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# AFRO-IDENTITY REDEMPTION: DECOLONIZING HAIRSTYLES OF GIRLS IN GHANAIAN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN PROMOTION OF CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*Most girls in Ghana are largely educated and trained without their hair and thus go through a long period of training deprived of the vital part of their make, which may render them identity denial. The aim of this paper is to explore the rationale underpinning the shaving off of girls' hair during pre-tertiary levels of education to understand the practice and its effects on womanhood from cultural identity perspective. The research employed qualitative approach and used structured open-ended questionnaires and document review protocols as tools for gathering data. The gathered data were thematically analyzed. The findings show that hair from African perspective on the ontological level is symbolic showing phases of womanhood and interspersed with external admiration from natural aesthetics endowment and cultural identity. It further shows that the policy on shaving, which has colonial attachment, disrupts cultural sustainability though it is meant to ease the burden of the girl-child from the cumbersome nature of styling of the hair supposedly. The authors recommend that to train the girl-child wholly for life, they should be allowed to explore Afro-defined natural hairstyles to develop the skills of maintaining their cultural image.*

**Keywords:** Girl child, shaving; hair, ontology, symbolic, cultural

## **INTRODUCTION**

Afro (African defined or with African origin) hairstyles have a rich cultural symbolic significance that echoes black pride, self-expression and black identity and have been used over the centuries as a means of communication and for social status declaration. For instance, the Fulani women in West Africa use hair braids adorned with beads as a symbol of femininity and beauty (Broussard, 2020 & Nguyen 2021). Again, Africans respect coiffure, Fossils from 36,000 BCE suggest that men and women styled their hair in braids and curls (Patzner, 2008) for it identified its wearer in informative ways. They saw it as a vital part of the human body with spiritual, philosophical, sociocultural and aesthetic significance. Hence Bartlet (1994) testifies that hair is particularly fertile and more potent conveyor of meanings.

In similar vein, Byrd (2001) relates that hair in fifteenth century Africa bore messages among the Mendes, Wolof, Yoruba, Mandingos and most West Africa Societies. Such information may denote age group, rank in the community, ethnic identity, marital status, religion or profession. Africans did not take the day-to-day presentation of the hair for granted. Earlier in Ghanaian history, coiffure was indicative of status of the wearer in society (Cole & Ross, 1977), agreeing with Bartlet (1994) and Byrd (2001). Adetutu (2018) also confirms that Yoruba girls and women of different classes, such as spinsterhood, wifehood and widowhood, wore special hairstyles. The trend generally does no longer apply today, as hair fashion trends currently gravitates towards Western hype and interpretations. Mcleod (1981) identifies Asante's priests and executioners as common bearers of locks. However, today, locked hairstyles feature in all forms, mostly by Africans in diaspora (of Western countries), before boomeranging its way back to the continent. Africans, who keep

dreadlocks today, do it with a Western identity (of the African).

African hairstyles have been gradually disappearing, with many Africans adopting Western hairstyles instead. A review inquiry into the causes of this phenomenon reveals that there are several factors at play. Reid et al. (2016), assert that the gradual eroding of African hairstyles is due to global reach of Western media and pop culture, which has led to a proliferation of Western hairstyles as the ideal beauty standard. Reid et al. (2016) add that this has made many Africans perceive their natural hair as undesirable and antiquated, with some even going as far as chemically straightening or relaxing their hair to conform to the perceived standards.

Another cause is the lack of education and awareness about the importance of African hairstyles. Ndiaye (2016) reveals that many Africans currently are not taught about the significance of their cultural heritage regarding their hairstyles and consequently, they do not recognize the value in preserving these hairstyles as their cultural identity and heritage. Instead, many adopt Western hairstyles as a way to improve their job prospects and social status, as they believe that these hairstyles are more accepted in professional environments from economic perspectives (Ogunyemi, 2019). Hence, over time, the cultural significance of the African hairstyles have been diluted and lost in various ways and one of the spaces where it manifest strongly is the Senior High Schools.

