

TALKING HEADS: HEAD DRESS OF GA WOMEN IN 2012

SUBMITTED

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the head dress of Ga women as it is worn now in 2012. It investigates why the wearing of traditional head dress is no longer common and seeks to understand the choices Ga women are currently making in what head dress to wear. It further inquires into whether the head dress of Ga women reflects their status, role and beliefs as much of the literature on African head dress describes.

The study finds that traditional head dress is now viewed mainly as the preserve of those who practice Ga traditional religion and that ordinary Ga women are choosing not to wear traditional head dress because it is closely associated with this sphere. Chemically straightened hair is now the first option of choice for Ga women used along with braided extensions and European type hairstyles achieved through use of hair extensions, additions and attachments.

Through a case study this research demonstrates that traditional head dress has been worn in the past by ordinary Ga women as a fashionable choice. However, it is now seen as old fashioned and out of date. The case study also demonstrates that Ga women have always made choices outside of their traditional head dress and borrowed from other ethnic groups as well as adopted global trends. This study explores Ga women's attitudes to the wearing of traditional, natural and other types of head dress today and the current influence of the media and Euro-American ideals of beauty on their head dress choices.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that, with the exception of other people's work, which I have duly acknowledged, this dissertation is entirely my original work and neither has this dissertation been submitted in whole or in part by anybody to any institution or university for another degree.

SUPERVISOR

Dr Kwame Amoah Labi

DATE



STUDENT

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DATE

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this work to Dame Betty Asafu-Adjaye of London and her family and friends here in Ghana, whose collective support has enabled me to come to Ghana, feel at ease during my stay and work productively to complete this Masters programme. I am most grateful to them all.

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I would like to give thanks for and acknowledge the support of Benjamin Mills-Lampsey at the Institute of African Studies, whose support in the field helped me to find informants and negotiate difficult and unfamiliar contexts and cultural practices.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore what significance there is attached to dressing the heads of African women today, not within the vastness of a continent of many peoples whose head dress variations have no bounds, neither by gathering the views, values and opinions of women in the entirety of Accra, but through asking members of the communities of the Ga; amongst the original residents of Accra, specifically Ga women. In contemporary setting but with one eye on the past, it seeks to know whether there are any meanings attached to dressing the head for Ga women today and what choices add up to that final outcome; the dressed heads that we see.

The Ga community was chosen as being one which was accessible to the researcher, being based in Accra at the time of the study and being within the constraints of the resources available to undertake such work. Women were chosen for the focus of this study because they continue to be the main purveyors of varied head dress in modern Ghana. Ga women were selected for this study to give the study a chance to explore and understand head dress of women from traditional, ethnic and customary perspectives and express ethnic and community relevance. Not least of all Ga communities were of interest to the researcher as they continue to be set apart from the many other ethnic communities of Ghana by way of their historical distinction; their migration history into Southern Ghana and survival in doing

so as told through oral tradition; celebrated and demonstrated annually through their *Homowo*¹ festival. As such the Ga invite exploration of their ethnic uniqueness.

It is important in the first instance to define what is meant by head dress for the purpose of this study. Here it refers to dressing of the crown of the head, which does not include the face, but comprises styling of the hair and clothing of the head including dressing and manipulation of natural hair, hair additions, hair adornments, chemically treated hair, straightened hair, extensions and wigs, head scarves, head ties, head wraps and hats all of which women visibly wear in social settings through their own personal choice and or for a purpose. Head dress and hair will be used interchangeably throughout this research piece.

Africans have long been known for their flair and fascination with dressing their heads. Visitors and observers to the African continent over the centuries have given written commentary on the head dress of Africans, noting the elaborate nature of head dress which Africans innovated and paraded. In his account of his time in the Gold Coast in the first half of the 18th century Ludvig, Ferdinand Romer commented thus on the women of the Gold Coast:

‘When a distinguished black woman in Accra decorates herself, she does not only wear a beautiful scarf together with small gold plates and many black

¹ Annual festival of the Ga , celebrated throughout the Ga towns between July – August. The festival brings communities together to ‘hoot’ at hunger by preparing a traditional corn based meal and commemorating their safe migratory passage into Southern Ghana from further afield in Africa.

corals but pays particular attention to her head dress. On some parts of their head they let grow their hair or wool. Usually it is a finger long and stated out in one, two, three or four places like a cylinder or one or more square pyramids. Others let it grow like a cocks comb. Indeed they have uncountable varieties. They use a wooden roller to powder these pyramids till they shine out black from their skin. It is necessary among black women to consult each other seriously on how a distinguished black women should dress up on her birthday which falls every week....a black woman decorated in this manner is considered to be as fashionably dressed as our women who visit a barber and a couple of hairdressers.’²

This extract gives us a glimpse of popular head dress at that time and shows that the women of Accra have always had a love of dressing their heads and styling it in a variety of fashionable ways, in such a way that the hair expresses a pride in appearance. It also reveals that women were dressing their natural hair; described as ‘wool’ by Romer and taking great pride in doing so, to the point where it shone with brilliance. Head dress was thereby given pride of place in the totality of dress overall. In addition it tells us that celebrating the head, through dressing, adornment and the diversity of expression in doing so has remained constant over the centuries and is ingrained as an African cultural practice.

1.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

² From ‘On the Negroes Religion in General’ By L.F. Romer. Reliable Account of the Guines Coast; Chapter 3, Translation by Professor Irene Odotei, unpublished.

This study sets out to examine what is considered as traditional head dress by Ga women and whether it reflects status, role and beliefs. It also seeks to enquire into the current head dress of contemporary Ga women and the values, beliefs and opinions which influence their head dress choices. It aims to understand whether Ga women's current and modern head dress signals any meanings, statements or significance to the self and to others in society. It further aims to explore their attitudes to the wearing of natural and traditional head dress, with consideration of notions of beauty in mind. It further seeks to assess why there is presently so little representation of traditional and natural head dress styles amongst the current choices of ordinary Ga women.

1.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study falls within the cultural anthropology discipline and views the dressing of the head and styling of the hair as a cultural practice which reflects on the individual as a part of society and on society itself. It seeks to inquire into and understand the traditional and ethnic cultural significance of dressing the head for Ga women. It further inquires into the modern head dressing of Ga women to understand what motivates them to make the choices they do and why traditional and natural head dress is underrepresented in those choices.

Because there are few sources which study the head dress of African women from ethnic, traditional and modern perspectives in this way, this study discusses sources from art history and sociology as well as photographic material in its literature review which all have relevance to the study. So, for example, scholars who have written on the spiritual significance of head dress are discussed in the literature review and are relevant to the spiritual element of Ga head dress worn by Ga priestesses as examined in chapter five.

Status in the context of this study is taken to be a socially recognized distinction from others such as age, marriage or occupation. Role is taken to be a set of duties, institutionally allocated, which are socially recognized such as those of a wife, mother, church member. Beliefs include faith, but are wider than religion, including a set of values, shared or personal which a person consistently upholds, adheres to and applies³.

I have taken an approach of direct engagement in the methodology and have not approached the women as scientific objects of study. Instead I interacted with them as part of obtaining the information in the field and was very much dependent on their oral contributions for this study to come into existence.

I have come to my own interpretations and conclusions about the research findings based on what women said. In addition I have tried to adopt a humanist approach to the research work and summarised the opinions and views of the women researched as given to me, qualitatively, rather than collate them into statistical representations and breakdowns which would not add value to the sense of their personal views which this study has tried to capture.

This chapter has outlined the remit of the study, its objectives and its concepts. No such study has been done before on the head dress of Ga women, as such, this piece of work is a first as a contribution to this field of work. As a result the literature review examines relevant literature in the broader context of African head dress. It relates African head dress to themes of history, art, heritage, tradition, modernity, spirituality and beliefs, all of which are relevant

³ Definition is author's own.

to this study. The literature review also shows, by way of lacking material on the head dress of Ga women, how this study fills this gap. The next chapter will discuss this literature in detail and what it tells us about African head dress.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have been exhibitions and there are books which have drawn on varied ethnographic content which presents literature on African head dress from the continent, as a whole. However there is very little written on the head dress of African women as a subject let alone Ga women. The head dress of Ga women has not been the subject of any study to date as far as the author is aware and so this study is a first contribution to this field of work. This study is concerned with the traditional and contemporary head dress of Ga women and their attitudes to traditional and natural hair today, however because there is no existing literature on this subject, this review will discuss the literature on this topic that throws light on it and bears some relevance to it. It will first discuss some of the historical literature, which shows how the head has always been important as a place of decoration by drawing on excerpts from the writings of de Marees and Barbot. It will discuss literature which demonstrates how the head is important in Africa not just in a decorative context but in a traditional one of socio-political and religious contexts. It then discusses the literature which covers the head dress of Africa as a continent from high profile sources; *'A history of Art in Africa'* by Visona et al, *'Crowning Achievements'* by Kreamer and Arnoldi and *'Hair in African Art and Culture'* Eds Sieber and Herreman . As there is very little literature on the head dress of West Africa as a sub-region, this chapter discusses the work of two famous photographers of the region Seydou Keita of Mali and Okhai Ojeikere of Nigeria, whose photographs provide a pictorial archive and cultural text of West African head dress. This review then moves to discussing the work of Ghanaian heritage writers Kofi Antubam and Alex Kyerematen who

wrote in the 1960s on types of Ghanaian adornment and Ghanaian scholar Doris Essah, who has written more recently and generically on gender and the fashions of Asante, Fante and Ga women, including head dress and the hairdressing profession in Southern Ghana covering the period 1900-2006. Finally because this study is interested in the views and opinions of Ga women and their attitudes to traditional and natural hair on which no studies currently exist, it touches on the contribution of one South African scholar; Zimitri Erasmus⁴, who has written on this subject and offered her opinion on hair and beauty and self-esteem in the South African context.

Early descriptions of head dress of Africans in pre-colonial Africa were noted by travellers in the 17th and 18th centuries, most notable amongst them, Pieter de Marees and Jean Barbot. In his *'Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea'* (1602), de Marees dedicates specific sections of his writings to the dress of both men and women. On African women's heads he comments how one individual:

'hair is attractively plaited and raised to a peak, in the shape of a little Bonnet of the kind unmarried ladies used to wear on their heads'⁵

He goes on:

⁴ Erasmus, Z. *'Oe! My Hare Gaan Huistoe': Hair-Styling as Black Cultural Practice'* Agenda, No. 32, Race, Identity and Change (1997), pp. 11-16

⁵ Pg 36, de Marees, P. *'Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea 1602'*

‘They decorate their heads and hair with plaits, making a bunch of their hair in the middle of their heads, almost like the kind of Bonnet which Dutch ladies wear on their heads; and around the edge they make round knots around a Daelder which they rub over again till it shines and looks nice. Then they smear their hair with palm oil, so that it looks as pretty as frizzled hair.’⁶

Barbot who drew on the writings of de Marees, in his accounts published as *‘Barbot on Guinea, The writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678-1712, Vol II’*, 1992 wrote of the women of the Gold Coast,

‘they keep their heads very tidy...They anoint their hair with palm oil, and decorate it with gold ornaments or red sea-shells and with rassade.’⁷

Both de Marees and Barbot are commenting on how hair was being treated to look nice and noticeable. The hair described is plaited and gathered together at the crown of the head in the form of a bonnet. It is braided, which form of head dress is still prevalent today, it is treated with palm oil, use of hair oils and conditioners which are also prevalent today and it is decorated with ornaments; dutch coins and sea-shells, these would equate to the use of hair beads and other accessories which are in use today. Some women today still use natural shells such as cowries in their hair. What de Marees and Barbot give us is an idea of change and

⁶ Pg 37, de Marees,P. *‘Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea 1602’*

⁷ Pg 495, Barbot, J. *‘Barbot on Guinea, The writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678-1712, Vol II’*, The Hakluyt Society, 1992

continuity, women no longer use palm oil in their hair, but they continue to use hair oils, such as shea butter, women no longer use coins but use beads and other shiny metal accessories to decorate their hair. Hence we find constants in head dress, the head is being dressed to look beautiful and it achieves this through materials such as oil that make it shine and objects which draw the eye such as shiny metals. We learn from them that looking good and dressing the head to do so was as important in the 16th century as it is now and that head dress has always been given pride of place.

