

## The Ontology of Hair and Identity Crises in African Literature

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### ABSTRACT

The significance of hair is deeply rooted in African ontology. It depicts leadership status and when shaved off completely, may sometimes signify mourning or lack of dignity. In Benin-city of Edo state in Nigeria, Chiefs who are mostly men are identified by their unique hair-styles. It shows their position of leadership in the society and when a king dies, all the men in the kingdom are expected to shave off their hair as a sign of respect for the departed king. In the culture of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, hair is highly celebrated by the women as it is seen as a crown of glory upon their heads. With advancement in globalisation and cross-cultural relationships, the culture of hair and its ontological significances are gradually being eroded as expressed in Chimamanda Adichie's 'Americanah'. For this reason, the hair, being a very important symbol of cultural identity has become a key role in understanding the issues with identity crises in Africa. The paper analyses the ontological significances of hair in Africa, evaluates the issues involved in the misrepresentation of African hair as presented in some African literature as well as interrogates the issues of identity crises occasioned by African hair.

**Keywords:** *Ontology, Hair, Identity Crises, Culture, Tradition, Americanah, African Literature.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Hair is of great importance in most African cultures. It has a great meaning that is strongly connected to their ontology. This is not too much of a surprise as cultures are deeply rooted in metaphysics. In fact, a people's culture is a physical manifestation of their metaphysical orientation. The hair on the head of a human being signifies so many things ranging from; leadership status, mourning, class, religious or supernatural connection when it comes in natural dreadlocks, royalty and so on. The Chiefs (mostly men) of Benin kingdom in Edo state display their haircut with so much pride as they walk around in admiration of the people. The special haircut differentiates them from other subjects. When all the men in the Kingdom are instructed to clean shave off their hair, it could only pass a message across that the Oba has joined his ancestors. Among the females, the hair is more of a storyteller; in fact, it meant to do just that in both simple and elaborate styles. Queens and Princesses are distinguished by their hairstyles. Occasions such as festivals, weddings or burials are marked with hairstyles. In traditional Yoruba culture of the people of Nigeria, the hair is highly celebrated by the women as it forbidden for women cut their hair unless they are widowed.

The purpose of this paper is tripartite. Firstly, it analysed the ontological significances of hair in Africa. Secondly, the paper evaluated the issues involved in the misrepresentation of African hair as presented in Chimamanda Adichie's 'Americanah'. Thirdly, it interrogates the issues of identity crises occasioned by African hair.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Donald Davidson's Principle of Rational Accommodation

An application of the principle of Rational Accommodation requires the suspension one's natural attitude by suspending judgment and placing of issues in inverted commas [1]. This is made possible by bracketing and suspending our cultural attitudes from all biases, prejudices and misconceptions against other cultures. The principle of 'Rational Accommodation' proposes ambiguity for the greater goal of understanding issues which might prove useful in the final analysis of any concept. It involves interpretation of lived experiences of people of other cultures by empathising with them. This principle enables a researcher to gain access to the conceptual scheme of a given cultural group and makes it possible to understand why people do the things they do and hold the kind of beliefs they hold. Through the principle of Rational Accommodation, "charity is forced on us, whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters"[2]. This is so because, considering the relativity of cultures, cultural practices are therefore justified by sufficient reasons that are understandable only to those who have knowledge of the conceptual scheme of the people.

The notion of hair in African ontology which has great significance for the people has sometimes been viewed in ways that are derogatory to the African. This principle aids the interrogation of these disparate views as the research explores the resilience of 'tradition' among Africans. Therefore, the principle of Rational Accommodation prompts the

interpreter to maximize the intelligibility of the speaker and not the similarity of belief. It entails taking into account probable errors due to bad positioning, deficient sensory apparatus, and differences in background knowledge [3]. This is so because it is irrational to have a prima facie belief that others are irrational. Thus, Davidson wants us to believe that the non-existence of irrationality is common knowledge. He is of the view that we derive “the meanings of the sentences of a language in that very language” [4]. The meaning of a thing should be conditioned on the truth value to the utterances which can be verifiable within the context from which it originates. Meaning that, the meaning of a thing is to be explained with reference to the circumstances that produced it.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Ontological Significances of Hair in African Culture**

Culture means a lot of things to different people or groups. But one general view is that it is a way of life. Culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people [5]. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs.

Culture as the sum total of shared attitudinal inclinations and capabilities, art, beliefs, moral codes and practices that characterize Africans. It can be conceived as a continuous, cumulative reservoir containing both material and non-material elements that are socially transmitted from one generation to another [6].

