

# Shona Ethnoaesthetics: Beauty and the Shona Proverb

by

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## Abstract

*This paper seeks to examine how the Shona traditional society conceptualised beauty; drawing from the meaning and content of the Shona proverb, suggesting that traditional society emphasised beauty as holistic to include such elements as moral uprightness and humility as the markers of inner beauty. While physical or outer beauty was appreciated, looking for it as the sole desirable quality as done in the modern beauty pageants misses the core of the way the traditional Shona society conceptualised it. Relying on philosophical debate between the universalist and particularistic schools on the nature and content of African philosophy, and the analyses of the influence of Platonism and Cartesianism on discourses on beauty, we seek to argue for an ethnoaesthetic philosophy through which value systems can be evaluated to enhance cross-cultural understanding.*

*Furthermore, this paper is motivated by the contention that the aesthetic sense of the Shona people was tied to the wider network of their social, economic, political and spiritual realms that defined their self-understanding. In this sense, beauty and its conceptualisation remain tied to a system of values that continues to inform the Shona people's identity. Hence, by quarrying into the Shona language (particularly the proverb), we call for the decolonisation of the way Africa conceptualises reality, a theme which runs across the vast array of African Studies.*

**Keywords:** Beauty, Ethnoaesthetics, Ethnophilosophy, Cartesianism, Platonism, Universalism, Proverb, Shona

## **Introduction**

The concept 'beauty' and how it is currently celebrated amongst the Shona has radically shifted from its traditional conception; traditional the Shona people understood beauty in holistic terms, but as we will see, it has changed.

Linguistically, the Shona people speak a range of related Bantu languages which can be standardised as Shona. Demographically, they constitute the highest percentage of the Zimbabwean population, and some spread beyond the Zimbabwean borders into Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi and Botswana. While the dialects may account for some linguistic difference, it can be argued that the various dialects share a lot and proverbs in one dialect have variants in another dialect. Further, the use of 'standardised' Shona has enhanced inter-dialect understanding. For that reason, it can be safely concluded that 'the Shona', as an object of linguistic and cultural analysis is a viable enterprise that scholars can pursue without strong fears or worries of obfuscating the different dialects. The linguistic and cultural commonalities have been used to show that the different groups that fall under this category share, among other things, a worldview, an array of beliefs, and a coherent system of thought. We seek here to interrogate how the notion of beauty has been presented in the Shona traditional society, and how these presentations differ from some such modern presentations as the beauty contests, fashion shows and other similar forums.

Some presentations and analyses of physical beauty in the literary works by the Shona themselves, especially as they depicted the females, have been motivated by an inferiority complex and self-contempt that tended to glorify and celebrate the physical traits of the European colonisers.

This paper, therefore, deconstructs the narrative that has dominated the discourse on beauty, and it argues that there is need to reconsider the Shona conception of beauty and analyse its holistic nature insofar as it looks for the whole person, and that though physical or external beauty was important, inner beauty was also pivotal and had strong moral implications. It is the physical and inner beauty that made a person fit within the nexus of his or her social, economic, cultural and spiritual life and become a full member of the society. The Shona proverb is going to be used in this paper to demonstrate what the Shona people anticipated and envisaged in a person, especially the female. These anticipations are central in determining one's beauty or lack of it. The contention that informs this paper is that the proverb is close to tradition and it may inform us with higher precision of a people's worldview, and therefore their conception of reality.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that informs this paper is that of ethnophilosophy as it relates to Africa. In an attempt to expound what African philosophy consists in Oruka (1991) distinguishes four trends: ethnophilosophy, philosophical sagacity, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy. As a trend, ethnophilosophy is a reflective philosophical enterprise rooted in a people's culture. It is in the people's shared beliefs, values and assumptions as they manifest in the language, customs and practices that we can decipher a people's philosophy. In this way, philosophy in Africa can be conceived as communally shared as opposed to being an individual's activity. For Imbo (1998:64) the common criticism of ethnophilosophy is that "it heralds a philosophy without philosophers." This criticism is rooted in the characteristic development of western philosophical thought that identifies philosophical ideas with individual philosophers. To use the defining characteristics of one philosophical tradition to judge another philosophical tradition is both mistaken and unfair. In this vein, ethnophilosophy seeks to deconstruct the assumptions implied in the Western philosophic tradition. The Western philosophic tradition argues that for anything to be called philosophical, it must conform to qualities of rationality, universality and objectivity. These qualities, Western philosophers have argued, cannot be attributable to traditional African systems of thought, world views and beliefs. This theoretical framework is also relevant to the methodological issue about the apparent disparity displayed by the universal-particular debate about the nature of philosophy itself and also the self-sufficiency of African thought systems in arming the African to conceptualise the world. Studies in African philosophy show that the logicity and rationality of Africans was denied by the very acts of slavery and colonisation.

