

Spring 2022

“Nappy Hair, Don’t Care”: Storytelling Through Strands

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“Nappy Hair, Don’t Care”: Storytelling Through Strands

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2022

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Dedication

First and foremost,

to my advisor, Yuka Suzuki, who without this project could not have been completed. Thank you for all your edits, notes, and words of encouragement. You kept me going even when I was down.

To Mario,

who spent countless hours working beside me, cheering me on, and believing in me.

To my parents,

Who stayed on the phone many a nights listening to me vent, aiding with translations, and providing me a lot of contextual information about their experiences.

To my ancestors, interlocutors, and fellow Kenyan women,

I only seek to tell our stories in a way that centres us. I hope you can see or find yourself amongst the narratives of these women. Thank you for guiding me.

Lastly and most importantly,

To me, who worked tirelessly despite all the challenges hurled my way, a pandemic, and being separated from family. You did this, you made it, and you deserve to feel proud and accomplished.

Introduction

My earliest memories of my hair are my visits to the hair salon as a kid, my first time being braided shortly before I turned one. Whether it was for myself, my mum's appointment or my aunties', I can recall my love/hate relationship with hair salons and hairdressers. On one hand, I felt love and admiration for the work that these women did; to a child it seemed like nothing moved faster than a braider's hand. On the other hand—fear as I recall the pain involved and hours of sitting still. Till today I remember the smack of the hairdresser's wooden comb on the back of my hand whenever I gingerly reached up to feel how much unbraided and free hair remained. *This feels like about 4 more braids.* And the sinking feel of horror when she fabricated twelve more parts for the hair pieces laid out on her lap. Time seems to flow differently when your hair is being worked on.

Now, twenty-two, I do my own hair and it's been years since my last visit to the salon. Salons carry memories of when I would cry as my braider hit a particular knot in my hair, and feel the hot tears welling in my eyes until they made their way down my chin. I was cursed with tender headedness, and on top of that I had the kinkiest of coily hair. My mother and family would say *nywele yako ni kama kamba, ngumu.* That my hair was like hard rope, difficult. Hair stylists often made that comment when dealing with kinkier textures. The exact opposite of *nywele nzuri.* Good hair. Looking back, it was clear early on that my hair needed taming or to be controlled, and that were it a looser texture, this would not be my cross to bear. I was never allowed to wear my hair out in its natural state. It had to be done up in a style, or otherwise I would be the recipient of unsolicited advice or comments. *Unkempt* was often thrown around to women who wore their hair in afros or out in its kinky state. Once, when I was around six, I

asked if I could wear my hair in colour ties and pigtails, the way I saw the little Arab and Swahili children around me wore them. I recall the moment when my aunt dismissed my request, saying I would look like a *bushbaby* or *like I came from the bush*, a negative reference to the San peoples who sport short coily hair. At first, hair to me seemed “good” or “beautiful” depending on the body that it was on. Later I found out that my Arab or Swahili classmates whose hair was deemed unmanageable like mine, were pressured into relaxing¹ their hair. Either their mothers could not handle their kinkier hair texture, it was too time consuming, or it simply eluded the adults around them. Kinky, ‘nappy’, or coily hair that needed tender, loving care (TLC) and patience like mine were seen as a hassle meant to be managed by braids, lines², or twists to make it at least look “smart” and presentable. Surrounded by my aunties, I wanted to emulate them with their butt-length box braids, and wavy weaves or sew-ins. Weaves and wigs were for the older women; that was a given. I was deemed too young for them and they would make me look too mature for my age. I would later get my first sew-in weave at the age of fourteen, a moment that felt like a rite of passage into womanhood. Regardless, hair politics was all around me; yet, it seemed as if no one questioned it. Younger me did not understand why I could not wear my hair out the same way some of my classmates did. I began to envy the Arab and Swahili girls, the foreign students, little German and Dutch half-caste kids with *good and soft hair*. The Somali children with curly ringlets that bounced and were infinitely easier to style. Even young, these racial and ethnic divisions within my very African country were visible, or rather, I noticed them in the way they took shape with hair.

Little did I know that my cousins and friends would soon come to be envious of *me*. I recall being in primary school on break visiting a friend of mine in Mumias, a small industrial

¹ A chemical process that ‘relaxes’ and straightens curly, kinky and coily hair textures.

² Kenyan term for cornrows. Both terms are used and understood.

sugar town at the time. Upon seeing her, my first comment was “you are bald!”. It took me by surprise. Now she looked like all the other Kenyan girls on their way to Secondary School. She told me she’d started boarding school since the last time I visited. When I asked my mother why Alice had to be bald, she told me that that was how it is. Part of the dress code in many boarding schools is a shaved head. That meant no more showing up on the first day of school with a fresh new hairstyle. If you came to school with hair, that became the prime moment to make an example out of a student, and scissors or electric clippers were promptly brought out. A fresh head of braids with beads on the ends were reserved for the lucky girls that went to private schools. I happened to be one of the lucky ones that would have the luxury of keeping their kinks and coils.

Once we had moved to Singapore, I begged and begged my parents for a relaxer. I was going to be the new girl from Africa. I could not go to school with an unruly afro. Eventually they gave in, and I underwent my first relaxer. It burned, stung, and generally felt like hell but all that ceased to matter when I first saw my hair, flat and silky straight. I thought I would not elicit the obvious intense stares I previously did, but that did not change much. However, I could not relax my hair every month. My mother was very strict on that—too many chemicals on my scalp and at such a young age. So in between relaxers, I was made to wear braids, rastas as I called them then, to give my hair a break. And so began my Elementary and Secondary school hair routine: two months in braids, get a relaxer, a month to whatever point my mum noticed new growth after my relaxer, then right back to braids. Anytime I did show up to school in braids, I was bombarded with questions from classmates.

*Were you born like that? Is it real? Is it fake? Why does it feel like that? How long does it take? What?! So you just sit there for 8 hours doing nothing?! **Is doing your hair like this a normal part of your culture?***

This was the question that always stumped, and later annoyed me. Was doing my hair like this a part of my culture? Yes, having and wearing braids is normal. All my African friends back home wore braids or cornrows of some sort. Is it part of Kenyan culture? No, I didn't feel like I had the authority at the time to confidently say yes it is or no it isn't. What even was Kenyan culture? Yeah women back home do get braids and cornrows and weaves but so did women in America and Nigeria and South Africa. In that moment it clicked in my head that I was different from my peers—that changing my hairstyle every so often made me stand out—and my hair represented that difference. My hair was unusual to them; none of them had been around a Black person before. For them, my hair was an enigma they couldn't crack, and came to be the biggest marker of my 'foreignness' aside from my skin colour.

Hair has been all around me, but I never had the words or vocabulary to convey what I thought until now. My choice to base and conduct my Senior Project in Kenya seemed obvious; not only is it where I was raised, but it is also where I was first exposed to hair grooming practices. Growing up in Kenya, accompanying my aunties to get their hair done, and communal hair grooming laid the basis of understanding my own hair. It is also the origin of the hair envy I would later develop, and continued tensions that my hair represents. In investigating my own relationship with my body, identity and hair, I noticed that my 'hair envy' began young and affected how I viewed and still view my hair to this day. This hair envy was rooted in a desire for more socially acceptable and desirable hair wherever I was. It drove me to have my hair relaxed, and later even go natural. How I wear, style, and change my hair now on a daily basis is influenced by the many places I have lived, but shaped largely by Kenya. It is through this lens that I seek to look at the questions of how Kenyan women's hair practices speak to wider ideas of respectability, status and beauty. What might the politicisation of hair and hair care say? Are

Kenyan women actively thinking about notions of desirability and presentation? How are these women navigating different spaces that they occupy? Are their hair practices changing with them? What conversations might be happening surrounding the natural hair movement, and in turn, how are Kenyan women shaping and changing it?

Black hair is never ‘just’ hair.

Hlonipha Mokoena, a South African historian, offers a look at Black modernity and its changing forms of expression in her article, “...If Black Girls Had Long Hair”. Borrowing the title from Cheikh Anta Diop’s work, she considers the link between contemporary Black hair and ‘ancient’ Black hair by prodding the distinctions. Mokoena borrows the Greek term "mimesis". The idea being that some aspect of life or the world around is replicated in the creation of art forms, further implying that African hairstyles are artistic in nature. She posits that African hairstyles are,

mimetic in both senses—it borrows from nature even as it dramatises such nature and such borrowing. This is one of the first misconceptions about black hair; people often assume that black women deliberately choose “dramatic”, over-the-top hairstyles. Not really; the hair itself is already architectural and dramatic, the hairstyle just accentuates the drama that is already taking place. (Mokoena 2017, 115).

She even answers the statement that is implied in criticisms of Black hair: that Black hairstyles are “over-the-top”. Mokoena, labelling these opinions as “misconceptions” and “assumptions”, frames these perspectives as incomplete or rather a result of faulty thinking or misunderstanding on non-Black peoples’ part. It implies that people think they know more than they actually do in reference to Black hair. What about Black women’s hair causes these instances of misinterpretation? And moreover, what does it mean for hair to be “architectural and dramatic”?

As I came across the story of Muthoni wa Kirima, I wondered how her understanding of her hair might relate to Mokoena’s idea of hair as mimetic. Muthoni’s story is one that traces

back to the Mau Mau rebellion within colonial Kenya. While fighting in the forests, she left her hair dreadlocked. With little time available to groom herself, her hair became significantly tied to her fight, and she was not alone. Dreadlocks over time came to be associated with the Mau Mau struggle, as images of fighters were circulated by the British colonial government. After retreating into the forests, she and other fighters continued to wait. Six decades later, Muthoni still waits to reap the benefits of her fight for independence; “until she receives them, she refuses to trim her knotted hair... She calls it “the history of Kenya”. (The Economist 2013). In an interview with Joy Kiruki, Muthoni explains the following:

Tulikua tufikiria, tutaweka mzuri ata. Hakuna ata mshara kidogo ya pesa nilipatiwa na hii serekali yangu, na niyangu! Anataka kuona anafanya nini. akifanyiwa atajua bila atafanya.

We thought we were going to be treated well. I never received any money or assistance from this government of mine, and it is my government. We want to know what is being done for us. When something is done, we will know what to expect. (Muthoni 2014).

Mark Holton’s “On the Geographies of Hair” approaches the subject of hair by looking at the body from a geographical perspective, and he identifies hair as an agent with its own materiality and ‘life’. In his writing, he extends these ideas into considerations of the social formation and influence between the body, hair, and identity. An argument that Holton (2020) makes in his article is regarding the significance of hair as a tool “through which discourses of power, control, and authority are inscribed upon, encountered by and used against bodies in space” (560). To him, hair is distinct because “it grows, meaning identities are not fixed in space and time and may be (re)shaped to complement adaptive identity expressions throughout the life course” (559). This frames hair almost like a canvas to be painted or clay to be moulded, constantly changing. Where hair differs from other body parts is in its ability to change drastically and its impermanent permanence. Holton too asserts in a way that hair is tied to

identity, and both have the potential for fluidity over time, and yet they are bound in parallel ways.

Muthoni's hair is Kenya's history; yet, hair is spoken about in a way that suggests it is just any other bodily by-product akin to nails or sweat. I have noticed too that in criticisms of Black women's irritation at the appropriation of African/Black hairstyles, the counterargument takes the stance of "it's just hair. It isn't that serious". It is subtle, but this is a dismissive statement that strips recognition of the ways that hair and its appearance have very real consequences for Black people; it can mean the difference of getting a job or not. This also works to depoliticize Black hair, which is inherently political as Black hair and hair care practices are imbued with racial discourses, historical and present. (Ndichu and Upadhaya 2018, 4).

Furthermore, hair is often treated with neutrality and passivity, and Holton disagrees with this view, labelling this view of hair as:

problematic and incorrect as it conjures essentialist interpretations of identity, particularly as the constituent components of hair – the scaly cuticle that determines hair's texture and shine; the protein-filled cortex of the hair shaft that provides structure and contains molecules that give hair its colour, shade and tone; the shape of the hair follicle that determines whether hair is curly or straight – all act as potent cultural signifiers that colonise and socially construct the body and its placement in society. (Holton 2020, 557).

The very structure of one's hair cuticles determines the texture of your hair—your follicle shape influencing whether you have straight, curly or kinky hair. What defines Afro textured hair is that the follicle shape is flat and ovular. Holton also suggests that hair can have a certain control over the body in its ability to "colonise and socially construct". Hair can socially mark one's body as different and in turn be a signifier of that difference in relation to others. When we moved to Singapore, my hair was always the first feature that strangers reached out to touch or get a brush of. My hair was markedly different from that of my peers who for the most part had

silky straight hair or slight waves. It made and constituted my body as “other” and foreign. Holton’s prime argument here is that hair is in fact imbued with value, with power. Even hair texture carries with it colonial and geographic connotations. Eugenacists came to adopt this classification of hair texture and applied it to race after social evolutionist anthropologist, William Ripley, used them to “differentiate and organise a cultural hierarchy among European populations according to the characteristics of the body”. (Holton 2020, 558).

The racialization of hair texture is still widely accepted and regarded as fact, and even within that, texturism³ thrives. My mother would always use the term *nywele nzuri*⁴ to refer specifically to Black hair that was looser in its curl pattern. Off-handed comments about biracial children having “nicer” hair because it was more manageable also made it clear early on that there was a hierarchy to the texture of African hair. Joseph Warungu, a Kenyan journalist, touches briefly on this in his experience in Somalia in his article about fighting uniform hairstyles. He writes in his letter from Africa:

For Africans, hair is one of the main signifiers of our race and speaks directly to our identity and status. Indeed there is a social pecking order for hair - the silkier it is the higher your status. I remember being called a derogatory word - equivalent to the N-word - on a trip to Somalia because of my "substandard" hair. Only the fine, curly Cushitic hair on the heads of the majority of people in the Horn of Africa was seen as up to standard. Black-on-black discrimination is real. (Wanguru 2019).

Warungu draws a connection between hair and race, labelling the former a “signifier” of racial category, “identity and status”. Even within the same racial categorisation, there is further stratification that carries with it implications of one’s social status. Warungu’s trip to Somalia is a moment where we see (or are shown) this invoking of status; he is called a Somali slur “equivalent to the N-word” that also carries with it reference to an ethnic minority in Somalia,

³ The practice of discrimination on the basis of hair texture. Many people have created systems and charts to characterise the difference between textures.

⁴ Swahili phrase meaning good or beautiful hair.

the Gosha or Jareer Weyne. The word, *jareer*, often used in a derogatory manner to refer to other non-majority Somali and Africans, is also the Somali term for coarse hair. Warungu terms this ‘black-on-black’ discrimination, yet it points towards the acknowledgement of difference and status on the basis on hair texture even amongst Black people. His hair is “substandard”, probably kinky coily, and therefore within that context he is scorned and assigned a lower status. This speaks back to the racialization of hair, and invokes a difference between the Cushites and Bantu Africans, with hair being the marker of difference.

