

## Symbolism of Hair Trends And Styles Among Women In Nakuru Town in the Post-Independence Period

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**Abstract:** Generally one's hair makes a statement about how they see themselves both internally and externally. Through the ages, styles and trends have changed especially among women most of whom perceive that, a bad hair equals a bad day. Hair and beauty is a booming industry. In Kenya, the average woman spends Ksh. 500 and almost two hours a month washing and styling her hair. This is not only because many of us believe that appearances are important, but also because our hair represents our personality, thoughts and beliefs. Head hair is similar to style of dress because it too, is easily manipulated, changed and given meaning. There are few things that hair has symbolized for women throughout history; these include femininity, identity, liberation, freedom and beauty. Many stereotypes have also surfaced assigning attributes to women based solely on the appearance of head hair. Generally, this research highlights the role head hair plays on determining a woman's overall physical attractiveness or beauty. Specifically, the paper attempts to address whether associations to personality have been assigned to women based on the colour and length of head hair. In addition, this study also seeks to answer questions such as: is a woman with coloured hair perceived happier? Are women with short hair perceived as being trustworthy? Which is the trendiest hairstyle among women in Nakuru? What factors do women in Nakuru town consider when deciding on a hairstyle? The researcher delved into interviews on individual and groups of women, hairstylists as well as unstructured interviews with men who accompanied their partners to the salons at the time of data collection. The researcher equally observed hairstyles worn by women across the streets as she collected data. This study provides literature to stakeholders in the hair and beauty industry, historians, artists, ethnographers, anthropologists, sociologists and the general public as a body of knowledge and reference material in studying and preservation of cultural history of communities in Kenya.

**Keywords:** Hair, Hair styles, hair trends, women, Nakuru

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Hairstyle and trend are the latest words which seems interchangeable. The difference between these two words is that, style changes for a particular season, climate or weather, but trend has a specific tenure which people follow and go through. This could be six months, 1 or 2 years tenure but sometimes it may extend as well because of the unique style. Style and trend sometimes mean the same or actually, have the same meaning with a different word because both have the same work to do. One can be said to 'follow the trend' as in wearing the latest styles or fashions. A hairstyle is the most universal and unavoidable form of body art. Hair reacts to our state of well being. This includes our physical, spiritual and emotional bodies. Emotionally, if we are in balance, our hair grows and looks beautiful as personification of our inner self. Under stress many people have experienced hair loss or the hair loses its texture and sheen.<sup>1</sup>

Hair has represented life, strength, energy, vitality, and the power among several communities in the world. For instance, both long locks and bald craniums have demonstrated political power and its absence. Its removal has signified surrender, rejection of the feminine or material worlds, as well as the bonding of martial groups. Loose hair has sometimes expressed freedom, sorrow and rebellion, just as disheveled hair has also been a common, but not universal, sign of grief. Bound hair may signify marital status or even subjugation. Prisoners,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Harris & P. Johnson (eds). *Tender headed: A comb-bending collection of Hair stories*. New York: Pocket Books, 2001.

slaves and soldiers have all endured the imposition of short hair.<sup>2</sup> Styles vary with one's career, age, ethnic and racial backgrounds, genetic, health, religious beliefs among other factors. Colour can be changed as can style.<sup>3</sup>

It is an understatement to suggest that, hair is merely part of African cultural identity, as hair and identity are inseparable. Hair is deeply symbolic, and its meaning extends into multiple dimensions of Black culture and life. This meaning is both deep and wide; in other words, hair has both spiritual and religious meanings. It may play an essential socio-cultural role and at other times its meaning may serve as a method of self-expression. Hair styling was an art that began from birth in Africa. Hair was not only for beauty purposes but was a symbol of gender, age, marital status, spirituality, political and social status in the society. Ceremonies and festivals, in particular, were characterized by specific designs, with every clan and 'tribe' representing their cultural hair styles.<sup>4</sup> Among the Nigerians, for instance, hair styles used principles of art and design such as curves, zigzags, horizontals, perpendiculars and straight lines.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, Black women's choices about how to wear their hair have been informed by societal pressures to adopt Eurocentric standards of straight hair. They therefore face biases that hinder their advancement. These biases may result from a perceived lack of fit between women's stereotypical attributes and the attributes necessary to perform effectively in society. Thus the biases may influence the choice of hairstyle and trend. To the researcher's knowledge, no previous research has investigated the above task in Nakuru town thus the need for the study.

