Non-Western Aesthetics as a Colonial Invention

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As we seek to educate our children in a multicultural society to understand and appreciate and to be able to interact with a culturally diverse and ever-shrinking world, we need to ask ourselves whether Western forms of knowledge are appropriate for understanding non-Western forms of culture; in particular, whether Western aesthetics is appropriate for understanding and appreciating non-Western art. And so, in this symposium we raise the question of non-Western aesthetics. Are there non-Western aesthetics and if so, what are they?

The first thing we must realize in this undertaking is that the world does not come conveniently prepackaged for us into neat compartments of "Chinese aesthetics," "Indian aesthetics," "African aesthetics," "Polynesian aesthetics," "Native American aesthetics," and so on. Any discussion of non-Western aesthetics initiated from within Western aesthetics must be (and can only be) a cross-cultural comparison. "Aesthetics" is an English word (or some related European derivative of the Greek) to which non-Western culture is compared. Are certain portions of Chinese, Indian, African, Polynesian, Native American thought sufficiently similar to what we know and understand as Western aesthetics to be called "aesthetics"? This is therefore basically a problem of translation, but what we might call "deep translation," where we are not just looking for equivalences (or near equivalences) among words of different languages for the same concept, but where it is not at all clear that there is a shared concept in the first place. What should we (Westerners) call (label) certain portions of Chinese and Indian writing and certain portions of African, Polynesian, and Native American oral tradition? Should we call it (label it) "religion," "mythology," "poetry," "art criticism," or "aesthetics" (using these terms as they are typically defined within Western culture)? Which of these Western terms, in other words, if any, best describes these non-Western thought systems? Perhaps, strictly speaking, it is none of these; or maybe we should say it is all of them

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and none of them at the same time. But if we are speaking and writing in English or some other European language, we have to select one of our own words — so, we have to ask, which one is the best? Which type of Western discourse does it most closely resemble?

In principle this cross-cultural comparison could go either way—Europeans comparing non-Western thought systems to their own European systems, or non-Westerners comparing European thought systems to their own Chinese, Indian, African, Polynesian, or Native American thought systems. But because of the history of European military, scientific, and economic domination of the world since the seventeenth century, it has been primarily Europeans who initiated the discussion using their intellectual framework to analyze and judge non-Western thought systems. As a result, while the non-Western thought systems are themselves ancient (at least as old as Western thought systems), their packaging as "aesthetics," "ethics," "metaphysics," or more generally as "philosophy" (using these words or their equivalents in some other European language, including Latin) is fairly recent (late nineteenth and early twentieth century).

As colonial masters desirous of control, Europeans wanted to know how the colonized peoples think, what were their basic assumptions, presuppositions, life goals, values, and norms; knowledge of which, it was thought, would greatly aid colonial administration. Assuming an essentialist, and perhaps racist or at least racialist, division of the world population into distinct groups, the assumption was that Indians look at the world in a unique way which is different from that of the Chinese who see the world in a different way from the Africans who see things very differently from Europeans whose outlook is different from all the others.

Since philosophy, including its various branches, such as aesthetics, was widely perceived after 1920 as reflecting the deepest outlook, worldview, *weltanschauung* of a people, it therefore seemed natural to think of an Indian philosophy and aesthetics expressing the worldview of the Indians, a Chinese philosophy and aesthetics expressing the world view of the Chinese, and so for Africans, Polynesians, and Native Americans. On the other hand, as Western-educated non-Westerners joined the discussion, they used this same colonial construction for their own political purposes, to create a positive, honorific image of national cultural unity with which to offset negative, pejorative colonial perceptions of their overall inferiority. Granted colonized peoples were not as scientifically, technologically advanced, they nonetheless could claim impressive though more passive, pacific, emotive, holistic, and aesthetic philosophies of their own. Non-Western philosophy is generally contrasted, either negatively or positively, in other words, with the cerebral, analytic, scientific orientation of "the West." Negritude is probably the most familiar example: where European colonial masters had disparaged Africans as emotional and childish, Senghor and others praised Africans for