The way Africans conceptualize and interpret the world around them is a product of the way they view the world. This form of epistemology is strongly rooted in the ontology of their culture albeit, well grounded in spirituality. This is why an analysis of the philosophy of human hair in African culture cannot be divorced from an ontological or spiritual interpretation. It should be noted that “the hair is highly valued in African culture and often linked to identity. This Philosophy of human hair encapsulates issues of aesthetics, identity, and class and so on. It brings to fore recent trends of change and continuity as a two-dimension of choice for hairstyling by men and women” [7].

Sierber and Herreman noted that “the way one wears one’s hair may also reflect one’s status, gender, ethnic origin, leadership role, personal taste, or place in the cycle of life. On the other hand, the symbolic and religious meanings attached to the hair are evidenced by social taboos connected with it. Except for occupational or ritual reasons, most males shave their head, moustache, and chin. Certain hairstyles, however, may indicate social status or unusual power” [8].

Long natural dreads are examples of hair that are believed to indicate the presence of spiritual powers in African ontology. Individuals who carry such hair are often seen as more spiritual and powerful than others who do not possess such hair. This is why it is not uncommon to find people with dreadlocks acting as Chief Priests in traditional shrines. Such individuals are also found in some Christian denominations being presented as Prophets. The later is probably after the account of Samson in the Bible who was said to have lost his power after his dreads were shaved off by Delilah.

Within the context of ‘Rastafari’ as doctrine, dreadlocks also embody an interpretation of a religious, Biblical injunction that forbids the cutting of hair along the lines of its rationale among Sikhs. However, once locks were popularised on a mass social scale via the increasing militancy of reggae especially. Their dread logic inscribed a beautification of blackness remarkably similar to the aesthetic logic of the Afro [9].

In Yoruba mythology, ‘Dada’ (a child born with dread) is the son of ‘Yemoja’, the goddess of the sea, wealth, procreation, and increase. It is therefore believed that natural dreadlocks and, dense hair which are allowed to grow till they become dreadlocks have religious significance, so hair is often left to grow into dreadlocks. Parents thereby do not cut their children’s hair as it may cause sickness or death. Before the hair can be shaven, certain spiritual activities must be performed to appease the gods against taking away such a child. Also, in traditional Yoruba and Igbo worldview, unkempt hair is akin to the forest. That is; mysterious, dark, and to be avoided. Hence, hair which is not dreadlock should be shaven to show sanity. Similarly, in the traditional Yoruba community, it is an aberration for a married woman (young or old) to carry a shaven head as it is believed to be a signal that the woman wants to have her husband dead. It is only the widows who are permitted to do so as a sign of mourning.

From Omotoso as well as Sierber and Herreman’s assertions, the elements of aesthetics, identity, class or status, gender, ethnic origin, leadership role, personal taste, and place in the cycle of life are clearly identified as areas where hair plays important roles. The significance of hair in African ontology is considered an aesthetic value due to the way the women plait, matt or weave their hair. Even the men are not left out as their hairstyles give them distinctive appearance in the society. But, beyond aesthetics, the hair is a definition of class, identity and other values as mentioned above. Value in this sense can be seen as some point of view or conviction which we can live with, live by and even die

for. This is why it seems that values actually permeate every aspect of human life. For instance, we can rightly speak of religious, political, social, aesthetic, moral, cultural and even personal values [10].

Shonisani Netshia speaking with reference to the politics of hair in a South African context identified that, within Black culture in South Africa hair is important, and it is synonymous with identity, many individuals use their hair to make a statement. He also noted that for a long time, black women have been made to feel ugly, insecure and ashamed because of their natural hair, while at the same time scrutinised for their choice to wear extensions, weaves or braids [11].

In the Benin culture of the people of Edo state in Nigeria the clear statements are made with hair. Within the palace of the Oba of Benin,

All women in the palace were grouped into three distinct categories, namely, the existing wives (iloi) who have given birth, new wives (iloi) who are yet to have children, and the maids who, though regarded as iloi, were not wives and did not visit the Oba's bedchamber. This category of iloi was carefully differentiated from the others by a distinct hair-do known as okuku [12].

This distinction by hairstyle is very important because as stated above, it separates the maids from the wives and anyone who sees them in the palace will be able to easily identify the wives and give them due honour. As Edoja and others noted,

No iloi is expected to be seen outside without adorning her exposed parts with various kinds of coral beads. They sometimes decorate their hairdo with beads, especially on occasions such as the Igue festival. This makes them distinct from the wives of commoners. The Oba's wives and mother were also profusely decorated with beads from their heads to their feet [12].