### **Objectives of the study:**

The paper was guided by the following objectives:

- a) To determine whether associations to personality have been assigned to women based on the colour and length of hair in Nakuru Town
- b) To identify the trendiest hairstyle among women in Nakuru town
- c) To determine factors that women in Nakuru town consider when deciding on a hairstyle

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is extensive literature on hair and its symbolism in many global cultures. This selected literature contributed to the understanding of the subject. Some of the most recent publications were reviewed to understand the centrality of hair to Africans and other communities in the world. Hair was and continues to be used as a marker of various cultural indications. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Africa, hairstyles were used to indicate a person's marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth and rank within the community. Once enslaved, hair became a symbol of the labour one was forced to do. For instance, field slaves often hid their hair, whereas house slaves had to wear wigs similar to their slave owners, who also adorned wigs during this period.<sup>6</sup>

Globally, hair has undergone a revolution through invention of various modes to make it appear longer and shiny. In the early 1900s, C.J. Walker, a writer and a hairstylist, received a patent for developing the "hot comb" also known as a "pressing comb". This device was the first of its kind to be marketed by a black woman to other black women, and it completely changed the hair game. Once the straightened hair was exposed to moisture, however, it would revert back to its original state. In the 1960s, George E. Johnson's chemical straightener, also known as a "relaxer" was promoted as a less damaging product to the hair and scalp. This was a convenient way to straighten hair since it could be applied at home and it was more permanent.

In the contemporary age, it is estimated that 80% of black women chemically straighten their hair. The other finding was that in the 1980s, weaves raised the black beauty bar even higher to hair that was not just straight, but also very long. Hair weaving is a process by which synthetic or real human hair is sewn into one's own hair. Currently many Celebrities have openly admitted to wearing weaves to make their hair appear longer.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>M. Godley. "The End of the Queue: Hair as Symbol in Chinese History" *East Asian History*, Vol. 1, No.8, 1994, pp. 53-56.

<sup>3</sup> E. Minarovičová. "History of Hairstyles in the Mirror of Ancient Coin" *BIATEC*, Vol. 13, No. 10, 2005, pp.26-27.

<sup>4</sup> T.A, Johnson and T. Bankhead. "Hair It Is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2014, pp. 86-100.

<sup>5</sup> E. Adiji. "Visual Documentation of Traditional Nigerian Hairstyles and Designs as a means of Expressing Social & Cultural Heritage through Photography" *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences*, Vol.3, No.6, 2015, pp.23-33.

<sup>6</sup>S, Tate. "Black beauty: Shade, hair and anti-racist aesthetics", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 30, No.2, 2007.pp. 300-319.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Europeans, who had long traded with Africans, knew the complexity and significance of Black hair. They were often struck by the various hairstyles that they saw within each community. In an effort to dehumanize and break the African spirit, Europeans shaved the heads of enslaved Africans upon arrival to the Americas. This was not merely a random act, but rather a symbolic removal of African culture. The shaving of the hair represented a removal of any trace of African identity and further acted to dehumanize Africans coming to the Americas in bondage.<sup>8</sup>

Growing dreadlocks, a hair practice usually associated with the Rastafarian movement, has become increasingly popular among people of African descent globally. In concert with other "makers," dreadlocks became a symbolic accompaniment to oppositional collective identities associated with the African liberation/Black Power movements. Its spread among African liberationists, womanists, radical artists of African descent reflected counter-hegemonic politics. From a combined new social movement and African cultural studies perspective, this research traces the sociopolitical and historical phases of "locking." In the contemporary politics, dreadlocks are perceived to play the role of boundary demarcation, consciousness and negotiation.<sup>9</sup> The selected sources above lay a foundation in the understanding of diverse hairstyles and trends adopted by African women over the centuries in order to conform to the set standards by the Europeans. The study of dreadlocks as a natural trend indicates a perception considered as an example of culturally contextualized everyday resistance.