being more emotionally sensitive and close to their bodies. But far from establishing differences between Western and non-Western thought systems, this merely projects onto non-Western cultures ancient Western dichotomies (binaries) of reason and emotion, science and poetry, logical and romantic, masculine and feminine, analytic and synthetic, and rational and intuitive; in which non-Western cultures are either idealized or stigmatized as sources of a more holistic, poetic, emotional, romantic, feminine, and intuitive vision of the world. Depending on how that schism is viewed within Western culture, non-Western peoples are typically viewed either negatively as primitive, backward, underdeveloped, or positively as a welcomed emotional and holistic antidote for the overly cerebral, logocentric West (where icemen can't jump, much less create music and dance). As a result, non-Western cultures have developed their own honorific aesthetics by way of contrast with Western aesthetics. Thus, for example, Chinese aestheticians frequently say that while Western art is slavishly concerned with imitating the external, physical surface of reality, Chinese artists seek to reveal the underlying, essential inner nature or spirit of a thing, that while Western art is more interested in the material object, Chinese art is more concerned with feeling.

If non-Western aesthetics is a colonial invention or construction we should ask, what is the point of this invention or construction? Whose interests did it serve? For the colonial masters it was a device for political control; and for the colonized it became a defense against the ubiquitous charge of cultural inferiority. But if this is so, then we must ask what use does it have now in a postcolonial world? Unless there is some other postcolonial use, will non-Western aesthetics survive the end of colonialism? Where do we go from here? Is it worth the effort today to try and construct a non-Western aesthetics as a branch of non-Western philosophy? In the case of literate non-Western philosophies (Indian and Chinese), the question is, is there enough contemporary philosophical interest among Indians and Chinese to sustain these non-Western philosophies into the twenty-first century? In the case of nonliterate non-Western philosophies (African, Polynesian, or Native American), the question is whether there is enough interest to sustain the attempt to continue the Western construction and invention of these non-Western philosophies. One important use of the construction or invention of non-Western aesthetics, which we wish to emphasize in this symposium, is its value for art education in a multicultural society in a culturally diverse world.

In literate as well as nonliterate thought systems, there are both advantages and disadvantages in translating them into a Western aesthetics framework. On the plus side, these thought systems are able to enter, as they otherwise could not, the mainstream of international aesthetics discussion. On the negative side, much of the integrity of the original thought may be lost.

For such a translation to succeed it must clearly be a cooperative effort among Western-trained Western and non-Western scholars. Nonetheless, insofar as it is Western scholars who initiate the discussion and into whose system non-Western thought is translated, it remains a Western construction and invention.

Any cross-cultural study must therefore be a cross-cultural comparison. This is true not only for terms like "philosophy" and "aesthetics," but of terms closely related to aesthetics such as "art," "art criticism," and "aesthetic experience." If we view aesthetics as the "philosophy of art," we have to ask similarly whether there is any non-Western art? All cultural descriptions are comparative — inevitably, culture A must use A's words and concepts to describe culture B (what else have they got?) This is true even in the case of art. We generally assume that every culture has its own art, but even when we ask about "Polynesian art," for example, "art" is an English word which we are trying to impose on an alien culture. Perhaps they do not have a word in their own language which translates exactly as our word "art." Similarly, in the case of "African art" or "American Indian art." The very question, "What kind of art did American Indians have?" presupposes something which may well be false — namely that American Indians not only made things which we see as fitting our concept (in English) of art, but that they, too, had a similar concept — that is, a word reasonably accurately translated as "art" — a word that they understood to mean something very much like what we understand the word "art" to mean.

