

# Historical Roots of *Makai* Hairstyle of Elmina People of Ghana

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**ABSTRACT:** The study traced the historical roots of the makai hairstyle, including its sociocultural significance in the celebration of the annual Bakatue festival celebrated by the people of Elmina in Ghana. The historical research design under the qualitative research approach constituted the research design. The expert sampling technique was used to select a sample size of nine (9) consisting of indigenous hairstylists in active practice with experience ranging from 20 to 35 years on the job and opinion leaders, historians, and cultural experts in Elmina for the study. Unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews were used for the data collection. Data analysis was done using narrative inquiry and historical analysis. The Akan-Fantse (or Fante) hairstyle spanned over six centuries, with a deep historical root in Elmina in the Central Region of Ghana and therefore an established precolonial hair grooming fashion. The history of the hairstyle can be traced to the very foundation of setting up the town in about 1300 CE, the inception of the annual Bakatue festival, and the African traditional religious beliefs of worshipping the supreme being and smaller gods (river god Nana Benya). It recommended the creation of an online virtual gallery on makai hairstyles to share their educational relevance, be it historical, social, cultural, economic, aesthetical, religious, or psychosocial.

**KEYWORDS** - Makai hairstyle, Bakatue, Elmina, precolonial, hair grooming, fashion, Fante

## I. INTRODUCTION

Precolonial Africa, including Ghana, had its own indigenous beauty culture standards and practices. They held a complex standard of beauty embodied in their 'Afrocultural aesthetics' (Essel, 2017, p. 25). For example, one of the beauty culture practices precolonial Ghana held high was hair grooming aesthetic ideals. Hairstyles in precolonial Africa depicted leadership status, gender, personal taste (Sieber & Herreman, 2000), ethnic orientation, religious affiliation, social status and socio-emotional state of the wearer. It was a symbol of cultural identity, a tool for submissiveness, and symbol of beauty (Essel, 2017). For example, it remains disgraceful for a Ghanaian woman or girl to parade through the streets with unkempt hair. It is almost a natural instinct for Ghanaian women or girls to spend a great deal of their time on their hair grooming. Generally, African women consider their hair a crown of glory. The Akan-Fante people of Ghana have a proverb that say *ɔbaa n'enyimyam nye ne tsir hwin*, which literally means the pride of a woman is her hair (Essel, 2017). It is therefore not surprising that black African women spend more money on their hair care thrice more than any other racial group (Greene, 2011). This is largely not the case in many precolonial African societies. In precolonial Ghana, feminine hair care was a shared responsibility among family and friends. Female friends and family braid or plait hair for others on a pro bono basis.

Indigenous feminine hairstyles were done to suit individual preferences, cultural dictates, and the social status of the wearers. There are numerous hairstyles in Ghana from the repertoire of pre-colonial, colonial and

contemporary times. The hairstyles include dreadlocks, popularly called Rasta (known in Akan language as *mpesempese*), Afro, braiding, plaiting, and shaving (Essel, 2021). Some of the hairstyles have their roots in specific Ghanaian ethnic origins but are practiced by many irrespective of ethnic orientation. *Dansinkran* hairstyle is associated with the queenmothers of Asante and other Akan ethnic groups in Ghana (Essel, 2021), while *Tekua* hairstyle is linked to the Fantse (or Fante) people of the Akan ethnic group in Ghana. Specific hairstyles are occasionally worn amongst the various ethnic groups in Ghana.