Manning conducted a study on the role of hair and its use in establishing group identity and self expression among women in the USA. The author notes that, many stereotypes have surfaced assigning attributes to women based solely on the appearance of head hair. These stereotypes include "women with short hair are perceived as trustworthy", "women with longer dark hair are perceived as happier". This study was conducted through random survey sampling administered on the Western Connecticut State University, Midtown Campus.<sup>10</sup> The paper has made the most significant contribution towards our understanding of the role of hair in determining a woman's overall physical attractiveness and beauty.

### **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Design**

An exploratory research methodology was used which initializes the data and explores the possibilities of obtaining relationships between variables without knowing their end implications.<sup>11</sup> The research provides a basis for general findings and provides a basis for further intensive research in the future.

#### **Study Site**

The study was carried out in Nakuru town because it is a multicultural region that represents all cultures and women of different economic status. Furthermore, Nakuru was purposefully selected because it is a residential area, an economic hub, a transit town and the Nakuru county Administration headquarters.

#### **Sampling and Data Collection**

Although, the precise number of salons in Nakuru town is unclear, it is estimated that there are at least 440 salons in the town. This made it difficult to employ probability sampling approaches in selecting participants. Accordingly, a non-probability convenience (availability) sampling approach was employed to select sampling elements in this study. A convenience sampling approach is one which the elements chosen for inclusion in the sample are those that are available to the investigator, such that all the population elements do not have an equal chance of being selected.<sup>12</sup>

The study targeted all adult women aged over 18 years at the salons at the time of data collection. The age limit was informed by the view that women below 18 years old were not responsible for their hairstyles and trends because this was determined by their parents or guardians. The researcher used interviews to women and hairstylists. Informal conversations were held with men who accompanied their partners to the salons. Beside interviews at individual levels, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also employed. As indicated by Marshall and Rossman, many participants (as in a group discussion) allow for more in-depth information gathering, as the ideas, beliefs and opinions presented by other members of the group will be reflected and added to by other

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<sup>8</sup> I. Ebong, *Black Hair: Art, Style and Culture*, Universe, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> M. Kuumba & F. Ajanaku, "Dreadlocks: The Hair Aesthetics of Cultural Resistance and Collective Identity Formation," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1998, pp. 227-243.

<sup>10</sup> J. Manning, "The Sociology of Hair: Hair Symbolism among College Students," *Social Sciences Journal*: Vol. 10, No. 11, 2010, pp.35-48.

<sup>11</sup>R. Panneerselvam, *Research Methodology*. PHI Learning, 2004.

<sup>12</sup>R. S Ozdemir & K.O Topbas, "Public Attitudes toward Stuttering in Turkey: Probability versus Convenience Sampling" *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, Vol. 36, No.1, 2011, pp.262-267.

members. Focus group discussions are richer than one-on-one interviews, as participants are able to reflect on the topic being discussed and share ideas with the rest of the group.<sup>13</sup>

English and Kiswahili were used in the interviews as appropriate to the groups. This was reinforced by non-participant observation. The total number of salons randomly sampled was 71. 3 women were conveniently sampled from each salon. In total 220 respondents were successfully interviewed. This included 150 women, 40 hairstylists and 30 men

#### **Scope and Limitation of the Study**

This study covered the post-independence period in Kenya. Specifically, the study encompassed aspects of hairstyles and trends and the results presented here are limited to Nakuru town and cannot be used to represent the whole county or country. Few problems were encountered in the administration of this study. Most women and hairstylists at the salons were willing to participate in the study although there was a small percentage that seemed uncomfortable. This was mitigated by the extensive use of Focus Group Discussions, observations as well as intensive reading of available literature.

