

UNRAVELING THE METAPHORS OF AKWA-CROSS WOMEN HAIRSTYLES AND CODE NEGATION IN VIVIAN CHIJI'S *AYAMMA*

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Abstract

The use of hairstyles in filmmaking may be for purely aesthetic stimulation; but to the Akwa Ibom and Cross River States people in their Akwa-Cross film, hairstyle is a cultural metaphor meant to identify categories of women in their social and marital statuses towards an orderly mutual interplay in the society. Drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics in a qualitative research approach, this paper interrogates Ayamma, an Akwa-Cross film, with the bid to probe the metaphoric identities given to women through hairstyles in this society. Findings show that the indigenous hairstyles of the Akwa Ibom and Cross River women bear deep cultural significations that help in regulating men's attitude towards them as an aspect of social control. These hairstyles beautify the women and equally serve as a tool of social control by demarcating the royal, the married and the maiden among them. Etinghe identifies the king's daughter; mmong-mmong depicts married women who have suckled children and with sagged breast; while mkpum show cases the unmarried with firm breasts. Findings further show that using different hairstyles for aesthetics on a single character whose role has not switched may end up impairing the message of the film. The paper concludes that hairstyles in filmmaking should be deployed to promote salient societal values, thereby encouraging good morals among the citizens. Costumiers should rely on facts instead of speculations in their deployment of indigenous cultural symbols to avoid sending wrong signals about people and their values, thereby misrepresenting their heritage.

Keywords: Akwa-Cross, Film, Hairstyles, Metaphors, Code-negation.

Introduction

The use of hairstyles among women in the African society has a historical undertone of cultural communication than mere fantasy. The statuses of women and what they convey within the Akwa-Cross (Akwa Ibom and Cross States) society have made virtually all intelligible performance-media to attempt a suitable stratification to suit the way women have been placed in this part of Nigeria. The woman, for instance, is the natural companion to the man. In the African society, she is the cynosure of her man's eyes with which the prominence of her features predetermines the man's emotions.

In a common idiom, “wives (are) bound together by the traditional role of keeping the communal paths clean so that the men who went to war can return” (Evwierhoma 38). This idiom opens the pod of the woman's role in setting the balance of the universe in which the Bible makes an emphatic referent to the circumstance of sight that “he who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the Lord” in Proverbs 18:22. Thus, the Akwa-Cross people elevate this divine signifier by alluding the creative patterning of the woman's hair to the circumstance of the man's sight and redefinition of status in the society. This notion is borne from Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin's conception that “the hair, once covering our animal selves, is exquisitely sensual and magnetic” (348). The use of hairdressing in the film of Akwa and Cross River States has played a significant role in unraveling the metaphoric deployment of these hairdressings to the contemporary audience.

In recent Nollywood films, however, the use of different hairstyles is normal and appreciable; but using it as a code to impart a deep cultural undertone requires some in-depth research about the people's signs system and the coding of meanings decipherable by the people. A code is the specificity of the whirr of a sign from wanton suggestions (Udofia, Atakpo and Udoinwang 48), and as David Lodge intones, a code focuses on "the finite system of language, not the infinite variety" (13). Hairdressing, on the other hand, is a cultural code in filmmaking not actually a craft of fantasy to showcase a natural endowment or grace or some mind provoking creative heights in the art of weaving. According to Etop Akwang, "cultural codes are generally accepted guidelines that govern the operation of a society and its culture" (84). This shows that on the basis of a culture projected in a film, the proper placement of hairdressing can aid the understanding of the message synergized, implying that an improper placement of a sign would end up impairing the information especially when it is metaphoric or an indirect referent to the signified.

