BLACK BODIES, WHITE MASKS?: STRAIGHT HAIR CULTURE AND NATURAL HAIR POLITICS AMONG GHANAIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

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Hair straightening and the usage of hair extensions, particularly chemical relaxing and 'Brazilian' weaves are common and, in many cases, preferable over natural Afro-textured hair among African women in both the continent and the diaspora. The practice, which has been extensively studied from the African American perspective, is largely explained as (1) a result of internalized racism and self-hate and (2) simply stylization, versatility, and choice. However, even though diasporic and continental Africans share similar hairstyling practices, their historical and cultural situations are not the same. This study looks at Ghanaian women's hair culture from a whiteness-decentered approach. The goal of the study was to research African women's hair norms from continental African women's perspective and find out whether their hair culture could be explained as a result of internalized racism and self-hate or stylization. The study interviewed thirty women. It asks why do they relax their hair and wear hair extensions: whether they are pursuing 'white beauty', or they have other reasons why they alter their hair. It found out that Ghanaian women do not relax their hair and wear hair extensions as a result of 'mental slavery,' and they do not hate their hair, or perceive white women's appearance iconic. It also found that hairstyling among Ghanaian women is not simply for stylization; there are specific reasons why they relax their hair and wear weaves. These reasons include the attachment of privileges and benefits to straight hair and stereotypes and consequences to coily hair in Ghanaian society. Contrary to earlier studies that explain African women's negative relationship with their hair as a result of colonialism and Euro-American influence on the continent, the study

found out that negative attitudes displayed toward hairstyles like (dread)locks in many African societies stem from pre-colonial traditional cultural norms.

This work is dedicated to my mother, Evelyn Mama Vordoagu. Thank you for believing in girls' education against all the odds and going the extra mile to make sure I furthered my education.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria believes that the head, which hair is a major part of, is the most important part of the human body. So, they say 'Orilonise' and "Ori inu mi ko ba ti ode je" (Lawal 93, 95), meaning the head determines whether one succeeds or fails in life, and may one's thoughts not spoil their outer look. Cultural groups all over Africa share the view of the Yoruba. Long before major explorations that brought the world 'together' took place, breaking down thousands-year-old traditions and cultures, people of different ethnicities considered hair a major identity marker. Each culture had its ways of styling the hair and took pride in them. Hair was also used to perform duties that include professional, ethnic, age, and gender symbolism, beautification and creativity. Today, the story is different, especially for African women. Though many cultures still maintain distinctive features that speak to their history and values, there is a higher attempt by African people to achieve conformity, forcefully and voluntarily, when it comes to hairstyling and other cultural practices. Clothing habits like suit and tie that used to be limited to Europeans are worn by Africans today. Many schools in Africa adhere to European standards of teaching and teach through European languages like English and French. Like clothes and education, Africans have changed their hairstyles more toward non-traditional-African hair forms and styles in spite of the richness of their own.

Hairstyling values among Africans have been redefined and continue to change. The women have largely moved to straight hair form and its styles from the pre-colonial, colonial, and pre/post-independence eras of wearing their hair in its afro-textured and various Afrocentric styles. Many of them straighten their hair with heat and chemicals and wear hair extensions. Toks Oyedemi, a Nigerian-South African scholar concerned with issues of social inequality and

social change, interviewed 164 female university students as part of his study on African women's hair. He found out that 96% and 87% of the women that took part in the study relax their hair and wear extensions, respectively.

Scholars in many fields, particularly Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Sociology, and Psychology, have tried to understand what caused the hair transformation among African women. Many well-thought-through ideas have been generated and explored as a result of their efforts. My goal in this study is to understand how straight hair became a norm, and often the preferred hair form over coily/afro-textured hair among African women. The reasons why women alter their hair are numerous, but debates on the topic are divided into two major schools of thought: the argument that straight hair preference among African women stems from internalized racism and self-hate on one side, and the view that African women alter their hair as a matter of stylization, versatility, and choice.

Scholars who argue that hair modification among African women stems from internalized racism and self-hate believe that historical and contemporary racist systems and structures are responsible for the practice. Civil rights leaders like Marcus Garvey, W.E.B Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington read African American women's act of straightening their hair in the 1900s as rudiments of the racism they suffered in America (Byrd and Tharps 36). Recent African American and African writers like Obiagele Lake and Toks Oyedemi argue that hair straightening and hair extension usage among African women show that they hate their features. To the internalized racism and self-hate school of thought, African women consider their former enslavers' and colonizers' (which are Europeans) features superior to their own. So, they developed a hatred for their African features. Thus, they try to modify their hair, skin color, nose, and eyes, among others, through various means to look like white people. By extension, this

group of people considers hair straightening among African people unacceptable or, at least, disagreeable.

On the opposite side, scholars like Kobena Mercer, and Shirley Anne Tate, argue that African people's reason for relaxing their hair is not necessarily a matter of internalized racism and self-hate but rather, an issue of style, versatility, and choice. In their view, African women's act of hair and other body parts modification are arts they created as a response to the systems within which they live. Tate particularly argues that African women are only experiencing and playing other forms of blackness when they modify their bodies. One school of thought believes that hair straightening and weave wearing are just matters of difference and options; the other school thinks that body modification practices like hair straightening and wearing of hair extensions show that African people do not like how they look, and they would prefer a resemblance to white people even if it comes at a high cost.

This research explores these ideas from the perspective of continental African women. In addition to previous studies on the topic, I use autobiographic accounts, news articles, movies, documentaries, Facebook posts, and comments, and data collected among thirty African women from Ghana and Nigeria to argue that African women's hair altering practices are neither internalized racism / self-hate or simply matters of style, versatility, and choice. Participants' responses show that even though the major factors argued by the two sides of the hair debate play a role in decisions African women make about their hair, they are only part of the reasons that influence their hair choices. Responses in the study show that African women do not hate their features, and they are not trying to alter their hair to look white: white beauty is not iconic to them. To the majority of the women interviewed, it is erroneous and unfair to read their hair practices as rudiments of internalized racism / self-hate, and by extension, a desire to be white.

They mentioned various reasons why they prefer to straighten their hair and wear hair extensions. These include manageability, convenience, cost, and consideration for social norms that support socio-political stereotypes, and privileges attached to hair forms in African societies.

While each factor participants mentioned hold significance, the most cited issue revolves around the perception that straight hair is kempt, neat looking, and the more appropriate hair form to maintain. Natural hair is seen as unkempt, ugly, and inappropriate to keep. People who maintain straight hair enjoy privileges in the form of social capital and tangible benefits like better chances of education and employment. Stereotypes attached to natural hair, on the other hand, attract negative consequences for those who do not alter their hair. Due to this, friends, family, community members, work colleagues, and office superiors around natural hair wearers tell them that their hairstyles are not appropriate to wear to formal gatherings, especially when it comes to employment in the formal sector.

My Hair Story

> Your boss didn't have a problem with your natural hair but the style. This style is themed after an unkempt nature. The style is supposed to look messy. There is no problem with that, but every environment has its rules. And a corporate meeting has rules of looking 'tidy' and conforming to a certain standard of dressing. [You] should have combed it through and not left it looking 'spiky.' (Facebook user 1, May 2017)

This is a remark by a Facebook user on a story I shared about an incident in which my boss (at the time) asked me to stay behind on our way to a corporate meeting because he said my hairstyle was not appropriate. I was wearing a twist-out 'ponytail' styled from my natural afro-textured hair. I had been working for the company for about seven months, and my boss had

never seen me with my hair the way it was the day he asked me to stay behind. From the time I was interviewed for the position, and all the time I had been attending meetings on behalf of the organization, I wore hair extensions and styles that kept my hair texture and volume unexposed. Like the majority of African people, including my boss, my hair is not straight or wavy and silky, and it is certainly not flowy: it is coily, and it grows upward. So, my 'ponytail' looked more like a pineapple or palm tree than a 'tail' that flows down my neck like conventional ponytails.

My boss was not pleased with my hairstyle, and he did not hesitate to register his displeasure. He asked me to get down from the official car with which they had come to pick me and left me standing by the roadside while he and the driver drove away. He said, "you cannot send this hair to an office environment." In my shock, the only words I could utter were, "this is my real hair, sir." I could not understand what was wrong with my hair as it was that day. But my boss insisted I would not go to the meeting with him any longer because my hair was 'inappropriate.'

When I shared the story on Facebook, I got a similar reaction from Ghanaian social media users. Some of the people who commented on the story said that "this hair would fit for [a] casual outing but not for the corporate environment. Too rough for a corporate environment" (Facebook user 2, May 2017). Others added that "Sorry, but it looks inappropriate for a conference!!! Your edges failed you. It's more like you just woke up" (Facebook user 3, May 2017). To a good number of them, "for a working conference though, your hair is distracting..." (Facebook user 4, May 2017). In their view, my hairstyle "looked somewhat unkempt… like a madwoman a little..." (Facebook user 5, May 2017). Though there were Facebook users who disagreed and said that my hairstyle was good enough, the majority of the people said that my boss was right; my hairstyle was not suitable for corporate meetings because it looked unkempt.

Some friends and followers argued that even if I wanted to wear my hair natural to work, I should have made sure that it met corporate standards.

Their reaction to my hair left me with many questions: what criteria are being used to determine which hairstyle meets corporate standards and which one does not? How do Facebook users know whether a hair form is kempt or not? Why could my boss and Ghanaian society not understand that many sub-Saharan African peoples' hair looks and behaves differently from straight hair? Why did so many people advise that I "tame" my hair? By tame, I mean 'always do' styles that make my hair appear smooth and collected. Taming for afro-textured haired people means either straightening the hair, wearing a weave-on, or always choosing natural hairstyles that follow and demonstrate the same cultural and beauty ideals that straight hair follows. My desire to understand these questions is how this research was born.

Even though I grew up in Ghana, and I am a global citizen (by exposure to non-Ghanaian/African ways of life and ideologies), I was not always aware that natural hair attracted the kind of rejection and trolling I received from social media users and my boss in 2017. Many months after arriving in the US for graduate school and after taking a couple of courses in Ethnic Studies as part of my preparation towards studying hair culture among African women, researching and writing terminal papers, I came to understand that what happened in Ghana is a classic example of the infamous, racialized 'good hair' vs 'bad hair' rhetoric in American culture. Anything smooth, long, silky and flowing is 'good hair'; anything kinky, nappy, and coily is 'bad hair' (Byrd and Tharps 24; Banks 2, 28; Chris Rock). In other words, straight, wavy, and in some instances, curly hair is perceived as 'good hair' while coily / afro-textured hair is considered 'bad hair' by some African and non-African people and institutions.

Similar to the South African students Toks interviewed, a substantial number of African American women and girls prefer to straighten their hair. The prevalence of straight hair among African Americans can be seen on TV programs, magazines, and billboards. In Chris Rock's 2009 documentary *Good Hair*, the majority of the women he interviewed wear their hair straight. In addition to the issue of coily hair being the less preferred hair form among African people, American companies, including U.S. government institutions like the military (which only lifted the ban on some Afrocentric hairstyles recently) expect African women to relax their hair or at least wear hairstyles that tame their hair texture. In a 1995 docudrama called *Middle Passage-N-Roots*, an African American military officer who was featured said that she did not have a problem with relaxing her hair to meet the US military's hair standards. But while some African American women have said that they have no problem with such policies and social norms, others want to wear their hair natural but they are unable to do so or face challenges while doing so.

In 2016, *The Guardian* newspaper reported that South African students were demonstrating against a school policy that banned afro hair at the Pretoria High School. According to students that *The Guardian* interviewed, their protest stemmed from many years of enduring racism at the hands of school officials. One of the girls said that she was given Vaseline by a school official to flatten her hair after having been removed from class. The Pretoria school, which used to be a white-only school until 1994, has dress codes that are unfriendly to students of African descent. But this situation is not limited to South Africa alone: a place where, like the US, whiteness often clashes with blackness. In Kenya, a student was asked to either cut her locks or forfeit admission to the Olympic High School. BBC News Africa twittered about the issue on January 14th, 2019. It asked whether it is okay for schools to enforce standard uniforms and

whether students who belong to the Rastafarian tradition, for example, could wear their hair in locks to school.

Away from South and East Africa, the story is the same in West Africa, particularly Ghana. Students are expected to keep their hair in a shortly cropped style. The only exceptions are private and international schools and businesses run by the UK, the US, and other foreign countries. Usually, these schools are attended by kids from financially advantaged homes. Many diplomats and top government officials send their children to these schools. Children in these schools are usually allowed to keep their hair the way they want (still with some restrictions), unlike their public-school counterparts. Recently, some social media users have tried to draw attention to the situation that is allowing international students who naturally have straight hair, i.e., students from India, to keep their hair long while they insist that Ghanaian students cut their hair. To the protesters, the policing of afro-textured hair stems from colonial legacies that are discriminatory to sub-Saharan African people who have coily hair.

In the US, where there are a substantial number of African people, laws have been enacted recently to curtail the problem of hair discrimination in schools and workplaces. On July 3rd, 2019, *CNN*, US reported that California became the first state to allow African American people to wear their hair natural in workplaces and schools irrespective of institution dressing codes. The law was met with a lot of happiness mainly from the African American community. However, as the following comment shows, some people were not pleased with the law.

> BS. An owner of a company can decide what look he wants for his business. Unconstitutional. Takes away from a private employer's right to have their company and everyone that is employed by it fit the professional image they desire. Very easily ruled unconstitutional when challenged. (Facebook user 5, July 2019)

Others, like Facebook user 6 pointed out that it was rather unfortunate that a law is needed to allow African people to wear their hair as it is naturally: "[It is] Ridiculous that a law had to be passed on something so specific! No one should be proud of this because it should come along with basic human rights" (July 2019). Unlike other racial/ethnic groups i.e. White people, some Indians, and Chinese, African people need laws and policies to wear their hair the way it grows out of their scalp.

Unlike the US where African people are in the minority and often found at the bottom of the racial ladder, in Africa, most heads of institutions are African. So why do continental African people experience the same hostile attitude African Americans face when it comes to socio-socio-political attitudes toward afro-textured hair? How is it that although most African countries and the United States are different in fundamental historical and cultural ways, they share similar hair culture and attitude towards afro-textured hair? The US is a space in which blackness directly encounters whiteness. Except for South Africa, whiteness and the racism that comes with it are not something continental African people deal with on a daily basis.

Both the US media and African media are heavily populated with images of African and non-African women in smooth silky long straight hair, something the greater number of African people lack naturally. From federal grooming policies such as those that the US military used to enforce, to workplace and school policies that students in Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa face, Afro-textured hair is constructed as unacceptable. People are told to do something about their hair. And when they refuse, they suffer unpleasant consequences such as being denied access to education and being humiliated like in the case of the African student who was pulled out of class by her teacher to fix her hair at the Pretoria High School in South Africa. The question is, what systems and structures support these discriminatory practices?

This study looks at straight hair culture and natural hair politics among African women. It asks questions such as how did African people (and non-African people) come to view straight hair as a norm and as more desirable in many instances? In other words, why do schools like the Pretoria High School in South Africa and Olympic High School in Kenya prefer their students in 'tamed' hairstyles such as perms and object to styles like locks and afros? What are the reasons why African women wear their hair straight, and in some instances, prefer it over their coily hair? Are they trying to be white because they perceive white beauty iconic and hate their features due to internalized racism? Or are they trying to achieve hair that is more manageable and more acceptable by the societies in which they live? Or is it that, perhaps, hair straightening and hair extensions usage among African women are simply a matter of style, versatility and choice like some scholars and popular opinion say?

The study explores these questions by using theories that suggest that Whiteness must be decentered from the study of African women's hair culture. Data was collected using a qualitative approach. The methodology would be discussed in this chapter. The theoretical framework is discussed in the next chapter.

Frequently Used Terms and Their Meaning

African women use many terms to refer to their hair, styles, and hairstyling techniques. I selected terms that describe the issues discussed in the paper most accurately. I refer to **coily hair** that most African people have as **afro-textured** hair or **natural hair**. Other terms for the same hair, sometimes pejorative, include **kinky, nappy,** and **coarse hair**. I avoided these terms as much as I could because they connote negativity in a lot of instances. In some writings, coily hair is referred to as **curly hair**. Perhaps, because most English word checkers flag down 'coily.'

I try to limit the usage of **hair form** to denote whether a person's hair is coily, curly, locked, wavy or straight. **Locks** or **dreadlocks** are matted afro-textured hair. **Braids** are hairstyles that involve the intertwining of two or more strands of hair into patterns. **Cornrow** braids lie flat on the head compared to other braids that are formed away from the scalp, with only the roots attached to the head. I used **hairstyle** to refer to the different ways in which these hair forms are arranged and designed. **Afrocentric hairstyles** are hairstyles developed by African people, particularly in traditional settings in the past, with some modernized versions that are still worn.

There are many terms for texturally processed/altered hair. **Perm, relaxed** or **straightened hair** is hair that has been chemically or heat processed to look straight. It is styled into different forms, including wavy and curly depending on the preference of the wearer. **Straightening, relaxing,** and **perming** refers to the process of altering coily hair to look and feel straight. A **hot comb** is a metal used in straightening hair. Other heat tools include **hot iron**. They are heated in traditional or electric ovens and used to comb the hair, thereby temporarily breaking down the hair structure. A **hair relaxer** is a chemical preparation that is used to straighten hair. When hair is relaxed by the use of relaxers, it is semi-permanent rather than temporal. This means that the processed hair remains straightened until cut off. Only the new growth of hair will be coily. Chemical hair relaxer users have to retouch the new growth of hair from time to time. They often get scalp burns when the chemical mixture comes into contact with their scalp.

Hair extensions are pieces of hair used to achieve certain styles. Some are gotten from human hair, while others are made from synthetic and non-synthetic fibers like rubber and wool. **Weaves** are hair extensions sewn on a thread and attached to the head with glue or thread. They

come in various lengths and textures. In this paper, weaves are largely used to refer to straight, wavy, and curly hair extensions won by African women. Some of these terms will be explained further at places where they appear in the paper.

Methodology

The most appropriate methodology for this study is the qualitative method since the main goal is to understand how and why straight hair proliferated among African women. Even though numbers are important to ascertaining how straight hair proliferated among African women, to understand the meanings attached to hair forms that African women wear, it is important to gather information about their experiences beyond numbers. So, in addition to observing people's comments under news articles posted on social media, and posts and discussions on hair forms among African people on sites like Facebook, I interviewed thirty African women. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the ideas that African women put into their hair choices and the differences that their hairstyling experiences bring to understanding the bigger issue of hair altering culture among African women.

The data was collected by talking to groups of women who wear their hair in straightened form, natural form, and use or do not use hair extensions. No preference was given to hair form during the recruitment process because it is necessary for the study to collect data about all hair forms. The goal is to collect data that is not heavily skewed toward one hair form and to give each group of hair wearers a fair chance at projecting their experiences. Out of the thirty participants interviewed, five perm their hair, and twenty-five wear their hair natural. Out of the twenty-five women who wear their hair natural, sixteen use hair extensions while nine of them do not use extensions. All participants who perm their hair report that they use weaves. All participants except one person have relaxed their hair and worn weaves in their lifetime. The

complex nature of the data (some women wear natural but wear weaves, others wear weaves and perm, and some wear only natural but have relaxed their hair before) brings richer perspectives to the study.

The study targeted African women. All participants identified themselves as African and women. They come from West African countries, mostly from Ghana and one person from Nigeria. I purposefully targeted people who come from the sub-Saharan region because the purpose of the research is to understand how hair straightening became a norm among continental African women. Since it is usually women who have coily hair that seeks to relax their hair, the study needed women who had coily hair naturally. Typical of the sub-Saharan region of the continent, most people have coily hair. All participants reported that their hair is coily when not straightened with chemical relaxers or heat. The study targeted women since its specific task is to understand hair practices among women, not men. Though African men also relax their hair and wear weaves sometimes, men who indulge in hair straightening are in the minority. Women are the ones who normally relax their hair and use extensions.

Even though some African American people also have afro-textured hair, the study considered writings on African American women's hair history and culture, especially in the literature review section, to create and frame a comprehensive narrative. No African American was interviewed because the focus is to understand the experiences of continental African people. The research is purposefully limited to the experiences of continental African women because the literature on their hair experiences continues to be scarce, and in many instances, written from approaches that center whiteness in understanding African people's experiences. A lot has been written on African people's relationship with their hair within the US and elsewhere, but African women who ironically happen to be the majority of the people of African descent,

have been painfully neglected in many scholarships on African hair. This has resulted in situations that generalize the African American situation, or at least make it the dominant narrative when discussing Afro-textured hair. Meanwhile, the two situations, continental African women and African American women's experiences are not the same.

Studies in America cannot be generalized as representing all African women. There are many reasons for this. For example, mixed-race people make up a good proportion of the African American population; hair type varies widely from almost straight hair to curly hair to tightly coily hair. This has resulted in a situation where, sometimes, the hair often represented as natural afro-textured hair in movies (especially the American ones) looks nothing like the majority of African people's hair. The constant presence of European Americans (and other racial groups who have straight hair) and their interaction with African people who came to America as slaves, played a role in creating the different Afro-textured hair types. This has further served as the basis for debates such as the "good hair" vs "bad hair" popular rhetoric among African Americans. In African countries like Ghana and Nigeria where the difference between hair textures is less varied, there are no labels that imply one afro-textured hair form is better than the other. Moreover, the history of people in places like America is heavily focused on slavery and other racist systems, which are different from the homeland situation on many levels. The intention here is to provide a perspective devoid of these concepts, and more inclusive of continental African perspectives, in a way that contributes to the extensive literature that is already available on African people's hair.

Participants were recruited through the principal investigator's social media profile on Facebook. Adverts were also circulated on social media site, WhatsApp. All women who took part in the study use social media and the majority of them said that social media is one of the

major places they learn how to style their hair and engage in conversations about hair and other topics. This adds to the study because social media is a powerful tool when it comes to integration, sharing, and spreading ideas and knowing what people think about specific topics, issues, and events. From a tiny electric or battery-powered device, one can connect and share information with people across seas and access data that they would have otherwise traveled several hours or even days to get. I am living, schooling and conducting my work in a city that is about twenty or more hours flight from the respondents, and under the supervision of a US higher education institution. Yet, I was able to collect a good amount of quality data because social media made it possible in a less expensive and less time-consuming manner.

The interviews were conducted through WhatsApp because it provides higher internet security compared to other social media platforms. Messages between WhatsApp users are encrypted from one end to the other. This means that third parties are limited, and users are made to believe that their data stays between themselves. Participants were sent a set of semi-structured questions at intervals. The questions are about sixty-seven in all and were divided into sections under sub-headings indicating the type of information and participant they are meant for. This is in exception of the set of questions on demographics of participants. Participants answered each set they were sent. After that, they were sent the next set of questions until they completed all the questions. However, most participants did not answer all the questions. On average, each participant answered about fifty questions in all. This is because someone who keeps her hair natural and does not wear hair extensions need not answer questions on straight hair experiences.

The disadvantage of recruiting and collecting data through social media is that only a certain type of people volunteered for the study – young educated Ghanaians. The only

requirements that were specified during the recruitment process were that people interested in taking part in the study must be from continental Africa, must be women, and have the willingness to spend a certain amount of time sharing information about their hair experience. But considering that the recruitment flyer was posted on my Facebook page, and circulated through my WhatsApp contacts, most of the people who access my social media profiles are mainly young Ghanaian people who are highly educated. So mostly young educated Ghanaian people saw the advertisement and volunteered. One person volunteered from Namibia in addition to the one Nigerian that was mentioned earlier. However, the Namibian could not complete the interview.

All women interviewed reported ages between twenty and forty. Out of the thirty people who participated in the study, eighteen said that they are in their twenties while twelve said they are in their thirties. Participants were not asked their specific ages because West African women generally find questions about their age inappropriate. One of the shortcomings of this research is that the age participants in the study make the data collected inadequate in explaining hairstyling norms that preceded the 1980s since none of them are old enough to have witnessed hairstyling during the pre-independence and immediate post-independence eras. In terms of education, out of the thirty women interviewed, twenty-six have either graduated from university or are currently pursuing graduate studies.