### **IV. DISCUSSION**

This paper presents the findings from the research. This involves analyzing responses from the interviews guides. The themes underlying the scope of this study are based on the nature of the objectives.

#### **To determine whether associations to personality have been assigned to women based on the colour and length of hair in Nakuru Town**

Findings from this study indicate that perceptions of hair colour and length continues to change as fashion and media icons change. A lady in her mid 40s reported that “women with long hair look more youthful and attractive than those with short hair”<sup>14</sup> Another added, “women with longer hair are viewed by society as less socially forceful.”<sup>15</sup> 83% of the men rated long hair as more attractive than short hair for the dark-skinned and medium-skinned women but not for the light skinned women. Generally men viewed women with shorter hair as more masculine than women with long hair. Two stylists had the following contributions, “women in long black hair appear attractive, intelligent, happy, confident, trustworthy, respectable and feminine.”<sup>16</sup> The other added, “most of my clients colour their hair between 18-30 years but beyond that they prefer it dark since most men looking for marriage partners prefer women in black hair.”<sup>17</sup>

83% of the women interviewed acknowledged that, women are perceived as less intelligent or capable due to the colour of their hair. Some of the responses included, “Light skinned women are pretty regardless of the size of hair if the skin is flawless”.<sup>18</sup> “Red haired or blonde haired women are viewed as more highly valued in society sexually, while dark-haired women are greater preferred as marriage partners.”<sup>19</sup> 10% of the women considered the redhead with short hair to be happier than the redhead with long hair. The blonde with long hair was perceived to be more attractive than the blonde with short hair. 93% of the men mentioned that, they would prefer associating with light skinned women and that their hair colour or length did not matter. Though hair colour may not be the only defining factor in the assigning of roles to women in the society, it may have direct impact on how they perceive themselves, which may promote lower or higher self esteem. It is also reasonable to generalize that; labels may be assigned based solely on complexion, hair length and colour without regard for a woman’s actual personality.

#### **To identify the trendiest hairstyle among women in Nakuru town**

After data collection and analysis, results indicated that the trendiest hairstyle in Nakuru was braiding which was worn by 48% of all female respondents in the sample. Long black or brown shades of braids were most preferable among women aged between 18-30. This age group was either at university, colleges or recently employed. Natural trend followed worn by 40%. Dreadlocks were the most popular type of natural hair worn by 35%. It was observed that, dreadlock was a style gaining popularity among women of all cadres in Nakuru town. This was from an interview with the hairstylists in the town who generally asserted that, every day there is

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<sup>13</sup> M. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002, Inc.

<sup>14</sup> Jane Wanjiku, OI, 12 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Rose Chepkoech, OI, 13 May 2017

<sup>16</sup> Kefa Mwangi, OI,13 May 2017

<sup>17</sup>David Wambio, OI,15 May 2017

<sup>18</sup>Linet Wanbani, OI,15 May 2017

<sup>19</sup>Joyce Malobe, OI,16 May 2017

always a new client who want her hair locked. 81% of women who wore dreadlocks stated that this was the only unique style that releases a woman from the financial and physical burdens of hair straightening.

Dreadlocks though gaining popularity in the town attracted a number of complexities and this was noted from the varied perspectives. A woman in her mid thirties and a teacher in one of the schools stated that, “my boss rendered my long dreadlocks as less professional. I prefer coiling them in a knot to conceal their length”.<sup>20</sup> Another woman argued that she was fired from a bank for wearing dreadlocks and dressing in African clothing.<sup>21</sup> Another interviewee explained that, she always pinned up her dreadlocks when on duty at her job, stating: “I’m sure that if I hadn’t done that, they would have found any way they could to fire me”.<sup>22</sup> A sales representative commented that she always covers her dreadlocks when attending job interviews or in any new job situation to avoid negative stereotypes.<sup>23</sup>

A lecturer from one of the universities illustrated reasons for discriminations against women in dreadlocks in work places:

Although there are probably many reasons why women choose to conform to dominant aesthetic standards in the workplace, women conform primarily because they seek to minimize the perception that they are different from their colleagues and because they want to avoid the pitfalls of stereotyping. Moreover, by conforming, they can preserve their professional images, avoid negative career consequences, and fit in with their colleagues.<sup>24</sup>

From the above statement we can conclude that, “ethnic” hairstyles such as dreadlocks are sometimes not welcome in the corporate world.