Hairdressing is a metaphor or an indirect referent to a cultural position and cosmic stance of the Akwa-Cross society. With the *Adiaha Obong* and the *Nwain* hair patterns during wedding, there is a remarkable difference. An outsider may only marvel at the sight of some elongated turfs of hair on a maiden's hair without conceiving its bearing with the firmness of her breast; so do the sagged-breasted, the widow, the priestess, and the Obong-anwan signifiers get interwoven in scintillating turfs on women's head in current Efik and Ibibio filmmaking in Nigeria called the Akwa-Cross movies. This paper interrogates the metaphoric portrayal of hair patterns towards effective communication of the Akwa-Cross conception of the woman and instances these codes subvert the dominant cultural norms in *Ayamma*.

Theoretical Framework

Using the hair to suggest a social situation may be understandable from the precinct of signs and meaning appropriation within the hub of a culture. On this note, a theoretical underpinning that raises a suggestive index on an object and concludes the suggestion by allotting an understandable referent would anchor a discussion of this nature. Against this backdrop, the theoretical position of this paper is drawn from Ferdinand de Saussure's conception of semiotics.

Semiotics was developed from Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology in 1915. It formed the stranglehold of structuralism in which the attempt to stabilize all human activities within conceivable structures as a system is conceptualized. The tenet of semiotics is that a language in utterance, gesture or representation is a sign embodying a suggestive concept which infers and idea that terminates in an agreeable and all-round acceptable referent. According to Peter Widdowson and Selden Raman, "signs... are made up of two parts (like two sides of a sheet of paper): a mark either written or spoken, called a 'signifier', and a concept (what is 'thought' when the mark is made), called a signified" (104). However, as a way of unraveling a textual language, Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald posit:

Semiotics... developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)... is a method of interpreting the meaning of signs words or objects which have a specific meaning within culture. Semiotics is based upon a distinction between the signified (the meaning of a word, object or image) and the signifier (the sound of a word, the physical object or the image). Together, the signifier and the signified are a sign (772).

By way of reassessing Haralambos *et al*, semiotics is a logical tool for apportioning meanings to concepts raised through sign in a language.

A sign, on the other hand, is explained by Colin Counsel and Laurie Wolf to embody three parts. One part is called iconic which a signifier has the same appearance as the signified; the second is indexical which the signified is caused by the signifier; and the third part is called a symbol which the signified is represented by an idea understandable as an aspect of a culture or history to be the referent for it away from a biological or natural connectedness to the factor (10). These three become “a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in the society... whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged” (Elam 1).

Hairdressing is a simple self-restructuring from the arrangement of the hair. Many people wear their hair as they like without considering any social remark to the outlook. In the Yoruba culture, for instance, the married haul their hair backwards to showcase a woman who is married. Among the *Habe* (Hausa) society, there is a hairdressing to depict the religious piety of the Islam faith; so does Akwa-Cross have a set of hairdressings that imparts certain cultural underpinnings of their society. Saussure's semiotic theory is a fundamental concept in understanding how signs and symbols create meaning. The theory suits the topic because the focuses of the paper is on a concept in hairdressing that suggests a cultural idea which agrees to the tenet of the signifier (the suggested idea) and the signified (what the idea actual results in to the people).

Metaphors in Hairstyles

“A metaphor is a mapping of the structure of a source model unto a target model... as concept and target concept” (Ungerer and Schmid 118). It makes a direct arrogation to a concept by establishing what is instead of what ought-to-be. A metaphor, then, appeals quite like a symbol which is intoned by Counsel and Wolf to be an imposed signified. In the view of Hurbert Zettle, a metaphoric concept is “the act of taking a minimum of clues and filling in, mentally, nonexistent information, to arrive at an easy manageable pattern” (135). This does not negate the position of Robert Stam, Robert Burgonye and Flitterman-Lewis Sandy that a metaphor alludes “the process by which signs refer endlessly only to other signs, with meaning constantly deferred in an infinite series of signs, without any direct dependence or any object or referent” (23). As Benson Oluikpe puts, “the magic of metaphor can thus transform a drab abstraction or an elusive emotion into a familiar sensory image that is concrete and specific” (196). Therefore, a metaphor merges the waves of ideas conjectures on an idea to a unit of signified decipherable as a code in human practices such as hairdressing.