The head being important in Africa, not just in decorative context, but in socio-political and religious ones goes back even further than 16th century, the elaborate head dress of the Pharaohs of Ancient Egyptians shown on tombs and depicted in hieroglyphs reveals this to be the case even millennia ago in the ancient worlds of Africa. More recently in what were largely pre-literate societies in pre-colonial Africa, numerous proverbs testify to the head being paramount. According to Peggy Appiah in *'Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans'*, 2007 amongst the Akans they say *'Obosom a onni komfoo no, yeto no abuo'* meaning 'If a god has no priestess, we put it on one side' and *'Memmu opanin' yese 'Asem beba da bi'* translates as 'If I do not respect an elder' we say 'Trouble will come one day' *'Nnipa nyinaa suro osee'* meaning 'All people fear the Asantehene.' These proverbs remind us of the important, elevated and pivotal socio-political and religious roles that heads; Chiefs, Kings, Priests and Elders play in their societies. Thus traditionally in indigenous social systems the head of the body politic as well as the head of the physical body are in symbiosis with one another and in both worlds the head rules.

African traditional religion has a great impact on head dress. The importance of the socio-political religious head has traditionally been reflected in head dress of the living person as

well as in sculpted art forms. This is most notable amongst the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, Benin and Togo, who stand out among others for their concept of *Ase*, which is pervasive to their traditional way of life, religion, philosophy and cosmology. *Ase* is the vital life force situated in the inner spiritual head, which is invisible, with its container being the outer visible one. Margaret Thonpson Drewal writing on '*Projections from the Top in Yoruba Art*'⁸1977 details how *Ase* which is found in organic material, can be manipulated and is usually associated with a divine presence. As she describes, *Ase* will typically be present and visible through the projecting headgear of human intermediaries of the spirit such as priests, royal messengers masqueraders and kings or alternatively through inanimate objects which also mediate a spirit and project upwards such as masks, sculpture and architecture. Projections from the top of persons heads or objects made from organic material signal a spiritual presence in a person or non-human entity, they are conduits which Drewal calls divine associates, the form of their projection will reveal the nature of the spiritual force present in them. As Drewal summarises 'Projections from the top, then, are a dominant symbol of the vital force of a divine associate; and in their various forms and contexts they may characterize the particular nature of that force.'⁹

The spiritual force of *Ase* is most celebrated and sanctified traditionally by the Yoruba through the head dress of their divine kings the Obas, who wear a peaked beaded crown with a veil of string beads effectively covering the face to represent divine separation and constant communion with the divine spiritual world of deceased royal ancestors. See (fig 1) As Lawal

⁸ Drewal, M.T. '*Projections from the Top*' African Arts, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Oct., 1977), pp. 43-49+91-92

⁹ Pg 91. Drewal, M.T. '*Projections from the Top*' African Arts, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Oct., 1977), pp. 43-49+91-92

puts it in '*Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art*', 2001, he is 'the oba (king), the temporal and spiritual head of a given community and a personification of its corporate existence'¹⁰. This concept of Ase has been well researched and documented by many scholars. Abiodun describes Ase in '*Àṣẹ: Verbalizing and Visualizing Creative Power through Art*', 1994; 'The word, ase, is generally translated and understood as 'power', 'authority' 'command' 'sceptre', 'vital force' in all living and non-living things and as 'a coming-to-pass of an utterance' in the Yoruba cosmos'.¹¹

Lawal further comments on Ase 'the head (ori) is perceived as the seat of the ase (enabling power) that determines one's identity and existence, influencing behavior and personal destiny: In effect, the head (ori) is the lord of the body and therefore must be acknowledged and given pride of place.. A similar message is apparent in the emphasis on the head in Yoruba art. It is almost always the biggest and the most elaborately finished part of a typical figure sculpture, often adorned with a crown like coiffure or headgear.'¹² The Yoruba and their traditional beliefs pertaining to their heads then are well studied. Yet the Yoruba are only one of many peoples of Africa that believe in the importance of the head, traditionally, as a spiritual container and socio-political religious signifier.

¹⁰ Pg 515, Lawal, B. '*Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art*', The Art Bulletin, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Sep., 2001), pp. 498-526

¹¹ Pg 310, Abiodun, R. '*Àṣẹ: Verbalizing and Visualizing Creative Power through Art*', Journal of Religion in Africa, Vol. 24, Fasc. 4 (Nov., 1994), pp. 309-322

¹² Pg 501, Lawal, B. '*Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art*', The Art Bulletin, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Sep., 2001), pp. 498-526

In representing the human form in African sculpture, we find the body's head frequently emphasized or enlarged to represent the symbolic importance of the head and the meaning or philosophy behind it. The emphasis on the headpiece in many masquerades throughout Africa exemplifies this. Visona et al's seminal work '*A History of Art in Africa*', 2008 finds adequate mention of the spiritual importance of the masquerade and its most often emphasized head piece amongst peoples throughout West and Central Africa. Amongst others worth mentioning include the masks of the Bamana and Senufo peoples of Mali, La Cote D'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. In addition mention of the art of dress of the living head and its importance in denoting status and wealth in indigenous African societies, are made by reference to Fulani women of wealth¹³; having worn elaborate hairstyles, which demonstrated their status, wealth and clear abstention from lowly portage work. The political and symbolic importance of head dress of Kings and rulers is well noted throughout ; the Crown of the Oba, which we have already discussed¹⁴, The Cap and nose covering of the King of Dahomey¹⁵, the head wear of Lunda ruler¹⁶, Head dress of Kuba King¹⁷, among others are all captured here. However wide ranging and fulsome though this contribution may be, with its

¹³ Pg 98, fig 3-32 and fig 3-33, Visona, Poyner and Cole, '*A History of Art in Africa*', New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008.

¹⁴ pg 239, ibid

¹⁵ pg 258, ibid

¹⁶ pg 363, ibid

¹⁷ page 382, ibid

few references to the head dress of women, what is emphasized throughout Visona et al work is the head dress of rulers and status holders, invariably men.

Head dress of rulers and status holders is a theme typically captured with reference to general literature on the subject and so we have the same themes echoed time and again. It leaves us to question the significance of head dress of others, women and ordinary citizens, the majority of any people. Moreover this source first published in 1953 captures the head dress of Africa which is fast disappearing outside of celebrated traditional arenas, with the onslaught of modernity and western hegemony.

Arnoldi and Kreamer's '*Crowning Achievements*', (1995) exhibition catalogue appreciates head dress as an art form and is the first to dedicate an exhibition with accompanying catalogue to the subject. As such it makes a significant contribution to understanding the importance of head dress in traditional Africa. It conveys the relevance of head attire, particularly hats, to status, politics, social and cultural functions as well as personal aesthetic of choice in African men and women's head dress. It covers a range of head dress over and above hats including head wraps, coiffures, special occasion and everyday wear as well as incorporating a section on transatlantic influences on head dress towards the end. It references the Yoruba significantly throughout the introduction and in the chapter '*A focus on twelve African hats*' where it features a focus on the Oba's crown. In addition a separate chapter is dedicated to Yoruba head-ties. However its greatest weakness may be that as a catalogue it is just that, hardly inspiring by way of insight. It provides, though, useful summary information on the head dress of a variety of peoples across Sub-Saharan Africa.

'*Hair in African Art and Culture*', (2000), Eds Sieber and Herreman, the book comprised of eleven essays with an exhibition of its time in 2000 is grand and sweeping in its treatment

of hair. It features glorious photographs of differing African peoples hair, drawn from Sub-Saharan Africa and depicts head dress covering different time periods with their corresponding sculptures showing how art mimics life in these cultures. Its photographs of the living head in dress are stunning and present an impressive historical cultural archive with essays mainly by art historians, however there are far too few contributions by anthropologists, hence little depth of insight. However glorious as they may be, without adequate explanation, these photographs do much to promote and retain the image of Africans as the 'other' by way of projecting a romantic and mystical African past and in so doing it exoticises its subjects. Moreover these photographs are from an African past, many from the early 20th century when colonialism was still new and the impact of Western hegemony had not fully penetrated. Therefore we have no means of deciphering how, whether and to what degree these hairstyles are still worn by members of these societies in the present day even in rural Africa. As such the book is of more use as art history than a text which provides meaningful understanding of the cultural and societal significance of hair in Africa in different societies through time. The photographic presentations and the essays needed a clarification between Africa of yesteryear and Africa of the present and perhaps a balancing of urban and rural Africa or traditional and contemporary to avoid these confictions.

Only Lawal manages to do this in '*Hair in African Art and Culture*' through his essay contribution '*Orilonise: The Hermeneutics of the Head and Hairstyles among the Yoruba*', where he makes clear under contemporary developments that:

‘The introduction of Western hairdressing tools, techniques and materials at the beginning of the twentieth century, coupled with the influence of the mass media, has encouraged the adoption of foreign hairstyles, which now exist side by side by indigenous ones’¹⁸

Despite a few flashes of enlightenment such as this, the overall difficulty with *‘Hair in African Art and Culture’* is that it tries to cover too much and in so doing strikes an awkward and inadequate balance between overview and insight.

West African photographers have made some great contributions to documenting hair as a cultural archive through the camera rather than the pen. Hairstyling as an art form has been captured by Nigerian, Okhai Ojeikere, a famous photographer of the 1960s who took photographs which made up his most famous photographic collection *‘Hairstyle’ 1968*. This photographic collection, see (fig 12) documented hair as cultural expression, drawing on hairstyles of both traditional and modern formations to showcase hair as a visual art form. *‘Hairstyle’*¹⁹ was one of the first to mark an appreciation of African head dress as an art form and documented almost 1,000 black and white images of sculptural like hairstyles worn by women throughout Nigeria with photographs of women’s hair arranged for traditional ceremonies and styled by experts in beauty salons, famously dubbed by him ‘sculptures for a

¹⁸ Pg 107, Eds Sieber, R. and Herreman, F. *‘Hair in African Art and Culture’*, Museum for African Art, New York, 2000

¹⁹ See Okhai Ojeikere entry, www.gallery51.com

day'. His impressive collection of photographs single out women styled with elaborate braided coiffures and featuring intricate hairstyles making use of thread and stylized headscarves to create majestic and regal forms. However as a photographic contribution only, we are left to our own imaginations to interpret what we see.

West African photographer Sydou Keita of Mali too, indirectly showcases head dress, see (fig 3) as an art form in his photographic collection of what is said to be over 5,000 photographs²⁰. These amount to an extensive cultural archive of traditional and modern dress and fashion of 1960s Mali. Women and men along with their families feature in photographs which often marked a special occasion, many of them detail the head dress fashions of the period, showing Malian women with heads styled in traditional ways, in head wraps and scarves, with hair ornamented with cowries shells and beads, featuring elaborate braids and wigs pieces, cornrow braids and hair bobbles amongst the young and older generations alike. Again as a photographic collection alone, we are left to understand for ourselves what we see.

From a Ghanaian perspective ,writing on '*Ghana's Heritage of Culture*' in 1963, Antubam, a great advocate of the African personality in a short entry on *Tibo Dwini* (Hair-do Symbols) relays:

'Hair-do is a great form of art in Ghana, and here too meaningful symbols reign supremely. One's social status especially in the royal houses was symbolically evident in the hair-do in the olden days. Today, however, the

²⁰ www.seydoukeitaphotographer.com

tendency is that most women wear the *dansinkeran*. It is the female hair style in Ashanti normal life, while in Southern Ghana all middle aged women wear the *Takuwa* hairdress. Attendants of paramount chiefs, however, still wear the varied traditional, symbolic hair-dresses. For example the stool bearers, drink bearers, sword bearers, and the girl attendants of the queen mother still keep to the old tradition'²¹

Here Antubam is appreciating tradition and culture changes while some things remain the same and we get a snapshot of things as they are in 1963.

Also from a Ghanaian perspective Kyerematen's '*Panoply of Ghana*',1964²² provides rich photographic cultural material of Ghana's heritage, with descriptions of the use and functions of ornamental art forms including personal ornaments, amongst which head dress features, however, its coverage is again focused on the dress and crowns of Chiefs and rulers; men with only casual reference to the hair style of a Fanti Queen Mother, described as 'typical' by way of photographic annotation but without explanation or insight as to why her hair is styled in this way.

