness is detested. That which enhances personal appearance is oonù èsò (ornament). However, the same ornament can detract from one’s appearance if it does not fit (ye). Hence the saying: ‘Gèlè o dun bi kà mo ó wè, ka mo ó wè, ko dàbí kò ye ni’ (The headgear is good only when it fits). In other words the beauty of any personal adornment depends on whether it suits the wearer. A woman may wear the most expensive cloth, but if it does not suit her, she may be derided as aro’gíl’èso (she wears cloth like wood). The well-dressed person is admired, while the under-dressed is ridiculed. This again underscores the principle of iwontùmuwòsi (the mean) in Yoruba aesthetics.

Indigo blue appears to be the favourite colour of the Yoruba as it is the colour of the òdùtì, the most popular of Yoruba fabrics. Since indigo blue is a cool colour, not too bright nor too dark, it can be correlated with the premium put by the Yoruba on cool character (iùwò títò)28 and the principle of iwontùmuwòsi. However, this preference for the cool colour does not necessarily imply that the Yoruba always react negatively to bright colours. For instance although red (pùpù) portends danger and is the sacred colour of Sango, the orisa of thunder, not all shades of red carry
the same association. For both the palm oil (épó púpá) and cam-wood (osun) are reddish in colour, yet they are highly valued by the Yoruba. However, the red of the palm oil and the cam-wood is not as harsh as that of Sango. White (alá) symbolizes purity, implying the sacred. It is used mostly in rituals. Black (díádù) on the other hand is regarded as portentous, as it suggests the evil that lurks in the dark. It is the sacred colour of Eshu, who delights in mischief. Nevertheless red, black and white, among other colours, can be appreciated on secular dress if they are well combined. But the person who wears an all-red or all-white garment is likely to be mistaken for a priest, while the person in an all-black dress is regarded either as a mourner or else somebody to be avoided.

The well made object or utensil is that which not only appeals to the eye but also performs well in use. For instance a good-looking but fragile cutlass is useless and is dismissed as ‘éwá ojú ìkàrò’ (superficial beauty). An object can be ornamented to increase its visual appeal. Ornament is onà, the artist is on’sonà or onísé onà. The carver is gbéèrè (carver of ornaments) or agbéèlèrè (he who transforms wood into images). Excessive ornamentation is abhorred as it leads to confusion (wùnìwùnì).

In architecture beauty is sought not only in the quality and strength of materials, but also in size and decoration. Yoruba buildings can be divided into three main types, i.e. the compound (agbo-íle), the palace (Òfin) and the temple (íle oríṣà).

The agbo-íle is a rectangular compound with a central courtyard, housing an extended family or members of a patrilineage. All inmates are responsible to the bágbé-íle (father of the house), the oldest member, who is in turn responsible to the chief of the ward. The chiefs in turn are responsible to the oba (king) whose Òfin is the largest and the most richly ornamented in any Yoruba town. More often the Òfin has many courtyards each of which has a specific function, but the largest serves as a forum for the town’s people, especially on ceremonial occasions. The façade of the Òfin is distinguished from the generality of the surrounding houses by sculptured wooden posts and doors, as well as by gable roofs above the main entrance. These features can also be found, though on a smaller scale, in some íle oríṣà. This correspondence between the palace and the temple and the fact that only the oba and the priest can use beaded objects underscore the divinity of the oba, who is otherwise known as Igba’keji Oríṣà (deputy of the oríṣà). Apart from priests, who have important shrines in their houses, no commoner would dare to decorate his house with elaborately sculptured posts or doors. Thus in architecture, art and space are used to enhance the image of divine authority.