Further, some western thinkers argued that African societies deserved to be enslaved and colonised as ways of imposing order, rationality and morality on them (Eze, 1997:8). Thus Africans' lack of self-consciousness, their primitive state, lack of historical development and culture (Masolo, 1994:5), the portraiture of the African as the half devil and half child (Serequerberhan, 1991), and the concomitant "marginalisation and peripheralization of Africa" (Odogu, 2004:76) implied by the colonial project are all forces at play in the silencing the African modes of knowing and are crucial for the process of the 'othering' African epistemological, metaphysical and moral claims. The concerns of the African philosophers are to reveal what Spivak (1985) termed "the epistemic violence of imperialism." By relying on this framework, we seek to highlight some of the pitfalls of modern philosophical thought as it decentred African 'ways of living' (morality), 'ways of knowing' (epistemology), and 'ways of being' (metaphysics) as all these try to penetrate to the core of Africanness. The Shona people and their language have been used to illuminate this debate with strong implications to Africa, but we have no doubt that what we can say about the Shona may be shared by some groups elsewhere in Africa. The main purpose of such an approach is to promote 'intercultural understanding' (Balser, 1997:359) by according voice to the viewpoints of the cultural groups. The theoretical framework we employ here is consistent with the strategic use of philosophy for the construction of African identity, a view advocated for by Masolo (1994).

### **Zimbabwe's Contested Bodies and Beauties**

The transition from colonialism in Africa has witnessed calls for authentic conception of culture, values and norms. Beauty has not been spared either. Zimbabwe has seen its own attempts to construct an authentic conception of Zimbabwean beauty, a notion that has triggered other equally contested issues like who constitutes as the genuine Zimbabwean. For example, Muzondidya (2004:) refers to a Miss Teen Queen Beauty Contest in 1989 that ended in an uproar as the majority of audiences protested that the contest was won by two Coloured girls and an Indian girl. About a decade earlier, the 1981 'Miss Zimbabwe' pageant had become imbued in controversy when the then minister of Community Development and Women Affairs, Joyce Nhongo (now Joyce Mujuru, the Vice President of Zimbabwe), expressed her ministry's reservations that it did not want to be associated with the pageant, and that the winner, Juliet Nyathi, was going for the Miss World Beauty Contest in London not as a representing Zimbabwe "but as plain Miss Beauty on behalf of those who wish to commercialise her physical asserts" (Lyons 2004: 216).

Nhongo further argued that rather, “our real Miss Zimbabwe is the special breed of woman who works hard and who sweats to improve her life and the lives of her community and her nation...a woman’s contribution to the improvement of the standard of life of her society is the yardstick to measure the crowning of Miss Zimbabwe” (Lyons 2004: 216). The two cases are only the tip of the iceberg. The beauty pageants in Zimbabwe, and probably elsewhere in Africa, have been accused of being too Western to have lost authenticity. As such, the winners of such titles as Miss Zimbabwe, Miss Malaika, Miss Face of Africa, Miss Tourism and others are said to be betraying the traditional conception of beauty. This fits into the wider conception of the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ women as the domesticated women who, according to Seda (2001: 121), when they attempt to move freely beyond the domestic domain are challenged and branded as ‘loose’. For Seda, the gender roles originated in traditional society and were later infused with colonial capitalist hierarchy (Seda 2001: 121).

The analysis above seeks to highlight that women’s bodies are contested and that the notion of beauty itself embedded within the struggles of hegemony and power. This paper does not seek to defend the traditional notion of beauty among the Shona, but to expose its economy within the traditional context and to suggest that the transition from the precolonial, colonial into the postcolonial has also meant that the conceptualisation of the concept itself has grossly changed. The changes are also due to imbrications between the body, its properties and the context of modern capitalist commoditisation.

### **Comprehending Beauty: The Platonic Legacy through to Cartesianism**

It is a fact that everyone is generally understood to have a conception of beauty with which to conduct business on a daily basis. Without such a conception life would not be easy to comprehend, and materials and events too complex to sort. The underlying assumption in these beauty pageants is that there is a universally acceptable way of determining and judging beauty. Those who call for an authentic African conception of beauty fall back on tradition, and they interpret the beauty of the pageants as modern and foreign, and, therefore, as something that has failed to remain true to the beauty as conceived by the Africans. It is this kind of dilemma that makes this debate important. The importance of the debate can be shown in a number of ways. Firstly, the current conflict that runs between the traditional and the modern conceptions of beauty can only be fully put into proper perspective if the concept is philosophically dealt with. If the concept is dealt with philosophically, the real issues can be exposed and some of the dilemmas can be resolved.

Secondly, the concept of beauty does not only apply to physical bodies, but also to abstract entities whose bearing on human life cannot be underestimated. Beauty, like other abstract concepts, bears on human life in terms of the values it carries and that the people cherish. As a concept, it shapes people's attitudes and perceptions not only towards certain things out there in the world, but towards themselves, thus making it central for questions of self-identity. Thirdly, there is also need to consider how the traditional conception of beauty among the Shona can be located within the wider social, economic and spiritual contexts so as to explain how the conception of beauty is culturally determined. This helps to explore how beauty in the traditional context was not just an appreciation of certain physical qualities, but the qualities as they relate to the whole and wider spectrum of human conduct and inextricably linked with the people's worldview. The Shona proverb has been used, therefore, to analyse how the Shona people conceptualise beauty because, as an aspect of language drawn from a people's traditions but with direct relevance to the current social situation or context, the proverb serves as a convenient tool for analysing a people's self-conception and worldview.

