

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE:

A VIEW FROM THE MANDARA MOUNTAINS¹

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“The body is our general medium for having a world.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
The Phenomenology of Perception

“Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”
Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

“We know not through our intellect but through our experience.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
The Phenomenology of Perception

“All aesthetic judgment is really cultural evaluation.” Susan Sontag,
Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963

“The flesh is at the heart of the world.”
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*

“I think it's more accurate to think of aesthetics as a key ingredient in a recipe, as opposed to the icing on the cake.”
Stephen P. Anderson, *Seductive Interaction Design: Creating Playful, Fun, and Effective User Experiences*

“The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art”
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*

“I argue that art is a part of man's quest for grace; sometimes his ecstasy in partial success, sometimes his rage and agony at failure.”
Gregory Bateson, *Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art*

“It is only during the last two centuries that the terms “Art” (with an implied capital A, connoting an independent realm of prestigious and revelatory works) and “aesthetics” (as a unique, and even reverential, mode of attention toward such works) have taken on their present elitist meanings and become unavoidably intertwined”
Steven Brown and Ellen Dissanayake,
The Arts are more than Aesthetics: Neuroaesthetics as Narrow Aesthetics

There is evidence for what we deem to be ‘art’ from at least 40, 000 years ago (Cook 2013) and it is reasonable to suggest that the lives of members of the species Homo Sapiens, and perhaps those of other hominid species, were enriched by experiences we call ‘aesthetic’ in millennia earlier still.² We may assume that philosophical and anthropological discussion of both art and aesthetics dates from a somewhat later period. That observation is not meant to be merely flippant for while the discourse/s with which we are here concerned are individual-centred, the products of *Gesellschaft* thought, the deep history of the aesthetic, and ‘art’ is rooted in *Gemeinschaft* worlds, community-centred. Our understanding of ‘aesthetic experience’ should neither ignore, nor relegate to secondary importance, almost the entire history of such experience³

Mandara Mountains? That must seem an obscure place from where to ponder the notion of ‘aesthetic experience’, so a few words of personal introduction. I began teaching in a town close to the Mandara

² The recent British Museum exhibition *Ice Age art: arrival of the modern mind*, the occasion for Cook's book, displayed 250 artefacts of aesthetic interest, each transcending the purely instrumental, in age ranging from 42,000 to 10,000 years ago, all from Europe and almost certainly of Homo Sapiens fabrication. These mesmerising objects clearly fall within our conception of ‘art’. Since the publication of Cook's book where she reiterated the view that Homo Sapiens had not significantly inter-bred with Homo Neanderthalensis, the opposite has been convincingly demonstrated and there is evidence suggesting Neanderthal aesthetic behaviour. More controversial claims for earlier ‘art’ have been made, extending as far back as pre-Homo Sapiens times, even to an astounding 200,000 years ago. Be these latter claims as they may, 42,000 years encompasses many, many generations; the aesthetic clearly cannot be ignored in our understanding of cultural-genetic co-evolution.

³ In his last, posthumously published book (Gellner 1998), philosopher-anthropologist Ernest Gellner reminded us that “There are two fundamental theories of knowledge” that “represent two poles of looking, not merely at knowledge, but at human life. Aligned with these two polar views of knowledge, there are also related, and similarly contrasted, theories of society, of man, of everything.” His opening chapters are an extended, and witty, discussion of these contrasting poles, the individualistic/atomistic and that of the organic vision.

¹ All references are to works written in, or translated into, English. In other ways also, what follows may well be glaringly Anglo-Saxon.