Though, the hair is a medium that reflects self and the society serving as a cultural material with meaning and values (Lester, 2013) but Senior High Schools girls are made to shave off their hair leaving small to cover the shape of their heads. Shaving off hair within the African ontological interpretation may signifies mourning or lost of glory since hair among Yoruba's of Nigeria is a symbol of glory (Fashola & Abiodun, 2021). However, on the contrary,

during the medieval age Wolof girls' hair were shaved to signify that they have not reached marriageable age thus hair to the African is an identity, spirituality, character make up and notion of beauty (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). The shaving off hair was peculiar to the Wolof and not all Africans. Again according to Byrd and Tharps (2001) and Thompson (2009) the African hair of women were considered as unattractive by the whites and was named peppercorn, matted or woolly, which might have led to the removal or shaving to let it become pleasing to the colonial masters. This paper therefore, argues that the practice may deny girls their cultural identity and disrupts cultural sustainability and their holistic education into womanhood. The aim of this paper explores the rationale underpinning the shaving off girls' hair during pre-tertiary levels of education to understand practice and its effects on womanhood from cultural identity perspective.

### **Cultural sustainability as a decolonizing theoretical framework for the study**

The study is theoretically grounded in cultural sustainability as a decolonization tool in the context of female or girl-child colonized hair. Decolonization of female hair in this context is basically shifting from entrenched Eurocentric initiated hairstyle practices void of contextual-cultural affiliation from ontological and epistemological perspectives. Cultural sustainability deals with the preservation and continuity of cultural heritage for future generations. Capitalizes on maintaining cultural identity for diversity, fostering community participation, and promoting intercultural dialogue as the central aim for cultural sustainability and establishes that cultural identity and sustainable development are inseparable (Labadi & Long, 2008).

For the purpose of this research, the authors focused on two key aspects of cultural

sustainability from female hair perspectives, which are the tangible and intangible cultural-hair heritage. These refer to the physical and non-physical aspects of culture, such as traditional objects and their attached knowledge, beliefs, practices, and skills, which are transferred from one generation to the other such the female hairstyles and their symbolic dimensions. According to UNESCO (2003), preserving tangible and intangible heritage is cardinal for maintaining cultural identity and promoting sustainable development because they are closely tied to community identity and social cohesion.

The maintenance of the intangible and tangible aspects of female hair from cultural sustainability perspective can be fore-fronted through community participation. Labadi and Long (2008) posit that local communities play a major role in the preservation and management of cultural heritage, which holds the potential to foster sustainability. Thus, Labadi and Long (2008) recognize that local communities are often the most knowledgeable about their own cultural heritage and are best positioned to identify and address potential threats to its continuity, when they foresee a subtle swift emerging. The maintenance can be done through cultural dialogue, which is also an important aspect of cultural sustainability. It involves promoting mutual understanding and respect among different cultural groups with a focus on the need to maintain their cultural identity on many fronts. According to Van der Duim et al. (2012), intercultural dialogue can foster the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and values, which can help to preserve cultural diversity and promote sustainable development.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study commenced in April and ended in September 2023. It employs a qualitative approach with the aim to gather in-depth narrative data from the public on the

unwritten policy of Ghana Education Service, which prevents girls from growing their hair in Ghanaian second cycle educational institutions, and also to explore perceptions on the practice. The authors adopted random sampling approach for both the Internet and physical administration of the open-ended questionnaire. For the physical administration, female student volunteers were recruited from four senior high schools all located in Tema in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana through accidental sampling. All tertiary participants were volunteer female students from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. Eventually, six hundred and thirteen filled forms were retrieved from respondents. However, saturation of data was reached at five hundred and fifty-five, giving the point where further data from respondents made no difference to the current data in possession. Consequently, whilst the physically administered questionnaires used in Tema and Kumasi had respondents whose ages ranged between thirteen and twenty-eight, the online respondents had age brackets between thirteen and sixty years, who were reached through social media group platforms of students and authors' colleagues. During the physical administration of the questionnaires, respondents' participation was strictly on the basis of willingness. The interviews focused mainly on the female in order to know their perceptions regarding the unwritten rule. The educational institutions and their managements were not part of the interview because the policy is already known to be in effect in all SHS in the country. The retrieved data was processed through thematic analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of the research have been categorized based on the core aim of the research. The first section of the findings and discussions, deal with results from the

exploration in Ghana educational institutions underpinning reasons for girl-child hair trimming, the second deals with the perceptions on the practice and the last with the effect of the practice on womanhood from cultural identity perspectives.

