

## THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF AESTHETICS: A CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH

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Like an unfinished symphony, culture is a work of art never meant to be completed. Its expressiveness demands that it be endlessly recreated and that its appreciation derive from this process of creation. (Guss 1989: 67)

### *Introduction*

DESPITE the growing number of anthropologists who recognize the usefulness of aesthetics in cultural analysis (see, for example, Forrest 1988, Guss 1989, Morphy 1991, Morphy 1992, Coote 1992, Shelton 1992), aesthetics—especially as it pertains to everyday existence—seldom appears in social analysis. Its common association with subjective, qualitative sense-activity removed from collective, observable cognitive processes has unnecessarily excluded it from social scientific inquiry. Such a position ignores the phenomenological aspect of aesthetic experience in favour of a rigid, Kantian view of aesthetics as disinterested appreciation. In this article<sup>1</sup> I offer a critique of the Kantian foundations of contemporary Western aesthetics and seek to establish an anthropological model for aesthetic systems that reorients Western readers to a more generalizable connotation of aesthetics. To that end, the theoretical foundations of this paper are twofold: (1) aesthetic

1. The theoretical premises outlined in this article have been developed in preparation for field research into everyday aesthetics in Puerto Limón, Costa Rica.

perception is the attachment of values to experience; and (2) aesthetic expression is the re-creation of experience through which those values are reconstituted and/or transformed.

The concept of aesthetic perception presented here incorporates a cognitive process into what has largely been written of as the qualitative/emotional response to experience. It also offers a critique of the universal application of the Western, more specifically leisure-class concept of aesthetics as an attitude of disinterested appreciation, placing such a concept in its proper context as one of a number of different aesthetic systems that have been constructed around the world throughout history.

The concept of aesthetic expression incorporates the active, processual aspects of creative expression into an analytical framework that has until now focused predominantly on isolated expressive products, or 'art objects'. It also positions the theorization of aesthetic systems as a potential answer to the structure/practice dilemma, that is, how to incorporate creative practice into structural models.

### *Redefining Aesthetic Perception*

Aesthetic perception is the attachment of value to the sensory experience of objects or events. This notion of aesthetic perception is derived from Baumgarten's (1954 [1735]) formulation of the Greek concept and Kant's first critique (1934 [1787]), both of which refer to the cognitive process of qualitative sensory perception. The concept here refers to a cross-cultural system of value attachment that involves both form and function.

Alexander Baumgarten's original use of the term *aestheticae* in the 1750s referred to 'the science of perception'—that is, 'a science which might direct the lower cognitive faculty in knowing things sensately' (Baumgarten 1954: 78). Baumgarten formulated aesthetics as a complement to philosophy, which was concerned with things known intellectually and therefore removed from the senses. The importance of the 'lower cognitive faculty' of the senses and their effects led Baumgarten to stress the importance of aesthetics in any philosophical pursuit of truth.

Baumgarten's use of aesthetics drew on the Ancient Greek concept, which referred to the apprehension of the material world as distinct from things immaterial or which could only be thought. This does not mean that sensory perception is excluded from the cognitive faculties; it in fact depends upon them for sense to be made of apprehensions. Kant, somewhat circuitously, draws this conclusion at the outset of *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant defines 'intuition', or sensibility, as the way in which knowledge relates to objects in their immediacy. Concepts arise from thought, and all thought is in some way related to intuition (Kant 1934: 41). In this way, cognition is intimately related to the experience of intuition. George

Mills neatly illustrates the relationship between qualitative sensory perception and cognition: 'experience is like a river, one bank of which is cognitive, the other qualitative. It is as incorrect to speak of a cognitive experience or a qualitative experience as it is to speak of a river with one bank' (Mills 1971 [1957]: 85–6). There can be no qualitative sensory perception if the cognitive faculties of the mind do not attach some value to the experience.

Aesthetic perception in this cognitive/qualitative sense is universal, though qualitative responses to objects and events are necessarily coloured by the given social environment. Depending on the context, an aesthetic response may be elicited by 'the perfect functional utility of a chair, the simplicity of an idea, or the elegance of a solution to a problem' (Morphy 1992: 181), not to mention the efficacy of a prayer blanket or the particular use of colour in a Matisse painting. This universal, yet culturally variable quality makes the concept of an aesthetic system particularly useful in the development of anthropological models of social formation.

