

Women and Aesthetics in Igbo Culture

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Abstract

The present paper aims at examining the Igbo sense of aesthetic as it relates to the womenfolk in order to determine to what extent it impacts on the culture or the Igbo society in general. The approach is analytic. It is discovered that unlike western aesthetic judgments that can be somewhat ‘disinterested’ or aesthetics for its own sake, the Igbo aesthetics has utilitarian and communal sense of beauty. This is to say that beauty consists not only in attractive or appealing physical appearance but also in the qualities of the human person. In the Igbo cultural context, the template for aesthetic judgments is an admixture of physical, communal, axiological *cum* moral imperatives. The above concept of beauty promises to be a panacea to the present ugly phenomena of radical individualism, indecency and *I-don’t-care* attitude in dressing, beauty without morals. The paper submits.

Keywords: aesthetics, Igbo, women, communalism and axiology

Introduction

Though the phenomenon of globalization has impacted positively on the Igbo culture in many ways, no doubt, revolution in women’s fashion and delusional quest for freedom seem to be the dominant outcomes of the dual phenomena of globalization and feminist ideology in the contemporary Igbo society. The quest for freedom stems from the erroneous assumption that the womenfolk which have been hitherto free as air and key players in the Igbo society are being subjugated. The attempt to exercise the so called newly found freedom resulted in undiluted individualism and divesting of beauty or aesthetics from the communalist, axiological and moral trappings which beauty originally incarnates in the traditional Igbo culture. In a way, it can be said that a sizeable percentage of the womenfolk gradually gained the freedom to live anyhow; to dress anyhow (sometimes half-naked) and at the same time be hailed as models to be copied, all at utmost disregard of communal norms and sensibilities. In fact, to a great extent, they perceive the core values of the Igbo culture as anachronistic. This portrays an abysmal misconception of beauty and aesthetic judgment in Igbo understanding. According to Matthew A. Izibili, beauty among Africans consists not only physical characteristics but also in qualities of the human person.¹ The urgent need to address the above socio-cultural malady has necessitated the present work.

How could the misconception about beauty and aesthetics and the attendant adverse effects in Igbo culture be mitigated? How could the dignity, pride and beauty of womanhood be once more restored in Igbo culture? Is it possible to unearth and analyze the traditional Igbo understanding of aesthetics so as to extract the ideals and use same to fecundate proper concept of women’s beauty in the contemporary Igbo society? Meanwhile, there are not much existing literary works on Igbo women and aesthetics. In fact among the available seminal written works on the Igbo women, the account of their individual and collective strong will and resolve to fight injustice, combat all forms of marginalization or exploitation as evidenced in the historic Aba Women Riot of November 23, 1929², stands out. This singular laudable historic event which led to the collapse of the institution of Warrant Chief in Igboland showcased in unambiguous way the status and power of women in Igbo society. Nkiru Nzegwu unequivocally affirmed the status and power of women in Igboland. In her write-up “Feminism and Africa: Impact and Limits of the Metaphysics of Gender,” She categorically opposed the notion that “females are psychologically passive beings who are or ought to be submissive and subordinate to men.”³ She equally

underscored the flexibility of gender identity, fluid state of being, and attendant social roles and functions as demanded from the females in the context of Igbo culture. In the same edited work, Nzegwu contributed another paper titled “Art and Community: A Social Conception of Beauty and Individuality.” As the title implies, she analyzed the understanding of beauty and aesthetic judgment as they relate to female beauty and communal values in traditional Igbo society. She averred that “public discourse on female beauty inevitably established a linkage between the beautiful and certain cultural imperatives.”⁴ Through her analysis of *ugolochamma* statues (a symbol of Female beauty), Nzegwu made a lucid presentation of the understanding of female beauty and its intrinsic linkage or connection with cultural imperatives. Chinua Achebe in his novel *Arrow of God*, gave a graphic account of women’s makeup and fashion in preparation for the joyful celebration of the Feast of Pumpkin Leaves. One could easily perceive the radiation of female beauty in the descriptive account presented by Achebe on the “black patterns of *uli* and faint yellow lines of *ogalu* on the bodies of the women, their plaited hair, the ivory bracelets etc.

Chimamanda Adichie seems to be the most widely admired Igbo woman. She has published some works on feminism. In her work *Dear Ijeawele, or, A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, she gave a series of admonishment that could serve as guide for the womenfolk. Adichie’s *Feminist Manifesto* contains some germs that could fecundate acute individualism and divest physical appearance and beauty from morality. The above reviewed authors harped on one or two aspects of the life of the Igbo women. Nzegwu seems to be to be more elaborate and captivating in her discourse aesthetics and the Igbo women. The present work leverages on the above presentations to do a more systematic work on women and aesthetics in Igbo culture.