### **The trimming of girl-child hair: the connection between Colonial Era and Ghana Education Service**

The tradition of cutting the hair of female harks back to the colonial days of castle schools, where Surama (2019) reports that, local girls attending castle schools were asked to maintain trimmed hair in order to differentiate them from mulatto girls. Local school girls who were not mixed race were also required to trim their hair in order to show they were not mulattos. The East African account seems more tenable. Bizimungu's (2021) account runs that; "When Christian missionaries established schools in different parts of East Africa, they constructed the narrative that Black hair was unsightly, ungodly and untamable". That falls in line with Bellinger's (2007:2) statement that; "shaving or [trimming] the slave's hair was the first step of stripping them of their identity and lowering their status."

In the context of Ghana Education Service, the practice of shaving or trimming the hair of girls stems from the colonial era of the then Gold Coast, manifesting now as an unwritten rule or a norm being enforced by school heads intended for the good of the Ghanaian girl child. Though the Ghana Education Service did not officially establish the rule, the service proudly wields it as a virtuous practice that should be meticulously preserved to aid Ghanaian school girls unto excellence. The claim among others is that, it is too tasking to manage the hair of the African girl child, therefore cutting it would help her to save time and focus well on her studies. They further argue that keeping their hair makes girls look mature and unduly attractive to

men, which could seriously distract or even derail them from schooling because of early romance and the concomitant pregnancies that might ensue. In this sense, the practice has rather been deemed supportive and even redemptive for these poor girls.

In considering the origin of this policy, it is crucial and factual to state that the policy of trimming of girls' hair currently perpetrated on the campuses of senior secondary and basic schools emanates from neither the Ministry of Education nor the Ghana Education Service. However, it is resolutely enforced in most basic schools and second cycle institutions by heads of these institutions that would like to maintain discipline on their campuses. Osam, (2015) of citifmonline.com reported in 2015 of a statement by the then Director General of the Ghana Education Service (GES) Michael Nsowah Adjei, as stating that; "The existing rule in Senior High Schools which stipulates that students must keep their hair trimmed and short is just a norm", making it an unwritten policy of GES. Enforcing an unwritten rule or policy if it is an inherently good one is appropriate, but the nature of policy currently under discussion when viewed from cultural sustainability perspective raises concerns. Base on the findings, two cardinal arguments can be looked at regarding the trimming of the hair of the girl-child student. The first is that hairstyle is distraction and will affect the effective girl-child education on the account of its difficulty in management and the second, is an extension from the first, which is, it makes girls unduly attractive to men, which may lead to pregnancies with the undesirable result of dropouts against the girl child.

When these two issues are perceived through the lens of cultural sustainability it is clear that though the reasons are legitimate but may threaten the extinction of fragile cultural elements that are cardinal for maintaining cultural identity leading to loss of identity

and its related challenges. In supporting the need for cultural preservation, Chen and Fu (2015) advance that cultural knowledge and traditions are passed on from one generation to another when the intangible and tangibles elements are consciously transferred from one generation to the other. Another aspect of cultural perseverance is its maintenance, which is linked to the practice of art forms from indigenous stands (Catherine, 2000). It is clear that, the avoidance of its practice will affect the perseverance of the art form and for the purpose of this research the African identity enshrined in the traditional hairstyle will be lost if its practice is not perpetuated.