In his third critique, *Critique of Judgment* (1952 [1790]), Kant constructs one of the earliest and most insightful characterizations of a culturally specific aesthetic system. Kant claims that for an object to be considered beautiful, viewers must completely detach themselves from any practical consideration of the object. This view of aesthetics may be seen to be that of Western elite society; and, so far as it goes, Kant's discussion provides a helpful analysis of one culture's view of aesthetics. Unfortunately, the philosophical power of Kant's presentation of this culturally specific conception of aesthetic perception has led others to argue for the inapplicability of 'aesthetics' in any context outside of the West (see, for example, Overing 1994, Gell 1995). Such an argument, however, hinges on two misconceptions (partly derived from Kant's third critique) concerning aesthetics: namely, that the critical use of judgement is uniquely Western, and that the valuation of function over form is uniquely non-Western.

The notion that judgement is a uniquely Western qualifier of artistic achievement excludes the possibility of a comparable use of aesthetic judgement in a non-Western context. The obvious argument against such a notion is the strikingly similar concept of aesthetic judgement found in the large-scale, socially stratified societies of Asia. For the moment, however, my intention is to illustrate the use of judgement in various non-Western contexts, where 'non-Western' refers to small-scale, non-state societies.

The typical argument against aesthetics as a cross-cultural category is based on the notion that non-Western expressive forms are intimately bound up with everyday cultural activity, where every member of the society is an 'artist' and no cultural products are judged in their own right as 'beautiful' or 'ugly' (Overing 1994). A well-documented example of the use of aesthetic judgement in a non-Western setting is provided by Harry R. Silver for the Asante (Ashanti) of Ghana and their carvings. Silver (1979) describes the then growing Asante carving-market as being largely a product of a thriving tourist industry. The Asante carve for a Western market and, maintaining a hierarchy of craftsmanship, make aesthetic

decisions based on that market that are comparable to those made using a Western concept of aesthetic judgement. Beyond that, the carvers themselves do not view every object produced as beautiful. The Asante have certain criteria by which they 'judge' aesthetic expressions. Styles that have been borrowed from other cultural traditions to meet the demand of tourists are judged to be 'conceptually incomprehensible, unspeakably ugly, and occasionally downright frightening' (ibid.: 200). Carvings that reflect the 'real Asante aesthetic' are 'judged' to be better than just any artistic creation. The Asante distaste for styles appreciated by Western consumers demonstrates the existence of an indigenous aesthetic that is different from that of the West, but comparable in its use of judgement as a qualification of beauty.

Another example of aesthetic judgement in a non-Western setting may be found among the Yolngu bark-painters of north-east Arnhem Land, Australia, as documented by Howard Morphy (1991). Though the aesthetic aspects of what is produced by the Yolngu serve an important function (and in some cases the objects themselves are not even meant to be displayed), the success of an 'artist' depends upon the aesthetic judgement of those around him or her. Howard Morphy describes one instance where a bark-painting was rejected by some men of the Djinang moiety who were watching the progress of its production. According to Morphy, 'the reason for this rejection was explicit: the figure looked too much like a crocodile, a Yirritja moiety species' (ibid.: 158). The technical mastery of the painter was not sufficient to portray accurately the correct Djinang moiety species of lizard, and so the painting was rejected.

These examples illustrate non-Western uses of aesthetic judgement in the attachment of value to objects. But are not these examples all focused on the evaluation of beauty in terms of its social or spiritual utility, and not on beauty as such? Does this not prove that valuing function over form is characteristic of non-Western traditions alone? Are there no examples of non-Western groups attaching value to an object or event for its own sake? The answers to these questions are debatable, but so are the underlying assumptions that prompt their asking. As the above ethnographic examples imply, within non-Western contexts concepts of beauty rarely have to do with the disinterestedness of Kantian appreciation, but relate directly to social or ritual practices. The success of an artist in a non-Western context often depends less on the creative use of a particular medium than on his or her ability to effectively manifest the cultural world-view. Thus, for most non-Western peoples, the concept of beauty is inextricably associated with social or spiritual utility. However, beauty 'as such' is rarely detached from function even in a Western context. Not only is the non-Western appreciation of beauty in utility valid as an aesthetic response, it is in many ways similar to Western aesthetic appreciation, which is not so much disinterested in functional aspects of an art object as it is interested in how its evaluation will be received in society. This analysis must now turn to examining the proposition that the value of function over form is limited to non-Western societies.