*Makai* hairstyles feature prominently amongst the Fantse (or Fante) people of Ghana and remain one of the unique indigenous hairstyles worn during the celebration of the annual *Bakatue* festival in Elmina. The *makai* feminine hairstyle with features of oxhorn is fascinating to watch. It projects outwards from the scalp of a wearer. This hairstyle has influenced some contemporary hairstyles in Ghana, yet there is little or no scholarly documentation about its historical roots. Hence, this study sought to trace the historical roots of the *makai* hairstyle, detailing its sociocultural significance in the celebration of the annual *Bakatue* festival celebrated by the people of Elmina in Ghana.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Taylor's (2002) object-based theory, which is concerned with materiality and has to do with description and documentation to bring out and classify garments, artifacts or objects for historical purposes, formed part of the theoretical underpinning of the study. The object-based theory focuses on the contextual attributes of the exhibits, oral history, company history, and design philosophy of fashion production (Taylor, 2002; Skov & Melchior, 2008). With this theory, the study considered the contextual attributes of *makai* hairstyle, its oral history, design philosophy, description and documentation to bring out its history and socio-cultural relevance amongst the people of Elmina and, by extension, the Akan community. This theoretical stance took the *makai* hairstyle fashion art object as central to historical studies and narratives in a sociocultural context.

## I. METHODOLOGY

The historical research design under the qualitative research approach constituted the research design. This involves identification, analysis, and interpretation of old texts, eyewitness testimony, and other oral history and interviews (Williams, 2015; Špiláčková, 2012; Vansina, 1985). Expert sampling technique was used to select a sample size of nine (9) consisting of indigenous hairstylists in active practice with experience ranging from 20 to 35 years on the job, opinion leaders, historians, and cultural experts in Elmina for the study. Unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews were used for the data collection. During the data collection, permission was sought from respondents to audio-tape the conversation for transcription purposes. Data analysis was done using narrative inquiry and historical analysis. The narrative analysis helped to accentuate consistency, suppress contradiction, and produce rationally sound interpretation without truncating the essential content of the told stories about the lived experiences (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000) of the *makai* hairstyle worn by the respondents. With the historical analysis, the study prioritised the source of the data, the context of the data, and the corroboration of the data for the purpose of ensuring its trustworthiness and authenticity. Photographic evidence of *makai* hairstyles taken with the permission of the respondents and those from the personal archives of the respondents supported the historical narration. The transcribed and analysed data was shared with the respondents for verification and confirmability purposes.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 Origin of *Makai* hairstyle

Oxhorn-shaped flamboyant, and eye-popping Akan-Fantse *Makai* hairstyle, believed to have originated from *Edina* (Elmina), has been in existence for over six centuries. Available archival evidence revealed that long before colonialist contact with the people of Guinea Coast, one of the indigenous feminine hairstyles practiced by the people of Elmina (Edinaman) was the *makai* hairstyle (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4). The hairstyle predates the colonialist dehumanising, and obnoxious transatlantic slave trade on the Guinea Coast. The Guinea

Coast bases for the colonialists included Cape Coast Castle, Fort James, Accra, Apollonia, Elmina (São Jorge da Mina), Axim, Fort São Sebastião (Shama) and Winneba (Black, 2015). The Portuguese profited immensely from their trading base, São Jorge da Mina (Elmina) in West Africa, which was founded in 1482. Christopher Columbus, the explorer, between 1482 and 1484, travelled on a Portuguese vessel to the Gold Coast and visited São Jorge da Mina, where he was believed to have witnessed the final stages of the construction of the castle begun on January 20, 1482 (Hair, 1990) during the reign of Nana Kwamina Ansa, the sixth chief of Elmina (Annan-Prah, 2007). There are available photographic representation of the *makai* hairstyle as practiced by the people of Elmina (National Museum of African Art, 1992).



Figure 1. Young Fantse woman wearing *Makai* hairstyle in 1860. The hairstyle is horn-shaped and connected at its apex while scarf covered the base. (Source: National Museum of African Art, 1992).



