



UNVEILING THE ART OF INDIGENOUS THREADED HAIRSTYLES IN SOME SELECTED AREAS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Indigenous threaded hairstyles are integral to cultural sustainability in many communities, which has recently been a cardinal discourse at global and local levels. This paper focused on unveiling the art of threaded hairstyles in some selected areas in Ghana.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This article employs an interpretivism approach, which requires inductive reasoning and a small sample size. A purposive sampling method was adopted for this study. Relying on in-depth interviews, data were gathered from ten (10) hairstylists, five (5) artists, eight (8) threaded hair wearers and one anthropologist, as well as four (4) respondents from the cultural centres, with two from the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi and the other two from Centre for National Culture in Accra. The data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings: The findings revealed four (4) distinct threaded hairstyles, *two* from the Ga Traditional Area and the other from the Kumasi Traditional Area. These hairstyles are portrayed in four primary visual art forms, the dominant being body art. Other art forms that appeared scantily were ceramic and wood sculptures. They all portray social symbolism.

Research Limitation: This research focused on unravelling the art forms of Indigenous hair threading in the Kumasi Traditional Area and Ga Traditional Area of Ghana.

Practical implications: This paper could help us understand the aesthetics of hair threading dynamics in Ghana and other developing countries.

Social Implication: This study will assist development policy-makers in addressing sustainable Indigenous artworks, such as hair threading, by ensuring social, economic, and environmental stability for present and future generations.

Originality/ Value: This study is based on a Knowledge Transfer Breakdown of the creativity and continuity of artistic tradition and the employable skills of human resources who make judicious use of available materials within their immediate environment.

Keywords: *Art. hairstyle. indigenous. threaded. unveiling*



INTRODUCTION

Indigenous threaded hairstyles are integral to cultural sustainability in many communities, which has recently been a cardinal discourse at global and local levels (Quampah, 2024). In Ghana, hair threading has served as a symbol of identity and symbolism in some communities, with little concern for sustainability through art forms (Opare-Darko & Dennis, 2023). The art forms of indigenous threaded hairstyles exist at a minimum level in literature. Therefore, many are scarcely known in contemporary times, negatively impacting tourism and the continuity of artistic traditions.

Indigenous threaded hairstyles, representing centuries of cultural heritage and traditional practices, face critical challenges in modern society, threatening their preservation and continuity (Leyew, 2024). Despite their historical significance and cultural importance, these traditional hair threading techniques are experiencing rapid decline due to various interconnected factors. This problem statement highlights the urgent need for focused research and practical solutions to preserve and promote indigenous threaded hairstyles for future generations. Some challenges include diminishing transmission of traditional techniques between generations, limited documentation of historical patterns and methods, decreasing number of skilled practitioners and loss of cultural context and significance. The gap in Knowledge Transfer Breakdown is addressed in this study.

This article focuses on indigenous threaded hairstyles in this context. The debate on the art of hair threading in Ghana follows five lines: types of threaded hairstyles in other areas of Africa, Afrocentric theory, the artistic forms of Indigenous threaded hairstyles in Kumasi Traditional Area and Ga Traditional Area, and the definitions of the terms “Indigenous” and “threaded hairstyles.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

Afrocentric Theory

This research is supported by Afrocentric theory since it looks at art forms depicting issues of African origin. Molefi Kete Asante, an African American academician and activist, has spent more than two decades attempting to address the issue of African identity from the perspective of African people who are centred, placed, oriented and grounded. He claimed that Africans have lived on the periphery of the European world for far too long and that

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they have been duped into believing that they are acting in their own best interests when, in fact, they have become Europe's main apologists. He argues that Europeans have oppressed Africans and other nonwhites for centuries through enslavement and colonisation and that European culture is irrelevant and opposed to non-European efforts to achieve self-determination.

According to Molefi, people of African origin must develop respect for the achievements of ancient African civilisations and define their own history and values system. This led to the development of Afrocentric theory (Afrocentrism) by Asante in 1980, which constructed a theoretical viewpoint that acknowledges the importance of African values and ideas as beginning points for analysing and synthesising African phenomena. This Afrocentric theory regards African or black cultures as pre-eminent in world views (Karenga & Tembo, 2012).