This is a shortfall to the study because data that show experiences of a more diverse group of people would have made the study richer. Variety in participants' education level, nationality and age are important to the study because hairstyles and the values attached to them are not necessarily the same among all ages, education levels and nationalities. The domination of Ghanaians in the research was unintentional, and it has affected the scope of the research.

However, the data is still very useful because it provides insight into hairstyling experiences of the excessive perm and "Brazilian weave" era that African women live in, as well as the newly discovered natural hair movement that is erupting the decades-old hair norms and practices. Therefore, the study looks at African women's hair culture using Ghanaian women and cultural norms as case study.

Data were analyzed by transferring participants' answers to a word document, into tables and sections under sub-headings and no names[1]. Then closely inspected against questions the study is set to address. Participants were placed on number-names only, and their answers were not identified with their social media usernames and real names. I refer to those who took part in the interview as 'participants' and social media users whose comments and posts I include in the study as 'Facebook users.' Each participant or Facebook user comes with a number tag depending on when they appeared in the study. The data was locked in my computer and copied to a Microsoft cloud location protected with a password. Though WhatsApp makes a backup into its cloud, as mentioned earlier, it is an end to end encrypted messaging platform, so only the researcher and participant has access to the chat history.

In terms of challenges, the data collection and processing time took longer than expected. While the interview sessions could have taken as little as an hour if participants were available to answer each set of questions instantly, most of the interview sessions took much longer, in most cases several days and weeks, because participants took as long as they needed to answer each set of question and at their discretion. Also, volunteers were not readily available from the time

[1] The research avoided tagging the information collected with participants' names because issues surround Afro-textured hair are still sensitive. In some cases, views expressed by people bring damaging consequences to them in terms of employment and promotion. So, some of the participants asked specifically that their name should not be identified with the data.

they signed up for the study. Most of them had to be contacted multiple times before and during the research. Some ended their interview sections in the middle without notice: they simply stopped replying to questions. Out of the fifty-one people who volunteered, only thirty people completed the interview. Therefore, the researcher's plan to conduct the study within a maximum of four weeks took more than five months.

Paper Outline

Chapter II of the Paper will be focused on a literature review and theoretical framework. This is to investigate what other scholars have written on the topic, as well as identify gaps in their work. Also, various theories that aided in the research process, particularly in analyzing the primary data that was collected, are discussed here.

Chapter III looks at the history of hairstyling among Africans with a focus on when and how hair straightening and hair extensions became a norm among African women.

Chapter IV is a thorough analysis of the primary data collected. Participants' responses are regrouped and discussed in ways that indicate the reasons behind their hairstyling choices.

Chapter V is on further research findings and conclusions. Here, I discuss the other factors that were identified in the study. I also attempt to answer the questions the research set out to address in the beginning in more specific terms, by using all data discussed in previous chapters.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Explaining African Women's Hair Straightening: Internalized Racism, Self-Hate and Whiteness Desirability vs. Stylization, Versatility, and Choice

A lot of studies have been done on African people's hair culture, but much of this work has focused on Africans in the diaspora and their historical relationship with whiteness (Susannah Walker, Tiffany Gill, Ingrid Banks, Noliwe Rooks, and Ayana Byrd & Lori Tharps). Some attempts have been made recently by continental African scholars, and other scholars concerned with African problems, to study the African hair issue from an African perspective (Toks Oyedemi, Hlonipha Mokoena, Doris Essah, and Simidele Dosekun). But scholars concerned with research on hair culture among Africans and from an African perspective are few and some of them have followed a similar trend of exploring hair-altering culture among African women by framing it within colonial theory (i.e., Toks Oyedemi). So, African American literature remains a richer source of information on African people's straight hair culture and the politics surrounding it.

There are two schools of thought when it comes to explaining the prevalence of hair altering among African people. One set of the literature follows the steps of male civil rights leaders and the Black Panther / Black Pride movement to argue that hair straightening is a form of self-hate that stems from internalized racism (Obiagele Lake, Cornel West, and Parmer, Arnold, Natt, & Janson). The other set argues that hair straightening is a matter of style; one of the many ways African people express themselves, celebrate their African heritage, respond to their environment, and enjoy different styling options (Kobena Mercer, Shirley Tate, and to some extent Noliwe Rooks). However, there is a grey line between these two schools of thought: some scholars have outlined and discussed issues surrounding African people's hair without

exclusively arguing for one side (Byrd &Tharps, and Ingrid Banks)). This study introduces a third position to the hair debate by arguing that hairstyling among African women is neither simply a matter of stylization nor a product of internalized racism and self-hate. This section looks at the existing scholarship and major debates on hair altering among African women.

Obiagele Lake, a professor of Anthropology with a focus on racism, colonialism, and sexism, explores the cultural and psychological effects of racism as embodied in hair and skin politics among people of African descent in her monograph, *Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African America* (2003). Lake argues that Africans alter their hair as a result of psychological and cultural damages they suffered during colonialism, slavery and other racist historical events. According to her "When Europeans first exploited Africans in the fourteenth century, they instilled the idea that Africans were without intelligence, without culture, and without beauty" (Lake xi). She points out that since the period of the European invasion of African lands and the forceful relocation of many Africans to unfamiliar lands, racist ideologies, formed by Europeans to make Africans believe that they were inferior to White people physically and mentally, have successfully taken root among Africans.

Lake calls her perspective on African people's hair and body-altering culture 'internalized racism.' In her view, "Africans on the continent and in the diaspora responded [to the racism Europeans forced on them] by internalizing negative representations of themselves and used all means possible to recreate themselves in a European image" (Obiagele 73). In other words, the prevalent desire and preference of straight hair and other European features among those of African descent is proof of the success of the damaging ideologies they were fed and the racist systems and structures within which they live. To Lake, therefore, African people's

consistent act of changing their hair, skin and other parts of their bodies, is proof of internalized racism.

To the position that Africans indulge in body modification practices as a matter of choice, style, and versatility, Lake uses newspaper articles, advertisements and explores language in African American literature to show that Africans who indulge in hair and body modification practices do so, not as a matter of any of these things, but to distance themselves from blackness and get closer to whiteness even as those practices prove dangerous, damaging, self-denying and self-alienating. She treats those who say that hair straightening is a matter of simple preference with skepticism. Lake challenges the style choice argument by further pointing out that even though hair extensions were part of pre-colonial Africa and some African ethnic groups use natural formulas to relax their hair prior to the manufacturing and proliferation of hair straighteners, hair straightening and extensions were only one of the many styles African people wore rather than being the norm as they are today. She also pointed out that natural hair is not a limit to style variation.

As to why hair straightening has persisted among African people, Lake says that it is African people's way of handling the many damaging stereotypes they encounter daily. According to her, African Americans were still faced with numerous problems after slavery ended in 1865. Apart from not being educated and thus forced to sell their labor cheaply on farms and domestic spaces, they experienced violence and rejection that kept them at the bottom. Appearance played a major role in how African American people were treated. Light-skinned African Americans who also happen to have "good hair," to a large extent, enjoyed privileges that dark skin people with "bad hair" were denied. To access some of those privileges, many African Americans welcomed the idea of bleaching and relaxing their hair when the opportunity

presented itself. They also made attempts to change their nose and lips through activities like "pinching" and less grinding (Obiagele 54). Therefore, Lake concludes, altering their bodies was and still is, a conscious effort made to survive, be respected, and be able to access opportunities.

Throughout the book, Lake juxtaposes her understanding of the hair problem as a binary between African and European cultural values and physical appearance. She insists throughout her writing that the European cultural invasion of African people's lifeways is the reason why African people have tried and are still trying to change not only how they look but how they worship, how they construct family, how they speak and how they socialize among others. In other words, Europeans are to blame for the current hair-altering culture among African people because it is their actions that taught and forced African people to hate themselves. In Lake's view, African people have come to accept that European features like long smooth straight and wavy hair and light skin, are superior to African features like coily hair, dark skin, and thick lips because of racism. It is a matter of blackness vs whiteness.

While Lake makes a tremendous contribution to the hair debate by connecting cultural histories and situations from all over the African diaspora and recognizing that African people's preference for straight hair has roots in European cultural invasion of African ways, her argument that hair modification among African women is a response to achieve European features out of internalized racism and self-hate is overly simplistic; it leaves many questions unanswered. Lake's position is overly simplistic because she lays all the blame on the shoulders of white supremacy and constructs her arguments in a binary – African bodies vs European ideals. So, one is left wondering: are all hair modifications that African women make found in whiteness? Is the white supremacy-generated internalized racism and self-hate she talks about adequate in challenging all alternative reasons African women have cited regarding why they

alter their hair? She addressed only some; style, choice, and versatility. Is Lake's argument true for continental African women as it is virtually so for African American women? But some African women have also pointed to easier management, cost, stereotypes, and privileges as reasons why they wear straight hair.

Furthermore, though Lake argues that white women, indeed all women, are forced to play to the male gaze due to sexism upheld by patriarchy, she seems to neglect her own argument when it comes to African women. If it is true that all women are forced to play to the male gaze, why does she insist that the situation of African women is different, and that difference is racist structures and systems and psychological and cultural damage? How do we explain attempts by white women to achieve features like thick lips and big buttocks, that are predominant among Africans? If the problem was racism, then should African men not be relaxing their hair and wearing weaves like the women? Moreover, how about the other racial groups that alter their bodies and yet do not share the same white colonial domination and enslavement history as Africans? Some Asian people apply chemical mixtures to their hair to relax it more, and white women curl their hair with hot irons to achieve certain hairstyles, yet these groups are not accused of self-hate the same way African women who relax their hair are.

Furthermore, when Lake wrote *Blue Veins and Kinky Hair* in 2003, one of the scholars she was replying was Kobena Mercer. Her argument that the predominance of hair straightening and weaves among African American women is not simply a matter of style was in direct opposition to Mercer's argument in his 1987 paper "Black Hair/Style Politics." Reacting to issues surrounding Michael Jackson's incident in which his (Michael's) hair caught fire in 1987, Mercer took the opposite position of popular nationalist arguments and insisted that African American people's habit of hair straightening did not stem from a desire to be white. Mercer calls

his theory creolized stylization. To him, hair straightening, like many other cultural aspects of African American life, was simply a matter of style, a creation of art that embodies different cultural values (Mercer 5-8).

Ironically, Mercer discusses his theory of stylization by recognizing that African hair is burdened with unpleasant racist stereotypes. In Mercer's own words, "These styles sought to 'liberate' the materiality of black hair from the burdens bequeathed by racist ideology" (8). Yet, he fails to lead the same logic to a conclusion that recognizes that stereotypes attached to afro-textured hair are part of the reasons why African people attempt to alter their hair; it is not simply a matter of style. According to Mercer, both afro and dreadlocks on one side, and waves, perms, and conks, on the other side, are stylistic responses to the negative meanings African hair is burdened with within a racist system. Therefore, the contention – the issue that nationalist African Americans are unhappy with - is more about one group's styles emphasizing 'natural,' and the other emphasizing artwork (5). He further attacks the natural hair group by insisting that no one's hair is actually natural; even afros and locks are cultured before they are able to achieve their looks.

Mercer's creolized stylization argument is valid in the sense that afro-textured hairstyles like locks and afros and straight/wavy hairstyles like perms and weaves are truly African American peoples responses that seek to tell white America and the world that, African hair could be versatile and appreciated. Mercer's argument is a valid one, but it does little to fully explain the African hair issue. Those who complain about hair altering and other body modification practices among African people as rudiments of self-hatred and internalized racism do not deny that those practices are responses of African people to racist systems and structures.

Some of the argument Mercer make are trivial if not bogus. What does it mean to say nobody's hair is ever natural? Do those who advocate for natural hair say that African women should not style their hair – moisturize, wash, manipulate to form styles, among others? Those who argue for the other side established that they have an issue with the constant attempt by African people to achieve a certain form of hair – straight/wavy/curly hair - usually through dangerous ways. Mercer accuses nationalists of being moral police due to this. But is hair altering not a moral issue that has to do with racial/ethnic pride, as much as it is a style and choice issue?

Mercer's stylization argument is also problematic in the sense that, he suggests that style, particularly variety, and "modern" fashion infusion, cannot happen within the confines of afro-textured hair. This perception is debatable. African people can burrow western hairstyles and wear them with their afro-textured hair without having to alter its texture the way hair straightening does. The ponytail hairstyle I wore on the day by boss prevented me from attending the meeting with him is a style mainly worn by straight-haired women. And that is why mine looked more like a palm tree/pineapple than a ponytail. It is because, even though I caught my hair up, it could not flow on my back the same way long straight hair would have flowed. Also, African women wear extension braids. African people until recently wore their hair in all sorts of artistic coiffures. If the issue of hair was simply a contention between nature and art like Mercer claims, then there would have been issues with extension braids too.

Those who argue that hair straightening and weaves are rudiments of self-hate are rather concerned with what it means for African people to go through self-harming processes like hair straightening so that they could achieve acceptable/beautiful hair. Like Rooks spoke about in her book (1996), her mother had a problem with hair straightening, yet she was okay with braids.

Mercer himself recognized that African hair was burdened with negative meanings. Therefore, it should not be far fetched for him to recognize that one of the ways African women have tried to survive and thrive is by removing themselves from that negativity as much as they can. And like he said, hair is one of the parts of the body that can be easily altered. So African people took advantage of it and changed it more toward the hair forms that they were socialized to believe is more acceptable.

Overall, I disagree with Mercer's stylization argument, but I stand on his argument that African people have responded to racism by changing their features. But as Mercer argues, that does not mean they are trying to be white. But unlike Mercer, I would not conceptualize straight hair culture among African women as a binary issue involving white and black cultural values. White people are not the only ones with the so-called acceptable straight silky hair. Also, the unfortunate relationship African hair shares with racism does not mean that hair straightening and weave should be automatically read as self-hate and internalized racism. It is neither a matter of self-hate or simply stylization. African people live in racist systems and those systems have influenced them. They are also people who engage in the creation of art – of which style is a major ingredient. But there are other reasons why African women straighten their hair and wear weaves.

Some of the major considerations that Mercer neglected (which this study would address) include African perspectives and experiences. A problem with Mercer's conceptualization of the African hair situation is that he limited it to the African American (and other 'slave destinations') experiences and hair arts such as Black Panther, afros, dreadlocks, conks, and jazz. By doing so, he fails to see points that an African perspective/cultural knowledge would have highlighted. For example, if he was considering hair altering culture within continental African people, it would

have been difficult for him to make the argument he makes that conks and jazz being creolized art forms and locks and afros not being natural. The continent's traditional art forms borrowed from cultures beyond Africa but the art was its own original making.

In the case of gender, Mercer at the end of his essay, calls on researchers to widen the conversation on hair by looking at it from consumers, workers and gender perspectives. This is a good call, but it does not change the fact that Mercer blurred the line between African women and men when he didn't need to. He neglected gender throughout his essay. Meanwhile, women and men do not experience hairstyling and aesthetics the same way, and this was clear in the way men and women treated their hair in the African American communities Mercer researched. There are differences in women's and men's hairstyle choices that any scholar interested in discussing the issue must pay attention to.

If Mercer had paid attention to gender, he would have realized that the straight hair African women wear is not a cultural creolization as he suggests. In straight hair culture, the afro-textured hair is totally transformed to feel and look nothing like afro-textured hair. Styles that straight hair encourages are not Afrocentric either. To have a creolized creation, all parties involved in the creation must have elements in there. What do African women have in the straight hair they wear? In other words, how is the Indian hair an African woman glues or sews over her hair a creolized creation? The conk worn by African American men in the 1940s can be a creolized creation to some extent. Because it is neither afro-textured or straight, and it did not copy white styles as Mercer himself points out. But not the straight hair forms that have come to stay among African women. Those hairstyles certainly copy from elsewhere. So, scholars who categorize straight hair culture among African women as a creation outside African hair are not out of place. Their arguments should be considered in any case.

Even if we are to accept Mercer's stylization argument, how do we explain the situation that only African women are predominantly straightening their hair and wearing the hair of women from other racial groups? Are African people the only artistic people in the world? Why this particular artistic display if it is simply a matter of style which has nothing to do with the desire to alter their features? In fact, why are people from other racial groups not altering their hair to look coily? In Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair* (2009), not even one of the people (including African people) he approached with afro-textured hair, were willing to buy it. Most people he approached expressed disgust and made expressions that suggest that no one wants to wear afro-textured hair over their straight hair. So, if people from other racial groups are unwilling to change their hair from straight/wavy/curly to coily, and no one is buying afro-textured hair African men throw away in barbershops every day the same way African women are buying straight wavy hair that Indian women dedicate to temples/gods, then the issue goes beyond stylization. We must ask questions and explore answers beyond stylization.

This paper explores answers beyond the style argument. It looks at other reasons – away from the exclusive self-hate and creolized stylization positions. Also, it considers gender a major factor that influences African women's hair practices. And lastly, it focuses on continental Africans by collecting data from Ghanaian people and their experiences, African movies, music videos, and news on African hair issues on the continent. By doing these, I hope to address gaps left by Mercer and others who have focused so much on the African American experience and neglected gender and other factors in their discussions of hair altering practices among African people. As Mercer noted, there is a politically charged way of looking at things in diasporic cultures - black and white. This study avoids the binary racial perspective.

Other scholars who make similar arguments to Lake and Mercer's positions include Parmer et al in their 2004 publication "Physical Attractiveness As a Process of Internalized Oppression and Multigenerational Transmission in African American Families" on one side, and Tate – "…Not all the women want to be White" on the other. Like Lake, Parmer et al argue that African women's straight hair desire comes from a place of oppression, inferiority complex, internalized racism, and hate for their features, while Tate argues that other reasons (i.e. personal choice to experience other black features) must be considered in explaining African women's body modification practices. These scholars would not be discussed here due to limited space and time. Moreover, there is no need to repeat arguments that have already been thoroughly presented through discussions on Lake and Mercer.

De-Centering Whiteness and Re-Centering Blackness: The Way Forward for African Hair and Black Beauty Studies

In her article, "The Weave as an 'Unhappy' Technology of Black Femininity," Simidele Dosekun, a Media and Cultural Studies lecturer with a research focus in black feminist theory at the University of Sussex, discussed the place of whiteness in exploring and understanding the prevalent weave culture among African women. Premised on her dissertation research conducted among young Nigerian women on what she called "hyper-feminine style," Dosekun argues that cultural studies scholars need to move away from the common practice of seeking an understanding of black women's hair extension and straightening culture from a whiteness-centered approach. She called her theoretical proposal a conceptualization of "the weave as an unhappy technology of black femininity" (68). In her view, the weave should be accepted as part

of Black hair in the sense that it is utilized by black women to solve the natural hair problem – what their hair fails to do, rather than be construed as white women's hair that African women are wearing.

Dosekun accused scholars who have written on Black hair, especially black cultural studies, and feminist writers, of essentializing and simplifying the issue and giving more power to whiteness at the peril of black autonomy. She accurately noted that "There is a tendency, scholarly and popular, in Africa and beyond, to see black women's appearance with hair longer and less 'kinky' than 'nature' would have it as evidence of a relative racial 'self-hatred' and 'inferiority complex'; as a form of repudiating 'blackness' and sign of desiring 'whiteness.'" (63). She explained that "such too-ready and too-simple suppositions" give white supremacy a firmer grip over black feminine subjectivity (64). She backs her theoretical perspective by arguing that scholars deny black bodies agency and portray them as people who lack the ability to think critically when they explain all black cultures from a white-centered approach as many of them have done in the African hair conversation.

In Dosekun's view, even though whiteness has an important role to play when it comes to understanding African people's contemporary hair culture, especially in respect to historical events that led to the racialization of black bodies and the devaluation of African features, it should not be the point from which all meaning regarding black women's hair culture is drawn. She suggests that the best way to explore weave culture among black women is to look at it in a complex way and let black women themselves tell researchers why they wear weaves and engage in other hair altering practices. In her own words, "black feminists should know that black beauty is deeply complex and should also know to accord it status and consideration as a thing in itself, not a mere derivative or external imposition [of whiteness]" (Dosekun 65). This

unconventional theoretical perspective does not only provide a new framework for researchers interested in studying the hair culture of African women, it also throws them a challenge to research hair without centering their explanations in whiteness.

Dosekun is not alone. Other scholars made similar arguments, some of which served as bases for Dosekun's point of view. Shirley Tate, a Critical Cultural and Racial Studies scholar who specializes in intersections of racial identity, beauty, and gender, and currently teaches at the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta, is one of them. In her article, "…Not all the Women Want to be White: Decolonizing Beauty Studies," Tate argues that black women who indulge in body modification do not do so because they want to be white. She accuses cultural studies scholars who argue that "Black women want to be white' because white beauty is iconic" of "misrepresenting Black women's beauty practices as signs of psychic damage" (Tate 195). In her view, black beauty is multiple, and therefore, women who change parts of their bodies are simply projecting that multiplicity. It does not mean that they are trying to become white people or have been psychologically damaged.

Tate further argues that, by having the freedom to alter parts of one's body, black women are showing that they have agency. She uses Lil' Kim, a black female rap musician who has publicly undergone several body modifications' views and actions regarding bleaching and various forms of aesthetic surgery to drive her point home. Like Dosekun, she points out that black women have agency, and therefore, their aesthetic actions cannot be limitedly explained as derivatives of racial oppression and approximation of whiteness. She summarily argues that the assumption that African women are trying to be white is inaccurate and therefore, whiteness must be removed from the study of African women's beauty practices. To Tate, white beauty is not iconic; all beauty is racialized and performed, so white women are performers of beauty from

other racial groups the same way beauty among other racial groups includes the performance of features that are considered white.

Dosekun and Tate's theoretical views give this work a framework that is much needed. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, even though women on the continent of Africa and those in the diaspora have similar hair cultures, the circumstances under which these two groups adopted hair relaxing and weaves may not be the same. Moreover, African women's decision to relax their hair may have nothing or little to do with a desire to be white. Due to this, a framework that is not heavily determinant on whiteness is needed. While this study does not deny that whiteness played a major role and continues to influence African women's aesthetic choices, particular among women in the diaspora and continental African women who are heavily influenced by Western media and colonial legacies, it hopes to conduct its work from a blackness-centered perspective rather than a whiteness-centered approach.

The focus on whiteness has denied researchers a chance to understand black hair from African ideological perspectives. It also denies African scholars a chance to make projections about African people's aesthetics purely about African people. The white gaze is constantly determining what Black Cultural Studies scholars focus on. Hlonipha Mokoena, a South African scholar who makes similar arguments to Dosekun and Tate, asked: "might we, as black women, position ourselves as anything other than victims of a dominant and pervasive "white culture"? Might we talk about hair "now," without denying its over-reacting historicity and facticity?" (125) Mokoena's question is important because it sheds light on the need to study African issues, particularly those about African bodies, through African voices.

The intensive study of African women's hair culture from the whiteness-centered approach denies African people more than agency. It is also heavily influencing what African people accept, reject and appreciate about themselves, especially in places like America where everything is racialized, and race plays a central role in exploring and understanding all social structures. Even in Ghana, where whiteness is hardly explicitly present, preference of straight hair forms, and rejection of afro-textured hair and Afrocentric hairstyles, are quickly read as "colonial/slavery mentality" and "mental slavery." The following comment was made by a facebook user who explains African women's straight hair culture as effects of colonialism.

> Perceptions.....According to chapter 6 of the mental slavery handbook, making everything African/ black look distasteful was of utmost priority in ensuring that slavery becomes institutionalized. We live in a society where we the individuals continue to glorify everything white as normal and everything black as out of the ordinary or accepted. It's quite unfortunate that you had to go through that, but the real problem is not your boss but rather society at large. Don't go looking for the mental slavery book, cos it is stored on the hard drive of all 'slaves.' I have read everything here and it's so interesting. The African has defined himself with the yardstick of the white, and that is what we see all around us. The African wants to look white - she bleaches, wears hideous wigs, and all sorts of fashion based on the western standard. Anything black is unacceptable. They define beauty as slim woman while we see a woman with protruding buttock as beautiful. What do we see on beauty pageants - women who have to go to all lengths to be slim to the detriment of their health. I love everything black - the Kaba, the *daavi* hairstyle, the braided hair, oh the beads around a lady's waist. When people condemn your Africanness, just take a step back and look at them through their own mirrors, not yours.

