

## **African women's hairstyles as communication media - A comparison between young and old women's hairstyles -**

**Kindavyi Lorraine and Kwon Young Suk<sup>†</sup>**

Dept. of Clothing & Textiles, Pusan National University /  
Korean Traditional Costume Research Institute, Korea

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the different communication messages behind African women's hairstyles, and to compare young and old African women's hairstyles. The contents of this research are: the hairstyle as communication media, the types of African women's hairstyles, and the difference between young and old women's hairstyles. We used a review of literature and an empirical study as the research methods for this study. For the literature review, we used papers on African hairstyles, and we linked hairstyles to corresponding communication. For the empirical study, we took a database of 240 pictures (120 pictures of young women and 120 pictures of old women) from websites related to African hairstyles and we analyzed the pictures to differentiate between young and old African women's hairstyles. The results of this study reveal that African women's hairstyles express messages of power, ceremony, and status and identification communication. Within the 240 pictures, we found out which hairstyles are preferred by young and old women. Young African women prefer long, straight hairstyles and artificial hair (wigs), while old women keep short, natural hairstyles. The result of this research will be useful for understanding African women's hairstyles as well as contribute to the field of hair design.

*Keywords: African hairstyle, beauty, young hairstyle, old hairstyle, hairstyle as communication*

### **I. Introduction**

Hair is a mode of expression and the way a woman hairstyle image appears, gives impression on image personality. With image personality, a woman can look perfectionist, kind even confident (Kim & Lee, 2011). In Africa, the outlook of women's hair has been seen as the most special thing in the body. The hair gives importance to the African woman, and let her to feel proud to be a woman. Hairstyle is very important thing as one being dressed up. African civilization had variety of different hairstyles; women still wearing, inspiring ancient African hairstyles in

the world. They had symbolic hairstyles because of tribal traditions. Hairstyles for Africans and for black-Americans are ever-changing, yet deeply rooted in the past history.

From Africa perspective, hairstyle is a type of hair arrangement taken as a mode of African art. African women create different styles of hairstyle on how they can be more beautiful. African women believe that to make decorative hairstyles enhance their beauty. At the infancy, a little girl has already the mind that to let grow the hair is one of the things which give the beauty. The African cultures agree on the importance of encouraging young women from childhood to

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<sup>†</sup> Corresponding author (kwonys@pusan.ac.kr)

grow their hair.

This research is needed to understand the African women hairstyle. African civilization is rich in different hairstyles therefore, there is need to know and study more deeply about African women hairstyle, know how to create these hairstyles and the way its influence the field of beauty. Making hairstyle had social implications and had a significant part of community life such to identify the tribe of a woman.

The purpose of this research is to examine different communications messages which are behind the African women hairstyle and to make a comparison between young and old women.

## II. Review of Literature

African woman's hair is a symbol of the glory and manifestation of the femininity. African Hair is taken as a key indicator of a woman's health and beauty. The Western standard of beauty defines beautiful hair as that which is long and preferably straight. The constant coverage of Black women suggests that their hair need to be changed in order to be perceived as beautiful (Thomas, 2013).

African hair was called by the term *negra* was essentially to represent the images of Black women. African hair texture has long been used as an indicator of racial background and a basis of racial classification (Caldwell, 2003). Jackson (2001) accurately contends that hair issues are always inextricably tangled up with other trajectories of difference, including age, skin tone, class, gender, and occupation (Jackson, 2001).

In African history, hairstyle begins with black Afro-American women at the time of slavery. And the comb was always the instrument to make the hair looks nice. Hair is considered as a sign of communication and the way someone wears or dress his hair can reflect his gender, his status in community, his origin, his role as a leader or his place in life (Sieber & Herreman, 2000).

Quinn, Quinn and Kelly (2003) argued that African natural hair is curlier hair and is more difficult to comb, which limits the ability to achieve many popular hairstyles. Pressing and chemical relaxing are used to make long and straight the natural. By relaxing African hair, women can achieve the widest variety of hairstyles (Quinn et al., 2003).