In the performing arts artistry is judged by the quality of presentation. A good singer or poet is judged not only by the quality of his voice but also by the quality of his composition. A dancer is assessed by the quality of his body movements and steps, as well as by how well he can anticipate the beat of the drums. Youths dance rather vigorously, while elders dance with restraint to emphasize the dignity of old age. An elder who dances like a youth (for no justifiable reason) is called ‘ángbálágbá àkún’ (the shameless) or ‘ángbálágbá t’omí lángbádàngbá’ (the gambloring gentleman), while the youth who dances like an old man is taken for a weakling. Short people are often regarded as the best dancers; hence the appellation ìkúnrí yíjó (short to match the dance). Although men generally prefer the plump or the average-sized woman, the short woman is held to be an asset to her husband in the dancing arena: ‘Obírin kúkúrí y’óko rí fí’ójo yíjó’ (the short wife brings honour to her husband in the dancing arena). However, the dance of the plump woman is considered to be more graceful than that of the slim or skinny woman. When a fat or plump woman throws all of herself into a dance every movement is echoed by the fleshiness of her form, especially the buttocks, which play a prominent part in the dance of the women. A similar attempt by the skinny woman often results in gyration (lilótipiá), which is not regarded as ideal.

Artistry in music is recognized in the individual’s ability to ‘talk’ with the drum and in the over-all rhythm or melody of an orchestral performance. However, the individual is seldom singled out for praise in an orchestral performance, although the lead-drummer is often regarded as the brain behind a good performance.

By and large music, dance and song are complementary in Yoruba culture. They enhance the quality of life, serving as a means of solemnizing occasions of joy or sadness. Music is also used to honour the gods so that they shall be favourably disposed to the society.

In essence Yoruba aesthetics is a quest for happiness in life. Èwá is pleasant to behold and experience; Èwá fosters social harmony among men, thereby generating law and order in society. Since more premium is put on ‘the mean’ than on extreme or facial beauty—which in any case is given only to a few—Yoruba aesthetics affords almost every individual the opportunity of being admired once he has Èwá. For to possess Èwá is to be beautiful.
1 This paper is based partly on field work and partly on my own experience as a Yoruba. I am particularly grateful to Chief M. A. Fabunmi, the Odole Atobase of Ife, Drs. 'Wande Abimbola and 'Sope Oyelaran, Messrs. S. O. Babayemi and Toso Eleyemi and many other people who contributed to the ideas expressed in this paper.

2 Literally, 'facial beauty'.

3 Literally, 'inner beauty'.

4 The prayer 'k'aye wa dun lo b'ayin' simply means: 'may our joy approach the sweetness of honey'.

5 For instance, see Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drunkard*, New York, 1953, pp. 18-22.


7 Ibid.

8 A beautiful rat.


10 Idowu, *Oloodumare*, p. 135. See also Fajana, 'Some Aspects of Yoruba Traditional Education', p. 25.

11 However, one may wish a pregnant woman a very beautiful child: *ki oris* ya'n'de ko ni o (May the oris (Obatala) fashion for us a good work of art). See Idowu, *Oloodumare*, p. 22.

12 To some Yoruba, *Owolewa* (money is beauty) to others omolewa (having children is beautiful). But a good majority will ask: 'kini t'alafo?' (What is as valuable as good health?).

13 This is not necessarily the same as Olówa, Our Lord.

14 Idowu, *Oloodumare*, p. 43.


18 Abimbola, 'The Yoruba Concept of Human Personality', p. 75.


20 Abimbola, 'The Yoruba Concept of Human Personality', p. 80.


22 Ibid.


24 For more on women's dresses, see E. De Negri, 'Yoruba Women's Costume', *Nigeria Magazine*, LXXII (1962), pp. 4-12.

25 For more on men's dresses, see E. De Negri, 'Yoruba Men's Costume', *Nigeria Magazine*, LXXXIII, pp. 4-12.

26 See also Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, passim.

27 Palm-oil is regarded as *èro* (pain-reliever), while *ósìm* is a popular cosmetic.

28 However, this is not to say that *Èsì* does not do good. His worshippers regard him as one of the most generous *oris*.

29 Decoration is *àrà*. Both *àrà* and *onà* are more or less synonymous.

30 For more on Yoruba architecture, see G. J. A. Ojo, *Yoruba Culture*, Ile and