Quite often, however, people disagree over what beauty is. Beautiful things in the various areas of human endeavor like music, poetry, art and nature are not easy to judge, and as a result there are conflicting views as to how beauty has to be viewed. How many times have you been reminded that the shirt that you are wearing or the poster on the wall of your room is very beautiful? The reminder often comes in an attempt to show that 'in case you do not have the aesthetic mind to judge, there are experts to do it!' The presence of the appreciating mind, therefore, pervades the discourse and conceptualization of beauty. That capacity for other minds to appreciate beauty would suggest that beauty itself carries with it some epistemological assumptions insofar as it involves a particular mind with some cognitive abilities if it has to be 'found' or 'discovered'. This cognitive mind grasps this by training.

Considering what has been said above, it is not anybody who can discover beauty. It requires someone with the right mental prowess. Above all such a mind can be trained or nurtured. This may also explain why expert judges are invited as judges to the beauty pageants and art exhibitions. Historically, appreciation of beauty has been tied to leisure, since leisure has been conceived as a journey from the worldly objects into the realm of the non-physical or intellectual. This has made appreciation of beauty as a practice of the elite group in society, thus making the concept of beauty far removed from ordinary life. Plato is one who made this elitist conceptualization prominent. He took beauty to be a Form. Ordinary objects we come into contact with our senses (the particulars) are mere copies of the Forms (the universals). In Platonic metaphysics, the universal or ideal is found in the world of Forms.

The Form is the absolute: the single and basic entity whose qualities the particulars seek to copy, and the Form is the basic unit to which all material things can be reduced. Art and poetry present the world by means of mimesis, which is imitation or representation. The one who masters the forms is the intellectual or the philosopher because he has mastered the unchanging, eternal and the immortal. The philosopher reckons 'beauty of soul more valuable than beauty of body' (*Symposium*, 211). Beauty in Platonic terms denotes the intrinsic qualities in an object. Thus, there is a progression from physical beauty to moral beauty until one arrives at supreme knowledge whose sole object is that Absolute beauty.

Beauty in the Platonic sense assumes a universal form, anywhere it is found, it cannot be disputed as long as people have the pertinent knowledge and use the right tools to apprehend it. This brings us to the idea of philosopher-kings, people who have gained knowledge of the good and beauty. For Ani (1994: 202), in the area of art, for example, these intellectual elites determine the criteria of its perfection; it is they who say what its attributes should be and should not be, and this is a consequence of the intellectualization of the artistic experience.

The analysis above leads to the monopoly and hegemony of the few as they determine where beauty lies and who possesses it. Thus insofar as conceptualization of beauty is concerned, there are others who have argued against "the tyranny of rationalism" (Ani 1994: 202), by which beauty has been taken away from the ordinary people to become a preserve of the few who are considered rational. In the Western intellectual tradition, rationality, and therefore knowledge, is considered universal and objective. As such the duty of the philosopher is to search for the indubitable foundations of human knowledge. Rene Descartes is the proponent of this form of foundationalism. The Cartesian philosophy stands as the basis upon which the development of the Enlightenment Project was build, and the Project's quest for a neutral standpoint upon which objective facts can be formulated as the building blocks for truth and knowledge. Reason as a source of indubitable knowledge, therefore, becomes opposed to emotion. This has some Platonic overtones in that for man to live a virtuous life there is need for emotion and appetites, which constitute the irrational part of the soul, should come under control of the rational part, reason. As such beauty has become the universalisation of the particular; whereby the interpretation of the objects of nature by one particular group assumes a universal status that has to be imposed on the rest. Ordinary parlance, however, shows that though people may not agree on whether certain things may be termed beautiful, they know and appreciate the beauty in things and they may agree on a number of things that they are beautiful. Part of the contention of this project is to argue that the Western conception of beauty as it rests on the Platonic and Cartesian formulation is too absolutist and does not fully address the way beauty has been conceptualised in other cultural traditions.

The Platonic and Cartesian legacies demonstrate the extent to which claims to rationality have sidelined and relegated other alternative ways of looking at concepts. The legacies have set absolute standards and the basis upon which beauty has to be judged. These standards are intrinsic, and as such are independent of any end that beauty can serve. It is this notion that this paper seeks to dialogue and consider its relevance with reference to the Shona people in an attempt to come up with a more open and comprehensive conception of beauty and how it may be embedded in a people's use of language. In this vein, it is argued that the cultural traditions are useful resources for a people's self-understanding and comprehending the world.