Mountains⁴ in the mid-1960s. These rugged but relatively low granitic mountains form the borderlands of Cameroon and Nigeria towards their northern reaches. Into the montagnard villages I went, with certain expectations. I suppose my personal pre-disposition inclined me to be enraptured by the beauty and wonder of it all. Anyway, enraptured I was, and I have ever since, in a very on and off way, pursued the ethnography of a smallish ethnic cluster known these days as the Fali.⁵

As I delved into Fali culture, I became perplexed at what I felt was a glaring discrepancy. On the one hand indigenous aesthetics and the very word 'beauty' were, in the literature, conspicuous by their absence, and at least one prominent anthropologist described the encompassing area as being art-impooverished⁶. On the

⁴ There are three excellent websites for those desiring an introduction to the historical ethnography of the Mandaras: Gerhard Muller-Kosack's *Mandara Mountains Homepage* (<http://www.mandaras.info/>); Nicholas David's *Sukur; a culture of the Mandara Mts.* (<http://www.sukur.info/>) and James H. Vaughan's *The Mandara Margi: A Society Living on the Verge* (<http://www.indiana.edu/~margi/>). That of Vaughan is the most personal, evocative and straightforward of these. Judith Sterner's *The Ways of the Mandara Mountains* (Sterner 2003) examines the main socio-cultural themes that characterise the region. Most evocative of all are the much earlier black and white photographs of the late René Gardi, published in, most notably among several books, *Kirdi: Parmi les peuplades paiennes des monts et des marais du Nord-Cameroun* (Gardi 1957).

⁵ Each politically autonomous Fali community-chiefdom was until very recently, certainly until colonial times, a classic *Gemeinschaft*, a nucleated settlement complex occupied of a few thousand, characterised by a strong sense of common identity, close personal relationships, and an unquestioned attachment to tradition, that is to both cognitive and affective ancestrally-sanctioned structures. Socio-cultural life was both highly ritualised and aestheticized, but notably produced almost nothing in the way of the figurative carving that has pretty much defined 'African Art' in the canon constructed by European art historians, dealers and collectors.

⁶ The place of art, of aesthetics in 20th century anthropological writing, its frequent absence, has not gone unnoticed and undiscussed but still strikes one as extraordinary. On its publication in 1964, John Beattie's *Other Cultures* became the best introduction to British

other, I was surrounded by people manifestly concerned with the creation, deployment and celebration of beauty at apparently all sorts of key points in their life-world. Intrigued, I devoted some of my research to this issue during those later years in which the Fali world was transformed almost beyond recognition. The aesthetic component, once so conspicuous, has faded and been degraded almost to oblivion. One must wonder why such a vigorous aesthetic could prove to be so fragile.

The rest of this paper is largely devoted to the explication of Fali aesthetic experience as I understand it to have been in the earlier years of last century, and to more general observations provoked by what I think I understand. To modify a favourite expression of anthropologists, the Fali are definitely 'good to think with'. In trying to make sense of Fali aesthetic ways, and determined to avoid any form of sociological reductionism, I have rummaged among what I take to be some of the relevant notions of aestheticians and philosophers.

My intention is to try and make sense of what I, an observer, take to be the aesthetic dimension in Fali life, to interpretive understanding rather than explanation, but of course from my own general perspective. I think it indisputable that we are *Homo Aestheticus* (Dissanayake 1995), a species with a profoundly 'humanising' *Art Instinct* (Dutton 2009) and that we may rather precisely be described as *The Artful Species* (Davies 2012). With Dissanayake⁷, Dutton and Davies I see the aesthetic, 'art'

social anthropology, a clear and confident survey of the field. It contained, however, no chapter on art/aesthetics and within its single reference to art we are told that "This is not the place for a discussion of primitive art..." (Beattie 1964: 205). The marginalization of the aesthetic often persists in ethnography.

⁷ I was particularly attracted to Dissanayake's notion of art 'making special' (1995, Chapter 4) beyond the purely instrumental, and of course an aura of the special attaches to those embellished artefacts, already referred to, speaking to us, in whatever idiom, across 40,000 years or so, as well as it does to the locations of early parietal art, sites often dramatic, imposing, exceptional,

if you will, not against the backdrop of human evolution but as part of that very process, and cannot conceive of any explanation for this most marvellous phenomenon except in broadly Darwinian terms. However, within this credo there is plenty of room for argument, as among the authors I have just invoked⁸. Many millennia of cultural-genetic co-evolution have resulted in our innate aesthetic propensity; however, aesthetic phenomena and experiences, material and immaterial, cultural and of nature, are almost certainly, at one or more levels, socially constructed.