Pierre Bourdieu undermines the universal applicability of Kant's view of aesthetics in *Distinction* (1984), his often-referred-to work concerning taste and class distinction in French society. Bourdieu demonstrates that disinterested appreciation is neither universal nor even wholly Western, but the product of the existence of an élite class accustomed to the luxury of having disposable time and resources. For Bourdieu, the working classes of Western, or any stratified, state society regard each thing in terms of its function, and yet are still able to discern beauty. Bourdieu writes: 'detachment, disinterestedness, indifference—aesthetic theory has so often presented these as the only way to recognize the work of art for what it is...that one ends up forgetting that they really mean disinvestment, detachment, indifference, in other words, the refusal to invest oneself and take things seriously' (ibid.: 34). For those unaccustomed to having disposable time and resources, survival is not taken for granted, and every word, thought, or deed requires an investment of oneself. This investment or attachment does not make impossible aesthetic perception, indeed it points to the existence of an alternate aesthetic system constructed by the working class that attaches value to objects and events in a fundamentally different way from the way in which they are constructed by the élite class. In modern French society there are at least two aesthetic systems operating side by side, mutually exclusive in the ways in which they attach value, but both valid as ways of knowing the surrounding world.

The Kantian concept of disinterested appreciation, where utilitarian contemplation spoils the aesthetic experience, is not found in small-scale non-state societies outside the West; nor, according to Bourdieu, is it found among certain classes in the West. The Kantian aesthetic therefore seems to be limited to élite classes within large-scale state societies, a fact that explains its appearance in the great societies of the Orient. Kant's critique of judgement, and the aesthetic experience that prompts it, is a product of his own experience within an intellectual élite, and designed to apply to it; and, like much else in European philosophy, has been accorded a universal currency. However, even if it should be accepted that Kant's conception has limited applicability, this does not negate the argument that the term 'aesthetic' refers only to Kant's conception of disinterestedness and therefore cannot apply cross-culturally or, apparently, across classes. But this argument may have merit only in so far as Kant's concept of disinterested appreciation applies within any class or culture at all.

There are, however, non-Western cases in which 'Western' dispositions may be seen to exist. The cattle-keeping Nilotes of the Southern Sudan offer a helpful illustration. In reference to the Dinka, Jeremy Coote describes a common dilemma for the owner of cattle: whether to keep a well-marked calf for stud purposes or to castrate it for display (Coote 1992: 252). This exemplifies a critical conflict between form and function in a non-Western context. The Dinka here are operating an aesthetic distinction, comparable to that found in the West, between that which is beautiful and that which is functional. This is not to say that a calf left to stud is not considered beautiful, but that that which is set apart purely for visual

appreciation is a category familiar both to Dinka cattle-keepers and to Western art collectors.

In his critique of Coote's essay, Alfred Gell convincingly argues that Dinka youth are more concerned with the social distinction accorded them through owning well-marked cattle than they are with any intrinsic beauty associated with certain configurations of black-and-white markings (Gell 1995: 23–4). In this sense, what appears to be the disinterested appreciation of a well-marked calf, which prompts its display, is in reality another example of a non-Western inability to separate form from function. No doubt Gell's argument is grounded in a reading of Bourdieu's discussion in *Distinction*, not to mention everyday observations of the role of art as social marker within elite Western society.

A thorough examination of this elite Western use of taste in society is found in Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994 [1899]). If Kant's aesthetic exists in any context, it surely exists here. Veblen describes all the activity of the elite in industrial society as being centred around pecuniary emulation—that is, the continual increase of wealth relative to others within the elite class. Honour is accorded when accumulated wealth renders labour and efficient consumption unnecessary, thus leisure and wastefulness become the marks of elite social status. In this context there is a socially constructed notion of the beautiful as that which marks wealth and leisure. In other words, beautiful objects 'are wasteful and ill adapted to their ostensible use' (ibid.: 78). As in Kant's formulation, members of the leisure class perceive beauty in objects removed from the context of their practical use.