But this may be a very mistaken assumption. Other cultures may simply not have words or concepts similar in meaning to our "art." One reason may be that these concepts in English and other European languages presuppose a division of society and culture into distinct functional regions — in which art is more or less separated from religion, which is more or less separated from agricultural, military, political, and scientific concerns — as in European, and perhaps Indian and Chinese, culture at a certain point in time. In many world cultures no such separation ever took place, and in cultures where what we call artistic activities are mixed together with what we call religious, agricultural, military, or political activities, concepts like our concept of art simply do not arise. In such cultures it makes no sense (even if you speak their language and they yours) to ask "what is your art?" They may make wooden statues for ancestor spirits to temporarily "occupy," and to which they make offerings of food and drink, and of which they ask (that is, "pray") for help for a successful harvest, battle, or marriage; but they have no sense of which part of this complex ritual practice is their "art," which part is "religion," which part is "agriculture," and so on. These questions will make no sense to them, though they will, of course, make sense to us. We are the ones interested in their art. So, even in the case of art, where it is widely believed that all cultures and societies have some

art, the possibility of bias and misunderstanding arising from cross-cultural comparison presents a serious problem — not only for the scientific investigations of the anthropologist and sociologist, but also a problem in adequately taking account of the cultural sensitivities of the groups we are describing.

In most big city art museums there are rooms devoted to African art, Polynesian art, and PreColumbian American Indian art. Many people collect, buy, and sell these objects as art works, and beautifully illustrated art books have been written on them. But consider for a moment where these objects came from and how they were originally used by the people who made them. Many of the ceramic pieces from Mexico and Central America are grave goods, that is, they were made to accompany the dead into an afterlife. Similarly in China and Egypt. Everything we need in this life was made available to the dead for their use in an afterlife — except that they are now in the form of miniature ceramic replicas — small figures of musicians, guards, servants, horses and so on. The only (living) people to ever see these objects are the people who made them, the family members which purchased them, and the priest who cast whatever magical spells are required to make them perform in the "land of the dead" (that is, to make these little ceramic figures play music, serve food, and so on). Only thirty or so years ago West Africa farmers could not begin their annual planting until the high priests had initiated a ceremonial dance by masked performers in the fields reenacting the original farming techniques given the people by their gods. But today these same wooden masks are displayed in art museums, described in art books, and bought and sold in Europe and North America as works of art. (Although it must be remembered that the first Europeans who saw them in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw them as false religious idols and accordingly destroyed as many of them as they could. Only later, beginning around 1904, did European artists, including Picasso, begin thinking of these same objects as works of fine art — and even started imitating them in their own art.)

But what are these wooden and ceramic objects? Are they "works of art"? Were they made by "artists"? Were they meant to be "aesthetically" appreciated? Although we today look at these objects as works of "fine art," the people who originally made and used them did not (or at least this was not their primary purpose). These objects were not used primarily aesthetically but also or mainly for religious, ceremonial purposes; they did not have to be beautiful for people to look at but just to be sufficiently representational (of a musician, for example) to perform their ritual function (to play music beyond the grave, to call forth the agricultural gods, to chase away the evil spirits, and so on). The people who made them may not have been expressing their own individual feelings, attitudes, beliefs, but conforming to the traditional pattern (form) required by the religious traditions of that

particular society. And certainly the objects were not made primarily to be looked at and admired — obviously not in the case of the grave goods, but neither in the case of the African masks, which were stored away out of sight only to be seen once a year during the planting ceremony.

When we contrast our modern aesthetic attitude with the presumed use and interest in Pre-Columbian American Indian ceramic grave goods and the masks used in West African planting ceremonies, we can see that people have not always looked at things in our aesthetic, "fine art" way. As natural as this may seem to us, it is not the only way; it is not universal, not a permanent part of human nature. It appeared at a certain point in the history of certain cultures and may just as easily disappear later to be replaced by another (postmodern) way of looking at things. These ideas of "aesthetic enjoyment" and "fine art" and "artist" were socially constructed and culturally inculcated in what we call the "modern" period — in Europe roughly from the end of the seventeenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century, and perhaps something similar from the Tang dynasty in China and the Gupta period in India. The period before that we can conveniently refer to as "premodern," just as the period we are now in is often referred to as "postmodern."