The natural African hair which is called also "Afro" consisted in its rejection of straightened style and short haircut. With the comb, hair was encouraged to grow into its characteristic rounded shape. The mode of appearance in everyday world, the ways someone shapes and styles his hear may be seen as individual's expression and embodiments of society's norms, conventions and expectations. Through African style, each black hair style wants to revalorize the ethnic signifier and the political significance of the hairstyle (Mercer, 1987).

Africans believe in themselves that to straight their hair is a means to fit into the new world. When Europe explored the West coast Africa in 1444, there was the vibrant lifestyle of African people in addition to their artistic hairstyles (Douglas, 2007). Women's hair would be arranged in elaborate patterns and designs to keep it nice; thus began the ritual and importance of African hair. African women were required to look as White in appearance as possible. In 1960s began viewing hair as a political statement and a symbol of the Black power movement (Bellinger, 2007).

Several citations confirm those African women hairstyle has been and always a mean of communication. Sylvia Ardyn Boone an anthropologist specializing in the Mende culture of Sierra Leone wrote that a women with long thick hair demonstrated the life force, the multiplying power of profusion, prosperity, a green thumb for raising bountiful farms and many healthy children. Hairstyle can tell what is going on in a woman's life or about her personality. The authors Tharps and Byrd say that in the early fifteenth century, hair served as a carrier of messages in most West

African societies (Kwekudee, 2012).

### III. Research Method

#### 1. Review of literature

This paper is written focused on overseas of literature on African hairstyle and site related to the African hairstyle. The papers used were based on the history of African hairstyle, how the hairstyle was significant for African people. In research work done by Sieber and Herreman (2000), they argue that as women made hairstyles there was significance behind the hairstyles. Kwekudee (2012) based on the African women hairstyles pictures; confirms that African women hairstyle could communicate their life style, their personality. According to Afritorial (2013) in Republic Democratic of Congo in Mangbetu tribe, women made head elongation hairstyle to mark their attachment to their ancestors.

#### 2. Empirical study

This study was conducted from September 2014 to March 2015. In empirical study, we use observation as instrument to find messages behind the African hairstyles (example: a woman could wear an elaborated hairstyle because she wants to attend the traditional ceremony; then with that qualification we classify that hairstyle reflected the ceremony). By observing pictures, we find out the meaning behind these hairstyles and we categorize them according to the messages that they express. For the comparison between young and old women, our sample was composed by 240 pictures retrieved from internet on the sites related to the African women (120 pictures for young and 120 pictures for old). Within 240 pictures we find 14 types of African women hairstyle that we classify in 3 main types: Natural hairstyle, Covering hairstyle and Artificial hairstyle. As African women style divers hairstyles, they make different choice such curly, wavy hairstyle (Sumpter, 2015). Old women as they make hairstyle, they like short natural hairstyle and others

put the shape as hairstyle (Londergan, 2011).

### IV. Results and Discussions

#### 1. Hairstyle as a communication media

Among the pictures observed concerning hairstyle as communication media, the results indicate that African women hairstyle as communication media gives the message such: power communication, ceremony communication, status communication and identification communication. Among the 4 types of hairstyles as communication, we identified that one could announce the: royalty, politic, spiritual, prosperity, royal tribes, ceremony, geographic region, tribes and marital status. These hairstyles were elaborated in the way that they have each one his proper design in order to make difference between women from different tribes.

##### 1) Power communication

###### (1) Prosperity

In Africa, a woman with a long stick hair style shows the power as prosperity. A woman from Gogo tribe in Tanzania wore a hairstyle which had the position to go above. This hairstyle with long thick hair demonstrates the life force, the multiplying power of profusion, a 'green thumb' for bountiful farms and many healthy children (Kwekudee, 2012) (Fig. 1).

###### (2) Spiritual

A Fanta woman of Elmina in Gold coast (Ghana) with the hairstyle in a wooden engraved drawing could communicate with the Divine Being. Because the hair is the most elevated point of the body, it is believed and means to be closely connected with the divine (Kwekudee, 2012) (Fig. 2).