²¹ Pg 146, Antubam, K. *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, Leipzig: Koehler and Amelang, 1963

²² Pg, 70, Kyerematen, A. A. Y. '*Panoply of Ghana; ornamental art in Ghanaian tradition and culture*' New York: Praeger,1964.

Doris Essah in her DPhil of 2008²³ gives comprehension and insight into the history of dress and hairdressing in Southern Ghana 1900-2006. It covers the dress of the Ga, Asante and Fante people and beauty salons in Lapaz, a suburb of Accra. In her approach she incorporates hairdressing as part of the wider subject of dress overall.

Essah uses dress to explore beauty, identity and belonging as it relates to gender, citizenship ethnicity and nationalism. As part of her study she looks at the significance of hair and status; ceremonial hairdressings, hairdressing discussions of working classes and elites and the professionalization of hairdressing in Southern Ghana.

In particular Essah's coverage of debate over usage of the wig in the 1960s and 1970s is comprehensive. She charts the controversy of the wearing of the wig during this period, which prompted much discussion about women and natural beauty. She states:

'From the 1950s, wigs were fashionable and women wore them to a variety of events and as office wear'.

Essah's coverage captures head dress fashion over the specific period of time; 1900-2006 and so it brings us up to date on the hairstyles of modern urban women of Accra including braided extensions, weave-ons and wigs. Essah states:

²³ Essah, D. *Fashioning the Nation: Hairdressing, Professionalism and the Performance of Gender in Ghana, 1900-2006*, internet publication, University of Michigan, USA

‘I am driven by the belief that the practices and discussions of everyday people are critical to our understanding of social relations and social processes’²⁴.

However Essah focused in her study on hairdressing professionals and high profile individuals, sufficiently well-known to feature in the press. Further she gained the feedback of beauty salon professionals working in the hairdressing industry and their associations as part of her grassroots survey work. Her study did not penetrate the lives and thoughts of ordinary Ghanaian women; the recipients of beauty salon services, therefore there continues to be much work to be done to understand how urban Ghanaian women and by deduction; urban African women, feel about their heads, to understand their head dress as cultural practice and as a cultural text and in this respect to hear ‘from the horses mouths’ so to speak. This study begins to move in that direction.

In contrast to Africans on the continent, African-Americans scholars through black studies have theorized a great deal more about the social significance of the hair of African-American women and its meaning and significance culturally and politically. Head dress and hair styles of South African women may have more in common with African-American women than the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, because of the history of similar political struggles; apartheid as it equated to segregation and their respective legacies. One South

²⁴ Pg 1, *ibid*

African scholar, Zimitri Erasmus says in her article '*Hair Styling as Black Cultural Practice*' 1997;

'The racial hierarchies and values of colonial racism have left a deep mark on our conceptions of beauty. Until recently, in most coloured communities 'good hair' meant sleek/straight hair. If you were fortunate enough to have a shiny mane of straight hair, you either inherited it from one or both your parents',²⁵

She goes on:

'The notion that straightening one's hair is a mark of aspiring towards whiteness and that we should thus abandon all straightening along with any other form of work on black hair denies the complexity of cultural practice. It also represents a simple and fictitious binary: black women who straighten their hair are reactionary and black women who do not are progressive',²⁶

Of her personal experience Erasmus says:

²⁵ Pg 12 Erasmus, Z. '*Oe! My Hare Gaan Huistoe: Hair-Styling as Black Cultural Practice*' Agenda, No. 32, Race, Identity and Change (1997), pp. 11-16

²⁶ Pg 15, ibid

‘When my hair was ‘done’ I felt proud and confident. I felt beautiful. I did not feel white. And I did not look white either.’²⁷

It may simply be the case that African women outside of such hierarchical racial contexts do not have to contend with these realities and do not have to carry this baggage, nonetheless this study takes a step closer toward assessing whether this is the case and seeks to explore some of the realities from the perspective of Ga women, as they exist in the present. It remains that scholars; both art historians, sociologists and anthropologists have yet to showcase the head dress of ordinary urban African women in terms of what it means to them, what do African women think or believe about their heads? What is their relationship between their inner and outer head and how is that reflected in their head dress. This study begins to address that gap in an understudied ethnic group.

This chapter has discussed the existing literature on African head dress as no literature specific to the head dress of Ga women exists. It has sought to discuss literature which has a bearing on this study and is relevant to it by presenting how head dress has remained an important and prominent site of decoration, ornamentation and beautification for African women over the centuries. It has discussed how the physical head of the body may manifest spiritual presence in traditional and socio-political religious contexts. It has indicated how head dress can comprise an art form. It has identified that the styling of hair is an African cultural practice and that hair may reflect issues of self-esteem and the power dynamic of

²⁷ Pg 16,ibid

social hierarchical structures. It has identified that hair can be studied under more than one discipline; art, anthropology, sociology to arrive at different understandings of its meaning and significance. It has highlighted that there is a gap in the studying of head dress of contemporary urban African women, in terms of what head dress means for them, which this study seeks to begin to fill. The next chapter will detail the methodology and approach which this study has employed in seeking to fill this gap.



Figure 1, An Oba's Crown, Courtesy of google images, accessed June 2012.

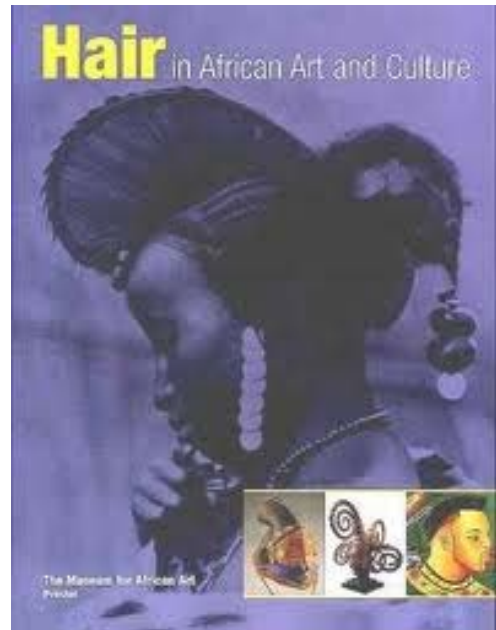


Figure 2, Front Cover Illustration of a Fulani woman, 'Hair in African Art and Culture' 2000. Courtesy of google images, accessed June 2012.



Figure 3, From Sydou Keita, Photographic Collection, Courtesy of www.seydoukeitaphotographer.com. Accessed

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Some of the aims of this study are to understand something of the values, identity and beliefs of Ga women; their traditions, their choices, their influences pertaining to their cultured head; that head which they design and intend to present to the wider world. Further the research seeks to understand whether there are representations; distinctions, boundaries or affiliations, signaled to others through their cultured head and so seeks to determine whether factors such as role or social status find representation through the cultured heads of Ga women. Because this research draws heavily on subjective primary data and indeed can only do so, to gather this information, it takes a qualitative approach to its method and is as interested in gathering non-scientific knowledge as it is adopting a replicable scientific approach; here scientific meaning as far as can be applicable to the human behavioural sciences, where 'science is defined as a specific and systematic way of discovering and understanding how social realities arise, operate and impact on individuals'²⁸. According to Denzin and Lincoln; (1994), the aims of qualitative research methods are 'to establish the socially constructed nature of reality, to stress the relationship between the researcher and the object of study, as well as to emphasize the value laden nature of the inquiry'. Additionally, 'to imply emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined or measured'. As a researcher

²⁸ Page 11, Bruce, L, '*Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*', Boston: Pearson, 2004

these were exactly my aims; to understand the socially constructed nature of head dress through developing something of a rapport with the Ga women approached for this study. As such a qualitative approach was deemed the appropriate one for this research. The very essence of this research is value laden as it means to uncover soft data; relating to attitudes, values and beliefs which are personally held as well as socially constructed.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

I used face to face methods in gathering the data, to avoid confusion, misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the questions by respondents. I also opted for face to face methods to gain as much first-hand experience of how respondents felt about hair. I judged that one to one contact methods which would reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation of the questions being asked or themes being misunderstood. I also wanted the opportunity to clarify questions and be understood as much as possible as a non-Ga speaker. Where interviewees did not speak English I relied on the help of an interpreter. On this basis I used structured and semi-structured interviews to gather information from informants in the field in May – June of 2012. I personally facilitated a focus group session with women, I spoke directly with the interviewee of the case study used in chapter eight. I used personal observation in hair salons, and was able to take photographs of photographic sources made available to me by some of the interviewees. These were offered by respondents and in the case study of Christiana Odokai Ashong who provides a picture story of how Ga women might have dressed their heads over the last half a century, there is a selection of photographs taken from her family albums, from which I took photos. Where I could not get necessary examples of hairstyles out in the field, some photographs used, by way of examples of threaded hairstyles were

downloaded from the internet. In addition photographs of photographers Seydou Keita's and Okhai Ojeikere's work, both freely available to download from the internet are included here. All photographs used are credited with the source for avoidance of plagiarism.

This research adopts a non-probability sampling approach as it would be impracticable within the time constraints, financial resources and availability of primary sources to seek to draw representative samples; representative women, from this coastal area. The research sought to make efficient use of time and resource through use of non-probability sampling. Incidental sampling through themed focus group discussion with women at University of Ghana campus and structured interview questionnaires at street locations in Accra, La and Teshie, were made use of as main data collection techniques. The questionnaire in Appendix A, used for street interviews, captured the ages, occupations and marital status of the respondents.

The approaches I have used are known to be flawed in relation to representativeness, nonetheless, the research embraces that fact, valuing the in-depth offerings of the respondents over vaster but shallower probability sampling approach. The downside is that this research alone does not enable one to make generalizations and draw definitive conclusions about Ga women as a whole. However, the researcher was aware of these drawbacks when adopting these methods, notwithstanding these the findings remain valuable to the research project because of its fresh exploratory nature, and is valid at least as a starting point for understanding this subject, especially given the limited existing academic research in this area. Therefore the research, with all the disadvantages inherent in its approach can be held to provide something of a reliable taster of what views are held by Ga women. Its findings need not necessarily be final and conclusive and this is not the aim of the research.

Women were approached through structured face to face street interviews, twenty altogether, to give a sounding on Ga women's views and choices on their head dress and its significance for them.

The research presented a challenge in getting the views of older women; over 40, to commit to a focus group session. Women approached expressed that they were less available, and had a lack of time to commit to focus group work and so the focus group session gives the views of younger women. The research also presented a challenge in getting authoritative sources from the traditional sphere; in accessing traditional women leaders, elders and priestesses, which was eventually overcome and so in this respect relied on informants and snowball sampling to identify these members of the communities. Again the drawbacks to adopting this method are known with respect to low rigour on representativeness. However the researcher asserts that this was the most appropriate method to adopt in identifying this category of subjects given the idiosyncrasies of their roles and the poor likelihood of reaching such community members without doing so.

The research is subject to the personalized approach of the researcher and dependency on community members to gain access to these women. The study nonetheless seeks rigour by soliciting information elsewhere to cross-check, corroborate and triangulate their oral testimonies by way of peer review and secondary sources which reiterate and confirm these statements, also by seeking secondary sources which augment these oral contributions.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

The primary tool used to collect data was a questionnaire; appendix A, used in street and market interviews for women of all ages who consented to answering it. The questionnaire

gathered information about the different forms of head dress that women wore and their likelihood and frequency of wearing different styles, also their attitudes to personally wearing traditional and natural hair as well as perceptions of these styles on others. It also captured respondents ideas of what made a beautiful head dress. The focus group discussion with women was themed and included discussion of all the elements included in the questionnaire as well as room for further discussion of what constituted beauty, the influence of media and role models on head dress choices.

Authority and information from the traditional women leader and priestesses informants comes from face to face semi-structured interviews which were taped. These interviews asked specific questions about head dress worn for their roles but were also exploratory and gave the respondents room to explain their experiences and roles on their own terms and highlight, demonstrate and provide photographic and further testimonial evidence in areas which they thought were pertinent to the research. The result was that they gave broader perspectives on their roles than just head dress.