Veblen uses as an example (ibid.) the contemplation of two spoons, one hand-wrought from silver, the other machine-made from aluminium, to illustrate the leisure-class aesthetic. The hand-wrought spoon would provide more aesthetic gratification than the common, machine-made spoon because the former is much more expensive and involves a far more complex production process without any appreciable increase in serviceability. However, if a close inspection should show that the supposed hand-wrought spoon were in reality only a very clever imitation of hand-wrought goods, but an imitation so cleverly wrought as to give the same impression of line and surface, the gratification which the user derives from its contemplation as an object of beauty would immediately decline.

The imitation spoon, being more cheaply made and easier to acquire, loses value as a beautiful object because it is more practical than a truly hand-wrought spoon. In as much as it is more practical it is less wasteful, and therefore less valued as beautiful by a member of the leisure class. The qualitative evaluation of the spoon as beautiful depends upon its appreciation apart from practical use, not because of some notion of 'purity' in aesthetic judgement but because the maintenance of class status depends upon conspicuous waste and abstention from labour, which are the conventional marks of social standing within the leisure class. Veblen explains: 'the requirement of conspicuous wastefulness is...a constraining norm selectively shaping and sustaining our sense of what is beautiful, and guiding our discrimination with respect to what may legitimately be approved

as beautiful and what may not' (ibid.: 79). The disinterested appreciation of objects is at the foundation of the leisure-class aesthetic system, but only in so far as 'disinterested' refers to the serviceability of objects and not to the attitude of the observer. The leisure class is supremely 'interested' in the social utility of aesthetic experience.

Kant's aesthetic model in *Critique of Judgement* initiated much worthwhile exploration of aesthetic contemplation, but it remains largely impracticable as a testable theory in ethnographic research. The utilitarian aspect of aesthetic perception that appears across cultures and classes is as necessary an ingredient of an aesthetic system as the faculties with which to qualitatively judge an experience as aesthetic 'in its own right'. The social utility of Dinka display-cattle does not detract from the aesthetic attachment of value to the experience of the cattle; in fact, it is a necessary aspect of the Dinka aesthetic system. Among the Dinka, the French working class, or the industrial leisure class, there is 'an ineffable reciprocity of feeling' (Eagleton 1990: 75) that arises from the attachment of value to experience, whether that experience be a well-marked calf, a glass of cheap beer, or a hand-wrought spoon.

A discussion of aesthetic perception ends where Kant began in his first critique: it is the attachment of value to the experience of objects or events. It is a cognitive process of qualitative evaluation, and as much as cognition is socialized, aesthetic perception is socially constructed and therefore viable as a locus of anthropological inquiry. Aesthetic systems 'materialize a way of experiencing' (Geertz 1983: 99), bridging the chasm between the rational, empirical world of material objects and the non-rational, subjective world of experience in its intuitive immediacy. For the Huichol of north-west Mexico, beauty is synonymous with clarity, which 'does not refer solely to their perception of the objective environment, but also to their recognition and understanding of the essences underlying perceptual phenomena' (Shelton 1992: 237). If social science hopes to grasp the processes of social formation in their complex variety, it must learn from the Huichol how to grasp the powerful influence of both the objective material world and the collectively subjective experience of that world embodied in aesthetic perception.

### *Redefining Aesthetic Expression*

Aesthetic expression is the human re-creation of experience through which the values attached by means of aesthetic perception are reconstituted and/or transformed. Aesthetic expression encompasses the whole of the creative process, including not only the art object or event as a creative product, but the cultural context and production process as well. Creative works are produced out of expressive forms and are used constantly to reorganize cultural forms in both the

institutionalized arenas of artistic expression as well as in the mundane realms of everyday activity. In this way, aesthetic expression embodies the bricolage of cultural production that bridges the theoretical chasm between static social structures and dynamic human practice.

The Western and, by association, anthropological preoccupation with the art object has proven to be a great distraction from a more useful focus on aesthetic expression. There has been a conceptual fusion of aesthetics with 'art' that has resulted not only in the conceptual limitation of aesthetics as critiqued above, but also in the inverted conception of aesthetics as subordinate to the Western, culturally static category of 'fine art'.