### **Beauty Among the Shona**

Gelfand (1973: 146) analyses the word 'beauty' as it is used amongst the Shona. For him, the word can be rendered as *runako* or *kunaka*. The word *kunaka* "has a very wide meaning, being predicated not only of persons but also of animals, things, circumstances and actions" (Gelfand 1973: 61). *Munhu akanaka* (the good person), therefore, is one who generally has appeal to others in terms of his or her good character and outward appearance. Gelfand (1982:7) also uses *munhu chaiye* (the good man) to refer to *munhu akanaka*, a person who is kind, humble and ready to help. The opposite of *kunaka* is *kushata* which can be rendered becoming bad. *Kushata* or *kuipa* also mean to be ugly. In application, this is also another broader concept as it points to both the internal and the external qualities in and of an object. With reference to a person, *kushata* may mean bad character or ugliness. Thus the concepts *kunaka* and *kushata* refer both to the physical qualities as well as attribute of character in the sense of good heart and self-control. It is also interesting to note that the nouns *kunaka* and *kushata* are also used to refer to the taste of food or how it appeals to the palate.

The Shona people had a number of cardinal virtues upon which *runako* could be judged. What this shows is that one's *runako* could not be decided independently of the social and cultural contexts, and mere outward appearance would not guarantee one's beauty. Some of the cardinal virtues discussed by Gelfand include truthfulness, humility, love, sympathy, self-discipline, pity, patience, courage and hard work. *Kunaka* was not only physical as the Shona emphasise the distinction between *kunaka kwepachiso* (the facial beauty which is physical) and *kunaka kwepamoyo* (the internal moral goodness as expressed by one's character). It is the combination of these two that were considered especially in females, and usually the latter for man. The beautiful is one whose physical and metaphysical qualities radiates and enriches the life of all. The Shona may be termed, therefore, holistic in their approach to beauty.



There is need, therefore, to analyse why they stressed both senses of *runako* in an attempt to fully appreciate the differences that may be there between the Shona conception of beauty and the Western conception that is pervasive in judging beauty in all areas of human life. However, there is need to highlight that this holistic approach may not be unique to the Shona people, as it may be shared by people of other cultures especially the Bantu speaking people.

Gelfand's analysis of the Shona people also shows that the Shona are so sensitive to difference and they wish to live a life characterized by uniformity. The way they clothe, their dress and the food they eat bear a "close resemblance" (Gelfand 1973: 159) and show the desire for uniformity. This extends to the material culture and their traditional behaviour patterns to which all members conform in a remarkable way. He further notes that in spite of kinship differences there is an underlying sense of equality cemented by a general uniformity of outlook towards what is right or wrong. The Shona, therefore, would not want to live a life that is very different and unique from the rest of the group. Such a life would be beyond "the range of normality" (Gelfand 1973: 162). This explains why the Shona distrust anything that looks "out of the ordinary" (Gelfand 1973: 162) or beyond the usual. The concept of *shura* or *nenji* (bad omen) covers anything that is strange whose occurrence is signalled by some mysterious happenings. Something that is beyond the ordinary may be a sign of some fatal occurrence that may take place in the future. A very good day in which all members of the family are happily preparing for an occasion and in which no hitch has been experienced may be a signal for a fatal incident to come. If a fatal incident follows, it may be said "*zvanga zvisiri zvega*" meaning that it could not have remained as perfect. The Shona do not want people to be excessively happy (*kufarisa*), and they always are suspicious that extremes may result in some fatal occurrence. It is for this reason that the Shona are wary of anything beyond the ordinary. Gelfand (1973: 162) observes that the Shona "would not want to be singled out for anything out of the ordinary" and that "all he asks is that he be like others with a good name."

In a similar vein, it is common to hear the Shona playing down his or her achievements because to openly acknowledge the achievements may alienate him or her from the rest of his or her kin and folk. As such the Shona refers to his or her belongings by using words that denote small things of little relevance. For example, when a neighbour pays a compliment for a good crop or a good breed of cattle, the one to whom a compliment has been paid may just water it down for fear of showing pride or being boastful (*kuzvikudza*). Even after helping someone out of a difficult situation, the Shona usually play down the assistance he or she would have rendered. Even bulky or many things are described as if they were small by using prefixes that are sarcastic or that demean.

Instead of saying "*mombe dzangu*" (my cattle) or "*nzungu dzandakohwa*" (the groundnuts that I harvested), one would say *zvimombe zvangu* or *tunzungu twandakohwa* no matter how big or many they are just to avoid being boastful of one's achievements. Prefixing *tu-* and *zvi-* to the nouns would suggest that the objects or items being referred to are insignificant, yet in reality they are so important to count on somebody's worth in society. Ordinarily, the Shona would rather have someone praise him or her than to praise oneself. This is not to say that there was no boasting in the Shona society, but boasting was reserved for particular occasions and contexts.

The discussion above brings us to the Shona's insistence on the mean and their discomfort with extremes. Being singled out of the ordinary was considered bad as it attracted suspicion from fellows that one could be acquiring things by other means like witchcraft. The woman whose beauty was extreme was also looked at suspiciously as she could have some 'dark spots' on her personality. The underlying assumption here is that there is no one who can be perfect in all regards, hence the need to be suspicious and to be careful on those whose bodily beauty may not match the inner beauty.