idiosyncratic, or deeply hidden far from natural light at imposing locations none-the-less. But 'making special' is of course more widely what we do, and dates from when our ancestors first spun those threads of arbitrary meaning, the webs that provided unprecedented cohesion to proto-communities, and distinguished them from others. As Geertz famously said "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (1973)

Cognitive structures, of significance, of meaning, *per se*, would have been, if in isolation, 'cold'. I suspect their survival, success depended upon the sense of empowerment they engendered, and that such would have been energised by an associated affective structure of feeling. While proto-ritual and proto-aesthetics had limited instrumental value in a world literally without meaning, within the new world, seemingly that of *Homo Sapiens*, ritual and 'art' probably played a decisive role in the construction of 'hot' embodied structures of feeling, underpinning, energising, the associated 'cold' structures of meaning. The sense of empowerment that ensued we can only guess at, but all of subsequent human history is testimony to its consequences.

⁸ According to Dissanayake (2000) the evolved ways in which the human mother and her helpless infant respond to each other are rhythmically patterned vocalizations and exaggerated face and body movements that she calls rhythms and sensory modes. Dissanayake goes on to theorise that these rhythms and modes gave rise to the arts, societies everywhere elaborating these pre-dispositions as music, mime, dance, and display, in rites which inculcate and reinforce socio-cultural norms, including beliefs. Just as rhythms and modes bond the mother-infant pair, in ritual-aesthetic behaviour they bring advantageous cohesion to a group. Dutton, on the other hand, argues that our 'art instinct' is derived from the evolutionary process of sexual selection. Davies is less wedded to any one particular mechanism in the earliest development of our aesthetic propensity, our 'artification' behaviour. In reviewing *The Artful Species*, Peter Godfrey-Smith (2013), in criticising Davies, carries forward this debate in an interesting (re)formulation of his own.

Our perception of African aesthetics has been bedevilled by the European category Art, with that capital 'A'. When numerous mere 'curiosities' rather rapidly became aesthetically admired creations, in other words 'art', much of sub-Saharan Africa was found to be devoid of 'painting' as Euro-centrally conceived, but enormously rich in sculptures easily absorbed into, indeed famously influencing, a new vigorous modernist aesthetic. Masks and figures, both human and animal, were favoured in the process by which these chosen items were removed, often with the barest contextual information, often with none at all. Their indigenous semantic status was seemingly irrelevant; all was in the eye of the (be)holder. Sometimes exotic, colourful multimedia creations, wildly out-of-step with any conceivable European genre were pared down to their basic form and given the status of 'classic', echoing perhaps what had earlier happened to many sculptures of Middle Eastern and Classical antiquity. Others, whose power resided in their secrecy, objects of a twilight zone, were likewise torn from their context and placed in the glare of a new day, de-contextualised and then re-contextualised in alien environments, in a sense utterly transformed. Much twentieth century energy in the art and museum worlds was expended upon the issue of whether 'primitive' art and its creators were more demeaned by exhibiting as 'pure', i.e. decontextualized 'art' ignoring use and significance which usually cannot be inferred from objects *per se*, or were more demeaned by a contextualising process that implied an ethnographic rather than an aesthetic gaze, thereby relegating said objects to a second class, not really 'art', status. All this is, or should be, so much water under the bridge, and you will be familiar with the history of 'the primitive' and 'Primitivism' in twentieth century art history⁹, in the history of both anthropology and ideas

⁹ While *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* (Rubin 1984) remains the key text, others of significance include *The Myth of Primitivism* (Hiller 1991), *Primitivism and Modern Art* (Rhodes 1994), *Prehistories of the Future* (Barkan and Bush 1995), and the documentary

more widely, as well as in a partial transformation of Euro-American sensibility. Most closely related to my argument/s here has been the related art/artefact debate (Danto 1988).

