# Visual Documentation of Traditional Nigerian Hair Styles and Designs as a means of expressing Social and Cultural Heritage through Photography

<sup>1</sup>Adiji, Bolajoko Esther, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> E. Bankole Oladumiye, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria.

<sup>3</sup> Ibiwoye Tope Israel, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria.

**ABSTRACT**: The evolving hair styles in Nigeria today are endangering some traditional hair styles. Many of the beautiful traditional hair styles which identify Nigerians as a people are gradually being eroded, giving way to Western or other foreign styles. As a culture evolves, there is always a need to preserve it. If precautions are not taken to preserve a cultural heritage, it will be lost. This paper explores the use of photography as a tool for documenting traditional Nigerian hair styles and discusses the preservation of those photographs in museums.

**KEYWORDS**: Photography, Documentation, Hair style, Museum, Nigeria

#### INTRODUCTION

Photography serves as visual documentation of the past, portraying values and ways of life and helping humans to relate to past events, express emotions, record social relations and enhance the pride a person has in his or her culture. In addition to its documentary purposes, photography is a legitimate art form. Most art and history museums have sections dedicated solely to photographic art and design works, and there are a number of museums and galleries dedicated specifically to photography.

Over the years, photography as a medium of expression in Graphic Designs has radically expanded. Aside from the traditional two-dimensional, modest-sized photographs in shades of black-and-white, the medium now explores and includes images in a variety of shapes, colors, and formats, with varied intentions, such as providing information, making formal statements, selling ideas of products, or analyzing political and cultural events. The advances and developments of new technologies and aesthetic theories, combined with the enhanced role of photography as a marketable commodity, have influenced the way the medium is now being used and perceived. The accepted and expanded state of photography is the result of a rich history in which the medium

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flourished by being so closely tied to developments in technology, the arts and society <sup>1</sup>(Wikiversity 2013, 90-93).

In Nigeria, hair styling is an art form that begins from birth. Nigerian hair styles use principles of art and design, including curves, zigzags, horizontals, perpendiculars and straight lines <sup>2</sup>(Oladumiye, Adiji, and Olabiyi 2013, 96-98). Traditionally, hair styling has been a highly respected vocation, and people who showed special talents for hair dressing were urged to pursue it as a career. A common historical and environmental influence results in some similarities among Nigerian hair styles, but there is great diversity in designs and types of styles for different social occasions. Ceremonies and festivals, in particular, are characterized by specific designs, with every clan and tribe representing their cultural hair styles. Similarly, idol worshippers design their hair styles in connection to gods. These two examples express ancestral beliefs and religious faith in unique ways that result in a great, meaningful variation on art and design forms.

This study explores the use of photography as a tool for documenting traditional Nigerian hair styles and considers the preservation of those images in museums. At the same time, the study analyzes the lost heritage of Nigerian hair styles, which during the twenty-first century has given rise to a new system of hair perming, wig attachments, and artificial hair influenced by Western hair styles.

## Visual Design Documentation and Cultural Background of the Study

Traditional Nigerian hair styles are attractive because of their powerful emotional content and beautiful, abstract design principles. Their bare essentials of line, shape, texture and pattern can be considered an aspect of industrial art or design. Hundreds of distinct cultures in Nigeria create over one thousand different hair styles according to their environments and cultural heritage. Faturoti a sculptor points out that in some of our industrial arts; graphic, textile, and ceramic designs; and carvings in museums and shrines, designers and artists paid more attention to the head than any part of the body <sup>3</sup>(Faturoti 1990, 127-30).

According to Faturoti, sculptors believe in the head as the god of fate and as the universal household deity worshipped by some people in Africa. Examples of African hair style and clothing designs are apparent in Esie stone figures and Ife and Benin heads. The hair styles of these works were influenced by their cultural heritage. This study uses photography to document cultural interpretations of traditional hair styles.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Wikiversity, http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Learning community accessed June 2013, Pp 90-93.