Policing of women through hair

“Fighting ‘Uniform Hairstyles’ in Kenya” by Warungu addresses some of the hair controversies and court cases surrounding the politics of hair. These stories have risen in popularity, of students being threatened with expulsion from school or being barred from admission because of their hair. One such instance was the case of 14 year old Ruth Jemutai Kongin, turned away by the administration of Metkei Girls Secondary School which explained that her long hair went against school rules, despite her citing her religious beliefs (Suter 2014). Warungu sets up the piece with a scene of a little girl fighting and resisting having her hair shaved for school, her loss and resignation showing clear as day in her tears. He asserts that despite his own lack of hair, he believes that “hair is part of our identity and cultural expression” (Wanguru 2019). Interviewed by Warungu, writer and civil liberties activist Kevin Mwachiro thinks “Kenya is increasingly becoming a moralist state” and he views “the growth of evangelism from the Christian right” as to blame (2019). To set side-by-side the legal ruling regarding hair and Kenya’s concern with morality unveils the underlying idea that one’s physical presentation---specifically how they style their hair---says something about their morals. Narratives of hair as a reflection of one's morality are not new within discussions of Black hair,

especially within the Kenya context. Even so, the increasing appeal to morality when discussing Black hair as well as criticising colourful and creative hair styles situates it as a crisis that is the result of foreign corruption brought on by mass media. This outcry from Nigerian and Ugandan educators in higher education sees these creative hairstyles, miniskirts, tight dresses as distractions that violate the dress code and shake the very ethical foundations on which we stand (Fayokun, Adedeji, & Oyebade 2009, 66).

Here, hair once again takes on an added quality---hair as a site of morality, or indicator. Mwachrio attributes this tension to the growth of Christianity within Kenya, an argument with historical backing when looking back to the colonial era. Dress codes which entail that hair should be worn short or shaved are neither new nor peculiar. Garnett Achieng, who views these rules as lasting legacies of colonial racism, explains that they stem from when Christian missionaries established and oversaw schools. These missionaries ``believed that black hair was “unsightly, ungodly, and untamable” and “forbade all African women who attended their churches from wearing any artistic hairstyles, even though African women did so for many different reasons, including signifying their age, class, and rank in their community.” (Achieng 2019). Kathomi Gatwiri, senior lecturer at Southern Cross University in Australia, recalls her younger days in her village in Kenya. She had to keep her hair short because her grandmother insisted it was more manageable that way. Those were the school rules as well, and failure to comply was met with punishment. Gatwiri remarks on the irony of ‘tidiness’ being emphasised in regards to keeping her hair short, yet her dusty feet were never mentioned. She writes that under Christian missionaries, schools would require shaved heads. In her eyes, “[c]utting girls’ hair somehow minimised evidence of their womanhood. It was a covert move to reduce their desirability to African men, who were constructed as primal beasts with no sense of sexual

control.” (Gatwiri 2018). In this statement is the implication of hair being tied to ones’ sexual desirability and femininity, an idea later explored by Rose Weitz. Even more, this gives off the sense that these missionaries enforced these rules for the benefit and protection of African women. According to Gatwiri, by banning “artistic hairstyles”, the missionaries were able to successfully sexualise hair and use it as a tool of control and punishment in a way that Africans had never done” (2018).

The same sentiment is found in places of work in Kenya. All the female newscasters I watched growing up on KTN, NTV, K24 and Citizen TV wore the latest greatest wavy and straight virgin human hair wigs or weaves. Hence it is not so surprising that places of work would expect their female employees to report to work with hair that fit this “formal” and desirable standard:

Not too long ago, the management of a national TV station sent a memo to female presenters saying they should not wear the Kenyan Hollywood star Lupita Nyong'o's look or natural hairstyles...They had to have hair extensions on air. (Wanguru 2019).

There is significance to the fact that Lupita Nyong’o was referenced, her being a Kenyan woman who has frequently used her platform to talk about experiences of discrimination because of her Black hair and showcase natural hairstyles. Nyong’o herself has been vocal about being shunned for her natural hair, and instances of magazine editors smoothing and shaving her hair. It is especially significant since Lupita stands as a figure that many women and girls look up to. She is a beautiful and renowned Kenya woman, confident, loud, and sincere in her rejection of eurocentric standards. I think it also suggests that while socially there is a shift towards accepting natural hair and hairstyles, there still exists a barrier when it comes to institutions like schools and places of work. This regulation of natural hair and barring it within a ‘professional’ space could point towards deeper rooted notions of hair presentability and formality.

Policies, rules, and attitudes of ‘professionalism’ and ‘formality’ like these are not limited to Kenya alone. Anthropologist Anneeth Kaur Hundle details the discussions surrounding the colonial-style dress code in Uganda. The ban outlines an extensive dress code for female and male civil servants that also states how hair should not be worn. For men, “hair should be well-groomed and generally kept short” and women are “not allowed to have bright coloured hair in the form of natural hair, braids and hair extensions (Tumfweko 2017). Hundle (2017) notes that the women’s dress code is far more detailed than the men’s, and that the policy is couched in a rather colonial language of “decency” and dressing “smartly”, a feature of former British colonies. Across sub-Saharan Africa and the African diaspora, the politics of Black women’s hair and its policing remains a contested and ever-present matter. The parallels in beauty standards places Black hair at the end of the desirability spectrum and liken kinky hair to unruliness, disruptiveness, and in need of “doing” or fixing. Historically, these assumptions---rooted in anti-blackness---have routinely manifested themselves in beauty ideals across the world, prioritising a Eurocentric standard. The same belief that straighter and silkier hair is professional and therefore acceptable, lends itself to notions of normalcy and attractiveness.

Edna G Ndichu and Shikha Upadhyaya apply a consumer analysis approach to how Kenyan women understand their embodied hair practices as contributing to their embodied identity projects. Their take on hair practices assumes a binaristic nature, normative (eurocentric beauty standards) and nonnormative (represents the embracing of natural black beauty). In their findings they state:

The normative hair care practices among Black women have been vernacularized not only by various media outlets, such as magazines and television, but also by other institutions, such as religious institutions, educational institutions, and service settings. Natural hairstyles such as afros, dreadlocks, and cornrows are considered untidy styles that do not necessarily fit the normative work, school, or social settings (Onwuachi-Willig 2010). Educational institutions’ surveillance of the women’s bodily

practices and behaviors also serve as an everyday formulation of “regimes of truth and power” (Foucault, Morris, and Patton 1979). These hair care practices rules when internalized by the Black women help in constituting themselves as rule-abiding females and “normal” women. (Ndichu and Upadhaya 2018, 3).

This “vernacularization” not only helped to establish these ‘rule-abiding’ women but also to situate straight, chemically manipulated hair as “normal”. The natural hair movement therefore stands to reclaim this state of “normalcy” by insisting and appealing to a return to naturality, opposed to the chemical and ‘unnatural’. This positions the natural hair movement as a resistive force to these “regimes of truth and power”, but also situates Black women as subjects to these power structures. Weitz (2001) discusses how disciplinary practices are used to create “docile bodies” (668). These practices, “which individuals both internalise and act on the ideologies that underlie their own subordination”, result in the creation of the body as “a site for power struggles and, potentially, for resistance, as individual choices about the body become laden with political meanings” (668), which is happening now.

Hair as social currency: inscribing power, femininity & desire

So far we have glanced through the relationship between hair and racial or ethnic identity, attitudes surrounding professionalism and formality, and their enforcement as attempts to police Black women’s bodies’. Another connection at play within hair discourses in Kenya is the relationship between hair and femininity, and how this traces and connects to ideas of professionalism and desirability.

In thinking about how hair can mark one’s body as different and be inscribed with power, Rose Weitz provides us with ways to think about how women attempt to gain or enact power through changes in their hair. Weitz (2001) proposes the argument that women are neither “docile bodies” nor free agents when it comes to their subordination, but rather they combine

strategies of accommodation and resistance to navigate these structures around them---the focus of these being “women’s hair management strategies” (669)(670). She categorises and attempts to frame her interviews between two ideas: women who adopt strategies that seem to accommodate these structures of subordination, and women whose strategies surrounding hair speak more to resistance. There are “conventionally attractive” women, who Weitz describes as those who adopt hairstyles that are seen as more feminine and beautiful. These women are more likely to be hired for positions, receive raises and job advancements, and have better marital or relationship prospects than women who are not deemed so (Weitz 2001, 673). While Weitz’s study is based in the United States and surveys women of various racial backgrounds, her writing includes but does not focus primarily on Black women’s hair practices. However, these ideas of “conventional attractiveness” also exist in Kenya, and usually describe women with lighter complexions, and straight or wavy flowing hair like those in magazines and pasted on posters in salons.

In her section discussing how women seek power through traditional strategies, one of Weitz’s interlocutors drastically changed her hair to keep her boyfriend interested in her. Another young woman kept her hair long because it allowed her to pass as heterosexual (2001, 673-74). These women either saw or experienced changes in how people around them perceived them as either more attractive or independent. In my experience, most Black women could attest to being treated differently depending on their hairstyles. As rapper Megan Thee Stallion says in her collaboration with Cardi B, WAP, “switch my wig, make him feel like he cheating”. Weitz sees these changes in hair as different from cosmetic surgery or makeup, as these women “are actively and rationally making choices based on a realistic assessment of how they can best obtain their goals, given both their personal resources and the cultural and social constraints they

face.” (675). The power in question, Weitz explains, “embedded in doing femininity well is power nonetheless” (673). This mode of seeking power using traditional strategies seems to apply mainly to white women and less so to Black women. On the other hand, when discussing nontraditional strategies of seeking power, Weitz (2001) writes that Black women are “far less likely to adopt any strategy that might downplay their femininity” at the risk of invoking associations to masculinity because of the dominant culture (678). Black women are viewed and tend to be depicted in a more masculine manner than their white counterparts. She touches on the adoption of protective hairstyles like wigs but is unclear on the difference between these Black women and the “working-class African American” women who are categorised by their more elaborate hairstyles. Weitz acknowledges that Black women are not afforded the luxury of assumed femininity, and thus are more likely to alter their hair to move closer to the “conventionally attractive” woman, so as to both maintain a standard of ‘professionalism’ and femininity.

One of Weitz’s interlocutors, Norma, said she “intentionally wore Afros just to upset the system”, and another who wore dreadlocks considered “[herself] in a constant state of protest about the realities of cultural alienation, cultural marginalization, cultural invisibility, discrimination, injustice, all of that” (Weitz 2001, 680). It is of note that these women did not have to drastically alter their hair for it to be read as a mode of resistance; the value of their hair being Black and in its natural state is enough to count. By virtue of adopting non-normative styles like afros, dreadlocks or braids, these women position themselves outside the normative ideology. This may be because a Black woman’s personal decision not to straighten her hair disrupts what normal looks like and “also puts into question the acceptable collective identity of Black women” (Ndichu and Upadhaya 2018, 4). These strategies of resistance differ from the

prior examples because “each of these strategies challenges the ideology that underlies subordination, even though only some of the women frame their actions in ideological terms” (Weitz 2001, 680). To count as ‘resistance’, the actor does not need to label or conceptualise their actions as resistance. It can be born or emerge from actors simply rejecting the status quo and embodying that rejection they feel.

In thinking back to Muthoni’s story, there seems something particular about the style of dreadlocks that carries with it a history and presence of cultural and political resistance, but also controversy. The style, often associated with Rastafarians in Jamaica, is worn by countless Black people in the diaspora, including some members of my family. The Mau Mau movement in Kenya popularised the style, as photos of warriors with long dreadlocks fighting against the colonial government spread. Yet today, there are many within Kenya who view dreadlock as a sign that someone is unruly, dirty, and possibly criminal. Natural hair signifies a woman who is fearless and embracing all parts of herself, yet at the same time it can imply unkemptness or lack of self-grooming. To understand these competing attitudes, popular and obscure, we have to understand how they emerged and have changed over the years. An analysis or study of the politics of hair in Kenya today has to account for how hair historically was seen in relation to the body and embodying identity. In a country with a recent colonial past, we must consider ways in which these structures of truth and power surrounding hair and the body have been shaped and moulded by colonisation, contact with Europeans, as well as globalisation.

As a Kenyan who grew up abroad and has had my own relationship with my hair and identity influenced by those places, I am interested in bringing an African perspective and analysis to this. Much like my own, Kenya’s relationship with the topic of hair is a result of decades of ingrained attitudes and ideas that are rooted in its colonial past, images and videos

circulated through the media, as well as the various natural hair movements that have started in the Diaspora.

Landscape of hair today, influences, and black imagination

Ndichu and Upadhyaya's (2018) study found that Black women's hair experiences and hair care practices are influenced by various factors like peers, the spaces that Black women move in and even hair stylists (3). Similarly, Mokoena (2017) explains that since hair traditions have been lost over generations, most Black women do not fully understand what is in their hair products and they "therefore often construct their hair rules and regimen based on what they see other black women do or what their hair stylists recommend" (123). While this suggests that Black women are influenced by and in turn influence other Black women, it re-emphasises how these hair care practices are shaped too by the spaces like work, places of religious worship and even salons. The very way Black women conceptualise and enact their agency and even identity is in a constant state of flux. This is complicated because despite Kenya being an African country many Western ideals are still upheld, primarily by the middle and upper class who are in closer proximity to and have the means to engage with more Western products and media. Ndichu and Upadhyaya remark on the pervasiveness of globalisation in helping to construct the hair care landscape and industry in Kenya:

While the population is predominantly Black, Western consumption standards, usually transported through media and other Internet Based technologies, heavily influence the consumption practices, particularly of middle and high income Kenyan consumers who are primarily found in urban areas and have ready access to such media and Internet resources, as well as the financial means to participate in enacting Western consumption standards...Consequently, the persistent exposure to Western ideals of consumption since childhood shapes Kenyan consumers' ideals and norms of beauty, skin color, and so on, and influences the consumers' practices and choices, even as adults. Particularly, hair practices among urban, Black women in Kenya mimic the Western ideals of straight hair,

with hair care manufacturers utilizing images of Black women with “long, soft straight hair” in their messages on advertising platforms such as television, magazines, billboards, and product packaging (Euromonitor International 2015, 1). (Ndichu and Upadhyaya 2018, 8).

Black hair and imagination go hand in hand, and nowhere does this show more clearly than among Kenyan youth. Despite all these existing barriers, young Kenyan women are using social media to share their hair journeys in vlogs, creating a sense of community online that uplifts and celebrates all types of natural and creative hair types. The natural hair movement, which was revived online in the early 2000s-2010s in the Americas has been spreading across the diaspora. A change this brought was a shift amongst Black female consumers in Kenya, who have increasingly moved away from relaxers and are going natural. The hair market has been expanding to cater to these needs, with a few natural hair oriented salons opening in Nairobi, and a greater influx in natural hair products from overseas, local stylist, and entrepreneurs.

Looking at the literature surrounding Black hairstyles and care practices in relation to the enacting of Black women’s identity, there seems to be a bias towards categorising Black women as either adopting and partaking in normative and conventional standards of beauty, or rejecting. Among the authors I read, engaging in normative ideals is read as accommodating the structures of subordination, and not engaging in them is interpreted as resistance. Even so, where does that leave the women that do not neatly fit into either category? What does it mean when a Black woman wears her hair natural in some spaces and manipulated straight in others? Where do the Black women who enjoy wearing 20 inch body wave lace front wigs and at the same time love and embrace their afros just the same? This binarization of Black women’s hair practices as it relates to their embodied identities fails to consider that many women occupy the liminal space between the two. By refusing to see the possibility of existence beyond these two categories, we

miss out on the other questions we can ask about how these embodied identities change and what message or stories our hair can tell over time, as well as what deeper meanings if any are inscribed in the hair decisions of Kenyan women?

