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Hair in African Art and Culture

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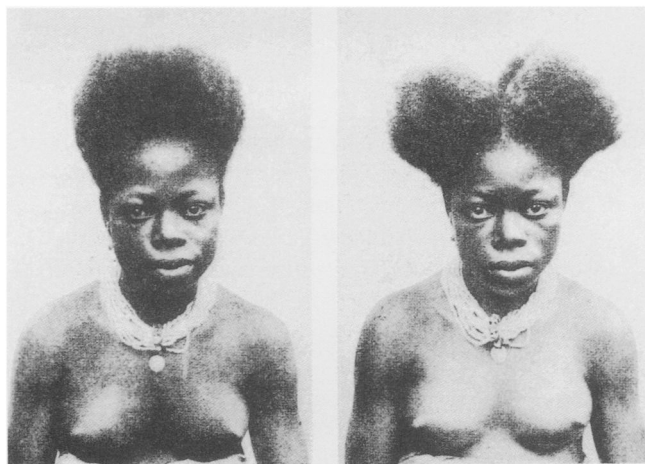
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# HAIR in African Art and Culture

**ROY SIEBER and FRANK HERREMAN**

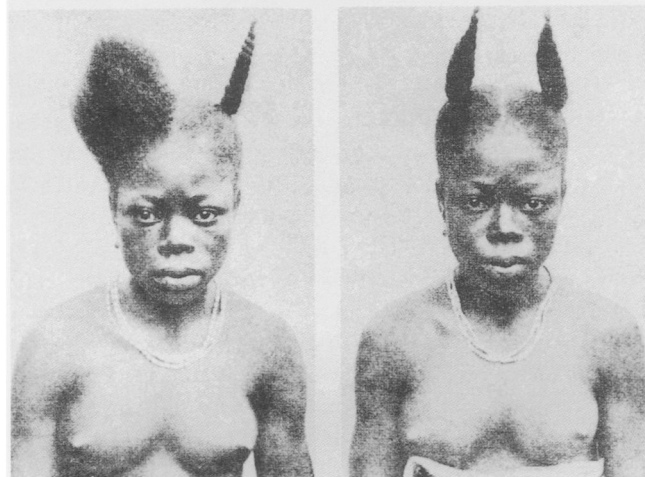
*"Hair in African Art and Culture" is a traveling exhibition organized by the Museum for African Art, New York, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation. Guest curator Roy Sieber and the museum's Director of Exhibitions, Frank Herreman, have brought together more than 170 objects from collections around the world to illustrate the significance of hair in African society. After its initial presentation in New York (February 9–May 28, 2000), the exhibition began a national tour, whose venues include the Apex Museum, Atlanta (June 25–August 20, 2000); the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University (October 4–December 31, 2000); the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit (February 8–April 15, 2001); and the California African-American Museum, Los Angeles (May 26–August 15, 2001). The tour is sponsored by the Colgate-Palmolive Company.*

*The exhibition catalogue, edited by Sieber and Herreman, includes essays by eleven additional contributors (192 pp., 129 b/w & 164 color illustrations, notes, bibliography). It is available for \$38 softcover and \$68 hardcover from the Museum for African Art and (hardcover only) from Prestel Verlag (New York, London, Munich). The text in this article is drawn from the publication.*



Combed out in preliminary stage

Parted ready for plaiting



*Opposite page:*

1. Figure. Fante, Ghana. Wood, fabric, beads; 111.8cm (44"). Private collection, Los Angeles.

Young Fante women have their hair styled into a royal coiffure that is worn for a brief period during the final phase of initiation. The Fante figure probably represents a young woman at that same stage of life.

*This page:*

2. Stages of coiffure-making. Fante, Ghana, early 20th century. From *The Secret Museum of Man-kind*, n.d., vol. 2: *The Secret Album of Africa*.









