

The Art of Photography: Memoirs of Hairstyles and their Symbolic Meaning in Ikwerre Traditional Hairdo

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Abstract

This work examines the symbolic meaning of common indigenous hairstyles in Ikwerre Local Government of Rivers State, Nigeria through the lens of photographic documentation and interpretation. Westernization has made women of today to disdain the wearing of traditional hairstyles, which were cherished and adorned in ancient time. As a problem, this has relegated and caused great havoc to the growth of the culture by the gradual fading away of the wearing of these traditional hairstyles. For education, promotion, and posterity, it is crucial to document some available traditional hairstyles within the localities before they go into extinction. This work adopts a qualitative approach combining photography with ethnographic fieldwork. In order to capture the diversity and complexity of traditional hairstyles, snapshots of diverse hairstyles were taken at many locations like saloons, churches, festivals, markets, homes, roads etc. The findings reveal the great importance and symbolic meaning of hairstyles as a cultural practice that explains and buttresses social values, norms and beliefs. These hairstyles symbolize strength, health, unity, sexuality, togetherness, boldness and fertility. This study is a valid contribution to the existing body of knowledge on photography studies of traditional hairstyles as fashion trend. These compiled hairstyles will preserve facts and also serve as referral in posterity. Photography should be fully engaged in creating awareness, educating, promoting and preserving, the benefits in wearing traditional hairstyles that is age long.

Keywords: *Photography, Women, Hairstyles, Traditional, Symbolic*

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Background to the Study

Hairstyle is a significant form of African art, design and culture that started from birth. Hairdo has played a vital feature of the lifestyle of women all through the ages, in diverse parts of the world. This area of cultural depth must not be neglected or left unstudied. The art and science of photography should be used to preserve the creativity and design rooted in the attractiveness of these hairstyles. Traditional hairstyles are intriguing for their visual appeal, pattern and skill involve in the hairdo. Unfortunately, the craving for western values and the use of synthetic hair is having a deteriorating impact on our traditional hairstyles, making it going into extinction. In the future, these elaborate hairstyles might not be seen again. Therefore, it's imperative to have a photographic documentary of these hairdos to preserve facts and referral in posterity.

Human beings have five senses that comprise of sight, feeling, smelling, tasting and hearing. It is noteworthy that the head carries all these five physical senses. This fact makes the head stands out, so too, the hair that covers the head. The culture and tradition of hairdo is rooted in both spiritual and biological roles of individual head. Through hair design and care, human hair is highly honoured and appreciated, (Lawal 2001). An extensive diversity of hairdos has been worn by people of different geographical location over many years and in different era. Many times, the hairstyle is determined by the belief system or culture of the society. Hairstyles distinguish people and as a consequence, it often signifies a person's age, marital status, occupation, and race. Some particular hairstyles are worn for different occasions. Some for special events, whereas some for daily living. Such as Eko Bridge, Suku, Close-up, and Love come down, among others, (Ojeikire and Sidibe 2010).

The beauty of a lady is often tied to style of the hair she makes in addition to the length of her hair. Actually, one of the attributes of a woman's beauty is the massive growth of her hair. This significance attached to the hair is even more glaring in some countries like Nigeria where fullness of hair is a sort of pride and dignity. With the advent of westernization, the indigenous African hairdos that have been worn with dignity and pride began to go out of style. In their place, western hairdos that involve the use of wigs characterised the late 50's and early 60's. The western hairstyles have to a great extent redefined and metamorphosed the elaborate Nigerian hair styles. Currently, people who wear these hairstyles are considered archaic and local. While some people still wear African hairstyles with dignity, sometimes due to religious or cultural beliefs. Some others, especially the younger generation have jettisoned these indigenous hairstyles in favour of the westernized hairdos that used to extend the length of their hair as attachment or wigs. This has made the westerners exploit Africans by selling these hair extensions at very expensive prices.