Autoethnographic approach and rationale

Deciding to focus my senior project on Kenya felt like a way for me too to connect with, understand, and untangle ideas and feelings about my hair that I had long since internalised. It feels impossible to write this ethnography without pulling from my own personal experiences both growing up in Kenya, living abroad in Asia, and through the conversations I have had with the various Kenyan women I have encountered over the years. For this reason, I employ an autoethnographic approach, at times switching between the voices of my interlocutors and mine to weave together our stories. There is a quote that stood out to me in Irma McLaurin's (2001) article, "Theorizing a Black Feminist Self", where she states that "autoethnography functions as a type of cultural mediation and as a repository of cultural memory" (67). This approach defined by McLaurin, a Black feminist anthropologist, recognises the role of the researcher in both being the 'producer' and part of the 'product'. She proposes a turn towards autoethnography for Black feminists and anthropologists as "a viable form through which Black feminist anthropologists may theorize and textualize our situated positions and elevate our subjugated discourses to levels recognized by both margins and center of the discipline" (McLaurin 2001, 56). This spoke to me, especially since sources or writings that approach the subject of Black hair within a Kenyan context were scarce to come by.

In my approach to theory, I opted to primarily draw from the theory and writing of African historians and anthropologists, like Omotoso, Mokoena, Nyamnjoh, and more while using writings by Western authors as supplementary sources. Black authors like Mercer and McLaurin while writing within the context of America still provide linkages and offer insights to parallels that I notice within Kenya. As a Black femme myself who identifies strongly with Black womanhood in all its forms, it was important to me that this project felt like a piece of work for us and by us. I do not attempt to explain in detail facts or information about Black hair to my non-Black readers, because that is not who I seek to write for. Instead I want to use this as a way for Kenyan women to begin unravelling how and where we internalise and adopt different messages and narratives about our hair. I go into a historical analysis that considers various lenses of interpreting these narratives and images of Black hair that have occurred and been subconsciously accepted over the last century within Kenya.

1. Tangu kitambo, mpaka hapa: Images and narratives of hair throughout time

The past is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be taken as appropriate, depending on the movie to be made, the scene to be enacted, the hostages to be rescued

- Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*

In order to understand how the landscape of hair today in Kenya came to be, we have to take a step back and examine all the influences that have shaped hair politics over time. While doing so, it is also important to recognise that peoples of East Africa, let alone Kenya, are diverse and varied. There is not, nor has there ever been, one singular way or approach to hairstyling and grooming across the plural ethnicities that occupy Kenya. Those ethnicities or groups that live closer to one another often share certain traits and traditions, yet we cannot treat them in a monolithic way. By attempting to recreate a historical landscape for the topic I am investigating, questions like “how was hair a means of expression historically? What relationship did women have with their hair? How did they style it?” started coming to mind. After all, African hairstyles have never fallen short of creativity or allure.

Instead I will point towards the variety in traditional hairstyling across a few ethnic groups. I use the word ‘traditional’ to distinguish between braided or shaved hairstyles that originated on the continent, and later more contemporary braided hairstyles that draw on these ‘traditional’ ones. Furthermore, while ‘traditional’ often stands opposed to ‘modern’ which is usually meant to symbolise that which is Western, innovative, and new. I do not intend to replicate this dichotomy that also places ‘traditional’ with the antiquated, old or backwards. Instead, I propose that hairstyles and the way women wear their hair has evolved over decades to include a syncretism of sorts, that shifts between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. Many of these ‘traditional’ styles are being revamped and restructured to fit modern aesthetics. The result is a

development of African hairstyles that re-visualise and reposition messages of the past, whilst also accommodating the influences that change with time.

What would an African perspective or theory of hair look like? Prevailing theory and Sharon Omotoso's article is an attempt at an African theoretical framework and epistemological way of thinking about Black hair. Much of her article articulates the need for an African philosophical framework of hair due to the prevailing nature of it, the economic power, as well as historical and prevailing significance of it in the lives of Africans. While Omotoso's article at first brings in international examples of the significance of hair in East Asian and amongst Native Americans, she draws mainly on examples from West Africa such as the Wolof and Asante to construct her African epistemological thinking of identity. While rooted in West Africa, Omotoso provides a way of approaching the Kenyan context in the absence of an existing East African theoretical framework. Her paper offers us an approach to conceptualising a philosophy that can be accessed through. I borrow this framework of thinking to argue that the politics of hair and hair grooming can begin to be understood through these lenses: 1) pre-colonial 2) colonial 3) neo-colonial 4) globalised standpoint. I approach these lenses as various modes of seeing and interpreting hair narratives that at times begin to overlap, in the case of the neo-colonial and globalised standpoint lenses. I do not treat these as consecutive stages of time, but rather lenses that can be stacked on top of each, much like binoculars, to obtain the best focus and the various means hair has taken stage in Kenyan history and today.

It would be helpful furthermore to consider combining Arjun Appadurai's model of global cultural flows in discussing Black hair and philosophies of hair as it relates to globalisation and neo-colonialism/post-colonial period as I notice moments of overlap. Appadurai proposes this framework as a way to view disjunctures and at times contrasting

imagined histories or attitudes, and it complements the adoption of Omotoso's lens philosophy. Appadurai's model of cultural flows contains five dimensions: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples (Appadurai 1996, 33). While Appadurai considers broader disjunctures arising from and influencing state interactions, I focus specifically on the disjunctures in hair narratives within Kenya. To understand how narratives of hair have been constructed, changed, and contradicted, I refer to his concepts of mediascaples, ethnoscaples and ideoscaples to articulate the real and imagined worlds that Kenyan women conceptualise, engage in, and navigate in respect to their hair. Appadurai (1996) defines these *imagined worlds* as worlds shaped and formed by the "historically situated imaginations" of people (33). But why are these mediascaples and ideoscaples so important? How does this all tie back to the narrative of hair in Kenya? I imagine these various scaples as unbounded spheres that merge and emerge from one another, constantly interacting and in turn changing and shaping themselves. In interacting with these mediascaples, ideoscaples and even ethnoscaples, Kenyan women are in turn actively engaging in and construing imagined worlds that shape their everyday understandings of being.

Pre-Colonial lens

At the moment of writing this, constructing a 'purely' pre-colonial landscape of hair and hair care where there has been no foreign contact is nearly impossible. Kenya's history of foreign interaction spans interactions with the Portuguese, Omani, British and Indians. The distinction of pre-colonial from colonial here is used to represent the difference between the British East Africa protectorate established in 1895 that existed alongside the, and once the British established the protectorate and colony of Kenya in 1920.

History of Arab interaction

Most pre-colonial first hand accounts of peoples in East Africa that we have access to are by British and other European explorers that paint African people's in very simplistic ways, flattening and narrowing down instances of difference that stood out to them and cataloguing these as proof of otherness and indigeneity. However, for many groups, this was not the natives' first time interacting with foreigners. Pre-British colonialism, there was already an established history of trade and commerce along the East African coast that had for centuries attracted merchants, traders, explorers and more from across the Indian Ocean. Situated along what is known as the Swahili Coast, towns and cities like Lamu, Mombasa, and Malindi were home to various ethnic groups like the Swahili and Mijikenda peoples.

As Arab presence grew and solidified over the centuries, with the Omani empire expanding to include places like Lamu, Kilwa, Mombasa, so did their control over nearby isles and cities along the coast. With growth in the local Arab presence, the Indian Ocean slave trade was booming, and in turn shaping the lives and environments of all those that were part of it.

The Swahili Coast: Slavery, dress and hair

Before the introduction of the British to East Africa, there had been an equally successful slave trade that even preceded the Transatlantic Slave Trade. While the Indian Ocean Slave trade was not as heavily commercialised and capitalised on, the Swahili Coast and its hinterland remained a fertile area for the capture, enslavement, and trade of slaves. The trade extended into the interior, sometimes with children, men and women being abducted from their villages to be brought to the coast and sold. Where the Transatlantic trade had been heavily racialised and

depended on the continued subjugation of African peoples, enslaved peoples in the Indian Ocean trade were not only African. As a result, the ruling Arab class had to develop and implement ways to classify and separate themselves from the locals, merchants, and slaves. While slaveowners took pride in converting the people they enslaved to Islam, enslavers were intent on maintaining an immediately visual distinction between slaves and owners—hence distinction took precedence over the Islamic prescription for Muslims to cover their heads (Fair 2001, 63). Enslaved Africans usually sported short hair or shaved heads to indicate their subordinate status.

Especially on the coast, distinctive aspects of a person's appearance told their story: from the fabrics they wore and how they draped them, to the jewellery and ornamentation they were adorned with—even how they were styled or veiled. It is hard to discuss the politics of hair at the time without also discussing the ways in which it was adorned or veiled, through fabrics or beaded jewellery. The influence of Arab and Islamic culture meant that fashion-wise, the Swahili Coast was dominated by these trends. Laura Fair (2001) writes about the politics of identity and dress in post-slave abolition Zanzibar, then the capital of the Swahili Coast and home of the Omani Sultan. While she focuses on Zanzibar, her writing extends to areas of the Swahili coast on the mainland.

Unlike in the Atlantic, slavery within the Indian Ocean sometimes operated on the basis of debts and did not extend past a person's lifetime and onto their descendants. This meant that enslaved people could often work off these debts, and eventually earn their freedom. While the British had already abolished their slave trade by then, slavery as an institution remained legal in Kenya until 1907 (British Online Archives, n.d.). Fair (2001) explains that “former slaves and their freeborn children began adopting elements of free dress that they had formerly been forbidden from wearing, particularly head coverings and shoes, as well as creating new forms of

dress as a public and daily expression of their growing autonomy and economic might.” (61). Not only was clothing changing, but also how it was used in conjunction with styling the head and hair. Many non-Arab Muslim women began to adopt the style of the buibui as a way to align themselves aesthetically with the ruling Arab class. This complete covering of one’s body (except for the eyes) “greatly enhanced a woman’s self perception as a respectable, urban Muslim lady” yet evidence suggests that veiling did not alter one’s marginal status (Fair 2001, 83).

Hinterlands- into Western Kenya

By the end of the 19th century, the British colonial administration had begun setting up headquarters in areas of Western Kenya, first in Mumias and later in Kisumu (Pitt Rivers Museum, n.d). Ethnic groups and tribes that were photographed or written of were usually done in the hands of white photographers, explorers and even anthropologists--some who worked with the British colonial administration. A few archival sources give us access to these images of various groups like the Luo, Luhya, Kikuyu, Nandi, Somali, and Wanika. Even these do not cover the range and diversity of peoples across what would come to be known as Kenya, nor the varieties of clans and regional differences.

The Pitt Rivers Museum Luo Visual History provides a collection of photographs taken between 1902-1920 by Charles W Hopley and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, two ethnographers whose work essentially forms most of the collection. The archive, available entirely online, can be viewed through the Paro Manene exhibition. As I navigated the website, I wondered what the relationship was between hair and the rest of the body? And importantly, how did the colonial

encounter and subsequent colonisation change or disrupt these notions? These were the questions guiding my research.

The Jo-Luo peoples are native to both Western Kenya and Tanzania. The Luoland within Kenya usually spans the areas of Kisumu and Nyanza. Both men and women sported short cropped hairstyles, some with finger-coil styles and loc-like twists. Image 1.1, a photograph, taken in 1902 by Charles Hobley, shows a “seated woman surrounded by young women and younger girls”. The subject that catches my eye first is the woman seated in the middle on the ground, smiling and facing away from the camera. She wears what seems to be a single necklace and her hair is pushed back in what may be mini-twists or locks, revealing the laughter on her face. Even amongst short and shaved hairstyles, there can be variety usually in the form of the design of the cut, like the two girls seated on the right with short hair, whereas the other four on the left are slightly different. The group seems at ease, relaxed, some even seemingly unaware that they are being photographed. They may have been sitting down gossiping or on their way somewhere together when the image was snapped. The one girl faced away from the camera and picking at the grass is cleanly shaven---bald, and the three surrounding her sport short hair with shaved sides. These slight differences could be a result of personal preferences, or reflect their ages or maybe even marital status.

The second image, 1.2, depicts an even larger group of women, many of whom appear older than the subjects in the image above. Organised into two rows, one standing and one sitting, some of the women carry children in their laps. Despite the simplicity in clothing, the cloth wrapped around their waists and covering their crotch areas, there is still diversity and a sense of individuality to their appearances. Some women sport more beaded necklaces than their counterparts, and others wear metal cuff-like jewellery around their arms and legs.



Image 1.1 *Kisumu Tribe: Women and Girls* (Pitt Rivers Museum Luo Visual History 1902)



Image 1.2 *Group at Karinga Station* (Pitt Rivers Museum Luo Visual History 1902)

Gilbert Oteyo (Pitt Rivers Luo Visual Archive 2008) writes that the “shaven head hair styles are very youthful and would have been a fashion in the period for young women”. Oteyo, a Luo archaeologist and historian, is heard through the collection in the short descriptions he provides to anchor these images in the past, and communicate highlights. Yet Oteyo, a Luo himself, also provides no further information about the hair of the subjects in these photographs further than that line. Perhaps hair was not seen as a significant enough feature to devote words to, or maybe the Luo paid little to no attention; but these assumptions are confronted in the face of the subtle yet marked ways we see differences manifest between this ‘pre-colonial’ period and later ‘colonial’ period photographs. Whether this lack of attention to hair is specific to the Luo tribe or not is unclear. An observation I had, which I was hesitant to write about, was that it was hard to tell or differentiate if the people in the photographs were men or women, especially since both men and women sported short cropped hairstyles, or finger-coil styles and loc-like twists. This subconscious attempt at differentiating gender underscores further how within a modern 21st century context, we have been socialised to turn to hair as a marker of gender expression. The question of whether or not the Luo people saw certain styles as specific to or reflective of gender expression is left open ended.

Another online archival resource, *Old East Africa Postcards* showcases over 2000 images taken from before World War II and features photographs from Uganda, Kenya, and Zanzibar. Young Kikuyu women and girls featured on these postcards are photographed with short hair, sometimes fashioned into what would today be recognised as ‘starter locs’, the beginning of the lock journey. Beaded headwraps and jewellery were worn to possibly emphasise or highlight the head. Many of these glass beads used in ornamentation were imported from West Africa and had been around for a while, gaining popularity at the turn of the century. In one particular image,

photographed in the 1910s, a young girl carries her baby brother on her back.



Image 1.3 *A youth and a girl with her little brother on the back.* (Old East Africa Postcards, n.d)

Around her head, we see a string of decorative cowry shells—most likely a result of trade with the coast. While the focus of my ethnography is not men, it is hard to ignore the drastically different hairstyles they wear from their female counterparts. Kikuyu warriors, mainly men, are pictured with long at times chest length-locks, often sectioned and styled elaborately. Despite the lack of descriptions, the use of these postcards as communication, endows attention to the subjects in the photograph. As the postcard passes between hands and travels distances, these images of what Kikuyu youth look like and style themselves are being spread as well. We can tell that these images usually consisted of natives in their most ‘traditional’ garbs, whether intentional or stylized, suggesting a sort of exotism of the ‘pre-civilised’ African. On top of this, these images were used and sent as a means of communication, often scribbled with short messages from one

place to another– colony to empire. When received, recipients of these postcards carried with them visuals of various African peoples, seemingly ‘stuck in time’.

