BEAUTY IN CONTEXT: AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF BODY AESTHETICS AMONG AFRICANS

Eyitayo Tolulope Ijisakin
Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria
tayoijisakin@oauife.edu.ng/ visn4exelence@yahoo.ca
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8617-4498
And
Idowu Folorunso Adeyanju
Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Introduction

The word "Aesthetics" can be used to describe appreciation of something beautiful, especially in the arts; it is the way something looks, when it is considered in terms of how pleasing it is. Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that aims at establishing the general principles of art and beauty, whereas the perception of beauty always gives pleasure to the perceiver, it delights the senses and exalts the mind. According to Lawal (1974), Aesthetics deals with the philosophy of the beautiful as well as with the standards of value in judging art and aspects of human life and culture. Shelley (2022) argues that the term "aesthetic" can be used to describe many things such as a kind of object, a kind of judgment, a particular attitude, experience, or value.

Aesthetic values have implications on the visible features of, and practices related to the body, while aesthetic judgment informs all sorts of embellishment people put on, do with bodies, and the experience of having a body (Martin-Seaver 2019). Some of these embellishments include clothing, makeup, hair, jewelries, and tattoos. The practice of body aesthetics has to do with understanding and being able to express one's self. It has been observed that the true self-apprehension is visible in the active language of cultural expression (Soyinka 1976). The practice of body aesthetics expresses not only "one's evaluative feelings regarding oneself and what would make one pretty, handsome, sexy . . ." but one's cultural context and relationship to that context (Eaton, 2016). While expatiating on body aesthetics among black women and how they navigate racialized standards of beauty, Tate (2009) argues that the "question of bodily practices such as those of beauty are always discursive and subject to the gaze of the other."

Among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, the beautiful is considered to have *Ẹwà* which implies "well-finished"; it has *Ìfanimóra,* attractiveness, pleasing to behold or experience. Ornamentation, adornment, decoration, beautification, and embellishment are words that are closely related to, or interwoven within the concept of body aesthetics. There have been widespread endeavours at harmonizing and emphasizing natural beauty either by working directly on the body, or, by producing aesthetical accompaniments for the human body.

This paper is concerned with why African people adorn their bodies with tattoos, scars, jewelries, hairstyles, clothing and other body art; and why they may also reshape their noses, earlobes or lips. Beyond serving as an expression of beauty, jewelries have been worn as an object of magic to ward off evil and also bring good luck (Ijisakin 2012). Bead as a form of body adornment has also served as an indication of a person's social status, or age (Ijisakin 2004, and 2020). In addition, Balogun (2023) argues that the practices of body aesthetics among Africans provide a useful understanding of socio-cultural structures as beauty often reflects social values, power differentials, and personal agency.

This paper therefore investigates beauty in the context of body aesthetics among Africans. It specifically focuses on hairdressing, tattooing, scarification, body painting, dresses, and jewelries. This is to enable a more useful understanding of different means and purposes of body aesthetics in the African culture, and how these serve as a true medium of cultural expression. Data for the study

were collected through field investigation which includes participant observation and visual media sources. Data were also collected from relevant literature such as textbooks, journal articles, as well as Internet sources. Data collected were subjected to art historical analysis. The primary concern of art historical analysis is to understand and give meaning to works of art by description of formal characteristics, examination of content or subject matter, and placing works of art in their historical context. According to Britannica (2023), art historical research seeks to discover who made a particular art object, why, and in what socio-cultural context was it made? It also seeks to understand the stylistic and formal development of artistic traditions on a large scale and within a broad historical perspective.

Hairdressing as a form of body aesthetics

African hair is among the body parts that receive the greatest attention and care as the people rarely leave their hair in its simple and natural state. The art of hairdressing among Africans is practiced almost exclusively by women, although male hairdressers can be found in some areas especially in recent times. The artistry which has been handed over from generation to generation involves manual dexterity and patience; it is time consuming and serves as a medium for creative self-expression. Niangi (2000) argues that the earliest European travelers and explorers were greatly amazed by diversified creativity of African hairstyles; while the coiffures on artworks also inspires admirations as well as questions about their nature, use, as well as function.