Within the Western aesthetic there is a category of 'art' that is concerned with the attachment of value to certain formal qualities of objects or events, which retain that value regardless of context. To the Western eye, a Trobriand canoe-prow board can be considered an 'art' object whether it is viewed cutting through the surf on its way to a Kula exchange or suspended from a museum ceiling. Its aesthetic appreciation is not dependent upon its cultural context. The problem with 'art' as a cross-cultural category is its particularly Western connotation as an end in itself. The Western art object, whether it be an Italian fresco or Duchamp's urinal, is viewed and critiqued in isolation. Objects extracted from non-Western cultures are subjected to the same contextually isolated evaluation, and therefore become incorporated into a Western aesthetic.

The preoccupation with art in isolation has narrowed the Western concept of universal aesthetic forms to those that are principally visual. This is largely due to the practical need for non-Western aesthetic forms to be portable in order to reach Western audiences, resulting in an emphasis on such art objects as sculpture and painting. Coote aptly points out that such an emphasis undervalues the poetic, choreological, and other arts (Coote 1992: 246), but it also excludes the importance of context in the aesthetic experience of any creative product. Rarely is any one creative product meant to be experienced in isolation from a particular environment. As Anthony Seeger (1994) argues, if music is studied in isolation the student misses the visual, sensual, and olfactory components of the aesthetic experience. In a sense, the music is taken out of context, physically and culturally. An aesthetic expression incorporates every aspect of the creative process, placing objects and events in the specific aesthetic setting crucial to its meaningful experience.

Art is a qualitative category of objects and events. Aesthetics is an evaluative process that subsumes such culturally specific categories as 'art' in its incorporation of all value attachment systems. Art is an important, but largely unique, aspect of a Western aesthetic. The fact that many languages seemingly lack a word translatable as 'art' illustrates this largely unique character. Jacques Maquet (1986: 10) suggests that any general study of aesthetics must start in a society that has a word for 'art' in its vocabulary, but this is to limit ethnocentrically what is understood by aesthetic expression.



The aesthetic systems of other cultures have no place for a term 'art' as the West knows it, because their expressive forms differ; but this does not indicate the lack of an aesthetic. A Kunama friend from Eritrea living in England recently commented to me upon the meticulously crafted ornaments found in so many shops around Christmas. The idea of putting so much effort into a decorative object was foreign to her since years of war have left the Kunama with few attachments to material culture. As a result, the Kunama aesthetic centres around performance; and she described with enthusiasm the dances performed at the funerals of the elderly who have lived complete lives and the rhythmic sound of the men with long-soled shoes who pound the earth as they dance for days on end. A simple cup of coffee becomes an aesthetic expression involving three hours of selecting, roasting, and brewing beans with the proper materials, and is no less meticulous a process than the fashioning of a Christmas ornament.

The conceptual fusion of aesthetics and art not only limits aesthetics as a Western category, it also obscures the potential of aesthetics for the examination of expressive processes. For example, the Eskimo emphasize process in expressive forms, especially sculpture, and often care little for the objects themselves (Carpenter 1961). To focus, as many writers have done, on the tiny sculptures, which the Eskimo themselves often discard, amounts to an idolatry of objects isolated from the meanings imbued through the productive process. The anthropology of aesthetics gives primacy to the expressive process, where product matters less than production. A work of art is just that—a work, or an act of expression. The anthropology of aesthetics is concerned with the work of art as well as other productive processes of expression that appeal to the senses in a culturally specific way. As such, aesthetics 'offers us a cross-culturally valid field of inquiry which partially subsumes "art" without detracting from the latter's historical and cultural specificity' (Coote 1989: 232).