Hairdressing, on the other, is the creative shaping of the human hair for beauty and appeal effect. In the view of King Mcfoe cited in Pauline Atakpa, “hairdressing is a creative art... It is the ability to invent new symbols and ideas on established symbols to stylize the human hair” (10). This definition has already predetermined hairdressing as an instrument of communication. Put differently, many people make their hair without imagining anyone reading anything from it about them or their social background. This is because hair is natural but the making is human. Hairdressing, then, suggests human innovation on the human feature that situates an idea of a people's conception of their world.

Hair is a dignified part of the body that protects, beautifies and, as viewed here, suggests some cultural facts about people. It has some archetypal undertones that send a volume of information about the owner and her nature. According to Ronnberg and Martin:

Hair is incredible potent. Its root follicles fed by tiny blood vessels, lie invisible under the skin, associating hair with interior, involuntary fantasies thoughts and longings. Hair tells us something about the state one's 'head' is; (that)...dirty, lice-ridden, unkempt, (and) locks have signified derangement, but also ascetical retreat and disregard of the worldly and bodily. The quiet curls of Buddha suggest enlightened tranquility. Apollo is depicted with classically ordered sunlike locks of gold. Dionysus with hair dark, chaotic, tangled like wild grapevine. Harry Potter's black, unruly hair signifies unconventional ideas and magical powers. Hair carries DNA and thus codes race, ethnicity and gender... whom a person identifies (346).

As a means of imparting ethnic identity and cosmic views, Emmanuel Akpan writes that hairdressing "has something to do with the relation between signs and linguistic expressions and their users" (47). In terms of the Akwa-Cross hairdressing, there is a significant motif in each hair reoccurring alike, especially as woven for a social occasion, for funeral, for wedding, for traditional performance or for any social event. This shapes the hairdressing towards a regular order.

However, Akwa Ibom and Cross River States have numerous hairdressings which suggest their common ancestral and cultural heritage. Some of the hairdressings are: *Mfi* (periwinkle), *Utong-Eku* (animal's ear), *Etinge* (the peak), *Mkpum* (the thwarted), *mmong-mmong* (water-leaf), *fiminyang* (alligator), *idet-abia* (priestess's hair), *Ebo* (bald) and so on. All these are "emphatically stressed as creative art... to create or relate it to certain objects" (Atakpo 13). The metaphor in hairdressing is the use of hairdressing to denote an indirect name to someone.

The metaphoric usage of hair patterns in Akwa-Cross can be seen in hairdressing delineating the first daughter of a king from the second daughter and also in identifying an *Obong-Anwan* (the queen) among others. Hair dressing also points out the maiden from the married. Through hairdressing also, the maiden with firm breasts is delineated from the one with a pair of sagged tubers. It is possible also to identify the priestess among acolytes along with the ordinary human beings. Metaphor in hairdressing links names of social circumstances to hair design in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria. These metaphors as deployed in their original semiotic undertones to filmmaking should have some significant cultural uplifting to the Akwa-Cross cultural heritage and cosmic views in the global view.

***Ayamma* in View**

Ayamma is one of the Akwa-Cross movies which much attempts have been made to deploy Efik/Ibibio milieu, their cultural practices and social outlook. The film was written by Vivian Chiji and directed by Prince Eneji. It was produced by Emem Isong and brought to public view and patronage in 2020. The setting of the film is Akwa-Cross milieu, the characters' names range from Obong Ikpaisong, Daraima, Ekong, Iko, Ama and Aniefiok; the period is the pre-colonial Efik/Ibibio society; and the central theme is love; while the recurrent motive is jealousy. There is much attempt to portray the indigenous Akwa-Cross creative ventures characterizing their perception of reality in activities like dress, dance, marriage, ceremony, infant-nuptial contract, traditional games, storytelling, folksongs and hairdressing.