Oladumiye, B., Adiji, .E. and Olabiyi, A. Nigerian Museum and Art Preservation; A Repository of Cultural Heritage Internatinal Journal of Inclusive Museum 2013 Pp 96-98

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Faturoti, B, African Hairdo: Artistic Creativity in Technological Nigerian Journal of Art Education. NSEA 2,2:1990.127-130

## **Research Objectives**

The objectives of the study are:

- 1. To examine the role of aesthetics and Designs in Nigerian hair styles.
- 2. To interpret some of the hair styles in Nigerian culture for social and cultural heritage and
- 3. To analyze the role of photography as a preservation medium to be used in museum presentations for future of the young generations.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

For this study researchers used a camera to photograph Nigerian hair styles and utilized qualitative research methods, with heavy emphasis on literature review. The research design was descriptive and illustrative, in that the research focused on photographic methods to illustrate hair styles in Nigeria. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews in Nigerian hair salons with beauticians on the reasons women and some men like to have their hair styled in traditional fashions. Researchers also visited art galleries and museums to collect materials on Nigerian hair styles.

# **Aesthetics of Traditional Nigerian Hair Styles**

The Nigerian people have a rich cultural heritage related to hair styling, characterized by philosophical and aesthetic concepts. Aesthetic interpretation and beautification in Nigerian hair styles involves symbolism. Rosemary describes the symbol as a combination of image beautification and mental associations, with tangible, visible objects joined with each other or with some immaterial or abstract notion <sup>4</sup>(Rosemary 1964, 30-52). The aesthetic symbol and meaning is drawn from breadth, depth and height, and the cultural heritage that plays a role in hair styling allows every traditional hair style to represent a significant new medium, a meeting of Nigeria's past and present in one design. Nigerian women's hair styles are also symbolic in that they are related to the traditional skills required for throwing, weaving and tying together of materials to form abstract designs.

Hair styles are uniquely distinctive, autonomous, self-contained, unified, exclusive of the extraneous and complete in themselves because they occur in the context of people, human life and culture, ideas and history. Aesthetic taste in Nigeria differs widely between cultural groups and other affiliations. For instance, the hair style in Figure 2, called kuli-kuli abiyamo, is especially for a class of mothers in Yoruba land. Figures 1 and 3 are worn by the wives of kings in Benin Kingdom, Edo State, while Figure 4, known as Puff-Puff, is worn by young ladies in the king's palace.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Rosemary, G. Art: Mistress and Servant of Man and his Culture In the Study of Education and Art 1964, Pp30-52.



Figure 1 Figure 2 Figure 3 Figure 4

**Figure 1:** Beaded Hairstyle, Benin Kingdom Nigeria (www.belanya.com.bn-bridal- beauty-Edo-bride-in-beautiful-beaded-Benin)

Figure 2: Kuli-kuli Abiyamo, Yoruba hair style (www.abiyamo.com/wp-content Yoruba-hairstyles Kul-kuli-abiyamo.com)

Figure 3: Beaded Hairstyle (www.bellanaija.com 2013)

Figure 4: Puff-Puff (www.therelentlessbuilder.com.2014.hair style for -Nigeria)

# Photographic Documentation and Historical Analysis of Nigerian Hair Styles

Long hair is one of the major attributes of feminine beauty. This concept is as old as the world. Africans showed much affinity for a woman's long hair, considering it a manifestation of dignity, and in Nigeria, to this day women with long hair are of great value, while women with short hair are said to be widows. Short hair signifies many things in the world, particularly in Nigeria, where a woman with short hair is usually viewed as unattractive. Hair dressing in Nigeria is considered the beauty of every woman. In the past, women have styled their hair into many beautiful patterns without using any attachments or hair extensions.

Akinlaja observes that Nigeria has a rich history of elaborate hair style designs. For centuries, women braided their hair into intricate designs. They would pass down the secrets of these designs and patterns from generation to generation. The elegant, amazing styles feature curls of hair that are tightly wrapped with shining thread to create elaborate constructions, in which tiny, intricate braids loop themselves into dramatic head dresses. Today it is difficult to find the shiny, black thread women once used. As a result, baby wool and rubber serve as substitutes. Flat braids move across the scalp with tidy precision or swirl in an organized form, emphasizing the curve and shape of the skull in elegant constructions. In the past, there were no wigs, weaves, hair extensions or Western forms of hair enhancers <sup>5</sup>(Akinlaja 2014, 56-59).