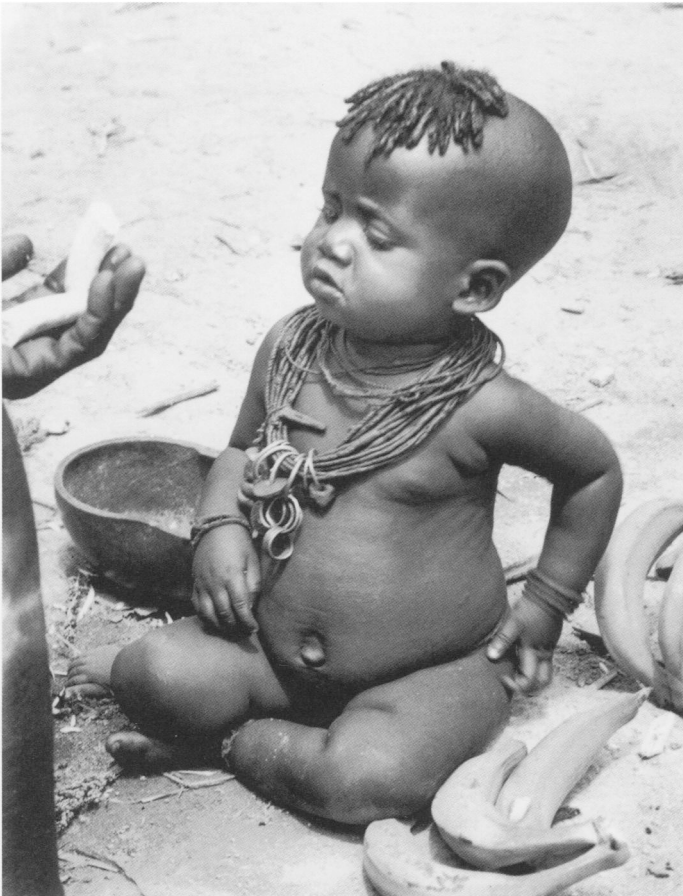
### Hair in African Culture

**H**air arrangement is a mode of African art too little and too infrequently recognized or appreciated. Through field photographs (Fig. 2) and traditional sculptures (Fig. 1), the exhibition "Hair in African Art and Culture" and the accompanying volume serve to introduce the wide variety of coiffures worn by peoples throughout the continent and to offer a glimpse of African-inspired hairstyles worn by African Americans. It must be emphasized that all African and African American hairstyles, historical or modern, have a major aesthetic component (Fig. 3).

Scholars, missionaries, colonials, and travelers with an interest in Africa have long been aware of the diversity and visual richness of both men's and women's hair arrangements. Usually they were best informed about those worn by the people with whom they were primarily concerned, focusing on one group or several culturally or geographically related groups. However, more generally shared attitudes or beliefs can be discerned from the literature. For example, hairstyles may reflect a special or abnormal condition or status (Fig. 4). In 1950 Hans Himmelheber photographed a Dan warrior with a beard and unshorn hair decorated with amulets. M. O. McLeod notes among the Asante: "Priests' hair was allowed to grow into long matted locks in the style known as *mpesempese* (a term sometimes translated as 'I don't like it'). Uncut hair is usually associated with dangerous behavior: madmen let their locks grow, and the same hair style was worn by royal executioners" (1981:64).

In African cultures, the way one wears one's hair may also reflect one's status, gender, ethnic origin, leadership role, personal taste, or place in the cycle of life. Infants and toddlers of both sexes may have their head shaved except for tufts of hair left to protect the fontanel (Figs. 5, 6). Girls receive or make dolls depicting local hairdos; these figures promote their adult responsibilities as mothers. A. B. Ellis, writing in 1887, reports that an Akan girl in "announcing her eligibility for marriage...is carefully adorned with all the ornaments and finery in the possession of the family, and fre-





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quently with others borrowed for the occasion....The hair is covered with gold ornaments" (1887:235) (Fig. 7).

Mourning is often expressed by deliberately abandoning the usually carefully coiffed hair. Among the Akan, "no sooner has the breath left the body than a loud wailing cry bursts forth from the house, and the women rush into the streets with disordered cloths and disheveled hair, uttering the most acute and mournful cries" (Ellis 1887:237).