##### 2) Ceremonial communication

###### (1) Initiation ceremony

A young girl in Fanta tribe in Ghana styled the

hair into a royal coiffure that is worn for a brief period during a final phase of taking part in society. The hair is worked into a shaped chignon with plaits tied (Sieber & Herreman, 2000). In the occasion of Ohango ceremony, Mbalatu Wambo group girls, in Namibia, wore hairstyle made of long braided sinew (eefipa). This style is worn by young women who take part in the ohango (at the age of approximately twelve years, girls started preparing their hair for later headdresses) ceremony (Gondwanatravel, 2012) (Fig. 3).

(2) Marriage announcement

For the announcement of the eligibility for becoming a wife, Akan tribe young girls wore elaborate coiffures adorned with white gold ornaments (Sieber & Herreman,

2000) (Fig. 4).

3) Status communication

(1) Royalty

The Queen mother from Oba tribe in Benin Kingdom wore a distinguished hairstyle with a coral-bead crown, which had a high forward pointing peak with an elaborate coiffure named "chicken's beak". This hairstyle was attributed for the Queen mother (Ajala, 2011) (Fig. 5).

(2) Marital status

A wife of the Niao chef in Gagna tribe (Ivory Coast), wore a distinguish hairstyle with a hair high, arched forehead is lined with a series of braids that



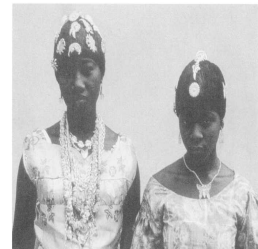
<Fig. 1> Prosperity communication. From. Kwekudee (2012). <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.kr>



<Fig. 2> Spiritual communication. From. Kwekudee (2012). <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.kr>



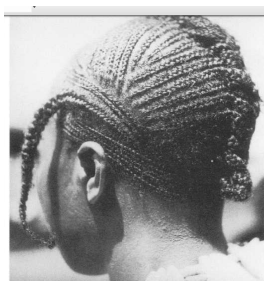
<Fig. 3> Initiation ceremony. From Sieber & Herreman (2000). p.55



<Fig. 4> Eligibility for marriage. From. Sieber & Herreman (2000). p.58



<Fig. 5> Royalty. From. Ajala (2011). p.4



<Fig. 6> Marital status. From. Sieber & Herreman (2000). p.62



<Fig. 7> Tribe. From. Kwekudee (2012). <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.kr>

end in the neck, while the top of her head is covered with many separated braids that are interwoven at the back. The separate braids create a chignon at the base of the neck (Sieber & Herreman, 2000) (Fig. 6).

### (3) Tribe

Women from Fulani clan in West Africa wore the complex coiffure and hair ornaments. Igbo tribe (Nigeria) woman wore hairstyle with coiffure in form of crest with ornament and comb. Woman from northten Dan village of Biankuma in Ivory Coast, had the high forehead, lined with a braids at each side, between the ear and the cheek (Kwekudee, 2012) (Fig. 7).

### 4) Identification communication

#### (1) Geographic region

The Mwila tribe girl in Angola, to distinguish their region, wore a certain unique process of hair creation; they use mixture of ground ochre and fat, called 'otjize' (Kwekudee, 2012) (Fig. 8).

#### (2) Politic significance

A Fouta Djallon Peul woman from Iabe, Guinea wore the hairstyle to express a desire to 'return to the roots' among black peoples in the Diaspora. The hairstyle had a head-start by initially plaiting long strands of hair. The style presupposed quite artificial

techniques to attain his characteristic shapes (Mercer, 1987). A black American woman could wear Afro hairstyle as the way to "show a visible connection to the African ancestors and Blacks throughout the Diaspora. Also the afros style, were viewed as making a civilian statement when that was not always the intention of those one wearing this hairstyle (Douglas, 2007) (Fig. 9, 10).