The Igbo Concept of Aesthetics

In a lay man’s language, aesthetics can be simply defined as the theory of beauty. The word aesthetics was first coined by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in his work ‘Philosophical Considerations of some Matters Pertaining the Poem’. Douglas Harper’s *Online Etymology Dictionary, elaborated on the etymology the word aesthetic*:

from German Ästhetisch (mid-18c.) or French esthétique (which is from German), ultimately from Greek *aisthetikos* "of or for perception by the senses, perceptive," of things, "perceptible," from *aisthanesthai* "to perceive (by the senses or by the mind), to feel," Guyer Paul echoes that aesthetic is derived from Ancient Greek, the word etymologically means ‘I perceive, sense, learn’.⁸

Michael Sweeney described aesthetics to be judgments about what art, beauty, and good taste are; he also considered it as a part of axiology.⁹ As we shall see, Igbo axiology constitutes an intrinsic aspect of Igbo concept of beauty. Philosophically aesthetics is the study of the concept of art and beauty, the meaning of beauty, how beauty and art are created, and how they are appreciated. This definition will be used for the purpose of this study; hence the emphasis is on the concept of beauty in the Igbo culture. What does it mean to be beautiful in the Igbo culture? What does beauty mean in Igbo culture? What are the essential attributes of beauty in the Igbo culture? What and what are the core constituents of beauty in the Igbo understanding. These questions are the focus of this paper.

Communalist Dimension of Beauty: though the phenomenon of individualism is rapidly gaining ground, the Igbo society is fundamentally communalist and this reflects on the Igbo culture. The Igbo cosmology divides into two interpenetrating, visible and invisible, spiritual and material realms. The two realms or spheres shade into each other. The Igbo have dynamic and relational concept of ontology. In other words, every existing reality is part of a concatenation. Innocent Asouzu describes it as *missing-link*¹⁰ of reality. This is a complementary ontology where reality cannot exist in radical isolation. *I am because we are*. One of the concepts of beauty in the Igbo culture is the communalist nature of beauty in the Igbo society. This means that a thing or a person is called beautiful based not on the basis of personal idiosyncrasies or criteria but on the communalist view – usefulness to the community, conforming to the community, adherence to the community and its norms, and having the right sense of identity of the community. The opinion that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder is a

non sequitur in Igbo-African context. This is because there are communal imperatives that serve as the yardstick for measuring or defining the beautiful and making aesthetic judgments. This is to say that even if one possesses physical beauty but does not have the requisite knowledge of the customs and traditions, resourcefulness, and does not wear the identity of the people, one is not considered beautiful as such. One may even be called odd or different but not beautiful, hence the adage “*nkem di iché bu aha ojoo*” (being strangely odd is bad identity). Hence beauty in the Igbo culture is not considered in isolation, it had to be seen in the society, starting from the family to the community – like the candle that cannot be hidden. From the above background, one can appreciate Nzegwu’s caveat: “In a relational scheme in which one thing affects another, the effect of beauty toward social good is carefully considered. When beauty is seen as lacking constructive social consequences, there is tension between the idea of “beauty as wondrous” and “beauty as socially incapacitating.”¹¹ Chinua Achebe also demonstrated this concept of beauty through Okonkwo and his daughter Ezinma in his *Things Fall Apart*.¹² Ezinma was a woman who showed strength of character rather than cowardice; the only one who could confront Okonkwo, and the one who gave up being married until her family returned from exile. In other words, the young girl sacrificed her personal convenience to satisfy the communal or family need.

In the case of women, the communalist concept of beauty in a woman is seen first in the identity of her parents, her mother precisely. This is because the Igbo culture believes that every woman is a reflection of her own mother, and that affects the choice of man’s bride too, hence the adage “*I ga-esi na nne mata otu nwagbogho ga-adi*” (a woman is best described by her mother’s nature), this adage was applicable for both physical appearance, character, strength, and the general description. In a resumé, the communalist imperative demands that one has to be psychosocially mature; be able to build good interpersonal relationships; at the same time conform to the norms of the society.

Beyond Physical Beauty

The Igbo place greatest emphasis on the qualities of the human person. According to Izibil, “beauty is seen and appreciated most in the character and conduct of the person rather than in the physical.”¹³ A person’s manner of communication with other members of the community is of great importance in aesthetic judgment. This entails that the content of speech and manner of speaking has to befit the audience and occasion. To be *bad-mouthed* is not a virtue in Igbo culture. The Igbo society expects that one should be well refined in manner of speaking and exercise prudence in content of speech. The emphasis on qualities of human person is not exclusively an Igbo phenomenon.