> Be what you want to be and don't let anybody define you, my dear. (Facebook user 7, May 2019)

This was one of the stances taken under the Facebook post in which I narrated how my boss at the time prevented me from going to a meeting with him because he said my hairstyle was not appropriate for a corporate event. From this comment, one can see that choices regarding style within African settings are read in a binary way: depending on what one considers acceptable, certain hairstyles are read as "colonial mentality" / "mental slavery" while others are viewed as representing consciousness and love for African ways of life. But what if colonialism and slavery have nothing to do with it? After all, women from cultures who didn't suffer slavery or colonialism are also changing parts of their bodies (including white women whose body modifications are hardly read as copying blackness).

To sum up, it will be quite challenging to discuss black hair and black women's bodies outside whiteness in view of the historical relationship between whiteness and blackness, but I agree with Dosekun, Tate, and Mokoena that, it is necessary to treat African women as people with agency and autonomy, nonetheless. This paper attempts to give Ghanaian women a chance to speak for themselves even as it measures their stories against historical events such as colonialism and slavery. It also disengages from a binary perspective by looking at African women's hair relationship with non-African and non-European peoples.

CHAPTER III: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Hairstyling Among African People

For more than a century, many African people have been altering the look and feel of their hair by applying heat or chemicals to make it straight, and sometimes curly. Also, hair extensions made from fiber, animal hair and human hair are commonly used by African people. Various reasons are behind both hair straightening/curling and hair extensions by African women. Many African people and non-African groups have come to view straight hair as more professional, more beautiful, more manageable, and, ultimately, more acceptable. Due to this, it is common to see black African people, particularly women, with straight hair even though their hair is naturally coily. Today, a lot of African women relax their hair, wear weaves, or braid with hair extensions as a norm but, the situation was not always like that.

Prior to Western, Christian and Islamic cultural and religious infiltrations, which some scholars (Byrd and Tharps 2; Batulukisi, translated by Neugroschel 25; Palmenaer 122; Lawal 107) point to as the sole cause of the destruction of African hair forms and styles, Africans wore their own hair and hairstyles with pride and took great care of their hair. Even when they occasionally made extensions from fiber and human hair, it was usually to achieve a certain style rather than replace and hide their hair, and the hair extension in many cases came from fellow Africans; it looked like their own hair. Hairstyling was about beauty, but it was also much more than cultivating a pleasing physical appearance: Africans considered their hair a major part of their identity, spirituality, and creativity. They also saw it as a symbol for their biological, social, economic, political, religious, and psychological status in society (Sieber 18 – 23; Batulukisi 25, 37; Herreman 47; Siegmann 71). A lot of time was invested in hairstyling among both women and men. Thus, in many African societies, unkempt hair was regarded as unsightly, and people

who did not take care of their hair were seen as social misfits (Batulukisi translated by Neugroschel 25; Byrd and Tharps 3,5,11). This section looks at the history of black African people's hair and how it evolved into today's hair practices that are now ironically dominated by straight hair culture.

Before the advent of Brazilian hair and perming, Africans wore their hair in many shapes and sizes without necessarily altering the texture. A study of the history of African hair reveals that African coiffures are among the most complex styles in the world. As the art collection *Hair in African Art and Culture* edited by Roy Sieber, Frank Herreman and Niangi Batulukusi show, Africans cultures are among the richest when it comes to the time, care, and decoration given to hair. Byrd and Tharp, writers of the famous *Hair Story*, while noting that African people may not be the only people who took great pride in their hair, observed that Europeans who first encountered African people were surprised by the complexity, style, and decorations of African hairstyles (9). The following account from reports on hair in Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire) and the Gold Coast (currently part of Ghana) by Marchais in the early 1700s and Bosman in the late 1600s, mentioned that:

> The Dress of the richer Sort is various, especially with respect to their Heads, in which they take the greatest pride… Some wear their hair very long and curled and plaited together, or tied up to the Crown: Others adjust it in small curls, smeared with Palm-Oil, and a Sort of Dye, which they order in the form of Rose, or Crown; decking with Gold Toys, and a Kind of Coral, called on the Coast Conta de Terra, which they sometimes value three Times beyond the finest Gold… Some shave-off all their Hair, leaving only one Part, about an inch broad, and in the shape of a Cross, or a Half Moon, or Circle. They also wear in their hair one or more small narrow combs, or two, three, or at most

> four, sharp Teeth, being like a Fork without Haft, or Handle. (Astley 11:631 ctd by Sieber 21)

The account above shows that African people took pride in styling their hair, and managing afro-textured hair was not a problem as is commonly believed today (that coily hair is difficult to manage); they had tools and products specially made for their hair.

African people styled and protected their hair with various instruments and products before the arrival of Western tools like scissors, blades, and hot combs to the continent. According to Sieber, Barbot (presumably an early explorer who visited Africa) noted in 1679 that people "wear long locks of hair, plaited and twisted, which they daub with palm oil and red earth" (20). Palmenaer also notes that "the hair was rubbed with palm oil to make it shine." (121) The following account by Astley cited in *Hair in African Art and Culture* gives a good picture of hair styling tools and products among African groups:

> They comb it with a wooden or Ivory Fork, with four Teeth, which is always fastened on their head. They also anoint their Hair with Palm-oil and Charcoal… to keep it black and make it grow… They shave themselves with knives, which they temper so, as to fall [a] little short of Razors… They are fond of their beards and comb them daily wearing them as long as the Turks. (125)

Other early moisturizing products included fish and other animal fat and palm kernel oil. According to Karel Nel, "the hairstyle is rubbed animal fat and colored a deep or brilliant red with ocher…" (152) Until date, palm-kennel oil is used to moisturize hair and skin and cure numerous diseases among the Ewe and Igbo peoples in West Africa.

From various accounts, it is evident that Africans had basic razors and combs of different sizes and shapes before European missionaries introduced scissors to them. What is popularly

called an afro comb today was a major part of hairstyling in many ethnic groups. Even though afro was not a commonly worn hairstyle, African cultures took great pride in ensuring that their hair was well combed. They regarded uncombed hair as a hairstyle only suited for special spiritual people. From pictures burrowed from many cultures on the continent and displayed in *Hair in African Art and Culture*, Afro combs could have as few as two teeth (i.e. some combs from the Ivory Coast region) to as many as thirty-three (such as those from the Congo). Hairstylists, which were pretty much everyone, also made use of hairpins and dividers used in achieving styles and keeping them in place. Some hairpins were made from bronze, others from wood, Ivory, and even fishbone.

As mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, African people styled their hair in various ways for a variety of purposes. From the South to the West and East, African people wore hairstyles that served as symbols for their ethnicity, gender, age, socio-political and religious status, occupation, marital status, aesthetic values, and many others. Yoruba women, for example, wore hairstyles that indicated their marital status: unmarried women wore simple styles of *ipako, ojopeti,* and *koroba* while married women and soon to be married women wore *panumo* and *agoago* complex hairstyles (Johnson; Talbot; and Houlberg all ctd in Lawal 98). Among the same people, messengers of the king used to wear half-shaved hairstyles (Lawal 105). According to Vaughan, ethnic groups in the Mandara Mountains wore distinctive hairstyles to differentiate between one another (111). Among the Margi of Nigeria, boys and men shaved their hair while young women maintained elaborate hairstyles, and older Margi women shaved off their hair like the men (Vaughan 112). Wealthy people in most African ethnic groups wore elaborate styles, sometimes similar to those won by royal people of their communities. Dreadlocks have religious symbolic value among the Ewe people of Ghana, Togo, and Benin. A child born through an

appeal to the gods is known as *Dorflevi*. The parents of that child maintain his/her hair without combing it and decorate locked hair with cowries until they perform required rites that would allow the child to comb his/her hair.

Hairstyles also served as platforms of art. A lot of African hairstyling was meant to display the aesthetic values of the groups that wore them. To Africans, hair goes beyond nature: hair is a creation away from nature. So they took the utmost care of it. In some of the earliest European accounts on African hairstyling (such as observations by Laplume, a Belgian commander in 1893 to 1911), it is mentioned that to create styles that capture the attention of one another, women of the Uele region of present-day the Democratic Republic of Congo spend a minimum of two hours a day to style their hair. In other situations, such as occasion hairstyles like the basket coiffures, and foundational styling among the Mangbetu, also of the Congo, women take days and even months to achieve the styles.

Hairstyling among Africans was not a commercial activity, but rather, hairstyling venues constituted spaces within which women formed and strengthened relationships. Such times also allowed women to get caught up on the latest happenings in their communities. Even though there were special people who had exceptional skills to style hair and were often called on to style fellow community members' hair in some African ethnic groups (Byrd and Tharps 6), hairdressing did not involve hairdressers styling hair and taking money in return in traditional African societies. Women styled each other's hair, same as teenage girls and boys, and older women or men styled girls and boys' hair especially during initiation rites. Till date, Ewe and Fante women located in rural areas in Ghana style each other's hair without (direct) payment. I observed this as a Ewe and when I worked alongside a friend who worked in Mankesim, a Fante town in the Central Region of Ghana. The tradition of salons as interaction and bonding spaces

can also be seen in African American salons and barbershops. Due to the sensitive nature of information shared during styling sections, Africans had (still have) a custom of allowing only their trusted friends and family members to style their hair. They believed that one's hair and stories in evil people's hands could harm them (Mbodj ctd in Byrd and Tharps 5).

While available data shows that African American women started relaxing their hair during slavery, and hair straightening proliferated among them by the beginning of the twentieth century through the entrepreneurship of women like Annie Marlon and Madam C.J Walker, African women did not shift predominantly to straight hair, particularly the long flowing weaves that are widespread today, until much later in the twentieth century. Both written and photographic data show that African American women were still wearing their hair in indigenous African hairstyles that had connection to their ethnic group origin, in the first part of the twentieth century and much later. Many pictures featured in the essay and art collection, *Hair in African Art and Culture* support this claim. Also, in pictures taken by the world-renowned Ghanaian photographer, James Barnor, dated from 1950s to about 1970/1980, African women's hairstyles featured both afro-textured hair forms in afro-centric styles and straight hairstyles. This shows that heat and chemical hair altering and the long flowing straight/wavy weaves that West African women wear today are very recent developments.

Though Bosman mentioned the importation of wigs into sub-Saharan Africa as early as 1600s in his accounts on trade (Astley ctd in Sieber and Herreman 59), hair straightening arrived much later. It is difficult to pinpoint a particular time frame within which hair straightening arrived among continental African people since the time and scope of this does not allow for much historical digging. However, if one considers the following points, one, can project that hair straightening arrived among continental African people somewhere in the early parts of the

twentieth century, were moderately spread by 1970, and started gaining widespread domination from the 1990s onwards.

- Available accounts credit the first creations of hair relaxer tools, products, and techniques to African Americans and French people
- Large scale hair straightening products, tools, and techniques began and proliferated among African American women from the year 1900 to about 1920 onwards
- Available means of cultural and material products transmission mediums in the past are not as fast and efficient as today's, so it must have taken some time for products developed in America to reach Africa
- Pictures that were taken as late as the 1980s still showed models in both afro-textured hairstyles and straight hairstyles

Also, hair straightening must have been worn side by side with wigs and this makes it difficult to tell whether the straight hairstyles in pictures taken before the 1990s are hairstyles made from hair extensions or the models' own hair. "In Ghana in the mid-1960s, wigs were in great demand among women of high fashion" (Sieber 59). This statement shows that straight hairstyles were first worn mainly in the form of wigs before hair straightening became a major practice. It also reveals that, ironically, hairstyling in Africa started changing tremendously to include straight hair during the wave of independence on the continent from the 1950s onwards. In other words, at the same time that African nations were making decisions to control their own destiny, they were also indulging more in foreign cultural practices. Wigs were appearing more in African women's hairstyle choices.

In photographs taken by James Barnor, a Ghanaian photography pioneer who spent several years taking photos in Europe and Ghana, and introduced color photography to Ghana, women wore hairstyles that were neither predominantly straightened nor natural. The photographs were taken between 1950 and 1980. In a photograph featuring James Barnor's eldest sister and dated 1950 (this was the time the first independence acts were being put to play in the continent), taken in Ghana's capital city Accra, she is seen wearing a well-pressed hairstyle. Her hair form is straightened. Though it is difficult to say whether the hair form and style were common among Ghanaian women at the time, one could argue that the style was one that only the elite women of Gold Coast society, like Barnor's sister, had access to. I arrived at this conclusion by considering the privileged status and great influence of the Barnor family, particularly James and his sister who had been to London and worked there by that time.

This led me to conclude that elite Ghanaian women must have been wearing straight hairstyles that were similar to their black European and American counterparts by 1950. Hair straightening was prevalent in America and other diasporic locations by this time. In a photograph taken at Rochester by James Barnor in 1966, the model, Maria Hallowi, a black African woman is seen wearing a straight hairstyle that ends at her jaw, while posing as a cover girl for Drum in Europe (refer to fig. 1). In another photo taken around the same time in London for the same company, the model also wears a straight hairstyle, but hers is short, it ends at her ear (refer to fig. 2). In a third photo taken during the wedding of James Barnor's cousin in Europe, the bride and her maid of honor are seen wearing straight hair (refer to fig. 3). It is unclear if they are wearing weaves or they achieved the style by straightening their own hair. Deductively, at the time straight hair was just available to a few elite women in Ghana, hair straightening was more common among African women in the Western world.

Fig. 1. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: Marie Hallowi; Place: Rochester; Year: 1966

Fig. 2. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: Rosemarie Thompson; Place: London; Year: 1966-1967

Fig. 3. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: James Barnor's cousin; Place: London; Year: 1964

Women shared hairstyles beyond straight hairstyles. The afro hairstyle, which was started in America, was becoming more popular alongside straight hairstyles around this time among African women in Europe and Africa. In a photograph featuring Mohammed Ali, the legendary boxer, and his fans in London in 1966, two women shown in the picture had on an afro and a straight hairstyle (see fig. 4). Though afro was not a distinctively African hairstyle that ethnic groups on the continent wore, pictures from the 1970s onwards show many women in Afro hairdos. In pictures taken by James Barnor during the immediate post-colonial era in Ghana, many women are seen in afro hairdos. Standing by two cars in Accra and photographed by Barnor in 1971, a woman is seen wearing a thoroughly combed high afro (see fig. 5). In another picture taken around the same time at a wedding ceremony in Accra, Ghana, the bride is in straight hair, but her two bridesmaids and a female family member or friend are seen wearing afros (see fig. 6). In a third picture taken in the 1970s, a group of three well dressed young women are surrounded by children in different sizes of afro and shortly cropped afro-textured hairstyles (see fig. 7).

Fig. 4. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: Mohammed Ali surrounded by his fans; Place: London; Year: 1966

Fig. 5. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: A shop assistant at the Sick-Hagemeyer store; Place: Accra; Year: 1971

Fig. 6. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: A Wedding at Holy Trinity Cathedral; Place: Accra; Year: 1970-1980

Fig. 7. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: A group of children, after Sunday Church Service at Holy Trinity Cathedral; Place: Accra; Year: Early 1970s

But indigenous African styles from perioids preceeding the latter part of the twentieth century were still in vogue. Newly-developed national and continental Afrocentric hairstyles like threading and "extensionless" cornrows, were worn in both the Western world and Africa alongside the newly discovered afros and the straight hairstyles elite women displayed. In a picture taken in 1953, a lady in the company of two gentlemen at the Youth Development Club party is in a threading hairstyle that is popular among the Ewe people until that date (see fig. 8). In another 1972 London photograph, the model, an African woman, is wearing a bikini with which she accompanied with a threaded style (see fig. 9). This photo is particularly interesting because one would expect an African woman to straighten her hair or wear a straight weave in a society of naturally straight-haired white women[2].

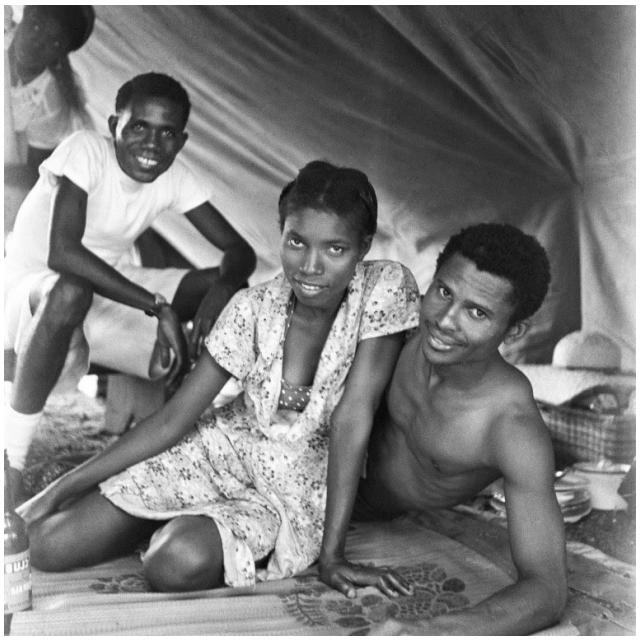

Fig. 8. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: Blavo and friends at a Youth Development Club Party; Place: Scout Headquarters, Accra, Ghana; Year: 1953

[2] All descriptions are made based on James Barnor's photographs that were displayed in the Washington Post on September 30th, 2015, as part of an article written by Nicole Crowder, and a featured a piece on James Barnor in the Clementine de la Feronniere.

Fig. 9. Photo by: James Barnor; Model: Woman posing in swim wear from London; Place: Accra; Year: 1972

But towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, things changed more toward hair straightening and hair extensions on the continent to the detriment of afro-textured hair and traditional African hairstyles. In an essay on her hair experience in Ghana as a visiting American scholar in 1997, Mariama Ross, notes that many urban Ghanaian women she came across "wore short straightened coiffures, some sported braided extensions, and some wore close-cropped natural do's" (166). Nevertheless, on her second trip to the country just two years later in 1999, she surprisingly saw "almost exclusively straight hair on women over the age of nineteen or so and proliferation of women wearing extensions" (Ross, 166). This means that Ghanaian women's hair preferences did not only change by 1999, they also changed very quickly toward straight hair forms.

The time frame and the speed at which hair straightening and extensions spread among Ghanaians had something to do with the aggressive advertisements that idolized Western culture and straight-haired women. Ross reports that in her 1999 visit to Ghana "Billboards and TV

commercials advertise hair straightening products with long swinging hair-styles worn by thin models in short, tight clothing" (167). According to her, one needed not to struggle to see that the message in Ghana shared so many similarities with that in the US media directed at African American women. Adverts were promising African women more desirability, sexiness, and popularity if they changed their hair from coily, short, and stiff to straight long and flowy hair. From Ross' account, and a study of photographs from that period, one would agree that the message was very successful. Many Ghanaian women came to view straight hair not only as better than coily hair but as a norm for hairstyling. Natural coily hair and indigenous Afrocentric styles that held meaning beyond the aesthetic, rather became a strange occurrence among Ghanaian women, particularly among urban women who also happen to be highly educated, wealthy, and in some cases, celebrities who hold a lot of influence over the rest of the population.

In the last twenty years, the dominance of straightened hair and hair extensions came to persist in Ghanaian society. There have only been few but impactful changes like hair extension imports from India, China, and other places, sometimes under the popular generic name, Brazilian hair, in addition to the more synthetic and less expensive hair extensions that are used mainly in braiding. Many young women who complete Senior High School (SHS) usually choose to relax their hair and wear extensions. Though almost all women relax their hair or have relaxed their hair at a point in their lives in addition to the usage of hair extensions, school-age children, usually below the age of eighteen, usually maintain cropped hair that they are required to comb thoroughly. Spotting of anything other than the recommended shortly cropped hair attracts severe punishment in many public schools in Ghana.

As a result of the association of hair form and style with age and education, similar to some late twentieth-century African hairstyles, hairstyle choice is used as a status indicator in Ghanaian society. The following comment by a participant in the study shows that those who wear shortly cropped hair, even when they are not children, are tagged with funny names that imply that they are kids: “Mainly the name-calling, losing out on some jobs. There are some jobs that prefer relaxed hair, so sometimes you lose out on that. People equally assume you are a student just because of the haircut” (Participant 1).

Beyond this, hair is used as a class signifier to determine where one lives (urban vs rural), what profession one belongs to (formal or informal) and whether one is poor or rich. The following comment gives a clear picture regarding some issues surrounding hair and class in Ghanaian society: “I once heard a man saying all the ladies who keep natural hair are depressed. Others say it is the poor and villagers who keep natural hair. [I] never [mind]. I just laugh over those comments and move on” (Participant 2). Straight wavy flowing long weaves are used as symbols of class in many West African societies. The situation is so perverse that the absence of weaves is seen as an indication of poverty or “brokenness.” One participant said that she was “once told [that she] didn’t have money i.e broke that's why [she] switched to [her] own hair. Others said that they have been told that they ‘looked like a house help,” “natural hair is for broke ladies,” and “poor people”(Participant 3). As these comments demonstrate, natural hair is sometimes read as a lack of money to afford straight hair.

Some women avoid wearing their hair natural because they do not want to be mistaken as poor (even if they are actually poor). Poverty is seen as ill-will and accompanied with shame in Ghanaian society. So, it is understandable why women would not want to be thought of as poor. In Ghana’s rural areas, some women, though not earning a living as high as some of their city

counterparts, still find various ways to make sure their hair is 'properly done.' By properly done, they mean relaxed or covered with a weave-on or a wig when situations and occasion demands. It is common to see many grandmothers who come from rural areas to attend their children's graduation ceremonies in Ghana's universities in the cities wearing straightened short hair that is achieved through weave-on or chemical relaxing. But, how did hair straightening begin and became so powerful among African women?

The Development and Proliferation of Hair Straightening Among Africans

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the particular time(s) continental African people (and non-African groups) started considering afro-textured hair problematic, less desirable and in some cases, unacceptable, and so moved more toward preference for straightening and hair extensions, as shown in the earlier discussion, the unsetting of natural hair has a strong relationship with the development and proliferation of hair straightening products and techniques among African people. In other words, the start and spread of hair relaxing products, tools, and techniques correlate with the decline of afro-textured hair and traditional African hairstyles among African people. In addition to this, many scholars argue that the devaluation of African features, including hair, started with the unequal relationship between Europeans and Africans on the continent and away from the continent. Their point is, it was racist systems and structures that forced African people to first start altering their hair in America. This section attempts to trace the events that eventually let to straight hair dominance among African people.

Available data shows that Europeans interpreted African features in both good and bad terms when they first met Africans on the continent. From some of the earliest accounts available on their experiences on the continent, one can see that African hair struck Europeans both as

beautiful and repulsive. Cada Mosto commenting on the hair culture of men of the Azanaghi ethnic group of present-day Senegal in 1455 wrote that "They wear their hair, which is black, frizzed over their shoulders, like Germans; and oil it every day with the Fat of fish, which makes them smell very strong; yet they repute it very modish." (Astley ctd in Sieber and Herreman 19) Mosto's statement shows that despite the value the people he met placed on their hair, he deemed how they moisturize their hair revolting. Palmenaer, writing on European colonizers' reaction and subsequent colonial policies toward African hair, reports that the elongation of the head and its hair decorations among the Mangbetu of the Congo were seen by the Belgian people as "attractive" but "bizarre" (122). This eventually led to propaganda in which post stamps that had the pictures of Mangbetu of Congo on it were sold in Belgium.

However, the mixed perception Europeans had about African hair and the 'free' system within which they made those observations discussed above quickly changed towards the negative when they began dealing in African slaves and creating territories within the continent. For example, the Mangbetu people were colonized by Belgium. So, in addition to making dehumanizing post stamps out of their images, the Belgian leadership later banned their head elongation rituals. African-American and other diasporic scholars argue that the devaluation of African hair started when their ancestors were put in chains and forced to board ships to foreign lands without their hair tools. The available literature supports both claims. The devaluation of African hair began when the relationship between African people and Europeans changed for the worse (Byrd and Tharps; Lake). Slavery is the most known historical event to have marked this change.