Women's re-Africanisation as a solution to challenging alien social structures and inappropriate values (Onebunne, 2023; Dove, 1998). This theory is adopted because indigenous hairstyles can be used as a weapon of resistance to the Western social order and a means of projecting the image of Africa.

Afrocentrism, also known as Africentrism, is the recognition that Africa is the genesis of humanity (Asante, 2020), and it is defined as a viewpoint that allows Africans to be subjects of historical events rather than objects on the outside of Europe (Asante, 2020; Asante, 1980). Afrocentricity was Asante's way of expressing the critical necessity for Africans to be repositioned historically, socially, economically, philosophically and politically. According to Whitehead (2018), Africans have been removed from cultural, religious, economic, social and political terms over the previous 500 years and have lived mostly on the perimeter of Europe. They appear to be decentered and do not know their classical background.

This essentially means that we have lost our cultural footing as Africans and have become alienated and disoriented from our cultural and political beginnings. Therefore, as a transformation theory, Afrocentricity aims to re-locate the African person as a subject, shattering the idea of being objects in the Western project of dominance. Afrocentricity, as a pan-African concept, has ramifications in the intellectual, social, cultural, and



aesthetic realms and has become the key to healthy child education and the foundation of African cultural rebirth and survival.

Based on the Afrocentric theory, it can be deduced that all cultural centres must be respected, including dance, clothing, and food, and that we must value how beautiful (artistic) our culture is. Many people's way of life has been ruined by exposure to the West, by colonial settlers who imported and forced their way of life on the natives, including hairstyles, to the detriment of the indigenous people. Therefore, the characteristics of the theory as applied to this study suggest that Africans must decolonise how colonial knowledge undermines Black existence, as evidenced through their black hair and indigenous hairstyles, as well as value them as part of their culture and appreciate its beauty.

While afrocentric philosophy tends to focus on Africans and their aesthetic culture, culturally grouping Africans and Europeans is misleading because neither Africa's culture nor Europe's culture is homogenous enough to be compared. Nevertheless, afrocentricity can help Africans revive their cultural identity, allowing those of African origin better to understand their art, culture, and values.

This theory is adopted because indigenous hair threading is discussed in the context of African culture. It aims to appreciate and project the values of the Asante and Ga cultures through African hair threading.

Types and art forms of Indigenous threaded hairstyles in other African countries

African hair threading is an indigenous hairstyle common among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. The Yoruba people call it *irun kiko*. *Irun* means hair in Yoruba, and *Kiko* means, to gather (Falola, 2022). Therefore, *irun kiko* means gathering hair into tufts and coiling threads around them. Plate 1 depicts tufts of hair with coils of thread around them. Black thread is mostly used in making this hairstyle.



Plate 1: A hairstylist making a threaded hairstyle (*irun kiko*) in Nigeria
Source: <https://www.busayonyc.com>

It is fascinating that once the hair is wrapped in thread, the structure can be bent into any shape and manipulated into various designs. This styling technique aids in maintaining hair length (Shuaib, 2020). Threaded hairstyles provide unique socio-cultural symbolisms among the Krobos of Ghana (Opare-Darko & Dennis, 2023). The most familiar form of hair threading found in the literature involves wrapping a thread around an entire segmented hair from the root to the apex or the tip alone. Other plaited methods exist among the Asantes and Gas but remain unexplored. Plate 2 depicts a threaded hairdo put into a designed structure. It is in the form of body art. Plate 3 portrays *the agogo hairstyle*, mostly worn by the priestesses of the *Shango* shrine. Some employ the African hair threading technique in styling the middle section of the hair, as depicted in the image. Plate 4 represents a wood sculpture of a Fante teenager in a royal hairstyle during the puberty rite. Both Figure 5 and Figure 6 depict drawings of African-threaded hairstyles. While Plate 5 shows a drawing of an East African threaded hairstyle, Plate 6 depicts a drawing of a threaded hairstyle from the Central African Republic (Zaire), which has been supported with a circular bamboo stick.