Amos Tutuola's (1984) tale of a strange and complete gentleman, though not coming from the Shona, reflects similar fears. In this tale, a lady refuses to marry the man she had been given by her father. One day as the lady was selling her wares at the market, she saw a man she had never met before. The man was a beautiful and complete gentleman as all the parts of her body were complete. As the lady followed him, the man insisted that she should go back, but the lady would not listen. The man entered the endless forest that belonged to only terrible and curious creatures. As he was in the jungle, the man began to return the hired parts of his body to the owners and also to each he paid the rentals. At this point the lady wanted to go back home, but was told that no full-bodied person who had entered the jungle was ever allowed to go back. She was permanently kept prisoner in the jungle. After all the attractive body parts that gave him his attractive appearance were returned to their owners, the man remained only with the skull. The lady realised, though late, that all she had been impressed with was not really the beauty she really wanted. The story reaffirms the general fears that Africans have, and amongst the Shona this view also runs strong, for what is beyond the ordinary and that beauty is skin deep, that just the superficial things like good looks and proportionate body parts are not enough. The search for physical beauty, therefore, is like a wild goose chase; one can never attain it without running into trouble. The search for physical beauty is like entering the jungle in which one's security is never guaranteed.

In most Shona literary works, beauty is judged in relation to the size of the body, fairness of the skin, darkness or lightness of the skin, deportment, the whiteness of the teeth and other physical qualities were important. What remains contested is that how true to tradition these depictions are as it is strongly believed that the process of acculturation has also meant the assimilation of certain sensibilities alien to traditional culture, thus rendering beauty open to judgments based on foreign criteria. In the novel *Garandichauya* by Patrick Chakaipa, presents Muchaneta debating with herself. In the debate, Muchaneta says this about herself:

*Iye pano pasi pane munhu anganidikunda here? Kana zvandakaita muchiringiro zviri izvo, hapana, kutosiya kwevakadzi vavaRungu vashomanana asi ruzhinji tinoenderana. Dai ganda rangu riri jena, chokwadi handaidai ndakawanikwa nemunhu mutema, asi hazvinei tichaona (Chakaipa 1963: 6)*

(In this world, is there anyone who is as beautiful as I am? If what I see in the mirror is anything to go by, then there is no one except a few white women, but I measure up to most of them. If only my skin was white, truthfully speaking, I would not have been married to a black person, but anyway we will see [time will tell]).

The writer, through his character Muchaneta, believes that to be beautiful is to be white. Muchaneta is convinced that she can compete even with white women, despite the fact that she loathes her skin colour. This is very common feeling in the novels written during the colonial era, and without attributing the views to the writers, we can say the presentation of the ideas by authors serve as a heuristic device for the readers to discover the self-contempt of the colonised. The colonised's aesthetic values have been shattered by "white supremacist ideologies that primitivize and pathologize black bodies" (McLaren, 1996:118). While the depictions of aesthetic qualities may be borrowed or may be exchanged from one cultural tradition to the other, it remains important to realise how colonisation has affected and distorted a people's aesthetic sensibilities in quite very strong ways in such a short time in history. An attempt to reconstruct may appear tedious but it is inevitable. Reconstruction also requires the deconstruction of the dominant yet distorted narratives that had been included in the traditional canon. One way of doing this is to make sense of cultural and linguistic resources of a people, in this case the proverb, and establish how the use of the proverb remains central to determine the aesthetic sense of a people.

Chiwome (2002), in his discussion of the social history of the Shona novel, highlights the inferiority complex of some of the Shona novel writers and how this complex has distorted facts by presenting anachronistic images and reactionary falsification of life. In the novel *Pfumo Reropa*, Patrick Chakaipa depicts Tanganeropa as physically less attractive than the Portuguese traders. The Portuguese traders were more handsome than anyone the character had seen. For Chiwome (2000: 109) the desire to be the other is evident in the novelist's description and the "Portuguese are said to be endowed with physical traits which are better than those of the Shona." This highlights the colonial mentality of writers who have assumed an inferiority complex that has transformed into self-hate. This has distorted the traditional aesthetical values of a people, as certain borrowed sensibilities have been co-opted into the Shona people's aesthetic corpus. Such things as long hair, straight nose and long nails that are emphasised in the local and international pageants are not universally acceptable markers of beauty and their place and origins could be explained as having been borrowed from other cultures.

### **The Shona Proverb**

Proverbs are general statements that are said to summarize situations. They are normally given with the intention of evaluating and affecting human behaviour. Proverbial lore, as oral literature, forms an undeniable part of a people's cultural heritage and present a totality of the experiences of a people. The oral and written language carries the philosophy by which people confront their contingent lives. This language makes it possible for people to share experiences and have a sense of belonging. The preservation of proverbs in oral discourse allows them to be flexibly applied to a number of varying contexts; thus, the proverbs remain relevant to a variety of contexts and situations.