Fali Aesthetics

Elements of ritual and of aestheticization, adornment and beautification, often the aestheticized components within rites, are among those aspects of a largely shared culture that most clearly distinguish one Fali community from another. However, for present purposes I shall conflate my data and refer simply to 'Fali' aesthetics, which *in toto* distinguishes Fali communities from others.

Fali aesthetic practice is best seen as a dimension of Fali life rather than an autonomous activity, and aesthetic experience best understood as being largely a shared, collective one. For the ethnographer the issue of projecting his own sensibility rather than apprehending indigenous perception is mitigated by an explicit aesthetic semantic field. And I have to add that, as far as I can recall, I never experienced a marked discrepancy between Fali aesthetic judgement/preference and my own. Briefly, there are two words for 'beauty', one of which has a female connotation while the other is of more general application, both very much used as is the English word 'beauty'. A third word *fwari* (Bahuli Fali) refers more narrowly to the added, decorative component, which in some contexts distinguishes from the everyday. A person's *fwari* is their mode of adornment worn on special occasions, such as attending a funeral, but without having to wear a particular, signifying costume. The word *fwari* is also used in

connection with such prescribed signifying costumes, with its qualified, more specific nature expressed or simply understood. Notable *fwari* ensembles include those of initiates, and of the dead at funeral rites, between whom there is a symbolic equivalence. Artefacts may also have their *fwari*. For example, the pyro-engraved designs applied to gourds are their *fwari* as are the colour schemes applied to the fittings in women's rooms;_even the slight temporary ochre applications to hoe blades, to attract market sale, are referred to as their *fwari*.

A more precise quasi-aesthetic vocabulary of course also exists with reference to skilfulness, whether displayed in forming a pot or in the exuberance of a dance, also to qualities such as the shine of a burnished pot, the perfect balance manifested in a well-made basket or the admired intricacies of richly decorated items. Whether the perceived functions of an object include beautification or not, its aesthetic quality per se, as well as its demonstration of skill or lack of skill, can always be discussed, the artefact in effect decontextualized, appraised simply qua object. Mundane objects, without material modification, sometimes viewed in a quasi-aesthetic way, can also resonate with significance, often with pride; the garden fence in the case of the Baruya of Papua New Guinea (Lemonnier 2012), the arrangement of firewood among the Fali.

Brass casting, a relatively recent addition to their repertoire of technical skills, proved deeply satisfying to a people with a marked socio-cultural disposition towards innovation, notably the elaboration of cultural forms and practices. Seventy or so different, named brasses constituted the corpus¹⁰; all can be thought of as personal prestige items, many for use in ritual contexts

Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art (Flam and Deutch 2003). In a different, distinctly postmodern vein are the provocative writings of Sally Price (*Primitive Art in Civilized Places*(Price 1989), and *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (Price 2007), also of Marianna Torgovnick (*Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Torgovnick 1990).

¹⁰ Prominent were an array of bracelets, armbands, and anklets; also knife handles, beads, smoking pipes, snuff holders, bags and bowls, waist-bands, hats and hoes, finger rings, 'medicine' holders, an seemingly endless variety of bells, stirrups and other horse brasses, even the occasional quiver, and, most especially, contrasting male and female ceremonial dance 'axes'.

but also many for routine personal adornment, a wonderful addition to a person's *fwari*. Nearly all of these were skeuomorphs, based on a remarkable range of prototypes of every material from grass to clay, from leather to iron. In their new, shiny and easily decorated material these artefacts embodied two extra layers of significance; on the one hand they demonstrated wealth and on the other they were more beautiful. As such, brasses were used joyfully, a cause of pride, a prestige marker, something to make the beautiful body even more beautiful. Many brasses were considered primarily as items of beauty, with some implication of wealth taken for granted; others, few and very highly regarded, were associated with a small category of recognized rich men, *brbn*, and demonstrated wealth above all else. Few only were primarily social signifiers, restricted to wear by royals for example, and very few had magical efficacy. I would argue that the desire for aesthetic elaboration was 'a', if not 'the', prime motivating force behind the flowering of a significant local artistry.