Hairstyles in Nigeria

Hairdo is an essential part of Nigerian fashion and culture. Prior to westernization, women patterned their hair into numerous lovely styles (which were even codified into names) without the use of wigs or attachments, (Ashiwaju, 1976). In some cultures, hairstyles are used to differentiate between the old and young ones. In addition, a lady's hairdo can also help identify her ethnic affiliation whether Yoruba, Ibo or Hausa or other minorities groups in Nigeria.

Each of these tribes has hairdos peculiar to them, (Lawal, 1985). In Nigeria, styling of hair often begins from tender age. Some elements and principles of art and design like line, shape, space, balance, rhythm etc. are often incorporated into different hairstyles, (Faturoti, 1999). The various factors and benefits attached to hairstyles have made hair styling a well-respected aptitude and persons with such skills are encouraged to develop such skill for a means of livelihood, (Njaka, 1971). There are similarities of hairstyles among different ethnic groups in Nigeria due to environmental and historical factors. Yet there are differences in styles and pattern in different occasions. During festivals and special occasions, each tribe adorned themselves with their traditional hairstyles indicating their traditional legacy. Also, traditional priests have specific hairstyles which are used to identify them with their gods/deities, (Akinlaja, 2004).

Even though many indigenous hairstyles have largely become extinct, two of them have survived till date. They are braiding and hair threading, (Ashiwaju, 1976). The braided hair which is worn in various styles, is either used for daily or ceremonial occasion. The braided hairstyles, worn by women for simple occasions, have the hair arranged in neat ridges, and this is worn daily. The braided ones used for ceremonial occasions have more intricate styles, (Ojeikere, 1968). The technique of braiding is generally one in which the hair is braided firmly at the surface of the scalp. Different ethnic groups have introduced some innovations to hair styling. For example, traditional Yoruba standards have resulted to styles like *Suku* (Together), *Patewo* (Close-up), *Kolese* (leg less), (Miller, 2001). (Figure 1)

Hair threading is partitioned in sets before braiding them firmly into several free-standing strands using thread, (Ashiwaju, 1976). Since the invention of photography (camera), it has proven to be one valuable tool used for the preservation of culture that narrates events that eventually allows many people share in events which may have become outdated and become historical items/events, (Collier, 1967) It should be noted that photography functions as visual material of the past which vivifies the cultural values and adequately interprets the past, it allows people to appreciate their emotions and enhances their social relations and ultimately boosts their pride and cultural lifestyle. Besides the documentary role that photography plays, it equally shows the role of visual art so that one can find this typified in various historic museums, (Holzknecht, 2004). Documentary is a popular branch of photography used to chronicle both significant and historical events and everyday life... the photographer attempts to produce truthful, objective, and usually candid photography of a particular subject, most often picture of people, (Christine, 2011). Documentary photography has the ability to sustain and reinforce memories of events that has remained legendry, according to Sontag (1977), photography does not simply render reality, it is reality which is scrutinised, and evaluated, for its fidelity to photographs. The importance of photography is enshrined in not only the truth of the immediate but in the realities, it embodies, (Pink, 2009). By virtue of its visual effect which engender quick reaction brain wise, photography becomes a veritable tool in the society and for individual to be given premium as this can adequately affect the behaviour of people in general (Zelizer, 2006).

It won't be out of place to say that photography is a channel of documenting and sustaining cultural heritage. This is evident in our hairstyles in Nigeria. We also have reflections of this in our religious practises, architectural designs, decorative materials and cultural outfits, to mention but a few, (Sontang, 1977). Going by the study carried out in the University of Pennsylvania, it was revealed that presenters who employed visual aids were more effective in conveying their ideas to their audience than those who never used visual aids. This goes to say that visual aids far outweigh and is more profound in learning, (Pink, 2009). It is important to point out that through photography, the cultural values and lifestyles of Nigerians are preserved and remain significant and thus prevent it from going into extinction or eroded by invading foreign cultures. By preventing its vanishing, we guarantee its existence and permit the chance of indigenous hair styling's re-emergence as a prevalent adornment and practice in a world of creativity and self-reliance.