Even though Europeans arrived on the African continent as early as the fourteenth century, it was not until the sixteenth century, after they had discovered new lands in the

Americas and other places, that they began to heavily trade with African people for enslaved human beings. Earlier on, they were trading in other items. Thus, the first African people to visit America and Europe were free people. However, when Europeans' newly found lands needed labor, they saw a great opportunity in their trading partners in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the West Coast. African people were already engaging in some sort of slaver/ human trade prior to the arrival of Europeans. The need for large scale cheap labor in America, the discovery of African people and accompanying perception that they deserve to be reduced to slaves, coupled with the willingness of African people to indulge in human trade, resulting in the shipment of as many as twenty million Africans to the Americas and other islands where cotton, sugarcane, tobacco, and other plantations were located.

The circumstance under which those who were enslaved left their lands made it impossible for them to carry their hair tools and products to the new places they were going. From the illustration of the infamous Atlantic voyage, slaves were packed like cargo goods – very close to one another in transporting them from Africa to America. Due to this, many Africans left behind not only their families, friends and familiar culture, they also left behind their hairstyling tools and products. (see Willie Morrow's book, *400 years Without a Comb*) In their new land, hairdressing became very challenging for them because of the unavailability of tools and products and many other reasons.

African people's hair forever became transformed because they were disconnected from their homeland and hair practices, they had no tools and products to style their hair, they worked long hours, and they did not have a supportive environment and society. As Byrd and Tharps explained in their book, a first step in the transformation process of captured Africans to enslaved people was the shaving of the head. (14) It marked the beginning of the separation of

the African from his identity and, thereafter, his transformation into a black person – a racial term that marks inferiority. Without hair tools and products, African people who were captured must have newly grown hair which they could not attend to in the inhuman situations they found themselves during their transit, which involved many days in dungeons like the Elmina Castle located in Ghana, West Africa, and on the slave ships that took several months to bring them to the Americas and the Caribbean islands.

Living in a culture that was different from their own in addition to being among people who did not understand their ways and considered them inferior, African people did not have an environment that appreciated their physical features like hair and skin. According to Byrd and Tharps, "moreover, treasured African combs were nowhere to be found in the New World, so the once long, thick, and healthy tresses of both women and men became tangled and matted" (17). In addition to the lack of tools and products that they had in abundance in Africa, they also did not have their family and friends or community members to style their hair. These coupled with long hours working in the field, sometimes as long as fifteen hours (Byrd and Tharps16), only resulted into more negative stereotypes about African people's hair since they had little time to style their hair (Byrd and Tharps 17).

Away from their land, hair products, and faced with unfriendly perceptions about their hair, African people in the Americas began practicing with what they could find in the new land. The available account shows that long before hair relaxers were manufactured and hot combs became popular among African people, African Americans were experimenting with lye, grease, and sheep fleece carding tools to manage their hair since the time of slavery (Byrd and Tharps 23). The aim was to make their hair lie down flat like their enslavers or at least, make it presentable. Though enslaved African women who worked as nannies noticed that combing their

masters' children's hair was much easier than combing their own hair and that of their daughters, thus attempted to make their hair easy to comb by changing the texture, their hair experiments were also about achieving hair that white people will consider acceptable.

It was racist conditions that forced African Americans to start considering alternative ways of styling their hair. This point is particularly important because it shows that African people who were removed from their homes did not start straightening their hair because they automatically saw whiteness as superior to themselves and desired to be white. This is one of the reasons why in as much as whiteness should be decentered from the study of African people's hair, it must be kept in mind as the subject is explored.

By the time African people became recognized members of the US society and slavery was abolished, there were so many unfavorable stereotypes about them. For starters, many people believed that their hair was more wool than hair. Byrd and Tharps describe this accurate when they write:

> In this new land dominated by pale skin and straight hair, African hair was deemed wholly unattractive and inferior by the Europeans. Many White people went so far as to insist that Blacks did not have real hair, preferring to classify it in a derogatory manner as "wool." Descriptions of Black hair in the early 1700s—in runaway slave advertisements, slave auction posters, and even the daily newspapers—use this classification, almost as if by likening the hair to an animal's, Whites would be validated in their inhumane treatment of Blacks. (18)

Others referred to the many scalp diseases (ringworm and lice infection) African Americans suffered as a result of lack of attention to their hair, improper management, and absence of

ointments for hair problems. American society, through popular perceptions and cultural norms, projected "long straight hair" and light skin, dominant features of European Americans, as the ideal beauty traits in contrast with many African peoples' tightly coily hair and dark skin (DeGruy ctd in Byrd and Tharps 19). These perceptions made things worse for slaves who were already suffering untold dehumanization.

To avoid stereotypes and all the depraved treatments and denial of opportunity and humanity that come with them, African American women, particularly the dark skin and coily haired ones, embraced hair straightening, and bleaching when they had the opportunity to access products that promised them magical transformation from 1900 onwards. Both white and black people were involved in selling these products to African American women. (Byrd and Tharps 29) Though hair relaxers, chemical mixtures containing sodium hydroxide (lye) used in straightening hair, were accidentally discovered by Garrett Morgan (1877 – 1963) in 1905/9, majority of the literature available on hair straightening among African American women show that two African American women, Annie Malone and Madam C.J Walker, were already selling concoctions that changed the texture of African women's hair at the turn of the twentieth century even when the two entrepreneurs denied that their products were meant to straighten afro-textured hair (Byrd and Tharps 31-35).

Annie Malone and Madam C.J Walker are the most known African American entrepreneurs who popularized hair straightening products, tools, and techniques among African women in America and beyond. However, Walker is the more well known of the two women. In *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (2001), Ayana Byrd, and Lori Tharps describe Madam Walker as the woman who "…came to symbolize all that black hair stood for in the first half of the twentieth century" (30). Hailing from a long tradition of African American

people who used all sorts of household ingredients such as potatoes mixed with lye, bacon grease, kerosene, cornmeal, butter, slick axle grease among others, these two women developed a product that helped African American women to achieve the straight silky glowing hair they have always pursued and also kept their scalp healthy.

Malone and Walker were born around the same time, both to formerly enslaved parents. Malone was born between 1865 and 1869 in Metropolis, Illinois, while Walker was born around 1867 in Delta, Louisiana. There are conflicting accounts on the relationship between the two businesswomen. Even though Walker is the better known of the two women regarded as the pioneer of the black beauty industry, it was Annie Malone who created the first commercialized hair care regime for black women. Recent scholarship on black people's hair and the black beauty industry suggests that Walker copied Annie Malone's products and business models. Walker did not go to school beyond the basic level (Byrd and Tharps 32). Malone, on the other hand, studied Chemistry in school. Her knowledge in chemistry enabled her to mix products and subsequently commercialize them.

According to a document published by the Poro company in 1926 titled *Poro College in Pictures with a Short History of Its Development*, Malone began practicing hairstyling as a child on her family members (Gill 21). She also started mixing products as early as 1899 to heal scalp diseases and hair loss (Trawick 56). By 1902 Malone was selling her wonderful hair grower in St Louis and had a substantial customer base. She adopted and registered the name Poro in 1906. According to both Gill and Trawick, Malone said she registered her brand to protect her products from imitation (Gill 21; Trawick 57). Both scholars believe that she was referring to Walker, who had moved from St Louis to Denver by then, initially to sell Poro products but later began selling her own hair grower instead. Irrespective of these claims, Walker said that she learned

how to mix her products in a dream after several years of suffering from scalp diseases and hair loss (Gill 21). Though it is difficult to tell which assertion is true, what is clear is that Walker started selling her own products after briefly working for Malone.

The success of Walker's hair products contributed to cementing straight hair preference among African American women. Walker's top seller was the Hair Grower, which promised to make African women's short and tangled hair long and easily manageable. Her straightening technique, the Walker system popularly called the "shampoo-press-and-curl" method, became the very foundation on which the black hair industry is built (Byrd and Tharps). The Walker System contained a metal comb that was heated over a fire, then the hair is coiled around it and pulled, to achieve a straight look and smooth texture. Even though Walker did not invent this comb (according to Byrd and Tharps, it was invented by the French in the nineteenth century), Walker is "...largely responsible for introducing the comb to Black women" (Byrd and Tharps). Although Morgan Snr invented a curved-tooth hot comb and registered it in 1910, it is difficult to tell whether it was a huge success like the combs Walker introduced to America. It was through Walker's workers that many African American women bought and learned how to use the hot comb.

Malone and Walker's marketing strategies, which involved door to door advertisement through fellow African American women, contributed immensely to spreading hair straightening among African American women. Their products were sold largely through African American women who served as agents that went from house to house. Both women started their businesses and empowered many black women during a time when career options available to black women were slim. Even though many black women who moved from the Southern areas to Northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York in the US did so to escape racism and find

new job opportunities, racism followed them everywhere they went. Due to that, black women worked as washers and cleaners in white people's homes and companies in the new cities in which they found themselves. According to Tiffany Gill, a professor of History at the University of Delaware, about 50% of African American women worked as washerwomen because all other available jobs were reserved for white immigrants and first-generation (white) Americans. So, even though African American women were able to access more jobs in the new cities they traveled to, they were limited to menial jobs that were very similar to those they 'escaped' from. Walker and Malone's business model served as a way to make extra cash or to get a decent job so, many women opted for it.

Walker herself joined the beauty product manufacturing industry while working as a washer. According to her, the decision to join the beauty industry came upon realizing that she wanted more for herself and her daughter, Leila, who later changed her name to A'Lelia (Gill 20). Walker came from Delta, Louisiana to St. Louis and later Denver. Her first job in St. Louis involved washing for white people all day. Since what she earned from her job was not enough to give her daughter a bright future and conditions of the job were not favorable, she started selling beauty products for the Poro company alongside her washing job (Gill 21). To the many African American women who shared similar circumstances with Walker, hairdressing opened new prospects; it enabled them to work at their own pace, earn more, and gain some social respect.

Since both white-owned and black companies like those owned by Annie Malone, C.J Walker, and Garrett Morgan were involved in the multimillion-dollar hair straightening industry by the 1920s, it is difficult to tell whether it was African American companies or white-owned companies who introduced the newly discovered hair straightening products and techniques to

African people. It could be both. By the mid-1900s, white-owned companies, which though used to sell products to African Americans, did not consider them a worthy consumer group to dedicate time to and thus paid them little attention, saw the potential in black consumerism through the success of women like C.J Walker. They began targeting African American consumers amidst continued disrespect and discrimination. The current literature on Malone and Walker typically contains information on the two women up till their death and the continuation of their legacy by their children such as in the case of Walker. Therefore, it is difficult to know if any of these women, or Morgan, were able to export their products to the African continent. This notwithstanding, one can to a large extent deduce that companies that produced hair straightening creams and tools, and hairdressing schools that took pride in hair straightening, must have proliferated and sort markets abroad in Africa. It could also be that African women, such as the Ghanaian women we see in James Barnor's pictures taken in London, learned hair straightening abroad and brought the culture home.

Based on available writings on hair straightening and hair extensions among African women, specifically those that indicate that African people were not wearing straightened hair as a predominant hair form until recently in the 1990s, one can conclude that Africans may have adopted the practice from their counterparts who developed hair straightening systems and products in the United States, France (where hot combs and irons originally come from) and other places where hair straightening was available as a styling option. Whether hair straightening was brought into African countries by entrepreneurs from abroad or African women traveled and brought it back home, by the mid-twentieth century. straight hair was part of the hair forms African women wore. From pictures discussed earlier, straight hair was won

alongside the afro for many years, but it was also clear that only the crème de la crème had access to hair straightening products and hair extensions imported from abroad.

It took much longer for hair straightening and hair extensions to become common and accessible to all women in Ghana. From earlier discussions in this chapter, straight hairstyles were on Ghanaian women whose photographs were taken from the 1950s onwards. From accounts such as the one given by Mariama Ross, also discussed earlier, one is able to tell African women in places like Ghana switched predominantly to straightened hair and hair extensions in the second half of the twentieth century.

This section showed that the culture of straight hair, particularly wigs and hair straightening go as far back as the days of trade and colonial infiltration on the African continent, slavery in the Americas, and newly discovered post-slavery and post-independence freedom in America and West African countries in the 1900s.

The Hair Situation Among African People Today

Straight hair is largely considered a norm among African people today, even though their real hair is usually between tightly coily hair and loose curls such as the hair of the Fulanis of Nigeria. But, natural afro-textured hair is making a way back into African women's hairstyles. Though it is too early to tell whether it is going to be a hair fashion or political trend that will go away after some time like the afro movement of the 1950s in America, or grow and dominate as it used to be among African people in the continent prior to European, religious and so-called modernism infiltration, there is a lot of optimism surrounding it. Today, it is not uncommon to come across many Ghanaian women in afro-textured hair that is not relaxed or hidden under a

weave-on. Natural hair campaigns such as those recently organized by *Project Embrace*[3], are contributing to how African women perceive their own hair. It is evident in the number of women transitioning from perms to natural hair. Take this study as an example. Even though it was not limited to only women who wear their hair natural, the majority of the women who volunteered to take part in the study wear their hair natural.

Irrespective of the fact that as many as twenty-one of the women I talked to wear extensions in addition to their natural hair and perm, most report that this is limited to hair braiding, a style that is predominantly associated with Africans, and occasional "protective" styling like weave-on (hair is sewn or glued to people's real hair to give them a look and feel other than their real hair). Some participants in the study mentioned that they "wear [their] natural hair out anytime [they] want without the stress of sitting under the hairdryer. [They] add extensions by braiding and also wear wigs to protect [their] hair from breaking due to the harsh weather conditions" (Participant 4). Others said that they "Generally believe [that they are] more than just [their] hair. Which is why [they] would wear a wig or headscarf… if [they] didn't have the time or desire to deal with [their] own hair at the time" (Participant 5). To one particular woman, "I prefer braids to weaves. I only wear weaves when my hair is thinning out" (Participant 6).

Irrespective of the persistence of straight hairstyles and hair extensions in Ghanaian and other African societies for multiple decades, as the following comments from participants show, negative stereotypes attached to natural afro-textured hair are reducing; more and more women are opting to not relax their hair anymore even as they wear hair extensions sometimes. An

[3] A UK based group of Black women with a goal to make afro-textured hair more visible in the media as beautiful hair.

example is participants who said: “Things have changed greatly and a lot of women are embracing kinky,” “[their] own hair is better.” In addition to this, participants anonymously picked natural hair as the more beautiful and more healthy hair to maintain.

> My hair is healthier to maintain because is natural and it can stand other conditions like having it in water and styling all the time but the weaves don't have that kind of good lifespan. No matter the brands you buy, when you subject it to water or too much heat, their appearance begins to change (Participant 7).

These comments give hope to advocates of natural hair who want to see a majority of African women return to their own hair forms and styles and develop healthier ways of styling their hair, in an age where racial/ethnic pride and health matters so much.

CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS

The study set out to understand how African women came to view straight hair as a norm and as more desirable than natural afro-textured hair. Since the greater part of the studies conducted on African women's hair has been done in America and other diasporic locations, and mainly from African American perspectives, this study focuses on continental African women. This research asks whether hairstyling is simply a matter of style among African women. It also asks further, that if hairstyling is not just a matter of style, are African women trying to be white? In other words, are African women relaxing their hair and wearing hair extensions because they hate their features due to internalized oppression? Furthermore (if this assertion is not true), then what are the alternative reasons why they engage in straight hair culture? Lastly, comparing literature on African American and other diasporic African people's hair altering culture, to data collected among continental African women mainly through interviews in this study, the study traces the differences and similarities between the two situations.

Women who took part in the interview come from diverse backgrounds. They were thirty women in all. They come from West African countries, Ghana, and Nigeria. They identify as black African, female and they classified their hair as coily. Participants report that they are between the ages of twenty and forty to address these questions. Twenty-eight participants are university educated, and two stopped their education at the senior high school level. Twenty-five women are employed, three are students, and two are unemployed. Out of the twenty-five employed participants, eighteen are in the formal sector, and seven work in the informal/private sector. Twenty-six participants said that they are financially stable, and four said they are poor. None of them said they are rich. All participants use social media. These statistics are discussed further in sections of this chapter and the next chapter that looks closely at the specific findings.

The study focused on knowing the experiences of women who relax their hair and those who do not, and women who wear hair extensions or do not wear extensions. Those who do not relax their hair are mostly referred to as natural hair wearers in this study. Natural hair as used in this research means afro-textured/coily hair that has not been chemically relaxed, straightened with heat, and grows on the wearer's scalp. Colored hair is not regarded unnatural hair in this study because the main concern of the study is hair texture. Straightened hair and hair extensions are sometimes referred to as straight hair in the study. People who wear this hair form are called straight hair wearers in some parts of the essay.

Participants were asked questions about their hair experiences in relation to social norms, stereotypes, privileges, work, convenience, cost, health, beauty, and hairdressing, among others. Participants were given sixty-seven semi-structured questions to answer. Each answered about fifty questions depending on the hair form they maintain and their past hair experiences. The data collected is explored in a way that allows the voices of participants to speak for themselves as much as possible. The goal of this researcher is to analyze participants' responses without measuring them against whiteness even as it keeps the historical and contemporary relationship African people have with European and Euro-American people in mind.

Current Hair Forms Among Ghanaian Women: How Participants Wear Their Hair

The study found out that more women are opting to wear their hair natural, but hair extensions continue to maintain their hegemonic status. Out of the thirty women interviewed, twenty-five participants wear their hair in its natural afro-textured state, without heat or chemically processing it. But, hair extensions continue to dominate hairstyling among West African women even as the number of women who perm their hair reduces. Although only five women in the study said that they perm their hair (and also wear hair extensions), out of the

twenty-five women who wear their hair natural, sixteen reported that they wear hair extensions. This statistic brings the number of hair extensions wearers to as many as twenty-one women. Meaning, only nine women out of the thirty people interviewed do not engage in any form of straight hair culture: they do not straighten their hair, and they do not wear hair extensions.

The picture looks even more discouraging for afro-textured hair if we look at participants' hairstyling history. All the women who took part in the study have relaxed their hair or worn weaves at a point in their lives. Out of the thirty participants interviewed, only one person said that she has never relaxed her hair. But even that participant said that she wears hair extensions in addition to her natural hair. This disclosure means that a majority of women interviewed during the study did not only indulge in hair altering culture as their current hair practices indicate; they have also straightened their hair or worn hair extensions at least once in their lifetime. So, the conclusion regarding hair form preference among Ghanaian women is that, even as more women are opting to go back to maintain their natural afro-textured hair, hair extensions are still a dominant aspect of African women's hairstyling culture even as hair straightening reduces.

However, comparing the above findings with earlier observations on African women's hair, one would see that even as straight hair forms like hair extensions continue to dominate the hairstyling terrain among Ghanaian women, current hairstyling preferences among African women are creating a substantial change. In a study conducted by Toks Oyedemi in 2016, 164 female university students were asked about their hair preferences. Oyedemi found out that "Inquisitive observations of hairstyles worn by African women reveal a dominant preponderance towards straight hair, whether it is a weave on, an attachment or relaxed hair" (4). 96% of the women he interviewed relaxed their hair while 87% wear hair extensions. Comparing Oyedemi's

finding to the variance in hair forms and styles this study observes, this study concludes that a shift in hair preference is taking place. This year is 2019, and hair preference among participants who took part in this study is not highly skewed toward permed hair as previous studies found.

The study also found out that Ghanaian women wear their hair in all sorts of forms (and for all sorts of reasons). Hairstyles mentioned in the interviews carried out include perm (also known as relaxed or straightened hair), locks (also referred to as dreadlocks, locs and have varieties such as micro locks/locs), sisterlocks (also called sisterlocks), afros, weaves (called weave-on sometimes), and braids such as box-braids and cornrows. The following comments by participants about their hairstyle choices reflect this diversity:

> I started with natural, permed it at a point, and then went back to keeping natural. How? I guess I just wanted to experience how it feels to have permed hair, and that was around 2003 to early 2005. Then, I went back to natural from late 2005 to early 2007. I again permed my hair from late 2007 to early 2010. And since then, I have been keeping my natural hair. (Participant 8).

> I have afro-textured hair because I love it. It makes me look African and is also versatile. It can be styled in many ways; twisted, locked, pony, etc. I wear weaves and other hair extensions (sometimes, extensions which look exactly like afro-textured hair) because my hair isn't long and thick enough. It breaks easily and is very light. This compels me to use weaves and extensions. Lots of recommended hair products have not helped my hair in any way. (Participant 9).

> I had permed hair first, and I cut it and started doing the natural hair with no knowledge about how to care for it. It was difficult combing it, so I had it permed again. But I always

> had in mind to do the dreadlocks, but I had to wait till I'm professionally settled before I can start as I was mostly told. This time I'm happy I get to do something I really love to my hair. (Participant 10).

From the comments above, participants report different ways of keeping their hair. Sometimes some of the participants relax their hair; other times, they cut off the perm and maintain shortly cropped hair; they braid with hair extensions, they wear weaves sometimes, and some of them also keep wigs that they fall on to anytime the need arises. Wigs are weaves that are sewn into caps.

Participants like Participant 11 reported that they also tried alternative hair altering methods like the Jheri curls during their hair journey:

> I've had both natural and permed hair at various stages of my life. Started natural as a kid then permed, had Jerry curls, then natural, then permed, and the cycle continued. Perming was always about hair manageability as a kid and even as an adult till I decided I was done.

This statement shows that although hairstyling and hair form preferences among African women are usually between natural afro-textured hair and altered hair, African women's relationship with their hair is more of a constantly shifting journey than static choices. In other words, most African women have had a regularly changing relationship with their hair.

Participants construct their hairstyling culture as something that keeps changing for various reasons. While some of the women I talked to said that they allow new knowledge (such as the natural hair movement) to change their hairstyling habits and preferences, others said whether they wear one hair form or the other is mainly a matter of convenience, personal choice,

and style-change. As some of the participants' comments above indicate, they love their afro-textured hair, but they are also willing to explore non-natural afro-textured hair mediums to achieve styles that their hair would not be able to do without an extension. For others, they maintain their hair the way they do out of necessity. Even if they love a certain hair form, the stage at which they are in life, the job they do, and the extent to which they can put up with side effects involved in some of the hairstyling processes, among others, determines whether they wear such hairstyles or they avoid them. For a good number of the women, hairstyling is about who they are and how they feel. So even when they are fully away of consequences attached to certain hair forms and undesired side effects, they still go for such hairstyles. These issues will be discussed in more detail under the subsequent sub-topics in this chapter and the next.

Identified Factors

The study found several factors that are involved in African women's hair decisions. Data analysis was carried out by collating and closely observing participants' responses and finally merging them into themes that reflect the study's findings. The study discovered that there are stereotypes attached to natural hair that are not attached to straight hair. As a result, wearing straight hair comes with privileges that natural hair wearers are denied. Therefore, stereotypes attached to natural hair and privileges that come with straight hair influence African women's decisions regarding their hair.

Other factors were identified in addition to stereotypes and privileges. Participants were directly asked what factors influence their hair choices. They mentioned about ten to fourteen factors they consider when choosing a hair form/style. Factors mentioned in no order include:

- Cost
- Comfort and Stress
- Ethnic/Racial Identity
- Versatility/ Style Options
- Hair Type and Need for Supplement
- Convenience
- Manageability
- Physical Damage
- Social Norms and Stereotypes
- Beauty

None of them mentioned 'corporate work,' and only two people mentioned 'social norms' and 'beauty' even though their responses to other questions indicate that these three things play a major role in influencing hairstyle choices among African women. Damage from chemical relaxers is the most cited factor by both participants who perm their hair and those who wear their hair natural as to why they believe that natural hair is healthier hair form to maintain:

> I wear my hair in its natural form, currently growing sisterlocs because wearing my hair natural was initially a revolt against the pains and struggles I went through with relaxers. The chemical burns and the hooded dryers. It was a representation of freedom, freedom to be myself without being bound by societal expectations. Progressively it became more about showcasing the beauty of my natural texture and its versatility and also a part of my healthy lifestyle as I found out relaxers have been linked to fibroids. (Participant 12)

The greater number of women who wear perm said that their decision to straighten their hair is mainly for ease of styling.