Socially-constructed time and space reflected, in Fali idiom, the central fact of Fali life, the mutual-dependency of the indisputable 'good' that is children and the equally indisputable 'good' that is sorghum¹¹. Life-cycle time was structured vis-à-vis seasonal time, on the basis of twelve/thirteen-month years with ritual, initiatory, and non-ritual, non-initiatory years alternating¹². Elaborate aestheticized ritualization rendered 'special' both trajectories in series of numerous, inter-connecting rites.

¹¹ I once asked an old Fali man, Kthlab, a long-time acquaintance but not one of my regular informants, what he knew of his community's history. After a thoughtful few moments, he replied "We are sorghum farmers". And that was it, and in a sense he had been profound, he had said it all.

¹² Northern Fali communities have numerical calendars, in this being typical of many Mandaran peoples, the year commencing with the first rains. The southern ones, commencing similarly, have months named descriptively, each referring to the season, directly or indirectly, or to a life-cycle event in the home, or even in a neighbouring, settlement.

The complete repertoire of Fali life-cycle rites, distinct ritual behaviours, male and female, including those pertaining to special categories of person such as twins, both large communal affairs and those more narrowly based, those pre-birth and those post-death, altogether these number many scores. Life-cycle rites, complex in themselves, were further inter-connected with a cumulative process of cicatrisation that also extended over many years. From the moment of birth when mother and child are rendered colourful and shiny, covered in red ochre-enriched mahogany oil, to the final removal of the *fwari nga mlan* (*fwari* of the dead) just prior to internment, the human body is of course treated as a cultural artefact, also, I would suggest, as a work of art¹³. Even a cursory overview of that life-cycle is beyond the scope of this paper. It is enormously elaborate and richly aestheticized, particularly so in the series of initiation rites, only slightly less so in the series of mortuary rites, where a number of symbolic equivalences, correspondences to those earlier initiation rites, are played out. Central to Fali aesthetic experience are the body and the trope of the harvest. A full life is

¹³ This of course is nothing exceptional, and the literature on the human body as art, its adornment and modification, is enormous. Once largely restricted to the exoticism of the 'other', this literature is now at least as much devoted to home-grown exoticism as Western, including Japanese, sub-cultures have taken to 'tribal' body schema in projecting their alternative identities. In a more down-to-earth idiom, tattooing, body piercing, and more extreme practices are all the rage, and have now become commonplace among 'ordinary' individuals. Ironically, in much of Africa, and elsewhere, such practices have become not only unfashionable, often despised, but are frequently made illegal. Among coffee-table books, *Africa Adorned* (Fisher 1984) is a serious delight; there are innumerable others, outstandingly those of Leni Riefenstahl, *The Last of the Nuba* (1976a) and *The People of Kau* (1976b). Notable academic studies include *Nuba Personal Art* (Faris 1972) *Self-Decoration in Mount Hagen* (Strathern and Strathern 1971), *Nomads Who Cultivate Beauty* (Bovin 2001) and *Reading the Skin* (O'Hanlon 1989), as well as Rubin's compendium, *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body* (Rubin 1988). A striking look at the recent scene is provided by *Return of the Tribal: Celebration of Body Adornment, Piercing, Tattooing, Scarification, Body Painting* (Camphausen 1999).

twice harvested, at the transformation to adulthood, and at death, the metaphor of the harvest being quite explicit at both. At initiation emphasis is upon the immediate ripeness of the initiates¹⁴, the assurance of fecundity and community regeneration. Initiates are praised for their beauty at prescribed ritualized moments and informally by passers-by. On different occasions within the rites the young men and women are both judged and acclaimed for their beauty. Several years later, at his father's behest and expense, a young man may be carried, danced, paraded through his community, and extravagantly adorned as the very epitome of male beauty.