As the embodiment of a productive process, aesthetic expression is a dynamic part of cultural transformation. The constant flux of cultural forms and the meanings attached to those forms has successfully eluded sophisticated social theory, which seeks concrete patterns in human interaction. Such scholars as Clifford Geertz (e.g. 1973, 1983), Michael Sahlins (e.g. 1987), Marilyn Strathern (e.g. 1991), and Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1977, 1990) have taken up the challenge of integrating practice into social theory. Geertz's 'thick description' seeks to avoid the entanglement of explanatory models by drawing out the complexity of cultural 'webs of meaning' through detailed ethnographic description. Sahlins's historical perspective informs his description of processual social structures that reproduce meaning over time in a dynamic way. Strathern writes of 'partial connections', where human interaction is contingent and constantly reproduced, rendering social structures flexible and, at times, fragile. Bourdieu refers to social strategies, where cultural members have any number of options from which to choose a course of action. In this way action may be anticipated rather than predicted. There is still considerable room for manipulation and interpretation.

Analyses of aesthetic expression must build upon the work of these and other writers concerned with integrating creative practice and social theory. Aesthetic expression is a phenomenological process of cultural production where a conceptual bricolage is made manifest within a material reality to produce meaning in a structured and dynamic way. Lévi-Strauss (1966) uses the concept of bricolage as a metaphor for his view of cultural production. The bricoleur, the jack of all trades cum handyman, represents the native or local, the producer of social meaning. As the producer seeks to express meaning, there is a limited set of tools and materials from which to choose, and therefore a limited amount of manoeuvrable space in which to produce meaning. The elements are 'pre-constrained' in that each signifies an aspect of experience over time. As a producer of culture, the bricoleur has a limited number of objects and events, meaningful to all members of the group, with which to signify.

While Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage is abstract, aesthetic expressions materialize experience in a way people can interact with and manipulate (Geertz 1983: 99). Further, the configurations of meaning in expressive form not only refer to socially meaningful experiences, they are themselves meaningful experiences to which values may be attached. This dual role of aesthetic expression as both signifier and signified expands the set of referents at the bricoleur's disposal, which increases the possible configurations of meaning. Alan P. Merriam succinctly summarizes this process when he describes the 'four-fold organizational pattern involved in the arts: concept, leading to behavior, resulting in product, which in turn feeds back upon the concept' (Merriam 1971: 98). In this way, 'the artistic system...can both generate new meanings or ways of expressing meanings appropriate to context and hide old meanings or associations' (Morphy 1991: 141). People produce culture, not in a static system of law and predictable action, but in a dynamic process where the possible configurations of meaning in aesthetic expression increases continually.

Adding actual practice in a material context to Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage allows one to retain its elegance while tempering its troubling emphasis on an underlying social structure that pre-constrains action. Though the limited set of images and signs at the bricoleur's disposal limits the possible coherent configurations of meaning, it does not constrain production to one particular option. The creative production involved in aesthetic expression implies what Mills calls 'style', the 'selection of elements from human experience and their reordering in new structures' (Mills 1971: 72). In this theorization of cultural production, 'the material-social world is changed by the artist (that is, everyone) and the artist is changed by it' (Flores Fratto 1978: 136). The speaker of a language is limited by the possible arrangements of words to express a thought that will be understandable to the listener, but this does not mean that the same thought will be expressed in the same way every time. A cultural theory that focuses upon aesthetic expression provides room for a human agency missing in much of the literature concerning social structure, and accounts for the identifiable patterns of structure giving form to the creative choices made by human agents.

David Guss's (1989) study of the Yekuana of Venezuela offers one particularly insightful example of cultural aesthetic expression as the re-creation of experience where values are either reconstituted or transformed. Even among the Yekuana, who pride themselves on the continuity and longevity of their cultural practices, the transformation of meaning takes place through aesthetic expression, which reconstitutes meaningful attachments to the past as it transforms the present set of collective referents in a creative and dynamic way.

Much of Yekuana daily activity centres around a connection to the mythical past and the adventures of ancestors. Storytelling among the Yekuana is not as institutionalized a verbal activity as it is in many cultures; rather, all activity is laden with aspects of the ancestor myths. As Guss describes it, 'to tell a story...was to weave a basket, just as it was to make a canoe, to prepare barbasco, to build a house, to clear a garden, to give birth, to die' (Guss 1989: 4). Creativity in recounting the myths is associated with mastery of technique, whether it be of weaving, carving, or decorating, rather than innovation or change, since reconstituting the values attached to ancestral experiences is of utmost importance.