The study considers these factors and measures them against participants' responses to other more specific questions throughout the interview to arrive at the following relevant themes under which the study's findings will be discussed:

- Social Norms, Stereotypes, and Privileges

- Hair as Transition
- Beauty and Gender
- Corporate Work and Formal Gatherings
- Class

➢ Other Emerged Factors

- Cultural Identity
- Sources of Influence
- Health Implications and Physical Damage
- Styling / Hairdressing
- Convenience and Versatility

Since stereotypes and privileges make the greater part of the factors that emerged during the study, Part I is focused on social norms, stereotypes, and privileges attached to hair forms, and Part II looks at other factors that emerged in the study that do not fall under any of the first themes. Part I is in this chapter, while Part II is placed in chapter 4 under 'further findings.'

Part I: Social Norms, Stereotypes, and Privileges: Hair Forms and How They Determine Acceptance and Rejection in Ghanaian Society

Hair forms in African societies are influenced by social norms, stereotypes, and privileges. Even though a person's hair is hardly charged with political messages in African societies the same way African people's hair is read politically in the United States, contemporary hair forms worn by African women carry socio-political messages that share a resemblance to meanings attached to hairstyles in African societies in the past. Social norms here means practices and beliefs that include unregulated rules regarding what society rejects/accepts,

praises/condemns, and rewards/punishes. Social norms influence hairstyling choices among African women. “Black women’s dress and fashion choices have psychological, social, political and economic meanings and consequences” (Sika Varyanne ctd in Mutukwa 71). This statement means that hairstyles worn by African women impact how they are perceived and treated in their societies. Socio-political meanings attached to hair forms result in either stereotypes or privileges for African women.

Hairstyles are symbolic in Africa in the sense that they are perceived as carrying social, traditional, and religious values. In many African societies, people wear certain hairstyles to identify themselves with a religion or tradition. Muslim women and some older West African women wear scarves because of this. Among Ghanaian ethnic groups such as the Ewes and Akans, widows and other family members of deceased people wear black head scarfs during the funeral and other related ceremonies to show that they are mourning. Even though the two practices mentioned stem from religious beliefs and traditional norms, they are made by those involved. But other times, a person’s hairstyle is given socio-political meaning by those who observe it even when the wearer disagrees. For example, a person who maintains her hair in its natural form may be seen as a member of the Jehovah Witness faith or Deeper Life Church.

This section discusses negative meanings attached to natural hair forms, privileges that come with wearing one’s hair straight, and the social norms that encourage women to relax their hair or leave it natural in African societies. Even though the main purpose of the study is to understand how straight hair became a norm among African women, the study paid attention to women who wear their hair natural because their experiences provide insight into the other side of the hair experience. In other words, the disadvantages that natural hair wearers say they encounter are part of the reasons why some African women choose not to maintain their hair

natural. Privileges attached to perm hair are part of the reasons why African women choose to relax their hair and wear weaves. Knowing the meanings that are attached to the two hair forms studied here will enable us to know the larger socio-political systems and structures within which African women form their hairstyling habits and ideals.

Participants who wear their hair natural said that their hair is often read negatively. The following comments are some ways participants said their natural hairstyles were read: "natural hair is seen as hairstyle for social deviants, not good looking, and not appropriate for formal events. Some also see natural hair as an indication of mental instability" (Participant 13). A second participant also remarked that: "Some of the negative comments include: Ooh you too? Are you sure your parents saw you with this kind of hairstyle? Is your husband ok with your kind of hairstyle? You look like '*dorflevi*' (slave of the gods)" (Participant 14). Many participants' comments showed that natural hair forms such as (dread)locks are equated to religious affiliation, social behavior, character, mental state and beauty values among others.

The negative meanings attached to natural hair make it challenging to maintain. Participant 15 explained that: "Natural hair is seen as hairstyle for rogues in Ghana. Things have changed greatly, and a lot of women are embracing kinky. Negative comments about natural hair... make it very challenging." Another woman who took part in the study added that: "Yes, few friends tend to say those who maintain natural hairs are wicked in the sense that it pains a lot when caring for it. Also, people see us as outmoded people cos we are practicing the old style of hair. The feeling is somehow bad, and it makes it more challenging especially if you plan to attain a certain level of the hair" (Participant 16). A third participant further observed that the challenges that come with wearing one's hair natural give them extra work to do: "I had to make efforts to dispel people's perception. I showed people pics of nice locs that do not look

Rastafarian. I had to also show them the difference between having locs and being Rastafarian. Now they think I'd look nice in locs" (Participant 17). Due to the hair form these women maintain, they are forced to correct the bad perceptions those they come across attach to their hair.

The situation is different for their counterparts who perm their hair and wear hair extensions. While African women who wear natural hair experience many stereotypes, those who perm their hair and wear hair extensions do not suffer the same negative socio-political perceptions. Participants said that straight hair comes with privileges because it is seen as the opposite of what natural hair represents: "[Natural hair] makes me more beautiful but does not make me more acceptable. In my society, women with weaves are considered well-groomed women" (Participant 18). One of the participants stated she wears hair extensions as supplements but she is also aware that they give her privileges: "I like volume, but my hair is light. I feel more beautiful when I add extensions. I think society has accepted extensions as the general beauty such that people with the natural Afro are seen as poor and unable to afford extensions, although the narrative is starting to change, and people are starting to accept the natural if styled well" (Participant 19). Participants' comments show that straightening their hair is about comfort that is heavily dependant on social image: women understand that their hairstyles are read either positively or negatively, and some of them decided that they do not want to be seen as social deviants, mentally unstable, poor, and uneducated rural dwellers so, they wear their hair straight.

Hair Forms, Education Policies, Racial Undertones and the Politics that Come with Them

One of the stereotypes participants mentioned that they encounter is the perception that it is immature and young women and girls that wear natural hairstyles, particularly, shortly

cropped hair. In some instances, non-extension braids in the form of cornrows and afros are added to the hairstyles that are stereotyped this way. When asked about her hair experience, this participant said that one of the stereotypes she encountered is being called a small girl: "[I was] Being called a small girl, a feminist 😂 among others. For me, it doesn't worry me because I psyched myself up before embarking on this journey and I know what I'm about, so I just ignore and it hasn't for once deterred me from going on" (Participant 20). Her observations are not unique. At university level 100, I did not relax my hair or wear weaves like many of my colleagues. I went to school with a shortly cropped hair. Fellow students, particularly male students, heckled me regularly as I went from my residential hall to lectures. Most of them made it a habit to run outside their rooms and shout "*Kwasasa*" at me from their balconies while I walked by. *Kwasasa* means child-student. It is an experience that was very mentally and emotionally draining for me. Interestingly, the same derogatory names were not yelled at me when I relaxed my hair and started wearing weaves on campus.

The perception that those who keep shortly cropped hair, non-extension cornrows, and afros are immature is not just a stereotype; it is also a social norm. School-age girls (and boys) are not allowed to grow and style their hair in elaborate hairstyles like adults do in Ghanaian and Nigerian societies. They are required by school policies and norms to cut their hair short. Even though a former Ghana Education Service (GES) director, Michael Adjei, said in an interview in 2015 on Ghana's Citi FM that the rule is more of a norm than an education policy/law, it is strictly enforced in many schools, especially in the public Senior High Schools (henceforth referred to as SHS). In 2015, the Citi FM news portal reported that three students of St John's Grammar Senior High School were prevented from writing the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) because their hair was classified as 'bushy' by the

headmaster. The incident is common. The same thing happened to many of my colleagues and me in SHS.

Interestingly, the same rule has not been intensively applied to straight-haired international students from Europe, India, China and other places who are schooling in Ghana. During a Facebook debate (which I was tagged in) on the issue of schools discriminately allowing international students to keep their hair while they insist that Ghanaian students cut their hair, the following conversation took place:

> X[4]: Dela Goldheart this might interest you. 😅😅 Foreigners get to keep their hair, and that is not classified as a distraction, but when a Ghanaian girl keeps hers, then it is deemed "not allowed."
>
> X1: Not Wesley Girls and Holy Child as I know. [You] would always find their hair cut.
>
> X2: We had some mulattos[5] who never cut their hair in Holi [Holy Child].
>
> X3: X1, please no oh… Holico[6] allowed mixed-race people to have their hair. There was the exception of one 'quarter co'[7] in my class who had hers already down before coming.
>
> X1: But you Holico as we meet during Interco[8] you often have your hair bushy (Afro) kind of. So sometimes that privilege is enjoyed and must equally extend to them since they have soft hair and somehow looked permed, dear.

---

[4] I refer to the original poster as X and all those who commented on the post as X + a numerical value depending on when they appear in the conversation.

[5] A term Ghanaians use when referring to people from multiple racial backgrounds.

[6] Popular jargon for students of Holy Child school.

[7] A term that means the person being talked about has a grandparent that is of a different racial background, usually white.

[8] Jargon for inter-school games in Ghana.

> X4: X1, lol, that's not true about Holico. We had them light skinners that kept their hair amongst us, lol.
>
> X5: Their's is natural… our girls… will add cream and braids.
>
> X6: You people would go at any length to justify nonsense. (Facebook conversation 1, July 2019)

The six Facebook users debated among themselves as to whether it is okay to allow some students to keep their hair and deny others the same opportunity based on their ethnicity, skin color and hair texture. While some of them argued that Ghanaian students, who are often dark skin with coily hair, deserve equal treatment, which is to be allowed to keep their hair too, others challenged them by saying that non-African students and multi-racial students have a different hair type and, therefore, deserves to be allowed to keep their hair. Others worried that if Ghanaian students are allowed to keep their hair, they will start relaxing it and adding hair extensions. To one of the discussants, such arguments wrongly justify discrimination.

In the past year, some Ghanaians have complained about the situation, and some parents have gone ahead to challenge the policy in schools that their children attend:

> I challenged my kids' school administration on this rule some time back. They threatened to cut down the hair, and I told them to go ahead and see the showdown with all the legal redress. I told them from that convo or banter, should my kids complain about anything close to discrimination, they will have me to contend with, and no one can tell me to take the kids out of the school. This society is too brainwashed. (Facebook user 8, July 2019)
>
> So, a colleague in my office was so livid today because his daughter was sent home to cut her hair because she had a little afro ... In the same school [there] are white kids with long

> hair. So, he points this out to the said administrator & he told [him] their's is natural. Honestly, shouldn't we be looking at this issue? We are going to carry on a colonial definition of what tidy hair is 🤦🏿♂. WTF is wrong with us as a people. (Facebook user 9, July 2019)

While some parents are successful at challenging rules that they consider discriminatory toward their kids in school, other parents' experiences show that challenging school policies on hair can be a long unpleasant experience. The following is a Facebook post made by a parent who witnessed another parent challenge a discriminatory hair policy in her children's school:

> [During a] PTA Meeting in my son's school, the Headmistress took time to brief the gathering about a few dos and don'ts. Kids to keep hair completely down. Clean shave. No afro. No this, No that. Just as I was going to ask a question about hair, a parent helped me… Description of the parent: He had beautiful dreadlocks [and] Dark black skin… Let's call him Charley…
>
> **Charley**: The rules about how kids keep their hair, does it apply to all kids in this school?
>
> **Headmistress**: All kids are to obey this rule [noose tightened]
>
> **Charley:** We have several Caucasian kids in this school who keep their natural hair natural, why are they not cutting it down as you have directed?
>
> **Headmistress:** They asked permission.
>
> **Charley:** Two of my kids are in other schools because you refused to take them. You said they couldn't keep their hair like this. I came to your office several times to ask permission, but you refused. What's going on here?

> [The] PTA Chairman with a very disappointed and serious tone told the headmistress and the school management to take a non-discriminatory decision on the matter before the next academic year begins… [other] Parents applauded… the schools in Ghana are the real places you will see [black on black] racism, direct sexism, and colonial architecture, let's start demolishing them immediately! (Facebook conversation 2, July 2019).

Many Ghanaians concerned with the issue blame what they see as unequal hair policy on Ghana's colonial past. According to some of the people who took part in debates on the issue on Facebook, it is a colonial mentality and mental slavery that is making it possible for the policy to be maintained in Ghanaian schools. In their view, hairstyles like big afros, cornrows, and other afro-textured hair Afrocentric styles would not harm the performance of students, so there is no justification for the policy:

> Simply put, we're still under slavery mentally. I don't know the relationship between growing one's hair and academic intelligence, but all the foreigners in our schools keep their hair as they please, and it is still a way of telling us they are superior to us. You know they can do whatever pleases them, and nobody punishes them like they'll punish a Ghanaian or other Sub Saharan Africans. (Facebook user 10, July 2019)

Another Facebook user (11) opined that: "Colonial rules that can't be justified but with silly excuses. How does hair distract learning in the first place? Which lab prove that?" (July 2019). These people believe that since hair and performance have no proven relationship, Ghanaian students should be allowed to maintain their hair.

Short hair policies in Ghana's SHS impacts Ghanaian women's relationship with their hair. Since most Ghanaian girls are not allowed to grow their hair while in school, they look

different from university students and adults. But more importantly, by the time they complete school and are ready to be integrated into adult society, they lack the voluminous and longer hair that adults wear. Ghanaians who want to see the SHS hair policy scrapped off believe that Ghanaian women end up relaxing their hair and wearing weaves because they are denied the opportunity to grow their hair while in school:

> X: X1, We here buying their hair at expensive prices just to cover up ours. Allow her to stay her natural way if u allow the Ghanaian girl to keep afro.
>
> X1: X, Godwin Acheampong we are buying weaves because we were not allowed to grow our hair since our infancy.
>
> X: It wouldn't be bad either but wouldn't want u to spend just to buy someone's hair just to add up to ur own hair given u by God😂.
>
> X1: X, doesn't that make it more reasonable to allow them to grow their hair from infancy? (Facebook conversation 3, July 2019).

The tangible point in the conversation above is that if students are allowed to keep their hair in school, by the time they transition to adults, they will know how to care for their hair, and they would have seen how big/long their hair could be when grown. By making them cut their hair constantly, they grow up not knowing how to care for the hair or understanding what it would look and feel like if allowed to grow.

The solution young women who are not allowed to grow their hair in school engage in is to relax the little hair they have upon completion. A participant gave a good picture of the situation when she said: "I wasn't making my hair as a kid. [I] began after secondary school. However, I admired cornrows and wished I could, I still do but can't because of my hair type and

scalp😢.” When asked about how they arrived at the practice of relaxing their hair, many participants said that they relaxed their hair more as a form of rite of passage. One of the participants said that she “finished school and [perm] was what everyone was doing so [she] equally did it.” Another one said, “Hair itself is beautiful. Seeing people completing SHS and doing new styles motivated me to try to.” To many participants, hair relaxing was what everyone did after SHS to show that they are now adults. Being an adult means wearing hair that looks like adult hair. Their remedy then is to relax the little hair they had when they completed SHS, fix weaves over their hair, or use extensions to braid to achieve immediate volume and length. Volume and length are things they could have had naturally if they were allowed to grow their hair while in school.

Straightening one’s hair was a transition ritual that symbolized the end of SHS and by extension, childhood. However, it was not every SHS graduate who relaxed their hair immediately or ended up maintaining relaxed hair in adulthood:

> After SHS, I left my hair natural for two years, then my dad took me to the salon to go get it relaxed because he said it will look good on me. From then on, I wore weaves or braids whenever I felt like it, but my hair being 4c never actually got relaxed completely. The relaxers also gave me burns on my scalp so I decided to go natural. I initially wanted to loc my hair immediately. I went natural in 2009, but there were so many misconceptions about locs, so I didn't get them initially. I finally found the courage to wear them in April this year. (Participant 21)

> Growing up, after SHS, the trend was to braid and grow the hair, and once it is grown, to relax it. I did just that until 2013/14. Trend influenced my choice of hair. However, understanding my identity influenced my final decision to go natural. Finally, flexibility

> and comfort influenced my decision to lock my natural hair. So there are 3 levels of choices here. (Participant 22)

As these comments show, hair culture and the politics surrounding it is a complex situation that Ghanaian women and girls constantly have to navigate. The choice as to whether one wears perm or natural hair and weaves is not a simple one. To a lot of the women who engaged in conversations about social hair norms and their effects on African women's relationship with their hair, practices discussed above play a significant role. But they could be socialized in a way that made them accustomed to one hair form but ends up opting for the other hair form depending on their own experiences and values.

In all, participants' statements, and debates on Ghana's SHS hairstyling policy discussed here have shown that the education policy on afro-textured hair and cultural norms that demand that girls maintain certain hairstyles at certain ages, impacts the larger cultural practice of hairstyling among Ghanaian women. Whether Ghanaian women are allowed to keep their hair in school or not, and whether their experiences involve seeing their foreign straight-haired counterparts enjoy privileges they are denied is important to the hair decisions they make in adulthood.

Religious Affiliation, Social Behavior, and Mental Condition Stereotypes

While straight hairstyles are considered normal/ordinary hairstyles, many natural hairstyles are seen as indicators of traditional African religions, Rastafarianism, mental instability, and questionable behavioral practices like smoking, stealing, fighting, and laziness. Even though not all the above-mentioned stereotypes are considered negative by all Africans

(some of them are people's legitimate cultural and religious beliefs and practices), natural hair wearers reported that they are perceived and treated poorly.

In Ghana, locks are perceived as symbols of traditional African religion. Among the Ewe people, locks, especially those with faded colored tips and cowries, are worn by children of parents who belong to the Voodoo worship system. This is because children whose mothers bore them after appealing to the gods for a child are not allowed to comb their hair until special rituals are performed to move the child from the spirit world to the human world. With time, the hair of the kids becomes matted and form locks. Wearers of this hair are referred to as *Dorflevi.* And since Judeo-Christian and Islamic values are pervasive in West African societies, the greater part of the population disassociates themselves from traditional African religious values and practices such as the Voodoo system. Therefore, *Dorflevi* often connotes negativity as the following Facebook comment indicates.

> It's about the perception developed over the ages due to certain happenings. I was even told it's demonic "*yeve viwo*". However, life has moved on, you know, it's now an expensive fashion, but some are yet to catch up. Until they do, their judgment is according to the limited knowledge they have... Just be yourself and live on. (Facebook user 12, June 2019)

Yeve viwo is another Ewe term for *Dorflevi* (singular) and *Dorfleviwo* (plural). It is important to remember that not all negativity attached to locks stems from 'foreign' religious values. Families also fear that their members will be wrongly seen as slaves of the gods due to their inability to pay for their children's freedom because only children whose parents did not pay the ritual fee keep matted hair with cowries in their communities.

Another popular misconception about locks is that people who wear them are Rastafarians. A participant said that she was told "Locking your hair makes you a Rastafarian. Rastafarianism doesn't suit you" (Participant 23) This misconception is partly because many people who belong to the Rastafarian religion allow their hair to become matted without combing. Mariama Ross, reporting on her hair experience while in Ghana in 1997 and 1999, said that her locks were often read as belonging to Rastafarianism, a religion she did not belong to (166). In the US where she had come from, dreadlocks were hairstyles worn by African Americans. Though it was read in a political way often in the US, it was not seen as indicating of Rastafarianism the way it was in Ghana.

Being referred to as a Rastafarian (Rasta) is not always a good thing. Often, West Africans use the word Rasta to not only refer to people who make and listen to reggae or believe in the Rastafarian religious ideology: they also use it to connote someone who smokes weed and does not comb their hair. Both practices, smoking weed and not combing one's hair are largely frowned upon in many African societies. In "Dreadlocks as a Symbol of Resistance," a feature article in the September 2016 edition of *Feminist Africa*, Tendai Mutukwatalks about her dreadlocks experience. According to Mutukwa, her parents were not happy when she went home after a semester in the university with "black worm-like studs" on her head. Her father worried that she was smoking Marijuana. Mutukwa accurately observes that "It seems that a lot of people do not understand the complexities of natural hair on black women; when they see dreadlocks, they think of Bob Marley" (71). Her choice to wear her hair in locks challenged by her parents because they associated the hairstyle to Rastafarianism and by extension, weed smoking. To Mutukwa's parents, locks are symbolically anything but a regular hairstyle for a well brought up educated young African woman like their daughter, so they registered their displeasure.

In addition to thinking that people who wear their hair natural are *Dorfleviwo* or Rastafarians who smoke weed, participants say that society also perceives their hairstyles as hairstyles for social deviants (i.e. armed robbers and fraudsters). According to one participant, "natural hair is seen as hairstyle for rogues in Ghana…" (Participant 24). This is not a unique observation. Due to the many negative attributes associated with locks, it is not uncommon to see armed robbers and fraud boys wearing the style. As to why they wear it, one cannot tell. But by criminals adopting locks as some sort of trademark hairstyle, regular people who wear locks are associated with criminal activities. The situation is so bad that it is not uncommon for the police in Ghana to profile lock wearers when they are searching for criminals. Though that mostly happens to men, the negative connotation that comes with the lock hairstyle rubs off on them. And this is partly the reason why families like Mutukwa's wonder if their daughter could wear such hairstyles to formal gatherings.

Participants also report that natural hairstyles are seen as hairstyles that are worn by mentally and emotionally unstable people. Some of the participants said that they have heard people say natural hair is a hairstyle for depressed people. Participant 26 said that "I once heard a man saying all the ladies who keep natural hair are depressed. others say it is the poor and villagers who keep natural hair. Never, I just laugh over those comments and move on." Her hair was read as a symbol not only for an unstable mental/emotional state but a poor financial status and urban affiliation.

Beauty and Gender Stereotypes and Privileges

Natural hairstyles are believed to be less beautiful than perms and hair extensions. According to participants who wear their hair natural, their hairstyles are often perceived as ugly,

unkempt, and not neat. Participant commenting on stereotypes they came across in their hair journey made the following observations:

> The most popular bad views on natural hair [I've] heard are that's it's "nappy", unkempt, impoverished looking, low maintenance, ugly and unrefined… Actually, those views made me want to prove them wrong by sticking with natural hair. I wouldn't say the views make it more challenging. They actually strengthen my resolve. (Participant 1)

> Yep, I heard comments like "your hair is too nappy" "natural hair is not for everyone, " etc. It was more challenging because I wanted to prove to everyone that I made the right decision to go natural and I am beautiful in it. (Participant 25)

> They say it looks unkempt and not smooth enough. It doesn't make me feel anything. I am way about criticism now. Nobody affects my hairstyle choice. They don't make it challenging at all. (Participant 26)

The study found out that the view that natural hair is unkempt, not neat looking and ugly is the most pervasive misconception about the hair.

On the other hand, participants statements also show that straight hair is seen by people around them as more beautiful, kempt and neat, and these come with benefits for African women who wear their hair straight:

> Even though I'm attracted to natural hairstyles, I feel more beautiful and acceptable in straight weaves and permed hair because the majority of my people think straight weaves and permed hair look more presentable and silky like Caucasian hair which is presumed to be the standard measure of 'beautiful.' (Participant 27)

> I may not have had the friends or company I have if I had natural hair coz people might look down on me. I've heard remarks like "she's not neat" or "she's unkempt" coz of natural hair. Some also regard them as poor. The "Brazilian hair" girls are often regarded as "classy." And I'm able to get monetary favors by asking for hair money which I wouldn't have gotten if my hair was natural. (Participant 28)

To know which hair participants themselves believe is the more beautiful hair in spite of the pervasiveness of stereotypes that privilege straight hair over afro-textured hair, participants were asked which hair form they think is the more beautiful one. They were to choose between 'A' - Natural hair forms such as afro, locks and non-extension braids, and 'B' - Straight hair represented by styles like perm, weave-on, and extension-braids.