The questionnaire in appendix A, used for street interviews captured the age of the respondent their occupation and marital status. In this way the study could draw out any issues relating to these status indicators.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Taped interviews of priestesses and the traditional woman leader were translated, transcribed and the essential elements and any particulars relevant to the research were picked out and are described in chapter 5. The content of data from the primary questionnaire was analysed under themes of attitudes to hair as well as exploring the

influences of the media and differences that emerged with age. This is laid out in chapter 7. The interpretations rely, as expected, on the subjective analysis of the researcher. The conclusion at chapter 9 draws together a summary of the findings of the whole study.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 THE GA PEOPLE AND ASPECTS OF THEIR TRADITIONS

'The head cannot sit down for the knee to wear the cap'

*'One head cannot make a constitution'*²⁹

The above proverbs gathered during my field work show that the Ga value the head and its importance every bit as much as the Akans. They can be interpreted to mean; the knee cannot take the place of the head, nor vice versa, each part of the body has its role to play. Secondly the know-how of one person is not enough to form a group, society is made up of groups and it takes at least two to form one, or two heads are better than one.

These proverbs reflect that the Ga are a people who believe in the importance of socio-political and religious heads, and that they have an important role to play in their society. The Ga have important roles for family heads, elders, and chiefs within their societal constitution who, traditionally, are indispensable to their organization as a people.

The history of the Ga prior to 16th century was wrapped up in their oral traditions, which may be retold in the form of legends, song and popular history³⁰ among others. Hence whilst the Ga may be held to be the original residents of Accra; earlier Guan peoples and settlements

²⁹ Proverbs of the Ga concerning the place and role of the head picked up during a street interview in La, May 2012.

³⁰ Pg 49, Henderson-Quartey, D. K. *'The Ga of Ghana: History and Culture of a West African People'*, London, Book in Hand Ltd, 2001

predate their migration into the land. Ga oral tradition firmly places the Ga as a migrant people. There are a number of speculations, which have been arrived at by way of gleanings from oral traditions, cultural practices and linguistics which purport to relate the true origins of the Ga. These have been adopted and interpreted by various scholars, historians and anthropologists that have researched the Ga. Some oral traditions, hold that the Ga came from the sea, effectively meaning that they migrated along the sea coast. Contrarily others and some historians have claimed that the Ga came from the central part of the continent, along with the Benins their fellow kinsmen, who stayed back in Benin. However, one of the most popular recounts of their origins tells of them as a people descended from the ancient Hebrews. I believe this is a somewhat romantic account which places the Ga at the heart of the bible tale of the flight of the Israelites from Egypt; under Moses. It proposes that not all the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, others, it conjectures, must have gone south towards the Sudan and eventually through migration, made their way to the West of Africa. This view is enhanced by the fact that archaeological evidence points to the region of Chad as the possible original source of several peoples of West Africa; the Sudan in particular is identified as the point of dispersal of many migrant peoples who settled in West Africa. Over and above these tentative linkages the claims that give real support to the common Hebrew ancestry are aspects of the Ga traditional religion and culture. These being that the Ga follow one God and have a socio-religious political organization headed by high priests; *Wulomei*, as did the Jews. Their God, whom they believe to be invisible, like the Jews, is worshipped through spiritual messengers whom are communicated with through mediating servants; the high priests; *Wulomoi*. Further the Ga festival and feast; *Homowo*, parallels Jewish customs in many respects. It is celebrated after harvest of the main food crop; corn and at the festival's

beginning the Ga paint their doorposts with red clay to ward off evil spirits for its duration as the Jews do during the Passover.

Historians such as Henderson-Quartey are enthusiastic about drawing parallels and finding further echoes of Judaism in the Ga such as the Ga practise of circumcision of their boys, their religious calendar based on twelve moons as in Judaism and other similarity in rituals concerned such as mourning the dead. The importance of these parallels lies not so much in whether they can be established as true or not. Rather they underscore the reverence, esteem and high regard with which traditionalists hold their religion.

The Ga have settled in what are now a plethora of towns and districts in Accra. Many refer to coastal Ga towns as the Ga State which comprises the early settlements of coastal Accra which formed an identity as one early even though they grew up into separate towns and suburbs linked by networks and communications. These were formed from what were considered three distinct Ga peoples; Ga Mashi, Ga Wo and Ga Boni, who intermixed with Guan peoples already in existence. The original settlements include; the original fishing village of Tema, La and Teshi, Osu, Nungua, Kpong and Ga Mashi with several inland towns and those which were set up around coastal European forts for trade such as Jamestown and Ussher Fort. Commonly Europeans established a trading presence in coastal settlements during the eras of gold and slave trade, through store houses, lodges or Forts from the late 16th century onwards. In time later immigrants gradually came to establish their own quarters in Accra, live amongst the Ga and be known as Ga , although they remain distinguished.

These later settlers came from the peoples of Akwamu, Fanti and Nigeria. Some trace their descendants from Brazilian immigrants to Nigeria in 19th century³¹. Within Central Accra, therefore, there are known Ga families whose ancestors are held to be of non-Ga origin, whom are not considered true Ga. Taking all this into consideration, the Ga are not one people, by way of genealogical reckoning and descent. They are a coming together of different peoples, whom through intermarriage and geographical proximity have formed ever closer unions and developed a shared language and customs.

The Ga's basic unit of society is the family. Each family bears a house name and keeps that name; its fathers name, through generations which affirms its identity and position relative to others. Each family member is a child of that house, reckoned by patrilineal descent, and all are the descendants of the founder. When women marry they remain a member of their father's house and at the head of each house there are elders, the head of which is the priest of the family god; a *Wulomo*.

The Ga use their names to reinforce identity of lineage and can be identified amongst themselves by their names, for each house has a set of family names, which are divided into two and used for alternate generations, hence the name of the paternal grandfather is adopted for male sons, a paternal grandfathers sister's name is adopted for a female daughter and her sisters and so forth, every other generation. In this way a house has specific names for all children from first born to tenth born. Members can be identified as to what house they are

³¹ As quoted by retired interviewee in Otublohum, June 2012

from by another Ga, by their name alone. For example in the *Asere* community of the Ga mashie state, there are eleven households, one of which is called *Abetsewe*. The following names are always given to the male children of a father's generation; the first generation: *Abe, Abeashi, Kwei, Laye, Boi*. There is a further set of names for the second generation of males; the children's generation. These are: *Abete Abetei Abekwe Laye Boi* . Likewise another set exist for females which I will not quote here. As these alternate for every new generation, this tradition makes it difficult for outsiders and anthropologists to make out lineage effectively without clues to identity such as nicknames.³² Ga tradition meant that women and men lived separately in compounds, men did not live with their wives but with their brothers and sons who joined them as soon as they had outgrown women's compounds. Women continued to live with their mothers after marriage, and so women's compounds were made up of generations of women of many houses, connected through marriage, whilst men's compounds were made up of the men of one house. Needless to say these traditions have changed over time and with the rise of Christianity, school fees and advent of wage-labour, taxes and the pressures these brought about under colonialism, the nuclear family is now the norm. However the concept of the family house and reckoning of patrilineage is retained and it is during the festival of *Homowo*, as it continues to be celebrated today, that all the houses of a town come together in celebration and thanksgiving of their survival through their tough

³² Pg 2, Field, M.J. '*Social Organisation of the Ga People*': London, Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1940.

migration passage whereby they can look back and confidently laugh or 'hoot' at the hunger their ancestors went through.

The Ga people are culturally diverse and rich in their traditions and this chapter does not attempt to cover the full extent of their origins and traditions, neither would it be the place to do so given that there exists much already on the traditions and religion of the Ga. This has been done extensively by Henderson-Quartey in *'The Ga of Ghana: History and Culture of a West African People'*, 2001 and by anthropologist Margaret Field in her works; *'Religion and Medicine of the Ga People'* 1961 and *'Social Organisation of the Ga People'*, 1940. This said the religion of the Ga is very pertinent to this study for its spiritual relevance. For the traditional Ga their religion has always been of the utmost importance and is central to their beliefs about how they conceive of the human personality. They believe that the human being is made up of three entities; the *susuma*, the *kla* and the *gbomotfo*. The *susuma* is one's personality of mind and may be conscious or unconscious, leaving a person in the potential position of knowing more than they ought, as in the case of fits of spiritual possession of priestesses, as they become the spiritual messengers of their deity or of the dead. The *susuma* may also leave the body in dreams and revelations, and witches are said to travel by night to devour others spiritually in this way. The *kla* is the invisible equivalent of a person's body with legs and arms and so forth, and it is this which witches are said to eat by night resulting in the death of victims in their sleep. The *kla* can be said to equate to one's body and the *susuma* one's mind, the two may fight for survival whilst asleep, but if the *kla* dies so does the person. The *gbomotfo* is one's actual physical body. These three interconnecting aspects of the human personality are central to Ga ideas of medicine, healing and remedying sickness

in the traditional sphere. These were the three entities as explained in Field's 'Religion and Medicine of the Ga People'³³, which still hold true for traditional Ga people today.

Traditional religion was also held at the core of Ga home and government. This principle being clearly demonstrated by the head of each house being a *Wulomo*. *Wulomei*'s role was originally to act as the leaders and guardians of the people in all aspects of their religious and socio-political affairs. However, through conflict with the Akan and increasing European intrusion over the 19th century this arrangement changed whereby the Ga had to develop and adopt new political mechanisms for diplomacy and war. As a result a new class of *Wulomei* were created, who acted as the chiefs of the people, were enstooled and given charge of diplomacy and secular matters of state. Nonetheless their position as priests remained primary and one could not be a chief if one was not first a *Wulomo*. Along with enstoolment of chiefs Queen Mother's have emerged in some districts to take on socio-political pastoral roles in overseeing the affairs of women in their wards. Political positions in chieftaincy, have been contested and lost, political and social arrangements have evolved, colonization and modernization have penetrated, but what has remained constant for the Ga is their traditional religion; which remains at the core of their identity as a people to the present day, preserved through festivals and ceremonies, which remain honoured throughout their calendar year.

³³ Field, M.J. 'Religion and Medicine of the Ga People': Accra, Presbyterian book Depot, 1961.

The Ga have a pantheon of gods, which they worship, many of which they have adopted from other neighbouring groups. Hence when in possession a priestess may speak Twi or Fante though having no knowledge of the language when in her 'right' mind. As such gods may be indigenous to the Ga or adopted from others such as the Fanti or Akan, such was the case with war gods adopted by the Ga to deal with the conflict and warring of 18th and 19th centuries. The *Wulomei* are the servants of the gods and they are 'interpreters of the will of the gods to the people'³⁴. Every god has a *Wulomo*; a high priest who acts as the spiritual leader of each town. *Wulomo* high priests are all male and act as the voice of the gods but are never possessed by them. They officiate at public worship, pour libation, settle disputes and advise the people in general. Instead they have subordinates; women priestesses also in the service of the gods. These priestesses are mouthpieces of the gods when in spiritual possession by them and may relay messages from the gods when possessed. Ga priestesses are known as *woyei*, *Agbayei* and *dzranoyei*³⁵. They are passive and have no authority other than when possessed but they are considered as special amongst their people, because of this ability they have to relay messages from spiritual sources, for which they were chosen. Like the *Wulomei* they wear special attire when in service, this is most especially visible during the feast of *Homowo*, when they adorn themselves with black and white beads, paint themselves with white kaolin and dress in white. They also dress their heads in a dedicated manner and it is this head dress which has deeper significance that we shall now turn to in the following

³⁴ Pg 4, Field, M.J. '*Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*': Accra, Presbyterian book Depot, 1961.

³⁵ Pg 8, *ibid*

sections to understand how spiritual significance manifests itself in the head dress of Ga women today.

4.1 HEAD DRESS OF GA PRIESTESSES

Whilst most traditions are evolving and changing over time, the dress and head dress of the Ga priestesses has remained constant and the same in living memory. The head dress of Ga priestesses is only part of a whole ceremonial outfit, (fig 4), and so gives credence to those who contend that head dress should be seen as part of dress overall³⁶. Their head dress bears testimony to the assertion of Sieber, in *'Hair in African Art and Culture'*, that the hair can 'serve to identify ethnic origin, gender, phase of life cycle and status'³⁷. It also holds as true scholar Batulukusi's statement in his contributory essay in *'Hair in African Art and Culture'* that as 'A biological component of the human body, hair has become a cultural element of social communication. Perceived as the expression of a cultural identity, a social status or a profession, the traditional coiffure has multiple purposes.'³⁸ Ga priestesses' head dress enables us to see the special role their head has to play in traditional religion and how the deities by whom they are possessed can be identified through their head dress.

