3 CROWNING GLORIES: THE HEAD AND HAIR
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Human hair can be fashioned and manipulated in a seemingly endless variety of ways. Styling, treasling, shaving, uncovering, or covering the hair with hats and headdress, are cultural practices through which multiple identities are expressed. These identities may be based on personal values, gender, age, religion, or ethnicity. Some hair styles have endured over centuries, others have changed significantly and undergone multiple permutations over time. Popular hair styles respond to the accelerated tempo of contemporary fashion, gaining prominence for a short period of time and then fading into obscurity, quickly replaced by new creations or updated versions of older forms.

In many African societies, hair, as an extension of the head, is an especially potent material and special precautions often surround its manipulation and disposal. Among the Tuareg, hair is considered to be the outer manifestation of intelligence, and abundant hair is linked to noble status (Rasmussen 1994:85-6). A Yoruba child born with curly hair is thought to be sacred and is given the name of the curly-haired god, Dada. The hair of these children is considered to have supernatural or divine powers (Houblon 1979:376).

Distinctive hair styles are often reserved for special segments of society including royalty, religious specialists, hunters, and warriors. In many African societies, key participants in critical rites of passage, including coming of age, marriage, and funerary rituals wear special hair styles. Among the Yoruba, Mangbetu, Luba, and Chokwe, for example, distinctive hair styles were once the exclusive prerogative of high-ranking men and women. For Mangbetu men and women of the ruling class, the shape of the head (they practiced head elongation), elaborate hair styles, hats, and prestige ornaments to decorate the hair were an important aesthetic preoccupation (fig. 3.3). Schödlowitz and Keim note that women's hair styles changed significantly from the time that Schödlowitz first visited the Mangbetu in 1871 and Lang arrived in 1910. They described the 1910 hair style for royal women: “First string was wrapped around the forehead and much of the head. The long hair was then drawn around a basketry frame to produce a halo-like shape. Numerous hairpins of ivory, bone, or metal completed the style” (1900:126). Lang wrote of this hair style, “The basket like type, however, if once adopted is seldom abandoned. It needs rather long hair and women are proud of it” (Lang quoted in Schödlowitz and Keim 1990:127).

Many historical hair styles are no longer worn today, but are known from early drawings or photographs or are preserved in sculptural forms. In nineteenth-century Opposite. A. “Mangbetu coiffure.” [Mangbetu headdress], Northeastern Zaïre. Photograph by Cameret d’Ostria Zapponi, 1936. “L’Afrique qui disparait,” Series 1, no. 35. Elie Elison Photographs Archives. National Museum of African Art.


Zulu society, married men wore a head ring (isicoco) to signify their social status. It was the Zulu king who gave permission for an individual to assume the head ring. It consisted of a fiber or sinew circle into which the man’s own hair was woven. When the hair grew out, the head ring was cut off and replaced with a new one. In the early nineteenth century, married women among the Zulu wore a hair style equivalent to the men’s called nkholo. Women shaved their heads leaving a small oval or circular patch on the crown which they greased and colored with a mixture of animal fat and red ochre. This tuft of hair was worked into a top knot that resembled a truncated cone.

Some time in the mid-nineteenth century, this top knot became more elaborated and the tuft was lengthened by adding guasses which were worked into the hair and bound with fiber to create a more extended cone (Fig. 3.3). Covering the head was a sign of a woman’s respect for her in-laws, and married women wore a band (nompumulo) across the forehead as a material sign of this respect. Later, in the twentieth century, this hair style was replaced by a hat. Hats were constructed from a woven fiber base that was covered either by human hair or string dyed with a mixture of fat and red ochre. The requisite headband was attached to the hat itself or worn as a separate piece in addition to the hat (Fig. 3.4; Kennedy 1978, Conner and Pelrine 1983).

In Nigeria an elaborate Igboha hair style with curled extensions was formerly worn by young women in “coming out” ceremonies which announced their status as adult women and proclaimed their eligibility for marriage. While these elaborate hair styles are no longer worn today, they do still appear on skin-covered masks that are used in performances by men’s societies in southern Nigeria (Fig. 3.5). In the Grassfield kingdoms of Cameroon, high-ranking men formerly wore wrapped, tufted hair styles. This specific hair style appears on carved wooden masks and figures from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was the inspiration for the cotton prestige caps (aibinu) that are worn today by ranking men at non-Islamic festivals (Fig. 3.6). On ceremonial and ritual occasions, Fante royal wives and female priestesses wear distinctive horned wigs (akawo) fashioned into elaborate hair styles decorated with gold ornaments (Fig. 3.7). These wigs seem to have been inspired by actual Fante women’s hair styles worn in the nineteenth century in this region (Fig. 3.8; Cole and Ross 1977:fig. 29).