Figure 2. A group picture of four showing two women wearing *makai* hairstyle that is not tied together. From left a woman in standing position wears one horn-shaped *makai*, while a woman seated wears two horn-shaped *makai* hairstyle. (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

From about 1300 CE, Elmina, a town in the coastal south of Ghana, was founded by Kwaa Amankwaa and named Anomansa (Annan-Prah, 2007; Womber, 2020). The town of Anomansa was also called Amankwaakrom by nearby villages. Kwaa Amankwaa, the founder of Elmina, is believed to have migrated from the Walata Empire in ancient Mali (Cartwright, 2019) to establish the town. Before the reported expedition of Columbus to Elmina, Prince Henry, the Navigator, had started maritime exploration in Africa's waters in 1415.

Forty kilometres west of Elmina lies Shama, a town that the Portuguese encountered in 1471 (Annan-Prah, 2007; Black, 2015). The connection between when Elmina town was established and the archival record on the *makai* hairstyle from the Fantse people raised some historical inferences. It could be inferred that the early settlers of Elmina in 1300 CE possibly brought the *makai* hairstyle from where they migrated to their present settlement, or that the people of Elmina had developed and refined the hairstyle after their settlement since it has been established that the *makai* hairstyle was a pre-Columbus visitation era in 1482.

The legend account also posited that the *makai* hairstyle was borne out of the religious beliefs and practices of the Elmina people, who focused on belief in the supreme God and lesser gods long before the arrival of the Europeans in 1482. The hairstyle was handed down to the people of Elmina by their ancestry and was strongly associated with priestesses (Figure 3), as revealed by Elmina cultural historians and confirmed in a focused group discussion in the data collection phase. A practicing Elmina hairstylist of pre-colonial hairstyles revealed that:

‘*Makai* hairstyle has been practiced by the Elmina people for a very long time and it was created by our forefathers. Chief priestess worn the *makai* hairstyle on the durbar day of the *bakatue* festival.’

This implies that the hairstyle was also associated with the annual *Bakatue* festival celebrated by the people of Elmina (Womber, 2020). The festival celebrated in honour of the founder of Elmina, Kwaa Amankwaa, and the river god Nana Benya (Ghana Tourism Authority, 2019) featured the *makai* hairstyle prominently as an indigenous practice in its celebration. Ladies, both young and old, wear their flashy *makai* coiffure (Figures 4, 5,

and 6) and the *Tekua* hairstyle during the Bakatue festival for expressive cultural performance and display. Hairstyle as part of body adornment is prioritised by Akan women in Ghana. Amongst the Akan people, queen mothers, opinion leaders, and royals' style their hair fashionably to suit different occasions. This practice has spread in society, where one need not be a priestess, royal, queen mother, or opinion leader to wear the *makai* hairstyle.

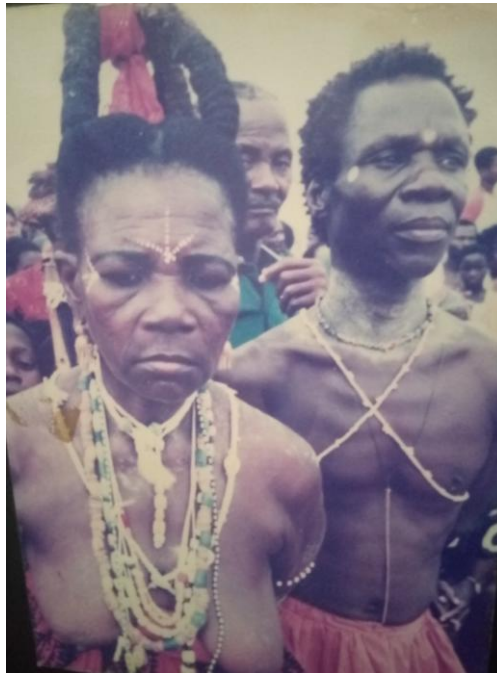


Figure 3. Elmina priestesses (left) wearing three horn-shaped *Makai* hairstyle with red stripe of fabric used to tie them together at its apex. (Source: Elmina Castle Archive).



Figure 4. Some Elmina ladies' group (in front roll) seated at the durbar grounds during 2017 *bakatue* festival. They were adorned in flashy *makai* hairstyle and bright kente fabric with their skin decorated with kaolin. (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).