Participants overwhelming endorsed natural afro-textured hair as the more beautiful hair form. Twenty-one of the thirty participants said that natural hair is more beautiful. Only two people said that straight hair is more beautiful. Seven participants said that both natural hair and straight hair are beautiful. This means that as many as twenty-eight women, making 93% of all participants, consider natural afro-textured hair beautiful. The conclusion therefore is, African women interviewed believe that natural hair is more beautiful even as they acknowledge stereotypes that favor straight hair over natural hair.

This is an unexpected result because, as discussed in earlier chapters, a great deal of the scholarship on African American women's hair (and even some African writers) have argued that African women hate their own hair. According to writers who argue from the internalized racism and self-hate perspectives, African women perceive white beauty to be iconic due to racism and thus attempts to copy them by changing their features. Also, stereotypes about natural hair and privileges attached to straight hair discussed in earlier paragraphs in this section imply

that straight hair is perceived as the more desirable hair form among African women when it comes to beauty. However, the results show that African women interviewed in this study believe that natural afro-textured hairstyles are more beautiful than perms and hair extensions, contrary to popular stereotypical perceptions in African societies. Their views also directly challenge assumptions about internalized racism.

However, this finding brings more questions to the study. If African women believe that their hair is more beautiful, why then do they put so much effort, to the extent of physically harming themselves, into altering their hair to look straight or curly or wavy? The answer is that stereotypes about natural hair are so strong that even when African women believe their hair is more beautiful in its afro-textured nature, they still straighten it and wear weaves over it because they have observed that there are more benefits attached to straight hair. As some of the comments above show, even when African women take pride in their hair and believe against all the odds that their hair is beautiful in its natural form, they face the problem of not being accepted in the society because straight hair carries the greater social capital when it comes to beauty. That is why some of the participants said clearly that they perm their hair and wear weaves even if they believe that natural hair is more beautiful so that they could access the privileges that come with wearing one's hair straight.

Even when women who wear natural hair say that negative views regarding how people see their hair aesthetically do not affect them, their responses show that they are still forced to challenge and redefine certain aspects of social norms, especially those that have to do with appearance, or simply succumb to social pressure by relaxing their hair and wearing hair extensions. According to some of the women who wear their hair natural and experience stereotypes regarding natural hair and appearance, beauty is one of the norms they have

redefined. Therefore, to understand to what extent beauty matters to participants and how they negotiate beauty ideals and their hair choices, they were asked: Do they believe that the hair form(s) they maintain makes them beautiful?

Their reactions were mixed and complex. Many women did not give straight answers to this question to allow for quantification. However, their answers reveal that they were no longer defining beauty solely based on appearance or social norms, stereotypes, and privileges surrounding hair and appearance. A substantial number of participants who wear their hair natural mentioned that even if their hair is not considered beautiful or acceptable, the important thing to them is that they have come to love it. They explained that beauty is the ability to accept one's features. In their view, beauty is not only about how one looks but the discovery of one's identity as well. Most responses to the question showed that beauty is correlated with self-acceptance and bravery. Some natural hair wearers mentioned that they are considered brave for wearing their hair. According to some of them, people compliment them and ask them questions about how they keep their hair.

Their statements are telling because they show that natural hair is not a common hair form among African women the same way perms and weaves are. Natural hair is not the norm. It also tells us that those who tell participants that they are brave to wear their hair natural are aware of the many negative consequences that come with wearing natural hair. The result is that bravery is constructed as a factor in identifying beauty in hair. Many women consider self-acceptance an important component of beauty. Since self-acceptance for many African women is a struggle since they live in a culture that favors straight hair over afro-textured hair, those who can challenge the norm are considered brave. Many women in the study associated hair relaxing and hair extensions with self-hate and internalized racism, thus they disassociated themselves

from straight hair culture. Some level of shame is being transferred away from natural hair to straight hair amidst the belief that to be beautiful is to be brave enough to wear the hair that grows out of one's scalp. To a good number of the women who took part in the study, beauty is the ability to feel comfortable and confident in their hair irrespective of what the larger society they live in thinks.

Another important finding regarding beauty and hair forms is the association of straight hair with kempt/neat and natural hair with unkempt/unclean by some participants in their responses. A few people said their permed hair makes them more beautiful because it looks kempt and neat. Those who said they look better in perm mentioned that Natural hair could be considered beautiful/acceptable IF it is kept clean, neat, well managed and styled. This suggests that natural hair is not neat, clean, and styled in its natural state. The same conditions were not made for straight hair. By inference, straight hair is automatically perceived as neat and kempt. Throughout the interviews, not one participant attached these conditional clauses to straight hair. This further speaks to how natural hair is construed and perceived negatively in Ghanaian society when it comes to beauty.

Overall, the section on beauty and hair forms found out that:

- Natural hair is seen stereotypically as less beautiful, unkempt and dirty in African societies.
- Straight hair is perceived as more beautiful, kempt, and clean and this comes with certain privileges in African societies.
- Participants endorse natural hair as the more beautiful hair irrespective of the stereotypes their responses reveal about the hair form.

- Responses by women who wear their hair natural reveal that maintaining natural hair is challenging and comes with the extra work of informing people around them that the stereotypes are misconceptions.
- Beauty is being redefined by participants, particularly those who wear their hair natural, to include values beyond physical appearance, i.e. self-acceptance and bravery.

What the Male Gaze Has Got to Do with African Hair

As part of efforts to understand the factors that influence African women's hair choices, the study asked participants if they thought their hair forms influence their ability to attract men. In particular, the study wanted to know how their experiences reflect social norms in relation to gender and hair. This section discusses participants' responses in an intersectional way – ethnicity, gender and beauty/attractiveness.

Some participants said that they hadn't seen any changes in men's reactions to them. However, some of them explained that it could be because they did not pay attention to how men react to them. In other words, they did not consider men's place in their hairstyling choices. Others also said that they had not noticed any change because men don't care what hairstyle they have on so long as they are women. Another set of women said that no man has ever stated a reason against their hair type or asked them to change it.

The rest of the women said that hair affects how men relate to them sexually. Some of them argued that men have preferences, whether it is for straight hair or natural hair. Some women said that they have noticed that a different type of men approach them since they transitioned to natural hair. This is what one woman said:

> I've realized since going natural several years ago that Afro-textured hair and Afrocentric hairstyles attract a certain "type" of man predominantly and which I prefer because such men tend to be deeper, wiser, and more spiritual... Less swayed by vanities and are more insightful to women and more empathetic to women on the whole. (Participant 29)

Among the differences women in this category noticed are woke, more matured, calm men and men who seem to have some fetish for afro-textured hair.

But the experience has been more negative than positive for some of the women. One participant said that a man offered to give her money to relax my hair because he thought her natural hair was not attractive and it needed to be fixed. Other participants supported this point further by saying that they have come across men who don't think afro hairstyles are good enough. Participant 8, for example, had this to say: "Not all men think the Afro hairstyles are up to standard. Most men want the sophistication that comes with relaxed, permed, or straight hair and since those types of men are closed-minded they might not get closer to find out more." To her, there is a class component to the issue; it is not simply a matter of natural vs fake, it is also about sophistication.

According to four participants, many men say they prefer women who wear their hair natural. But they think that men who make such claims are, more often than not, lying. The women said that they noticed that men compliment straight hair more even as they claim that they like natural hair. To them, men say one thing and go for the other. So, since they know that extensions generally attract men more than natural hair, some of them opt for straight hair even when their men say they prefer natural hair. An example is a lady who said that:

> From experience most men like natural girls. They want girls with authentic beauty who are confident in their own skin. However, we girls think they share with us our ideas of beauty and try to attract them with extensions. In my head, wearing extensions make me look more attractive to men. (Participant 30)

She believes that even though the widespread belief is that men prefer natural hair, she knows they prefer straight hair.

However, other women counter this position by pointing out that there are men who actually like natural hair. According to these women, they get a lot of compliments all the time from men. Some participants also say that they see that men approach them more when they are in natural hair. Others agree that men like women with natural hair but they argue that it is mainly because natural hair is less expensive to maintain. Participant 1 pointed out that "Most men like ladies that keep natural hair because it's less expensive to maintain and stress-free. Not all men want to be asked every two weeks for a lot of money on expensive European hairs." To her, men encourage their partners to wear natural hair because it means their women won't ask them money frequently to 'fix' their hair. This is not a far-fetched idea because, in many African societies, men are expected by tradition to financially cater to the needs of their partners. And hair is a major part of what women need financial assistance with. Though there is no proof that women's hairstyling is paid for by their partners, the idea cannot be totally dismissed because of traditional gender relations are still unequal: some women depend on men for their upkeep.

The rest of the participants argued that even if the male gaze has an opinion on the hairstyles they do, they don't care what men think: they will wear whatever hairstyle they want to wear. In this spirit, the hairstyle is being used as an instrument of freedom. Here are some comments from three participants who made this claim:

> Someone who was pursuing me at the time Was not happy and complained that my natural hair was not "me" naturally I told him to STFU and even went ahead to cut my natural hair to a short crop to spite him. He stopped talking to me, and I was pleased. My then-boyfriend, too, said he liked my natural hair but wasn't happy with it being short, so I should get a wig or braids to cover it till it grew back. I didn't. I dyed it blonde and ignored him. 🤣 so you see there's a difference between the type of man one would attract based on the hair one wears but not necessarily have the ability. (Participant 2)

> To attract men affected... Since going natural I've dated men who'd insist on wearing only my natural hair or braids. Not even an Afro wig was tolerable, but I'd still wear my Afro wig if I felt like it. They'd be upset but didn't care. Now my current ex loved and was fascinated with my natural hair but didn't have any problem with braids or wigs. He'd advise me to use them when I didn't have time to deal with my hair or as a protective style. So, I also always made a point to wear my natural hair out on our dates and when we spent time together because he was so fascinated with my natural hair. He even encouraged me when I decided to get locs and supported my decision. (Participant 3)

These women say that when their men say they don't like a certain hairstyle, that is the hairstyle they wear. To them, hairstyling is a tool for defying patriarchal systems that oppress women and give men power over women's bodies.

Despite the lack of a clear agreement among participants on whether men take note of women's hair and factor it into their decision to date them or not, the male gaze plays a role in how African women style their hair. As some participants said, they hope their future partners like their hair in its natural state. Others wondered what happens if their men like one hairstyle and they decide to switch hairstyles? Would they lose them? The debate goes on, but for women

like the participant behind the comment below, their experiences tell them that amidst all the complexities on the male gaze and hair, hair matters to African men, and some women are willing to consider men's view when choosing hairstyles.

> Yes, very. Some men are sold to the idea of some type of hair a lady has in terms of LOOKS/BEAUTY (of coz depends on what the man in reference wants from that woman concerned). I experience more advances from men just because of my hair (amongst other things) at times it annoys me because at official or casual gatherings men would comment on my hair being beautiful and find it like its being sexual harassment. Perhaps they long seeing these hair types. Some men would just compliment me and describe as a real woman and a true African woman. However, I noticed more men approached me just to compliment me on my hair. Some asked me if I could talk to their girlfriends/wives to sell them idea of natural hair as they love them dearly compared to fake hair. I didn't know that I only discovered that when I started journey of wearing my hair, so was kind of angry at myself for having betrayed self and my partner of appreciating my hair view😬, no wonder when I went to the salons for weave-on he didn't comment sometimes or notice because it wasn't worth him noticing or appreciating. All men I spoke to are black, and they said they like African hair or natural straightened hair, unlike straight hair as they love touching the skin of their partners and don't like apparently a woman to try more external stuff in the name of beauty because they fall in love with nature already. (Facebook user 13, May 2019)

Whether all African women agree that gender has a relationship with hair or not, gendered meanings and reactions will continue to be attached to African women's hair forms and styles.

Natural Hair, Corporate Work, and Formal Gatherings

Many natural hairstyles are perceived as inappropriate for formal gatherings due to the belief that natural hair is ugly, unkempt, and not neat. One of the issues Mutukwa's parents raised against her choice to wear her hair in locks was that her hairstyle was not appropriate for "formal gatherings such as church…. graduation ceremony, and…job interviews" (71). As some of the following comments indicate, some women were told by people around them to opt for weaves or perm their hair since their afro-textured hair was not appropriate to attend functions like weddings. Participant 18 said that she was told: "Your hair is not nice, why don't you just use a relaxer and be free? Go and buy a wig cap cos you can't attend a wedding with that among many others. But it doesn't affect me in any way. I always tell them it's my hair and I decide what I do with it and how I keep."

Women who wear natural hair are not only told their hair is not beautiful; they are also specifically pointed to perms and hair extensions as the better options for them. Participant 9 said that her headmistress advised her not to attend the meeting she was attending at an American embassy with her natural hair: "Some months ago, I had an important interview at the US Embassy, Ghana. My headmistress called and asked me if I intended attending the interview with my kinky hair (I had twisted it) She advised that I don't attend the interview with such a hairstyle." Her boss feared that her prospects at the meeting may be jeopardized with her natural hairstyle due to stereotypes attached to the hair form. Natural hair is frowned upon?? while straight hair is rewarded when it comes to formal gatherings.

However, the biggest negative impact on natural hair wearers in this regard is the belief that natural hairstyles are not appropriate to be worn in corporate spaces. The following comments are some responses participants gave when they were asked about the challenges and stereotypes attached to their natural hair:

> People said things like, are you going to work with that kind of hair? Do you know your hairstyle isn't appropriate for your profession? (Participant 2)
>
> [People said] That they [natural hair forms] don't make you look decent and professional especially with the dreadlocks. I really didn't feel bad so far as my mind was already made. (Participant 3)
>
> People feel natural hair is messy and not to be sent to a professional environment. It actually empowered me to prove them wrong. It has been challenging but we are still striving on. (Participant 4)
>
> I battled accusations of not looking "professional " and as a tv news anchor, I was told it was inappropriate. I always defended my right to wear my own hair and, in some cases, threatened to sue. Fortunately, a lot of management level bosses were more open-minded than line managers. (Participant 5)

From these comments, it is evident that a section of Ghanaians believe that natural hair forms and corporate hair forms are irreconcilable. They see natural hair to be messy, ugly and unkempt and a hairstyle for criminals (and radical people to some extent); values that are opposite to corporate principles. So, they believe that straight hair is a better hair form to wear to work in the formal industry.

The other side is the belief that natural hair is not good to wear to the office, and formal gatherings are the perception that straight hair is more appropriate for corporate work. Participants were asked whether they think their hair gives them an advantage in terms of getting employment and being promoted at work. They were to choose between natural and straight hair if they answered ‘yes’ to the question. They also had the option to say no or they don’t know.

Ten people said ‘no’ or they don’t think so. Most of them mentioned that perceptions about natural hair are changing more toward the positive. Twenty participants said that they believe hair affects their chances of being employed and getting a promotion. Out of the Twenty people who said hair influences their prospects of work, 85% of them specifically mentioned that straight hair improves prospects of getting a job and promotion. Only three participants, 15%, said that natural hair rather improves their chances. Conclusively, the study found out that straight hair is more advantageous when it comes to employability and promotion.

The following comments are some of the observations made by participants regarding the influence of hair forms on employment:

> In our society, women with afro-textured hair are seen as rascals, irresponsible and loose women. Women with weaves are considered "ladylike". A few months ago when I visited a Senior High School while I had twisted hair on, an elderly colleague asked me if my parents had seen the kind of hair I had on. Obviously, he believed the twisted hair doesn't suit my profession as a teacher; a role model for young girls. A few of my superiors also expressed dissatisfaction with my choice of hair when I had the afro-textured hair (well-combed) on. (Participant 6)

> I had to wear a weave to my interview when I felt like wearing my short hair. When the idea of starting the locks came to mind, I was asked to wait till I get formally employed before considering it. I believe that shouldn't be the case, but I had to follow. (Participant 7)

> Corporate organizations and employers in this country tow towards colonial standards of professional appearance dictated by Europeans. (Participant 8)

> The corporate world biased towards Eurocentric standards of appearance. For the non-corporate, I'd say either would not be a hindrance to employability or chances of promotion. (Participant 9)

> Straight hair improves your employability and chances of promotion because of the perceptions and misconceptions about natural hair. (Participant 10)

> There has been so many times natural hair has been associated with feminists and people unwilling to conform at least in my dealings with people, so to increase your chances of getting hired better wear a weave. (Participant 11)

> Yes. Unless one just gets all seated on the interview panel to be understanding that all hair can be acceptable when employing someone, otherwise if you get natural hair or locks, etc people judge you negatively. People think persons with Afro, locks, etc are not serious with jobs, disorganized, criminals, they honor alcohol &drugs, they smoke, and anything bad one can imagine. So they believe persons with straight hair, "potatoes cuts ". [The] first day I show[ed] up at work with my locked hair in Afro, one of my supervisor told I've degraded myself. Apparently, I should have just kept the wearing fake hair or do weave in. (Participant 12)

While some people believe that straight hair simply suits the office for no specific reason, others tie it to Western ideologies and aesthetic values. Some participants also believe that the preference of straight hair in work circles is due to the perception that natural hair looks unkempt, does not look neat and presentable, and shows that a person is unlikely to conform to rules. Participants' comments show that they are forced to wear weaves and perm their hair

sometimes because they understand that the hair forms, they maintain will impact their employment chances.

The effect of stereotypes attached to natural hair in the work environment is that those who wear their hair straight do not face hair related discrimination the same way those who wear their hair natural do when it comes to employment, firing, and promotion. Participants explain that straight hair is perceived as more appropriate for formal work and most organizations are biased toward straight hair wearers. Those who wear natural hair are criticized and their prospects of getting employed, maintaining their jobs or getting promoted are jeopardized by their hairstyle.

To know what Ghanaian women who were interviewed think irrespective of the stereotypes they listed, they were asked which hair form they prefer to wear to work. They were to choose between natural hairstyles and straight hairstyles. 43% of the interviewees said that they prefer to wear natural hair to work. Only 10% of participants, 3 in all, said that straight hair is more appropriate for the corporate environment. Fourteen participants making 47% said that both natural and straight hair is good to wear to work. Most people who wear their hair natural said that it is more convenient. Those who chose straight hair said that it is the preferable hairstyle for corporate work.

While the data collected shows that there is no preference for straight hair over natural hair when it comes to corporate work, their comments reveal an interesting trend. Most participants who vouched for natural hair did so on the condition that it appears neat and well kept. This is especially revealing because this perception keeps popping up. But what standard is determining what is neat and well kept? Another point answers in this section make is that there is a denial. The reasons that participants gave for saying that both hair options are okay for work

denies the very real problems that natural hair forms face in the work environment. Their comments also indicate that, for natural hair to be acceptable to them, it must not come on the concept that it is their hair and therefore is the natural thing to wear, it is better than relaxed hair and weaves, or it is simply appropriate for corporate work. Participants' responses suggest that natural hair is okay alongside straight hair options because people must be allowed to wear whatever hair they want to wear. It is the classic liberal – human rights era rhetoric that denies the stereotypical problems African women who wear their hair natural face in the work environment.

Some of the participants who chose straight hair as a better option for work pointed to colonial residues in African countries as the culprit. To them, it is colonial legacies that continue to force them to wear their hair straight or cover it up with a straight weave before they go to the office. Their comments suggest that, if colonialism were truly a thing of the past, there would be more appreciation of coily afro-textured hair. In a society whose education, laws, governance and religious systems and structures are very westernized, one can hardly deny these concerns raised by participants.

Some participants recognized that colonial holds and negative perceptions attached to natural hair are losing their grip more and more each day. They mentioned that natural hair shows one is confident, intelligent and knows what they are about. But others added that whether one’s hair is accepted in corporate circles or not also depends on one’s place of work. Some companies do not discriminate against natural hair, but others do. If an African woman works in a company that has natural hair friendly policies, she is likely not to experience any setback. Their comments show that there are companies that have unfriendly hair policies that affect those who wear their hair natural, and they blame colonial legacies and westernization for it.

However, contrary to some participants blame for colonial legacies for the situation, a closer look at most of these comments shows that traditional African hair values that prioritize well-managed hair created a fertile ground for Western values concerning presentability to become standards against which formal industry workers are measured. Negative meanings attached to natural hairstyles like dreadlocks are not necessarily stemming from colonial values. Traditional African religions and societies did not necessarily see dreadlocks as a positive hairstyle. Locks served as symbols of servitude to the gods in different ways. That is why it was a hairstyle reserved for *Dofleviwo* and priests among the Ewes and Akans of Ghana.

Moreover, when African people first encountered locks as hair that ordinary people could wear, it was Rastafarians, particularly Bob Marley, who wore it. So, they automatically associate it with Rastafarianism. To them, smoking and not combing one's hair are not positive personal values. So even though locks became popular and more people understood that 'normal' people wore locks, the negative values associated with it in African societies lingers on. This is partly why they are considered inappropriate for formal work.

The important point to keep in mind amidst the debate surrounding the source of discriminations against natural afro-textured hair is that perception that natural hair forms are not good enough for office work is a cantankerous one. As many comments by participants have shown, it is a problem many people who wear natural hair are forced to deal with in African societies. Wearing natural in a society that believes that neat hair is hair that looks smooth is especially harmful because it makes those whose hair does not adhere to this expectation, suspects, and outcasts. It denies them survival and growth opportunities. And that, in turn, makes some women wear hair forms that they do not agree with.

Straight hair does not carry the same burden of misconceptions attached to natural hair when it comes to social behavior, character, and mental state: factors considered important when it comes to employment. Stereotypes about natural hair that support privileges attached to permed hair and weaves affect African women's livelihood. These are some comments by participants on how their jobs are threatened because of their hair: "Mainly the name-calling, losing out on some jobs. There are some jobs that prefer relaxed hair so sometimes you lose out on that, people equally assume you are a student just because of the haircut" (Participant 13). Participant 14 said: "There's stereotyping from the uneducated mass. And it goes as far as affecting your job as well as how we're treated at public places." Even though some of the participants say that the negative meanings attached to natural hair forms in Ghana do not affect them, and the privileges that come with straight hair are dwindling, their comments show that they still suffer consequences because of their hairstyles.

Employment and the Consequences of Maintaining Natural Hair

To know more about the benefits and consequences of maintaining straight hair or natural hair when it comes to employment, participants were asked whether hair plays a role in how they are treated and the opportunities they access. Participants mentioned in other sections that hair influences their chances at work and how society, in general, sees them. This section is designed to explore these points more closely. By understanding whether participants' hair forms influence how they are treated, we get closer to finding out why some of them choose to perm their hair and wear weaves despite the many disadvantages they listed. The same applies to natural hair. Information on how natural hair wearers are treated lets us know how bad the situation is and whether those treatments have contributed to the prevailing straight hair culture among African women.

Participants' responses to the question show that those with perm get more favors and those with natural suffer consequences. The following are some comments to this effect:

> It does to a large extent. Most women with Permed hair are seen as responsible. Natural hair, especially twists-outs, dreads, and locks are seen as "not presentable " forms of hair" However, the concept of hair in Ghana is gradually changing. Most people are beginning to embrace the kinky hair. (Participant 15)

> Most people find my haircut intimidating. It's a mohawk. some job opportunities would require me to cover my hair or I lose the opportunity. (Participant 16)

> Yes, it does, people kind of look at you weirdly if you leave your natural hair uncombed. Even if you want to wear a rough look, there must be a deliberate attempt to style it like that before you are not asked any questions. (Participant 17)

Some women who wear their hair natural said that they get weird looks from people. To them, that means investing more time into managing a hair form that is already difficult to maintain.

Others remind us that, despite the general negative assumptions associated with natural hair and the privileges given to straight hair, hair-related benefits and consequences depend on where one is and who one is dealing with: “I believe your hair plays a role in how you are treated depending on who you are dealing with and where. Everyone has a different perception on hair and would treat you a certain way based on those perceptions. And hence give or withhold opportunities based on such” (Participant 18). Other natural hair wearers tell us that there is a glimmer of hope amidst the negativity attached to natural hair:

> Yes, it does. I tend to get more customers for my salon for instance, cos people see my hair, they love it and ask me how and where I got it done, how I treat it, etc. I just give

> them a card and direct them to my salon. I also tend to get stares from people when I pass by. The attention is what I need for the education. (Participant 19)

To this participant, her natural hair has influenced her so positively that it has resulted in more customers for her hair business. However, other participants said that they haven't noticed any changes in how they are treated based on the hair form they maintain.