Their fully decorated state guides both initiates and non-initiates to know their role and place in society. In this way the head dress of Ga Priestesses is a social signifier in the way that

³⁶ Barnes, R. and Eicher, J. *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*, Oxford: Berg, 1993

³⁷ Pg 15, Eds Sieber, R. and Herreman, F. *'Hair in African Art and Culture'*, New York: Museum for African Art; Munich: Prestel, 2000

³⁸ Pg 25, ibid

much of the literature on this subject describes. The significance of the head dress of Ga priestesses echoes the notions of inner and outer head of the Yoruba. The head that we see is the outer encasement and dressed in accordance with the wishes of the inner spiritual head that dominates; the one that we cannot see, but may hear. This inner spiritual head comes out at public gatherings, celebrations and festivals when the community comes together. At this opportunity a priestess may involuntarily fall into a hysterical fit and give tidings of what must be done to right wrongs that have been done in the community, what must be sacrificed to make amends. Her inner spiritual head in this element is speaking through her, she is merely the conduit; the tongue, through which news is being communicated, essential though she is to the process and alarming though her physical display may be. Like the Yoruba's concept of *Ase* which dominates in the sphere of their traditional religion, it should be no surprise that we find these characteristics also in the Gas traditional religion.

Following the stories and oral testimonies of three Ga priestesses, who by no means constitute the only authorities on this subject, but help to understand something of the tradition of head dress; why and when it is worn, what significance it bears for them, for their religion and their role and status within society.

4.2 MADAM MARY YEBOAH – FORMERLY KNOWN AS PRIESTESS AAWON BOTWE (ACCRA)

Madam Mary Yeboah was kind enough to take the time to see me and an interpreter in her home and talk to me about her experience as what she called a 'fetish' priestess. Now retired and no longer in the priestesshood, she spoke as a practicing Christian reflecting back on her fifty years or so as a priestess.

Mary told us her name as a fetish priestess was Aawon Botwe, her name in itself had significance; being called Botwe indicated that she was the eighth person that her trainer had initiated into the priesthood. She recalled approximately fifty years being spent in the priestesshood. Although she could not remember the exact date, this she reckoned by way of being initiated at the time of Nkrumah's assassination attempt; the bomb throw at Kulungugu. Entering into the priestesshood had not been an easy decision nor a decision of her own accord. She had been involuntarily possessed by her deity; an Akwamu god, and whilst her father had initially tried to prevent her from going into the priesthood, her possession continued for a period of about eight years wherein she and her family finally realised that nothing could be done to stop the possession and that she would have to be allowed to follow her call. This resolved, her family searched for an experienced priestess for her to study under. One was eventually found who administered medicine to Mary to determine exactly which deity she was being possessed with. Once her deity became known Mary began her apprenticeship period, During this period she had her head dressed in what they called *mpesepese*; a rasta type style, appropriate to her apprenticeship period and indicative of service to her deity. The apprenticeship period was one of very strict adherence to practices including much seclusion and frugal living. It was during this period that she learned the will of her deity, herbal remedies and arts of healing. Whilst Mary wore the *mpesepese* style during her apprenticeship, not all initiates did. Head dress worn during apprenticeship was very specific to the deity by which one was possessed. Mary made it very clear that not all initiates wore her style, only those possessed by her particular deity. Mary elaborated further; the *mpesepese* head dress was not simply a style of head dress worn showing affinity of possession, it was also dressed with medicines again specific to the deity by which one was

possessed. In a natural state of living during her apprenticeship, only her natural hair could be worn at that stage of her life; as a priestess in the making. I asked her whether any other form of hair would be tolerated, what, for example would be the case if a new found initiate were to be wearing chemically treated hair? Mary was adamant in her response; it would have to be shorn off and the initiate would have to wait for her hair own natural hair to grow before continuing and having it treated in the *mpesepese* mode. It was a strict code that had to be followed. Mary expounded that it was only one of the many rules and regulations that an initiate had to abide by. In her time experienced trainers in the priesthood had taught Mary all that she needed to know about possession which was a spiritual affair and she had been bound by the rules and had to observe the taboos of what had become her new master; her deity. However wearing *mpesepese* hair was merely a stage in the cycle of her life as a priestess, worn whilst she was learning the ways of how to heal the sick, prepare medicines and herbal remedies. Once her initiation period had been passed and all ceremonies regarding the priesthood had been fully completed, Mary had been free to return home to her family and able to wear her hair in any style or manner as long as it did not conflict with the wishes of her deity. Initiates were possessed by different deities, and so they sported different head dress accordingly. Even though they might be unfamiliar with one another initiates serving the several deities were able to recognize one another and their respective positions in the priesthood not only by virtue of their names, which ranked them but also by virtue of their head dress. Diversity of hair styles according to deity possession also applied to fully fledged priestesses. Priestesses called *akomfoi*, for example, had a particular way of dressing their heads; braiding and then twisting using black thread a style

called '*wuobibiafee*' literally translated as chicken faeces, which it resembles. Natural hair could graduate into different styles. Once worn for a certain period and the hair had grown, the *akomfoi* style was often replaced by another known as *akotoshi*. This style again used thread to bend and twist the hair. Hair which had grown to a long length through these styles was often divided into four parts, then plaited with thread. The gender of the deity by which a priestess is possessed determines the style of her head dress. Typically the head dress of a male possessed deity projects upwards into a peak, (fig 5), while the head dress of a priestess possessed by a female deity is rounded off either into one or into sections of which each part is rounded into a soft ball-like shape, (fig 6). One can observe how the head dress of a male possessed priestess projects upwards into a cone, shaped like a peak. By contrast the head dress of a priestess, possessed by a female deity, is separated into rounded balls of hair. Thus aggression and domination is symbolized by the head dress of a male possessed priestess whilst submission is suggested by the head dress of her counterpart; the female possessed. Some would argue that these therefore symbolise and characterize essential gender differences.

Mary also spoke to some extent of the ranking of the deities, which were ranked higher when they were gods indigenous to the Ga. Ga Mashie indigenous deities were considered to be Nai, Sakumo, Dantu and Korle and if one were to be possessed by these even if already in possession by another lesser deity, they will rank first because their deity is a higher god than the lesser one with which they were formerly possessed. Hence Mary throws light on the potential life situation of a priestess, that she could during the course of her life be possessed by more than one deity and would therefore have to serve more than one initiation period, go through another cycle of learning and dress and regulate her life accordingly. With such a

demanding call, despite the social esteem it brings in the traditional sphere, it can be understood why so many families now want to prevent their young girls from entering into the priestesshood, why Christianity has been resorted to as a hope of breaking the spell of spiritual servitude and why so many modern Ga men and women have distanced themselves from the spirituality of Ga traditional religion. Mary herself prayed to leave the priestesshood and testifies that it was through the divine intervention of God, by the grace of God that she was able to do so.

4.3 VICTORIA MERLEY KORLEY - PRIESTESS AAWON OTOJWO (TESHIE)

Victoria known locally as Aunty Vic, spoke more generally of life in the priestesshood and gives us a fuller picture of the experience an initiate and a fully practicing priestess would go through. Her experience like that of Madam Mary Yeboah's was a frugal one during her apprenticeship. Once taken into service as an initiate she had worn white beads and went about bare-footed, clothed about her waist in white calico cloth. However, she was possessed by a different deity to Mary and so unlike her she did not sport the *mpesepese* rasta-type hair style during her apprenticeship. Her hair styles varied. Her initiation period was one of service which could take up to ten years to complete, though some apprentices served as little as a year and a half. Completion depended on whether and when family could raise the necessary money to perform final initiation rituals. Relatives had a key role in helping in this way as they could pay for one to graduate out of service. During the initiation period, sometimes at the request of the deity by whom you were possessed you could be brought 'luxuries' such as sandals and head scarves whilst still in this service. Otherwise it was a period of limitation, learning and dedication to service. Victoria spoke of her graduation a public ceremony, which she likened to a marriage ceremony. She was taken to the seashore,

where she was bathed and took an oath of service. She became a public figure, thereafter the whole local community and its elders looked up to her. Beads were worn once she returned from taking her oath and then there were performances; dances in her father's compound and in the principal public squares. After these ceremonies were completed thanks were given. Although one was released back to their family after this period and taught a trade or means to make a living, a priestess is always on call. She is always on call to either the bidding of the one she served under or directly to her deity, her new master. Priestesses marry but before they do so, their husband is told of their situation so that they understand that if their wife is called, even by night, she must go, if necessary accompanied by him for safety purposes. Because a priestess has a role in the community this call also applies to if she is needed by the Chief, at his behest she must drop everything and respond. A priestess would have to prepare herself before attending to a call by wearing white cloth and beads around the neck and waist. As Victoria expressed priestesses are 'like soldiers of the land'. When they are called in this way, they will perform rituals and ask the spirit of an individual what they need for healing.

Victoria saw the head dress of a priestess as part of the overall dressing style of a deity. As she put it "Every god has their dressing style. For instance, mine wears cloths". She also said 'My god sometimes requests for a hat and sometimes it doesn't. Some male gods also have *akuklu* but it is also held together upwards'. Further 'every spirit has what it likes and dislikes. For some people their hair has to be shaved. That is how the spirit wants it. Some spirits also require your hair to grow'. Victoria's testimony accentuates how demanding the role of a priestess is, being akin to something of the equivalent of an emergency doctor in the western world. She also enables us to see how 'normal' priestesses are aside from when they

are at public gatherings receiving messages from the spirits and gods. They marry, have children and interact as regular members of their community in all respects. They were all members of a Ga house. Indeed on meeting all of the priestesses, I was struck by how ordinary they all seemed. They were genuine people who had a special place in traditional society by way of being servants of spirits that they were bound to speak for.

4.4 AUNTY CECILIA – ABOSU, PRIESTESS OF THE SHRINE NYONO TSAAWE (LA)

Again I was lucky, through making enquiries at the Chief's palace in La, to make the acquaintance of Aunty Cecilia, priestess of a shrine in La who took the time to demonstrate to me two of the hair styles typical of priestesses' wear. The first was worn by those possessed of a male deity, mentioned above, where the hair is parted into four to five parts, threaded in each part and bound together with thread at the top, (fig 5). The second was again parted but rolled into soft balls of hair indicating possession by a female deity, also mentioned, (fig 6). Aunty Cecilia spoke of these styles as being customary and traditional, that they had been in use since time immemorial. She also reckoned that there were 99 deities in La and that overall there were more male than female deities. These styles were prepared with natural afro hair, which was combed and oiled with shea butter before the threading began. The *duku*, which is the name given to the head scarf used to tie around the head, was used by most priestesses, whether possessed by a female or male deity. It finished the hairstyle.

When celebrating *Homowo* the head is almost always covered with a *duku*, (fig 7), here priestesses are gathered in celebration for *Homowo* 2011. Whilst receiving a message from the spiritual world, when a priestess goes into possession, her hair too moves into an altered

state. In a state of hysterical possession she removes the *duku* and unwinds her hair into a disheveled state, this state of being tells all that a spirit has arrived. A priestess does not know what she is doing when in this state but the spirit descends on her and in so doing, makes her put on a convulsive hysterical display talking in a foreign tongue, which ready interpreters can translate. As Aunty Cecilia put it, 'this can happen any time there is a celebration or worship. The spirit brings messages and there is an interpreter....when the message comes you will know. At times it happens that there are wrong-doings in the community. The spirit will tell us we should slaughter goats or cows to stop the calamity'.

Through interviews which comprised the oral testimonies of three Ga priestesses, this chapter has demonstrated that the head dress of priestesses is traditional and customary and is believed by priestesses not to have changed over time. Their head dress is determined by their role, status and beliefs and the nature of their spiritual possession. It is not in any way subject to fashion. Yet their head dress has clearly absorbed modern materials such as hair thread, and borrowed scarves and hats, when appropriate and incorporated them into their customary head dress.

We have also seen that Ga priestesses have an inner and outer head, much like the Yoruba concepts of *Ase* and *Ori* discussed in chapter two. Their inner head is one which can be dictated to by spiritual possession which determines their existence and behaviour. The styling and form of their outer head reflects the inner one, the nature of their deity possession and its gender.