The above is an indication that the hair is a very important symbol of identity in the Benin Kingdom. Apart from the Queens or maids, the Princesses and Chiefs are identified by their hairstyles. When a teenage Princess attained the age of puberty she became entitled to a special form of 'okuku' hairstyle. Although this was primarily decorative in purpose, it was also a symbol of maturity, an indirect but eloquent way of announcing the presence of a possible wife for the noblemen of the court [12]. The Chiefs are identified by their special hair-cut which is distinctively shaved off with some hair reserved to form an arc very close to their foreheads. This identifies them as people with leadership roles in the society. By their hair cut alone, they are accorded instant honour.

The hair is also a very important symbol for identifying a person's ethnic origin. Just as a Benin Queen, maid, Princess or Chief are easily identified by their hairdo, a typical Yoruba woman is known by her hairstyle whether it is woven or plaited with threads. Among different races around the world, hair colour, texture and length differ. The African hair is known to be tough, tick and shorter than that of an Indian, American or British. In most cases, the African hair has been branded with racially denigrating terms such as dirty. This has made a lot of young Africans especially ladies to opt for artificial hair which is attached to their natural hair as a means of concealing their own hair. An African woman who carries her tick natural hair is now seen as primitive or dirty. This racial discrimination on the basis of hair forms a part of the issues presented in Adichie's 'Americanah'.

### **The Notion of African Hair in Adichie's 'Americanah'.**

Hair is obviously a physical attribute that distinguishes a race from another. Adichie makes use of this in her text to differentiate the African kinky hair from the white sleepy hair. Hair becomes a significant feature in the text which symbolizes the identity of an individual or group of people. It is the easily recognised means of defining a person's race and identity. It is the thin line that shows the identity of the Africans and the identity crisis they undergo.

Adichie in 'Americanah' uses some characters to depict the identity crisis through their hair, most especially the main character. In American society hair represents the racial root in the society; hence, the character, Ifemelu says; 'Hair is the perfect metaphor for race in America'. Adichie uses this to illustrate the trivial feature in the body of a person that passes message out there of who a person is, she describes an African woman's hair as being kinky and as such it must not be sleepy like the white race. In order to look more like the Whites, some Africans go as far as to relax their hair and reject their African looks as instantiated in 'Americanah'. In the case of Ifemelu, she loses herself when she decides to relax her hair; the hairdresser compliments her new look even though her hair was burnt; "just a little burn, the hairdresser said. But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl you've got the white-girl swing" [13].

The new hair look however makes her completely unrecognizable even by herself, meanwhile it does not make her totally acceptable in the American society or stop the racial discrimination: Curt looked uncertain when he saw her. Do you like it, babe? He asked. I can see you don't, she said [13]. This, however, implies the struggles Africans go through

in the intention of pleasing the sight of the Americans; unfortunately it goes all in vain as they are still presumed with the identity of Blacks which implies their background identity of slavery and colonisation which means they will still be segregated. She is deprived of certain normal activities just because she wanted to maintain the straight hair look: You didn't go running with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out the straightness[13].

Hair is the physical appearance of a person which defines who you are even in the American society, this is evident when Ifemelu cuts her hair and goes to work like that, her sexuality is however questioned: At the cafeteria, Miss Margaret, the bosomy African-American woman who presided over the counter and apart from two security guards, the only other black person in the company asked; Why did you cut your hair, 'hon'? Are you lesbian? [13].

It is also very interesting to note how Adichie uses the setting of the salon as a free place to expose the true African attributes. Salon in 'Americanah' is a place where every kind of African comes to appreciate each other. Nevertheless, the salon symbolises the reunion and the true place in which being African is acceptable and not a crime, the setting of the salon is typical of what an African salon is; citizens of different African countries unite and simply chitchat about their experience in America. Like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known, they were part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like 'Aisha and Fatimas African Hair Braiding'. They had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer and they were full of Francophone and West African women braiders, one of whom would be the owner, speak best English, answer the phone and is deferred to by the others. Often, there was a baby tied to someone's back with a piece of cloth. Or a toddler asleep on a wrapper spread over a battered sofa. Sometimes, older children stopped by[13].