The death of Obong Ikpaisong has thrown the kingdom to its darkest mood as Daraima, the crown prince, makes a pronouncement that forbids any form of merriment in the kingdom until the king is interred. His wife-to-be, Ama suspects that, Iko, an orphan girl that danced on the day of her arrival, has caught Daraima's fancy. She decides to get rid of her by plotting to set her up against the rule that is prevalent in the land over the mourning of the king. When Daraima discovers a secret sexual affairs going on between his younger brother, Ekong, and his wife-to-be, his mind skips and with the manipulation of Ama and Ekong who have begun intensifying their motives to usurp the throne, his state of mind goes deranged.

Daraima has been dreaming of a maiden that has Iko's semblance who sings with him in the dream world. The oracle intones that it is a lady that would sing to restore his mental derangement. Iko is brought into the royal entourage along with Itoro, her friend. However, she is made one of the prominent ladies of honour who strolls in the royal train with Queen Ama; yet on many occasions, Iko is demeaned to oblige in numerous duties that bring her reputation beneath that of a slave. She along with her friend, Itoro, is worried over this mishap. Ama boldly utters to Iko that she likes keeping her enemies close; and she ends her threat with a hysterical long laughter which crows Iko beyond measure. Iko, herself, has read a mark of love on Daraima's eyes. Being aware that the song of a maiden would bring his sense back, she is willing to sing but only waits for such opportunity to unveil. Ama senses the urge and goads Iko to sing to Daraima in his deep delirium. She sings but Daraima gets more maddened by her voice. Iko is beheaded under Ama's command while Daraima goes worse in his mental derangement.

Ama and Ekong seek the chiefs endorsement to take over the throne by conniving with the chief priest to enchant Daraima to a more perilous condition. Daraima's condition goes worse to the point he saunters into the jungle and gets missing. All is set to crown Ekong and Ama, Daraima's wife, as Ekong's queen. However, Daraima is found by Ifeoma in the jungle. Ifeoma ministers some herbs to revive him. As she sings, Daraima's deranged mentality is restored. Ifeoma discloses that she is Iko's twin sister. With the help of Aniefiok, they return on the coronation day to claim the throne which results in the death of Ekong, Ama and the chief priest.

Metaphors of Akwa-Cross Hairstyles and Code Negation in *Ayamma*

There are some significant hairstyles that are deployed in the film to make some salient statement about the character. Hairstyles have been practically deployed in many African cinemas to beautify and pass a deep cultural message to the audience. In *Ayamma*, hairstyles are deployed for the same purpose. This sect discusses how the metaphors are succinctly portrayed and the circumstances the portrayal downplays the cultural norms of the Akwa-Cross people in the film.

Plate 1: Adiaha Obong: *Etinghe*



Plate 1 Adiaha Obong *Etinghe*

This hairstyle is typical of the Efik people. The Efik people have a potentate unlike the Ibibio, Annang, Eket or Oron which is more of egalitarian society where no king is traceable. Being that there is a king in Efik, hairstyle is used to distinguish between the king's first daughter and the second daughter. The picture above shows *Etinghe* which has ten combs. The metaphor of the hairstyle is that Ama is the first daughter of a king.

Plate 2: The Firm-Breast: *Mkpum*



Plate 2: Firm Breast

Mkpum has the undertone of the dwarf, shortness, and retardation. It is used in the film to portray that one made with it is one possessing a firm and tender pair of breast. It is an indirect way of suggesting that she is not married; she has not given birth yet to a child; she is single and mingling; and that her breast is pointed waiting for the lucky suitor. The hair stands erect. The erectness (signifier) suggests the breast that is firm (signified).

Plate 3: The Sagged Breast: *Mmong-mmong*



The word *mmong-mmong* is derived from waterleaf. Waterleaf among other leaves is synonymous to putrescence. Waterleaf blossoms and serves its aliveness with splendour but decays to putrescence afterwards. The Akwa-Cross use this hairdressing to portray a woman who is married; a woman that has suckled children; and a woman whose breast has fallen from suckling children. The hair bends to the temples of the wielder. The bending (signifier) depicts a fallen breast (signified).