Weave took the third position worn by 7% of the women sampled. Long, curled, coloured weaves were preferred. What did men really think about the weave? 80% of the men preferred natural hair if possible. Two in particular associated the weave and intimacy:

I have dated a number of girls wearing weaves and they tend to have smelly hair. Why would a woman depend on another woman’s hair? For this reason I’m not comfortable getting too close to them intimately.<sup>25</sup>

Weaves are fake. If a woman can fake her hair, she can fake love, affection and any other thing in this world. A woman who wears weave is not only plastic but untrustworthy.<sup>26</sup>

This view has gained popularity among social media groups. In 2016, a social media group, MAWE (Men Against Weaves) was formed in Kenya. Its objective was to express dissatisfaction with the uptake of the weave by the Kenyan woman. Indeed one member of MAWE said that he would rather die than date a girl who has a love for weaves. “I feel like she would be cheating on me with the weave.”<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand weave lovers seemed to support the argument above but with a different reason. One of the respondents argued:

Part of the reason why women wear weaves is because natural black hair is seen as inappropriate and socially unacceptable. We want to make our hair longer because our society believes that long hair is beautiful and looks nice.<sup>28</sup>

From the ongoing discussion above, it is likely that, the popularity of the weave persists among women because of perceptions of the ease of hair maintenance, prevailing norms of beauty, and the popular belief that, long straight hair is more attractive than tightly curled hair.

The chemically relaxed hair took fourth position worn by 3% of the sample where perm took the lead. On the other extreme end was the wig worn by 2%. Clean shave took the last position and was preferred by 1% of the respondents. These three trends did not attract criticism from the respondents interviewed.

### **To determine factors that women in Nakuru town consider when deciding on a hairstyle**

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<sup>20</sup>Ruth Kimani, OI,16 May 2017

<sup>21</sup>Susan Njeri,OI,17 May 2017

<sup>22</sup>Joyce Wamuyu, OI, 17 May 2017

<sup>23</sup>Winnie Kipchoge, OI, 18 May 2017

<sup>24</sup> Hannah Kipchuma, OI, 20 May 2017

<sup>25</sup> Joel Maingi, OI 21 May 2017

<sup>26</sup> Peter Njoka, OI 21 May 2017

<sup>27</sup>L. Maingi. “The Slow Death of the Wig and the most Popular Hairstyle in Nairobi,” *Salon Your and Beauty Solutions*, February 2015, p.14.

<sup>28</sup>Mary Osewe, OI 21 May 2017

There are many reasons why a woman would choose a hairstyle over another. In one of the studies conducted concerning fashion and change, Sharma highlights that, fashionable men and women do just what has not been done before they resort to doing what is being all around them in order to appear up-to-date and latest.<sup>29</sup> Thus 96% of all the respondents agreed with Sharma's view that, the need to look unique was the leading factor that a woman considers while choosing a hairstyle.

Cost was the second factor that determined style and trend. Results from the research indicate that less than 30% of the sampled female clients had incomes above Ksh. 20,000 per month. On the other hand, 52% of the sampled clients had incomes of more than Ksh. 5000 per month. In the urban context, particularly Nakuru, majority of the women have incomes that can hardly support their households. This state of affairs perhaps explains why a 77% cited cost as an important factor thus preferred braids and dreadlocks since the trends were cheaper and could be worn for more than a month.