The other, at first sight less obvious, trajectory is that annual one of the sorghum, the grain of life. It begins when the 'Guardian of the Calendar' announces that planting may commence, continues into first, second and third weedings, communal affairs energised as much by song, beer and conviviality as by the prospect of the harvest. A first climax is reached when the fresh, young, tender corn is celebrated in the field with a dance-centred rite. Later when the grain is eventually harvested, threshed and winnowed, it is brought to granary amidst much song and dance, food and beer, all a joyful celebration. All of this has its aesthetic dimension, in common with harvesting in traditional societies most everywhere. Less common I suspect is the creation on the threshing floor of a work of art from the soon-to-be-threshed heads. Sorghum comes in a range of earth colours, from white to rust. Stacked in layers and fastidiously arranged this cupola-shaped construction crowned with a bunch of heads from the full range of colours is an arresting sight¹⁵. Beyond

celebration, pride and beauty, there is, I think, something more to this, perhaps an assurance of successful harvests yet to come, and I was once asked not to photograph such in case by so doing I spoil its efficacy. The grain granaries, elegantly constructed and arranged in a man's privileged compound upper section are adorned with small nodules of glittering white quartz and worn down hoe blades. If full, a granary may be crowned with a ceramic roof finial of complex and distinctive shape. Finally, this finial, one of several in the case of a successful farmer, is placed upon the owner's grave; having signified one type of harvest brought to fruition, it now does so for the final harvest of that other great trajectory. While granaries are prominently located in the male upper section, it is in one of a wife's rooms that the grain is finally ground prior to cooking, and it is to her rooms that more aesthetic energy is devoted. Many of her clay fittings including the base of her grinding surface are coloured with the black, white and red of the African aesthetic¹⁶.

It is perhaps difficult in our commoditized world to appreciate how very much more a crop can be than a mere food item. Ground sorghum, cooked into a sticky, stodgy heavy 'mash', served as a single large dollop, with which the chosen soup/sauce is eaten, is the basis of

¹⁴ At least in recent years, it is not uncommon for the long primary marriage process to come to fruition, the girl moving to her husband's compound, the very day after the central initiation rite is completed.

¹⁵ The Nuba of the Sudan apparently celebrated their harvests in similar fashion, as part of their own exceptionally powerful aesthetic universe (Faris, 1972: colour plate 13, facing p39)

¹⁶ There is a certain irony here, as these rooms of the wives were generally speaking much less permanent than those of the husband, the compound head. The prevailing 'secondary marriage' system (Smith 1953), whereby women were able to leave their husbands, and immediately establish other, secondary marriages, meant rooms abandoned, temporarily or permanently. This is not polyandry, rather serial marriage with the right of return, and no institutionalized divorce. These secondary marriages were in addition to the initial, primary marriage, the latter the culmination of a long ritualized process and of great importance whether or not cohabitation persisted. . The rooms of a compound's upper, more private male section, though the permanent physical heart of the household, were, with the exception of the sorghum granaries located there, much less obviously decorated than the lower rooms of the wives. (However, many of these upper sections were beautifully constructed and fastidiously maintained. Some of the old men I knew well were aesthetes by any measure.)

every meal, every day. The two types of beer, the everyday one and the 'ritual' one, are both made from sorghum, and I can think of no rite, or 'occasion', where beer is absent. Offerings to ancestors and to a multiplicity of shrines, as well as gifts to innumerable categories of the living and the immediate dead, all these centre upon sorghum, raw or cooked, ground or unground, as beer or food, as the case dictates. Of particular power is that moment on initiation's climactic day when beer, prepared by the guardian of the main community shrine rather than by a woman, is 'ritually' consumed by the boys while it is 'ritually' sprayed from the mouth upon the girls, as both sets dance within the sanctum, to ensure fecundity and thereby the community's future. Prayers, entreaties, to local spirits and to the otiose high god, never fail to implore that women should bear many, healthy children and that the coming harvests should be equally fecund. Without presenting an exhaustive ethnography of sorghum, I hope I have established its instrumental and symbolic centrality to these montagnard farmers, and given some idea of how it permeates pretty well every aspect of significant life.