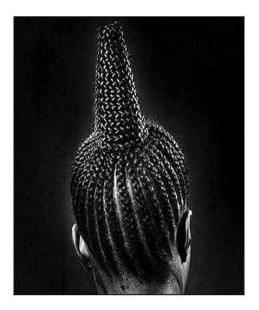
All women had almost the same type of hair style, though with different designs and meanings. Ogiri writes that with modernization and westernization, the traditional African hair style seems

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Akinlaja, A. Appreciating the Nigerian old hair styles. Publish in Art & style falsh back Newspaperm 2014,Pp 56-59.

to be fading into history books. Each hair style speaks to an ancient history, an accumulated knowledge and present state of a living culture. These intricate creations involve many hours; sometimes even days. These styles include Shuku (Figure 6), Basket, Ekobridge, back and front, matting, love come down, and many others. Today, according to Ogiri, a woman who wears one of these traditional hair styles is considered a very local and naive person, as people no longer admire or see the beauty of these styles. Although some people still wear these traditional hair styles for religious or cultural reasons, most Nigerian young women have left behind traditional styles of corn rows and thread, which were usually fashioned in artistic ways, only to settle for Western hair styles, wigs, weaves, and hair extensions. In turn, the West has begun to sell these hair products to Nigerians as an exchange for the cultural heritage of Nigerian women. As a result the beautiful hairdo legacy was been forgotten. <sup>6</sup>(Ogiri 2013, 34-36).

Historically, various symbolic hairstyles were designated for special causes and for special classes of people in society, particularly in the eastern part of Nigeria. Oziogu describes a symbolic hair style designated for spinsters, unmarried women, elderly women, women who have passed child-bearing age, and childless women. Oziogu also mentions that children's coated their heads thickly with cam wood-paste and tucked couriers into it, aimed at bringing out messages of love and affections home to the public and their communities about one festival or ceremony. Cowries were regarded as a symbol of fertility, so when a childless woman wore that style long ago, the message was vividly understood by members of her community. A spirited elderly woman and man would always give words of encouragement and blessings each time they encountered a woman with a cowry. Likewise, in Yoruba land a hair style from the forehead which ends at the back of the neck indicates that the carrier is married. Figures 5 and 6 are examples of such hair styles <sup>7</sup>(Oziogu 2012, 50-52).





<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Ogiri, A. Blue Print Newspaper. World Press Thermsixth HTML .2013. Retrieved January, 2014 Pp 34-36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Oziogu, O. Blue Print Newspaper. World Press Thermsixth HTML 2012. Retrieved March 2014 Pp50-52.

Figure 5: Zanne weaving hair style OjeikereJ.D Okhai Pictures(2014)

Figure 6: Shuku weaving hair style Ojeikere, J.D.Okhai, Pictures (2014)

In recent years, the use of wigs has begun to threaten the popularity of indigenous hair styles, thereby contributing to their gradual disappearance. As each year passes, new hair styles and hair extensions flood the market. The influence of hair extensions on Nigerian women is tremendous, especially on hair stylists who are not skilled in the traditional manner and prefer to perm or bleach hair. Today many women in Nigeria spend an increasing amount of time at hair salons, where they pay for Western hair styles and wigs.

The ancient Nigerian women curled their hair and held it in place with hair pins. They made long, black wigs from sheep's wool or human hair and often used dyes to decorate their wigs with stripes. There were three main hairstyles prevalent among the Nigerian women: a style in which the hair was divided into numerous locks, each thickly plaited; a style in which the hair was divided into numerous long, parallel braids grouped into two masses, with the smaller mass falling onto the front of the shoulder and the larger mass falling behind; and a style in which the hair was divided into two broad and flat braids, one on each side of the head, with the hair in the back cut short. Comparatively, ancient Greek women styled their hair elaborately, by parting their hair at the center of the crown, bringing it down to the temple, and carrying the two divisions towards the back, then fastening them over the point where the parting begins or tying them into a tuft or knot on the back of the head.