Age is one of the most basic social categories of human organization and a primary factor in all societies for assigning roles because of the social and historical influences on members of an age group.<sup>30</sup> Well 15% of the sampled female respondents admitted that, age was a primary consideration in their choice of hair trend, style and colour. One respondent admitted that, "in fact, the importance of age and hairstyle increases with the prestige of the office or status held".<sup>31</sup>

12% of the hairstylists stated that there were factors they took into consideration when advising their clients on the hairstyle. These factors included hair texture, shape of the face, length of the neck and hair length. However, these were the least of the factors taken into consideration by 1% of the women interviewed.

The choice of hairstyle and trend is embedded in ongoing social relations and interactions. This study seems to concur with this assertion as 10% of the respondents cited media and peers having influenced their trend and style choices. The old adage that birds of a feather flock together seems to be vindicated with these results.

What is the occasion? How long will the event last? Is it taking place indoors or outdoors? Were some of the questions women considered in the choice of hairstyle and trend. 6% of the female respondents gave these as very key factors. Two respondents asserted, "If you are attending a wedding, you may opt for something more intricate and feminine. If your destination is a casual gathering, perhaps you can afford to be a little more laid back"<sup>32</sup>. The other added, "a club atmosphere where dancing will be a part of the plan, may warrant a more fun, free spirited style"<sup>33</sup>.

It was averred that a woman's marital status has a bearing on choice of trend and style. 3% of the female clients asserted that they had to seek an approval from the husband before changing a hairstyle. One in particular stated "there are days I will wear a very expensive hairstyle. If my husband disapproves it, I have to redo my hair first thing next morning"<sup>34</sup>. On the other hand, single respondents exhibited diverse hairstyles and hair colours. This can be explained from the perspective that, single respondents have less attachment to social bonds largely due to their younger age or probably that, they live outside family circles.

It was evident that, religious background exerted the least influence on the choice of hairstyle and trend. 99% of the respondents were Christians and affirmed that the choice of hair trend or style did not interfere with their activities or role in church. 1% of the female respondents stated that at times they covered their hair in selected activities such as attending an elder's burial, performing in a church choir and leading a bible verse to the congregation.

Finally, from the findings among the sampled respondents, ethnicity or clan, party politics and level of education were not important predictors of a hairstyle or trend among women in Nakuru town. This means that, if a guiding policy is developed by hairstylists and beauticians, it should pay more attention to the more significant predictors revealed above by this study.

## **V. Conclusion and Recommendation**

### **Conclusion**

It is persuasive to conclude that, hair is a social construct that is deeply connected to the identities of women. This research helps establish that within Nakuru town. Labels may be assigned based solely on

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<sup>29</sup> R. Sharma. *Social Change and Social Control*, Atlantic Publishers, 1997.

<sup>30</sup> R.G. Braungart, and Braungart, M. M. "Life-course and Generational Politics" *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 12, 1986, pp.205-231.

<sup>31</sup> Jane Chepkemoi, 01 15 may 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Pamela Kanini, 01 15 May 2017

<sup>33</sup> Jecinta Mwirigi, 01 16 May 2017

<sup>34</sup> Jecinta Osewe, 01 16 May 2017

complexion, hair length and colour without regard for a woman's actual personality. While braiding was the trendiest hairstyle in Nakuru town, dreadlocks, though not universally embraced by the larger society, are becoming more popular with women opting for a natural and an African expression. It is likely that the popularity of the weave and chemically relaxed hair persists among women in Nakuru town because of perceptions of the ease of hair maintenance, prevailing norms of beauty, and the popular belief that long straight hair is more attractive than tightly-curved hair. Based on the outcome of this research, the most considered factor when choosing a hairstyle and trend was the need to look unique and modern. Ethnic affiliations, level of education, party politics and religion were insignificant in trend and hairstyle choices.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Extension and enlargement of the research should be conducted and this will bring more views on the issues under consideration. It would be reasonable to study remote areas separately so that comparisons can be made for different social groups in Kenya. This will reduce the possibilities of falling into the trap of "urban bias". There is need for further studies on emerging themes such as, an analysis of the frequency with which women in Nakuru town change hairstyles and trends.

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