While we are left unsure of their contexts– the moments the images were snapped and the relationships these subjects had with their photographers– we can invoke our imagination to piece together semblances of stories of these people. Based on the grouping of images of “Grooming” and “Celebrations” together, we could guess that hair and its changing appearance played a role in ceremonies, rituals, and rites of passage. Hair may have been cut or even shaved to indicate a transition in maturity. Many tribes may have had young children's heads shaved to signify moving up age-groups, or warriors dressing up their hair for celebrations. At times these photographs depict people caught in laughter, and yet sometimes the faces of the subjects remain stoic, hard, and unreadable. I am left wondering if they welcomed these instances or felt intruded upon.

Colonial lens

Following World War 1, the British annexed the inland region of British East Africa and established the crown colony of Kenya in 1920, leaving the coastal area as a protectorate and under the Sultan of Zanzibar. Following this move and over the decades of their rule, the British colonists worked overtime to erode the rights of native peoples, leaving them dispossessed of their land, and herding people into positions of forced labour.

Photographic evidence and written records by colonial administrators show the presence of Christian missionaries in homesteads and villages on missions to convert the locals. The British Colonial government even commissioned artists like Joy Adamson, an Austrian conservationist and author, to depict the indigenous communities they felt were going ‘extinct’. I place ‘extinct’ here in quotations to clarify that it was not the people themselves that were dying

off but rather their ‘traditional’ cultures and ways of life with increased colonial influence, and as individuals left behind their homesteads or ancestral homes to move towards working in ‘modernising’ towns and cities. Adamson’s pieces are available for viewing on Google Arts and Culture, and the website even states that she went on to complete 580 paintings. While the actual paintings themselves are undated, she embarked on the project in 1942 (Google Arts and Culture, n.d.).

One such illustration is of Jepterokwa Lotaen Riwua in image 1.3, a married Suk woman, evinces that there were still Kenyan men and women that remained tied to their tribal identities through their dressing, adornment and hair. The description provided suggests that Jepterokwa’s jewellery and earrings reveal her married status, but again, no mention of her hair or how it is worn, nor the string of beads and feather that adorns it. I cannot help but bear some scepticism at the intentions behind the colonial government commissioning these pieces. Adamson’s work in Kenya also included conservationist efforts, and the exhibition of her works emphasises that quality, which leads me to view these paintings in another light. The images, while stunning, seem to capture a moment in time, memorialising and epitomising the native African. Amongst European settlers and colonists, there seems to be an obsession and fascination with the ‘noble savage’. The African untouched by European civilisation is worthy of immortalising in their traditional state. While it was the colonists goal to eventually ‘civilise’ all Kenyans, there

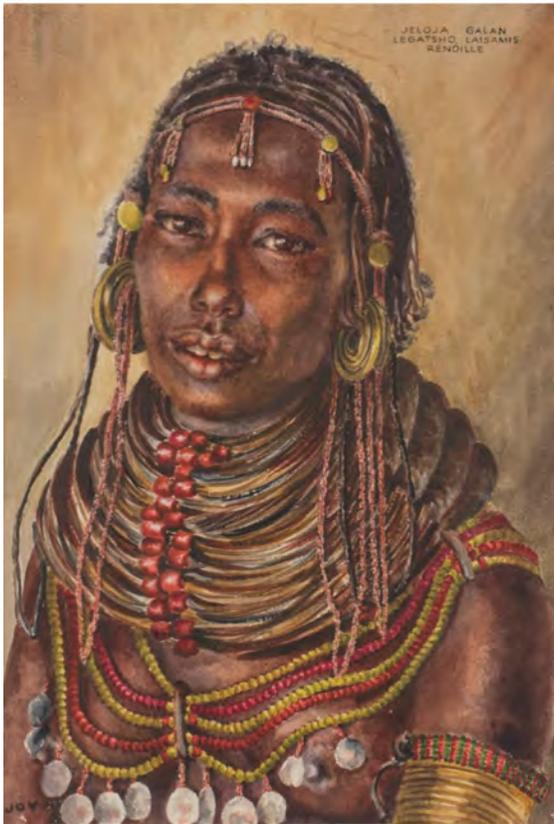
remained a desire to capture and immortalise the image of the pure and unsullied native.



(Left) Image 1.3 *Married Suk Woman* (Adamson, n.d.)

(Right) Image 1.4 *Borana Woman* (n.d)

As I further examine Adamson's paintings, I notice the attention to colour and detail, emphasising the 'exotic' and non-European. There is the sense that since these paintings depict 'extinct' peoples', that the 'traditional' is somehow dead or lost. This sense of colonial or imperial nostalgia is not exclusive to Kenya, but also illustrates the European's fascination with the pure native, untouched or corrupted by modernity. The women remain unnamed, but their strikingly distinct clothing, manner of wearing their jewellery, and different hairstyles set them apart from one another. The Borana woman pictured in Image 1.4. has her hair styled in what seems to be cornrows starting in the middle of her head and plaited flat going outwards towards her ears. Her face which appears scrunched gives away a slight discomfort probably at being painted .



(Left) Image 1.5 *Rendille Woman* (n.d)
(Right) Image 1.6 *Ndorobo Bride* (n.d)

'Westernisation' and Tribal identity in disarray,

As the British solidified their role as colonists, they also undertook the goal of 'civilising' the native africans. Evans-Pritchard's photography reflects a shift in the Luo community, as his visit occurred around 30 years after Hobleys'. By 1932, areas of Kisumu and eastern Uganda had been ceded to the British Colony of Kenya, and Luoland had established and continued contact with Europeans. This 'westernisation' can be understood through multiple avenues, one of these being a European education, and another through the adoption of Christianity, but easily spotted visually. Moreover, these schools were the result of missions conducted by the Church Missionary Society and the Catholic Mission into the interior as the railway line was being built. Falling under the section "*Westernization*" of the Luo, the next two images in the exhibition that drew my attention were taken at two colonial primary school parades in Ugenya and Muhala, 1936.



Image 1.7 *A parade at Kagomya, a colonial primary school in Luoland* (Pitt Rivers Museum Luo Visual

History 1936)



Image 1.8 *A parade at Mulaha, a colonial primary school in Luoland* (Pitt Rivers Museum Luo Visual History 1936)

A closer look at the children in these school yard images reveals that they all have shaved heads, and the children sport the same uniform: boys in a white button down shirt and khaki shorts, girls in white dresses. It is also interesting to note that most personal adornment such as bangles, bracelets/arm cuffs, and leg jewellery seen earlier is not found on the individuals in these later images. While differentiating between boy and girl becomes easier, the children blend into one another in the absence of other body markers. The greatest change I observed was how patterns of clothing, dress, and ornamentation had altogether shifted.

As contact with the British and Europeans continues, headgear is replaced with European headwear in the form of hats amongst men. Women's hair is no longer an array of styles, and is covered with *kitamba* (headscarves). To draw attention again to Oteyo's words (2004), he writes in the description that most of the women are wearing *tik ng'ut* (beaded necklaces), "which were often considered to be traditional and some of these beads are a mixture of colours and sizes.

However, they wear nothing on their feet.” Image 1.9 shows a group of women and girls who are members of a mission school.



Image 1.9 (Pitt Rivers Museum Luo Visual History).

This points to a shift towards adopting European clothes and ideas:

By the time Evans-Pritchard visited Luoland in 1936, many people did not wear traditional ornaments, favouring European-style clothing. These changes went hand-in-hand with the fact that most Luo people had been baptized with a Christian name and were under the influence of the European missions. Those who fully embraced the new education and clothing styles were referred to in various ways as 'civilized' (lony or nanga) or of 'good dressing' (jananga) or even a 'clever or educated man' (odiero).

Description of “Changing Body Adornment”. (Pitt Rivers 2008)

I would add to this argument too that changes in dressing were inextricably tied to decisions in hair styling, and reflected these individual evolving identities. For example, a village chief choosing to wear a European shirt and slacks, is also reflective of the decision not to don his headdress and opt for a more ‘appropriate’ head covering. Leaving behind the elaborate and visually striking for the more simplistic and ‘tamer’ aesthetics of the Europeans seemed to be the way to any kind of social recognition and mobility under British rule. Natives who worked for

the colonial administration were given European clothing, usually in the form of khaki shorts or pants. Margarte Hay (2004) goes furthermore to express:

“[i]ndividual choices about dress coalesced into broader packages of identity and self-expression that came into conflict, reflecting a polarization between those who had adopted European forms of dress and traditionalists who rejected many of the changes that accompanied colonial rule.” (67).

Your choice of dress was not merely a fashion statement, but an affirmation and alignment of which ideological side you stood for. The local chiefs (ruoth) were slowly replaced with colonial and village elected chiefs. This is where the concept of ideoscapes becomes relevant as both the tribal and colonial are vying for control and power. Hair and dress become intertwined in narratives of modernity vs. traditionalism. This concept of modernity here is tied to that which is European, as the British ‘positioned’ themselves hierarchically above the natives intellectually, technologically, and culturally. I place the words ‘positioned’ in quotes to indicate that this adopting and internalisation of Western values by Kenyans was subconsciously accepted.

Constructing European notions of gender

An argument I want to put forward is how the process of westernisation influenced and in turn shaped the ‘modern’ Kenyan’s conceptions of gender expression as it relates to hair and appearance. As I conducted my archival analysis, it struck me how elaborate, artistic and expressive men’s hairstyles were too, sometimes more so striking than the women of their tribes. Warriors and young men often sported long hair, and women also had a variety of styles depending on their tribal background. However, images from Kenya during the colonial period illustrate increasingly a shift towards Western clothing, but more importantly, the covering and shaving of hair. As I had noted earlier, it was difficult to immediately distinguish the gender of certain subjects in images unless the descriptions made them explicit. Hair may have served a

different purpose in men and women's lives, but the process of westernisation seems to have altered that completely. While women are pictured either with their hair covered in scarves, men sport European style hats. Their clothing changes were also very apparent to me with women almost exclusively in dresses and skirts, and men in shorts or trousers and khaki button downs. Seeing this difference made me question whether the Colonial British government was concerned with the immediate distinguishability of gender? While none of the writings I referred to ever address this point, it was a curious observation that I wanted to voice.

Mau Mau movement and hair

During the 1950s, unrest amongst natives about land dispossession, allocation to white settlers, and unequal colonists policies led to the beginning of the revolt's roots. The Mau Mau rebellion was a result of a peasant rebellion composed largely of Kikuyu, Meru, Embu people and other tribal groups. The group, Kenyan Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), fought against the British Colonial army, loyalists and local militia that allied with the colonial government at the time.

Eddah M. Mutua introduces us to some narratives of hair politics within Colonial Kenya. Mutua starts by laying out the historical and political relationship between individual and hair in the experiences of Mau Mau fighters, who she posits as the jumping off point for Kenyan colonial and later neo-colonial resistance through hair. While dreadlocks came to represent opposition to the colonial regime, "the narrative of hair as freedom/resistance was counteracted by a colonialist view of the Mau Mau as a threat to Kenya's national security." (Mutua 2014, 392). The Mau Mau were labelled terrorists, a message that made its way around the world. Imagery at this time was important because that was how the colonial government counteracted

the efforts of the Mau Mau and convinced other Kenyans that they were dangerous and to rally against them. In his article “The Enemy within”, Daniel Branch (2007) presents examples of loyalist cooperation with the colonial government to vilify the rebellion,

“A Catholic loyalist from the Baricho mission argued: ‘You should know that the meetings and the words which are brought to you at night by those dirty people with long hair, are the ones which make your country poor.’ Mau Mau according to Eusebio Ngari, ‘have brought poverty, famine, and murdering in the country. ‘Freedom’, Headman Stephen Mutuo Kibubu wrote, ‘does not come from hatred and such things like murdering’.” (313)

Instead of their hair being a testament to the dedication of their fight, the colonists and loyalists presented the Mau Mau as dishevelled and untrustworthy, hammering the idea that they were responsible for the stagnation of Kenya’s growth. Further connotations of them being dangerous, and wild presented them not as people fighting for their liberties, but as savages attempting to drag down the order or society and intimidate people. This contrasting meaning assigned to hair in the form of locks was later on replicated in the postcolonial state and used to severely punish critics of the status quo (Mutua 2014, 392).

Post-colonial/Neo-colonial lens

Crafting a (western-approved) National Identity

As newly independent African states were beginning their process for state formation, the influence of hair and attitudes too were changing and shifting, with young states clinging to independence whilst maintaining economic ties to their colonial powers and as such cultural ties and attitudes as well. Mutua (2014) reveals that “students, professors, and Members of Parliament (MPs) with the ‘dangerous hair/look’ became targets of police brutality and other forms of state-orchestrated torture such as forceful verbal abuse, detention, and imprisonment.” (393). She states further that “the meaning constructed by the Moi government about natural hair

as ‘criminal’ was intended to dislocate the meaning of hair as a tool of liberation” (393). The Kenyan government under the control of Kenyatta and Moi used various repressive techniques to ensure that the real Mau Mau fighters were disenfranchised from any fruits of their labour, spinning the story to posit Jomo Kenyatta as the hero that fought for Kenya’s independence. Yet as this so-called hero, he went on to replicate many of the ideals that the British had upheld.

The Black Power Movement: Effect on Black consciousness

During the postcolonial era in Kenya, which began with the nation's independence in 1962, we also witnessed a shift in how the politics of not just hair but race was being discussed worldwide. The emergence of Black Power Movement in the 1960s was a pivotal moment in history, not just for African Americans, but would later influence many across the diaspora, and Kenya, with Black Power ideals. One key feature of this movement was the way it visually captured audiences, as outward image was a key part focused on by the American and international media at the time. The Afro, known for its round, shaped and kinky texture, became a significant visual in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of the Black Power Movement, and as key activists like Angela Y Davis, Miriam Makeba, and Kathleen Cleaver sported their natural hair in this style (“Women in Black Power”).

The Afro— one of many hairstyles— stood for more than a visual, it evolved into a symbol that was intentionally conflated with the idea of the ‘natural’. Kobena Mercer discusses this comparison of the Afro with the state of naturalness in his article “Black Hair/Style Politics”, where he questions how the existing beauty norms and standards in Western society, specifically America, have been defined against Black people. Mercer (1987) puts forward that:

An important clue with regard to the Afro in particular can be found in its names, as the Afro referred to as the ‘natural’...The interchangeability of its two names is important

because both signified the embrace of a 'natural' aesthetic as an alternative ideological code of symbolic value. The 'naturalness' of the Afro consisted in its rejection both of straightened styles and of short haircuts: its distinguishing feature was the length of the hair... The three-dimensionality of its shape formed the signifying link with its status as a sign of Black pride. (37).