This is not far from the Yoruba understanding of the difference between beauty in character and physical beauty: the wise Yoruba man or woman recommends that one should marry not for physical beauty but for its ethical form and beauty in behaviour, for it can be said that “The lady may be beautiful in looks, but spoil her beauty with bad character.” But in the absence of the combination of physical beauty and beauty of character, it is better to marry someone who is not (so) beautiful but who is known to have been properly brought up by his or her parents and acknowledged to have good character (i.e., an *omoluabi*, a well-cultured, highly respectful, and morally upright person). Whenever comparisons are made in Yoruba

Axiological and Moral Dimensions of Beauty in Igbo Culture

Beauty is inextricably linked with axiology in Igbo culture. The word axiology is gotten from two Greek words *axios* (meaning ‘worth’ or ‘value’) and *logos* which means ‘study’ or ‘science.’ Etymologically speaking, axiology means ‘study of worth’ or ‘study of value’. As a branch of philosophy, axiology is concerned with study of the concept, meanings and origins of value and justifications for value judgments. In a way, axiology goes hand-in-hand with ethics and aesthetics. Ethics is concerned with the goodness or wrongness of human conduct whereas aesthetics is concerned with beauty and art in general. One easily perceives the correlation between the concept of worth or value and the determination of what counts as the beautiful. Beauty is conceptualized in Igbo culture based on values and worth. This is to say that certain values portray a thing or a person as beautiful. Slightly different from the communalist concept of beauty, value based beauty considers individual

skills, talents, disposition, prowess, and charisma. These ideals tally with communal sense value determines how they would be appreciated. In concrete terms, this beauty is observable in how one carries out the quotidian activities; how one does whatever one has to do – it is more about ‘how’ you do what you do than it is about what you do despite how good it is. The emphasis here is on the application of conscientiousness, diligence, dexterity and expertise. Whether it be dancing, or walking, or singing, or doing chores, or even fighting like in Okonkwo’s case (*Things Fall Apart*), how it was done was a beauty determining factor. This value based beauty affirms the Igbo adage ‘*ezigbo agwa bu mma nwanyi*’ (a woman’s character is her beauty). A woman is completely groomed when her character is fully formed, and if she is skillful. Traditionally the Igbo society will have more regard for a woman who is of character and skillful in different activities. A beautiful but lazy woman is considered a nuisance. On the other hand a man is handsome if he had physical strength to protect his family and if he could provide for his family, hence the adage ‘*ahu dimkpa ahu ogologo imi ya*’. The value based beauty is such that a woman who had no character or skills is described as ‘*ochakaomaka*’ (feigned appearance of beauty), which implies looking beautiful but lacking the ingredient of beauty. The same can be said of the expression *o mara mma n’ugbene*. This literally refers to “shallow beauty lacking in depth, in other words, it means “ephemeral beauty that lacks substance of beauty.” Names like ‘*oyiri nne ya*’, or slogans as like mother like daughter are both value based beauty names which means ‘mother’s replica’, while the first is in praise, the second is usually of mockery. Similarly, beauty in appearance is inextricably linked with morality. Beauty without morality is no beauty. Nzegwu averred that,

In the Igbo conceptual scheme, the idea of beauty is intricately intertwined with morality, since societal well-being and progress set the standard for the good life. As a result of this moral basis, individuals routinely stress the importance of inner beauty (character) over outer epidermal beauty. They insist too that one need not be physically beautiful to be included in the category of attractive people. One with a pleasant personality and good character is beautiful.¹⁴

Moderation in Physical Aesthetics: a woman’s physical appearance, her knowledge of fashion and manner of dressing is of great importance in Igbo culture. This is more applicable to women than men in the Igbo society, because the beauty of man is not necessarily judged by his physical appearance. Beauty in appearance is remarked by features like pointed nose, height, bright eyes, good dress sense, and tidy hair. These are the prime features of physical aesthetics for women in the Igbo society. However, there is a caveat! Beauty in physical appearance could be likened to Aristotle’s theory that virtue lies in the middle and not at any extreme. This means that a woman does not need to look excessively beautiful. A good number of people have some reservations for such extreme beauty. A woman with such beauty is sometimes likened to a water goddess or *mammy water*. Her beauty is considered to be *too shouting* and out of normal. A French expression says, “*Les traductions sont comme les femmes: Lorqu’ elles sont belles, elles ne sont pas fideles, et lorqu’elles sont fideles, elles ne sont pas belles*” (translations are like women: when they are beautiful, they are not faithful, and when they are faithful, they are not beautiful). Can a woman be beautiful and at the same time faithful? A woman’s beauty is best appreciated in moderation. Virtue must stand in the middle.

