

IGWEBUIKE AS AN IGBO-AFRICAN HERMENEUTIC OF BEAUTY

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Abstract

A cursory glance at the conceptions of what is beautiful reveals that there are different understandings of beauty. What beauty is to someone in India might be different from what it is to the American. A person can be beautiful in America and be very ugly in Iran or Iraq. A person can be beautiful in Saudi Arabia, and look like a masquerade in Japan. The famous saying “beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder” implies diversity in the conception of beauty and does seem to reflect the enriched human culture, nature and perceptions of what beautiful is. However, most times when beauty is spoken about, it is meant a combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight. While all these are very important in the consideration of beauty, for the African, the word “beautiful” holds more meaning to it. Beauty for the African is wholistic, and thus goes beyond the physical appearance of a person to encompass character and relationships with the other. This piece would study the African concept of beauty, using the Igbo culture area as a point for detailed studies. Igwebuiké philosophy, which is characterized by a wholistic and complementary approach, would be employed for the interpretation of the Igbo concept of beauty.

Keywords: *Igwebuiké, Beauty, Hermeneutics, Universality, Relational Theory, Wholistic Theory*

Introduction

The discussion on beauty within the context of *Igwebuiké* philosophy comes under the philosophical discipline of aesthetics. Aesthetics is a philosophy of art or the science of the beautiful. It has come from the Greek word *aesthetikos*, which means perceptive. It was first used by Baumgarten around 1750 as a science that focuses on beauty. Ekwuru (2004) defines the philosophy of aesthetics as “a rigorous critical investigation into the nature of the objects of beauty and our experience of them” (p. 7). It attends to issues such as the concepts we use to talk about objects that we find perceptually attractive, the meaning of beauty, its importance to the human person, etc. It reflectively and critically investigates our experience and evaluation of art and beauty. It deals with the process of producing and

experiencing arts, beauties in flowers, human beings, machines, figures, shapes and sizes.

An *Igwebuike* hermeneutic of beauty speaks of the understanding of beauty within the framework of *Igwebuike* philosophy. It is an understanding of beauty through the lens of *Igwebuike*. As a concept, *Igwe bu ike* is an Igbo-African proverb and also a typical Igbo-African name. It is a combination of three Igbo words: *Igwe* is a noun which means number or multitude, usually a large number or population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significances, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu 2016a). *Igwe, bu* and *Ike* put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power' (Kanu 2017a). However, beyond the literal sense, it means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. Beyond the literal understanding of *Igwebuike*, it concatenates Igbo-African forms, symbolism, signs, media, meaning, anthropologies, universal cosmic truths, functions, semantic powers, physics, phenomena, faculties, and Igbo environ-mentalities. It captures the relational engagement in the world, accomplished in solidarity and complementarity, and the powerful and insurmountable force therein (Kanu 2017b). The closest words to *Igwebuike* in English are complementarity, solidarity and harmony.

A hermeneutic of beauty through the lens of *Igwebuike* philosophy would introduce the concept of relationality within the context of understanding that which is beautiful. This would mark a shift from the classical and neoclassical conceptions of beauty around architecture, sculpture, literature, and music to an understanding of beauty within the context of relationships which is fundamental to African ontology- a world of relationships and complementarity.

Philosophical Perspectives of Beauty

This section would study the different major perspectives of beauty. This would include the classical, idealistic, erotic, hedonist and practical conceptions of beauty.

a. Classical Perspective

The classical concept of beauty is a primordial Western conception of beauty embodied in classical and neo-classical architecture, sculpture, literature, and

music. Its concept of beauty is interwoven around the elements of coherence, proportion, whole, symmetry, integration, etc. Wölfflin (1931), in describing the Italian Renaissance painting and architecture brought out this perspective:

The central idea of the Italian Renaissance is that of perfect proportion... In the system of a classic composition, the single parts, however firmly they may be rooted in the whole, maintain a certain independence. It is not the anarchy of primitive art: the part is conditioned by the whole, and yet does not cease to have its own life. For the spectator, that presupposes an articulation, a progress from part to part, which is a very different operation from perception as a whole. (9-10, 15)