He argues that with the Black Power Movement, the afro came to be seen as the natural state of afro-textured hair, opposed to the long silky hair that Western hegemony had long since treasured and upheld. Mercer's argument here is that this hairstyle evolved into an ideological marker that people would adopt to illustrate their alliance with Black pride. The nature of the Afro, growing upwards towards the sun, defying gravity as many have said, became a symbol of pride by the 70s. While the Black Power Movement was so much more than just about hair, Mercer defends that while it may seem trivial to distil these movements to dress and wear, "we might also remember that as they filtered through mass media, such as television, these styles contributed to the increasing visibility of black people's struggles in the 1960s." (37)

How did these changes in consciousness and movements across the Atlantic affect the national consciousness of Kenya? At the time, Black intellectuals, Pan-Africanists and Afro-centric activists from all over the diaspora were finding ways of distributing materials like literature across the Black Atlantic and engaging in discourse with one another. Franz Fanon is an example of a figure that was widely read and regarded in the post-colonial struggle of newly independent African states. And with these Black-centred narratives being circulated and engaged in, so were images of the hair of these figures. Mutua (2014) writes that by the 1970s:

Student leaders and professors espoused the Mau Mau symbolism of hair as resistance to the postcolonial state's hegemony and inattentiveness to the needs of the majority of Kenyans. Their preference to wear natural, unkempt hair and beards re-embraced the meaning of hair represented by the freedom fighters. Reconstructing and performing the narrative of hair as resistance and freedom mobilized university students to engage in the struggle for freedom. Dreadlocked hair, Afros, unkempt beards, and the "Karl Marx look" were common at the University of Nairobi's main campus. In response to this rising political consciousness, the government used the canon applied by British

colonialists to label critics of the status quo as anti-government, dangerous, and unpatriotic to demonize hair once more. (393).

That one can choose to engage in certain narratives of hair, not just normative or non normative practices, and tell a story to convey a message of resistance and freedom is certainly powerful. Hair, which can be treated as a locale of control, both psychologically and physically, now takes on a counter hegemonic narrative. The same hairstyles that were vilified by the government and under western ideals were now being employed as statements of political and ideological alignment. The notion that your hair can take on the added quality of performance speaks to Mokoena's earlier remarks about Black hair being mimetic, and architectural but the hairstyle being what accentuates the drama. These student leaders, professors, and activists, in choosing to style their hair in locks and Afros are actively rejecting eurocentric standards while physically exhibiting that defiance.

Retaining tradition in the post-colony

Even in the post-colonial period of Kenya, and with the efforts of the newly formed government to retain many of the colonial structures, systems, and attitudes of the past, some tribes and groups had still managed to hold on to and retain some of their cultural practices in the face of imposed colonial attitudes and norms.

The Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher African Ceremonies Collection, part of World Heritage Sites: Africa, provided a way of understanding how some groups rejected imported Western beauty standards. The collection features a vast array of photographs captured from 1980 spanning to the 1990s. The website says that the project resulted in “an unrivalled, joyful, and intimate photographic record of African traditional life.”

Her images of the Maasai capture both warriors, men and women in moments of hair grooming, adornment, and ceremony. The focus of Beckwith's images are ceremonial moments and rites, and like the Luo Archive, the descriptions pay limited if any attention to the intricacies in braiding hairstyles that the images captures, nor do they elaborate on the nature of communal hair braiding which is featured heavily throughout the collection. Instead the focus is placed on the exoticism and eye-catching features of these different African peoples' dress, jewellery and adornments. By conducting my archival analysis, I hope instead to bring to the forefront how women's hair was not merely an accessory, but at times even held markers of status and even deep spiritual meaning.

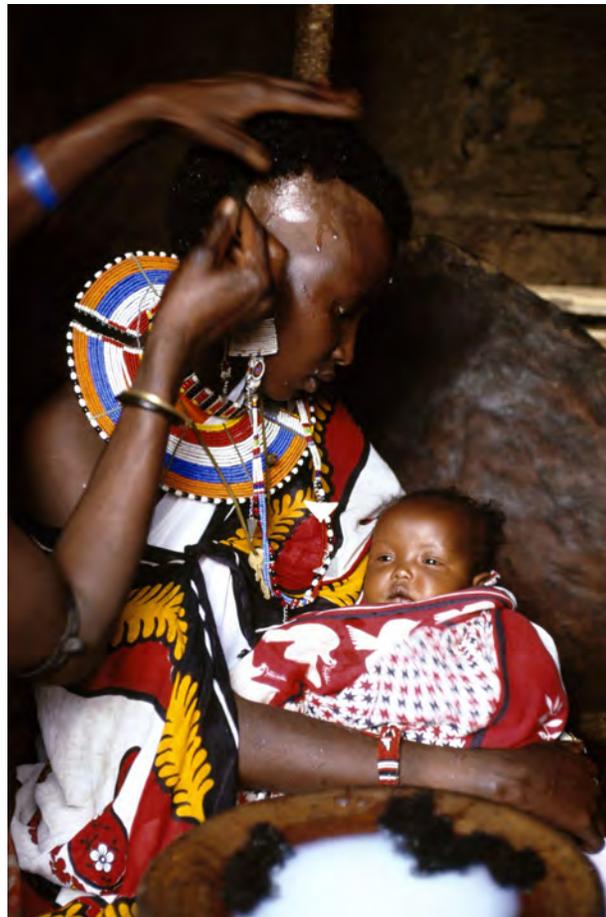


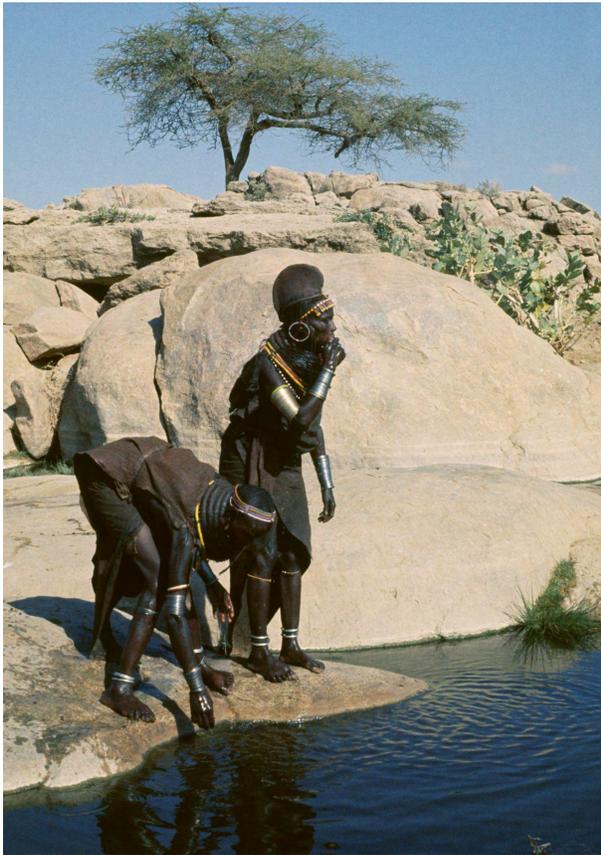
Image 1.6 *Maasai mother head being shaved, Kenya* (Beckwith, n.d)

This photograph, Image 1.6, was taken from Beckwith and Fisher's *African Ceremonies* vol. 1 and was published under Trust For African Rock in 1999. The image depicts a Maasai mother cradling her baby as her head is being shaved. As the shaving occurs, the shaved hair is placed in a bowl of white which appears to be milk. The description reads:

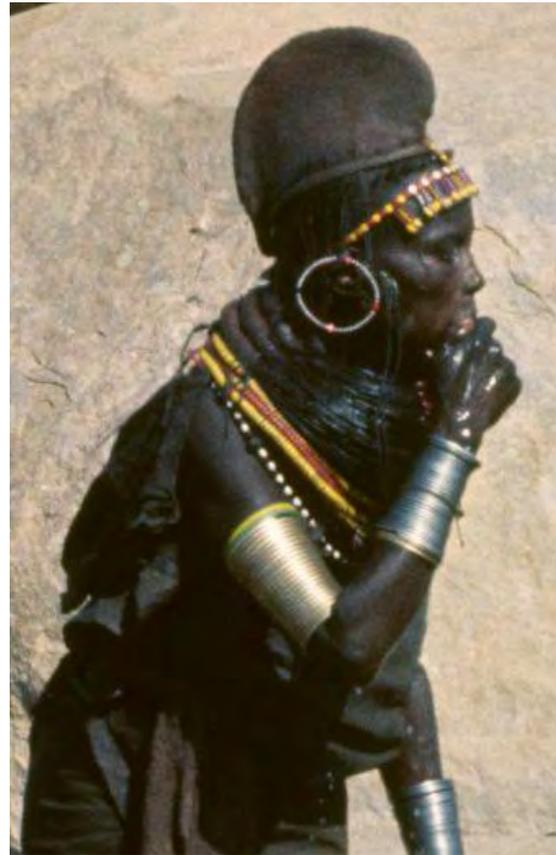
For the Maasai of Kenya, the first and most important of childhood rituals is the Baby Naming Ceremony. Following the slaughter of a sacrificial goat, the heads of both mother and baby are shaved to signify their simultaneous entry into a new phase of life. Their shorn hair is placed around a pool of milk in the centre of the seat of a stool, as an offering to seal the mutual bond... (Beckwith, n.d)

Here, head shaving takes on a ritual and metaphorical significance, tying the mother to the child as they begin this new phase. The practice of the shaved hair being placed in milk “as an offering to seal the mutual bond”, might imply that the hair, even disconnected from the body, still carries with it material and spiritual properties. The phrase “dirt is matter out of place” came to mind, often attributed to Anthropologist Mary Douglas, would imply that once hair becomes disconnected from the body, that it loses its ‘cleanliness’ and thus its purity-becoming ‘dirt’. However, in this instance, fallen hair retains its connection to the person in the form of a spiritual and emotional one. Mercer (1987) would postulate that such practices like the Maasai head shaving, “socialize hair, making it the medium of significant ‘statements’ about self and society and the codes of value that bind them or don’t.” (34). Hence the importance of the hair is not derived from its innate material value, but rather its given significance through ritual practice. I would argue that the Maasai woman’s hair already had a set of ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ attached to it, hence it is shorn to enter the new phase of life, and endowed with new meaning.

Another group of Kenyans whose images I found striking were the Rendille. This group of Cushitic people are from the Eastern province of Kenya.



(original image)



(zoomed in)

Image 1.3 Rendille women wearing their hair in a coxcorn to show that they have give birth to their first son, Kenya (Fisher, n.d)

Description that the collection provides:

To show that they have given birth to their first son, Rendille women of the northern desert of Kenya wear their hair in a coxcorn made from mud, animal fat and ochre. This permanent fixture is constantly repaired, and will be worn until the boy is circumcised or until a close male relative dies, when the head will be shaved... (Fisher, n.d)

This hairstyle, the coxcorn, transforms the body and individual as their status changes from childless to having a first born son, usually favoured, and in this instance showcased. The hair may be seen too as an expression of pride. The materials that are used in these traditional styles,

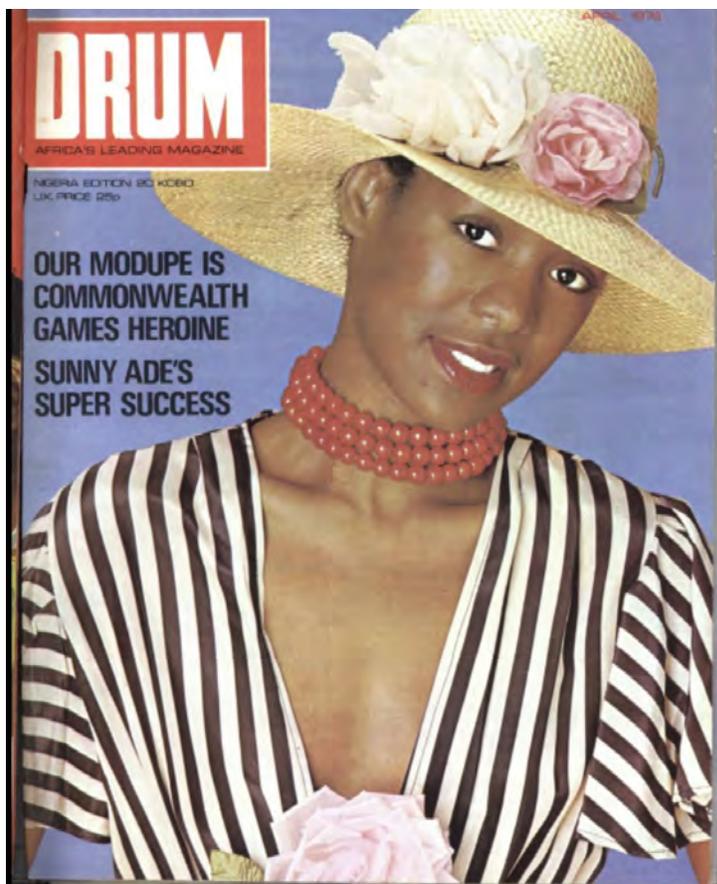
“mud, animal fat, and ochre” are easily and readily available, sourced from the earth and reflective of the lifestyles that they live. This too is important as the upkeep of the hairstyle is important until the son becomes of age, or a male relative dies. This structural nature and shape of the hair becomes tied to the son’s maturation, as the hair grows and he does too. Once of age, the shaving of the head might also symbolise a detachment from the son, as the role of parenting and nurturing has been ‘fulfilled’ and he is now a mature young adult. It is such a visible and striking feature of the body, who’s change signifies a transformation in the lives of these women

Globalised standpoints lens

While all the previous lenses reveal dominant hair narratives that existed in Kenya, none of them quite account for the rapidly changing, evolving, and interconnected world we live in as a result of technology and mass media proliferation. Mass media in the form of entertainment, magazines, newspapers and later on social media has brought in images and ideas of what the ‘modern’ African woman is supposed to look like. As I thought of how often women especially are inundated with images and narratives of what they should aspire to look like, I want to explore how these mediascapes combine to create at times contrasting ideas of beauty and in turn foster feelings of inferiority, acceptance, or pride.

Crafting the Modern African Woman

DRUM is a South African women’s magazine that was and still is prominently spread and read throughout the continent. The Bailey’s African History Archive holds a 40 year collection of magazine covers, ads, special stories and more– but I want to focus on the magazine covers of “Africa’s Leading Magazine.”. These magazines, distributed across the continent, featured glamorous cover pages of models in various hairstyles, often inspired by Western trends.



DRUM Cover, April 1974 (Bailey's African History Archive, 1974)

The description on the archive reads:

African model Lydia reflects the growing sophistication of the modern girl. In Britain girls dress like this once a year to visit top-class racecourse like Escot. Could this new 'Escot' look catch on in Africa at racecourses like those of Nairobi and Lagos? Let's try! (1974).

The Social Media Effect--rebirth of the natural hair movement

A great instance of this would be the revival of the Natural Hair movement that came alive around the 2000s with the advent of social networking and video-sharing platforms like MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and later on Twitter, Instagram. What started as individual women posting online about their hair care choice, tips, and products they used slowly grew into an online community of women increasingly turning to adopt their natural hair.

The natural hair movement serves both as a resource and community. You have black women across the world sharing information with one another in Facebook groups, comments sections, and community threads. Mokoena (2017) writes in her article, “If black girls had long hair...” that “Black women therefore often construct their hair rules and regimen based on what they see other black women do or what their hair stylists recommend.” (123). I would assert that part of caring for Black hair is the communal relationship that hair grooming fosters and provides. Whether it be an individual following along to a tutorial or a mother doing her daughter’s hair, historically, within African communities, hairstyling and grooming is a special and intimate collaborative effort.

Attitudes about hair can also often be revealed by the expression of hair concerns, hair envy and more. Visiting the website of Standard.Ke, Kenya’s largest new paper outlet, is a testament to this. Under the hair section, the first article I was confronted with was, “ABCs for Long, luxurious hair” , “What you need to know before going bald”, “Beginners guide to caring for a wig”. At the core, these headlines reflect a fear and anxiety around hair appearance, as Kenyan women are constantly striving for said “luxurious hair”.