Epistemology of Beauty in Igbo Context: Epistemology of beauty is concerned with the apprehension and expression of beauty among the Igbo women. It is a popular saying that *the mara mma na anya gbara akwukwo*, meaning that whatever is beautiful is worthy of admiration. Beautiful women are identified with names that are believed to reflect the aesthetic appeal they radiate. A woman could be called *akwaugo*, *achallaugo*, *ugomma*, and other names. Other similar names include *Oyoyo*, *e nenebe eje olu*, *Ada e ji aga mba*. These are all names that eulogize the woman’s beauty. Subjectively some of these names are beautiful, while some of them do not put women in a very good light as the name givers intend. Beauty is an important concept in the Igbo society, and women are more synonymous to beauty than men in the Igbo world, *ipso facto* a lot of praises are showered, and the body adorned with accessories. Women also appreciate being identified as beautiful, and the one who is not identified as beautiful will strive to get such compliments. Summarily, beauty in the Igbo society is not judged in isolation but in line with communalist cum other cultural imperatives.

Women and Aesthetics in Igbo Culture: An Analysis

Unlike Western approach to beauty and aesthetic judgments which tend to consider beauty from the point of view of appeal to sensibility and beauty for its own sake, Igbo-African approach to beauty incorporates sense of purpose and some cultural imperatives as determinants of the beautiful. According to Izibil,

It is on record that the African considers aesthetic judgment not merely from the point of view of pure administrative excellence, as suggested by Kant's notion of "disinterestedness". There is a broader scope of aesthetic appreciation in which utility, value and preservation of communal ideals, which oftentimes are transferred from one generation to another, play a formidable role.¹⁵

Western concept of beauty as seen in Immanuel Kant,¹⁶ divested beauty and art of every functional and purposeful attachment. The same notion of beauty or art for its own sake finds a resonance in Hannah Arendt who had opined that, 'the proper intercourse with a work of art is certainly not "using" it; on the contrary, it must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use objects to attain its proper place in the world. By the same token, it must be removed from the exigencies and wants of daily life.'¹⁷ On the contrary, Igbo-African understanding of beauty has some utilitarian trappings and incarnates some cultural cum communal imperatives. This is understandable given the relational and complementary ontology and cosmology that undergird human activities in the Igbo world.

In the contemporary Igbo society that comprises of *novum et vetera*, (new and old cultural elements) the traditional values have come under big threats. The Igbo society today battles with the ugly phenomena of individualism, unfaithfulness on the part of married peoples, indecent dressing coupled with *e-no-concern-you attitude*, ignorance knowledge of the Igbo core cultural values. There is misplacement of values with emphasis shifted to acquisition of material wealth, physical beauty and indecency in female fashion. This goes with abysmal neglect of character and morals which are part and parcel of the communal values that have for long served as cohesive of the Igbo society.

In the face of the above predicament, it is the firm belief of the present researchers that the a systematic presentation and application of the Igbo concept of beauty and aesthetics will serve to fecundate a society that appreciates not only physical beauty but also decency, character and morals. On the other hand, the fact of change in the in the Igbo society cannot be ignored. As stated above the Igbo culture today comprises of old and new elements. The new elements derive mainly from external influence. This is a fact. Today, women engage in some professions that may call for deviation from the autochthonous cultural imperatives and expectations. Rationality demands that the adjust according. This is inevitable. Change and growth are the only permanent realities.

Conclusion

The present paper has succeeded in analyzing the phenomenon of aesthetics as it relates to women in Igbo culture. Aesthetics is primarily concerned with beauty and its appreciation. Attempt was made to articulate the Igbo understanding of beauty and it from Western understanding. The western notion of beauty as seen in Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt is inclined to beauty for its own sake without any utilitarian purpose. This is quite unlike Igbo notion of beauty which has intrinsic cultural imperatives such as communal, moral or ethical and axiological trappings. The Igbo concept of beauty is more comprehensive. On the part of women, there are cultural imperatives to which female beauty has to conform; some of which are utilitarian. It is the thesis of the present paper that, amidst the prevalence of the indecency in dressing, lack of good moral and misplacement of values, a good appreciation and application of the ideals of Igbo aesthetics will serve as panacea to ameliorate these socio-cultural maladies.

Endnotes

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