Of course, hairstyles are always changing. What was popular a week, a year, or perhaps as long as a generation ago gives way to new forms, which themselves will one day be replaced. Many styles depicted in early photographs or sculptural forms have been abandoned. For example, the Shilluk man's style documented in Figure 8 was "unfashionable" by the early 1930s (Seligman & Seligman 1932:38). Unfortunately, except for a few such hints, much of the history of African coiffure is lost to us. We can but regard the present or read the records of the recent past. It is important to realize that observers have always documented what is at best a moment in the flow of fashion. Undoubtedly some changes in coiffure were introduced from outside Africa via Islam or Europe. Internal change in hair arrangement is indicated by the differences that exist between closely related groups living at no great geographical distance from each other.

In contrast to scarification, another widespread African body art, coiffures are temporary. Hair can be manipulated. It can be kept short or worn long. It can be braided or modeled with one or several crests, lengthwise or crosswise. Finally, it can be oiled, dyed, or rubbed with different pigments. It is not surprising that hair works very well as a signifier.

## Hair in African Art

All of these stylistic possibilities are also represented in statues and masks, for the most part in an idealized way. In many African figures, the head is extremely large in relation to the rest of the body (Fig. 9). This disproportion can be attributed to the concept that

### Opposite page:

*Left:* 3. Nziri man. Central African Republic, ca. 1905. Photo: J. Audema. Postcard: Published by Imprimeries Réunies de Nancy, France. Postcard Collection, 1985-140108-02, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.

Elaborately coiffed hair like that seen here has been documented by early travelers to Africa.

*Right:* 4. Healer. Côte d'Ivoire, 1974. Photo: E. Laget. The special status of this healer is signaled by his coiffure.

### This page:

*Left:* 5. Child with partially shaved head. Mambila, Cameroon, 1950. Photo: Gilbert Schneider, courtesy of Evan Schneider.

Various African peoples shave an infant's head except for a patch of hair that is believed to protect the fontanel.

*Right:* 6. Head. Makonde, Tanzania. Wood, human hair; 16cm (6.3"). Drs. Jean and Noble Endicott. The hair atop this head fragment reflects the naturalism of Makonde art.



Counterclockwise from top:

7. Young women during coming-of-age ceremonies. Fante, Ghana, 1964. Photo: Roy Sieber.

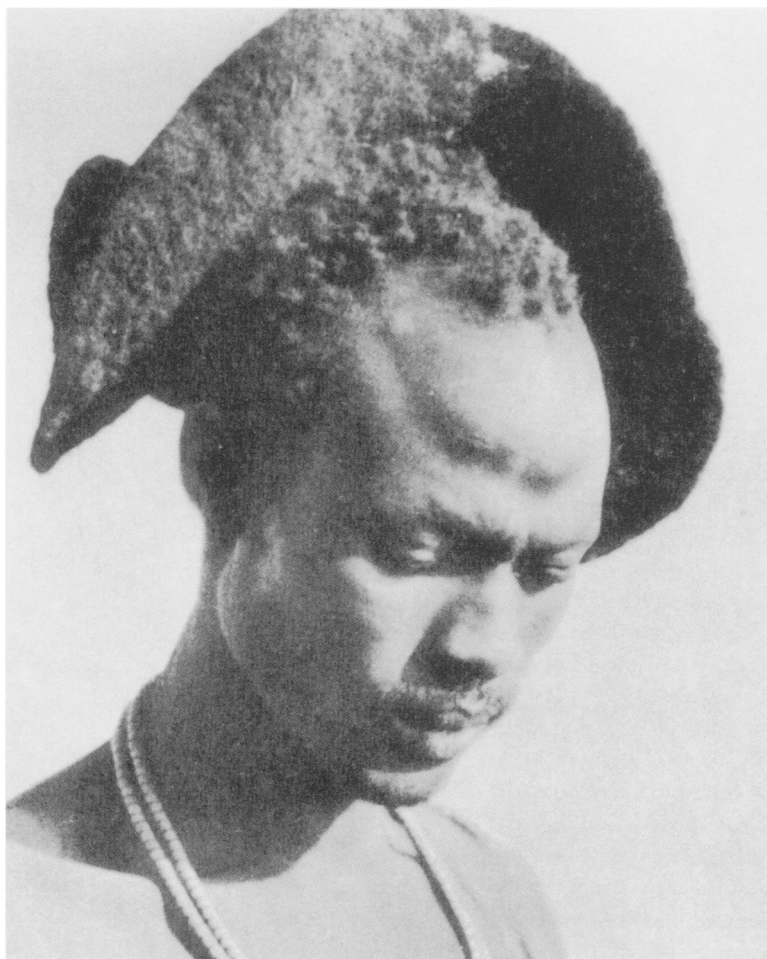
As early as the nineteenth century, as reported by Ellis, Akan girls announced their eligibility for marriage by wearing elaborate coiffures adorned with gold ornaments.