The cultural expression which is articulated in hairstyles goes a long way to showcase hair as a visual art form. This dates back to over 1,000 years where black and white photographs of women in adorable hairstyles, arranged in high sophistry were used for ceremonies. All these vivify art form as cultural expression in Africa as a whole, (Rosemary, 1964). Photography has contributed to documenting hair as a cultural archive through the aid of camera rather than the pen. Hairstyling as an art form has been captured by a Nigerian, Ojeikire (1968), a famous photographer of the 1960s who took photographs which made up his most famous photographic collection 'Hairstyle'. Ojeikere's photographic collection, documented hair as cultural expression, drawing on hairstyles of both traditional and modern formations to showcase hair as a visual art form, (Okhai and Malick, 2010). His impressive collection of photographs singles out women styled with elaborate braided coiffures and featured intricate hairstyles making use of thread to create majestic and regal forms. (See figure below).

Figure 1.



Source: Ojeikere's photographic collection (1968)

Significant of Traditional Hairstyles

Hair arrangement is a way of African art, excessively rigorous and also rarely acknowledged or appreciated. Historically, traditional hairstyles symbolize certain things. Nigeria has a gorgeous cultural inheritance associated with hair styling, characterized by ethical and artistic

ideas, (Gill, 2015). In traditional African societies, hairstyles had immense cultural and social significance, but in modern times, the social significance and personal meaning of traditional hairstyles have been accepted by African women in the diaspora, (Byrd and Solomon, 2015). Ancient styles are re-born, with many variations linking them more with fashion and aesthetics due to its contemporary appeal even to Nigerian musicians, or entertainers as JARAoh! TV show demonstrates. This means that there is a cogent reason and inevitable need to continue to preserve this aspect of Art.

Aesthetic Significance

Hairstyles are particularly peculiar in design, conceptual, autonomous, enriching and portraying the lifestyle of people, tradition and history. Aesthetic preference in Africa is widely acknowledged amongst cultural groups, (Hebidge, 1979). Aesthetic interpretation in hairstyles involves symbolism. These symbols can be described as a combination of beautiful images and cognitive appreciation, with visual objects interacting with each other or some other abstract ideas, (Akinlaja, 2014). The aesthetic values of visual art exhibited in these symbols go a long way to portraying the cultural values and heritage of Nigeria, thereby serving as a reminiscence of Nigeria's past, which is linked with the present so as to give a better interpretation of the future, (Faturoti, 1999). Traditional hairstyles are figurative in that they are related to the traditional skills involved in the techniques of ceramics, weaving because they show similarities like other arts and crafts like tie and dye, ceramics and sculpture to form a design of abstracts, (Njaka, 1971).

Social Significance

In time past, in most West African communities, hair helped as a transporter of messages, (Tharps and Byrd 2001). Hairstyles often communicate affluence, ethnic affiliation, social placement, belief and marital status. Traditional hairstyles might also aid the recognize of people from a geographic area, (Lawal, 1985).

Spiritual Significance

In addition to the social and aesthetic reasons, there is also spiritual significance that is attached to hairstyles worn by different people. Quite a number of Africans agreed that hairstyles can be used to interact with Divinity or Spiritual entity. The hair on human's head is the most pre-eminent part of the body, which makes it next to the divine, thus, many ideas, thoughts and communication passed through the hair, (Mohamed, 2004).

