



Other People's Aesthetics

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When I travelled to the Trobriand Islands to begin my fieldwork I had brought with me a wide selection of beads to give to people, knowing that in the early days of contact, and then colonisation, the trade of beads for food and other indigenous items was widespread. More to the sensibility of the late 20th century, I was well aware of Trobriand Islanders continued passion for body adornment of any kind, particularly the novelty items that could be brought from Australia. Early into my fieldwork I was attracted to the *kuwa* (red, white and black necklet made of spondylus/chama shells and banana seeds) worn by everyone in the Trobriands. While the real thing was not easily attainable I thought that with my plastic beads I could create something similar, copying what I thought these necklaces looked like with my array of plastic beads. A strand completed, I proudly tied it around my neck and wore it in anticipation of sharing, to some extent, conformity to local body adornment.

Instead of the anticipated exclamations of pleasure and complements I was treated to disconcerted appraisals charged with indignation about the how it was all "wrong", the colours were in the wrong order, their relationship causing amusement to and ridicule. Apart from a bruised ego, this experience made me consider that it was not enough to use the three colours in any way, even though I had thought I had done it right. One had to use colours in a particular way so that their arrangements conformed to Trobriand cultural conventions of colour

arrangement. Only then was there a satisfactory effect. This realisation highlighted a Trobriand aesthetic that could not be ignored.

There have been recurring discussions about whether we, as western academics, can talk about another people's evaluative processes given the unique place the concept 'aesthetics' has in our cultural discourse. While there are few amongst those of us interested in the production of art/ifacts in a cross cultural context that would argue against the effects these have on the people for whom they are produced, there are some who draw a line in the sand when it comes to attributing an 'aesthetic' to the evaluation of these same items and performances. What is becoming a 'classic' debate on the subject aired most poignantly through Tim Ingold's *Debate on aesthetics as a cross-cultural category* (1996), a 'for and against' argument concerning the value of applying the word to indigenous systems of appraisal continues this debate. It seems appropriate that the debate should even extend to the use of the word 'art' as a term applied to indigenous production given its rather restricted application in the Western context, although its narrow application even in the West has been challenged in post-modern discourse. Indeed, there are many words throughout the history of Anthropology that have come under scrutiny as applicable to the 'other' because the meaning has specific application to a Western sentiment. To take this argument to its logical conclusion, perhaps we should abandon writing about the 'other' entirely as translation is fraught with issues of inappropriate meanings being applied. Alas, Anthropology has and will always be an enquiry dependent upon translation.

Any ethnographic endeavour to describe and analyse other people's cultures is dependent upon our ability to translate what goes on in other people's lives. Translation is of itself a weak tool, fraught with the potential to misrepresent. Anthropology has from the very beginning been a victim of this endeavour because of its very nature. Nevertheless, the discipline has proceeded to develop, discuss and to redefine problematic words conveying concepts that were once thought to be uniquely Western. In this way, the discipline has been party to a humbling, if only to anthropologists, of our own notion of ourselves as Westerners (and those with strong intellectual ties to a Western Academia), so that a superior approach to the 'other' becomes unsupportable.

To talk about the 'other' with those who share the same cultural conventions and language as the speaker of necessity requires translation. This has been a thorn in the side of ethnographers from the beginning and has mostly been circumvented through clarifications that place meaning within the context for which it is being applied. Translation is never perfect, but it does, or should, enable a degree of non-judgment so that the 'other' is not assumed to be lacking

the necessary requirements associated with the meaning of words. When searching for the right word to convey meaning about another context it may be necessary to qualify our meaning to conform to the phenomena we describe in different contexts. In the debate against the applicability of aesthetic discourse of other people's cultural art/facts there is a danger of reifying our own construction of meaning. This is ludicrous given there is very real evidence within the Western context of change in our usage as we rethink our categories. There is also, it seems to me, an implicit judgment in claiming ownership over words and the concepts that they reference, as if others are in deficit.