8. Man with hood hairdo. Shilluk, Sudan, early 20th century. Photo: Hugo Adolf Bernatzik. From Bernatzik 1929: abb. 114).

As an element of fashion, hairstyles are always changing. This coiffure was considered out of date by the early 1930s.

9. Twin figure (*ibejji*). Yoruba, Nigeria. Wood, metal, beads, fiber; 32.5cm (12.8"). Private collection, Belgium.

This *ibejji* is wearing a *suku* ("knotted hair") coiffure, so called because the braids terminate in a short or long knot on the crown of the head (Lawal in *Hair in African Art and Culture*, p. 98).



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the identity of the supernatural being or ancestor is largely determined by the shape, finish, and embellishment of the head, including scarification, facial paint, and the form of the coiffure (Fig. 10). Many figures, masks, and prestige objects display complex coiffures that are often symbolic of the status of the ancestor portrayed, the significance of the spiritual force embodied by the masquerader, or the secular importance of a ruler (Fig. 11).

It is not difficult to point out extremes in hairstyles, ranging from minimal to elaborately detailed, in the incredibly diverse formal language of African sculpture. The coiffure of the Kuba doll is suggested by a simple hairline, recurrent in ornamental cups, cosmetics boxes, and royal statues (Fig. 12). In contrast, the hair depicted on a crest mask from the Cross River region is indisputably the center of attention (Fig. 13), with several corkscrew braids radiating from the head in different directions. The coiffure helps to create a distinctly dramatic appearance for the moving masked figure.

Both these cases indicate that the African sculptor represents hairstyles conceptually rather than mimetically. This approach is entirely in accord with one of the principal characteristics of African sculpture, which is that it never copies exactly from nature. The artists are more often inspired by what they know than what they see. They do not hesitate to accentuate what is considered important in their cultures (Figs. 14, 15).

10. Figure. Igbo or Ejagham, Nigeria. Wood; 24cm (9.4"). Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht.

The large head reflects the belief that the identity of an ancestor or supernatural being can be determined by the shape, finish, and embellishments of the head, including the coiffure.





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*Left:* 11. Two adzes (left). Luba, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Wood, iron, copper, brass; 48cm. (18.9"). Felix Collection.

Axe (right). Kalundwe (Western Luba), Democratic Republic of the Congo. Wood, iron, aluminum, glass, beads, varnish; 41cm (16.1"). Felix Collection.

Conical hairpins or nails of copper or iron, as seen on the Kalundwe axe, are perhaps the most important objects forged by Luba blacksmiths to remember past royals (Dewey & Childs 1996:66).

*Right:* 12. Fertility figure or doll. Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Wood; 26.5cm (10.4"). Collection of J. W. Mestach.

The coiffure is suggested by the elegantly minimal hairline.

*Opposite page:*

13. Crest mask. Cross River, Calabar area, Nigeria. Wood, skin; 56cm (22"). Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht.

This coiffure with spiraling braids contrasts dramatically with the simple example shown in Figure 12.

A particular design is also determined by the material used. Wood, clay, ivory (Fig. 16), and various metals such as copper alloys or iron each have their own characteristics, which influence the final shape.