Proverbs are orally transmitted from generation to generation. In these proverbs are embedded experiences of long gone and distant generations. They are expressions of beliefs, values and knowledge of the community that would have created them. They are normally introduced by the expressive formula: *Vakuru vedu vaiti ...or Vakuru vedu vanoti...* ('Our elders used to say ...' or 'Our elders say ...'). This formula expresses that the experiences of the elders, both present and departed, are the authority behind these words of wisdom, and as such their word is to be taken seriously. What gives the words their punch or strength and authority is the African notion that age is an important factor in determining who is wiser. An old man or old woman may not be educated in terms of receiving a Western form of education, but since they are the depositories and custodians of the wisdom of the long departed, their word is the voice of reason. They have gone through more experiences and deserve to be listened to.

For the proverb to be formulated and be understood, Sumner (2001: 23) argues, there is need to be two axis of the receiver and the sender who should share a cultural unity, same language, same images and same values. This he calls it a horizontal axis, which is social in character. The other axis is "where the message starts from tradition and aims at the actual situation" (Sumner 2001: 23). Since proverbs must refer and apply to a concrete situation, the sender and the receiver must somehow participate in this situation and the "optimal condition is realized when the proverb definitely transforms the ambiguity of a situation and enlightens it, either for understanding or for action" (Sumner 2001: 25). The sender should have the cognitive capacity to relate the proverb with the actual situation. This is important if any communication is to begin. Thus, the proverb must be seen as an intervention whose purpose is to break an impasse and direct the way a situation is to be judged to determine an appropriate action. This means that proverbs cannot be meaningfully interpreted out of a situation with which they have direct relevance. The actual situation is directly addressed by some experiences drawn from tradition. Thus, in proverbs, there is a sense in which traditions constantly inform the present situation.

The above analysis by Sumner suffices to mean that the speaker of the proverb and the listener should share some general linguistic competence with which to relate the proverb with the situation at hand. This competence ensures effective communication between the sender of the proverb and the listener. Chimhundu (1980: 39) makes a similar observation when he said that to the Shona, the appropriate use of the *tsumo* is good evidence of such competence and such use is met with approval. The relevance of the proverb lies in the application of the collective experiences of the past generations to present lived realities and situation. The transmitted word seeks to draw from the past some lessons to address present concerns. The proverb requires that the receiver and the sender of share the same epistemic frame within which the proverb gets its full meaning and application. The proverbs address human experiences with yet another set of experiences drawn from the past; there is an assumed continuity between the past and the present in the proverbs. Lestrade cited by Chimhundu (1980: 40) argues that the proverb has the purpose of "summing up the accumulated ethical and philosophical experience of generations for the benefit of posterity." Thus, the collective experiences of the past continue to inspire and give guidance to the present, and as the sender of the proverb is appealing to tradition, there is a sense in which the sender reminds the receiver that tradition continues to be relevant in the present as something that has stood the test of time, hence the special force and weight of the proverb.

Hamutiyinei and Plannger (1987) use the terms *tsumo* and *shumo* to refer to the proverb. They say:

Shumo must be distinguished from madimikira (allusive idioms) or zvirevo (picturesque sayings) although these are closely related forms of Shona oral literature (1978: xiii).

Chimhundu (1980:37) says that the term '*shumo*' as used by the Karanga is not just a dialectal variant of the Zezuru '*tsumo*'. He says that the two cannot be used interchangeably. '*Shumo*' has a wider meaning. He writes:

What is being suggested here is that while the use of *tsumo* to refer to proverbs as a genre is perfectly acceptable, *shumo* should be allowed to retain the "other meaning" where reference is to relative importance or praiseworthiness of an idea, object or act. Of crucial importance for our purposes here is the fact that this "other" meaning of *shumo* implies approval by "the generalized other" or community at large (1980: 37).

This distinction of *shumo* from *tsumo* goes a long way in helping in our understanding of how proverbs are viewed by the Shona. They have to have a meaning that has a bearing on their lives. From what Chimhundu says *shumo* means sense or wisdom. It is possible that one can say, "Tsumo dzine shumu" (Proverbs have sense/wisdom). In this vein the proverb refers to that which is approved because it allows for people to maintain their standards and norms of social and cultural behaviour. What is worth preserving is what people seek to be identified with. Thus *shumo* refers to the important things that a people values and cherishes. The philosophical significance of this conceptualisation of the proverb cannot be underestimated. *Shumo* will mean the traditions and values from which a people draw from so as to direct their behaviour. For anything to be called philosophical, there are certain claims to truth that are made and that need to be sustained so as to allow the truths to inform how people have to live. Using the various understandings of truth, one can note that there is an underlying assumption in all theories that truth improves one's condition. This view can be termed pragmatic because it seeks to interpret truth in terms of how certain beliefs and statements that carry them relate to human concerns and attempt to solve them.