The hair has become a cultural element of social communication and an expression of cultural identity. Hair is styled practically to enhance beauty, especially among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria; to indicate social status, as well as commemorate special occasions. According to Sieber (2000) hairstyle has served to identify ethnic origin, gender, phase of the life, status, as well as personal taste. The processes of hairdressing involve cutting, coiling, braiding, bleaching, dyeing, oiling, powdering or adding wig or other ornaments such as beads.

Further, Lawal (2000) h observed that a majority of Yoruba women fashion their hair into assorted crown-like designs and sometimes adorned with colourful beads, both to honour their *Ori inu* (inner head or destiny) and also in keeping the popular maxim *irun l'ewa obirin* (the hair adds to a woman's beauty). Daramola and Jeje (2005) identified various Yoruba hairstyles such as *Patewo* (clap), *Suku* (knotted hair), *Kolese* (without legs), *Ipako Elede* (pig's occiput), *Panumo* (close your mouth), *Oko nlo, Oko nbo* (the hoe goes forth and back), Ojo ma peti (rain should not fall on the ears), as well as *Koroba* (bucket). Among the Yoruba, spinsters wear simple styles such as *Ojo ma peti, Ipako Elede*, or *Koroba*; brides and housewives wear exquisite hair styles like *Panumo* and *Suku*; while wives of the nobles and Kings usually distinguish themselves with more intricate and elaborate version of the *Suku* style. Widows are usually required to undo their hair throughout the mourning period, after which they shave it clean as a symbolic separation from the deceased husband and to return to the usual life.

The itinerant nature of the Bororo Fulani people makes body decoration a travelling art; both men and women elaborately decorate their hair by coaxing and teasing the hair into excellent shapes. The hair could also be plaited, padded or decorated with other assorted materials such as beads (Plates 1a & b). In the Fulani culture a woman who has given birth to her first child has two strands of hair over her cheeks and fixed under her chin with a white bead; on the nape of the neck the hair is arranged in folds and decorated with white stones: the hairstyle is meant to portray a new mother's calm and wisdom (Brain 1980). The Masai, like the Fulani people of West Africa are a nomadic people whose society is very much enthusiastic about personal adornment. In some African cultures, women rely on their exquisite hairstyles to draw attention of men; this practice was very popular in the erstwhile Malagasy Republic, now Madagascar.

Plates 1a & b: Fulani women showing decorated hairdo
Brain, Robert (1980): *Art and Society in Africa*,