Ikwerre Traditional Hairstyles and their Symbolic Meaning

Ikwerre is a tribe in that occupies four Local Government area in Rivers State. It was discovered that hairstyles in Ikwerre are described and created by both stylists and the people wearing them. They make use of some activities around them to create styles and give such style a symbolic name. Below are the traditional hairstyles and their symbolism. Threading and Braiding styles in Ikwerre are very much seen as traditional hair fashion. The use of thread is a key tool in the making of traditional hairstyles. Strong black thread and coloured wool can be used to device and manipulate the hair to straighten and lengthen it, twist it and twirl it, curl it to yield a variety of forms and designs, some of which are so well known that they have been

given names one of which is recognized as 'Barbwire', symbolising “security”, 'Nigerian Noodles', which closely resembles indomie symbolising that 'food is vital', 'Twisting' another hairstyle, symbolising 'togetherness' (as seen in figure 2)

To achieve some of these hairstyles, the hair is combed and oiled, then parted into a number of sections. Thread is then wound tightly around each section of hair, in the process straightening the kink in the hair and pulling out its full length. A number of hairstyles can be made up using a mixture of threading and braiding or just braiding for everyday and festive wear, as such the use of this technique is really a shared heritage of culture. Traditional hairstyles in Ikwerre are good-looking for their great expressive content and attractive abstract design values. Their essential elements of line, shape, texture and pattern can be regarded as part of traditional arts or design elements. They symbolize strength, health, unity, sexuality, togetherness, boldness and fertility. Women in Ikwerre wear these indigenous hairstyles because it boosts the rate of growth of their hair.

Figure 2.



Source: Photographed and compiled by Comfort Anyia (2024)

Table 1: Common Names of Hairstyles in Ikwerre and their Symbolic Meaning

S/N	Name of Hairstyle	Symbolic Meaning
1	All back	Restoration
2	Periwinkle mouth	One love keeps us together
3	Question mark	Many times, we ask questions and we are questioned”
4	Traffic	Sometimes we are held down by circumstances
5	Three in one	Threefold cords can never be broken
6	Nigeria noodles	Food is very vital for our well-being
7	In the garden	Sometimes we are lost and we need to be found
8	Front and back	There are only two choices in life; the Front which leads forward and the Back which leads backward”
9	Networking	Communication is vital for human existence
10	Twisting	Togetherness
11	V-boot with periwinkle	Varieties is the spices of life
12	Leaf	Agriculture
13	Mixed-twist	Life is a mixture of joy and sadness, ups and downs
14	Half-parting	We part to meet
15	Side with clap	Jubilation
16	Barbwire	security conscious
17	Rows	Organization
18	Shuku with base	Royalty
19	U- Turn	Change of mind
20	June 12	Peaceful election

The above table explains the symbolic meaning of some traditional hairstyles in Ikwerre land. Some essential elements of arts such as line, shape, texture and pattern were skilfully manipulated by the hair stylists to symbolize strength, health, unity, sexuality, togetherness, boldness and fertility. And respondents attested that Ikwerre women wear these indigenous hairstyles because it boosts the rate of growth of their hair, it's cheaper, affordable, and that it lasts longer.

Conclusion

Pictures speak louder than mere words. This study by the use of visuals, has examined the intricate connection between hairstyles and their symbolic meanings in Ikwerre land. It is revealed that these hairstyles are not just decorative, but also serve as visual language, conveying messages about spirituality, identity, status and cultural norms. However, westernization has been a persuasive and accelerating force across the globe today which has resulted to losing some of the cultural uniqueness and identity. As a consequence of this, many indigenous cultures such as the traditional hairstyles are now on the verge of extinction because of globalization which is necessary to document for posterity. This study has contributed to the current frame of knowledge on African way of life, revealing the benefits of preserving cultural facts and practices in the face of modernization. Moreover, this work establishes the influence of photography as an instrument for cultural documentation, storytelling, and visual advocacy.

Recommendations

Built on the results of this study, the following recommendations are herein stated:

- i. Pictures of traditional hairstyles should be encouraged in media houses such as TV stations, Newspaper, by including them in their product designs, illustrations and advertisement. This will compel and bring back our fading culture of hairstyles to a competitive ground in Nigeria.
- ii. The government should launch a cultural archive to document and preserve our culture for posterity.
- iii. Events that promote traditional hairstyles should be encouraged to attract tourists and promote cultural exchange.

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