Yoruba hunters wear a distinctive braided hair style that falls down the back or
Figure 3.3, below. Zulu woman’s hair style (isikulu). During the latter half of the nineteenth century, women grew a tuft of hair several inches long to facilitate the creation of a truncated cone. To give the hair cone the desired volume, grass or paper hat was sometimes woven into the hair and the cone was smeared with fat and ochre. Photograph: postcard. Photographer, undetermined. "A Zulu Woman, Copyright L.A.97." Publisher, date, and printer undetermined. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The Photograph Study Collection.

Figure 3.4, above, front and back. Woman’s hat (nd vigorous). Zulu, South Africa. Human hair, pigment, twine, cloth. H. 29.0 cm. Private collection. Human hair is worked into the woven fiber base of this hat and then the whole is dyed with red ochre and fat mixture. A braided headband of commercial white yarn is attached to the hat.

Figure 3.5, left. Headress. Egba, Nigeria. Wood, paint, metal, bone, rattan, leather. H. 67.0 cm. FAMH 155.9043. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. The coiffure on this mask represents an older version of a young woman’s hairdo that was worn in coming-of-age days prior to marriage. Today these headdresses are worn for initiation and for funerals of members of certain men’s associations.

Figure 3.6, above left. Man’s hat (ojularu). Bamileke, Cameroon. Cotton, wood. H. 25.0 cm. FAMH 104.291. Museum purchase. Jerome L. Josi Endowment Fund. These cotton prestige hats have bands reinforced with wood and are reminiscent of an elaborate hair style once worn throughout the Grassfields area. This hair style is also carved on wooden masks from the area.

Figure 3.7, above middle. Fante women wearing elaborate wigs (akwaba) with gold ornaments in a procession at annual state festival (Fety Aboye). Cape Coast, Ghana. Photograph by Donn H. Ross, 1979.

Figure 3.8, above right. Nineteenth-century Fante women’s hairdress from southern Ghana. The Illustrated London News, April 4, 1874.

Figure 3.9, right. Egungun mask, Yoruba, Abeokuta, Nigeria. Wood, paint. H. 44.5 cm. FAMH 155.9031. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. This ancestor mask represents a hunter who wears a distinctive braided hair style. Hunters wear this braid either down the back or, as in this example, over the left shoulder.
on the left side of the head. Their hair is associated with strength and along with the medicine pouches they attach to their hats, it serves to protect them from the forces of the bush (Houiberg 1979:374). The same hair style and medicine pouches are often depicted on Egunmu masks that celebrate ancestral hunters (Fig. 3.9).

Historically, hair styles could also indicate religious affiliation. Modern men in Mali wore their hair cropped short, while their non-Moelmen neighbors, especially hunters and warriors, often wore their hair long and braided. Slaves among the Tuareg, Bamana, Yoruba, and in the Grassfield chieftaincies of Cameroon often had their heads shaved as a sign of their status. In Cameroon slaves were not allowed to wear hats, which were the sign of free adult men in these chiefdoms. Priests and priestesses among the Yoruba still wear distinctive hair styles today that distinguish them as members of particular Òrìṣà cults.

In Akan areas in Ghana, certain religious specialists of both sexes regularly appear with long unkept hair to which they add various spiritually potent objects such as gold pieces, coins, cowries, and bone (Cole and Rons 1977:22). Their unkept hair is more remarkable when compared to the carefully braided and styled hair of most Akan women and the short cropped hair styles of Akan men. Contemporary male adherents to the Bay Faal Murde Islamic sect in Senegal wear their hair long imitating the dreadlock hair style of precolonial solo warriors in the service of the Wolof kings (Colvin 1981). This Bay Faal hair style stands in sharp contrast to other Islamic Senegalese men who keep their hair cropped short. Among the Zulu of South Africa, most men and women keep their hair cut relatively short, however fiber wigs that imitate long twisted locks are worn by women diviners, a class of religious specialists (Fig. 3.10).