Code Negation in *Ayamma*

The various hairdressings deployed in *Ayamma* practically situate the cultural referent of the character in the film. However, there are certain hairdressings or hair portrayals that send a wrong signal about the character. They are found in the characters discussed below:

Plate 4: Adiaha-obong of Efik + Longer Hair to Waist



Plate 4: Typical Adiaha-Obong of Efik

The Adiaha-obong of Efik land is drabbed longer to the waist of the daughter. This differentiates her from her sibling. The portrayal of the Adiaha-obong in the film is sending wrong information about the birthright

Plate 5: Ama + Damsel + *Mmong-Mmong*

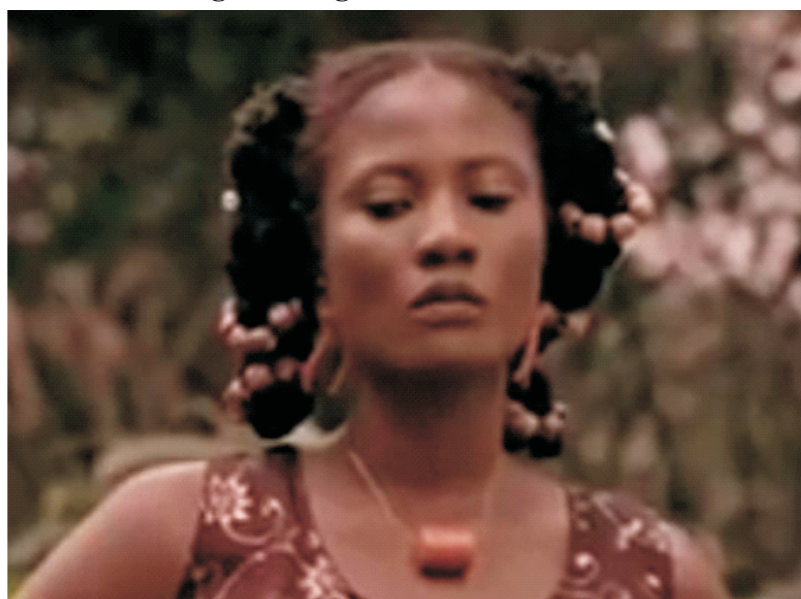


Plate 5: The Married/Sagged Breast

This hair is meant for an older woman not a damsel that is not even fully married. She is a young maiden brought to be married by Daraima. Wielding *mmong-mmong* when she has not even experienced pregnancy, let alone suckling a child to set her breast on the path of collapse is a code negation in the film.

Plate 6: Ifeoma (Damsel)



Plate 7 The Married/Sagged Breast

Ifeoma is portrayed with *mmong-mmong* whereas she is a maiden. This portrayal is misleading. It looks as if Ifeoma, Iko's twin sister, whom Daraima has been dreaming of; the maiden who has become the queen of the kingdom, has already been married, or, may be sent away elsewhere for Daraima to pick and marry. Hairdressing can communicate a lot. As Uwemediako Atakpo acknowledges, a good costumer or makeup artist pays attention to details (20). Thus, the detail in appearance adds to what Effiong Johnson implies in what he intones as the "historical depiction with spasm of affectations of the historical epoch" (169).

Conclusion

The use of film to project a people's culture is brought to its height when the various instrument of communication are given their due attention. A good film with a fantastic theme, picture quality and characters may still fail to appeal when the semiotic context is blurry. The portrayal of Akwa-Cross culture in *Ayamma* has reflected the attempt to use film to abridge the past with the future resplendent of the relevance of art to the society. However, the inordinate portrayal of some of the characters end up confusing the ones that are aptly portrayed, reflecting that much attention was not given to the semiotic undertone of the hair patterns deployed in the film. Paying attention to details of metaphoric referents would have situated the film on the limelight of the sublime. Nevertheless, through films like *Ayamma*, there is more hope on the preservation of the Akwa-Cross heritage for the future.

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