Hair can be depicted by means other than sculpting and carving. A coiffure can be suggested by coloring the head of a mask or figure. Tufts of hair can be represented with wooden pegs or, as among the Songye, iron arrowheads inserted point downward. A wig, usually made of raffia or knotted fibers, may be attached to the crown or temples of a mask (Fig. 17). The wigs are often more fantastic versions of the actual coiffures that inspired them. There are also examples of masks or statues with attachments of human hair (Fig. 18).

Representations of hair ornaments or amulets are regularly included in sculpted coiffures. Depictions of small, upright ornamental combs flank the lengthwise crest of many Igbo *mmo* masks. The Luba and the groups within their sphere of cultural influence, such as the Hemba, adorn the coiffures of sculpted figures with representations of metal plates, hairpins, and tiaras separating forehead and hair. It is not uncommon for Luba sculptors to attach actual beads to a figure's hair or to decorate it with a copper hairpin. Cowries are sometimes fastened to the real hair of Cross River masks (Fig. 19).

Indeed, coiffures often included ornaments of gold and other metals, coral, glass beads (usually imported), stone beads (often indigenous), and ostrich-eggshell beads





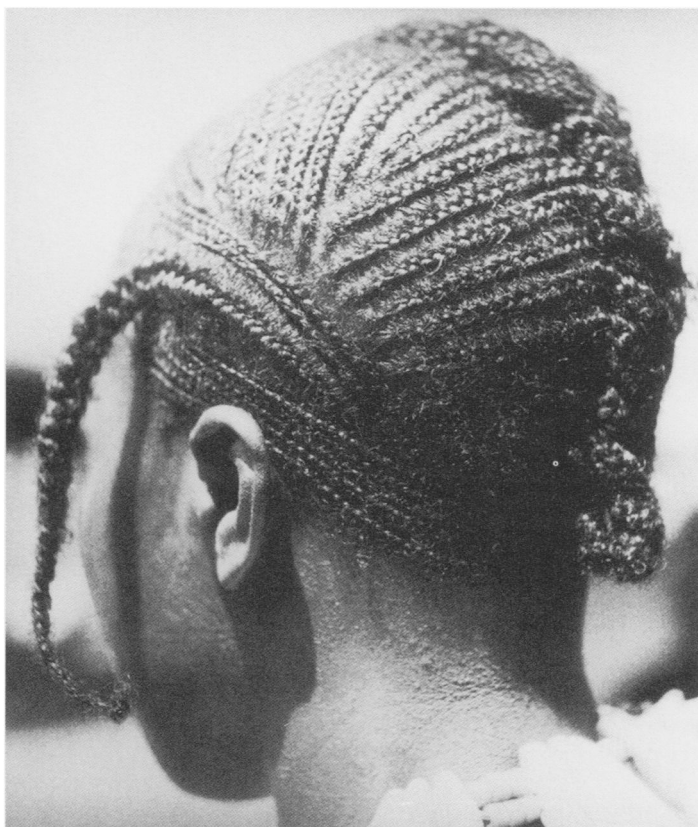
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*This page, clockwise from top left:*

14. Figure. Asante, Ghana. Wood, beads; 37.5cm (14.8"). Henau Collection, Antwerp.

15. Wife of the Niao chief at Ganya in Wè territory, Côte d'Ivoire, 1938–39. Photo: P. J. Vandenhoude.

16. Fly-whisk handle. Yoruba, Nigeria. Ivory; 11.5cm (4.5"). Alan Brandt Inc.

The initiation of a Yoruba priest involves shaving and treating the head with herbal preparations that sensitize it to signals from the deity, or *orisa*. Henceforth the individual must not carry a load on the head except for objects sacred to the deity. Frequently a round patch of hair (*osu*) is allowed to grow in the center or front of the head. Priests of the *orisa* Esu wear their *osu* like a pigtail, called *ere*, which characterizes many Esu staff figures (Lawal in *Hair in African Art and Culture*, p. 102).

*Opposite page:*

17. Face mask. Ngangela, Angola. Wood, fiber; 27cm (10.6"). Private collection, Belgium.

Fiber braids attached to this mask re-create a hairstyle favored by the Ngangela.