Figure 5. Elmina women group singing at the durbar grounds during *bakatue* festival. They were adorned in *makai* hairstyle decorated with ribbons. (Source: Uncle Ebo Photos, 2022).



Figure 5. Young lady in *makai* hairstyle decorated with silver coloured tiara

during the 2022 *bakatue* festival in Elmina. (Source: Uncle Ebo Photos, 2022).

#### 4.2 Design and production of *makai* hairstyle

The oxhorn-shaped *makai* hairstyle projects outward in space. The shape and style are achieved by braiding hairs together with the help of thread. The number of horn-shaped braids formed could be one (Figure 2), two (Figures 1 and 2), or three (Figure 3), a stylization that was largely informed by the cultural symbolism and status of the wearer. The unique hair texture and density of the Elmina people and, by extension, Akan women allowed the hair to stand upright (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Elmina ladies at the time relied hugely on natural hair relaxers and an essential hair implement, the wooden comb (Morrow, 2014), with no artificial hair straighteners, which destroyed their unique African hair texture. With the introduction of hair straighteners and other chemical relaxers that affected the tenacity of their unique African hair, it contributed to influencing the materials for styling the *makai* hairstyle.

The respondents disclosed that the materials used for *makai* hairstyles have changed over the years. In precolonial times, human hair was sectioned into two or more depending on the preference of the client and the shape of the head and face of the individual. The respondents added that practitioners of this hairstyle in contemporary times take inspiration from *makai* hairstyles done in pre-colonial times. They said in pre-colonial times, the sections of *makai* hairstyle were joined together with thread at the tip of the hairstyle, but in contemporary times, practitioners have improved it by using ribbon for such purposes (Figures 4 and 5).

Apart from ribbons, the uprightness of the hair is reinforced with *ponkɔhwɪn* ('horse hair'). The *ponkɔhwɪn* (Figure 6) is folded in rolls with the help of thread and used to create the oxhorn feature of the hairstyle. A threadlike extension, a multi-piled yarn (locally called *abyssinia*), is added to the short hairs of individuals to create the long feature of this hairstyle. Some designers show their creativity by using a scarf at the base of their hair, which also gives support to the hairstyle they wear.



Figure 6. Sample of horse hair (*ponkɔhwɪn*) bound in rows (left); and in raw state (right).  
(Source: Fieldwork, 2022).



Figure 7. Sample of *abyssina* thread in raw (left) state and plied stage (right). (Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

The hairstyle has evolved in design. Maame Winnifred, an indigenous Ghanaian hairstylist, has fused the *tekua* and *makai* hairstyles to create a unique wig design named *Tsir kor mmpam* (Figure 8), which literally means one head does not go into counsel. The uniqueness of this creative wig is an advancement of the indigenous hairstyling culture of the Akan-Fantse people of Elmina.



Figure 8. Creative wig inspired by *Tekua* and *makai* hairstyles. Hairstyle design by Maame Winnifred. (Source: Maame Winnifred)

#### 4.3 *Makai* hairstyle in the celebration of *bakatue* festival

The annual *Bakatue* festival is celebrated using a variety of hairstyles by females in the Elmina community. The *makai* hairstyle is one of the precolonial yet evolving hairstyles featured. During the



celebration, cultural troupes in the community show off their dancing and singing skills to the general public on the Elmina lagoon (locally called *baka*) to entertain themselves, the general public, and thank the supreme God for seeing them through the year. Different cultural troupes stylishly adorn themselves and perform on the Elmina lagoon. Some wear the *makai* hairstyle (Figure 4), while others wear the *tekua* hairstyle (Figure 9). The cultural troupes stylishly adorn themselves.



Figure 9. 'Tekua' hairstyled cultural group on the canoe (left); details of the tekua hairstyle sample (left).  
(Source: Uncle Ebo Photos, 2022).