### **Lived experiences and perception of the public on trimming of the Ghanaian girl-child student hair**

Most respondents indicated that they prefer and will want women and girls to keep long hair while few advanced that short hair is their choice due to several reasons. A section of those with short hair preferred to have their hair cut as SHS students because it made them look nice when it was well-trimmed, giving them the Dancing Crown effect when dyed with back substances. Others who shared that cutting hair was not appropriate advanced various arguments for their position. They advanced that cutting hair short or leaving long does not determine the grade of a person and advanced that foreigners keep their hair and still do well. African women are more expressive and confident with their hair and deserve to keep it since it makes them who they are and the practice deprive girls of their African look. Another finding on the effects of cutting hair on womanhood was that it weakens the skills of women in cultivating self-made hairstyles that reflect the African identities. It also make them even spend more money on wigs and hair extensions that could have been used for important things in their lives. The experiences shared indicate that

cultural identity advancement is not promoted due to the entrenched position some schools took in cutting the girl-child hair in an attempt to make their parents life less complicated in maintaining the hair style of their female wards.

A trip across the country, visiting the various senior high schools will familiarize one with copious results of the policy under discussion. Girls appear like boys with feminine bodies. Hard bony faces free of hair on their head, bald headed girls! Dreary and barren like dry trees bereft of their tender leaves on account of the biting harmattan wind. The girls look hardened, masculine-faced and overcome! Setting one to think whether such external harsh defacement would have no repercussion on their self-esteem and view of life. Lina<sup>1</sup> recounts her ordeal and endurance of mutilation under the head mistresses' scissors, at the time when she had escaped all snares in order to celebrate the coming Christmas with some good amount of hair. Stories of this kind abound among girls who have suffered variously in similar vein. Some mistress has also boasted of teaching hard lessons to stubborn girls with their scissors, confirming the practice. The way the Ghanaian society treats these girls and continues to do so, sets the tone for the general attitude prevalent within the Ghanaian culture, and in this case, it is humiliating and contemptuous in the context of cultural identity.

The findings also reiterated the claims that girls who groom their hair in pre-tertiary schools will not be able to concentrate on their education and the girls' hair are trimmed to make them look presentable. However, studies have ascribed beauty to lush and long hair as marker of femininity (Chapman, 2007), which supports the African concept of beauty, which is functional. On the contrary, some respondents compared the Westerners' girl-child hairstyles that are not trimmed yet some of them perform well academically

and therefore conclude that trimming of hair may not necessarily lead to better academic performance because several causative factors trigger poor academic performance. Another core comment from a respondent reiterates that long hair does not diminish intelligence, instead with the right training and education; intelligence is boosted leading the individual to become a more responsible, confident and self-reliant adult.

## CONCLUSION

The notion of the need to perpetuate cultural sustainability through tangible and non-tangible cultural values are enshrined in many adornments and among them is the hair, which must be managed stylistically from African perspective without any hair additives to portray the rich values of the African culture. On the level of non-tangible values from an ontological perspective, African hair styling exhibits innate natural qualities of girls, confirmatory admiration of others and supports nature's endowment.

Maintaining African Identity through African hairstyles trigger confirmatory admiration of the bearers. People admire and wish for girls to have long hair. Existence is not only intrapersonal limited to self, but also interpersonal, depending heavily as well, on what others give to, think of, and expect of us. Therefore, for girls to wish for and groom their hair, they should receive support from the society to advance their wish, finding themselves in admiration of the aspiration of girls as regards their desire for long hair. This saying is often used by Akans to signify their admiration of their neighbours hair; "ɛna ebu wo kɔn sei!" Literally meaning, "Cascading over your neck!" Girls want to have long hair and society also support and affirm the idea because girls and women look more beautiful with lush hair than without. Therefore, beautiful women and girls are received more favorably and treated in more positive light

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by society (Patzner, 2008). Lastly nature has bequeathed long hair to girls and women for natural endowment. It is in the grooming of her hair that a female distinguishes herself in the domain of elegance and beauty. Not even in her earring primarily. It is in allowing her hair to grow and set elegantly and exquisitely, that a woman sets herself apart, exuding respect and dignity from society. Girls should therefore be supported to groom what nature has given them, and not deprive them of it. It is not for nothing that women are those considered in the “beauty culture” (Taga, 2012:3).

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Lina, is the pseudo name for a lady interviewed in 2021 by the authors, who recounted her ordeal of cropping of her hair by the Headmistress, during the final year in the secondary school. She had managed to grow her hair some inches long. However, she managed to keep it always pressed to escape the prying eyes of the Headmistress. But the day came when she was called out and given a clean shave!

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