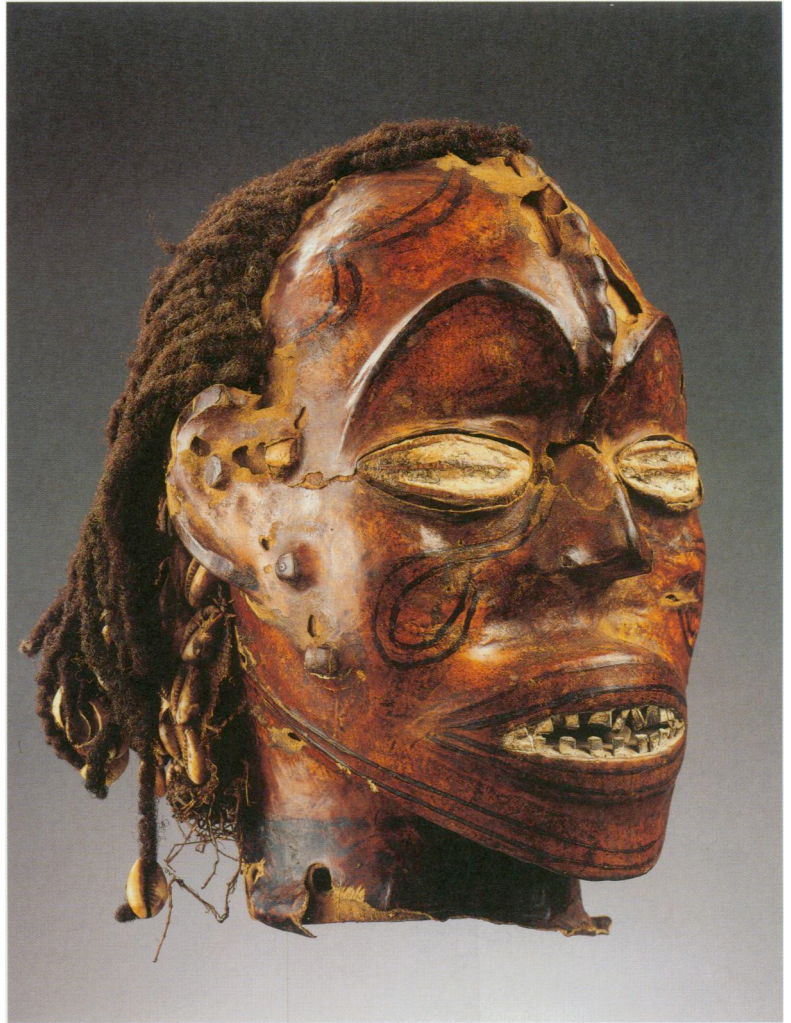








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(always locally produced), fruit seeds, shells, and leather. The list seems endless. Godefroi Loyer (1701) reports of the inhabitants of Issini on the Ivory Coast that

of their....Hair they are might careful..., tying it up in an hundred different Fashions. They comb it with a wooden or Ivory Fork, with four Teeth, which is always fastened on their Head. They also anoint their Hair with Palm-Oil and Charcoal, as they do their Bodies, to keep it black and make it grow. They adorn it with small Toys of Gold, or pretty Shells, each striving to outvie an other in their Finery.

THEY shave themselves with Knives, which they temper so as to fall little short of Razors. Some only shave one half of the Head, dressing the other like a Night-Cap cocked over one Ear. Others leave broad Patches here and there unshaved in different Forms, according to their Fancy. They are fond of their Beards and comb them daily wearing them as long as the Turks.

(in Astley 1968, vol. 2:435)

*Left:* 18. Crest mask. Ejagham, Nigeria. Wood, skin, human hair, basketry; 26cm (10.2"). Henau Collection, Antwerp.

*Right:* 19. Crest mask. Ejagham, Nigeria. Wood, skin, human hair, cowrie shells; 26cm (10.2"). Collection of Rolf and Christina Miehler.

In the Cross River region, crest masks are covered with tightly stretched goat or antelope skin. Hair may be represented in various ways: through coloring, wooden pegs suggesting tufts of hair, and, as seen here and in Figure 18, real human hair.