We have further seen that priestesses head dress reflects a phase in their life cycle; would be priestesses adhere to very strict rules of head dress when going through their apprenticeship

term which may last for years. Chemically treated hair, for example, is strictly forbidden during this period. However, once a fully fledged priestess, they may dress their heads in any way subject to the codes of their deity possession. As we can see (fig 7) their head dress at ceremonial functions, remains consistent over time. This demonstrates that there is a strong theme of continuity in their head dress which is evident yearly in their annual festivals and ceremonies. It also suggests that Ga priestesses' head dress is dominated by their traditional beliefs and not by modern influences.



Figure 4, Ga Priestess in full ceremonial dress. Photo by author.



Figure 5, Ceremonial hair style of a Ga Priestess possessed by a male deity, before covering with a head scarf known as a Duko. Photo by author.



Figure 6, Hair style of priestess possessed by female deity. Photo by author.



Figure 7, Priestesses gathered for *Homowo* ceremonies, 2011 . Photograph by Benjamin Mills-Lamptey of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.

4.5 TRADITIONAL HAIR STYLING

Based on an interview in the field with a Queen Mother Beatrice Adua Ankrah of Otublohum Dadegboenaa, who took the time to have traditional forms of hair demonstrated to me, this chapter takes a closer look at the traditional head dress of the Ga, worn by ordinary women, which does not fall within the sphere of Ga traditional religion. It aims to give an overview of traditional hair styling so that we can understand what traditional head dress means and know it from a Ga perspective.

The word traditional is a nebulous and tricky one to use in the study of culture, particularly hairstyling, which is ephemeral. This is especially so given that it means different things to different people at different points in time, yet it still retains its value as it recalls notions and ideas which a people commonly hold and popularly agree on is tradition for them. Therefore the word has not been avoided in this study rather it has been embraced as part of the cultural exploration of what traditional head dress means to Ga women now as well as how it is remembered in the distant past. Hence this word was used as a prompt during questionnaires

with respondents alongside words like indigenous to clarify which head dress was seen as originating from the Ga people themselves.

Queen Mother Beatrice Adua Ankrah held a prominent role within the community as a caretaker of women and women's affairs. Through discussion she gave me an understanding of what traditional head dress is considered to be and I was rewarded on the occasion with actual demonstrations of the hairstyles sported and considered as traditional. Which I will relate as clearly as I can, with the aid of photographs below.

The use of thread is a key tool in the making of traditional hairstyles, which were originally worn with the natural unadulterated hair of the head using just oil, applied prior to threading, to make natural hair look healthy, give it sheen and conditioning and make it pliable enough to work with. As we have seen priestesses wear traditional head dress using thread, but their head dress is coded on celebratory and worship occasions in a way that lets other know of their special role and place within society. It is not only priestesses, however, but ordinary women who may dress their hair in traditional styles using the same techniques, tools and materials. It is important to note this overlap because it is an association, which we will see in the following chapter, that dissuades many otherwise adventurous Ga women from dressing their heads in traditional ways. Ordinary Ga women have always made use of black thread to create hairstyles which they considered to look good and to be their traditional head dress of which they were proud.

4.6 THREADING

Threading styles are very much seen as traditional hair, identified first and foremost by respondents and focus group participants as the traditional hairstyle of the Gas. Strong black thread, (fig 8), is used to control and manipulate the natural hair to straighten and lengthen it, twist it and twirl it, curl it to produce a variety of forms and designs, some of which are so well known that they have been given names. Traditional hairstyles have been constant over the years and can be made up either singularly with the use of black thread or a combination use of black thread and braiding. Traditionally threading styles were the domain of natural hair alone, and necessarily so before the onset of hair straightening techniques. However with the coming of hot combs and perms, they have also been used on hair which has been heated or chemically treated. This notably has a different end effect; hair treated in this way stands differently from natural hair; less rigidly. Women questioned also considered certain kinds of braiding to be part of traditional head dress. Scarves and hats were not seen as part of their traditional repertoire, rather they were hairstyling arrangements borrowed from the world of fashion.

Kelekele

The basic style of threading is known as *kelekele* or *aho* as seen in (fig 9) for the Ga. The *kelekele* hairstyle is seen as one of the most traditional for the Ga. It is simple and shows off a full head of natural hair. It is the single unit of one section of threaded hair that priestesses of male possession use to wear their hair, but it is not bound up into the cone like state as their head dress is. To achieve the *kelekele* look the hair is combed and oiled, then parted into a

number of sections. Black thread is then wound tightly around each section of hair, in the process straightening the kink in the natural hair and pulling out its full length. The end effect is in (fig 9). A number of hairstyles can be made up using a combination of threading and braiding or just braiding. Styles are given names which those with some understanding of traditional head dress know or remember. The *Kelekele* style may be twisted and manipulated to form a variety of styles, one of which is known as the 'snails eye', as seen in (fig 10) the shape of a snail to which it is similar. Or else thread can be loosely wound and twirled around natural hair to form a style called *wuobibiafee*, literally translated as chicken faeces, which it closely resembles in form. If we recall the testimony of Madam Mary Yeboah, this is also a style worn by fully fledged priestesses. *Agbonaho* another style, is a way of plaiting the natural hair combined with the use of thread, which helps to straighten and firm up the braid. Queen mother Beatrice considered that these styles were old-fashioned and were now uncommon. She herself rarely wore them, except on traditional occasions, preferring instead the use of a wig on special occasions and head scarves, wrapped about her head for everyday wear.

When she did wear them she often prepared styles like *kelekele* herself. I could see from the demonstration that the styles needed a skilful person to roll them out, as such these hairstyles were often left to the practiced hands of older relatives and close friends who knew the styles well and were versed in doing them. Otherwise, as I understood from street interviews, one could find experienced women in certain corners of some markets who would also be able to do these styles, for a small fee. Whilst the two young women helpers present and aiding with the demonstrations of traditional hairstyles with Queen Mother Beatrice said that they would and did wear traditional hairstyles, it was interesting to note from some of the questionnaire

feedback that some younger Ga women did not really know what traditional Ga head dress was. Others knew of it though they saw it as a way of preserving Ga culture rather than an everyday wear option. From my own personal observation I have rarely seen these styles sported in urban Accra. On the rare occasions I have seen them; they stand out and make a jazzy statement of originality very contrary to the norm of contemporarily dressed heads see (fig 11).

The use of black thread, combs and natural oils - whilst certain styles using these materials are identified by the Ga as their own tradition, are commonly used by many other ethnic groups in the West African region to create a multitude of styles and designs, for everyday and occasion wear, as such the use of this technique is really a shared heritage of culture. Many of the famous Nigerian photographer; Okhai Okeijere's photographs see (fig 12) , for example, capture such designs, which couple skilful use of black thread with the dexterity of the artist to create hair sculptures. These amount to works of art in their own right.

4.7 BRAIDING

Certain braiding techniques were also identified and demonstrated by Queen Mother Beatrice and her team as traditional head dress, although what came to be known as traditional head dress for the Ga was often borrowed and adopted from another ethnic group. As the Queen Mother told me, certain styles of braiding were picked up by migrant workers during their time in Nigeria in the 1980s. One such style called the *Anago*, became very popular and was brought back by Gas following their sacking from Nigeria during an anti-Ghanaian immigration protest period. This style *Anago* came to feature among the already existing traditional styles of braided hair. In this way what is considered as traditional here is more

about form than age; braiding of natural hair then into certain styles is something considered transcendent of age of the style and inherently traditional. Another popular traditional braided style called *agbonaho* see (fig 13) is having the head of hair divided into four or five parts and then plaited into singles without the use of thread as support. The cornrow braid is a staple; a plait along the head taking the form of a sheaf of wheat, it is also considered to be traditional Ga head dress when employed to dress natural hair in a variety of forms. Alongside its multiple variations it creates many innovative designs. The use of braiding on natural hair is a much more common feature of head dress amongst Ga women and urban woman of Accra in general. Braiding is a form which has evolved to incorporate new materials such as the synthetic hair which is much in use to achieve a braided look with length. Despite their waning use traditional hairstyles stand out and make a statement about ethnicity. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are used chiefly during traditional occasions, where the wearing of traditional dress signifies social standing and makes a statement about one's pride in one's ethnic origins. In its various forms of threading and braiding it may be worn by anyone. However, it is no longer commonly worn by ordinary women and is seen most often worn in the sphere of traditional religion and by Ga priestesses. This means that it is no longer a fashionable choice for contemporary Ga women. The next chapter will examine, amongst other themes, their attitudes to traditional hair styles and seek to answer why it is disappearing from view as a choice of head dress.



Figure 8, Black thread, used used to prepare traditional hair styles. Courtesy of google images, accessed June 2012.



Figure 9, *Kelekele*, hairstyle. Photo by Benjamin Mills-Lampsey.



Figure 10, Snails eye design. Photo by Benjamin Mills-Lampsey.



Figure 11, Examples of some of the jazzy styles which can be achieved using the threading technique Source: google images, accessed June 2012.



Figure 12, Agbonaho, plaiting with thread to stiffen the plait. Photo by Benjamin Mills-Lampsey.



Figure 12, Photographs of Head dress from 1968 'Hairstyle' collection by Okhai Ojeikere, using thread.

Source www.gallery51.com, accessed June 2012.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY HAIR STYLES

5.1 OVERVIEW

The field work relating to this study was conducted between May- June of 2012 in the Ga towns of La, Teshie and Accra. This chapter collates the findings from the street interview questionnaires that were conducted in these towns and the discussions of the focus group session held at the University of Ghana. It pulls together the findings from both the interviews and the focus group and examines them under the themes of fashion, attitudes to natural hair, traditional hair and relaxed hair, and also considers the influence of the media and differentiated that emerged with the age of respondents. These themes were the subject of the interview questions and the focus group discussion. Appendix A, which is the interview questionnaire used during street interviews, shows that the questions centred around finding out what women thought was traditional head dress, whether they would wear it, what women thought about wearing natural hair, what they thought was fashionable and beautiful head dress, what types of head dress they were choosing to wear, how often, and what motivated their choices. This fits with the study's focus on the head dress of contemporary women.

5.2 FASHIONABLE HAIR CHOICES

The head dress of ordinary Ga women frequenting their local high street or the central markets of Accra stand out as no different from women of any other Ghanaian ethnicity. Their head dress collectively reflects current fashions and trends. Currently fashionable head

dress are; weave-ons (fig 14), chemically treated relaxed hair (fig 15), braided hair extensions (fig 16), twisted 'rasta' extensions (fig 17) Natural hair in the form of twists (fig 18).

Women interviewed during field work fed back that they valued the head and its pride of place as part of the body and women are keen to have their hair styled to 'look good'. 'Looking good' and whether a style 'fitted a face' were the phrases that seemed to dominate choices around what fashions women chose to wear. Women alternated styles of head dress and would wear any of the given currently fashionable styles as and when it suited them.

Decisions about whether a woman should wear a wig or a weave-on, or relax their natural hair came down as much to money as to what looked good. Hence the use of these type of fashionable additions are part of a beauty industry on which women spend a great deal to achieve and maintain the looks that they desire.

Women frequent hair salons to have their tresses dressed in a fashionable way. They do this at regular intervals depending on which hair style they are wearing. Women with chemically treated relaxed hair frequented salons on a more regular basis than women wearing hair extensions, weave-ons or wigs. This is because relaxed hair needs regular treatments which can be only be performed at a salon, to maintain the look. As such these women spent more on their hair maintenance than women wearing other types of head dress.

For special occasions such as weddings, christenings, funerals and birthdays, women tended to visit a salon, to have their hair done, but generally sported the same type of styles that they did for everyday wear. When asked what was currently fashionable women invariably replied that, weave-ons, wigs and extensions particularly Brazilian waves were the 'in' thing. Women expressed a desire to experiment with hair so that they could change their look.

When women were asked what they thought makes a beautiful head dress, women responded with answers in essence saying what looked nice. From the interviews looking nice was what looked 'healthy', 'well oiled', 'nicely styled', 'well nourished' and was 'good textured' hair. Notably, despite the extensive use of hair additions, their answers to what made a beautiful head dress made no reference to trends; long or short, relaxed or natural, weave-on or wig, or type of hairstyle, which suggested that women did not care in particular about the hair type or any enhancements that were employed, what seemed to be important was the overall appearance and the effect of looking good.

5.3 CURRENTLY FASHIONABLE HAIR STYLES



Figure 14, Young vendor sporting waves, a fashionable weaved-on style. Photo by author.