Adichie also uses the salon to show the distinctiveness in the intonations of different Africans rather than Americans categorizing them as the same: Once a Guinean braider in Philadelphia had told Ifemelu; 'Amma Like, Oh Gad, Az someh', it took many repetitions for Ifemelu to understand that the woman was saying, I'm like, oh God, I was so mad[13]. Salon in 'Americanah' is seen as the place in which Africans are their true self, it is a place where Ifemelu thinks about her life and redeemed herself, she makes rational decisions. Nevertheless, Ifemelu thinks more in the salon as most of the flashbacks in this novel took place in the salon. She makes her final decision of moving back home and sending the mail to Obinze in the Salon. Ifemelu succeeds in taking out the African look of her hair by relaxing it into the straight kind of white girl's hair, at this point she doesn't recognize herself anymore.

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing straight up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone, she did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully, while the hairdresser had flat ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died had made her feel a sense of loss[13]. This leads to a contradiction of wanting to be an American and not being an American. Ifemelu made her hair look like an American but did not look like an American. Even though she was still recognised for being black she could not see her true blackness anymore. She was cut up and lost in the valley of two contending races.

### **Issues of Identity Crises Occasioned by African Hair.**

There is a kind of contradiction that exists in trying to be what one cannot be. A person cannot be black and not be black at the same time. This contradiction is the root of all sufferings according to Buddhist tradition. This kind of suffering arises when one seeks for permanence in a world where all things are temporal or in this case, one looks for affirmation on the bases of race where there is none. According to Byrd and Tharps as Quoted by Shonisani Netshia, in the early fifteenth century, hair served as a carrier of messages in most West African societies. They noted that within the Mende, Wolof of Senegal, Yoruba of Nigeria, and Mandingo of Sierra Leone communities, hair often communicated age, marital status, ethnic identity, religion, wealth, and rank in the community. They emphasised that hairstyles could also be used to identify a geographic region [11]. This assertion confirms the contradiction that was noted above as it also becomes ironical for anyone to conceive of changing his or her geographical origin on account of change of hair texture and style.

A Chinese scholar [14] posits that, any outstanding culture should have double features of human commonality and their individuality. He stressed that an outstanding culture firstly keeps and reflects unique features, but that this unique features should be in the context of human civilization and keep its consistency with the direction of movement of human civilization's progress. He noted that from a historical perspective of development, the spread of Chinese civilization promotes World Civilization's progress, and similarly, the absorption of other civilizations also promotes Chinese Civilization's progress. He concluded that being brave enough to absorb and learn the essence of foreign culture is a kind of national cultural confidence. What he means here is that assimilation of some elements of a foreign culture is not a bad idea as civilisation has become a global phenomenon. For this reason, a calculated and reasoned assimilation of foreign cultures without jeopardizing one's own cultural identity is very important.

It is further noted that Western powers forced China to open the door for them with gunboats, so Chinese intellectuals realized that learning technology from Westerners to challenge and win them was urgent. But, this Cultural Revolution so to say, almost caused a setback for Chinese traditional values as people then desired to absorb most parts of advanced culture to enrich their own lives. When China opened its door to Western culture, Western materials, institutional culture and spiritual culture flowed into China suddenly, so Chinese people felt new and strange, and some people blindly learned and embraced the Western culture. The implication of unchecked inflow of Western culture was profound changes in the economic system, social structure, and ideology. At the same time, some people begin to doubt their original and traditional cultural values [14].

The above experience is not new to most African countries. Most of the indigenous civilisations and practices of the people which have been left untapped and undeveloped have been set aside for Western civilisations which are considered better and prestigious to associate with. Among the Benin people of Nigeria, a lot has been lost to Western culture but one area that has been greatly preserved is the dressing of the Oba and Chiefs which also include their mode of hairstyle. Edoja and others stated that,

It is a well-known fact in African studies that Benin derives its large profile in history not only from its highly developed political institutions but also from the prowess and sophistication of its art works which included a dressmaking component. They noted that it is a testimony to the prominent place of dressing in Benin culture that successive Obas in the past had taken its control into their personal responsibility and in the case of the palace itself, a whole institution of the 'Iwebo' had to be created to take special charge of the Oba's regalia and wardrobe [12].

The mode of dressing of the Oba is therefore considered very important and needed to be preserved. The way an Oba, his Chiefs and subjects both males and females dress and carry their hair is also of paramount significance. It is believed in most African cultures that as the forests act as a covering for the fertile Mother Earth, so does the hair of a woman cover her head. The woman in African society is a symbol of fertility and for this reason it is believed that she necessarily bears children [15]. This was noted in [11] when she said of the Mende people of South Africa that, "the way hair grows is compared to the way forests grow. The vegetation on earth is the 'hair' on the head of Mother Nature in the same way the hair on the head of a woman is her 'foliage.' A woman with long, thick hair illustrates a life force, she may be blessed with a green thumb giving her the ability to have a promising farm and many healthy children. And so, hairstyles are very important in Mende society as a Mende woman's hair must be well groomed, clean, and oiled.