### 2. Analysis of African hairstyle as communication media

In 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century as African women wore different elaborated hairstyle; there was significance behind their hairstyle. According to the regions or the tribes, women wore hairstyle that could differentiate from another woman. As they made different hairstyles, they wanted to express the social, traditional, ritual significance or their belonging, membership even to indicate a time. Example young women may wear style that shows that they are open to marriage.

### 3. Types of African women hairstyle

By examining 240 pictures, 120 pictures of young and 120 for old women, we identify 14 different types of hairstyle (Fig. 11) that we classify in 3 main types of hairstyle which are: Natural hairstyle, Covering hairstyle and Artificial hairstyle. The Natural hairstyle includes long straight hair, curly weave, chignon,



<Fig. 8> Geographic region.  
From. Kwekudee (2012).

<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.kr>



<Fig. 9> Political significance.  
From. Mercer (1987). p.43



<Fig. 10> Political significance.  
From. Douglas (2007). p.6

shaved, shaved with necklaces, short natural, short straighten, afro natural and short with necklaces. The Covering hairstyle includes: big shape related to the cloth, simple shape and shape with necklaces. The Artificial hairstyle contains: braid style and wig.

Among 120 pictures; long straight wig (Fig. 12), short natural curly weave (Fig. 14), chignon, braid style (Fig. 13) are the hairstyles which are mostly preferred by young women. Other hairstyle like: simple shape, short straighten, shaved style, afro natural, short style with necklaces, big shape style related to the cloth, shape style with necklace are less preferred by African young women. African young women like the hairstyles with long design, example: long straight hairstyle, the braid style, chignon and the wig style.

As the figure indicates (Fig. 15), the short natural (Fig. 16), simple shape (Fig. 17), big shape related to the cloth (Fig. 18), and short with necklaces style are mostly preferred by old women. Along these hairstyles, the common characteristic is that old women

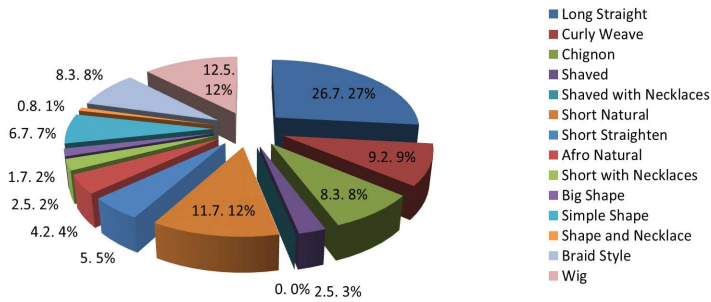
like to make the simple hairstyle which helps them to cope with the ageing, example: short natural, simple shape.

#### 4. Comparison between African young and old women hairstyle

##### 1) Natural hairstyle

For the Natural hairstyle, the hairstyle for young is beauty than old women. The reason is that, old women because of the age, they don't keep the same beauty like young women, as they get old, they lose their hair. This explain why old women most of time, they keep the natural hair or they shave.

The chignon hairstyle, is liked by young because of the fact that they have plenty of hair but old women some of them can't make this hairstyle because they don't have much hair as young. Concerning the shaved style even is a hairstyle without hair, it shows up the beauty. And for young women, they style it



<Fig. 11> Graduation rate for African young women hairstyles



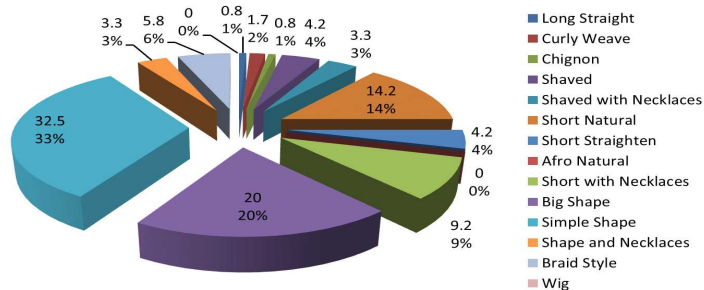
<Fig. 12> Long straight hairstyle.  
From Allen (n.d).  
<http://hairstylesweekly.com>



<Fig. 13> Braiding hairstyle.  
From Aguilar (n.d).  
<http://www.shelookbook.com>



<Fig. 14> Short natural hairstyle.  
From Deutsch (n.d).  
<http://www.headshotsnyc.com>



<Fig. 15> Graduation rate for African old women hairstyle



<Fig. 16> Short natural hairstyle.