Tattooing, Scarification and Body Painting

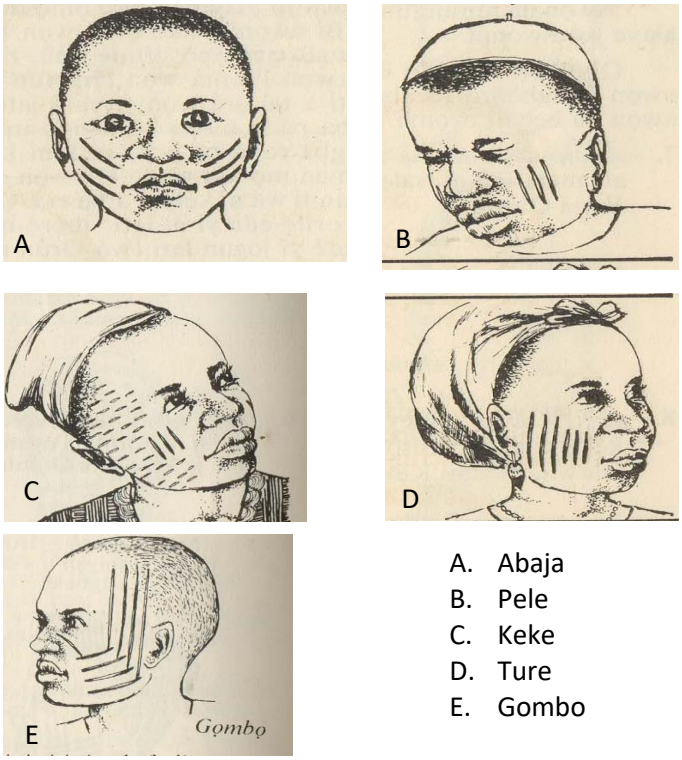
Tattooing is a method of decorating the skin by inserting coloured substances under the surface having punctured the skin with a sharp instrument. Archaeological and anthropological evidence suggest that early people may have decorated their bodies with paint, tattoos, and other types of ornamentation even before the wearing of cloth. Scarification like tattooing is the practice of cutting the skin and introducing irritants into the wound to produce a permanent scar. Although rarely practiced today, scarification has a long tradition in many African cultures, and these traditional markings continue to appear on carved statues and pottery figures (Chanda 2006). Most scars were made on the face, back, chest, or around the navel. Scarification could express social status or ethnic affiliation; it could also offer protection against harmful spirits.

Among the Yoruba, scarification indicates lineage affiliation. The body is scarified for the aesthetic value of the patterns among the Tiv of Nigeria. Among the Somba people of Benin and Togo, in Western Africa, scarification indicated a person's stage in life. An individual received his or her first marks at the age of fourteen, signifying the transition from childhood to adulthood. The Bangwa of Cameroon, according to Brain (1980), cicatrize their women in the abdomen (Plate 2) with complex patterns to celebrate the birth of a first child. Scarification among the Nuba women in the Sudan also signify a mark of physiological status: patterns which indicate such stages as the onset of puberty and the birth of the first child (the Encyclopedia Britannica 2008). Among the Nuer of Sudan, six cuts which remain for life as scars, are often made across the forehead of boys during initiation rites (the Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia 1989).

The use of line to accentuate facial features is essentially for enhancement of the natural beauty, although some are meant to stimulate terror especially among the warriors while subsequent Alaafin's (Kings) and their *Aare ona kakanfos* (Generalissimos) were expanding the Old Oyo kingdom to as far as Dahomey. Ewuare the great in the 15th century led a series of military campaigns to expand the boundaries of Benin kingdom. Also, Osei Tutu and Okomfo Anokye left no stone unturned for the stability and expansion of Ashanti kingdom. Uthman Dan Fodio later came with his Fulani Jihad of 1804. This was a time when there were wars and rumors of wars in most parts of West African states. People were being captured and many were sold into slavery, especially during the Atlantic Slave Trade, it was this time that the practice of facial marks gained ground among the Yoruba. The facial marks were meant for easy identification, in order to know from which town and from what family an individual comes as this often helps the individual to regain his or her freedom. Apart from easy identification, the Yoruba also make facial marks to enhance their natural beauty; this is evident in their popular adage: "*Omo lo dara bi eyi ti ko r'owo ko'la*" (the beauty would have been enhanced, if the child had facial marks). Yoruba facial marks (Plates 3a-e) include *Abaja, Pele, Ture, Gombo, and Keke*. According to Bewaji (2003), the old art of tattooing and various forms of body adornment have been rediscovered in the West, especially in the United states of America; it has now assumed a plastic art status being performed by "highly skilled" surgeons for a huge sum of money.

In a related development, some young Nuba men celebrate their youthful vigor in extensive body painting (Plate 4). One of the most striking examples of body decoration is that of the pastoral Fulani of Nigeria which reaches its peak in the annual *gerewol*, a beauty competition between men whose faces are painted and wear bead necklaces, metal bracelets, and head ornaments, reminiscing the Makeo warrior of the Southeast of New Guinea (Plate 5).