Among the Pokot, Karamojong, Turkana, Maasai, and Samburu in East Africa, young men of the warrior age-grade (morani) spend hours grooming their hair (Fig. 3.11). Intricately coiffed hair is a sign of masculinity, courage, and strength. Among the Pokot, mud-plastered coiffures are worn by young men, and the colors and the shape of these hair styles are prescribed and identify the wearer’s age-set. If an individual or group violates these rules by wearing colors, styles, or decorative elements to which they are not entitled it can lead to serious inter-age-set or intergenerational conflict. Jean Brown notes “These conflicts are ostensibly over personal ornaments, but actually express a thwarted desire for promotion” (1986:28). Individuals are, however, free to create decorative designs in their coiffures at will. Patterned striations are made in wet clay with a special spatula, color is applied, and feather holders and other decorative items are embedded in the mudpack before the clay dries. The blue mud-plastered hair style, achieved with commercial laundry blueing, identifies a man as a member of the junior age-set (Fig. 3.12; Cole 1974).

Maasai and Samburu warriors do not create mud-plastered hair styles, rather they twist their hair into hundreds of small braids, saturate them with fat and red

Figure 3.10. Wig, Zulu, South Africa, fiber beads, leather. H. 44.0 cm. FMCH X.36.67. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Brody. The donors have identified this wig as a Zulu female shaman’s wig, but its origins have not been independently confirmed.

Figure 3.11. above left. Mud cap. Pokot, Kenya. Mud, paint, ostrich feathers, wood, aluminum, human hair. H. 26 cm. FMCH X.36.366. Promised gift of Jerome L. Josi.

Figure 3.12. above right. A recently initiated Pokot man with feathered blue mud cap. His ochred frontal hair reflects his junior status. The haibdo has an old zipper imbedded spirally. Photograph by Herbert M. Cole, 1973.

Figure 3.13. left. Wig, Maasal, Kenya, Hide, fiber, beads, wood. H. 32.0 cm. FMCH X.12.123. Gift of Mrs. Papale Macnair. Wigs of twisted fiber sewn onto a fiber cap and twisted over wood forms are fashioned in the style of the plated coiffures worn by the warrior age-grade (morani). On important ceremonial occasions these wigs might be donned by men who had abandoned the practice of wearing the distinctive plated hair style on a daily basis.
ochre (obtained from iron-rich stones), and then they pull these braids forward and backward securing them to wooden pendants or wrapping them into a larger braid (Cole 1974, 1979). The Masaai fiber wig imitates the splendid braided hair styles worn by members of the warrior age-grade on a daily basis (Fig. 3.13). Warriorhood lasts about twelve to sixteen years beginning when a boy is initiated and ending when he marries as a man in his late twenties or early thirties. Once he marries, he ceases to participate in martial activities and dances, and he generally cuts his hair short as an indication of his new status in the community. Women in these ethnic groups either keep their hair cropped short or wear only short twisted braids from the time they are adolescents until they reach old age. Rather than hair styles, the focus of their aesthetic and symbolic elaboration is decorative headbands, metal and beaded earrings, and massive accumulations of beaded necklaces (Cole 1974, 1979).

Throughout much of Africa, most children’s hair is kept short, is periodically shaved, and remains relatively unadorned. However, in urban and rural areas in Mali, Senegal, and elsewhere in the region, many young girls today wear modest versions of the teased and braided styles of their older sisters. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, children’s heads are often shaved in bold asymmetrical patterns (Cole and Aniakor 1984:39, pl. 64). Himba boys’ heads in Namibia are also shaved into decorative patterns, and line drawings are created in the shaved areas (Gustavo Verweij, personal communication 1994).

Combs to style and decorate the hair are widespread throughout Africa and come in a variety of different woods, plant fibers, metal, and ivory (Figs. 3.14). Metal studs and ivory hair pins, porcupine quills, cowries, and glass beads were used in the past, and some continue to be used today to decorate the hair (Fig. 3.15). Among the Mangbetu, long ivory pins ending in flat discs were highly prized by both men and women (Figs. 3.1, 3.2). It is said that it took a full elephant task to make a single one of these hairpins and that only a master artist was capable of creating them (Schötrup and Kein 1990:130). Elsewhere in Central Africa the use of iron and copper nails inserted into elaborate coiffures is an ancient practice documented in a Kikuyu-period grave dating from the eighth to the thirteenth century AD. The nails excavated from this grave site have the same shape as more recent examples used by the Luba. People claim that the nails were used in the coiffures to symbolically lock in the power of chiefs and kings, who are associated with the introduction of iron technology into the area (Dewey 1993:21).