#### 4.4 *Makai* hairstyle in puberty rites and marriage ceremonies

Various ethnic groups in Ghana have ways of admirably initiating their adolescent females from puberty to adulthood. During the entry of young women into adulthood in Elmina, the families of the young ladies dress their wards with beautiful beads, gold jewellery and other accessories, colourful kente, and other fabrics heralded by their attention-grabbing *tekua* and *makai* hairstyles. They also applied indigenous bodily cosmetics such as kaolin by making aesthetically pleasing and symbolic designs to show off their great physical beauty (Figure 3). They are then paraded through the streets of Elmina for a couple of days for would-be suitors to feast their eyes on the young ladies and select their prospective wives. One of the respondents remarked, "They look so gorgeous, and you will see that yes, this is a woman going." It was also found that females wear the *makai* hairstyle for their marriage ceremonies in contemporary times as well as to exhibit their culture and origin. One of the respondents said, 'My sister did the *makai* hairstyle for her traditional wedding in 2012.' These scenarios confirmed how the hairstyle was featured in nuptial and puberty rite ceremonies.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Some precolonial Ghanaian hairstyles have withstood the test of time and become irresistible hair fashion classics in contemporary times. However, the historical narratives and sociocultural significance surrounding the hairstyles have remained largely undocumented. One of these hairstyles in the coastal south of Ghana is the *makai* of Elmina. This study traced the historical roots of the *makai* hairstyle, including its sociocultural significance in the celebration of the annual *Bakatue* festival celebrated by the people of Elmina in Ghana.

The Akan-Fantse *makai* hairstyle spanned over six centuries, with a deep historical root in Elmina in the Central Region of Ghana and therefore an established precolonial hair grooming fashion. The history of the hairstyle can be traced to the very foundation of setting up the town around 1300 CE, the inception of the annual *Bakatue* festival, and the African traditional religious beliefs of worshipping the supreme being and smaller gods (river god Nana Benya). Based on the religious angle connected with the root of the hairstyle, the Akan-Fantse priestess in Elmina wore the hairstyle for their spirituality and religious wellbeing as well as that of the

community. Creating an online virtual gallery on *makai* hairstyles would help share the educational relevance, be it historical, social, cultural, economic, aesthetical, religious, or psychosocial.

In the precolonial era, the hairstyle was the preserve of queen mothers, opinion leaders, royals, and priestesses and showed social class distinction. However, the restriction of the *makai* hairstyle to a select few that showed a high social class monopoly in precolonial times could not stand the ravages of time, as there are no barriers to wearing the hairstyle in contemporary times. All are free to wear the *makai* hairstyle for fashion and self-expression purposes.

The oxhorn-shaped *makai* hairstyle and varying projections that characterised the hair stylization achieved with the aid of hair braiding thread have sociocultural connotations. The number of oxhorn-shaped projections in the hair stylization contributes to its beauty. However, beyond adding beauty to the entirety of the hairstyle, the number of hairstyle projections has hidden cultural connotations and symbolism that need further investigation to establish.

The conventional materials and tools, such as natural hair relaxers, braiding thread, and wooden combs, have been modified to include chemical hair straighteners and relaxers, horse hair, headscarves, ribbons, and multi-piled yarn (locally called *abyssinia*). These new materials and tools have contributed to the development of a hybrid style derived from *makai* and *tekua* hairstyles that is wig-like in form. There is a need for tools and material exploration to make hairstyling faster with increased innovation. The use of chemical hair relaxers and straighteners in addition to the indigenous natural ones must be researched to find out their health implications for users.

The *makai* hairstyle continues to feature prominently in the Bakatue festival celebration, the performance of puberty rites, and marriage ceremonies as it existed in precolonial times. Finding out the motivation of users for their preference and choice of their hairstyle in contemporary times would enrich scholarly documentation efforts on the hairstyle by fashion historians and African beauty culture researchers.

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