Plate 2: Threaded hairdo crafted into a designed structure, (body art)
Source: <https://www.busayonyc.com>



Plate 3: Threaded hairdo (*agogo*) decorated with white beads in Yuroba
Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/XaNURNoYtarfyCEB7>



Plate 4: Wood sculpture of a Fante teen in a royal hairstyle during puberty rite
Source - Sieber and Herreman (2000).



Plate 5: A drawing of a threaded hairstyle
Source: My Biro Sketch Titled: Irun Kiko (hair knotting with thread)

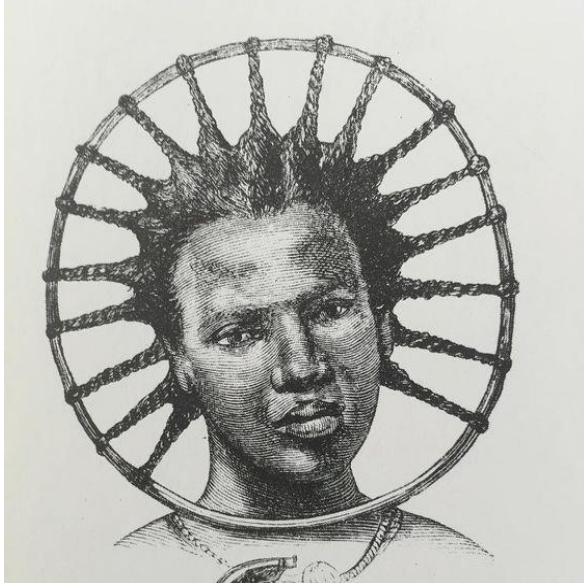


Plate 6: Drawing of a threaded hairdo supported with bamboo in Central African (Zaire)
Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/xwxmysRKat6N3PLHA>

METHODOLOGY

This section explains the study's philosophical underpinnings and justifies the sampling procedure, data collection instruments, and analysis.

Research Design

This paper used interpretivism, necessitating a limited sample size and inductive reasoning. Given its complex cultural, social, and historical dimensions, interpretivism is particularly appropriate as a research methodology for investigating indigenous threaded hairstyles. This methodological approach provides a robust framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of indigenous hair threading traditions.

This methodological justification demonstrates that interpretivism provides an appropriate and effective framework for investigating indigenous threaded hairstyles. It offers both theoretical rigour and practical applicability while maintaining cultural sensitivity and respect for traditional knowledge systems.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

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The sampling procedure, which was mainly purposive (or selective) was used to select the entire twenty-eight (28) respondents for the study. This implies that participants were selected due to their characteristics and knowledge about the art of hair threading. The participants included four (4) respondents from the cultural centres, two from the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi and the other two from the Centre for National Culture in Accra, as well as ten (10) hairstylists, five (5) artists, eight (8) threaded hair wearers, and one anthropologist. The sampling strategy employed in this study is consistent with Campbell, Greenwood, Prior, Shearer, Walkem, Young and Walker's (2020) description of purposive sampling as a judgmental method by which researchers choose particular important informants from a community.

Data Collection

The instruments used for data collection were in-depth interviews and observation. Interviewing mainly involves interacting with participants through dialoguing to solicit answers to questions (Dursun, 2023). In terms of observation, non-participant observation was used (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020).

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke developed the six-step thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This includes interviewing/observation, transcribing or familiarisation, code formation, theme development, recoding or retheming, and discussion.