European Stone Age cave paintings, Pre-Columbian American Indian ceramic grave goods, West African wood carvings, and a great deal of Greek and Roman and early Christian religious art belongs to the "premodern" period — a period of "art before art" (and aesthetics before aesthetics). From the Renaissance until fairly recently is the "modern" period in which concepts of "fine art," "artists," and "aesthetic experience" — and the study of such known as "aesthetics" — became deeply ingrained in our common-sense outlook. If there is a comparable period in Indian or Chinese history (perhaps the Tang dynasty in China and the Gupta period in India) of a similarly predominant aesthetic interest in "art for art's sake," this should be more actively investigated.

If we are to translate non-Western thought into Western philosophical terminology, we need first to be clear about our own Western terminology — which of course, we are not! The problem with the term "aesthetics" is that there simply is no standard ordinary use of the term. In ordinary language, usage drifts uneasily between taste and aesthetic sensibility, and is almost never used as professional philosophers use the term for a systematic philosophic study of art and beauty and aesthetic experience. Even within philosophical circles the term is not always well understood.

What exactly is meant, for example, by the "aesthetic attitude" or point of view on which so much Western aesthetics since the eighteenth century has been built? The word "aesthetics" can refer, as a noun and in the plural, to a philosophical investigation of art, that is, a branch of philosophy which is concerned with art and questions of beauty. But, as an adjective and in

the singular, it can also refer to a kind of experience, the so-called "aesthetic experience," or "aesthetic attitude," as it is sometimes called. The two are related in the sense that defining aesthetic experience was originally the main task, and continues, despite George Dickie and others, as one of the important tasks of aesthetics.[1]

But what exactly do we mean by an "aesthetic experience," or an "aesthetic point of view"? A number of contemporary aestheticians, most notably Dickie, argue that there is no such thing, that it simply does not exist. But whether it exists or not, what does it mean, and what is it supposed to be? Is it rare or ubiquitous? Does its presence dominate consciousness, driving out all other points of view, or is it simply one aspect, among others, within a single mixed point of view? Are there, in other words, pure states of aesthetic consciousness, perhaps like the ecstatic states of mystical awareness, or does it occur with other attitudes, interests, and concerns in a mixed state? If we decide that aesthetic consciousness can occur with other attitudes in mixed states of consciousness, what exactly is the relation between aesthetic elements and nonaesthetic elements, especially that broad range of nonaesthetic attitudes we call "utilitarian"?

How are we going to detect in non-Western cultures the presence or absence of an aesthetic outlook? Must this come from explicitly held theories on the nature of art and the aesthetic? Must it come, in a somewhat weaker criterion, from the use of a vocabulary of aesthetic terms of appreciation, praise, and blame? Or should we be satisfied with the still weaker behavioral criterion of preferences shown or willingness to pay higher sums of money for one object over another? Whatever criteria we choose to adopt, how similar to the Western aesthetic attitude must a non-Western perspective be in order to count as "aesthetic"?

The main difference between Western and non-Western approaches to aesthetics would seem to be the culturally defined value placed on the degree of purity of aesthetic sensibility unmixed with other nonaesthetic concerns. Aesthetic sensibility need not be and seldom is completely unmixed, of course. But it is true that in Western culture since the Renaissance (and to some extent perhaps in China since the Tang dynasty and in India from the Gupta period), there has been a privileging of aesthetic sensibility relatively purified of nonaesthetic interests into which individuals are taught and trained as a cultural practice. Nonetheless, this is a cultural ideal, not a reality — and some mix of aesthetic with nonaesthetic sensibility is surely cross-culturally universal both psychologically and as a social ideal and practice. Differences in various cultural aesthetics are therefore a matter of degree — the degree of mixture and aesthetic isolation, and there are offsetting advantages and disadvantages to both — a relatively pure aesthetic interest being better able to abstract from particular concerns to achieve a more universal appeal and to function internationally as "fine art" which can be and

is appreciated by many different ethnic groups, but with the disadvantage of being less engaged religiously, nationalistically, and ethnically.