There is a large body of works devoted to the subject of aesthetics in Philosophy and the Philosophy of art particularly. It is not my intention, nor my expertise to delve deeply into these debates. They are largely concerned with the way Western cultural discourses around the subject have developed and thus speak to Western understandings as these are discussed and refined. Even a brief perusal of the literature demonstrates a wide variance in defining the category in Western contexts, both historically and lexically. In the Debate there is a clear diversity of usage amongst the respondents, each choosing to some extent their version of meaning as it fit into their argument 'for' or 'against' the proposal. As the Debate occurred at the end of the 20th century together with a wider postmodern debate seeking to blur boundaries, it seems odd that some of those against the appropriate use of aesthetics as a cross cultural category based their arguments on relatively narrow definitions. A more contemporary definition appears in the Oxford Dictionary of Aesthetics (2005) and does not limit an aesthetic approach to one question, let alone one cultural context:

The study of the feelings, concepts, and judgements arising from our appreciation of the arts or of the wider class of objects considered moving, or beautiful, or sublime. Aesthetic theory concerns itself with questions such as: what is a work of art? What makes a work of art successful? Can art be a vehicle of truth? Does art work by expressing the feelings of the artist, communicating feeling, arousing feeling, purging or symbolizing feeling? What is the difference between understanding a work of art, and failing to do so? How is it that we take aesthetic pleasure in surprising things: tragedies, or terrifying natural scenes? Why can things of very different categories equally seem beautiful? Does the perception of beauty have connections with moral virtue, and with seeing something universal or essential, and is the importance of aesthetic education and practice associated with this? What is the role of the imagination in the production or appreciation of art? Are aesthetic judgements capable of improvement and training, and thence of some kind of objectivity?

There is room for us to consider many of these questions as they arise in other cultural contexts. This definition does not rest on considerations of Beauty

or Truth alone. Although this was initially the focus of the word when Plato began to explore these ideas in 3rd century BC Greece, contemporary writers have widened the application of aesthetic discussions. Considerations of 'beauty' have not been the sole project of aesthetic enquiry for some time, although this concept alone has a weighty number of volumes dedicated towards its elucidation. Stripped of the specifics evoked by the term, aesthetics has come to be understood as being associated with sensory responses to phenomena, usually, but not always in the vicinity of objects and/or performances often classified under the label 'art'. As such, there is no reason to exclude other people's behaviours, responses and judgments from discussions on their aesthetic sentiments because aesthetic discourse is no longer only about Western notions of Beauty and Truth. If we can expand the usage of the word in Western contexts why should we limit its usage outside these?

As suggested earlier, to argue that aesthetics is not a cross-cultural category is to suggest a deficit in other's cultural categories, particularly in indigenous or small-scale societies ability to make judgements about certain phenomena (we are happy to accept a Chinese or Indian aesthetic discourse). The argument against this is that because aesthetics is a construct of a Western sentiment and thus unique to a Western discourse it can only be applied to Western behaviours and judgments. In other words, it is not up for translation because it only has meaning within the Western cultural experience. But then, how do we talk about what is clearly judgment-making by others? In searching for alternative words and awkward phrases to describe the way indigenous people respond to and around objects that we might consider art/ifacts, we are in effect making a value judgement about that behaviour while at the same time reifying our particular ownership of aesthetic considerations. This is all the more precious because the entire discourse on aesthetics comes from our imagined 'Golden Era' in Classical Classical Greek philosophical enquiry; the birthing of Western Civilisation. As such, the entire debate on whether aesthetics can be a cross-cultural construct is flawed.

What is so precious about the Western concept of aesthetics that we are unable, or unwilling to apply it to the behaviours of people outside of the Western cultural context? It is almost as if the concept, as it is evoked by the word, is sacred and thus must be left 'intact' from any dilution of its 'true' meaning. Is that not also an argument against any re-evaluation of words and concepts arising from our classical past? Calling a "halt" to any project that seeks to make relevant the past to the present is futile. In all academic projects a periodic airing of ideas, concepts and premises once, held as inviolable, is necessary for the

maintenance of relevance and is concomitant to a continuing reworking of our understandings of the world around us, particularly as this increasingly shared with the 'other'.