Later, the data from the collected interviews were transcribed by converting the recorded data into text on Microsoft Word. Concerning the code formation, to ensure anonymity, the actual names of the respondents were not used. They were coded using numbers for identification and the purpose of in-text citation in the analysis. All the eight threaded hair wearers who were interviewed were coded as Threaded Hair Wearer 1, Threaded Hair Wearer 2, Threaded Hair Wearer 3, Threaded Hair Wearer 4, Threaded Hair Wearer 5, Threaded Hair Wearer 6, Threaded Hair Wearer 7 and Threaded hair wearer 8. Artist 1, Artist 2, Artist 3, Artist 4 and Artist 5 were contacted and interviewed. In a similar vein, the hairstylists were identified as Hairstylist 1, Hairstylist 2, Hairstylist 3, Hairstylist 4, Hairstylist 5, Hairstylist 6, Hairstylist 7, and Hairstylist 8. The Centre for National Culture

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in Accra and Kumasi staff were coded using abbreviations like SS, which represents Senior Staff; CNCA, which represents Centre for National Culture, Accra; and CNCK, which also stands for Centre for National Culture, Kumasi. The codes are as follow: SS of CNCA 1, SS of CNCA 2, SS of CNCK 1 and SS of CNCK2.

Secondly, the transcribed responses and photographs of indigenous hairstyles were also coded using alphabets. Later, similar responses were merged into subthemes. Out of the subthemes, major themes were developed. The report writing followed these. Direct quotes from respondents were occasionally used to support the report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Types and Art Forms of Indigenous Threaded Hairstyles in Kumasi and Ga Traditional Areas

The findings revealed five (5) distinct threaded hairstyles, three from the Ga Traditional Area and the other two from the Kumasi Traditional Area. They include *akukuli*, *gele*, *yihoo*, *puaa*, *tirasa ahoma tire*.

***Akukuli* (group of tufts hair) as body art**

Plate 7 portrays a threaded hairdo called *akukuli*. It is depicted in the form of body art. Observations and in-depth interviews show that the hair is fashioned into tufts, which are mostly five in number. A thread is used to coil only around the apex section of each tuft. The threaded sections are later tucked into the base of the hair with a locally manufactured hair clip. The pattern employed in this hairstyle is a threaded apex and threadless bottom. Traditionally, resin, a gumlike substance obtained from plants like the shea tree, is sometimes used to make the hair at the bottom firmer. It is identified with the priestesses of the *kple* shrine among the Ga people. It symbolises spiritual loyalty. Apart from the indigenous priestesses, other categories of people whose hair could be groomed in this hairstyle are the puberty rite initiates. In collaboration with this finding, Antwi and Bonsu (2024) stated that traditional hairstyles play an essential role in revealing the cultural identities of some communities in Africa. A respondent had this to say:



The prestige associated with it allows puberty rite initiates' hair to be groomed in this fashion. Puberty rite initiates who successfully pass their virginity test after their visit to the tɛgbɛtɛ sacred stone is sometimes groomed in this indigenous hairstyle. It marks identity and success (Threaded hair wearer 5, 2023).



Plate 7: Akukuli in the form of body art
Source: Author, (2023)

Gele in the form of body art

Plate 8 depicts the gele hairstyle. The hair is segmented into tussocks, with the root to the apex sections of each tuft plaited with a thread. The process is completed by connecting the tufts' apex sections with a thread's aid. It is also identified with the priestesses of the *Kple* deity among the Gas, symbolising spiritual acumen. Sometimes, white thread could be used.



Plate 8: Gele in the form of body art
Source: Author, (2023).

Body art of *yihɔɔ* (threaded hair)

Another type of threaded hairstyle among the Gas is *yihɔɔ*. *Yihɔɔ* means threaded hair. The two main types of *yihɔɔ* are *kunɔɔ bi mɛɛfii* and *akwele waobii*, which translate to "chicken droppings" and "Akwele's fingers," respectively. Both are depicted in the form of body art.

It is described as *Kunɔɔ bi mɛɛfii*, shown in plate 9. The threaded hairstyle is called *Kunɔɔ bi mɛɛfii* because it resembles "chicken droppings. A hairstylist in this current study had this to say:

This can be the first hairstyle for a young girl to use threads. This style comes in many versions. However, the commonest involves segmenting the hair into smaller sections and tying only the base. This creates little tufts of hair that resemble the droppings of chicks, hence the associated name (Hairstylist 5, 2023).