2. Sanaa ya kufunya nywele na jitengenezeshia: Kenyan women's practices of hair grooming

You have to suffer to be beautiful.

-Anonymous

Having looked at how various narratives, conceptions, and ideas of hair have come to be within Kenya, I want to examine more closely how Kenyan women have internalised these messages in their various contexts and yet strived to enact and reclaim a sense of agency when it comes to their own hair decisions. Before the vibrant, architectural and striking hairstyle is achieved, the process of hair grooming plays a role in how Kenyan women form relations of intimacy and trust between themselves and the one(s) working on the hair-- at times, themselves. Moreover, societal norms and rules as they pertain to hair grooming, whether explicit or implicit, are continuously evolving whilst being simultaneously challenged and maintained through these women's practices. In this chapter and the following one, I have a series of conversations with Kenyan women regarding their relationships with their hair, its upkeep, and what it symbolised or meant to them. These conversations yield information about how hair expectations-- and wider ideas of presentability are internalised, lived, and at times rejected. Additionally, talking with these women illustrated instances of evolving relationships of trust and intimacy between hairstylist and client, the individual and the body, and the individual and community.

Introductions to hair and grooming

In a drawer in Beijing lives a collection of photographs of a young Kenyan girl in various hairstyles and accessories. The earliest one shows a 1 year old on her birthday, bright blue shining through. To a viewer, the pair of matching royal blue ribbons that go with her blue of her flower detailing and dress stand out immediately. The ribbons hold in place two ponytails, one

on each side of her head. I do not remember my first birthday, but I have heard my family retell the story countless times. My aunties insisted on having my hair done in a style that would complement and showcase my birthday dress. As early as I can remember, my hair was always done up as a child. As children, it is instilled in us that our hair is meant to be 'kempt' and maintained, so as to look 'smart'.

Whether it be lines that meet high at the back of my head for school, or beaded cornrows, or even my first hair extensions when I was a flower girl at my aunt's wedding, my hair was for the most part taken care of. This meant that I spent a lot of my time and weekends at the salon, as many others do. If not the salon, then sitting between the thighs of a trusted family friend or aunt who knew how to braid. The physicality and demand for stillness were always the hardest parts for me, being expected to stay still for hours on end, bend, lift, or crane your neck in any direction the hairstylist willed it. It was always impossible for me to make it through without complaints from my hair braiders and stylists. Most of my stylists would begin braiding in the back of head, right at the nape. If they were kind and gentle, they would ask about the tension and hurting me. The others, the majority, made comments about how much you fidgeted or winced as they created sharp and clean parts in my kinky tangled hair. It often felt like there was never room for empathy or even pity for me in the braider's seat. They would silence my gasps of pain with empty platitudes of "Beauty is pain". It all felt like a tortuous lesson in behaviour and expectations to me. Spending hours of time on a style that inevitably hurt that I did not want to get because my parents almost always disapproved of the styles I wanted. Even then, I knew that I wanted to be able to do my own hair so that I did not have to remain at the whim of others' desires; neither my parents or aunties who wanted to experiment, nor the money hungry stylists who were interested in getting me in and out. I would argue that children are not afforded an

agentive status that allows them to actively take part in the hair grooming process, but rather they are subjects or bodies meant to be worked on, and in turn come to internalise messages and ideas that are entangled within these practices.

Most Kenyan women are introduced to grooming practices when they are young girls, either by their mothers or aunties, or through visits to the salon.. One of my interlocutors, Bianca, an aspiring model in her early 20s, recalled being introduced to hair care by her mother as a child. Our conversation takes place on Whatsapp, and consists of minute long voice messages back and forth as I ask her questions and she replies, at times providing me with videos for extra clarification on the products she uses and some hairstyles that she has sported. Reflecting on her relationship with her hair and her days in school, she told me,

In primary we used to plait our hair, just do 8 or 10 cornrows with the natural hair and that was in primary. And you have to redo it every weekend, you make new cornrows to keep it neat. Then in high school, I used to have short hair, so short hair you just wash it, apply some oil and comb it to make it look neat.

While the nature of our conversation at times felt broken or interrupted because of the mix of dispersed voice recordings, it added another visual element as she walked me through some steps in her hair routine. Bianca's school expected the students to maintain a certain appearance of presentability, and this was also an expectation upheld by my other interviewee, Diana. My conversation with Diana occurred over FaceTime, both times at night with her sitting in her living room. In her late 40s, Diana sports dark black locks with the occasional wisp of white hairs interspersed. Her locs are shoulder length, and she has had them for around 6 years now. Before then, she wore her hair in a variety of styles ranging from wigs to weaves, and even braids. Hair grooming rules at Diana's schools growing up did not allow braids or any other African hair styles. Without access to a salon, and because her family could not afford it, Diana had to learn to plait her hair in sections everynight to go to sleep. In the morning, she would

spend time detangling her hair and combing it out for school. Diana's school days are long behind her, but that detail remained with her because of how much she disliked it. She tells me in detail how painful it felt and I believe her; kinky coily hair can be hard to maintain without the proper knowledge of how to care for it. Detangling presented a challenge to her because it took up time and caused pain. This is a factor that would later influence her to transition over to locks permanently. At the age of 6 or 7 being raised in the 1970s, Diana barely knew how to care for her hair. None of the women on TV had the hair she did, instead they sported silky long wigs and weaves.

Francis Nyamnjoh (2014) asks whether it is "possible that what hair is worn by what African where, how and when might, at the end of the day, not be a simple matter of individual choice?" (56). While he does not seek to answer this question in his article on "Africans Consuming Hair/Africans Consumed by Hair ", his words ask us to consider the role of the individual in the styling and adornment of hair and whether choice is influenced by other factors. Both examples by Diana and Bianca, despite being separated in decades, point to an influence of institutions like schools and their explicit grooming expectations. Whilst both women were introduced to hair grooming through their mothers, the schools they attended too shaped how they wore their hair. Most schools in Kenya, along with a uniform code also have grooming rules for how students should carry themselves. I would add that attending religious institutions like church or the mosque also introduces other expectations of whether hair should be worn in more modest styles or if it should be veiled. While family, hairstylists and friends might be the first instances of exposure to hair grooming for Kenyan women, there are other bodies— like educational and religious institutions— that also continue to shape understandings of how hair should be worn or styled in certain spaces.

(re)Learning to care for your own hair

As I grew older, I knew I did not want to keep going to the hairstylist and paying an exorbitant amount of money each time I wanted braids. For lack of resources, being Black and living in Singapore, I turned to the internet and social media. By the time I was 14, YouTube was around, and I began watching tutorials of black women teaching how to box braid and grip both your hair and the hair extensions at the root. It was a long and tedious process that took months and years to perfect, and executing a style was even more time consuming than a trip to the hair salon. The time it would take to complete a 6 hour hairstyle would easily transform into an entire weekend when I attempted to do it myself. Even now, at 23, I spend a day working on a hairstyle that might take professionals in the salon a few hours.

Working on your hair on your own, especially from home, is drastically different from the hair salon experience. A hair session or hair day significantly differed when it came to doing it alone and at home versus in a salon where you have hairdressers doing the work. With none of the professional set-up of the salon at my disposal, I would perch myself in front of my mother's laptop, combs, clips and pins laid out by my side in case I needed to reach them as I desperately tried to follow along to Craving Yellow or Naptural85's videos. In many ways I was attempting to mimic certain features and processes that I had seen in the salon over the years. Learning to part my hair extensions evenly and consistently was a task that took me a while to get down. My very first attempt at a head of box braids on myself featured thick, medium and at times smaller braids because I was grabbing and adding different amounts of hair onto my own. My lack of training and skill meant that the executed style was visually discernible as work that was not professionally done.

Melissa, one of my other interlocutors, expressed to me her frustrations around caring for her hair. As we sat down for our interview, it felt a lot more like a casual conversation because it was a Whatsapp video call. She answered the video call sporting simple straight back cornrows to her nape. Melissa sat in her dining room, and it was around 9pm in the evening Kenya time which explained why she appeared slightly tired. A young adult in her mid 20s, she had natural hair all her life until she unknowingly overprocessed her hair and sustained heat damage in her second year of university. She then cut her hair short and relaxed it but faced issues with breakage, no matter what treatment she seemed to use. When I asked her how she would describe her relationship with her hair and how she often thinks of her hair, she responded with laughter, *“struggling, it is struggling. It is in a struggle”*. This often seems to be the sentiment of Black women with kinky natural hair, that taking care of it is tasking and demands energy, time, and money. Furthermore, most Kenyan women do not know how to properly care for their natural hair in its unaltered state, as we are never quite taught how to. This is where the relearning process comes into play. Melissa added:

In as much as there's so much information on how to take care of my type of hair, not everything that works for other people works for you. So no matter how much you try, your hairstyle breaks. So looking at the way the resources—also these products are not cheap, you get? You have to really spend money on them, and if you don't have the money, you don't have the product and you don't have the good hair, so it's struggling

When I asked if it's made difficult because of the need to keep up a routine, Melissa continued:

The other thing which affects a lot is, the way we maintain our hair is quite hard kwasababu (because) you find you can't stay with your bare hair for quite a long time because it's really hard to just manage it. You have to keep it in protective hairstyles, mostly if you are going to work you don't want to keep waking up in the morning to start detangling

Melissa listed all this off, seemingly exasperated too, *“eh eh, I can't live like that”*. She brings up the costs of products and how money plays a factor in someone's hair grooming practices.

Something else that stood out to me was time, and how both her and earlier Diana expressed that grooming practices like detangling can be time-consuming. Working full-time as a data-analyst and in graduate school all whilst in her mid-20s, Melissa, underscored time and money as two large hurdles that make her feel like she struggles with her hair. Another thing she mentioned that only caught my attention later was how what works for others may not work for you – implying a sense of commonality in hair types and textures yet different in how they behave and respond to products.

Both she and Bianca also mentioned how difficult it is to maintain one's natural hair when wearing it unstyled or unprotected. Bianca confessed to me, *“Personally my natural hair is not that good that I can keep it without using braids or weaves or something extra to make it look that nice, it's kinda difficult to maintain it”*. Then, she elaborated in detail the steps and products she has to take when wearing her natural hair out. *“With my natural hair, you know it's difficult to maintain natural African hair like if you don't braid it, it breaks, your scalp gets painful, so sometimes I just be with my natural hair for like a week then plait it.”* Again was this emphasis that our hair texture is a challenge to take care of or upkeep. My understanding was that somehow, our hair had to be looked after and protected in order to keep it ‘safe’ from breakage and tangling. One such way to protect it is by plaiting or braiding it, using protective hairstyles.

Social Media as a Democratisation Tool

When our conversations shifted towards where and how these women learned how to care for their hair and establish these hair grooming practices, Melissa informed me that it started with her initial curiosity on social media. As she was perusing Instagram, she came across a post

of a natural hairstyle that she liked and saved. The recommendation algorithm then proceeded to show her more posts like that. Learning for her became easier through social media, and she remembered, “*it was easier for me for social media, cause mine started through instagram then it proceeded to youtube, because youtube now you have to take time and watch the whole video...*”. Turning to YouTube was what Mellissa initially did; however,

At a certain point, there was a time I shaved my hair. At that point when I was raising it from like scratch, I did (watch a lot of videos). But it reached a point I was also doing that and it was still breaking and I kinda give up like that? I've done—I've done my part and it's still behaving like.

Social media provided a forum of information for both Melissa and Bianca to draw from. One such platform that continues to do this is YouTube as it continues to grow in day-to-day use by Kenyan women. Naturalistas and bloggers flock to the site to share and consume natural hair content as well as information on protective styling. Popular video bloggers like Sheila Ndina, Michelle Anyango, and Tabitha Tongoi of Craving Yellow all sport large followings that tune in regularly for their hair tutorials, reviews, and product recommendations. For example, Sheila Ndina’s channel has 87.9 thousand subscribers, and the majority of the content she posts are videos on caring for natural hair. Her oldest video is from 6 years ago, and her latest one was in 2020. Sheila went on to open Spritz Hair Studio in April 2019 which has gone on to become one of Kenya’s biggest salons. Her video, How To | High Side Afro Puff on Natural Hair, opens into a gorgeous side shot of her hair manipulated into an afro puff. This video, an instructional and how-to, is 12 minutes long and has been watched over 1 million times.

The video ‘officially’ begins with Sheila’s “before” shot, her hair parted in three sections. She explains that she’s starting off with a three day old twist out because of the volume that Day 3 or Day 4 hair provides⁵. The style is hence best achieved on hair with volume and frizz. Sheila

⁵ Referring to one’s hair with how many days it’s been since the hair was washed/manipulated into a certain style. Day 3 hair of a twist out means that it’s been three days since the twists were installed.

uses a mix of water with aloe vera juice in a spray bottle which she stores in the fridge. This step is to get the hair more manageable as she explains. Proud of her technique, she boasts that the only products used were water and shea butter. As she smooths the product into her hair, she explains the reasoning for it, “to seal in the moisture. You don’t want to have a puff and then your hair is all dry, so you have to make sure your hair is moisturised and the moisture is sealed”(Ndinda 2017). Throughout the video, she talks about and reviews the brand and actual product. She emphasises that since it is a high puff, you want to get your hairline and baby hairs slick and smooth. When she is ready to puff her hair, she shows the audience the ‘hair tie’ she is using: an old knee length stocking. Her reasoning being:

I find that this works really well because it doesn’t leave my hair feeling too tight. Sometime people put the elastic bands here and they make it so tight and pull it up so it ends up snagging or breaking the hair...when you use this, you are able to control how tight the puff is. (Ndinda 2017).

When she talks about tightness, she is referring to the tension on her scalp from manipulating her hair, something that should be considered as well when protective styling. As she ends the video, she shows off her complete hairstyle, promising that it is “so easy to do it can even take you up to about 5 mins to do it” (Ndinda 2017).

A simple scroll down brings you to the comments section. The comment section is just as an important part of the page as the video. Viewers respond to the video, with like and dislike buttons, as well as share it to other social media platforms if they wish. However, it is not the content of the comments as much as the relationship it creates that interests me. Comments can be liked, disliked and even reported, and the video creator ultimately can do this as well and has control over what comments stay up. All these calls to action to “like comment and subscribe” are also how viewers at home are able to interact with the information outside of viewing the video. To my interlocutors, social media apps are not only a tool for connecting to other Kenyan

naturals, but they also create spaces for communal knowledge sharing amongst individuals. A quick Google search can yield an overwhelming amount of information, much of what is typically known by hair professionals—is now accessible to anyone. In many ways, this allows for a democratisation of knowledge, especially for how to care for natural afro-textured hair. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest are such examples of apps the women I spoke to cited for their natural hair education.

Moreover, popular media channels within Kenya such as NTV have even gone on to create their own YouTube channel with segments and videos like Living With Ess, a lifestyle segment that features various topics including hair. One such episode titled “Protective Hairstyles for African Hair”, hosted by Sharon Mundia, features her interviewing hairstylists Lucy and Irene Bacha. The interview takes place in a salon and features the women discussing different aspects of protective hairstyling. Using the example of box braids to start off the interview, Sharon asks Irene if it would be fair to assume that all Kenyan women had at some point had a protective style, to which Irene agrees, adding that “it’s almost a part of our culture”. Two moments in this interview stood out to me as they spoke about protective styling, and this was when Irene brings up some of the decisions made during the hair process like tension, amount of hair to add, and what products to use.