In ancient Egypt appearance was an important issue, as it indicated a person's status, role or significance in society. Consequently, images of Egyptian people were created in artworks and used for decoration on everyday items. These artifacts have been preserved in museums and today are available for public display and scholarly research. Nigerian hair styles have not been preserved in this way. However, ancient Egyptian hair styles and Nigerian hair styles have much in common, in that they vary with age, gender and social status. Idem notes that children had unique hair styles in ancient Egypt, with their hair shaved off or cut short except for a long lock of hair left on the side of the head, the so-called "side lock of youth." Children in the northern part of Nigeria also have their hair shaved totally from birth for religious reasons. Likewise, in images from ancient Egypt and in modern Nigeria, women's hair styles are more unique than that of men, consisting of smooth, closed styles, with an emphasis on natural waves and long hair <sup>8</sup>(Idem 2014, 76-88).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Idem, I. On The Comparative Anthropometry of English Jew: IB XIX 2014, Pp76-88



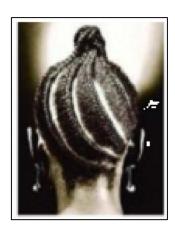




Figure 7: Ipako Elede hair style (Mobile Oil Pictures)

Figure 8: Suku Ologede (Banke Akinlaja Pictures)

Figure 9: Isi-Eri tying hair style (Mobil Oil Pictures)

Traditionally, women in Nigeria have tied and decorated their hair with beads and cowries and used a styled lotus blossom as an adornment for the head. This style evolved, as women began using crowns and bead bands, particularly in Benin Kingdom. Among women in Nigeria, long hair was considered a mark of beauty, and a woman's hair was never cut except as a baby, or as a sign of deep mourning or ill health. Women gave much thought to the care and decoration of their hair. Figures 7, 8 and 9 are examples of Nigerian women's hair decorations. Figures 7 and 8 are waving, and Figure 9 is tying with thread, a common practice among the Ibo people.

Nigerian hair styles were also influenced by other cultures at different points in history, such as the period of British colonization for an average Nigerian woman wanted to be like the white who colonized them, during that time wigs were very popular and worn by women and young girls, both inside and outside the house. Nigerian women wore a new wig each day, and the wigs varied in styles. The primary function of a wig was as a headdress for special occasions, such as weddings and funerals.

## **Museums and Visual Documentation**

Museums are institutions dedicated to helping people understand and appreciate the natural world, the history of civilizations, and the record of humanity's artistic, scientific and technological achievements. Museums collect objects of scientific, aesthetic or historical importance; and care for, study, interpret and exhibit them to support public education and the advancement of knowledge. Museums are valuable repositories that showcase the history and evolutionary trends of a culture, country or people; offer ideas about their philosophies or ideologies; and express their national characters, unity, and diversity. The evolutionary and historical progression of cultures is also preserved in the publications museums both create and collect to support research <sup>9</sup>(Hirzy 2008, 450-550).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Hirzy, E. "Museum." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft 2008, Pp 450-550

Nickink argues that the type of cultural awareness museums preserve and promote is essential to a nation's future success, stating that history is to a people what memory is to an individual. A people with no knowledge of their past would suffer from collective amnesia, groping blindly into the future without guideposts of precedence to sharpen their course. Only a thorough awareness of their heritage allows them to progress into the future. Nickink further argues that educational reforms should include reflection on cultural awareness of previous events and policies, on the cultural heritage of the people as this manner of reflection will help both individuals and groups determine future courses of action <sup>10</sup>(Nickink 2000, 90-92)

Through art, a people can look into their past to understand how they have survived. Folaranmi notes that the lost heritage of a people can be retrieved and revived through art <sup>11</sup>(Folaranmi, 2003,86-90). Virtually every aspect of Nigerian culture can be expressed via visual art. Photography, therefore, is a form of visual art that serves as an essential tool for recording the trends and progressions of Nigerian culture and making it available for posterity. Photographs are especially valuable for communicating the essence of a culture to people who are unfamiliar with that culture. The rest of this paper will analyze the role of photography in documenting and interpreting Nigerian cultural heritage.

Culture, according to Puke and Shaibu, is a whole body of knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, norms, customs, values, habits and other capabilities acquired by Nigerians as members of their society. In essence, Nigerian cultural heritage as a result is an embodiment of values and meanings constructed by cultural group or societies with high standards of originality <sup>12</sup>(Puke and Shaibu 2001, 56-58). It is a cultural heritage that derives from Black culture which, according to Senghor, is a set of values originating from an original to blacks that is expressed in their different national cultures. Whether ancient or contemporary, in West Africa political institutions, traditions of moral values, languages, literature, and the fine arts all derive from Black culture. The culture of a people is so strong that it is expressed even in the way the people walk, laugh or cry <sup>13</sup>(Senghor 1977, 80-82).