When I speak of 'significant life' I refer to that shared meaningful life lived within Fali idiom and categories, the life that identified them to themselves and to others. Among the Fali that life is, or rather was, highly ritualized and aestheticized and, not only relative to the world we here in large measure share, but also to other subsistence farming communities, including many at no great distance from themselves. We may ask if there could be a structural explanation for this, or at least an enlightening perspective along structural lines, as opposed to an historical-particularist one. Fali community chiefdoms are strongly bounded, the primary source of an individual's identity, not only vis-à-vis other communities, these always at some distance, but also internally along 'positional' and caste lines, and can thus be approximated to 'strong group' societies. At the same time a 'strong grid' quality is evidenced by the

vast ego-centred matrix of personal relationships, constraining and enriching each and every life, those of kinship, those established through marriage, often many marriages, those of neighbourhood, those of both formal and informal friendship, those of ritual obligation, those generated by the dynamics of economic and ritual association and service, and very much those brought into being during rites of initiation when in effect each initiate becomes a member of not one, but three age sets. Such societies are regarded (Douglas 1986)¹⁷ as being disposed to extensive ritualization, and, I argue, also to marked aestheticization. Further, along with several other Mandaran groups, Fali are casted, with each community having around 3-5 per cent of its population belonging to an endogamous caste, of common ethnicity, often referred to as *forgerons* (Sterner and David 1991, van Beek 1991). Called by the Fali *mihin*, (Wade 2012) they, male and female, serve the wider community as craftspersons, diviners, musicians, healers, sacrificers, ritual specialists, cicatrizers, midwives and morticians. So doing, they handle what is perceived to be unclean, of blood, of fire, dangerous. As you would expect all is underpinned by a strong pollution concept. Now, in a tightly-knit, nucleate settlement, occupied by a highly ritualized, strong group, strong grid, though essentially egalitarian community, characterised by an ethos of competitive individualism, with such a caste of multi-specialists close to hand, we have a situation favourable to cultural innovation and elaboration, both material and non-material (Wade 1989)¹⁸. A rich, and enriching, aesthetic dimension to life

¹⁷ Douglas altered her grid/group theory more than once over many years (Spickard 1989). It is her first, 1986 formulation that I find the most useful, and to which my discussion here refers.

¹⁸ West African montagnard societies were long regarded by many as quintessentially 'primitive' and static, 'cold', this view embodied in two theoretical formulations, the 'hill refuge' (Tambo 1978) and the 'palaeonegritic' (Froelich 1968). They were far from being so. I have personally witnessed several innovations, material and behavioural, entirely within traditional domains, having nothing to do with the socio-cultural impact of modernity.

was, I think, one of the more obvious products of this situation.

Ruminations

Pondering my experience of Fali aesthetics, and aesthetic experience, for this occasion, I shall try to draw some Fali-specific conclusions and then make a few observations of wider resonance.

Fali aesthetically-informed practices and products were 'used' to assert both intra-community and inter-community identity, and were in both their material and non-material forms notable and exploited forms of cultural capital¹⁹. Their aesthetic experience, in both ritual and non-ritual domains, was effective in embodying, and inculcating a common structure of feeling. In the 'truth' by which Fali lived, both the human body and the sorghum sustaining that body were both beautiful as well as 'good'; aesthetic experience centred upon the recognition, elaboration, refinement and cultural embodiment of that essential truth, with manifest emphasis upon the aesthetics of the body. Ethos and the aesthetic were the two sides of the Fali coin. With absorption into the quasi-modern *Gesellschaft* that is contemporary Nigeria, with the attendant commodification of almost everything including sorghum, and with the inevitable abandonment of many traditional beliefs, feelings and practices, the once joyful and powerful aesthetic dimension of Fali life has shown little resilience. Market kitsch, often baroque, now calls the shots while neither the 'true' nor the 'good' remain unproblematic.

Perhaps most significantly, Fali aesthetic experience was, I always sensed, conducive to a heightened sense of

being, at individual, kindred and multiple community levels. What my old informants, sophisticated in the ways of their predecessors, would have thought of the notion of contemplative disinterestedness I shall never know, for sadly I never asked them; had I done so I just might have been surprised.