Sharon: When it comes to braiding and the amount of force that’s used how tight it should be?

Irene: When you feel it too tight, you should be able to tell your hairdresser. So you find we give a lot of power to the hairdresser, but sometimes it's also good for you as a consumer to take back your power, because if you feel she is tightening it, you need to tell her. (Protective Hairstyles for African Hair || Living with Ess 2019).

One of the reasons I decided to start doing my own hair, outside of the costs, was because I could not put up with the pain of having my hair braided too tightly. At times, the tension that my braiders used was out of my control, and they would end up braiding so tight it would leave

tension bumps on the perimeter of my scalp. Was me starting to do my hair and learning how to take care of it a form of taking back my power? Moreso, why do clients refrain from giving feedback during the hairdressing process? Irene's call to 'take back your power' implies that there is a dynamic at play here. As a child, my cousins and I were always warned against giving the hairdresser a hard time, and to make the process as unobstructive as possible. Irene mentions that a lot of power is ceded to the hairdresser by the client in the process. I would add too that there's an element of trust too at play in such situations. The client entrusts the hair stylist with their hair and trusts their skills. The result is a client-stylist relationship that is formed and built with each appointment. This relationship and trust is seen when Melissa reveals exactly what she looks for in a stylists:

What I look for in a hairdresser is somebody who listens. I don't want to feel like I have to compromise to shut my mouth just cause I'm afraid of how you-I need people who listen to what I'm saying. When I see you are plaiting let's say a cornrow wrongly, or it's not the same size as the previous one I will definitely call you out and say 'I think this cornrow is bigger than this', you get it? She might not notice because she might have been plaiting the whole day so she's exhausted, but when you tell her this cornrow needs to be redone, she needs to be open and say 'okay let me redo it again' until you are satisfied. My salonist needs to listen; if you don't listen, it's not gonna work out.

Melissa asserts that it is the stylists job to listen to the client, and she takes a more active role in her hair appointments--vocal about how she feels a style is turning out or how she wants it executed. Growing up, I never felt this degree of comfortability with the stylists I was taken to. Perhaps this has to do with an assertion of power during the styling process. As a child, I did not have the agency to decide how my hair was presented or styled. That individual power to decide and carry myself was not afforded to me. However, as an adult, there seems to be a capacity to recapture one's individual power by assertion. To interrupt the stylist or braider and ask for a change in style or technique is to assert oneself as a client and paying customer. This seems to be what Irene is underlying in her advice to "take back your power".

My other interlocutor Layla, however, stressed that you have to work in collaboration with the hair professional you choose. I came to know of Layla through a family member that let me know she worked in the hair industry and sold hair products. Layla is in her 40s and lives in Canada, although she frequently travels for work. Her company manufactures and sells lines of hair products, ranging from relaxers to hair extensions and products aimed at natural air, and has been operating for at least 15 years. Our conversation takes place in her office, her hair is styled in a short bob:

You and your hair professional need to work on your client, who is the hair, together...both of you own the health of that hair, so it is 'I am doing this today for your hair but when you go home, I need you to do abcd before your next visit' and that's how the relationship needs to be

When I asked if trust was an important aspect of the relationship, and if she looks to build trust in her relationships with her stylist, Layla went on to continue,

And someone who knows their language, someone who they're not just putting a product on my hair cause it smells good. I need to know why they are putting it on the hair, and what I need to do when I leave there.

As a hairstylist herself, Layla does her own home hair care but enjoys and prefers going to the salon to have the professionals work on her. Her insight as a hair care professional allows her a better understanding of not only her own hair, but expectations that she has of other professionals. To her, the hair, not the person sitting in the chair, is the client. This extends to a sense of ownership and responsibility when it comes to the hair in question, as Layla expresses that both parties play a role in the overall health of the client's hair. This collaboration between client and stylist even extends beyond the salon, as the stylist imparts the client with advice on what steps to take next. Layla mentioned language and needing to trust someone who "knows their language". At first, I did not grasp what she meant but she could be referring to the

language of hair. To know ones' hair language might mean to fully understand and be able to explain to others why certain products or steps are being taken and used.

Is this relationship between stylist and client being replicated or lost when women rely on video tutorials and at-home hair care over the salon? How different is home hair care from salon hair care outside of the obvious? It would be hard to say; however, we can look at other relationships being formed in such scenarios. As I continued watching the interview, Irene brought up some tips such as avoiding your baby hairs when braiding and avoiding excess tension. "We tend to hold the hair up", she adds, lifting a section of braids on the model, "you find that even these braids are quite light" in reference to the added weight onto the hair of her client (Protective Hairstyles for African Hair || Living with Ess 2019). Too much hair added can lead the style to appear bulky and being too heavy, pulling excessively on the hairline.

Home hair care vs. the salon

Growing up in Kenya, I had my fair share of salon experiences. Enough to say that getting your hair done in a salon and doing your own hair at home are entirely different experiences. In my times at the salon I was usually seated on a chair, surrounded with multiple braider's hands working frantically overtime. Sometimes it was only one woman with maybe one or two unoccupied others finishing off the ends. Whatever changes were made were usually accomplished with a wordless transition. One moment it would be just my braider, the next, another two more women would join in. While I always hated multiple people working on my head, it made for a shorter time spent in the salon. Especially on weekends, when the number of women coming in and out never ended. Time was of the essence, especially on days when braiders were fully booked, and they do not appreciate clients dragging their feet.

When you are doing your own hair versus having it done for you, you are actively involved in the creation of the style. This mode of doing my hair felt way more collaborative, and inventive, like I had created something with the help of someone else, the person in the tutorial video. Whereas in a salon, the client is meant to sit and have their hair worked on without interfering, my YouTube education relied on my ability to put up with the muscle strain and aches that doing one's own hair entails. My arms would rise and fall repeatedly as my fingers moved to tuck and twist hair my way and that. Then there's the visual aspect, a hairdresser can see what they are doing as they work on a client's hair, I could not. I was relying entirely on the wall mounted mirror in my bathroom that only showed the front and maybe sides of my head. It almost felt like my fingers and comb worked extra hard whenever I did the back section of my hair. The biggest difference in the two experiences can boil down to the physicality of the two. Whereas the salon demands a more fixed and still body, working on your own hair calls for pliability.

Another major difference that became apparent to me as I watched Living with Ess, was the gap in knowledge between a stylist and the client. The stylist is furthermore responsible for the majority of the decision making. For example, the client's hair density and thickness might determine how much additional hair is added to achieve the desired style. Choices like these are furthermore reflections of the knowledge that the stylist holds, and are decisions that are being made on the spot and quickly. At home, without that same understanding of how tension and pulling are related to added hair, one can easily end up with a style that hurts physically and leads to hair breakage in the long run. These decisions became easier with practice and experience at home, yet do not replace the expertise of the stylist.

3. Nywele Nzuri/Nywele Mbaya: Carrying Messages with Our Hair

Aware that beautiful hair is both natural and cultivated, cultivated nature, and naturalised cultivation, Africans are as enamoured with their hair of birth and nature as they are with the birth and nature of their artistic and creative investment in the social shaping of the hair they wear.

-Francis Nyamnjoh

What is good/beautiful hair?

“I first look at the volume and the length, those are the two things...the thicker the hair—the thicker and longer the hair the more nywele nzuri.”

-Melissa

Nywele nzuri, that is good hair according to me is hair that is strong, haivunjiki vunjiki, i'd describe it nwele ikona colour nzuri, black...Hair that grows fast, it has a fast growth, its strong it's not breaking breaking, it has a good colour and fine texture.

-Bianca

In the introduction, I drew on how Holton considers a lot of how hair influences and shapes the border of the body, how it is perceived and internalised. While he largely focuses on hair texture, type, and its classification, I want to turn towards Black hair styling, decision making, and how it affects its wearers. All my conversations with my interlocutors began with me asking them if they had heard the phrase “nywele nzuri” “beautiful/good hair” used before, and what came to mind when they considered it. I posed this question out of curiosity for whether women’s conception of what was desirable also influenced their relationships with their own hair. Layla and Diana’s responses to my question were slightly different from those of Melissa and Bianca. Melissa thought of volume and length, and Bianca strand strength, colour, texture. Both focused on physical aspects of the hair that could be determined visually, and the

overall sense was that longer and more voluminous hair that grows quickly was the desirable standard.

The image of *nywele nzuri* fed to Kenyan women through the media has always been luxuriously long, silky hair, often in the form of relaxed hair or hair with hair extensions installed. This idea of beautiful hair coveted by many has been the source of hair envy and struggle for many women as they manipulate their hair in hopes to achieve this illustrious standard. Yet my conversations with Layla and Diana pointed towards a change of mindset that had occurred in regards to the phrase. Perhaps this was because of their age, both of them being in their 40s, and having lived through various hair trends and movements. Diana remarked that her definition of “nywele nzuri” had changed over the years. Growing up she thought of beautiful hair as silky hair that was “long, shiny, bouncy”. This may be influenced by the fact that growing up there, most channels she watched were broadcasting shows from America, with female characters in wigs and weaves. The few local channels and shows that starred Kenyans also featured women in straight and wavy hair extensions. Now, she viewed nywele nzuri as hair that is healthy, and determined by how one takes care of their hair rather than its texture and length.

When I posed the same question to Layla, she smiled and chuckled, “*you know Sasha, when you say nywele nzuri direct translation is good hair, and i don't know if you watched the Chris Rock documentary on good hair*’ she laughs⁶. While a quick tangent, it was another reminder that the concept of ‘good/bad hair’ as it applies to Black women is seen across the diaspora. Layla continued, “*For me, I would say Nywele Nzuri, which is good hair is optimal, meaning your hair is happy hair. That's what I call Nwele Nzuri, happy hair. Is your hair*

⁶ Good Hair is a 2009 documentary by Chris Rock that explores the social and cultural implications of what it means to have ‘good hair’ within the Black community. His work actually was inspired by a question his 5-year old daughter asked, “Daddy, how come I don't have good hair?”

smiling?”. Out of curiosity and because I’d never heard someone reference happy hair as a factor of good hair, I asked her if she always thought this way. “*No!*” she responds emphatically, “*Growing up i thought nywele nzuri is long, long and bouncy*” she looks up as if trying to recall what her younger self might answer. “*But now I define good hair as healthy. When I look at it , it doesn't matter the style... I look at it and see healthy hair.* The use of descriptors like “happy”, an emotion, and “healthy” signalled to me that Layla’s view of her hair was similarly tied to the health of her body.

The myth of good hair aka nywele nzuri can be understood as a result of various cultural flows and influences interacting with one another. And it fascinates me that this is an occurrence or commonality across my friends and peers from around the African diaspora. Good hair/Bad hair, Pelo Malo/ Pelo Linda, Nywele Nzuri/Nywele Mbaya. Mercer (1987) writes that “[d]istinctions of aesthetic value, ‘beautiful/ugly’, have always been central to the way racism divides the worlds into binary oppositions in its adjudication of human worth.” (35). What does this say about the way that Black women internalise and hierarchise hair? Is there a possibility that amongst Kenyan women these conceptions might be shifting or changing?

Hair’s weight: versatility, expression, and appearance

I was curious to understand how and why my interlocutors felt the way they did about what good hair was and their hair, and if this was in any way reflected in their routines. As seen in the first chapter, hair routines are a reflection of the time, energy, and money one dedicates to their hair, and by extension their bodies. Therefore, I suspected that how one perceives and feels about their hair would have an influence on the way they treated their hair or could even be explained by it. Furthermore, as the hair occupies the topmost location on the body and is a very

visible aspect of one's appearance , what did hair represent to my interlocutors? Was it important to them and did it influence how they thought of their bodies? Holton (2020) argues that “because of its materialities, its relationality, its symbolism, hair complicates the body's borders, making them spaces that are experienced, understood and produced simultaneously.” (556). This means hair not only alters the visual appearance of a person but creates a body that can be imbued with various meanings and significances.

When I extended these questions to Layla and asked if she viewed her hair as an extension of herself, she was quick to chime, “*Of Course Sasha! They say the hair is your crown*”. This invocation of a crown sparked the image and practice of wearing headdresses for adornment. Layla gestured towards her hair with laughter and incredulity that I even asked her this question. “*So I see it as an expression of who I am,*” she added, with hands thrown up. “*It's very important to have healthy hair so you can be versatile. You can choose who you want to be and not let your hair limit you. So hair health is very important 'cause when your hair is healthy, you can be whoever you want to be*”. Layla chose to emphasise the importance of hair health once more, this time pointing to the fact that healthy hair can allow for a fluidity in identity, and there being an element of choice and decision-making. When I asked her to elaborate, Layla begun explaining to me the flexibility of hairstyling,

When you have healthy hair, you can be with your natural hair. Like today I have my natural hair. Yesterday I had my hair in a ponytail and I had a beautiful wig on. So I was not using the wig to cover up my unhealthy hair, it's who I wanted to be that day. Sometimes I'll be putting hot oil treatment on my hair and because I still want to look good, I'll put my wig on. So hair should help you express who you are and not be a limitation of who you want to express, whether you are using hair additions, hair enhancers or just your typical hair. You can be whoever you want to be with it, the secret is healthy hair. Make sure you have healthy hair that can help you be whoever you want to be with or without enhancements

In our conversation, I recall Layla mentioning that too often women are consumed with achieving a particular style over the overall health and integrity of their hair. She discusses hair extensions and enhancements in regards to aiding self-expression, as tools, rather than dependencies that limit one's versatility. Layla's response also points to an element of care and cultivation that goes into hair health, implying that it can be fostered and is not an inherent quality. This fluidity and flexibility that hair affords is what Holton writes about in regards to the materiality of hair. He argues that "the topographical landscape of the body's borders – and not just the head – can be shaped, contoured and transformed by hair. (Holton 2020, 560). Granted while Holton speaks of other forms of body hair other than the hair on one's head, one's hair has the potential to transform or obstruct their embodied self.

Is there an internal transformation at play here? If hair is seen as an expression of oneself, can changes in hair also be reflective of a change in self? Unfortunately not having asked Layla these questions during our conversation, I turn to Nyamnjoh, Durham and Fokwang (2002), who present that "modernity means desire, the desire to refashion the self, to imagine new ways of being, it is this imaginative seeking that brings together modernities under the aegis of a globalised consumer ecumene (104). Drawn from their article that examines the domestication of hair and effects of globalisation in Cameroon, this desire to be "whoever" or change how you express yourself through hair could be seen as yet another instance of enacting 'modernity'. This echoes back to a line in my first chapter, where 'modernity' often stands opposed to 'traditional' and ideas of stagnancy. While she may not have said it, Layla's implication of being limited by one's hair does speak to a sense of stagnation in a rapidly changing world. It is almost as if your hair has to be able to keep up with the changes in both time, and trends. Since hair is intricately linked to the concept of identity, it further reflects the importance placed on Black women's

identities being fluid and moldable rather than fixed. To embody and enact modernity, one has to be able to reinvent oneself constantly.