As the world crowds in on the Yekuana, new experiences and contacts must be dealt with in a creative way in order to reconstitute the primacy of the ancestors' experience. One way this is accomplished is through the narrative incorporation of the surrounding landscape into the mythical flight of Wanadi, the Yekuana culture hero, from the centre of the universe. As Yekuana experience of the outside world increases, so too do the geographical features and cultural groups encountered by Wanadi in the myths increase. As a result, 'the historical events surrounding the arrival of the Spanish, along with the new technology they introduced, are reinterpreted into the meaningful language of Yekuana symbols' (ibid.: 60). In this way, the primacy of ancestor experience is reconstituted while the symbols associated with that experience change over time. Guss explains that the 'ability to endlessly manipulate these [symbols] insures that the culture continues as a dynamic mode of thought capable of processing new information and ideas' (ibid.: 61). The expressive forms drawn on in myth-telling invoke the meanings associated with certain experiences and incorporate them in a dynamic way that reconstitutes Yekuana values.

Another way the Yekuana use aesthetic expression to transform meaning while reconstituting certain values, is in the socialization of people and things through decoration or spatial arrangement. Objects, people, and even history (as described above) must receive the cultural stamp to be recognized as distinctly Yekuana. Within a Yekuana house, women are symbolically and physically located beneath men, that is, further from the centre. This arrangement is completely transformed outside the house in the garden (ibid.: 33). In a ritual concerning the creation of new gardens, the Yekuana express the inversion of power between men and women in order to 'civilize' nature and ensure a productive garden. During three days of singing, dancing, and drinking, women take the men's place at the centre of the house before moving out into the garden. This empowers women to successfully 'tame' the land and cultivate the freshly cleared earth. Music, dance,

food, and architecture are all drawn on as expressive forms in the transformation of the land into a meaningful part of Yekuana life.

This view of the re-creation of experience in aesthetic expression, which reconstitutes and/or transforms meaning through the manipulation of values attached to collective experience, fits well with Sahlins's ideas about processual social structures that are constructed or recreated through history. Sahlins claims (1987: 138) that 'the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction'. And he goes on: 'every reproduction of culture is an alteration, insofar as in action, the categories by which a present world is orchestrated pick up some novel empirical content' (ibid.: 144). The Yekuana's increasing contact with the outside world has forced what Sahlins calls a 'functional revaluation of signs' (ibid.: 149) to incorporate new experiences in the long-established set of concepts that inform the content of aesthetic expression.

Like bricoleurs, people in general construct meaningful attachments to the social and material world through a set of familiar concepts. In his analysis of Yekuana aesthetics, Guss concentrates on a few specific aesthetic concepts that unify the expressive forms. Concepts like 'centrality' and 'wild/tame' permeate the Yekuana aesthetic system and as a result inform their way of interacting with one another and the world. The manifestation of specific aesthetic concepts within an aesthetic system appears in other contexts as well. Coote (1992) illustrates how qualities found pleasing by Dinka in cattle, like contrasting colours and curving horns, are repeated in expressive forms such as jewellery, pottery, tree-branch shrines, and even dance. Morphy (1992) explains how the Yolngu aesthetic is based on the concept of ancestral power, which is linked to visual brilliance. This concept is manifest in painting through cross-hatching, intended to provide a shimmering effect, and in certain foods high in shiny, visible fat. The shimmering brilliance of cross-hatching and the shiny, fatty foods are in turn evoked in compositions of Yolngu song and poetry. For contemporary Trinidad, Daniel Miller (1994) identifies 'covering', 'elaboration', and 'enclosure' as specific aesthetic concepts that are expressed in a number of forms such as the organization and use of the living-room as well as in cake decoration. In each of these examples specific aesthetic concepts may be seen to unify all expressions of the cultural aesthetic. Through the bricolage of cultural production manifest in an aesthetic system, these concepts are taken apart and reconnected to produce a new understanding of a new and constantly changing world.

