

On the issue of women's hair and women's personality
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There is no need to raise hairs over this matter of 'hair.' Men admire women with long hair or society says that long hair is beautiful. We women act like objects and respond to what we think they say or like. I was immediately drawn by Dr. Onwueme's piece and sighed: 'It's high time we begin to talk about it.' Popular culture, as Onwueme said, is definitely a factor here. Many people were shocked by the result of self-esteem survey conducted in 1998, because it showed that African American women were very high on self esteem while Caucasian women were low. This was attributed to the impact of the TV whose female characters were mostly Caucasian; TV that catered mostly to white audiences. The problem now is that American popular culture is global and this is why we should talk about it and do something, because no place is left out.

At the wake of all the controversy surrounding the untimely demise of Nigeria's former first lady while undergoing cosmetic plastic surgery, I reworked a piece not in her defence as a colleague wrongly said based on her cursory look at the paper, but an article that shows how all of us who point fingers at her are in the same ocean where we drink images of the tall thin long-haired woman. The article mostly looks at traditional beauty standards and how they have continuously been undermined by all of us groomed in the postcolonial or so called modern and now global beauty criteria.

I want to center my thoughts on this matter of 'women's hair' by looking at the female personality presented in traditional African mask expressions. I need to do this because they represent African ideologies and we are talking about African women. These expressions provide a broader perception of beauty than the one sold by the global network of beauty pageants, magazines, and television. Mask performances, particularly female spirit mask character that represents women, indicate appreciation of women of all sizes, shades, and shapes in African ethnic nations; while Western popular culture represents one image as the ideal; the tall, thin, white (preferably blond) woman. The most popular icon that represents this image is Barbie. No doubt, her image clashes with countervailing images of the female mask.

In performance, female masks epitomize societal views of the feminine: communal, moral, good form and features, nurturing, gentle, vigorous, and dynamic. Feminine personalities are varied and often complex in their mixture of traits, such as gentility and vigour that may appear contradictory in popular terms, but which are admired in many Nigerian contexts such as in traditional Igbo setting of agbala-nwanyị or the bold assertive woman, who nonetheless lives side by side with the fragile-looking esekelẹm-anwu (mosquito-like) woman.

Talking about female personalities, what about skin color? Health issues are also implicated in the quest for global image and the 'right' colour. We buy skin-lightening lotions; we make the cosmetic industries rich at the expense of our health. Skin-whitening agents such as hydroquinone, mercury, and steroids have very harmful effects. Hydroquinone, for example, inhibits the skin's production of melanin; an agent that protects the skin from the damaging effect of the sun. Black skin is noted for its large amount of melanin that is partly responsible for shielding it from sun burn (although the skin can burn in some circumstances), and guarding it 'against long-term damage associated with aging – the development of deep wrinkles, rough surface texture, and age spots (sometimes called liver spots)'. What kind of power drives women with melanin-rich skin to peel it off (this is what skin-lightening agents do) and endanger their health? Should one find consolation in the readiness of pharmaceuticals and health systems in general to manage ailments; for those who can afford them?

Eh hen! Talking about hair. It's not as if our mothers and grandmothers didn't have ways of managing their hair and looking very beautiful. Elaborately plaited and woven hair in different designs used to be major beauty enhancers. Plaited hair is beautiful, because of the patterns carved on the scalp showing the lines and shapes of units of plaits, which are hair that are tightly sculptured with threads. The style of the plaits are differentiated by their suggestive names, such as 'boys-follow-me' and kpafiga (referring to the skill of fingers in the production process). The styles display faces to advantage and are able to withstand rain, heat and harmattan cold weather, without breaking or sagging. Their designs promote confident personality and complement the artistic styles of female attires.

These styles are being replaced by the more expensive, time-consuming, and easily messed-up, chemically processed hair with Caucasian-inspired styles. Some of us argue that straightening the hair with chemicals is more manageable, but this is largely due to the decline of the industry that manages African hair and promotes its unique outlook. A similar situation exists in cosmetic usage where traditional cosmetics are fast disappearing. Cosmetics such as uli and egu used in making designs on the body, eye makeup like odo and otangele, as well as body rubs like uvie and ude-aki, have almost disappeared in the cosmetic apparatus of Nigerian women.

True, the decline in hair plaiting is mutating into a boon in hair scarves, which have become elaborate and stylish with suggestive names such as Yoruba derived onile gogoro (sky scraper) and Madam-Kofo (named after a Lagos socialite). This trend in fashion can be interpreted as a strong area of resistance and contribution to preservation of the African style as we continue to search for authentic ways of managing our hair and singing James Brown's 'and black and proud.'

Many of us don't own businesses that deal with women's personality and might feel that we can't help. We can help by talking about it, agreeing and disagreeing with sisters and brothers. We'll sing about it and write about it. They will hear. We also have to make individual decisions about how we patronise or don't patronise popular culture.