## Tools and Related Arts

A primary tool for shaping and teasing the hair is, of course, the comb. Max Schmidt notes that "the comb is found among every people of the world, and appears in numerous forms," and that "treating the hair with butter or vegetable oils is a widespread practice, and so is rubbing with earth or lime" (1926:67). To dress the hair or shape the coiffure, African peoples use oils and agents such as camwood, clay, and ochers, and devices such as extensions of human hair (from spouses or relatives), vegetable fiber, sinew (Fig. 20), and, more recently, locally spun or imported mercerized cotton. Hair is often stitched over supports of bamboo, wood, or basketry. Perfumes such as lavender,





Top: 20. Two women with hairstyles made of braided sinew (*eefipa*). Mbalantu, Wambo group, Namibia, 1940s. Photo: M. Schettler. From Scherz et al. 1992:39.

To create this hairdo, plaited extensions from previous coiffures were removed and additional plaits attached to lengthen them until they hung to the ankles. This style is worn by young women who take part in the *ohango* initiation ceremony.

Bottom: 21. Razors. Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Metal; 16.3cm–19.5cm (6.4"–7.7"). Collection of Roy and Sophia Sieber; collection of Mona Gavigan/Africa.

Razors and combs are the primary tools for styling the hair. Scissors were a later introduction.

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sandalwood, and frankincense may be added. Other tools of the hairdresser include pins and razors (Fig. 21). Scissors did not appear south of the Sahara until introduced by North African leatherworkers and by European missionaries and colonials.

Neckrests (often called headrests or pillows) have been used all over Africa to protect one's coiffure during sleep (Figs. 22, 23). They were found as part of grave furniture in ancient Egypt and Nubia. The concept may have spread from the north throughout the continent, but it is by no means impossible that the move was from south to north in pre-historic times. The variety of forms does suggest long, separate evolutions.

Beards are commonly seen in African men: they usually enhance status and reflect, when gray, the importance of an elder. References to the gray beards of West African elders and rulers appear from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. Perhaps the most elaborate is Loyer's 1701 description of the King of Issini:

His grey Beard was twisted into twenty small Locks, which were threaded with sixty Bits of Aygris Stone, bored, round and long. This is a kind of Precious Stone found amongst them, which has neither Lustre nor Beauty, and looks like our glass Beads; but these People esteem it so much that they give in Exchange its weight in Gold. By this Reckoning the King's Beard was worth a thousand Crowns.

(in Astley 1968, vol. 2:422–23)

Wigs are another form of African hair representation, as are hats that echo hairstyles. Bosman in the late 1600s offers an interesting note about the popularity of wigs in Ghana:

They are very fond of Hats and Perukes, which they wear, but after a Manner remarkably dismal. Formerly a great Trade was driven here by the Dutch



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*Left: 22. Neckrests. Left: Bari, Sudan. Wood, leather; 12.7cm (5"). Right: East Africa. Wood, leather; 16.5cm (6.5"). Collection of Roy and Sophia Sieber.*

*Right: 23. Neckrest. Luba, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Wood; 17cm (6.7"). Private collection. A complex coiffure, the result of a lengthy process, may last for weeks or even months. Neckrests elevate the head to keep the hairdo from being crushed during sleep.*



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Sailors in old Perukes, for which they got Wax, Honey, Parrots, Monkeys; in short, all Sorts of Refreshments whatever they pleased, in Exchange: But for these four Years so many Wig-Merchants have been here, that the Sailor swears the Trade is ruined....

(in Astley 1968, vol. 3:124)

In Ghana in the mid-1960s, wigs were still in great demand by women of high fashion.

Certain aspects of hairstyles—braids, plaits, chignons, and wigs—may be exceedingly old. Ancient Egyptian tomb reliefs show forms similar to those observed and photographed in the nineteenth century; many are identified as wigs. One touching example is a small wig on the mummy of a seven-year-old girl who died of typhoid, an illness that had caused her hair to fall out (Brier 1998:45).