In the bricolage of cultural production, meaning is constructed from the materials at hand in a constant reproduction of experience through aesthetic expression. The structures that constrain the possible configurations of meaning are themselves constantly reproduced and therefore susceptible to transformation with each new experience. What Sean O'Faolain wrote of Ireland some sixty years ago could be applied to any cultural context: 'This Ireland is young and earnest. She knows that somewhere among the briars and the brambles, there stands the reality which the generations have tried to reach—not, you notice, the Ideal.... We are living experimentally' (quoted in Sheehy 1968: 58). In this way,

all cultural participants are living experimentally, maintaining a connection to the past as they wade through the present world of ideas to come out with some semblance of meaning.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this article has been to outline a more fruitful theorization of aesthetics than that which currently dominates social science and popular philosophy. The concept of aesthetics, as outlined above, is both cross-cultural and culturally relative and, when treated as an integrated whole, offers insights into socio-cultural processes that might otherwise remain invisible to the social scientist. The process of socialization, the production of moral values, and the construction of identity all draw heavily on aspects of a cultural aesthetic.

Terry Eagleton describes the ultimate binding forces of social order as 'habits, pieties, sentiments and affections', attributing the formation of these forces to aesthetic experience (Eagleton 1990: 20). Aesthetic experience within the context of a particular culture is necessarily filtered through the process of socialization. An initiate is not only introduced to ways of interacting, but also to ways of perceiving the sensory world. In this way, there is an aesthetic disposition common to a particular group, establishing a social bond at the level of the subconscious. The connection can be inarticulate, but each understands the value of, and can share in, certain experiences. Cultural members are therefore inclined to maintain that bond on the conscious level through political and economic means.

Coote observes that 'what is morally good is expected to display valued aesthetic qualities, and what displays valued aesthetic qualities is expected to be morally good' (Coote 1992: 266). Though expectations are not always satisfied, there is a conceptual connection between aesthetics and morality. Distinctions between good and bad, or right and wrong, spring from the same process of value-attachment that perpetuates the aesthetic system. Beauty is attributed to those experiences that appeal to the socialized senses, sparking a myriad of different associations embedded deep in a cultural way of knowing the world, and as such, those experiences are felt to be right and good. The association between beauty and morality is based on an important ideological aspect of aesthetic systems. Aesthetics, like ideology, provides a culturally specific way of knowing the world, and as such 'offers to the participants in a society a model upon which they may (and by implication should) base their beliefs, their behavior, and their characters' (Flores Fratto 1986: 250). A culturally specific aesthetic system stands as an absolute upon which a group as a whole, like Eagleton's 'new subject', can establish 'a law at one with its immediate experience' (Eagleton 1990: 20). The 'comprehensive factual "is"' from which grows 'the powerfully coercive "ought"' (Geertz 1973: 126) owes its existence to the aesthetic experience. Unlike ideology,

an aesthetic system is constantly reconstituted or transformed by everyday activity within a group, rendering its claims malleable by the people and therefore less susceptible to manipulation by a ruling élite.

The construction of identity also hinges upon a collective acknowledgment of a cultural aesthetic, or a particular way of knowing the world. That collective acknowledgment is based on a shared history of experience to which all members have attached value. As noted above, Eagleton claims that 'the ultimate binding force of...social order, in contrast to the coercive apparatus of absolutism, will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections' (Eagleton 1990: 20). Those 'habits, pieties, sentiments and affections' can themselves be the product of some coercive apparatus like slavery, which colours the sensory perception of the world of a group of people who as a result recognize and express beauty in a similar way. Among the Yolngu, aesthetic expressions communicate group affiliations and inter-clan relations (Morphy 1991). As such, these expressions can incorporate or exclude, thus establishing the boundaries of group identity.

Roger Abrahams claims there is a one-to-one relationship between social and aesthetic patterns. Rather than view expressive events as epiphenomenal, 'we can now listen to our informants, who have long been telling us that it is in such events that a people depict themselves most fully and regard themselves most seriously (even when the event is carried out in fun)' (Abrahams 1983: xxiv). Coote, and a growing number of others, support this view, maintaining that 'all other things being equal, people act in the world to maximize their aesthetic satisfaction' (Coote 1992: 269). If this is so, then the processes of socialization, morality, and identity outlined above form only part of what is surely a host of social phenomena that may be better understood through an analysis of aesthetic systems. This article seeks to contribute to increasing the current level of awareness in social science concerning the usefulness of aesthetic analysis, and urges its implementation in social research.

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