In that regard, proverbs address human concerns, aspirations and express their fears. The other understanding of truth is those beliefs that generally fit within one's world-view and continue to inform the relations and unity of elements in that world-view. For the Shona people, proverbs present their worldview and how the world-view is constantly referred to with the repeated use of and constant reference to the proverbs. Proverbs as a strong aspect of language legitimate particular belief system of the Shona and also draw from the personal experiences of both the living and the departed.

Further, Hamutyinei and Plannger (1987) say that proverbs have a dual role or function. They are both juridical and educational. They are a way of verbalizing customary law and lore, and enunciate rules of conduct in life. From a juridical perspective they could be used to sway a case in one's favour. For example a man has been brought before the chief's court (*dare*) for adultery and is told: "*Uchinyarawo murume mukuru. Hauzvivi here kuti zvakanzi mukadzi wemumwe ndaambuya?*" (You should be ashamed of yourself. Don't you know that another man's wife is you mother-in-law?). In response that man could say: "*Ndizvo hazvo Changamire asi zivaiwo kuti zvakanzi mukadzi wemumwe ndiye munaku*" (That's true Your Worship, but it was also said another man's wife is more beautiful). Even though this man would not be forgiven, the court was likely to pass a lighter sentence on him as compared to one who would have tried to defend himself without seeking the assistance of elders who would seek refuge in proverbs.

The educational value of proverbs is realised when they are used in *nhango dzepadare* (court teachings). Among the issues that were discussed *padare* (at the court/palaver) is the one that relates to marriage and the type of woman who is worth getting married to. Depending on the speaker, the following proverb or any one of its variant forms was used to sound as a warning to the bachelors so that they had to look for more than physical beauty in a woman. An elder could say: *Mukadzi munaku kukona kuba anoroya*. (A beautiful woman who does not turn out to be a thief becomes a witch). Other variant proverbs are the following:

*Matende mashava anovazva doro.*

(Light coloured gourds make beer lose its taste).

*Guyu kutsvukira kunze mukati mune masvosve.*

(A fig may look ripe from outside yet inside it is full of ants).

These proverbs are not an indication of a disregard for physical beauty. Beautiful women and handsome men were desired but beauty did not have to be the main criterion for determining a marriageable person. Beauty was not supposed to be an obsession or a commodity as it is conceptualised today. Beauty has been commodified to the extent that it has lost the moral and aesthetic value it was associated with. African folktales are full of examples of people who were attracted by physical beauty but ended up in problems. Like the story by Amos Tutuola referred to above, there is even a Shona novel *Runako Munjodzi* (Mutasa 1982) that shows people going to war because of a beautiful woman. It is only after Runako (beauty) is dead that the author raises questions regarding beauty. At the end he says if beauty can lead to senseless killings then it is of no use to humankind. The Shona poetry, especially of the *nhango* discourse, which was recited to the young by the elders, is full of caution to the young boys that be careful of women, especially the beautiful ones. The woman was conceptualised in contradictory and ambivalent ways: as both the mother and the witch; the wife and the prostitute. The poet would give polemics in an attempt to reveal the double-sided nature of women. Bhera (1979) wrote the poem 'Muzukuru Zvawava Kuenda kuHarare' in which he takes the role of the grandfather (*sekuru*) teaching the grandson (*muzukuru*). One of the things that the grandson should be careful about was the prostitute:

Siyana navo vakapikira upfambi,  
Ravo basa ngerokujuruja mari,  
Ziva kuti pfambi haina nyasha, pfambi muroyi,  
Chandinokuudza ndeichi, ukaona mukadzi akanaka, tiza. (1979: 13)

*(Avoid these ordained prostitutes  
Their task is to fish money  
Be warned! A prostitute is merciless; she is a witch,  
What I tell you is this: If you see a beautiful woman run away [from her]).*

In the poem, the advice to the young men was that the beautiful woman is the prostitute and the witch, who any man is better off without. Women in the urban context are morally weak and are bent on destroying the moral fabric of society.



This was a lesson predominant in writings that came from and that depicted colonial Zimbabwe, an era that only men were expected to be seen in the major towns since they were central in providing the labour force for the colonial settler economy. The urban space was not for the women since they were to be circumscribed to the rural homes where they cared for the family. The man working in the towns' industries and mines were like hunters, an image that was borrowed from the traditional and pre-colonial setting. Therefore, any woman who traversed the space which was considered to be for males was morally bad. As such the young men were told to be careful and avoid socialising with her or making a love proposal.

To Africans especially the Shona, physical beauty is not the most important asset that a person has to have. The concept of beauty is realised through other issues; among them there is morality, ability to bear children, family background, being industrious and not engaging in gossip. A woman who is physically beautiful but lacks *unhu* (humaneness) is not appreciated. People at times would even comment regarding these people saying "*Kunaka akanaka hake, asi kunaka kunoiswa mudura here?*" (She is really beautiful, but can beauty be harvested?). These words clearly show that the person who is being talked of is lazy. This is a clear indication that physical beauty is not important but one's "utility value" in a given family or homestead. This value is socio-economic. One was expected to help her family, especially her new family to survive and live comfortably if she was a woman.