Headrests were used by many groups in eastern, central, and southern Africa (Fig. 3.17a-d). Among the Luba, many of these headrests were carved with a female figure as the central caryatid (Fig. 3.17b). Special attention seems to have been given to the rendering of the coiffure and the body scatification of these female figures, suggesting the importance of bodily adornment in Luba culture. While these head-
The naming ceremony of a newborn, an animal is sacrificed, the child's head is shaved and anointed with blood, and the name is pronounced. This ritual act constitutes the reincarnation of a specific ancestor in the person of the newborn child (Jahan 1963:333). Among the Yoruba, a newborn's hair is also shaved (except for sacred children) at the naming ceremony. This act is said to separate the newborn from the world of the spirits and to incorporate the child into the world of the living. The shaved hair is endowed with power and is incorporated into an amulet to ensure the good health of the child (Houborg 1979:368).

One of the first ritual acts performed in many coming-of-age ceremonies involves shaving the initiates' heads in order to accentuate their present state of childhood and to mark the beginning of their movement to a new adult status. Among the Odek and the Maaasi, both girls and boys undergo this head-shaving ritual. During this one-day ceremony, which may precede the final initiation rites by many years, the child's and the mother's heads are shaved in the morning, and later in the evening the child is given a new name (Kratz 1993:93).

Funerary rituals were often occasions for special practices regarding the hair. In many cultures close relatives of the deceased shaved their heads or went unshaven during the period of mourning. Spearer (1965:74) notes that among the Sambari it is believed that when a man dies, the contamination of his death infects the hair of his age-mates within a certain range of kinship, and in order to rid themselves of this contamination and aver misfortune, they must all shave off their hair soon after death; they are said to "share their hair" (Kong'or bupit). Formerly, among the Yoruba the head of the deceased was shaved as a rite of separation (Bacon 1969:66).

In Africa and in its diaspora, hair styles for both men and women are part of the ever-changing face of fashion. Contemporary African hair styles, as a popular art form, comment upon society and on the changing attitudes and values that shape people's lives. Some hair styles are created as social commentary, others celebrate topical events, others are inspired by popular music and other forms of media. Houborg documented a number of examples of older Yoruba hair styles that have been given new names based on more topical events and were then repopularized. She also found that certain older styles that had once been restricted to particular segments of Yoruba society (for example, royal wives) were now being worn by ordinary women. Her study suggests that the names for hair styles tend to change more rapidly than the hair styles themselves (1979:354-5).

In both African and African-American communities, there have been rapid shifts in hair fashions from the Afro styles of the sixties to the elaborate weave and shaped hair styles of the eighties and nineties. These hair styles convey a variety of different messages. First they serve as statements of individual creativity and indices of personal notions of presentation and aesthetics. Some, like the Afro styles of the sixties in America, communicated critical political ideologies. Often when this same style was adopted in Africa, it was viewed as a symbol of modernity and high fashion. Men's shaped cuts, popular among adolescents and young adults in African-American communities in the late eighties, were quickly embraced by African urban youth. In much the same way, the elaborately braided women's hair styles of the eighties and the nineties were worn simultaneously by women in Africa and in America, and these styles underscore the profound cultural links between African-American and African culture and the dynamic nature of con-
temporary transcultural exchanges.

Most of the very intricate tasseled and braided women’s hair styles and the sculpted and shaped men’s styles are created by professional hairstylists and barbers. In cities and towns in Africa and in America, hairstyling salons have sprung up to meet specific local demands. These popular hair styles are often labor-intensive and require a substantial investment of time and money by the client. Human and synthetic hairpieces and hair extenders, and a multitude of hair products designed specifically for the African and African-American markets, constitute a growing business (Fig. 3.18). Human hair extenders are sold in specialty stores, while packages of synthetic hair are available from salons and in local markets and shops (Jones 1994:277-297).