This deep embodiment of culture is embedded into hair styles in Nigeria. <u>In Figures 10</u>, 11 and 12, Nigerian hair styles are emblematic of their cultural and ethnic groups. Figure 10, sideway cap, represents the traditional Yoruba cap, bending to the left- or right-hand side of the head, Figure 11 is the Hausa Fulani's hair style, and Figure 12 is common among the middle belt people of Nigeria.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Nickink, K. Guide to the National Museum Oron. Lagos 2000, Pp 90-92

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Folaranmi,S. Art and Education for Nation Building: Bruce Onabrakpeya's Experience at 70 Agbaraha Otor 5<sup>TH</sup> Harmattan Workshop. 2003 Pp 86-90

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Puke, T., Shaibu, M. Fundamentals of Citizenship Education. Lokoja. Shola Medupin Printers & Publishers 2001,Pp56-58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Senghor, S. Black Culture, Festac '77 handbook, African Journal Ltd. London, and the international Festival Committee, Lagos.1977,Pp80-82.







Figure 10 Figure 11 Figure 12

Figure 10: Sideway cap hair style (http://www.abiyamo.com/100 different hairstyle in Nigeria)

Figure 11: Doka(Mobil Oil Pictures 2014)

Figure 12: Colling Penny Penny (Banke Akinlaja Pictures)

## Photography as a Preservation Medium

Photography is an ideal medium for documenting and preserving cultural heritage, such as hair styling in Nigeria, in that it records tangible evidence of peoples, practices and traditions. Photography provides images that can support and enrich written records about religious practices, utilitarian objects, architecture, decorative art and other cultural materials from antiquity to the present. In a study at the University of Pennsylvania, Holzknecht found that speakers who used visual aids were twice as successful in communicating their message as those who used none (67% vs. 33%). The study also found that an audience's information retention increased fivefold if the speaker used visual aids (from 10% to 50%) <sup>14</sup>(Holzknecht 2004, 100-5). These findings emphasize that visuals are powerful aids in learning and ensuring memory retention. Through preserving photographs of Nigerian hair styles in museums, we will not only increase the chance that Nigerian museum patrons will remember their significance, but also preserve a cultural heritage that is in danger of disappearing. By preventing its disappearance, we ensure its survival and allow the possibility of traditional hair styling's reemergence as a popular practice in the future.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Photography is a valuable tool for collecting Knowledge about Nigerian hair styles. It is an excellent method to learn more about the ancient culture and the fascinating life—style of the earlier generation, many of the hair styles created today in Nigeria have their roots firmly planted in their traditions and methods of their ancestors. Some of the cultural hairdo and arts are created back to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Holzknecht, J. Planning Visual Materials for an IVC Course: Austin Community College Texas Jim Holzknecht HTML Doc. 2004 Pp100-105.

about 2,000 years ago .Nigeria as a multicultural society has affirmed her arts as a way of propagating her way of life and culture. As a result Nigerian hair styles have made unique contributions to art, design, and culture in Nigeria and abroad. This aspect of cultural heritage should not be relegated to the background or thrown into the dustbin. The artistry and design embedded into it must be properly considered, guided, and preserved through photography. The Nigerian people, in turn, must retain the beauty of their hair styles.

Nigerian hair styles are fascinating, not just for their visual appeal, but also for the intricacies and innovation for which they are known. Unfortunately, the influence of Western culture and the use of artificial hair have threatened to make indigenous hair styles obsolete. In time, we may no longer see these beautiful hair styles in person. As a result there is a need to photograph and preserve these hair styles in museums so that Nigerians can reference them in the future.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Mrs Adiji B. E.** (B.A. M Tech) Industrial Design Textile. She is currently a Lecturer at the Department of Industrial Design, Textile Section of Federal University of Technology Akure Nigeria. Her PhD research is on embroidery techniques.

**Oladumiye E. Bankole.(Ph.D.)** B.A. Hons Graphics MFA printmaking and Ph.D Industrial Design Graphics Advertising. Senior Lecturer, head of graphic options Department of Industrial Design and Sub Dean School of Environmental Technology, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria. He has several years of creative experience in printmaking and graphics. He is a prolific writer,

**Ibiwoye Tope Israel**, holds a Master of Technology in Industrial Design. Graphics He teaches Multimedia Graphics and Photography in the department of Industrial Design, of Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria. His PhD research is in the area of photography and social network.