A woman's beauty also lay not in her looks but in her ability to mother children. If she did not succeed in having children then she was not beautiful. This is clearly amplified by the following proverb: "Unaki hwemukadzi huri pamwana". (The beauty of a woman lies in her potential and ability to have a child). If she were to raise children successfully by ensuring that they were morally upright and hardworking as well as being respectful to elders, then her beauty would be fully realised.

Physical beauty alone would not count to one's overall judgment or assessment. Even if one were very beautiful (*tsvarakadenga*) that would not be considered if one were morally weak or loose. If she would not change it would not have been surprising to hear people commenting: "*Maida kuti aite zvingani? Kuti runako nekuva neunhu? Hamuoni here kuti hazviiti?*" (What did you expect her to have? Beauty and good morals? Can't you see that that is impossible?).

It is clear that what is more preferable are people with good morals and not physical beauty. Comments such as the above were meant to warn beautiful people, that while beauty and being beautiful were acceptable, people were mainly interested in deeds that were positive and physical beauty could only count as additional. People who saw themselves as beautiful also had to adhere to a certain code of ethics and among them were being chaste. Another interesting aspect that was appreciated for a woman to be considered beautiful was her ability to perform her sexual duties in a way that would make her husband happy. Even though one's poor performance in bed was not for public consumption, the husband could inform the woman's aunt so that the woman would rectify the problem. The husband could see in this poor performance the beauty of the woman depreciating.

### **Towards a Shona Ethnoaesthetics**

The discussion in this paper is meant to highlight that the traditional society had a holistic approach to the notion of beauty, and as such beauty can be more meaningfully understood within a given people's system of values. Such an approach gives primacy to a people's worldview, language, spirituality and value systems. Ethnoaesthetics, therefore, is a concept used to refer to a philosophy of beauty or taste that is grounded in a people's system of values. The quest for a Shona ethnoaesthetics is in general terms an advancement of the argument that the universalist thesis of philosophy is not substantive enough to ground and accord full expression to African systems of thought. According to van Hook (1997:385), the universalist thesis contributes nothing to African philosophy and should be abandoned. Thus, ethnoaesthetics, whether understood as an appendage to or a sub-category of ethnophilosophy, seeks to locate the coherence, credibility and foundations of a people's systems of values and how they fit within their worldview. This agrees with Kaemer's (1978:121) view that aesthetic philosophy refers to the concepts by which a social group ascribes value to human creative activity. The ascription of value is done and sustained within the context of the people's worldview and is given full expression through a people's language. Hence, quarrying the language, worldview, and value system is important if we are to make sense of the significance attached to a people's conceptualisation of phenomena.

As we push for a case of a Shona ethnoaesthetics, we argue for the need to subject the Shona idioms, proverbs, folklore, myths and rituals to a more rigorous and critical analysis. Throwing away the facets that embody systems of thought is to throw away the baby with bath water. In a context of calls for decolonisation, we need to call for the interrogation of African cultures in the light of the strong view that culture and philosophy remain entangled. And according to Myers (1987: 455), culture is the continuous reflective thread with which we weave our experiences into a meaningful fabric. Thus the activity of philosophy is centred on cultural analysis. Following the analyses by Wiredu (1980; 1996), all cultures have their distinctive beliefs and world-views which become philosophical when we apply critical analysis and rigorous interrogation. In his analyses of the Akan worldview, language and thought system, Wiredu also makes an appeal to the African philosophers to interrogate African languages and reassert the uniqueness of the Africans' experiences. It is in pursuant of this call that we argue for the uniqueness of the Shona people's understanding of reality.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion above seeks to address particular concerns that have risen as a result of certain practices of modernity. Modern beauty pageants celebrate beauty as objective, universal and also blind to culture. However, a closer analysis would show that the pageants are just an instance of the universalisation of certain particulars. The paper argues that any conception of beauty has to be understood within its cultural specificity, and as such the claims that beauty is objective and universal stems are bequeathed to us by the Platonic and Cartesian legacies. Relying on the Shona proverb, the paper has attempted to argue that the traditional Shona society had a worldview within which their conceptualisation of beauty has to be analysed. Contrary to the distortions by the pageants and competitions that are common today, beauty amongst the Shona was broader and deeper to include the physical and the moral that determined one's position in the larger social, political, spiritual and economic spheres of life. Beauty and conceptualisation of beauty remains core in determining and emphasising the values and a sense of identity of a people, hence the need to focus on how beauty was central for the Shona people, thus the centrality of the view that modern standards of beauty emphasise certain things that were not so prominent in the Shona traditional society. These differences may suggest that there is a paralysis that continues to haunt our analysis.

Thus, the proverb as something closer to the tradition helps to dislodge this paralysis inform how beauty was understood in the traditional Shona society and demonstrate that the Shona have a unique aesthetics that fits in well with their worldviews and value system; appreciating this ethnoaesthetics helps to avoid the current distortions and generalisations.

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