In the culture of the Benin people of Nigeria as earlier noted, the Chiefs cut their hair in a special way and when the Oba dies, all the men in the Kingdom are made to cut their hair as a sign of honour. But when teenage Princesses attained the age of puberty they are made to carry a special form of okuku hairstyle. The Wolof culture of Senegal is not as different as observed by Shonisani. She stated that, young girls partially shaved their hair as an outward symbol that they were not courting. However, boys also partially shaved their hair. Likewise, widowed women would stop attending to their hair during their period of mourning so they would not look attractive to other men. And as far as community leaders were concerned, they donned elaborate hairstyles. And the royalty would often wear a hat or headpiece, as a symbol of their stature [11].

Hair as a means of identity was very prominent in the Apartheid regime of South Africa as it differentiated the whites from the blacks.

Hair is the most visible marker of Blackness next to skin (Mercer 1987), and refusing unruly hair is also about silencing inassimilable Black politics. In South Africa during the Apartheid era racial classification was everything, the division of people into racial groups using a complex and trivial series of tests. The result was the classification of the population into one of four groups: White, Black, Indian and Colored, with Colored and Indian groups further subdivided. These unofficial tests were also set up to determine the race of individuals who either appealed their classification or whose classification was challenged by others. The tests were primarily based on appearance -skin color, facial features, appearance of head (and other) hair [16].

The use of hair as a means of identity is not deniable but when its use becomes derogatory, it raises some racial concerns. One of such instances was recorded in the stories relating to Apartheid. It is on record that there was a 'pencil test' decree that if an individual could hold a pencil in their hair when they shook their head, they could not be classified as White. But it is clear that there is a problem with this test as it so inaccurate and vague because members of an extended family could be classified in different racial groups as a result of differences in hair texture [17].

African students were forced to straighten their hair before they were allowed entrance into the school. Such students were made to believe that their natural hair was dirty. This was the same idea that was presented in Adichie's *Americanah* where Blacks preferred to straighten their hair in hope that they would look more American than African, but were faced with a contradiction. With the spread of modernisation and cross-cultural influences, it will be unfair to misbrand an African child's hair as dirty. Every race is unique with certain peculiarities. In 2016, Pretoria High School for girls was accused of racism for allegedly telling black girls to straighten their hair and not wear afros. Pupils at the school said they were forced to chemically straighten their hair and not have afros that were deemed untidy. This made students donning afro hairstyles and braids to hold a protest at the school to voice anger against the alleged longstanding rule. The prestigious school in Pretoria was historically attended by whites only but now admits black children following the end of apartheid in 1994 [18].

## CONCLUSION

Racism on the basis of hair is no different from racism on the basis of skin colour. According to Mercer, racism is considered to be an ideological code in which biological attributes are laden with societal values. Black hair is perceived within this framework as it is burdened with a range of negative connotations. He noted that classical ideologies of race established a classificatory symbolic system of colour with black and white as signifiers of a fundamental polarisation of human worth in terms of superiority and inferiority [9].

The use of hair as a means of identity is not a problem but the misrepresentation of African hair as ugly or dirty makes it a problem. This paper have expressed that it is very unfair to shame or discriminate against people as a result of what they have no control over. Some form of Western hegemony has made this social discrimination possible. It can be argued that if the blacks happen to be the dominant race in the world, the possibility that black skin or black hair would be seen as beautiful is very conceivable. The hair as stated in this paper is an ontological symbol in Africa. It is the covering of the head (*ori*) which in the Yoruba culture is the destiny bearer. For this reason, an honour for the head is an honour for the hair. This is why people who plait hair for others in traditional African societies did not request for fees as they did so as a form of ritual or religious rites and a social service. This service is necessary for social harmony. As one good turn deserves another, it is easily possible for any other person to return the favour without requesting for fees. This act promotes inter-subjectivity which predisposes an individual to influence and be influenced. So, people are contractually bound with the society in which they find themselves and therefore, cannot live a life of individuality [15].

It becomes worrisome that the same hair which binds a people together in Africa should be the reason for which they are discriminated against by people of different races. This is part of what Adichie lamented about in her *'Americanah'* where Blacks, as a way of preventing being humiliated or bullied, preferred to straighten their hair in hope that they would look just like the Americans, but were faced with a bitter contradiction.

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