Ultimately, the study found that many natural hair wearers experience discrimination and those who wear their hair in perms and wear weaves enjoy privileges that natural hair wearers are denied. For a lot of participants who wear their hair straight, straight hair pays, and they have no problem saying it does.

Class and Hair Forms

Another insight developed from the study has to do with hairstyles being perceived stereotypically as indicators of financial status, education level, job type, urbanization and measure of the ability to keep up with beauty trends. As the data discussed under previous sub-topics have shown, many participants who wear their hair natural complained that their hairstyles sometimes portray thems as poor people, illiterate, village dwellers, menial job workers, and outmoded people. Even though this is largely a myth (hair forms are not accurate indicators of the factors listed here as this study will show in subsequent paragraphs), participants point out that such views are a major part of their hair experiences.

While straightened hair and hair extensions are largely seen as "ability to afford to fix hair", natural hairstyles are seen as an inability to afford to take care of hair. Some of the interviewees said that they were told they didn't have money to fix their hair and that is why they kept it natural: "I was once told I didn't have money i.e. broke that's why I switched to my own

hair. I've been told I looked like a house help" (Participant 20). Participant 21 added to Participant 20's point by saying that:

> I remember one time I was asked by a lady if I keep my natural hair because I can't afford relaxers? I was like😳😳 wow! I was literally shocked by her question and sad at the same at her ignorance, hmmm. But such behaviors don't affect me negatively in anyway cos I only see them as ignorant and I move on to being beautiful. (21)

When asked about what she thinks the consequences of not relaxing her hair and wearing weave are, Participant 22 said that:

> I won't actually lose anything except the wired looks I'll receive from people who don't believe in natural hair and the unnecessary questions about why you're not keeping up with modern trends of beauty standards, or you're not financially sound to fix weaves nor keep perms, why you as an educated person is keeping natural hair (unkept) which doesn't fit your status.

To the people whom these participants encountered, their chosen hairstyle indicated that they were poor and did a menial job thus, they could not afford to relax their hair or fix hair extensions. In those people's views, something other than natural hair represents a stable financial status and a good job. But the issue of class and hair is more complicated than.

The perception that natural hair showed poverty, illiteracy, rural and outmoded status, and straight hair showed stable financial status, educated, urban, and trendy status has a historical and cultural background. Even though the adoption of wigs during the pre-colonial and colonial era on the continent, and the introduction of hair straightening later on during the pre-independence, independence and post-independence periods was mainly by the elite class

(people who could afford these things either through their status as royals or wealthy individuals), straight hair forms did not necessarily indicate class at the beginning. From older community members' accounts, when hair straightening first came, it was a fashion trend for many people who tried it. My mother said that they altered their hair to show that there was part of the latest fashion. They did not do it because they wanted people to see that they were better than the rest of their community members.

In some cases, freshly straightened hair was mocked as *gborfu*. Gborfu means hair of a goat. Therefore, one's hairstyle was not considered by their societies as a determinant of financial status, type of job, where one stays among others. From my mother's account, there was no difference between those of them that indulged in the new hairstyling practices and those who did. They all did similar jobs, lived in one town, and had similar levels of education among others.

But things changed as it became clearer that only those who lived in places where such hair styling techniques, materials, and hairdressers were exposed to them and could be afforded could afford to maintain such hairstyles. In other words, only those who lived in urban centers and had the means to afford hair straightening and hair extensions could wear their hair in straight/wavy/curly forms. Those who lived in rural areas and did jobs that paid too little could not afford to style their hair in perms, Jheri curls, and weaves. Thus, hairstyles began to be viewed as indicators of financial status and place of dwelling.

Also, straight hair forms became the signature hairstyle of certain professions like teaching and nursing as indicated in the following response from Participant 23:

> Upper-Class Woman? Not really when it comes to income but I teach girls and try to mold young girls into assertive, intelligent and independent women. So, when I began my teaching career in 2010, I relaxed my hair just like a madam would. So, it actually played a huge role in the hair form chose.

This comment suggests that straight hair is a part of an upper-class role-play. So, teachers dress a certain way to communicate their place as educators that influence younger people. An absence of straight hair will deny them respect, so they play the part when they find themselves in positions that warrant it. The comment is rightly so.

Teachers and nurses were part of the elite class in West African societies. They were educated, they got salary and their jobs were considered formal in comparison to their fellow community members who had little to no education, did not get a salary and were not involved doing formal jobs. This means that, with everything being equal, teachers and nurses had access to new information, they could afford new hairstyles and they had the moral responsibility of maintaining a certain image. For example, when television first arrived in our town, Tegbi, only my grandfather, who was a teacher, had a TV. But the privileges that enabled teachers to occupy a higher status in African communities went beyond earning salaries and having access to information first. So, second, colonial legacies had something to do with how teachers styled their hair, dressed and behaved in general. Teachers did not only carry English names, mostly worshipped through the Christian faith, spoke English like the colonizers, taught like Europeans (formal education in Africa is a copied European education system), and wore European clothes; they attempted to style their hair European ways.

Education systems and almost all the “modern” professions in Ghana are tailored after European ways. So, nurses and teachers maintain dress codes that were more Western than

Afrocentric. They mimic their counterparts in Britain and other places. Since the people their professional principles were tailored after have straight hair, straightened hair and hair extensions fit more in playing the role of teachers and nurses compared to traditional African hairstyles like *Atsifuifi*:

> Growing up, I have been fascinated by female teachers. They were called "lady teachers" in the community I grew up in. So I earnestly wanted to be a teacher. I could practice for long hours the way the dressed, spoke, ate and how they generally carried themselves about. Of course, they had relaxed hair. Wanting to be like them, I knew I wanted relaxed hair too😊. (Participant 24)

But even at that, traditional hairstyles and newly fashioned Afrocentric hairstyles like Afros were still worn by teachers alongside straight hair.

However, things changed more toward straight hair connoting educated, financially stable, and urban with the advent of print media sources like newspapers and magazines, and traditional media outlets like TV. A lot of the material these outlets showed included European and American cultures. These mediums made it easier for West African elites, professionals, city dwellers, and wealthy individuals to see which hair forms were being portrayed as “classy”: “My family cos I have about three saloonist and I've always kept a relaxed hair since childhood, female news anchors; I'm always attracted to their hairstyles” (Participant 25).

Since traditional hairstyles were not shown in these media outlets the same way straight hair was depicted, they came to represent the hairstyle for poor *colo* village people. Interestingly, *colo* is a shortened version of word, ‘colonial,’ used to describe as an outdated person. With a historical and cultural link between colonialism and professions like teaching and nursing, there was

already fertile ground for these ideas to take root among West African people. Thus, hair forms became associated with class factors.

From observations I made in towns, cities, and villages I lived in Ghana for these twenty years or more, and talking to participants in this study, there is no correlation whatsoever between hair forms and class anymore. In other words, hair forms are no longer a viable way of knowing whether someone belongs to the upper/middle class or lower class in any way. Hair forms are no longer a viable way of determining a person's class; they have been quite contentious subject for a long time now. A person cannot look at another person's hairstyle and conclude that they are poor or not, educated or not, or did menial jobs or not, or lived in the city or village. This is due to various reasons.

First, women began to consider hair straightening and hair extensions an important part of their social image since hair forms were associated with class amidst colonial legacies and the advent of print and digital media. And since they did not want to be seen by their societies as poor uneducated rural dwellers, they perm their hair and wear extensions even if they are poor and uneducated or lived in the village. I saw many women in my town who, though struggled to make ends meet from their informal jobs at the lagoon side and the beach, still managed to 'fix' their hair. To them, poverty and illiteracy is a shame they did not want to be associated with it. So even when they had no to little education and did menial jobs and earned very little, they still considered hair an important aspect of their image.

Second, hairdressing – people, skills, and products that have to do with perming – became more widespread, available in rural communities and poor neighborhoods, and at an affordable cost to all people, with time. Whether a person relaxed their hair or not, and fixed weaves or not, or braided with extensions or not, was more a matter of where they styled their

hair (as in-salon wise) rather than salon availability and cost of styling. In every neighborhood in my town, there are more salons than schools and churches. Even at places where there are no salons in both the cities and villages, people operated a hairdressing center from perched locations and their houses. They used tables and set hair products and tools on them. And they advertised by making the tables visible to the public, or they placed a signboard outside their homes and operating centers.

Third, natural hair forms that cost as much, sometimes even more than perms and weaves, were introduced. Also, the rarity of natural hair maintenance among African women, certain natural hair products cost more than perming products. Therefore, a person's hairstyle did not necessarily tell whether they were "classy" or not. By extension, though straight hair remained the more common hair from among teachers, nurses, and other formal occupations like banking, it was no longer a matter of affordability and signature professional image. Poor women in the village were also wearing the same hairstyles teachers, nurses, and bankers wore. With the introduction of the natural hair campaign that encourages African women to maintain their afro-textured hair, more so-called high-class women and professionals began to wear natural hairstyles.

However, despite the changes that took place in class and hairstyling perceptions, straight hair forms, particularly Brazilian weaves, continue to be used as symbols of class. The effect is that those who do not wear Brazilian hair are seen in West African society as poor, outmoded, rural dwellers and menial job workers. Even though the stereotype arises mainly from the cost of Brazilian weaves in comparison to other hairstyles, Brazilian hair is not an accurate measure of a person's education, financial, urbanization and job status. To expose the complex nature of hair forms and class perceptions, the study asked participants about their financial status and their

earnings, whether they consider class and cost of maintenance when selecting hair forms and styles. Then drew conclusions as to whether hairstyles are true indicators of financial status, a person's education level, the job they do and where they live among West African women currently.

Out of the thirty women I interviewed, the majority said they were financially stable. And they also mentioned that cost is not a deciding factor in their decision to wear the hair forms they wear. But answers to the section on class and hair indicate that society uses hairstyle to judge people's financial standing and education status, even when it is inaccurate most times, it affects the wearer. A woman in the study pointed out that, many people associate natural hair with poverty: "Well, some people look down on ladies with natural hair…", at the same time they correlate good financial status with straight hair: "To some extent.....cos of the value attached to straight hair and weaves and the notion that you're financially sound" (Participant 26). This shows that hair forms are still read as symbolic of class in African societies.

Even though this research paper has established that there is no correlation between wealth and hair form, the stereotype that natural hair wearers are poor remains a valid concern among women. Some opt not to wear their hair natural because of this perception. They don't want to be seen as poor even if they are poor. As mentioned earlier, a lot of women in rural areas, who do not get a big salary like people in the formal sector and urban centers still relax their hair and wear weaves precisely because their absence is interpreted by a segment of the society as poverty. To some of the women I interviewed, because of poverty and all the other negative factors associated with natural hair are as a shame, they make decisions that will not bring shame to their image; they relax their hair and wear weaves because that is what is considered sophisticated and financially stable.

Other participants said that class does not matter to them and have no influence when they are choosing hair forms. Participant 27, for example, said that she is " a middle-class woman… and personally… don't think [her] societal standing has any influence on [her] choice of hair". Some of the participants explained further that, class is not something they consciously think about when choosing a hair form but they don't mind if their hairstyle aligns them with a more respected class. Participant 28 explained: "If my hair qualifies me as an upper-class woman why not but our society sometimes back considered women with natural hair as a lower class but God being so good that assumption is changing." Some of the women said that straight hair is considered more sophisticated than natural hair. They explain that the hairstyle they wear is not just about whether it is natural or an extension; when choosing which weave to buy, they make sure that it is a certain type: "Yes. I'd like to fit in by looking classy. That's why in choosing extensions I don't go for synthetic hair" (Participant 29).

Others said that class is important to them but they still wear their hair natural because natural hair is what they consider classy. Participant 30 mentioned that she "considers [her]self an upper- class woman and choosing [her] hair form was to fit [her] personality and also looking at the woman [she has] admired all [her] life which is [her] mother made want to follow her steps by having afro hair." Others are fully aware of the misconceptions about natural hair and its association with poverty, but they simply don't care. They are adamant and they choose to still go ahead and wear their hair natural.

The conclusion drawn here is that class plays a role in African women's decision to wear their hair straight. Class influences straight hair preference among Black women. From the data discussed so far, it is evident that contemporary hairstyling among continental African women, as exemplified by Ghanaian women, still holds class meanings. While some participants do not

care how society perceives their hair class-wise, others have redefined class to say that natural hair is what is classy. The rest continue to perm their hair and wear extensions to show that they are classy. As the contention surrounding hair forms and class continue to be debated, it is clear that the stereotypes surrounding hair forms, though, inadequate as the next section would show, continues to influence which hairstyles African women opt for and which ones they avoid wearing.

African Hair and the Paradox of Cost

Cost has been cited as a major consideration among African women when it comes to hairstyling and its social significance. Comments made by many participants, especially those who wear their hair natural, indicate that they are aware that a segment of the African population attaches one's financial status to one's hairstyle. There is a perception that those who wear their hair natural do so because of cost. This perception stems from the idea that maintaining natural hair is less expensive. This study has a hypothesis that this perception influences hair form choices among African women. To verify this, participants were asked whether cost influences their hairstyling and whether they make decisions about their hair based on the salary they receive.

For the question regarding cost, only 23% of participants, representing seven people said that cost affects decisions about their hair. 63%, representing nineteen people said that cost does not influence their hairstyling choices. On the issue of salary and hairstyling, only nine people, making 30% of all participants said that how much they earn influences the hair forms they maintain. Seventeen participants, making 57%, said that they can afford any hairstyle they want so their salary is not a factor in what hair form they maintain. Four people did not answer the question. The conclusion regarding cost/salary and hair is that the majority of participants said

that cost is not a factor in their hairstyling decisions. The following paragraphs discuss the details of the participants' responses.

Participants who claim that cost is not a factor in their styling decisions are mainly people who wear their hair natural. According to most of them, maintaining certain natural hairstyles cost much more than perms and hair extensions. They said that their decision to wear their hair natural is not because they cannot afford to perm their hair or afford weaves. Here are some comments by participants to this effect: “Actually no. Maintaining natural hair costs Soooooooooo much more money than relaxed hair, and even kinky wigs cost more than straight. And sisterlocs cost a fortune to install and maintain. Even though the time between retightening is longer” (Participant 1). Participant 2 added: “No, hair cost has nothing to do with my hair choice. In fact, micro locs are very expensive to maintain.” Some of them point out that hairstyles like sister locks (a micro-strands form of locks) cost more, and natural hair products and services also cost more.

While many natural hair wearers vehemently argue that their hairstyle is not an accurate measure of their financial status, others say that natural hair maintenance is cheap, and that is one of the reasons why they opted to wear their hair natural. Participant 3 explains her hair decision and costs, saying: “I considered going natural to save the cost of perm cream etc, but I found the cost of maintenance for natural hair is more.” From her comment, it is evident that even this claim is unstable. Other women agree that cost is one of the reasons why they went natural. However, they discovered that the equation of natural hair to less cost is a myth. Due to this, some have reported disappointment in their decision to go natural because of cost only to discover that their choice of natural hair form costs even more than what they were spending on perms and weaves.

Both sides of the debate have valued points. The situation is not as simple as natural equals to poverty and straight hair equals good financial status. On the average, a basic perm cost more than a basic natural hairstyle (there is nothing like a basic natural hairstyle. I use the term to refer to hairstyles like shortly cropped afro-textured hair). This is because perms demand special skills that can only be accessed in salons, and they also demand special hair creams and tools that need to be bought. There are no home remedies when it comes to perms (and weaves) like natural hair. Even though perm products are more readily available and usually cheaper than natural hair products in Ghana, those who wear perms visit the salon more often than those who wear natural hair. Natural hair can be handled with household products *'dzele ibor'/ 'alata salami'* (African black soap), water (as a moisturizer), and shea butter. Moreover, an impromptu rain won't force a natural hair wearer to rush to the salon to fix her hair and pay the same way someone with perm would have.

Also, natural hair can also be worn in a variety of forms. A person who keeps natural hair can wear them in a shortly cropped form. This means that, on the basic level, they only need to go to the barbershop occasionally. This is less often than the number of times a person who maintains permed hair is required to visit the salon. A perm wearer needs to visit the salon often to wash or retouch and style her hair. But even shortly cropped hairstyles can be expensive. Depending on the type of salon the wearer cuts her hair at and the styles she does. For example, if she decides to color her hair after cutting it, she will end up paying far more than the $2 average that she would have spent if she only cut her hair. In terms of the type of salon, a 'local' place may charge $2 but a salon reserved for upper-class clientele, and salons that offer more sophisticated services may end up spending five times the amount spent in a 'local' salon.

As one participant pointed out, there are natural hairstyles like ‘sisterlocs’ that have costs that are comparable to perms and weaves. This is because such hairstyles are done by special hairdressers who are certified in those particular hairstyles, they require periodic salon visit that costs a lot of money (sometimes, far more than perms and weaves). A person who wears her hair in sister locks needs to visit the salon every six weeks to retighten new growth. This is more than a perm wearer retouches their hair. Also, one sister lock retouch session can cost as much as $30. But a perm session may be around $10. However, it is important to keep in mind that there are ‘Brazilian’ (real human hair from India) costs as much as $200 (the cost goes higher when fixing, and maintenance charges are added) while one is comparing natural hair forms and straight hair forms.

These are some of the reasons why the issue of cost is not simply a matter of one costing more than the other. Reasons such as availability of salons and hairdressers, time, convenience and cost of salon sessions influence hairstyle choices even in the face of cost. This participant sums up the most considered reasons in her response:

> I was primarily tired of salon queues, too much time I had to invest in getting relaxed, to do weave in, the stress has to endure leaving salon late. I had to endure self-punishment of removing weaves, relax my hair, have them blew [blow-dried], plaited or weave in all these same day and at time had to call people to drop me home because they styling finish at night and sometimes had to do this and pressed for time to pack and travel with work or work night or early shifts. It just made life difficult for me. Again my hair was breaking and losing hairlines because of hair pulling and excessive heat through hair straightening and blowing. I happened just to miss my hair too. Puzzled why I was wearing hair that is not mine and that represent other races, I just felt I was also

> practicing slavery. I just got tired of all those things &want lifetime freedom. With natural hair I reduced those and some deleted because I do it myself and natural hairstyle most don't take long time. Cost came into play later after I cut my hair (at first I cut my hair and relaxed and adopted my own hair but I actually shifted to high-cost maintenance type of hairstyle that requires to tong the hair 3 days a week, before I later kept unrelaxed hair, so cost wasn't really my primary reason). (Participant 4)

The study also asked participants how cheap, or expensive their hair maintenance is, whether they are charged more or charged less at the salon depending on their hair and whether products for their hair type are cheap or expensive. Participants were asked to ignore questions in the cost section if they maintained their hair natural (without hair extensions) except they feel that the questions were related to them. The result is that even though some participants did not respond to questions in this section, most of them did. So, answers are reflective of both natural hair wearers and straight hair wearers.

Overall, nine people said their hair form is neither cheap nor expensive to maintain. Another nine said that theirs is expensive to preserve, and eight people said that their hair forms are cheap to keep. Participants mentioned that maintenance cost depends on the following:

- Whether they visit the salon or not,
- The type of salon they visit,
- The type of hair they have,
- The type of hairstyles they want to do,
- The type of products they use.

In other words, people who visit not such sophisticated local salons and do not go to the salon often, do less sophisticated hairstyles, and use cheaper products tend to pay more for hair maintenance. But as briefly mentioned previously, many women point out that, in addition to these factors, those of them with natural afro-textured hair may have a higher maintenance cost compared to those with permed hair. Though this issue is debatable, there are some factors to consider further.

Seven participants said that they are charged neither more nor less. Six people said that they are charged less, and twelve women said that they are charged more. What was clear is that many participants consider cost, even though they claimed that it is not an issue in previous sections. Most of them are people who wear their hair natural. Due to this, participants said that they have tried to cut the cost in various ways. On the one hand, some participants said that they put longer distances between salon visits. On the other hand, others said that they send their own products to the salon. But ultimately, some women forfeit going to the salon altogether and style their hair at home.

Participants were asked whether they do some styling at home to reduce cost, or they always visit the salon. 70% of all participants (21 people) said that they do some home/self-styling to reduce cost. Only 20% of participants (6 people) said that they always go to the salon. Three people did not answer the question. Participants have said that due to the unavailability of adequate services and proper natural hair management skills in salons, they either stop going to the salon as mentioned earlier or they make do with bad salon service because they don't know how to style their hair or achieve specific hairstyles. The conclusion is that the majority of participants who wear their hair natural do some home/self-styling to reduce the cost of hair maintenance and also to avoid other problems.

This chapter established that there are stereotypes attached to natural hair while straight hair comes with privileges. Due to that, more African women choose to straighten their hair or wear hair extensions to avoid the damaging stereotypes and gain access to privileges that have to do with beauty, job and social regard among others. The next chapter discusses other factors that emerged in the study and further explains how stereotypes and privileges discussed in this chapter influence Ghanaian women's hair choices.

CHAPTER V: FURTHER FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Part II: Other Factors That Emerged

In addition to stereotypes and privileges, participants outlined other factors that influence their decisions regarding which hair forms to maintain. These include cultural identity, influence, health implications, hairdressing and styling, and convenience. This part of the paper discusses findings on these factors.

Cultural Identity

The study found out that identity affiliation and identity performance are a major part of African women's hairstyling decisions. But the issue of identity is a contentious one. While some of the women interviewed believe that their hair is part of who they are; their hairstyles show who they are, so they must wear it without changing the texture, others defensively argue that hair is not a part of their identity and therefore the hair form they maintain is not an indication of who they are.