In his *Poetics* Aristotle expressed the classical concept of beauty thus: “to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must ... present a certain order in its arrangement of parts” (1450; 34). In his *Metaphysics*, he writes further: “The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree” (1078; 36). Aquinas, who is strongly Aristotelian argues in the same direction: “There are three requirements for beauty. Firstly, integrity or perfection – for if something is impaired it is ugly. Then there is due proportion or consonance. And also, clarity: whence things that are brightly colored are called beautiful” (Summa Theologica I, 39, 8). Hutcheson (1725) extends the concept of beauty beyond bodies to include mathematical principles and laws like the law of gravitational force. Burke (1757) further extended the concept of beauty to flowers.

b. Idealist Perspective

A very strong representation of idealist perspective is in Plato’s *Symposium*. He understands beauty as an aspiration towards perfect unity. This implies that the beautiful things of this life are only precursors to the real beauty which is eternal. Until one possesses a vision of this in his or her soul, life is not worth living.

For Plotinus, all roads of inquiry and experience lead toward the Good/Beautiful/True/Divine, an idea that would be very instrumental for the Patristic and Medieval theologians in developing a mystical vision of the beauty of God. Individual material things are seen as manifestations of the beauty of God (Pseudo-Dionysius, 4.7; Kirwan 1999, 29). Thus, Schiller (1795) and Hegel (1835) aver that the experience of art and beauty is a primary bridge between the material

and the spiritual. It is in this regard that Shaftesbury (1738) speaks of three levels of beauty: what God makes (nature); what human beings make from nature or what is transformed by human intelligence (art, for example); and finally, what makes even the maker of such things as us (that is, God).

c. Erotic Perspective

Thinkers like Burke (1757) understand love within the context of love and longing. He writes that “by beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (p. 83). In the *Phaedrus* Plato expresses this perspective thus: “Some say thronging cavalry, some say, foot soldiers, others call a fleet the most beautiful sights the dark world offers, but I say it's whatever you love best” (Sappho, 16).

In Plato's discussions of beauty in the *Symposium*, love is portrayed as a lack or absence that seeks its fulfillment in beauty: a picture of mortality as an infinite longing. Love is always in a state of lack and hence of desire: the desire to possess the beautiful. Then if this state of infinite longing could be trained on the truth, we would have a path to wisdom (Symposium 203b–d). Nehemas (2007) understands beauty along the same line as a longing:

I think of beauty as the emblem of what we lack, the mark of an art that speaks to our desire. ... Beautiful things don't stand aloof, but direct our attention and our desire to everything else we must learn or acquire to understand and possess, and they quicken the sense of life, giving it new shape and direction (p. 77).

From the foregoing, beauty is understood as evoking love and creating hunger for longing.

d. Hedonist Perspective

The hedonist perspective understands beauty within the context of pleasure. This perspective was very dominant in the writings of eighteenth-century thinkers. Muratori (cited in Carritt 1931) holds that “By *beautiful* we generally understand whatever, when seen, heard, or understood, delights, pleases, and ravishes us by causing within us agreeable sensations” (p. 60). In Hutcheson (1725) the same line of thought is evident:

The only Pleasure of sense, which our Philosophers seem to consider, is that which accompanies the simple Ideas of Sensation; But there are vastly greater Pleasures in those complex Ideas of objects, which obtain the Names of Beautiful, Regular, Harmonious. Thus, everyone acknowledges he is more delighted with a fine Face, a just Picture, than with the View of anyone Color, were it as strong and lively as possible. (p. 22)

Hume (1740), the thoroughgoing empiricist also conceived beauty in terms of pleasure:

Beauty is such an order and construction of parts as, either by the primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. ... Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence. (p. 299).

The hedonist concept of beauty focuses on the pleasure that comes from that which is beautiful.

e. Practical Perspective

Philosophers have also understood beauty in relation to usefulness. Diogenes Laertius take a rather direct approach when he writes that:

Is not then, also, a beautiful woman useful in proportion as she is beautiful; and a boy and a youth useful in proportion to their beauty? Well then, a handsome boy and a handsome youth must be useful exactly in proportion as they are handsome. Now the use of beauty is, to be embraced. If then a man embraces a woman just as it is useful that he should, he does not do wrong; nor, again, will he be doing wrong in employing beauty for the purposes for which it is useful. (p. 94)

Berkeley (1732) holding the same view writes that: "Everyone knows that beauty is what pleases" (p. 174). It pleases for reasons of usefulness.