Plate 2: Bangwa woman of Cameroon showing cicatrized abdomen
Brain, Robert (1980): *Art and Society in Africa*, p. 226



A. Abaja
B. Pele
C. Keke
D. Ture
E. Gombo

Plates 3a-e: Various types of Yoruba facial marks, Daramola, Olu & Jeje, Adebayo (2005): *Awon Asa ati Orisa Ile Yoruba;* pp.78-80

Plate 4: A Young Nuba man with extensive body painting, Encyclopedia Britannica (2008)

Plate 5: Body painting of a Makeo warrior, **Leakey, Richard & Lewin, Roger (1977): *Origins;* E. P. Dutton, New York, p.246**

Body painting may also indicate the particular social role one is playing at a given time. It also expresses social and religious values. Many African cultures have employed the use of body painting to denote the warriors and the chiefs, with each rank having its individual pattern. Body painting has also been used to show one's affiliation (Plate 6) with his area of interest, or heritage, and for advertising purposes (Plate 7). The Ngere girls of Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire also paint their body for initiation rites (Plate 8). Among the ancient Egyptians, Henna was used to dye the fingernails, the palms of the hands as well as the soles of the feet; similitude of the *Osun* among the Yoruba, and *Laali* among the Hausa and Fulani of Nigeria.

Plate 6: Body painting showing affiliation with Nigeria, MTN Recharge Card www.mtnonline.com

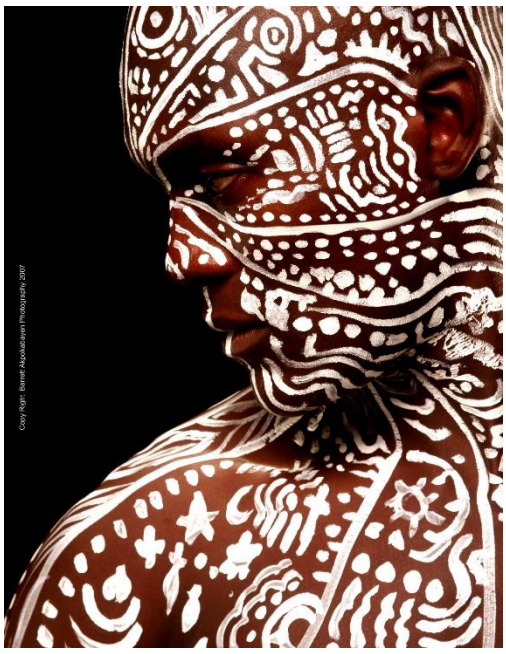


Plate 7: Body painting used for advertising purposes, Akpokabayen, Barret (2008)

Plate 8: Body painting of an Ngere Girl, Willet, Frank (1971): *African Art: An Introduction*, Thames & Hudson, London, p.174

Dresses/Clothing in body aesthetics

The variety of dress found throughout the continent are matters of aesthetic concern irrespective of other social purposes they may also serve. Clothing has served as a symbol of identity and a means of nonverbal communication in many African cultures. Steele (2006) argues that clothing functions almost as a language that can indicate a person's age, gender, marital status, place of origin, religion, social status, or occupation. Both men and women participate in cloth making processes such as dyeing, stamping, or weaving designs into textiles. Among the Yoruba, weaving of cloth is majorly done by the women; Iseyin is a Yoruba town famous for her dexterity in the weaving of *Aso-Ofi*

otherwise known as *Aso-Oke*. Other types of Yoruba clothes include *Etu, Sanyan, Kijipa*, and *Adire*. Abeokuta is another Yoruba town where women are specialists in dyeing of cloth, unlike in Kano, northern part of Nigeria, where men are the exclusive cloth dyers; this perhaps is as a result of Islam which inhibits women from being seen outside.