In African towns and cities, professional hairstylists and barbers often advertise and attract their clientele by commissioning painted signs displaying current fashions. Next to the painted signs, they may also present options to their customers thorough assemblages of images drawn from various national and international magazines. The paintings are generally rendered on wood with enamel paints. Names for the different hair styles are often printed directly on the signs, and this conjunction of images and words tends to establish the styles, as both signs and fashions circulate in and out of the urban centers.

Barber shop signs and other forms of hand-painted commercial art have been part of the vibrant urban landscape in Africa for at least half a century. Several different dates have been proposed for the origin of this commercial art form; the earliest suggested time is between the 1930s and 1940s and the latest in the 1950s (Lerat 1992:8). Many commercial barber shop signs are painted by self-trained artists, and the prices for signs continue to be based on the number and size of the painted heads. More recently in Bamako, Abidjan, and elsewhere, academically trained artists will sometimes produce these signs to supplement their incomes. The prices are, again, generally based on the number and size of the painted heads (Lerat 1992:14).

Sign-painting ateliers have been established in many urban centers from Bamako to Libreville. Many of the painters sign their names or a nickname, or use the name of their atelier on the paintings. In Kumase, there are several ateliers including “Almighty God Art,” “Unity Best Art,” and “Messian Art” (Krentz 1980:38, Lerat 1992:73). A Ghanaian barber, a recent immigrant to Bamako, brought several of the Kumase-produced signs with him. He told me in 1992 that he felt that the styles represented on the signs (“Fades” and “Box” cuts, which were popular in the 1980s in America) had been instrumental in attracting a younger clientele (Fig. 3.19). The paintings themselves are also rendered in a much more sophisticated manner than are the locally produced signs. The Kumase figures seem to have been originally copied from photographs in magazines or other media sources.

In Libreville, one of the most popular sign painters is Bikok T. Pierre, who was
born in Cameroon in 1940. In the late 1960s, Bikok came to Libreville as a young sign painter and in 1969 he received his first commission. Between 1977 and 1986, the number of salons in Libreville grew from about fifteen to about one hundred (LeRat 1989:51). Today, there is hardly a barber shop or hairdressing salon in the city that does not display multiple paintings by Bikok (Figs. 3.20, 3.21). Like sign painters in other parts of Africa, Bikok now regularly copies photographs from a variety of fashion magazines and other publications in order to keep current with the latest styles (Fig. 3.22). Working directly from photographs has changed how he renders his figures. In his early work he concentrated on relatively flat profiles which he outlined in black. In his more recent work, he has moved to three-quarter poses, as well as paintings of full figures which he renders in a more realistic manner (LeRat 1992:87–104; Fig. 3.23).

Today in Ramako, barbers not only commission signs painted on wood, but they buy paintings on cotton sheeting. The images on the cotton sheeting are in the same style as those on the wood signs and are clearly being produced by the same group of local artists. Many barbers who set up their temporary stalls in residential quarters, near markets, and in taxi and bus depots now commission paintings on sheeting. The sheets may be tacked up as banners stretching across the entrance of the stall or, in some cases, they are used to form the actual sides of the shop. More and more barbers also display large, commercially printed color posters as advertisements. Most of these posters are of African-American music groups, like High Five and Troop, who were popular in America in the late 1980s. The question remains if these commercial posters become more widely available and affordable, will they begin to replace the demand for hand-painted signs?

CONCLUSION

Much time and attention is paid to hair throughout Africa and its diaspora, and culturally specific beliefs and values associated with the head and hair underlie people’s notions of propriety, appropriateness, good grooming, beauty, fashion, and modernity. These beliefs and values, which have clearly been subject to modification over time, profoundly shape the manipulation of hair by men and women of different ages in everyday, ceremonial, and ritual contexts. The regenerative quality of hair and the ephemeral nature of hair styles, like hats that can be put on and taken off, make hair an excellent and dynamic vehicle for the visual expression of diverse and changing individual and social personas.

Figure 3.22. Left. Detail of a hairdresser’s sign by Bikok T. Pierre next to the fashion magazine that was its inspiration. Photograph by Philip Reventhr, 1989.

Figure 3.23. Above left. Barber sign. Bikok T. Pierre, Libreville, Gabon. Wood, paint. H. 62.0 cm. FACH 1950.0. Museum purchase, Mansu Fund. The women’s hair styles on this sign were popular in Libreville in the 1980s.