Beauty in *Igwebuiké* Perspective

Central to the African perception of reality is relationality and complementarity. And this is the worldview that *Igwebuiké* captures as a philosophy. What this

section would investigate, therefore, are the perspectives of beauty within the *Igwebuike* space.

a. The Human Person as Beauty

Central to *Igwebuike* philosophy is the human person. And *Madu* is the Igbo-African word for human being, both male and female. Etymologically, it is an abbreviation of the words *Mma* (which means 'beauty' or 'good') and *di* that is the operative word in *Idi* (to be) and which comes from the word *odi* (it is), which is the third person of the singular *idi* ('to exist' or 'to be'). From this etymology, it means that you cannot be a human being without existing or being in existence. However, put together, *Mmadi* means 'the beauty or the good that is'. Within this context, the human person is understood as a manifestation of beauty.

This understanding of the human person as the manifestation of beauty is because of the connection between the human person and God. It is in this regard that Edeh (1985) connects the idea of *Mma* with the creation of the world by *Chukwu* from whom the human person draws his or her beauty. He writes:

For the Igbos the notion of 'good' is derived from divine creation to say that man is the 'good that is' is not to say that man is 'good *in se*' for no one is 'good *in se*' except God. This is made manifest in such expressions as: (a) 'So *chukwu dim ma ezie*' that is, 'Only God is good in the true sense'. (b) 'Onye *dim ma belu so Chukwu?*' a question which translated literally means: 'Who is good but only God?' (p. 100)

The beauty of the human person is, therefore, because of the beauty of God in whose beauty the human person shares and without whom there cannot be any beauty in humanity. From this understanding, it means that the beauty of the human person is a participation in the beauty of God. In other words, the human person is beautiful because he or she was created by a God who is beauty itself and the Highest Beauty and Good that there is. To express and appreciate this divine beauty in the human person, the Igbo-African bears names like *Chiamaka* (God is beautiful) *Chibumma* (God is good). In this case, the human person who bears the name does not only point to a beautiful God but becomes a reflection of the beautiful God, such that within the particularity of his or her being, he or she becomes a reflection of the Universal Being: God.

b. Relational and Holistic Theory of Beauty

Within the *Igwebuike* context, beauty is determined within the relational and wholistic contexts. Which means that a person is not beautiful until the person is can relate well with others, and also, that physical beauty is not enough to make the beautiful. For instance, in the following proverbs which reveal the debt of the thought of the African people, the relational and wholistic character of beauty is evident:

1. A woman's polite devotion is her greatest beauty
2. Every woman is beautiful until she speaks
3. Having beauty doesn't mean understanding the perseverance of marriage
4. Ugliness with a good character is better than beauty
5. Patience is the mother of a beautiful child
6. A pretty face and fine clothes do not make a person beautiful
7. If there is character, ugliness becomes beauty, but if there is none beauty becomes ugliness
8. You are beautiful, but learn to work because you cannot eat your beauty
9. Beautiful in front, ugly behind
10. The skin of a leopard is beautiful but not in the heart
11. There is no beauty but the beauty of action

Several African stories teach that physical beauty without character ends in a big loss. An example is the story of the young pretty girl who meets a great misfortune due to her defiance and decision to disobey her parents. This happened at a time when demons and spirits roamed around villages, the girl called "obaledo" was instructed by her parent before embarking on their trip, to remain within the confines of their home and eat just yam and snail when hungry. The parents asked that she roast the yam first before the snail, as the snail would eventually quench the fire. Unfortunately, the girl, being greedy and having a strong lust for meat, roasted the snail first and the fire went off. Still hungry, she set out of her home, in disobedience to her parents, to get a matchstick from neighbors. On her way, she encountered a demon that stole her beauty and left her with his ugliness.

c. The Dynamics of Beauty and Pain

Igwebuike conveys an eclectic perspective. It does not hold that beauty is independent of pain. To love what is beautiful is to prepare for the pain that goes with it.