Nowadays, people have more freedom on selecting their clothing in order to convey their respective messages. However, clothing still provides significant information about the wearer, such as individual personality, economic status, as well as the nature of occasions being attended by the wearer. Plate 9 shows Oba Akenzua II of Benin in full regalia; just as the Yoruba Obas (Kings) when dressed in their full regalia convey a personality of authority, power, wealth, beauty, and majesty. In the opinion of Blier (1998), the tall conical shapes of the royal beaded crowns give visual prominence to the head, in accordance with the central place of the head in Yoruba philosophy about *Ori* (destiny), *ase* (spiritual power), *iwa* (character) and *ewa* (beauty). Among the Akan of Western Africa**,** Kente a Ghanaian textile is historically worn in a toga-like fashion by people with royal status. The earliest surviving examples of Kente cloth date from the 16th century; they consist of woven strips of blue and white silk sewn together. Anquandah and Kankpeyeng (2014) have also observed that Kente are usually made of handwoven cloth, strips of silk and cotton. The Kente cloth signified the wearer's status, its patterns might also allude to a proverb or a historic event. However, the use of Kente in contemporary times is no longer exclusive to royalty such that it is highly sought-after and used in important occasions across West Africa and beyond. Chanda (2006) has also observed that a more brightly coloured version of Kente cloth has become more popular among all social classes.

The traditional mode of dressing among the Itshekiri in Nigeria is quite commendable, according to Negri (1968), the Itshekiri men wrap themselves in yards of cloth which is passed around the hips and pleated from the centre to the left side, folded into draperies and left to hang free; the waist edge is then rolled over into a fat bundle which holds the pleats in place and also gives a little swing to them. A long shirt is usually worn on top of the skirt-cloth, this is complemented by a form of European-style hat known as *Ekoro*, while noble men also carry large fan, with a long gold chain and pendant. Plate 10 shows the Samburu people wearing traditional clothing. The men wear solid bright red fabrics, while the women have vivid designs on their clothing, with collars made of roped beads. Headdresses come in various forms for different people. The Yoruba headdresses for men are known as *fila* (cap). They are beautifully designed and some are embellished with tiny beads. The headdresses for women are known as *gele*. This could be tied in different styles; while some styles could be curious, others could be highly imaginative. It is pertinent to note that there is creativity in the tying of *gele* to the extent that experts now do it for a fee.

Among the Ndebele peoples of present-day South Africa and Zimbabwe, beadwork serve as means of marking different cultural stages of a woman's life; typical examples are the girl's apron known as *lighabi*, and married women's' apron known as *ijogolo*. Beadwork has also been used to express African cultural identity through bold geometric designs that made potent political statements especially during the apartheid era (Green 2018). For instance, Nelson Mandela made a very strong political statement when he dressed in the costume of a Thembu King, which included leopard skin and a beaded collar (*ingqosha*) to his trial in 1962 (Barnard 2014); the beaded collar (*ingqosha*) is similar to the one shown in Plate 11.

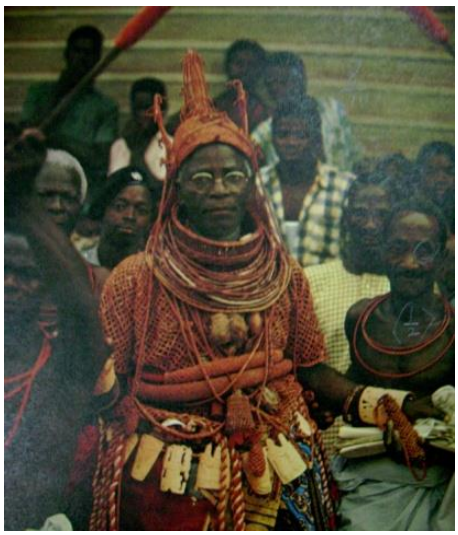


Plate 9: Oba Akenzua II of Benin in full regalia, Davidson, Basil (1966): *Africa: History of a Continent*, Springs Books, London, p.191

Plate 10: Samburu people of Kenya wearing traditional clothing, *Microsoft ® Encarta ®* (2006)