Plate 9: Kunno bi mɔafii in the form of body art
Source: Author, (2023)

The element of art is conspicuous in *akwele waobii*. Plate 10 shows a type of threaded hairdo called *akwele waobii*. The main observable element of art in this hairstyle is shape. *Akwele waobii* is a type of threaded hairdo carried out with a thread, during which all the threaded hair units are made to stand vertically erect like a tree. According to a hairstylist of this current study *Akwele waobi*, means "Akwele's fingers", A respondent had this to say:

In Ga- Adangbe linguistics parlance, Akwele is a name assigned to the first female twin. The threaded hairstyle resembles an assortment of pepper called akwele waobii. This is done by partitioning the hair into small units and coiling thread around each section. The threads are usually of different colours. However, the most common is black thread. The segmented units could be of any number, depending on the individual's choice. Moreover, it usually ranges from four to six (SS of CNCA 1, 2023).



Aesthetically, the threaded hairstyle is left standing throughout the head, as portrayed in Plate 10. The thread is wrapped from the bottom to the tip of the tuft. The process is completed with a knot at the tip of the threaded hairdo. The extra thread is then cut off. The threaded tufts are usually not connected. They are made to stand alone. Among the Gas, this hairstyle is highly symbolic. In line with this, Sherrow (2023) indicated that most indigenous hairstyles among African countries convey lots of meaning. A respondent threw light on the customary representation of this hairstyle:

This design is symbolic and mostly associated with unmarried maidens. It is believed that unmarried maidens live or stand alone because they are unmarried. This enables men to easily recognise them and ask for their hand in marriage (Threaded hair wearer 2).



Plate 10: Vertical form of Akwele waobii in the form of body art
Source: Author, (2023)

That notwithstanding, married women connect the threaded units depicted in Plate 11. The connection could be put into various intricate designs. Each threaded hair tuft is connected to the other to denote the wearer is married. As a result, the societal standing of women wearing such threaded hair is symbolically conveyed to the community



members. On the other hand, Himba married women of Namibia are usually identified in *erembe* hairstyle, according to Sherrow (2023). Unlike *Akwele waobii*, which uses thread, *erembe* requires goat skin and ochre. Also, the tufts in *erembe* are not necessarily connected. An artist threw more light on the *Akwele waobii* hairstyle in Plate 11.

The upright threaded hairstyle can be manipulated into various ways to depict a connection between the various threaded units. The connections reveal its cultural and aesthetic significance. It is usually designed to lie horizontal on the scalp. The point must be made clear that, regardless of the type of threaded hairstyle, the sectioned hair must have the right number of threads surrounding it in order to appear attractive (Artist 2, 2023).



Plate 11: Connected or horizontal form of Akwele waobii for married women
Source: Author, (2023)

***Tirasa ahoma tire* as body art, ceramics and wood sculpture**

Plate 12 depicts a threaded hairdo called *tirasa ahoma tire*, which is in the form of body art. Plate 13 portrays *tirasa ahoma tire* in ceramic sculpture, while Plate 14 shows *tirasa ahoma tire* in the form of wood sculpture. This hairstyle's ceramic and wood sculpture are



meant to preserve this aspect of Asante culture for posterity and tourism. Observations show that depending on the length of one's hair, it could consist of several tufts, as shown in the body art of Figure 12 or a single tuft, as in the ceramic sculpture of Figure 13. It could even lie, as in the wood sculpture in Figure 14. The pattern employed in these visual art forms is a threaded bottom and apex, while the middle remains unthreaded. It is identified with old women and symbolises the Indigenous Asante concept of the Trinity, which includes the Twi-language, traditional rulers like the Asantehene and the golden stool. In correspondence to this, Appiah-Kubi et al. (2022) indicated that the golden stool plays a significant role in the culture of the Asantes. It binds the souls of all the Asantes. The souls include the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. Therefore, a symbolic representation of the golden stool will contribute to its knowledge of sustainability. A respondent had this to say about the Trinity:

Three indispensable cardinal elements among Asantes are enshrined in the indigenous trinity. They consist of a golden stool represented by the bottom of the hair. The golden stool is believed to bind the souls (both living, dead and yet to be born) of the Asantes; the middle depicts the Asantehene, while the top depicts the Asante Twi language. Asantes speak one language wherever they find themselves (Senior Staff of CNCK 1, 2023)