From. Demographics of Tanzania (n.d). From. Demographics of Tanzania (n.d).

<http://en.wikipedia.org>



<Fig. 17> Simple shape hairstyle.

<http://en.wikipedia.org>



<Fig. 18> Covering hairstyle.

From. Adeoye (2013).

<https://yeyeolade.wordpress.com>

in hair beauty salon. But often; old women when they want to shave their hair they don't go to the hair salon, their neighbors or relatives shave them by using scissor or disposable razor because for old women the beauty is not important like young women. For that fact, (by using scissor) the beauty of that hairstyle cannot be the same like young women.

In short straight hairstyle as the resemblance between young and old woman, the hair is short but the beauty is not the same; old women because of the ageing their hair contains the gray. And for some old women when they want to keep the beauty of their hair they use the hair dye (most of hair dye in Africa women use yellow color even red) to hide the gray hair. With regard to the Afro natural hairstyle, this hairstyle doesn't exist for old women because as they advance in age at least they lose more than 50% of their hair.

### 2) Covering hairstyle

In Covering hairstyle, young and old women put loincloth as shape hairstyle. This loincloth can be related to the cloth or not. This hairstyle depends on the will of someone while she wants to appear more beautiful. Women in Africa when they make shape hairstyle, some of them put earring and necklaces. It depends of someone's choice. And some wear earring and necklaces which share same colors with the cloth. In Africa, old women by wearing shape as hairstyle, it doesn't mean that it is only the hairstyle but it has become like a culture because many of them like to wear shape either they stay home or they go somewhere.

### 3) Artificial hairstyle

African young wearing different hairstyle, they alternative with wig, braids or they put relaxer cream as the result of long straight. A young woman can

make braids and after a certain period of time like 3 months she changes by making wig or keeping her natural hair or straightening her hair. In the case of old women, a small number of them style braids because for making braids, it needs someone to have enough hair. This explains the reason why most of time old women don't put braids hairstyle. About the wig, most old women in Africa don't put wig they consider that is the hairstyle for young.

In Natural hairstyle; the long straight, curly weave and chignon are liked by young women, while for old women those hairstyles almost don't exist because these hairstyles require someone to have much hair.

In the short natural style, old women have a big percentage (14.2%) than young women (11.7%). As women become old, some of them prefer short natural because short natural style doesn't disturb them, another reason is that as they become old they have tendency to lose which means that they are not able to make a variety of hairstyle like young women. Young women, make short natural hairstyle just for a pleasure like one among other hairstyles.

In shaved with necklaces hairstyle, usually young women are not interested in it, as the statistic indicates this hairstyle is preferred by old women (3.3%). When old women make shaved style, some prefer to cover with a shape others to leave it.

In short natural and necklaces style, often old women (9.2%) make it in comparison with young women (2.5%). Afro natural hairstyle is not much worn. The fact is that the afro style asks a lot of care because his characteristic is nappatural (African hair that is exclusively kept in its natural state). Afro natural style appears and feels denser in head. The African natural hair is also called afro- textured hair. Afro natural style needs to be washed and to be combed every day and it is so hard to comb it because of his nature (strong and denser in head). This explain why African young women (4.2%) try to imitate white people by getting relaxed hair (long straight hair) which is easy to comb and to take care of it. For old

women, is not possible to make it because of the lack of hair. In Natural hairstyle, the effective for young women is 84/120 pictures while old women have 46/120 pictures.