In my own research on the production of art/ifacts on Vakuta Island which is part of the Trobriand Islands in Papua New Guinea, I found that people are making judgments of an aesthetic kind all the time and in much the same way that you would find people making aesthetic judgments in the art galleries of the Western world. While I don't want to get into the argument here about the difference between objects made for 'use' and those made for 'display' (if one can actually make that distinction at all!), the behaviour, that is the appraisal of something as worthy of appraisal, comes from a need to acknowledge and to sometimes express a sensory response. Whether there are any universal sensory responses is another debate, and not one relevant to this discussion. Vakutans regularly make aesthetic judgments about things. The example given in the opening of this piece is but a simple case in point. There are indeed formal occasions when people are expected to contribute to judgements that are not just about the utility of the object, but also about whether it conforms to a convention of 'beauty'. Not only did my bead '*kuwa*' not conform to the conventions of colour placement for such items, but it also failed to conform to ideas about the 'natural' relationships between red, black and white. I was told that the colours just weren't 'right' and that they 'didn't work'. 'Work' in what sense? Surely there is no utility in the combination of colours in a certain way, so by 'work' Vakutans must be referring to a sensory experience that is culturally relevant to them about the relationships between the colours that should conform to a 'natural' placement that is pleasing to a Vakutan. Similarly, when confronted by glaringly 'off' colour combinations in some of our art galleries, we may be afflicted by certain sensory objections and make aesthetic judgements based upon our conventions of colour associations. Are these not the same behaviours? And if so, then why can we not accept aesthetics as a cross-cultural discourse? This seems perfectly obvious.

While I have written on Vakutan production of objects for Kula and analysed the meaning of these in relation to the pursuit of Kula (2001, 2002), I have not given as much time to Vakutan skirt making. Unlike Kiriwina, Vakutans do not make bundles as these were described by Annette Weiner (1977). Instead they make the full garment for exchange and display. While women make skirts on a regular, low activity level for ongoing needs, women also participate in the mass production of skirts for significant mortuary observances (CAMPBELL, 1989). This involves considerable economic and prestige activity as materials are

prepared, distributed to others to make-up on commission and then displayed in a series of public showings before finally being distributed to honour those who undertook mortuary observances for the women's deceased kin. On the first occasion the skirts are displayed it is ostensibly for the 'cutting' of the skirt. At this time all the new skirts are brought out and modelled by young women while the makers and/or those who had skirts made for them on commission cut the hem of the underskirt and the first red-dyed layer. Women from all around the villages gather to participate or simply to sit and comment while chewing betel nut. Throughout this ostensibly informal procedure people are making judgments about the skirts. These judgments are concerned with the colours used, the number of layers and the complexity of pandanus designs inter-layered with the dyed banana leaf fibres. Some of the women are known to have been given magic to enable them to create particularly fine skirts, incorporating many layers and a complexity of design much admired. Other women are acknowledged as having skills in making skirts beyond the mere assembly of the significant elements and they too are highly regarded as accomplished skirt makers. Still others simply go through the motions and make durable and adequate skirts for exchange and then wear. So, in this very brief outline of one part of the mortuary sequence and the discriminations made between the 'artists', or those with magic, the 'artisans', or those with acknowledged skill and the common skirt makers it is clear that there are some very clear sensory judgements, based on cultural conventions being made to distinguish levels of expertise and appropriate skirt design. These judgements are not only related to the durable quality of the skirts, as even the common skirt makers are quite capable of making skirts that will take the challenge of everyday wear and tear. The judgements are related to criteria set by the community circumscribing complexity, balance, colour arrangement, and sensory pleasure, all of which are commonly used in Western aesthetic discourse. While the skirts are not made for display and appreciation alone, this does not diminish the sensory experience of Vakutans as they display, exchange and wear banana fibre skirts.

Vakutans, like others in the Massim, are wood carvers. While they do not produce to any large extent for tourist consumption, they do produce what is needed for use within their cultural environment. Wood-carvings are the prerogative of men with some men capable of carving acceptable pieces for local consumption and others who are not. There are those, however, who are known to be particularly masterful. These men were given magic as young apprentices and thus enabled, and then renowned as master carvers, or 'artists'. Their work is appraised as having qualities far above those of men who simply have the skills

to carve adequate objects for local use. Although these men work to specific standards in that the items that they produce have to conform to a norm that ensures the 'power' of the object to do its 'job', there are avenues for appraisal that relates to the work of individual carvers.