Figure 15, Woman wearing popular relaxed look or chemically straightened hair. Photo by author.



Figure 16, Fashionable braided extensions using synthetic hair-like fibre. Photo by author.



Figure 17, Growing in popularity, 'rasta' extension twists. Photo by author.



Figure 18, Growing in popularity twisted natural hair. Photo by author.

5.4 ATTITUDES TO NATURAL HAIR

The wearing of natural hair was not an option favoured by women. It was considered difficult to manage and limited in styling options as it did not grow to a great length. Short natural hair was considered as the least favourable natural hair style to flatter the face. As one woman in the focus group put it; a short afro 'brings you out, so if you are not pretty it's very obvious that you are not pretty' Another added; 'Most people are not really pretty, but then they have the extensions which makes them look good'. I questioned then whether what women were really doing was hiding behind these attachments, hiding their real faces and real looks. Was it really that bad? The response was laughter, and one woman countered; that what they were doing was not hiding but enhancing their faces.

One woman during discussions expressed a preference for wearing a wig only until she could grow her hair natural to a desired longer length underneath it, her ultimate aim being to sport a natural hair style of the twisted type that had become fashionable in the last year or so see (fig 18). Others also saw wearing their hair natural as a period of rest, between chemical relaxer treatments or whilst on vacation. One young woman considered chemically treated relaxed hair to be her definition of natural hair, to her it was natural because it grew 'out of her head'.

There seemed to be a shyness about wearing the hair natural, in that it was hidden and worn during periods of rest for the hair, underneath a hat or wig. However when women in the focus group were asked whether they would wear the popular hair of 1970s, the afro, all said they would if it looked good and if it fitted their face. Natural hair then was not maligned; it was just not seen as something currently trendy. Apart from the recent short twisted styles, it

was not considered as fashionable. The natural dreadlocked look worn by Rastafarians, was not one to which any of the women present aspired.

5.5 ATTITUDES TO CHEMICALLY STRAIGHTENED HAIR

Almost all women asked replied yes to straightening their hair by relaxing it. They commonly treated it with chemical straighteners every four to six weeks or at most every few months in a salon. Correspondingly very few wore their hair natural as we have seen above. Women interviewed kept their hair relaxed even under the wearing of braid extensions, weave-ons and wigs. As such relaxed hair can be seen as the accepted form of wearing natural hair for Ga women and the predominant way of wearing hair for women of all ages.

However, interviewees and focus group participants favoured weave-ons and wigs over relaxed hair as everyday wear. This is because relaxed hair was seen as the most costly option to maintain needing regular weekly treatment at a salon for maintenance. Relaxed hair needed re-touching at least every six weeks. By contrast a wig or weave-on could last the same time or longer and needed only the expense of the initial outlay. Hence it could be deduced that the relaxed style is the domain of women who have the means to pay for it and maintain it well. This has repercussions for very low-income earners, for whom it would be an unaffordable and un-maintainable look. However, the relaxed style can be seen on the street

as worn by women of all income categories. It currently costs an average of 8 Cedis to have one's hair relaxed in Accra³⁹. This is still, clearly an affordable hairstyle for many.

5.6 ATTITUDES TO TRADITIONAL HAIR

Feedback from street interviews and the focus group held that traditional hairstyles, such as *kelekele* with the use of black thread or braiding of the natural hair, were unfashionable and out of date. All women asked had some knowledge of what traditional head dress was, and knew the local names of the styles but only one of the respondents to the questionnaire said they would wear it. Women did not want to wear it because it was not fashionable. Some younger women recalled having their hair dressed in that way, by their mothers or grandmothers, when they were children, but expressed that they would not wear it that way as an adult.

One older women expressed that she would wear a traditional hair style if she took part in a local traditional celebrations or festival. Traditional hair was considered to occupy its own sphere, the same one as traditional religion, which younger women did not want to associate with and wished to keep a distance from because of its spiritual and 'fetish associations'. Younger women who did not participate in traditional spheres, equated traditional head dress with traditional religion. These young women were keen to make an impression on others by the way they looked and thought that wearing a traditional style would give the wrong

³⁹ This price was quoted on my enquiry at a local hair salon and came up in discussion during the focus group session

impression; an impression of being involved in traditional practices. As one woman put it 'Most people don't like to keep their hair traditional because it depicts this spiritual ancestry stuff, gods and stuff like that.' Additionally the wearing of traditional hair was seen by all women as old-fashioned. Some women valued traditional hair as a way of retaining Ga heritage, but this did not mean that they would wear traditional styles themselves.

One woman commented that braided extensions of the latest kind could be seen as traditional because braiding was a traditional technique. Her view was that there was something traditional about braiding hair that transcended time.

Traditional hair was therefore seen as being in the sphere of traditional religion and closely associated with it. This association was the main reason for women not wearing traditional styles. One older woman when asked whether she would wear traditional hair, shrugged and said simply "I don't like it".

5.7 HEAD DRESS OF YOUNGER WOMEN – 18-40 YEARS

Certain differences came out in attitudes to head dress with respect to younger women which will be mentioned here.

Younger women thought that traditional head dress could look good on older women depending on how it was worn with the total outfit, but would not wear it themselves. Younger women also expressed that they were not in the habit of wearing head scarves or head wraps for everyday wear, but might do so if requested by their church. Head ties were seen as unfashionable and in the arena of traditional styles, which they did not wish to sport. Few wore caps or hats. However scarves were worn by them by night to keep hairstyles in

place. As such the head dress of younger Ga women, as presented to society, was more or less limited to hair styling.

One young woman in the focus group, expressed that because she was not permitted to wear anything other than short natural hair at high school, her experimentation with hair styles through relaxers, wigs and weave-ons was a form of entry into womanhood for her. This was because only women and not girls within society were allowed to wear their hair in this way.

Another in the focus group, commented that as a young girl she had watched her mother fashion her hair and style it in various ways. Through the long years of watching this process of beautification she had always yearned and looked forward to the time when she would be able to do the same. In this way the styling of hair into modern and fashionable styles, experimentation with wigs and weave-ons can be seen to be a part of achieving the status of being considered a woman in modern society. Just as short shorn hair is indicative, to anyone who cares to know, that a girl is still at high school. The wearing of fashionable hair styles is a statement expected of any female who wants to be considered a fashion conscious adult woman. Hence passage through high school could be seen as a form of a modern rite which young girls must pass through before they can enter into one aspect of the world of womanhood; that of the hair styling domain.

5.8 HEAD DRESS OF MATURE WOMEN – 41 YEARS +

Certain differences came out in attitudes to head dress with respect to mature women which will be mentioned here.

Mature women questioned during street interviews were also keen to look good but seemed to be less influenced in following popular trends. Unlike younger women they made more use

of scarves and hats as part of their everyday and special occasion wear and the older they were the more likely they were to use wigs. Older women, particularly over the age of 50 were also more comfortable about wearing their hair natural hair, because some had worn natural braided hair in their younger years, which they had, had to before the arrival of chemical relaxer treatments and the current braided extension fashions became available in the last few decades.

Older women also wore extension pieces as a way of supplementing their own hair. Like younger women, they saw the wearing of traditional styles for everyday wear as old fashioned. However, traditional styles were seen as styles that one could opt to wear for a traditional occasions such as festival. As Christians their church, on occasions might request them to wear a traditional style for a special anniversary. Therefore traditional head dress was also seen as outmoded by older women and only worn if an occasion called for it..

Older women also considered that a hair coiffure could make a woman beautiful and that a woman should dress her head in such a way that others would know that she is a woman and not a girl any longer. Older women wore hats to family celebrations and occasions. The wedding of a close family member such as a daughter was a typical occasion on which to wear an elaborate hat. Older women also made more use of scarves and head ties for everyday wear and for going to church.

Older women had seen the coming of the chemical treatments in the late 1970s and 1980s and so many of them had lived without this as an option in their earlier years, as such they were more indifferent to having their hair relaxed permanently.

One older woman expressed a preference for wigs because her hair was too soft and could not stand the chemicals. Others did not relax their hair at all, instead being totally reliant on wigs to achieve their desired look. When one older woman was asked why she chose the hairstyles she did, she replied simply 'I'm not a girl, I'm a woman so I have to do it. I have wigs, I like wigs'.

5.9 INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

It is evident that the media and Euro-American hairstyles currently have a big influence on the fashionable hairstyles of Ga women. When asked what influenced their choice of head dress, women replied what looked good, but relayed that what looked good for them was determined by what they saw in the newspapers, magazines, and on the internet as well as in the hair salon. Influence of peers also had an effect, a friend or a complete stranger might sport a look, which was admired and then a women could relate it to her hairstylist in a salon, who would work to achieve the same effect.

Younger women were aware of their influence by the media and some saw it as part of socialization. One said "We are socialized into thinking our hair will make us look good". Another, "We've been brought up to think that everything white is good".

When women during the focus group discussion were asked whether they would prefer it if their hair grew out of their heads straight and long like European hair, all present said they would prefer it. When asked whether if they had European type hair they would still add

extensions in it, some said yes as one put it “Sometimes you will want to change how you look”,⁴⁰.

When asked what head dress fashions they thought were influenced from abroad, all women cited weave-ons and wigs as fashions which originated from the Europe and America, which deeply influenced their choices and current trends.

During the focus group discussion I queried whether all traditional associations were seen as negative by them. For example many were wearing traditional dress, in the form of prints and kente designs. Participants expressed that traditional dress was accepted as fashionable wear. The negative associations of traditional themes therefore seemed to work for them only in the arena of head dress and not dress overall. One young lady commented that it had not always been so. It was only relatively recently, in the last ten years or so, during President Kuffour’s time, that wearing traditional dress had become the norm by all, and this was because it had been made fashionable by becoming more stylized and available in different fashions.

I queried if traditional head dress was also to be made fashionable by someone famous they would also follow the trend. The answers were a unanimous yes. It would take a popular star someone like famous actress, ‘Joselyn Dumas’ to sport the style and make it look good that would get everyone wearing it. I commented that the young women seemed to be slaves to fashion and the media. In response one replied “Even though we do think, we don’t think for

⁴⁰ Focus group participant; from female student, focus group held at University of Ghana, May 2012

ourselves, we are playing along with society we are just going along with a trend”⁴¹. The advertising placards of the many salons in Accra promoting modern day pop stars such as ‘Beyonce’ and ‘Rihanna’ as ideals of beauty are a testament to this statement.

5.10 CASE STUDY OF CHRISTIANA ODOKAI ASHONG – 75 YEARS

This study as mentioned in the introduction also has one eye on the past in order to gauge any significant change of practice to the wearing of traditional head dress and whether there has really been any significant change in this respect from the present. As such this chapter will also follow a case study; that of Christiana Ashong, and her head dress choices over the last half century, to get some idea of how Ga women were wearing their hair in the recent past, and how mature women might have adopted different head dress for their respective roles.

Those women, like Christiana, that have lived a full life make a particularly interesting study as their photographs provide a picture story of how head dress fashions have changed over time. This chapter explores the head dress of as Christiana Odokai Ashong over the years to illustrate how head dress styles have changed, during the period 1950 to the present. Christiana’s case particularly illustrates that European influenced hair styles have had influence over the head dress choices of Ga women for a long time. Her case also shows that women have always had choices about how to wear their hair, they have adopted new fashions when they came along but they also wore traditional styles. Further her head dress

⁴¹ Focus group participant, from female student, focus group held at University of Ghana, May 2012

choices show how hairstyling can be part of dress overall as well as indicative of fashion. Not least her case can be used as a time chart; indicating when fashions came into being.

5.11 BACKGROUND TO CHRISTIANA

Christiana was fortunate to get a good education. She attended St Paul's Anglican Church Elementary school and a Presbyterian Middle School in Accra. After attending Middle school, she spent some time doing petty trade in cosmetics and then later joined the Convention People's Party (CPP). The CPP needed a typist and she soon became one for them. From there on she went to typing school and eventually got a job working as a typist and typewriter mechanic for the Ghanaian Army. This she did for the duration of a full career; some thirty-nine years. Whilst at school, as was the norm for young girls, and as we saw earlier, is still the norm today, Christiana wore her hair short and natural. It was when she graduated; when she left school and left behind assisting her mother with petty trading, when she began to work for the army in the 1960s that she began to experiment with hairstyles. As Christiana recalls this was from about 1961 onwards. She had always had a flair for style and this was evident in her clothes as well as her head dress.