Plate 11: Collar (*ingqosha*), 19th-20th Century. Beads, Fibre, Buttons, Leather. South Africa: Xhosa, Mfengu, or Nguni peoples. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Jewelries as a form of body aesthetics

Beads rank among the most universal form of personal adornment, and it is an important means of expressing humanity's most basic cultural and spiritual aspirations. The quest for personal adornment has led to the creation of a variety of jewelries made of beads. A great variety of shells

have also been used in making jewelries. Other materials used include coral, amber, bone, wood, ivory, brass, leather, as well as faience, glass, clay, plastic, paper, and gold. All materials that have been used over the years have gone through certain mechanical, physical, or chemical treatment in order to transform their raw forms into shapes that are not only functional, but are also aesthetically pleasing. Beaded jewelry is prominent among the clothing of Samburu people of Kenya (Van Bavel, 2022); while Plate 12 shows a Fulani woman with gold earrings.

Beads are significant in shaping the identity of the people who use them. A Yoruba adage states that: *eni ti o so ileke, lo pari oso* (one who adorns with beads has done the ultimate in body adornment). Ijisakin (2004) has observed among the Yoruba that status and ranks are acknowledged by wearing of beads, *ade ori l'a fi n mo oba, ileke orun ni ti awon ijoye* (the king can be distinguished by his beaded crown; while the chief is identified by the strings of beads he puts on). Ijisakin further argues that women waist beads (jewelries) known as *bebe* and *lagidigba* are explicitly erotic and possess the power to attract and evoke deep emotional responses. In the opinion of Drewal (1998), the people of Owo and Benin enjoyed an extensive beading tradition with many elements similar to those at Ife, while heavy multistrands jewelries embellish their figures. There is also a preponderance of beaded jewelries in the soapstone sculptures found at Esie in Northern Yorubaland (Drewal and Pemberton 1989).

Among the Masai, a nomadic people of Eastern Africa, belts, beaded earrings, necklaces, and ostrich feathers indicate the stage a man has reached in life (Chanda 2006); a young Masai woman from Kenya (Plate 13) wears an elaborate collection of bead collars, an ornament for which her tribe is noted. In the submission of Jefferson (1974), the Masai massive earrings proclaim: "I am a married woman"; in fact, the Masai wife would not want her husband to see her without her huge ornaments. The Ndebele women of South Africa also adorn themselves with numerous necklaces, ankle and wrist bracelets as shown in Plate 14. A Samburu woman from the northern area of Kenya is also shown in Plate 15 with jewelries made of beads and leatherworks. The foregoing is a testament to the use of necklaces, earrings, pendants, rings, belts, armlets, and bracelets and other forms of jewelries as a form of body adornment among Africans.

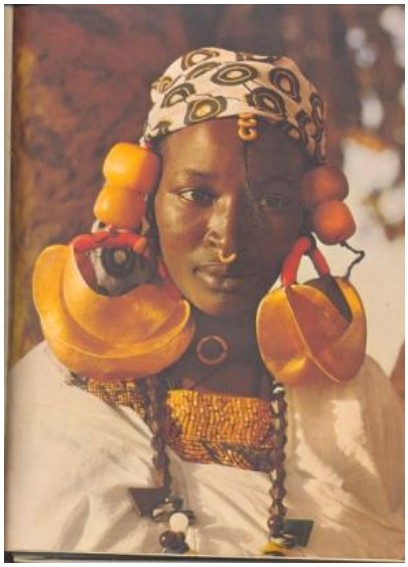


Plate 12: A Fulani woman wearing gold earrings, Davidson, Basil (1966): *Africa: History of a Continent*, Springs Books, London, p.247