More work needs to be done to determine the degrees of difference between non-Western and Western cultures. Do the ancient Greeks share with us the same degree of aesthetic detachment as Europeans since the Renaissance? And do highly developed bronze and iron-age literate kingdoms of India and China have the same degree of aesthetic detachment as their stone age forebears, or the same as Europeans of the Greco-Roman period or Europeans since the Renaissance? These questions cannot be answered speculatively but only with painstaking empirical study.

But whatever the case may be, the existence of a degree of aesthetic consciousness/sensibility ("aesthetic experience") does not answer the question of the existence of aesthetics as a study or theory of this. And does this "study/theory of" aesthetic sensibility have to be part of something known as "philosophy," which, after all, only emerged rather late (eighteenth century) in the history of Western philosophy. So we should not be too fussy about this — any relatively systematic investigation of art and beauty and aesthetic sensibility or any relatively systematic attempt to adjudicate among competing art criticisms as hierarchies of an art critical terminology (what is most important and why) should suffice.

As we have seen, most tribal and premodern artifacts were not made aesthetically as works of art. From this widely accepted fact many writers have concluded that traditional Africans, Native Americans, Polynesians, and other tribal peoples had no aesthetic sense, no critical standards of taste, and no sense of the artistic worth of their own art. But this is highly questionable. Having an aesthetic sense is not synonymous with and does not require the socially accepted institution, which we know, of adopting in art contexts that degree of aesthetic perception which defines the "aesthetic attitude," and while many cultures do not possess the latter, they most certainly do have aesthetic sensibilities. Similarly, possessing critical standards for judging works of art is not synonymous with and does not require a theory of art criticism, and while some cultures do not possess the latter, they do have and utilize critical standards in judging art works.

Here I think it is useful to distinguish a developmental hierarchy of stages of aesthetic consciousness. First, and surely common to all peoples, is a spontaneous, innate, elementary aesthetic response. A child will prefer a brightly colored object to a dull one, for example. This common and widespread aesthetic response can then be culturally defined in terms of socially accepted meanings. It can then be isolated and heightened in certain societies like our own by social institutions surrounding fine art and aesthetic experience which focus on the aesthetic aspect of a situation in certain appropriate contexts, such as the museum or the theater, This culturally defined basic aesthetic response may also be subsequently articulated

verbally. In certain societies the child may later be taught words such as radiant, lustrous, or glowing to express his or her aesthetic pleasure or displeasure in culturally defined ways, in which the word radiant, for example, comes to mean intelligent or holy, as well as literally bright and shiny, and to discriminate different sorts of aesthetic apprehension. These verbalizations will inevitably involve criteria for acceptability, that is, unspoken standards for what is aesthetically good and bad (good because lustrous; bad because dull), and these standards and criteria can then be verbally ranked and prioritized, leading finally to an explicit theory of art criticism and aesthetics.

These different types of aesthetic expression represent stages in a hierarchy in the sense that the latter presupposes the former, but not the reverse. There can be no verbalization of preference without some initial preference to start with. Nor can there be any institutionalized isolation of aesthetic experience from other types of experience unless there first exists some aesthetic experience to start with. Nor can social institutions select among preferences, channeling preferences into socially approved, "good taste," unless there are first preferences from which to accept and reject. And until there is verbalization there can be no judgmental standards or criteria, and until standards appear there can be no attempt to reconcile and order them, an effort which eventually leads to theories of art, in other words, aesthetics as a branch of philosophy.

The fact that one level of aesthetic awareness is not present does not imply that none are present. In most, if not all, societies the basic level of aesthetic preference is clearly present, and indeed this would seem to be a necessary part of any conception of human nature. At the same time, very few societies possess the final stages of theories of art and institutionalized methods of focusing and isolating aesthetic experience. Thus, precisely what type of aesthetic organization exists within a particular society can only be discovered by empirical observation of both behavioral and verbal manifestations.