While working extensively with the practising master carvers during my stay on the island I took the opportunity to engage with visitors and interested passers by, asking them to comment on the work that they look at. As in our own polite tradition, most of the comments in front of the artist were of a positive nature, not risking to offend the carver in his work. Most were also ignorant of the meaning of the designs in the same way that most gallery visitors are ignorant of the protocol for looking at art but nevertheless attending because it is a cultural activity. Back on Vakuta, I also detected judgmental behaviour that stemmed from awe at the sheer ability of the carver to make the patterns in the board, to appreciate the craft of carving and to respond to the effect it had on the eye of the beholder. Comments like, "He is a master carver for sure", "(It) is very 'good'", and so on were regularly expressed. Whether "very good" refers to the objective of the carving to mesmerise the kula partners or to the sheer wonder of the work is not altogether clear. But in a Vakutan context, does that distinction make sense? As Gell argued from this material for his paper on technological enchantment (1992), this appraisal is all to do with the mesmerising effect of the work and not related to any ideals of aesthetics. However, how can we separate the 'work' effect from the sensory effect? Appraisals of Western art do not simply rest on the sensory effect. There is also 'work' that a painting, for example, has. We often expect it to tell us a story, to convey some kind of message that is important to detect, to demonstrate a unique style and/or technical virtuosity. It is very difficult to separate the sensory response from an expectation that the painting should also fulfil some kind of 'work' according to the conventions we set for the role of art in our society. We are fooling ourselves if we think that we can have a completely objective aesthetic response, devoid of any expectation or any other feelings of need or sensory experience we might call 'aesthetic'. I argue that aesthetics is highly contextualised already within Western usage and discourse. So to deny its applicability to the 'other' is ludicrous.

Apart from the awe a carving may induce, there are appraisals as to the 'look' of the work. Negative judgments attest to this. When showing Vakutans pictures of carved kula prowboards from museum collections in Australia and the Papua New Guinea Museum and Art Gallery, Vakutans remarked that some could not have been carved by master carvers because their appearance was too 'messy', disproportional or the imagery in the wrong place. Again, while these

assessments may be related to the expected 'work' of the boards to have a terrorising impact on their kula partners (CAMPBELL, 2002), these appraisals are also targeted at the visual impact of the boards to the consumers, those who utilise them within their cultural environment and displayed on kula canoes.

While one might argue that given the data above we can certainly talk about a Vakutan aesthetic practice and that this might indeed be an example that does not fit the norm for the 'other', it should be noted that Gell, in his paper 'Technology and Enchantment' (1992) was heavily influenced by my analysis of the Vakutan material when he argued against the value of aesthetics as a cross-cultural category. Instead he proposed a new category, the 'technology of enchantment'. In his paper, Gell argues that, "...aesthetics is a branch of moral discourse which depends on the acceptance of the initial articles of faith: that in the aesthetically valued object there resides the principle of the True and the Good, and that the study of aesthetically valued objects constitutes a path towards transcendence." (ibid:41). There is no denying that one aspect of the historical discussion on aesthetics has pursued this line of thought. But it should also be noted that this is not the only line of discourse spurred by an enquiry into aesthetic behaviour. Indeed, as it is applied in the Philosophy of art, this 'faith' in art to promote 'the True and the Good' has little use today. Some would argue that art is neither epistemology nor ethics, but a sensory experience.

There is an arrogance in the supposition that a discussion of cross cultural aesthetics is misplaced. It is somewhat akin to the historical argument and conviction that animals were not as intelligent as humans based on the presumption that they did not have tools, until it was demonstrated that they did indeed utilise tools. Then it was argued that they didn't fashion tools but instead used implements on an opportunistic basis, until it was demonstrated that chimps make implements for the specific task of collecting ants. Then it was argued that they aren't intelligent because they didn't have culture on the basis of transmitting learned behaviour, until it was demonstrated that a troop of macaques learned how to clean potatoes from one individual so that the practice was not innate. More recently evidence that some mammals are able to communicate in sophisticated ways has the potential of knocking down yet another edifice of human superiority.

Aesthetic behaviour is a part of the human condition as we experience in a sensory way the world around us. Notions of Beauty and Truth may not be part of that experience as these are not the only subjects for aesthetic judgments. What is not consistent in the human experience are the details circumscribing sensory experiences. These are criteria that are learned in our specific cultural contexts.

Nor are these unchanging in any particular culture. Our judgments about phenomena are always subject to change. The fact that the discourse on Western aesthetics has undergone considerable change since its origins amongst the Greeks should undermine any argument that limits its applicability cross culturally.

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