Seeing as Black womanhood and our identity is closely related to and influenced by our hair, how might we begin to understand how these various identities are in turn produced and moulded? Nyamnjoh Francis and Divine Fuh (2014) put forward that it is not just the wearer that defines their identity, “[identities] are mostly a function of relationships of power; and individuals and communities often find themselves trapped in and by identities that have little or no resonance with how they live their lives and relate to others and the world around them.” (55). This reminded me of a conversation with Bianca who felt that hair carried a lot of importance in how one presented oneself and was read. *“Hair is one of the things that most women really admire in their bodies and everyone wants to have that good, nice looking hair”* she responded to me. I had asked her how hair was spoken about in her circles, and she confessed that most people struggle to ensure their hair is ‘maintained’. *“If your hair is bad, it will make your appearance bad and if your hair is good it gives you a presentable appearance”*, Melissa iterated while placing emphasis on the shame that ‘bad hair’ brings. That one’s hair speaks to their quality of appearance and presentability is neither new nor far-fetched. Hair is after all, one of the first features that stands out for Black women. In their discussion of hair politics and identity, Francis Nyamnjoh and Divine Fuh (2014) present that “[s]uch coercive identities are at best aspirational in their political and ideological expectations of cohesion and solidarity around common values, but they are often in denial of the sociology and ethnography of everyday life that characterise those politics and ideologies of expectation they so clearly want to define and confine.” (55). The implication of such an argument means that these resulting identities women are performing are not only futile in their aims to constrain by claiming to uphold certain societal

values, yet such coerced identities are effective in their constraintment because of the disconnect between the everyday.

Hair speaks, what is it saying?

Is it that hair speaks or is it merely a reflection of the messages that we endow it with? And if hair could speak, what would it be saying? Listening to Bianca tell me about the care and attention she places into ensuring her hair looks good, I was curious to know if there were ever times when she did not style her hair and how she felt in those instances. With a career in modelling, her appearance plays a large role in the jobs she is able to book as well as her pageant scores. Bianca tells me, that when her hair is styled:

...it looks neat, it looks presentable, it actually gives me that confidence that I can go out and at least I wouldn't have a problem with how I look—I wouldn't be that anxious. So styling my hair gives me that confidence, it gives me a good look, it gives me a comfortable look.

As opposed to when her hair is unstyled, Bianca feels more confident and less anxious in her appearance. Hairstyling for her provides the opportunity to feel comfortable about herself and body. In moments when her hair was unstyled:

...it looks shaggy, it looks unkempt, it gives people the feeling that I'm lazy that I'm irresponsible. It makes me look like someone who is lost and just confused. So with me being a model and most of the time I go out, I associate with people, most of the time I have to look neat, I have to look presentable, so that's why I do my hair in an updo all the time.

This is often the rhetoric that surrounded Kenyan social media in regards to women wearing their hair in its natural unaltered state. There's an implicit societal expectation for one's hair to be neat, done up or covered if not. Labelling natural hair in its unmanipulated state as “shaggy” and “unkempt” is neither new nor unique. Bianca's feelings of anxiousness and discomfort towards her unstyled hair marks it as unsuitable for her more professional situations. In order to appear

presentable she styles her hair in up-dos most of the time. The implication here too is that her unmanipulated afro-textured hair is unpresentable and messy. However, for Bianca hair is quite literally a category she is judged for, and as such it takes precedence in her life. Her appearance is her job, and so hair becomes a way for her to assert her professionalism and place within the modelling world. Hair takes on the weight of a person's character, as Bianca expresses how her unstyled makes her mental state appear questionable. It may not be obvious to her, but her response suggested that hair speaks to one's appearance and character. The imagined world Bianca engages in requires her to present herself in a certain way, and be hyper aware of how people are viewing or judging her.

These notions of presentability, appropriateness, and formality, are neither universal yet seem so as a result of the colonial process. Omotoso (2018, 13) cites the argument of African women aspiring to Eurocentric ideals of beauty as a result of facing hair discrimination and a growing sense of self-hatred. This self-hatred manifests in a lower self-esteem “thereby pushing them into application of chemicals, colours and hair extensions as deemed fit in order to gain recognition within an imagined class of the ‘formal’” (13). However, is this ‘formality’ truly ‘imagined’ if it has very real consequences for Black women and men? How Bianca shows up to a casting call as a model and styles her hair has an impact on whether or not she gets a call back. This argument also overshadows the necessity for survival that underscores this assimilation of Kenyan and other African women to eurocentric hair standards. While hair can be used to convey and express, it is also in turn be read and appraised. It is a site where meaning is both created and construed.

In my conversation with Diana, it came up that she saw hair being used in different ways by individuals. Diana elaborated on:

the hair is a mode of expression, and as I said, There's two ways that I see hair being put into use. I said there are people who use hair as a means of expression and they use hair as sort of an identity aspect of who they are. But then there are those that look at hair from a beauty aspect, you know femininity. And so for people who use hair as identity, it's a very unconventional way of looking at hair, and they don't necessarily look at or conform to the standards of you know, its not about the hair being kempt. Its about the hair being uniquely different in what speaks to them as who they think they are.

I could not help but recall Weitz who was discussed in the introduction for her ideas on using hair for power through means of accommodation or resistance. At first, I assumed Diana was aligned with Weitz's idea that using hair to appeal to aspects of femininity was a form of gaining power through accommodation. At the same time, she recognised that hair could be used as an expression of one's identity—something she considered 'unconventional' because expressing one's identity through hair may go against standards of beauty or hair norms. Yet, Diana revealed to me later that neither choice was entirely divorced from the other, and that she felt like she fell somewhere in between.

This may have to do with various reasons, including the fact that locks, Diana's hairstyle, are a low maintenance state to wear one's hair in. She wears hers simply most of the time, and occasionally styles them for work or special events. When we had our second conversation, she had worn her locks in a half-up, half-down updo. She lets me know that a good hair day is one where she wakes up, spends a few minutes and leaves the house. Diana's ideal hair state is one of low maintenance so as to accommodate for her busy life. Her hair choices are a result of her hectic lifestyle. Her styling for survival indicates an interaction born of necessity, and in fact she almost seems to reject the idea of using her hair for beauty purposes. Perhaps she saw it as shallow as opposed to those that used their hair as an extension of or mode of expressing their identity.

Embedded in all these conversations with these women was the sense that all of them were styling their hair for themselves. Despite at times being cognisant of how they are perceived, it felt important that all these women were styling their hair for their own sense of self being.

Protective styling: locs/locks

“Yet, while hair certainly operates as a component of the ‘socially shaped body’ (Behnke, 2010), it contains synecdochical qualities that allow it to define a person’s identity whilst simultaneously categorising entire demographic groups” (Holton 2020, 560)

No African hairstyle has received the scorn and derision associated with dreadlocks. Locks themselves as a hairstyle almost stand separately from other hairstyles that Black men and women wear in that they are a long-term protective style that can be worn for years. There is a history and richness linked to them that differs from other styles because of the history and further sense of community attached to them. Locks and people with them could be considered a demographic within the natural hair community. Locks have been around for some time, and are often thought of in relation to Rastafarianism, but their history extends beyond this. As the first chapter showed, locks are neither new to Kenya nor the continent, and are often thought to have originated there.

In the first conversation we had, Diana confessed to me that she initially got locks out of convenience. For 8 years she had lived abroad outside of Kenya and experimented with various different hairstyles ranging from wigs, to weaves, and braids, but eventually settled on having locks once she knew she was moving to China. Uncertain about whether she would find a hairstylist that did African hair, she decided to get started locks. This decision was not one she would have always been open to. When she was younger, she confessed that she had negative

conceptions. Growing up, Diana informed me that people who wore locks were thought of as “outcasts, living like a Rastafarian”. When I leaned in to listen to her explain, I noted the disapproval on her face as she spoke. Despite asserting that her views on locks had changed, her face stayed scrunched in disgust as she referred to how locks were associated with “more free, living liberal” and marijuana. Noting her reaction was interesting because as a person with dreadlocks, it felt like she still carried some of that disapproval. As our conversation progressed, I wondered how she felt about her own locks and how she saw herself. Diana confessed to me that she saw her locks as part of her:

I wear locks out of locks defining who I am as a black woman, but even with locks, I wear my locks in a neater fashion. I don't wear my locks so my locks come before me, you will still see me before you see my locks. I don't use my locks for my identity first but it's just embracing my identity by use of locks.

By ‘neater fashion’, she meant that her locks were parted and uniform rather than freeform locks, which is often what comes to mind when people think of the Mau Mau or Rastafarians. The latter part of her statement about her locks not being used as an expression of her identity, but her still using them to embrace her identity confused me when I heard it. I felt Diana might have been trying to say that she does not wear her locks as a statement, and that her hair was secondary to who she was as a person. Despite feeling connected to her hair because of her racial identity and as a virtue of her black womanhood, her locks did not define who she was—despite her saying so at first. How is it that she was able to see her hair as a defining feature of her black womanhood yet feel like they are a means to ‘embracing’ her identity rather than a statement of it?

Natural(ness): simplicity and the virtue of natural hair

As my conversation with Diana progressed, I wondered if she felt like locks were treated differently or stood differently from other styles. When I extended the question to her and asked

what her locks represent, she responded emphasising that she viewed it as the epitome of embracing one's natural self:

For me, locks epitomise simplicity. To me, the first thing when I see somebody wearing locks, it's an element of simplicity. There's only so much you can do with locks...once you have your hair locked, it's very unlikely that you'll find yourself accommodating wigs or weaves ...that element of simplicity comes from knowing you can only play with the locks...The whole idea of rocking locks is you want as much as possible to minimise the artificial looks or hairdresses that we wear at any one point for convenience. There is nothing that is [as] convenient as locks...

I was interested in how Diana connected the ideas of simplicity and one's natural self. It implies that her idea of naturalness reflects a desire for minimalism in her hair routine. The addition of hair extensions or wigs are seen as artificial and not in line with the intentions behind locking one's hair. Diana's understanding of 'natural' hair was surprisingly different from that of my other interlocutors. Nyamnjoh and Fuh (2014) point to there being "gradations of 'natural' hair – for example, styled dreadlocks versus dreadlocks that are allowed to grow in their own way, with little interference such as twisting with wax products – just as the lines between natural and synthetic hair and weaves are a lot more blurred than conventional assumptions make them out to be." (57). This quote speaks to an earlier comment Diana made when she differentiated herself from other lock wearers because she has hers regularly retwisted.

We also see a further complication or rather conflicting ideas of naturalness. When Layla illustrated the fluidity in her hairstyle choices, she mentioned being able to use protective styles like wigs so as to better care for her 'natural hair' through treatments underneath. I place this in quotes because the term natural hair is usually reserved for hair that is not chemically straightened or processed, which Layla's is. Despite that, Layla's reference to her hair as natural points to the existence of multiple meanings for this phrase. 'Natural' for her is her hair without added extensions or enhancements, can be hair that has been altered. While this may seem

similar to how Diana views her own locks, the understanding of what ‘natural’ hair is remains contested and up to interpretation by the individual.

Where my other interlocutors, like Melissa, understood ‘natural hair’ to be the hair you are born with, and saw it as rather inflexible when it came to changing certain qualities of the hair. As we discussed what good and beautiful hair meant, she asserted that “*your quality of hair, like nwele nzuri , is dependent on your genes!*”. ‘Natural’ for Melissa seemed to mean genetic and related to one’s biological inheritance, as was the notion of beautiful hair. As we discussed what having good natural hair meant and taking care of one’s hair to attain that standard, she kept bringing up the role of genes. Melissa felt natural hair at its essential form could only be ‘bettered’ marginally by hair thickening creams or hair oils. As she brought up natural hair youtubers and having hair envy towards other Kenyan women with thicker or longer hair, she elaborated:

The people who have naturally good hair regardless of that, you will do the same thing but their hair will be better, irregardless. Even if you start from day 1 together, their hair will either grow faster and thicker. Yours will need a couple of more things to be that, you get?

As I looked back on my conversation with Melissa, it struck me that there was almost always an element of comparison to other women in my conversations with my interlocutors. For Melissa, her understanding of what natural good hair was related to how she perceived other women’s hair. Going back to her definition of ‘good hair’ quoted at the beginning of this chapter, she emphasised qualities like hair growth rate and hair density, the thickness of one’s hair. These understandings may have been influenced and reinforced by the mediascapes that she interacts with, but she was unknowingly weighing her hair against that of these other ambiguous women. As did Diana when she mentioned how her locks were different from others, because they are ‘neater’. It seems that an individual’s understanding of their hair is related to what they are able

to observe in other women's hair. The understanding of one's hair therefore shifts constantly between being an individual experience, and one that is continually related to their circles of women. What really is natural hair, and is there something at stake for these women in their claims of naturalness? Why claim naturalness at all? Shifting trends and ideas with modernity, result in a never-ending chase to attain the 'newest' style amongst Black women.

Conclusion

After 70 years and her sworn promise to never cut her locks, Muthoni wa Karimu, was publicly shaved by Mama Ngina Kenyatta on April 2, 2022⁷. The act took place publicly and ceremonially, marking an end of an era for Kenya's history. The ceremony and public shaving took the country by surprise, with many of the country's opposition claiming that Muthoni was coerced into a publicity stunt for the current ruling dynasty of Kenyattas. According to the website kenyans.co.ke and other media reports, "the one of a kind event" was organised as "a symbol of Mama Ngina settling differences with Field Marshal Muthoni" and took place in Muthoni's home town, Nyeri (Kimani, 2022). Whereas reports state that Muthoni consented and wished for the ceremony as a show of gratitude to President Uhuru Kenyatta, many Kenyans watched in shock and disbelief.

One critical take of this was an article published by The Elephant, titled "Mama Ngina and Field Marshall Muthoni's Locs: Sanitising the Kenyattas", which painted the act as an underhanded one with ulterior motives:

From a cultural heritage perspective, the ceremony is a cultural invention, masquerading as traditional, though Kikuyu co-wives and friends did traditionally shave each other's heads. In a rite of passage not dissimilar in some ways to FGM/C (female genital mutilation/cutting), and the shaving of Maasai warriors' dreads by their mothers when they graduate to junior elderhood, the self-styled Mother of the Nation has cut and removed a precious part of the body which symbolizes a past state of being. The only problem is: this past has nothing to do with her. Thereby, through false pretences, she has appropriated Mau Mau-ness and its legacy for present political purposes. In so doing, she has attempted to weld Mau Mau to the Kenyattas, when in fact they have always had a deeply troubled relationship. (Hughes & Githuku, 2022)

Mama Ngina's actions can be seen as a way of enacting an imagined history and seizing ownership of the past through the removal and endowment of Muthoni's hair to her. I say this to

⁷ Mama Ngina Kenyatta is the first First Lady of Kenya. She is the widow of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president and the man often credited with winning the fight for Kenya's independence.

mean that by being the person shaving Muthoni's head, Mama Ngina confers herself a role and part of Muthoni's struggle as the figure that signals the end of Muthoni's fight. As I read the story, it was hard not to see the moment as an appropriation of history—more specifically one's personal history and how it is entwined with the collective memory of the nation. The act of hair removal seems intrinsically tied to new beginnings or the entrance of a new stage or era in one's life. As Muthoni had claimed, her hair is 'Kenya's history', and now it has been shorn off. What does this mean for a country that still grapples with a past of internalised anti-blackness that constantly rears its head in school policies, decision making, and media guidelines? What implications does this have for Mau Mau veterans who were vilified and disregarded in the aftermath of independence?

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