Christiana had secured what was considered to be a good job and was a skilled worker. With the wages she earned she was able to maintain herself well and sport the latest fashions in dress as well as the latest fashions in hair, which during the time of the 1960s was the ubiquitous fulsome wig. The wig dominated all other hairstyles of its time and was favoured

by men as well as women, some of whom went as far as to buy them for their wives⁴². In the independence era of the 1960s, nations such as Ghana were pressing for modernization. The wig in all its fulsome glory captured this spirit of modernization. Copied from the height of western fashions such as the beehive, the wig expressed an aspiration. The wig heralded the promise that Ghanaians could and would have it all, and achieve all that was for the taking in the brave new world to be carved out of independence.

Christiana was a woman of substance, not just an achiever in the world of work, she was considered as important by members of her family, a person whom they looked up to. Because she was held in high esteem by family and in the community, she was often requested and expected to attend chieftancy functions, to represent the family, their wishes and concerns and those of the community. In this respect she had to dress in the respectful attire of the time. See (Fig 21). On these occasions one could not simply wear the latest fashions, or convenience wear, as Christiana made clear to me, one had to dress appropriately for the occasion at hand. The occasion might call for the wearing of kente cloth for example. Ghanaians had long reached a stage where borrowing across ethnic boundaries was taking place and creative and innovative designs from other cultures were being emulated and employed cross-culturally. Dress was simply one forum, in which this was taking place, another, of course, was hair. Hence Christiana's hairstyle, see (Fig 21), wearing a Fante style wig, which was popular at the time. This wig was homemade and Christiana explained to me

⁴² Pg, 167, Essah, D , 'Fashioning the Nation: Hairdressing, Professionalism and the Performance of Gender in Ghana, 1900-2006, Internet Publication, Michigan University, USA.

at some length how it was prepared. A sponge was first placed to cover the natural hair of the head, over this was then placed the synthetic hair. The hair was tied at the base of the head, then folded over and tied again at the top, the remaining hair was styled into a chignon type puff at the crown of the head to achieve the overall handsome effect. This wig was a DIY (Do it Yourself) job.

As Christina explained other styles from neighbouring countries also crossed over to Ghana in her time, culturally speaking, as they do today. One such style was the Gele; which is a native head dress from Nigeria, popularly worn by Nigerians during functions such as weddings and naming ceremonies. This is a form of wrapping the head with elaborate material made of damask, with the overall effect of a shiny sweetie wrapper. This style adopted from Nigeria remains popular in Ghana today.

Christiana's case therefore in one sense, brings to light the futility of looking at the form of head dress in ethnic or cultural isolation. It is by its very nature a conduit for what is popular not just locally, regionally or nationally but trans-nationally. Head dress is influenced from much further afield than one's own yard and has always been in a world of what has always been interchange and which has now become one of fast communications and global exchange.

Christiana's 'hot combed' hairstyle, see (fig 22), reminds us that before the popularity of the wigs of the 1960s and 1970s, to achieve a straightened look with their hair most women used a metal hot comb which was placed on hot coals and applied to hair which had been primed with conditioner oil ready before the hot comb's application. The hot combed hairstyle did not completely fade out with the advent of wigs, instead it ran as a style alongside wigs of the

period though less popular. Its near death knell came rather with the mainstreaming of the 'geri-curl' or curly perm look of the 1980s, even so it remained on the scene as a cheap and credible alternative to straightening the hair. Once one had invested in a metal hot comb, it was yours for life. Coals and a little grease was all that was needed to smooth your path to looking good. Hot combs alongside wigs therefore remained in the repertoire of those economically challenged women who could not yet afford the desirable new 'wet look' another name for the 1980s curly perm..

Christiana's overall dress choice in (fig 23) and (fig 24) respectively, show how one could choose to mix and match traditional dress with popular hair and alternatively, traditional hair with fashionable dress in the 1960s and 1970s. The now unusual combination of traditional *agbonaho* hair style or traditional hairstyles with modern dress is evident here in a way that it is not seen commonly today. Few women today choose to combine popular fashionable dress with traditional head dress. Christiana pictured in (fig 24), shows that traditional head dress has gravitated into the secluded sphere of traditional religion since her time. This could be read as simply a phase in the cycle of fashion, whereby traditional hair is currently being eclipsed by European modes of hair styles. It may be that in time a phase may start when traditional styles begin to move into ascendancy and worn again by ordinary women. The evidence gathered from the feedback in this study suggests, however that it would take a popular and fashionable Ghanaian role model to do it.

Christina's picture story tells us how mature women have adopted styles, fashion and head dress from within and outside of their native culture appropriate to the functions they have had to attend for their multiple roles in society. Therefore we see Christina in different head dress for her different roles; dressed as a mother attending the wedding of her daughter (fig

25), an esteemed woman of the chieftaincy circle,(fig 21) a member of her local church who has pastoral care of others(fig 26) and as an ordinary everyday woman dressed with an ease to accommodate the demands of everyday life (fig 24).

Christiana Ashong is an example of how Ga women have adopted different head dress for different roles and functions in the past. It has shown how global fashions have dominated the head dress of Ga women at least since the 1950s and that European type head dress has always been a popular fashion choice for Ga women. Her case also reveals that traditional head dress was worn as contemporary fashion in the 1960s and 1970s and appeared to be a popular choice, unlike now. In this respect Christiana's case demonstrates that very little has changed in the last fifty years in terms of how global fashions dominate head dress and European and American hair styles are the aspiration. The only change apparent is that traditional head dress has since moved into greater association with traditional religion as a coiffure and is now less of a head dress choice for Ga women than it was in the 1970s.



Figure 19, Family photo, Christiana as a young girl, circa 1953. Family album. Photo by author.



Figure 20, Family Photo of Christiana wearing a popular wig, circa 1967. Family album. Photo by author.



Figure 21, Christiana photographed at a chieftancy function wearing a native Fante wig called Oduko, popular amongst the Ga. Family album. Photo by author.



Figure 22, Christiana wearing hair straightened with a hot comb. Family album. Photo by author.



Figure 23, Christiana in her prime wearing popular 'high top' 1960's wig combined with traditional dress, circa 1967. Family album. Photo by author.



Figure 24, Christiana wearing traditional *agbonaho* style with western dress, circa 1970. Family album. Photo by author.



Figure 25, Christina dressed for daughter's wedding. Family album. Photo by author.



Figure 26, Christina dressed as pastoral member of her church. From family album. Photo by author.

CHAPTER SIX

6.0 SUMMARY CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study sought to find out what is traditional head dress and why it is not represented amongst the choices of Ga women, also whether status, role and beliefs are signaled in the head dress of Ga women. It discovered that traditional Ga head dress is varied and skillful and employs braiding and threading techniques which can create unique designs with natural hair, but that this form of head dress is considered as old fashioned by contemporary Ga women and so is not worn by them. It also found that status, role and beliefs are strongly indicated in the sphere of traditional religion and in the head dress of Ga priestesses but is rarely indicated in the head dress of ordinary Ga women in everyday life, rather women may choose to adopt a particular head dress for a special role or occasion as and when it is called for.

The study sought to understand attitudes to the wearing of traditional, natural and other types of head dress. It emerged that above all Ga women want hair that, as well as looks good, is convenient and economical to maintain with the bonus of being fashionable. As compared with chemically straightened hair, natural and traditional hairstyles do not rank highly in women's perceptions of what made fashionable and desirable head dress. Women's choices of head dress are influenced heavily by what they see in the media and the media images are full of Euro-American ideals of beautiful hair which they therefore aspire to. Moreover women wish to disassociate themselves from the spiritual association of 'fetish' priestess hair styles, many of whom are practicing Christians.

In contrast to the various choices of head dress adopted by ordinary Ga women, the head dress of Ga priestesses does not change and is not subject to the tides of fashion but instead is subject to the requirements of Ga traditional religion. Priestesses and others who wear traditional head dress for ceremonial functions and special occasions are therefore maintaining a part of the ethnic identity of the Gas that would otherwise be lost. This heritage aspect was recognized and appreciated by some women but still, did not mean that they would seek to wear the traditional styles themselves. Traditional head dress as worn by priestesses continues to hold its own against the barrage of new and fashionable hair styles. It adapts by creatively borrowing from modern materials to maintain its standard.

History shows that since recording began the use of braiding and hair additions have been a staple in the head dress of African women since the time of the Egyptians. Along with the use of the comb and oil they present the basic materials, tools and facilities which African women have used over the ages to beautify their hair. Arguably use of current hair extensions, wigs and hair additions are simply the modern way of expressing this age old cultural practice. The obsession with the head continues in a myriad of ways, showcasing the head as dominant in the modern context with additions of new synthetic hair-like fibre extensions, once again popular wigs, relative newcomer weave-ons, as well as chemical relaxers and straightening treatments. This tells us the African women are doing what they have always done but are making full use of the innovations in science and technology available to them to do so.

However this study makes apparent that there is a lack of investment culturally, economically and innovationally in the styling of natural hair, traditional or otherwise. The hair and beauty industry has not yet invested the effort and technology to research what possible forms, fashions and permutations natural and traditional hairstyles may take, with hair in its natural

state. Natural hair therefore remains an undervalued and undesirable option for most and for the majority natural hair continues to be treated, regardless of hair style adopted, with straightening treatments, hot combs and chemicals in a way which denies its presence and potential beauty.

For reasons of undesirability and unfashionability traditional and natural hairstyles are under-represented in the array of styles which women choose to adorn themselves with and in doing so it is my contention that something of the self of the African woman is being denied. I do not suggest that traditional hairstyles be resorted to as a way of fascist enforcement of a strict code of hairstyle conduct, rather that a process of research and investment be pursued so that African hair which, as we have seen can be an art form, can be held up in its natural state as one example of beauty.

This gap acknowledged, Ga women have countless choices and possibilities of experimentation with their head dress, which should also be valued for their potential to produce what is good, beautiful and healthy hair. Limitations in designing and styling natural kinky afro hair are no longer and by virtue of this the racial construction of hair in itself is fading away as European and African head dress styles morph into one another.

Ga women continue to borrow head dress choices cross-culturally from national, ethnic and global sources adopting for example en vogue Nigerian head gear such as the Gele, which is again being seen at Ghanaian weddings and special occasions. Aside from this the present emerging trend of wearing natural kinky hair in twists looks set to continue as it gains new credence and popularity as a style and by 'looking good'.

Ga women have choices of how to wear their hair in a multitude of ways which may all compete for their attention. The evidence suggest that these conflicting cosmologies, these colliding worlds; global, local, traditional, modern, ethnic, trans-national, natural and added will compete for centre stage on women's heads and co-exist for time to come. Like Charles Darwin's Evolution of the Species, these modes of head dress will undoubtedly continue to wrestle and compete for survival of the 'fittest'⁴³.

⁴³ British slang denoting good looking, handsome, attractive.

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APPENDIX A – STREET AND MARKET QUESTIONNAIRE – GA TOWNS

Age Status Occupation From

- Q.1. What do you think about the head? Do you think the head is important? Why? Proverbs?
- Q.2. How do you usually wear your hair/dress your head for everyday wear?
- Q.3. Have you already dressed your head in this way? How has your head dress changed overtime – motives?
- Q.4. Do you dress your head differently for special occasions?
- Q.5. How do you decide what head dress to wear? What influences your decision?
- Q.6. Do you use head services, cloths or hats to dress your head? When?
- Q.7. Do you use wigs, extensions or other addition to your hair? How often?
- Q.8. Do you relax your hair? How often?
- Q.9. Do you ever wear your hair natural? When?
- Q.10. What do you think is traditional head dress?
- Q.11. When is traditional head dress won? By whom?
- Q.12. Do you ever wear traditional head dress?
- Q.13. Do you like traditional head dress?
- Q.14. Where will you go to have your head dressed in a traditional way?
- Q.15. What do you think of women who wear traditional head dress?
- Q.16. what do you think is old fashioned head dress?
- Q.17. What do you think is modern head dress?
- Q.18. What is fashionable head dress now?
- Q.19. What do you think makes a beautiful head dress?
- Q.20. What head dress style do you think are influenced from abroad?