Another respondent added:

Enacting a hairstyle to depict the indigenous trinity of the Asantes will help many people recall it better. Symbolic representation of cultural practices facilitates easy remembering, and It will help in preserving our culture better (Threaded hairstyle wearer 2, 2023)



Plate 12: Tirasa ahoma tire in the form of body art
Source: Author, (2023)



Plate 13: Tirasa ahoma tire in the form of ceramic sculpture
Source: Author, (2023)



Plate 14: Tirasa ahoma tire in the form of wood sculpture
Source: Author, (2023)



Plate 15: Puaa hairstyle in the form of body art
Source: Author, (2023)

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Puaa (single tuft hair)

Puaa hairstyle is shown in body art as in Plate 15 and wood sculpture (Plate 16). Concerning the description, the entire hair is held together into one unit. A scrunchie is used to hold the bottom part of the body art. According to the respondents, the wood sculpture is another alternative way of sustaining this aspect of Asante culture. Observations of both Figure 15 and Figure 16 reveal that the tufts are positioned at the occipital zone of the head. This hairstyle is called Afro pony since it resembles a pony's tail. It is depicted mainly by the female servants and symbolises God's supremacy. This finding is similar to Opare-Darko and Dennis (2023) as well as Shuaib (2020), whose research work discussed different types of threaded hairstyles, which involve wrapping a thread around tufts of hair among the Krobos and the Yoruba people, respectively. A respondent's description of *puaa* hairstyle is as follows:

Puaa hairstyle is a simple hairdo which resembles a circular heap with a narrow base. It also resembles an inflated balloon or cabbage. It can be self-made. In carrying out the process, I have to massage my hair, which has already been sprinkled with water. The aim of the water is to wet and soften the hair to facilitate easy combing. This is followed by holding the entire hair together and tying it with a rubber band or thread. It is identified with the female servants, meaning God alone is all-powerful (Female Servant 1, 2023).

A respondent had this to say about the artistic representation of *puaa*:

Puaa is depicted in body art because the artwork is found on the body. It is also depicted in wood sculpture because the main material used is wood. This form of cultural preservation helps attract tourists. These art forms depict the multiple ways by which indigenous hairstyles among Asantes can be preserved to enhance posterity (Artist 5, 2023).

The *puaa* hairstyle involves holding the entire hair into one unit. It is identified with the female servants of Asanteman and symbolises God's supremacy. Putting it into a wood sculpture promotes posterity for future generations and tourism.



Plate 16: Puaa in the form of wood sculpture
Source: Author, (2023)

CONCLUSION

The in-depth discussion above clarifies that art forms and cultural sustainability go hand in hand and that sustainable cultural development can be achieved only by projecting the art forms of indigenous hairstyles.

The relevance of art forms in preserving and projecting indigenous hair-threading culture calls for policies that support and facilitate the achievement of more sustainable artworks in this field. These include:

- photos of traditional artworks, as well as their cultural significance, can be shared on social media;
- donations can be made to support local artworks;
- local leaders can use platforms like social media to educate the public about the symbolism of hair threading;
- experienced artists and hairstylists can volunteer to teach the youth about artwork that is centred on indigenous hair threading;
- traditional rulers or local government can organise art festivals where crafts showcasing indigenous hair threading styles can be showcased;
- the development of green artistic materials that are derivable from the immediate local environment and less reliance on imported materials;
- smart individuals should participate in locally organised artwork shows.



If these highlighted policy suggestions are adopted and implemented, the course of sustainable artworks on indigenous hair threading will likely increase. This will contribute to preserving this aspect of the Ga and Asante culture more.

The study of indigenous threaded hairstyles carries significant practical implications across multiple domains. These implications affect educational practices, cultural preservation, professional development, and community engagement. These practical implications manifest in various ways, impacting individual practitioners and broader societal structures. Integration into formal cosmetology education and implementation of intergenerational teaching methods. Incorporation of traditional techniques into modern salons to enhance professional practice.

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