For purposes of our discussion I therefore suggest that the most useful way to compare modern and nonmodern cultures is to think of where they fall along various points of a developmental hierarchy:

1. aesthetic sensibility, leading in some cases to
2. socially defined taste, leading in some cases to
3. a critical vocabulary for articulating the above, leading in some cases to
4. hierarchies of such critical terms (which is the most important?), leading in some cases to
5. competing critical theories, leading in some cases to
6. the need to adjudicate among them (establishing which is aesthetics proper).

Where in this hierarchy do various non-Western cultures lie? All human groups have #1 and all or almost all societies have #2 and #3. Many have #4; some have #5; and a few have #6 (aesthetic theories). But since the word "aesthetics" is not well-defined in ordinary usage we do not have to be too fussy here either — strictly speaking we (we professional philosophers) mean #6, but in a looser and relative sense we can talk about anything from #3-5 as aesthetics in a looser but closely related sense.

To illustrate the above, let us consider an example. Probably the best-known anthropological study is that of Robert F. Thompson who asked for critical comments from hundreds of Nigerian Yoruba and by analyzing these responses was able to come up with nineteen distinct Yoruba aesthetic criteria of excellence in wood carving, including *jijora*, a balance between realism and abstraction in subject matter; *ifarahon*, clarity of articulation; *didon*, shining smoothness of surface; *gigun*, upright symmetry; *odo*, representing the subject in the prime of life; and the criterion which Thompson has made the most of in subsequent discussions, *tutu*, a cool aloofness.[2]

Certainly the way in which Thompson translates these terms makes it seem as though these are indeed terms of a Yoruba art critical vocabulary regularly used to make aesthetic judgments in praise or blame of wood carvings. Words like "realism," "abstraction," "symmetry," "clarity," all invite a comparison with Western formalistic art criticism. But as anyone familiar with Yoruba knows, these terms are notoriously difficult to translate — and a slightly different rendering would remove much of the supposed aesthetic, art critical sense from the list of categories. "Didon" might be equally well translated to mean that the carving should be polished with oils; "gigun" might come to mean little more than the requirement that the carving be able to stand on its own. Even where the terms are understood to refer to the representational subject matter, they might mean little more than that the carving must look like what it is supposed to represent and that, all other things being equal, a figure of a person must be that of a young and healthy person. And even if we agree, as I think we should, that these terms do nonetheless contain aesthetic meanings, this would not establish a Yoruba aesthetic theory or even a theory of art criticism (which would have to address the question, which of these criteria are the most important and why?), but at most only of a vocabulary of art critical terms.

In conclusion, are there non-Western aesthetics theories or not? If non-Western aesthetics is an invention and construction, as we have been arguing, then it is not so much a matter of fact whether there are or are not non-Western aesthetics as it is a pragmatic decision whether such a thing is desirable and worth constructing. Since 1920 the larger question has been raised whether ancient Indian and Chinese thought systems should be considered as philosophy or not. But whether ancient Indian *darshanas* (Nyaya, Shamkhya, and so on) and Chinese writings of the *zi* (Kongzi (Confucius),

Mengzi (Mencius), Laozi, Xunzi, and so on) and the various *jia* (Dao Jia and Ming Jia) were philosophical or not, they certainly became so in the work of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Fung Yulan; and whether precolonial African thought was philosophy or not it has certainly become so with the work of Wiredu, Gbadegesin, Gyekye, and Masolo. In the same way, a Yoruba aesthetic theory could be constructed from the sort of evidence Thompson and others have amassed, whether Thompson's claims about Yoruba linguistic usage are accurate or not.

Whether non-Westerners trained in Western aesthetics should rewrite their own traditions to conform to Western aesthetics is another matter. There are certainly pros and cons — whether to enter a larger discussion or to operate within a more limited but more authentic discourse — and this needs to be discussed (and eventually decided). But from the point of view of those of us preparing this symposium, there is undoubtedly a value for art education in North America and beyond in the construction of non-Western aesthetics.

NOTES

1. George Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude," *The American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964).
2. Robert F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1983).