1. A beautiful one hurts the heart
2. One who plants grapes by the roadside and one who marries a beautiful lady share the same problem
3. The surface of the water is beautiful, but it is dangerous to sleep on
4. Three things cause sorrow: water, green trees and a beautiful face
5. A pretty basket does not prevent worries
6. A chicken with a beautiful plumage does not sit in a corner
7. The most beautiful fig may contain a worm
8. There are many colorful flowers on the path of life, but the prettiest have the sharpest thorns
9. He who marries a beauty marries trouble
10. Despite the beauty of the moon, sun and the stars, the sky also has a threatening thunder and striking lightening
11. Greatness and beauty do not belong to the gods alone

Thus, to possess the beautiful, one will have to go through pain that is commensurate to the beauty one aspires to possess. Even to keep that which is beautiful after possess it, there will always be an element of pain.

d. The Androgynous and Relative Conception of Beauty

The Concept beauty within the Igbo-African understanding is an androgynous concept. It can be used for both male and female. The use of the adjective 'beauty' for the following Igbo male names point to the reality of its applicability to male:

- a. *Chima amaka*
Chima (male) is beautiful
- b. *Ugochukwu amaka*
Ugochukwu (male) is beautiful
- c. *Nnanna amaka*
Nnanna (male) is beautiful

In relation to women, they can also be described as beautiful in the same way that men are described as beautiful. For instance, the Igbo would say:

- a. *Ifeoma amaka*
Ifeoma (female) is beautiful
- b. *Chidimma amaka*
Chidimma (female) is beautiful
- c. *Nnennia amaka*

Nnennia (female) is beautiful

The androgynous character of beauty is based on the relative character of beauty. Beauty is relative to men and women, meaning that what makes a woman beautiful is not exactly the same thing that makes a man beautiful. Even within the same sex the application of the concept of beauty is relative. What makes Ifeoma beautiful is not the very reason why Chidimma or Nnennia is beautiful. In the same way, when it is said that Chimma, Ugochukwu and Nnanna are beautiful, it is not based on the same standard of measurement of beauty. Nnanna could be beautiful as a result of a particular character trait that he has, like kindness- Ugochukwu could be considered beautiful as a result of his meekness, and Nnanna based on his generosity. Thus, they are all considered beautiful but in a relative sense. In these cases, the fact of the relative character of beauty does not mean that what is beautiful is relative. This is because, these character traits are all parts of beauty, and anyone who sees or experiences these characteristics of beauty feels a taste of beauty.

Conclusion

This piece has studied the *Igwebuike* perspective or interpretation of beauty. It argues that while there are different perspectives of beauty, for the African, the word “beautiful” holds more meaning than the western or classical conception of beauty. Beauty for the African is wholistic, and thus goes beyond the physical appearance of a person to encompass character and the quality of relationship with the other. The classical and neo-classical concept of beauty that is interwoven around the elements of order, coherence, proportion, whole, symmetry, integration, etc., is not enough to describe beauty for the African. The classical concept of beauty understands beauty within the context of a metaphysical unity, not in relation to the other metaphysical unity, but as it is in itself. The *Igwebuike* concept of beauty is evaluated within the context of a relationship.

The *Igwebuike* concept of beauty is also different from the idealistic conception of beauty, which understands beauty as precursors to the real beauty that is eternal. This would mean that from the idealistic perspective that beauty is not yet realized- a continuous longing. For the African, although the beauty of the present reflects Chukwu who is beauty itself, the present experience of beauty is real and concrete and does not necessarily depend on a future for fulfillment. However, like the erotic concept of beauty, the Igbo-African strongly believes in the fact that

the beautiful should be attractive, but that is not enough to capture that which is considered beautiful. Physical attraction must be accompanied with good character as the human person is not just a being to be admired like a sculpture, artifact or edifice. The human person is a being with the other. The *Igwebuike* concept of beauty is a practical concept of beauty. A woman or a man is beautiful only when it reflects in the relationship of the person with the other or others.

In the understanding of beauty, the African value emphasizes love, care, compassion, respect, wisdom, faithfulness and truthfulness and non-violence. Beauty is the sum of human cherished values that contribute to peace, harmony, wellbeing, security and development in society. Thus, it is not the appearance that counts so much, but the personality. A person is not beautiful unless he/she displays noble characteristics and this truth applies to both males and females. A person's beauty is to protect his internal dignity and that of others by showing love, care and being nice to people. Such persons in African communities are treasured and most families would express interest in their children being married to such a person.

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