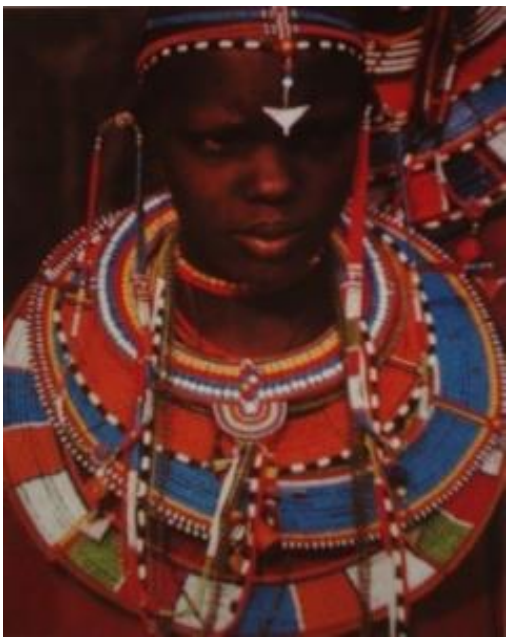


Plate 13: A young Masai woman wearing an elaborate collection of bead collars. *Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia*, (1989): Lexicon Publications Inc. New York, Vol. 3, p.138

Plate 14: A Samburu with jewelries made of beads and leatherworks, Leakey, Richard and Lewin, Roger (1977): *Origins;* E. P. Dutton, New York, p. 138

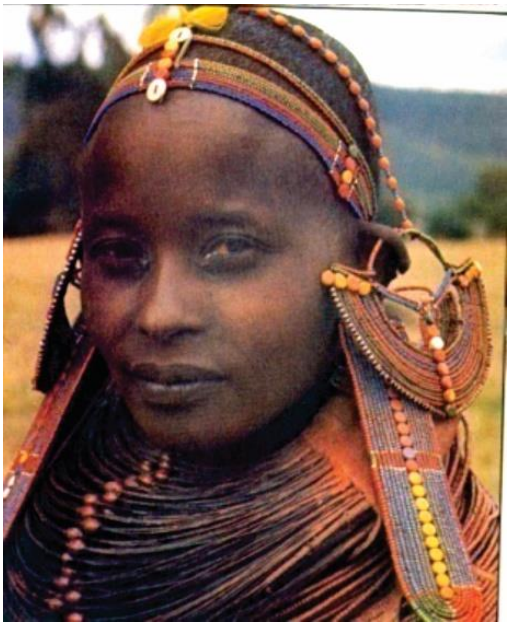


Plate 15: Ndebele woman adorning herself with numerous jewelries, *Microsoft ® Encarta ®* (2006)

Conclusion

With the foregoing it is evident that enhancement of beauty for identification purposes, as well as distinction of social status are among the diverse reasons that have aided the practice of body aesthetics among Africans. Body aesthetics have also been applied to terrify the enemy and also serve as a form of charm or ritual to ward off evil and avert danger. At times, body decorations are done in some African cultures to test one's ability for endurance, especially during initiation into age grades or puberty rites. The essence of African aesthetics is the quest for pleasure, satisfaction, and happiness; in this, body aesthetics have been able to achieve a lot.

Appearance is a vital element in African aesthetics; beauty in appearance is not only about cleanliness but also neatness, hence, "*irinisi ni isenilojo*" the way you are dressed, so you are addressed. In Yoruba concept of beauty, cleanliness is highly cherished while dirtiness is abhorred *"obun sio sio ni yio ru eru afinju"* the filthy ones shall bear the burdens of the hygienic and beautiful ones. Finally, it is pertinent to note that hairdressing, clothing, tattooing, scarification, body painting, and jewelries which aimed at enhancing one's natural beauty can also detract; *hence, "gele ko dun bi i ka mo o we, ka mo o we ko dabi i ko yeni*" which means having a headgear is not as good as knowing how to tie it; tying it is not as beautiful as when it fits. In conclusion, the perception, adoration, appraisal, and all the principles of natural beauty depend largely upon the epoch as well as the individual culture's ability to judge aesthetically.

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