Finally I should like to suggest that the rhetorical question asked earlier can be answered. The strength of the Fali aesthetic lay in it being so embedded, in its capacity to empower and delight within shared structures of meaning and feeling. Later, its strength became its weakness. As the Fali worldview was undermined, their aesthetic, lacking any autonomous resilience, also collapsed.

Concluding Thoughts

To the outsider, philosophical aesthetics, the mainstream European sort (Wicks 2013), often seems to be extraordinarily narcissistic, obscure, and remote from the 'real' world. Looking beyond the comfortable confines of the anthropology of art and aesthetics, to try and make greater sense of my ethnographic experience, it was only when I read of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics that I experienced a visceral response of 'yes, that's how it is!'²⁰

²⁰ In the words of John J. Compton (1992), "At the core of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is an attempt to recapture in experience (and to analyse) what it is like to encounter the world in a 'primordial' way—that is, prior to describing and explaining it in objective, scientific terms. Drawing on the gestaltists, he proposes that one's primordial experience is to exist towards things through a living (perceiving, feeling, and acting) body. It is to struggle to achieve an equilibrium with things against the background posed by the global environment, on the one hand, and one's 'body schema', one's developed repertoire of perceptual-motor skills and habits, on the other. Through this reciprocal interplay, as he sees it, one's way of being in the world and the primary perceptual world itself become formed and instituted. Since the environment includes others, one becomes an embodied social being and one's perceived world becomes a social world as well. Each bodily movement, each object one sees and responds to. Each performance

¹⁹ The *mihin*, male and female, especially benefited, not only as craftspersons but also as healers and diviners, both within their home communities and also when called to practice and reside in others. Communities were not isolated and fame could spread.

Fortunately, beyond mainstream philosophical aesthetics there has emerged a plethora of sub-disciplines. These I imagine enliven philosophical aesthetics and they are certainly of interest across a wide range of disciplines, perhaps especially at their intersections. The anthropology of art and aesthetics (Coote and Shelton 1992, Morphy and Perkins 2006) refreshes, and is refreshed by, cultural anthropology, art history and aesthetics. Everyday aesthetics (Saito 2007, Leddy 2012) is now both well-known and the subject of lively debate. Eco-aesthetics and the closely related Environmental aesthetics have, together become an enormous and pervasive field²¹. The contributions to evolutionary aesthetics of Dissanayake (1988; 1995), Dutton (2009) and Davies (2012), all writers of significant introductory studies, have been alluded to at length above. Introductions to the rapidly developing field of neuroaesthetics are provided by Skov and Vartanian (2009) and Lauring (2014). There is also of course the subject of this conference, somaesthetics, with Shusterman providing the seminal texts (2000, 2008, and 2012). Inter-connections, among these sub-disciplines, are plain to see and each sub-discipline gains from all the others. We might also note that John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) appears to have been a significant influence across several of these fields.. The overall

momentum is exciting and of great interest to many of us way beyond the confines of professional philosophy.

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one carries out is thus, in a sense, an aesthetic achievement—an expression of the meaning of one's individual style within a concrete situation. The involved, living body is to be understood as an expressive medium, and every perception, feeling and action as a work of art."

²¹ Berleant (1970, 1992, 2010) and Carlson (1999, 2009), are both professional philosophers who have done distinguished work in this field. David Abram (1996, 2010), himself directly influenced by Merleau-Ponty, writes for a wider audience as does Robert Harrison (1992). Barry Lopez (1978, 1986) and the late Peter Matthiessen (1978, 2001) have been for many years major influences. A tone of restrained and persuasive aestheticism pervades much of the 'new' nature writing, exemplified in the books of Robert Macfarlane (2003, 2012), Roger Deakin (2007), Mark Cocker (2008) and Jeremy Mynott (2009). Saito, who serves on the editorial board for *Environmental Aesthetics*, contributes to this field as much as she does to everyday aesthetics.

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