In covering hairstyle, African old women are the ones who like to wear shape style. And most of time the shape that they make as hairstyle resemble to the cloth that they wear. For young women some of them don't care much about it, because they consider that is especially for old women. In comparison with old women, young women don't like the covering hairstyle because it supposed to hide their hairstyle while they want to show it. In covering hairstyle, according to the will of someone, some put the necklaces and the earring while other doesn't put them. The Covering hairstyle is preferred by old women than young. The effective is 67/120 pictures in comparison with young women who have 11/120 pictures.

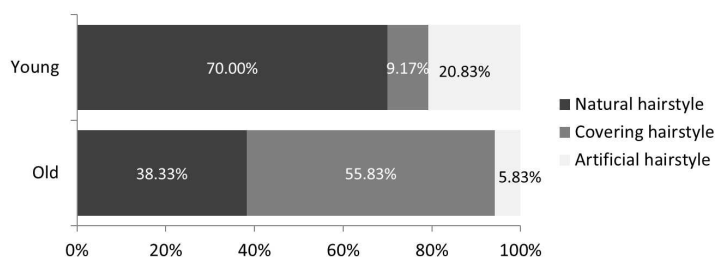
Artificial hairstyle is much liked by young women. As the table reveals (Table 1), wig style comes in second place (with 12.5%) after the long straighten hairstyle (26.7%) for young women hairstyle. Wig hairstyle is more appreciated by African young women because one of his characteristics is to be long straight hair and some of young women in lack of not having chance to get hair, they prefer to wear the wig in order to pretend that is their really hair. In general, young people like wig because it seems more beautiful than their hair. Braid is preferred by young women (8.3%) because braid style is beautiful, and according to the preference of someone, they can make divers types of braiding style (example: twist, single, cornrow braiding style) with divers colors of hair extension. Concerning old women (5.8%) in most of the cases don't make braids because its require someone to have enough hair. In Artificial hairstyle, the results come with 25/120 pictures for young while old women have 7/120 pictures.

This figure (Fig. 19) reveals that African young women prefer Natural and Artificial hairstyle in comparison with old women. The Covering hairstyle



<Table 1> Analysis of African young and old women hairstyle

Types of hairstyles		Young		Old	
Natural hairstyle	Long straight	32	26.7%	1	0.8%
	Curly weave	11	9.2%	2	1.7%
	Chignon	10	8.3%	1	0.8%
	Shaved	3	2.5%	5	4.2%
	Shaved with necklaces	0	0.0%	4	3.3%
	Short natural	14	11.7%	17	14.2%
	Short straighten	6	5.0%	5	4.2%
	Afro natural	5	4.2%	0	0.0%
	Short with necklaces	3	2.5%	11	9.2%
Covering hairstyle	Big shape (related to the cloth)	2	1.7%	24	20.0%
	Simple shape	8	6.7%	39	32.5%
	Shape and necklace	1	0.8%	4	3.3%
Artificial hairstyle	Braid style	10	8.3%	7	5.8%
	Wig	15	12.5%	0	0.0%
Total		120 pictures	100.0%	120 pictures	100.0%



<Fig. 19> Rates of each type of hairstyle

is mostly preferred by old women in comparison with young women.

### V. Conclusion

This study examined African hairstyle as communication media and the types of African women hairstyle which distinguish the difference between young and old women hairstyle. The hairstyle as communication media shows a significance of power, ceremonial, status and identification communication. Among the three main types of hairstyles which are Natural,

Covering and Artificial hairstyle, it comes out that the mostly young hairstyles are natural hairstyle and artificial hairstyle (long straight, braiding hairstyle) while old people prefer covering hairstyle (simple shape hairstyle). We can conclude that for young women, beauty is the most motivating factor for making a variety of hairstyles while old women keep a simple hairstyle like short natural hairstyle which helps them to cope with the aging. This emphasizes that the hairstyle of young people is more beautiful than old women hairstyle. The limitation of our research indicates the need to further investigate about the

history of African hairstyle since there is not much documented literature on the subject. This subject turns out to be important and delicate as it's informs about African hairstyle. Therefore, it's recommended in addition for future research, to extend this subject about African hairstyle.

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