### Styling the Hair

Hairdressing in Africa is always the work of trusted friends or relatives (Fig. 24). Hair, in the hands of an enemy, could be incorporated into a dangerous charm or “medicine” that would injure the owner. The power of hair as an extension of a person is evidenced by its use as a surrogate for someone who has died; as an important addition to a ritual mask, protective sculpture, or amulet; and as part of the fabric of a costume for a priest, warrior, or hunter, added to increase power and success in their endeavors (Fig. 25).

Usually women dress the hair of women, and men dress the hair of men. John Atkins (1721) offers a rare early description of hairdressing. He reports that the women of Sierra Leone

work hard at Tillage, make Palm-Oil or spin Cotton, and when they are free from such work, the idle Husbands put them upon braiding, and fettishing out their woolly hair, (in which Sort of Ornament they are prodigious proud and curious) keeping them every Day, for many Hours together at it.

(in Astley 1968, vol. 2:319)

24. Hairdressing in West Africa. Photo: Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

Hair is always styled by trusted friends and relatives, as it is considered an extension of a person. If it falls into an enemy's hands, hair may be incorporated into a harmful charm.





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25. Tunic. Grasslands, Cameroon. Fabric, human hair; 96.6cm (38"). Collection of William M. Itter. Tunics of vegetable fiber decorated with hundreds of tufts of human hair, and sometimes small pieces of red felt or fiber, have been recorded at funerals in the Grasslands kingdom of Oku. The tunics distinguish the leaders of certain lineage masquerades that include dancers wearing male, female, and animal masks.

*Opposite page:*

Top: 26. Barber's kiosk. Ghana. Wood, metal roofing sheets, wire mesh, vinyl sheet flooring, enamel paint; length, width, and height 213.4cm (84"). Ernie Wolfe Gallery, Los Angeles.

In Africa today, hairstyles are both innovative and tradition based.

Bottom: 27. "Locks Heaven." Brooklyn, 1987. Photo: Chester Higgins, Jr.

Many contemporary African American hairstyles are inspired by traditional African coiffures.

The styling of hair in present-day Africa reflects innovations and borrowings as well as a commitment to old forms and techniques. To visit an African urban center is to be exposed to a delightful passing parade of contemporary styles. In the United States, women's fashions are often influenced by African forms, but in Africa, men's styles echo those of American men. "Hair in African Art and Culture" concludes with a presentation of contemporary African and African-American fashions, including a Ghanaian barber's kiosk (Fig. 26), several hairdresser's signs, and photographs of African and African American coiffures (Fig. 27).

The catalogue and the exhibition are meant to reinforce and supplement each other. The essays in the publication explore aspects only hinted at in the installation. Some of them are personal in viewpoint. Some present the nature of coiffures in the cycle of life, from birth to death, from celebration to mourning. Other essays focus on the role of hair in the life of a girl or boy during initiation, or survey the role of hair in establishing identity during the lifetime of a member of a particular ethnic group. One reviews the comments and descriptions of early travelers. Like the exhibition, all of these writings demonstrate the enormous significance of hair in African societies. □

*References cited, page 96*





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In addition to Sieber and Herreman, the contributors to the exhibition publication are Niangi Batulukisi, "Hair in African Art and Culture"; Elze Bruyninx, "Coiffures of the Dan and Wè of Ivory Coast in 1938-39"; Els De Palmaer, "Mangbetu Hairstyles and the Art of Seduction: 'Lipombo'"; Kennell Jackson, "What Is Really Happening Here? Black Hair among African-Americans and in American Culture"; Manuel Jordán, "Hair Matters in South Central Africa"; Babatunde Lawal, "Orilense: The Hermeneutics of the Head and Hairstyles among the Yoruba"; Karel Nel, "Headrests and Hair Ornaments: Signifying More Than Status"; Mariama Ross, "Rasta Hair, US and Ghana: A Personal Note"; William Siegmann, "Women's Hair and Soweil Masks in Southern Sierra Leone and Western Liberia"; Barbara Thompson, "Cross Dressing for the Spirits in Shamba Ughanga"; James H. Vaughan, "Hairstyles among the Margi."

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