Participants were asked (1a) whether they consider their hair a part of their identity, (1b) whether they wear their hair the way they do as part of their identity performance, and (1c) if they believe it is their responsibility to keep their hair natural because they are Africans. For (1a) and (1b), twenty respondents, representing 66%, said yes, they consider their hair part of their identity and wear their hair a certain way to show that. But eight people, representing 27% of the participants, said no. Two people who represent 7% of the women interviewed said that they don't know. Participants who said their hair was part of their identity mainly connected it to the idea of being African. None of them connected it to gender or class. The following comments by some of the participants demonstrate this:

Yes. I have a theory. It is this: authenticity is the symbol of self-love and dignity. Being my authentic self means I do not consider myself inferior to others and also that others, living their authentic lives, are not inferior to me. For this reason, [I] have the freedom to showcase who I am, and that involves loving the natural occurrence of my physical self, including my hair. I reached this decision in 2013 when my classmates in Oxford were confused about my hair. They met me for the first time in braids (long twists to be precise). Later, I often changed from one braid to another and from one wig to the other. They always wondered where my hair went. Thus, without intending to do so, I had given up my identity by keeping on my head what did not belong to me. To me, wearing wig probably has been a sign that I didn't love my natural hair (and myself) enough, although that wasn't my reason for wearing wigs and braids. I began to realize that I, on the other hand, never doubted the identity of my colleagues because they wore their natural hair and never changed it: it was a part of them. It was their identity. I felt lost and ashamed that I couldn't show them enough of the African identity; the real me. So I showed my real hair to make the statement that "I actually exist. (Participant 5)

For Participant 6: I decided to wear my hair firstly because I don't believe in the definition of beauty imposed to me that I am only seen beautiful or looking great by my peers or community when I wear fake hair that represents other races, so [I] wanted to disassociate [my]self with that meaning and communicate that I am beautiful just as I was created. Fake hair is just not me. It makes me feel like I'm trying to be somebody I am not because I'm not comfortable with my own hair. Some races don't wear my hair, and I find it strange that this has been normalized to wear other races' hair. My second reason to wear my hair is embracing who I am, self-identity despite 1000 negative and

> discriminatory opinions about my hair. I just had enough with [the] globe believing beauty lies in certain hairs and not mine, and world marketing hair relaxers to straighten my hair, yet they can't make others races hair kinky like mine. So I want my peers, my children, my family, and the young and beauty industry to know kinky, curly, afro hair is beautiful and wonderful, you don't need to wear other races hair to be the best you can be or to be recognized.
>
> It identifies me, and I feel it brings the true me out; it makes me more beautiful and younger. I feel more liberated, [and] courageous wearing my hair. Fake hair makes me feel I'm suppressing my own race and allowing me to practice slavery when I wear fake hair, especially if they do not resemble African hair. Lastly, I find it ridiculous and punishing to self-create some financial budget and [put] time into fake hair when I can nurture my hair at a fairly reasonable budget and save time on significant things. (Participant 7)

While there is a clear majority in the case of question 1a and 1b, question one 1c was more contentious. In all, twenty-three participants responded to the question, and thirteen of them said that yes, it is their responsibility to wear their hair natural since they are Africans. Reasons they gave include:

- That is the hair nature/god gave them / that is how their hair grows naturally
- The world deserves to know Africans as they are

Closely behind them, ten women said that they do not think that they have to wear their hair in an afro-textured form. According to them,

- The type of hair a person keeps is choice. So, their hair forms came out of individual choices
- Hair has nothing to do with whether they are African or not
- Hairstyling is about convenience and how much a person can afford to spend on hair
- Racial tags divide the world

Women who made these points explained that "hairstyle choice is strictly based on [a person's] convenience and pockets" (Participant 8). Some added that they are Africans, "but perming makes life easier" (Participant 9). In their view, if people had issues with their hairstyles because they do not look African, they do not care because they "don't owe anyone any explanations or duties" (Participant 10). Some of the women explained that they do not like being labeled racially:

> No, I don't. On a personal level I dislike tags. I understand identity and all that, but I'm an African by virtue of someone's tag. Tags supposedly used to identify us together yet separates us from the human family or human race which is all of us. It's an expectation I prefer not to burden myself with. (Participant 11)

Furthermore, participants were asked whether they wear weaves to look white and whether the act of wearing weaves constitutes a desire to look like white women by changing African features. The majority of respondents said no, they do not wear weaves to be white. Only one person said yes, she wears weaves to look white. According to participants who argued that wearing weaves does not connote hate for African features and desire for whiteness:

- Skin color still marks them African even when they alter their hair

- They only wear weaves as part of the many hairstyles they wear
- Weaves are just fashion trend/ they are trying out something new
- They are just trying to look different and sophisticated
- They wear weaves for the sake of beauty but not to be white

Some emphasized that weaves are not a symbol of whiteness. According to them, even if they are, blackness is not only hair, so wearing weaves does not hide their blackness. Others pointed out that weaves are just a matter of personal choice for beauty and versatility for them. Participant 12 explained their hair choices as an ability to do different styles with one's hair forms:

> It is [a] choice. And choices are informed by people's level of thinking. Assuming that they perm their hair because they want to be white is wrong. There could be various other reasons. E.g. to feel more beautiful. As I think beauty is about understanding one's identity, others might think of beauty differently, and it will be unfair on their part for them to think I am crazy. In the same vein, it is unfair to assume. We have to be empathetic about people's choices, considering the different levels of exposure and upbringing people have.

Participants also said that white women were not their beauty idols, rather fellow African women were. Their main point being that their generation came to see a lot of black women in perm and weaves, so they look up to them more than white women (most participants are between the age of twenty and forty years). Most of them also stated that it is unfair to think that African women who wear weaves and perm their hair are trying to be white:

> I think it is unfair because, as stated earlier our generation came to meet permed hair and weaves as accepted forms in achieving beautiful looks, so we look up to other black women with weaves rather than white women. We're not avoiding looking African because we base our "Africanness" more on our skin color than hair. (Participant 13)

One of the women captured these views accurately when she said: "They do it not to be white but to be accepted by whites. And because they've been conditioned to feel beautiful that way" (Participant 14). Her point is that African women alter their hair not to look like white people but rather to look a way that white people consider acceptable. Her statement suggests that white people are the majority of those who control systems and structures that hold most of the world's opportunities; being accepted by them is important to many African women.

Despite the validity of respondents' argument that they are not trying to be white, their statements need to be interrogated further because, first, how did weaves come to represent beauty, sophistication, and versatility? Second, how did the African women they see as idols arrive at wearing straight hair over their afro-textured hair? Third, is hair truly not an aspect of racial/ethnical identity formation as some of them defensively and quickly claimed? Some of their comments came out very defensively. The defensiveness could be because the greater number of participants wear hair extensions, and they felt that their identity was being questioned by those who insist that they are trying to deny their African identity.

A couple of women made statements that suggested that perms and weaves symbolize a desire for whiteness, and they stood on that conviction to argue that their fellow women who indulge in hair straightening and wear weaves are trying to be white. Participant 15 who took this stand said that: "No [it is not unfair to say that they are trying to be white], because that's exactly what they're trying to achieve [by] changing their appearance and identity to look like another,

though some people do it out of ignorance." Participant 16 emphasized by pointing out that each racial group's hair looks a certain way: "No because whites are born and they live with long straight hair. Blacks are born with rough afro hair. If you can't leave in your own hair, it means you want to be like the other." In the two women's perspective, so long as an African person changes the texture of the hair she is born with, she is trying to be something other than African.

The study attempted to verify this accusation of the desirability of whiteness and the denial and defensiveness that accompanies it, by asking participants further questions about their hair preferences.

Considering that hair color is one of the major factors used in determining which hair is iconic and which hair isn't in European beauty standards, participants were asked which colors they prefer to wear, or they normally wear. 73% of them (22 people) included 'black' in their color preferences or said that it is the only color they wear. The rest of the participants said that they wear other colors. These include commonly used colors like brown/coffee and gold. Other colors include wine, red, blue, violet, burgundy, and grey. Only one participant said that she prefers blonde. Even at that, she explained that she prefers those colors because they make her skin appear darker due to the contrast those hair colors provide:

> I usually opt for shades blonde or red hair color. As I enjoy playing with color, and coloring my hair or wearing colored braids has become part of my identity. Aside from loving colors and standing out, having brighter colored hair makes my skin look darker which is one of the reasons I prefer bright colors as opposed to my natural black hair color. (Participant 17)

Knowing whether African women wear blonde hair and reasons behind their color choices is important because blonde is the hair color that is the most celebrated hair color among Western people. If more African people desired it, it could be read as a desire among them to copy white features. So, the conclusion on color preference among African women is that most of them prefer to maintain their natural colors – which are usually black.

Length is another factor considered important in determining which hair is beautiful and which hair is not when it comes to European beauty ideals. Apart from texture, length has been a major part of the styling argument. On what length of hair participants prefer, or wear normally, 30% of all participants (9 people) said that they prefer both lengths, or any length is fine. Sixteen people, representing 53% said that they prefer long hair. Some of them specified that the hair must be between 13 – 16 inches long. Others clarified that by long hair, they mean afro-textured long hair. There is a positive correlation between the number of participants who relax their hair and wear hair extensions and long hair preferences.

The most cited reason for long hair preference is that it is easier and more beautiful to style. African women who prefer straight hair point out that perms and weaves make their hair longer, and longer hair means more styling options and a variety of styles. But what these people usually mean, as a study of their comments reveals, is that they would want to do styles that coily Afro-textured hair cannot do in its natural state. Take ponytails as an example, even though an African can catch her hair in a band at a certain growth natural, the afro when placed in a ban, does not look smooth and flows down the back the same way someone with a smooth long hair does. So, to achieve a ponytail style, a person with coily hair would relax their hair, and if it is not long enough, which it hardly is, they will add weaves to the end of their permed hair to achieve the ponytail.

There were a few women who prefer short hair because they say long hair is difficult to manage. Five people, making up 17% of all women interviewed said that they prefer their hair short. Most of them said that short hair is easier to manage. Some of them believe that they look better in short hair. This stance shows a positive correlation between the number of participants who wear their hair natural without extensions and short hair preference. But this does not mean that all women who wear their hair natural prefer short hair. The conclusion on hair length preference among African women is that most women prefer long hair. However, this does not necessarily translate into a will to be white or a desire for non-Afro-textured hair.

To know whether participants desired to change features that are considered dominant African features to dominant European features or not, participants who relax their hair and wear hair extensions were asked (1a) which other parts of their body have they altered and (1b) whether they will change other parts of their bodies if technology makes it possible and at a cheaper cost. For 1a, respondents said they had not altered any part of their bodies. Some of them clarified that apart from their hair. But others insisted that perming and weaving are not body modifications. On question 1b, most said they wouldn't change anything about themselves even if technology makes it pain-free. But some of them also pointed out that changing their bodies does not mean that they are no longer African since how a person looks has nothing to do with one's identity. Only two people said they would change something about themselves. One person said she would opt to bleach. The second person said that she would like to change her hair to become long straight hair so that she stops experiencing stress.

Participants' statements on cultural identity and hair forms show that, though the issue of cultural identity and hair is one that invites debate, African women are not trying to be white through their hair choices; they do not hate their hair. The following statements are some of the

things participants said when they were asked what would they say to a younger African coily haired woman who believes that their hair is not good enough:

> I'd tell her [that her] hair is her crowning Glory, and Afro-textured hair is the most versatile and magical of all hair textures... hair that defies gravity, can mimic any hair texture with either a straightener, curl formers, curl wand or a simple Bantu knot out, twist /braid out, and yet revert to its natural texture when desired. [It is also] the only hair texture that can shrink to up to 30% of its actual length. You can go from 2" of length to 10" with a simple blow dryer. Afro-textured hair is beautiful and meant to be celebrated. And it's the only texture of hair that doesn't look nasty and ugly when locked or braided. What's not to love? There is pride in one's natural hair, not shame. (Participant 29)

> You are beautiful, hair inclusive. Without your African hair, you might look weird. Our hair is so versatile, and that's our little secret. See, you can wear it anyhow you like (show pics of a popular African with curly, wavy and straight hair). So many things you can do that other [people] can't do, and they envy that. (Participant 18)

> Your hair is your crown. It swells with pride and absolute superiority. Unlike the ones of other ethnicities that falls and drapes yours defies the odds of gravity. It brings out the Queen that you are. Own it. Be proud of it! It makes you unique. It is your beauty. Anything short of it decreases your beauty. (Participant 19)

Not one woman said that it would be better for the younger African women to relax her hair or wear weaves over it. The absence of such advice is significant because people who hate their hair and are trying to be white would have advised younger people to alter their hair as a solution to the dislike they have for their hair.

Conclusively on hair forms and racial identity, natural hair is seen as a matter of being, (African) pride, self-acceptance, and racial equality on one side. On the other side, straight hair is constructed as a matter of freedom of choice, assimilation, survival, and acceptance. Hair is about racial identity as much as it is about choice, stylization, versatility, and convenience. Some believe natural hair is a matter of identity, so one must automatically wear what one is born with. To these people, the absence of natural hair means one hates herself and has internalized racism. Others believe that straight hair is simply a choice to experience new styles, and for the sake of convenience, it does not mean that they hate their features or they are trying to be white.

Sources of Influence

What a person grows up seeing or experiences life as every day, to a large extent, determines their decisions. Many participants recounted situations where their hair decisions were made based on the things and people they saw in their homes, environment and the media while growing up. This influence is why images are important. To understand how young girls who had afro-textured hair grew into adults who relaxed their hair and wore hair extensions (only one participant reported that she has never relaxed her hair, even that, she wears extension), the study asked participants to mention some of the things that influenced their hair choices when they were growing up. They were also asked how they arrived at the decision to first perm their hair, wear weaves, or keep it natural. The factors they mentioned include the following:

- Self-love
- African identity
- Environment / Social norm
- Transition/ Desire to be considered an adult
- Mentor/ role models
- Religion

- Family and friends influence
- White people and Longhair
- TV personnel that had straight hair
- Nature of hair / Hair Type
- Pain from Combing and Styling
- Fashion trend
- Cultural imposition

I discuss some of the most occurring factors in subsequent paragraphs.

Many participants pointed out that they relaxed their hair because it was all they knew while growing up. Some of them explained that 'everyone' they knew had various forms of altered hair. Participant 20 said that all she saw around her while growing up was straight hair: "Growing, all I saw around me is permed hair, and I won't lie, I found it really attractive back then." Participant 21 supported the first woman's claim by stating that: "Environment mostly. I didn't even know anyone who kept virgin hair at the time I started mine." Participant 22 mentioned that her decision to relax her hair came from the fact that straight hair was a norm in her community: "My parents cut my hair at an early age coz it was just convenient being a schoolgirl. When I decided to start growing my hair I was only interested in perm coz at the time it was the "norm." Natural hair was for Jehovah's witnesses." Their comments indicated that hair relaxing is a very common practice among West African adults. As mentioned earlier in Part I under social norms, while school kids in Ghana cut their hair regularly, adults normally perm their hair and wear hair extensions.

Sometimes, the influence that encourages women to relax their hair comes from their parents. A participant who started relaxing her hair at a tender age said that it was more of her mother's decision than her own:

> As a child relaxing was the choice of my mother as she found it time-consuming dealing with and braiding hair for four girls. So, relaxers were a means to make hair manageable. In JHS [Junior High School]is was normal to have permed hair, especially as I had longer hair. After SHS, relaxing seemed the obvious choice however I didn't use weaves. I would just get box braids or cornrows with extensions. [I] wasn't a fan of weaves probably because I didn't really need or fancy them. When wigs came onto the scene I started experimenting with them. (Participant 23)

Although she explained that her mother's decision to relax her hair was a choice that emanated from necessity, her story highlights the fact that dangers associated with hair relaxing are not limited to adults: children are also culprits of the notorious habit of hair relaxing among African women.

Other participants explained that, beyond family, they had been influenced by people they regard as mentors and role models. In other words, images of people who represented their career dreams influenced how they chose to wear their hair. A participant explained that she got encouraged to straighten her hair because that is how the career holders she dreamt of becoming maintained their hair:

> Growing up, I have been fascinated by female teachers. They were called "lady teachers" in the community I grew up in. So, I earnestly wanted to be a teacher. I could practice for long hours the way the dressed, spoke, ate and how they generally carried themselves about. Of course, they had relaxed hair. Wanting to be like them, I knew I wanted relaxed hair too 😊. (Participant 24)

Participant 5 said since the people she looked up to relaxed their hair, she followed their footsteps: “Most of my role models relaxed their hair and wore weaves. So, I got my hair relaxed. I decided not to relax my hair anymore after I suffered a severe burn. I sometimes wear weaves and use extensions though I have kinky hair.” From this statement, role models are not the ultimate influencer; participants’ hairstyling experiences are. However, even though some of the women ended up with hairstyles that are opposite to their mentor’s, the role imagery plays in African women’s hair choices is significantly spelled out.

Considering that imagery matters when it comes to whether African women maintain their hair in its afro-textured form or straighten it or wear weaves, the study asked participants to mention people who influence their hair decisions. Participants mentioned the following people:

- Mzvee (Ghanaian musician)
- Lydia Forson (Ghanaian actress)
- Mawunya (CEO of We Naturals)
- Nadia Buari (Ghanaian actress)
- Sister Debbie (Ghanaian artist, actress, and designer)
- Charlotte Osei (Former EC of Ghana)
- Jackie Appiah (Ghanaian Actress)
- Genevieve Nnaji (Nigerian Actress)
- Omotola Jalade (Nigerian Actress)
- Monica Geingos (First lady of Namibia)
- Thandiswa Mawzwai (South African musician)
- Winnie Mandela (South African Anti-apartheid fighter / Former wife of President Mandela)

- Lucky Dube (Reggae musician)
- Ras Sheehama (Reggae musician)
- Oprah Winfrey (American entertainer)
- Halle Berry (American Actress)
- Toni Morrison (American writer)
- Maryam Babangida (Former first lady of Nigeria)
- Rihanna (American singer)
- Michelle Obama (Former first lady of USA)
- Alicia Keys (American singer)
- Lupita Nyongo (Kenyan-American Hollywood star)
- Beyoncé (American singer)
- Kim Kardashian (TV personality and beauty influencer)

Out of the about twenty celebrities mentioned, more than ten of them wear their hair mostly natural and publicly display hairstyles that are considered Afrocentric. These include Lupita Nyongo of Kenya and the US, Genevieve Nnaji of Nigeria, and MzVee of Ghana. The rest relax their hair and wear straight/wavy weaves and other forms of hair extensions that do not look like afro-textured hair. But it is important to keep in mind that the lines between the two groups could be blur since women from each side of the hair divide – natural and straight - wear hairstyles that are opposite to their usual public look sometimes.

Also, almost all the people mentioned are African descendants. This point is relevant because, as hinted earlier, some of the women who were interviewed argued that it is fellow African women who influence their hair choices, not white women. True to claims by participants that they copy hairstyles from fellow African women more than white women,

participants' comments show that African women, not white women, are driving the straight hair preference among themselves. Women mentioned above have millions of followers on social media. Their followers observe the hairstyling choices they make and follow suit. In a way, these women's exceptional success stories inform participants that their dressing codes are worth following.

Other things worth noting include one, people who influence African women come from all over the continent and the US. This is particularly telling because it supports the claim this study makes that continental African women copy hairstyling techniques from fellow Africans and other women in America. And this brings me to the next point: some of the most influential people who impact hairstyling preferences among African people are women who almost never show their real hair. Some of those people include Michelle Obama (probably the most powerful African woman alive), Oprah Winfrey, Jackie Appiah, and Omotola Jalade. These are women who control some of the largest, if not the largest, followership among African people in the US, Ghana, and Nigeria. Studying them further tells us more about how African women themselves contribute to the maintenance of straight hair cultural dominance among themselves. Almost every person mentioned above is a media personality in one way or the other. Some of them are musicians, artists, actors, and people generally seen on TV all over the African world.

A lot of younger women who wear weaves and perm their hair mentioned that the media played a major role in decisions they made about their hair: "The influence was rather from what I saw from the traditional media because wearing long hair was something natural with the whites and not us" (Participant 25). To some of the women, traditional media has aided in influencing African women to choose straight hair over their afro-textured hair. According to participant 26, "Movies, beauty pageants, basically anyone who had long straight hair,"

influenced her hair decisions. This means that a great deal of influence that impacts African women's hair decisions comes through the media.

Both American and African media show African people more in straight hair than afro-textured hair. Also, afro-textured hair and Afrocentric hairstyles are portrayed in both African and American media products as reserves of poor, uneducated, rural, and mentally unstable people. Participant 27 captured this accurately when she said:

> When growing up my choice of hair was influenced largely by how University students were portrayed in movies. Never saw one with natural hair. The celebrities always had on hair extensions, and you could only see their natural hair when they were either poor or in a village setting. I felt I had to wear those same hair types to be considered someone with class.

The projection that certain hairstyles are for certain people has contributed immensely to cementing the place of straight hair as the more preferred hair among African women. As the following comments show, many women wanted the long flowing hair they saw in the media even though their hair was nothing like the styles on TV. Participant 28 explained why she initially relaxed her hair: "I permed my hair because I wanted long flowing hair. I used to wear weaves in order to look like the women on TV. I decided to cut my hair when I realized my hair was weakened by the relaxer. I stopped the weaves because they were expensive." Sometimes, the choice to wear hair that one does not have naturally results in damages that the same media programs fail to highlight in their capitalist agenda. Damages caused by perms and weaves are discussed below.

For the rest of the participants who commented on how they arrived at the decision to straighten their hair and wear weaves, it is a straight answer; they wanted hair that looked like white people's hair. Participant 29 explained that she wanted white people's hair because it looked beautiful to her: "Growing up I wanted long flowing hair like white people. It looked beautiful to me." Her statement is not surprising because, as shown so far in this study, there are many stereotypes attached to natural hair forms, straight hair comes with privileges, and many programs in the media portray African hair forms and styles as lesser and straight hair as the better hair. And since white women are the most prevalent straight hair images in media that African people are exposed to, it is not surprising that an African woman would want hair that looks like white people's hair.

The media's habit of showing more straight hair than afro-textured hair and showing afro-textured hair negatively have been normalized so much that when natural hair has largely assumed symbolism for poor uneducated rural dwellers, social deviants, and people who are not in a good state of mind. Participant 30 mentioned in the interview, in West African movies, natural hair is often reserved for parts played by maidservants and village girls. On the other hand, when straight hair is shown, it is often accompanied by light skin and portrayed as hairstyle for beautiful women, queens and wealthy people. Even though white people are not the only group with straight hair, straight hair is highly associated with them. Though there has been some effort in recent media productions to change the situation (*Lionheart, Nappilly Ever After,* and *Black Panther*), the situation is far from balanced between natural hair and straight hair. Much more remains to be done to give coily hair a good representation in the media – representations that are devoid of negative stereotypes.

Health Implications and Physical Damage

In both academic and non-academic conversations on African women's hair straightening habits, health has been one of the factors that are constantly mentioned. In a natural hair group on Facebook that has members from Ghana, Nigeria, and the US, women cited damages they suffered from hair relaxers as the major reason why they transitioned to natural hair. Five-hundred-and-one comments were made in a post that asked group members why they decided to transition back to their natural hair. One-hundred-and-seventy-five women said that they stopped relaxing their hair because of the damages they suffered from chemical hair relaxers. Out of the eleven factors I identified, the harmful effects of hair relaxers topped the list. The health implications participants who wear weaves and perm their hair suffer from include scalp burns, itchy scalp, boils, and alopecia. Some also mentioned that they have read that relaxers cause fibroid. This study does not corroborate the claim.

To know the specific health issues participants suffer, they were asked: What are some of the harmful effects you have suffered as a result of wearing weaves? The mentioned the following problems:

- Their scalp hurts in the first two days after fixing
- Their scalp sweats and itches especially when it is sunny
- It is very uncomfortable especially when they can't scratch their scalp when it itches
- It has caused hair loss/alopecia
- It creates boils on their head

Others said that they hadn't noticed any undesired effects. Two participants say that weaves help their hair grow.

Participants were asked which hair form is healthier to maintain based on their experiences. One person said that she has always had a perm so she cannot compare. Twenty-nine people compared the two hair forms – natural afro-textured hair on one side and relaxed hair and hair extensions on the other side. Twenty-eight people, representing 93% of all participants, said that natural hair is the healthier hair form to maintain. Only one person said that perms are healthier than afro-textured hair. According to the participant who said that perms are healthier to maintain, perms are healthier because they do not cause "hair shrinkage and excess hair loss" (1). Fellow participants strongly challenged her claim by pointing out that "chemical relaxers damage the hair follicles and weaken the ends and edges of the hair leading to it breaking off as fast as it grows. This claim is not difficult to verify because it is evident that even though African women retouch their new hair growths often, their hair does not grow long like the Indian and Brazilian weaves they attached to their hair.

This is one of the reasons why I argue that hair extensions are symbolic in the sense that they represent the unachievable hopes of African women. In other words, weaves come-in to supplement what perms could not do. Since the length and volume of perms depend on how much hair the wearer has, and also the fact that chemicals that damage the hair are being used, they stay at a certain length. It is difficult to come across perms that are comparable in volume and length to the Indian weaves African women purchase and fix. The downside of shorter hair is that some styles that are shown in the media and magazine as beautiful and desired by African women cannot be achieved. So, by adding hair extensions to their hair, African women are able to do those styles that they would otherwise not have been able to do. Therefore, hair extensions, though constantly constructed as "just style," serve the purpose of supplement in African women's hairstyling preferences.

While some women said that general processes of hair relaxing, i.e., drying and styling, and the chance to put water in their hair anytime they want, are the reasons why they say that natural hair is healthier than perms and weaves, majority of the participants specifically mentioned that they voted straight hair as the less healthy option because excessive heat and chemical relaxer damages have negative impacts on their health. Here are some specific comments from women who commented on the issue:

> My natural! I don't use heat, and I love it that way. I haven't had the scalp burns that come with using relaxers in my hair. Times I'd be at the salon and hear ladies complaining of burns which I find funny because there's always an easier way out which most of them don't want to go accept. (Participant 2)

> I'll go for natural hair. I read an article that talked about how certain chemical bonds in the hair are broken when relaxers are applied. I'm yet to find out if there are any health implications. But I've also realized that most older women who have their hair relaxed suffer hair loss and receding hairline. (Participant 3)

In this regard, participants suggest that natural products like shea butter that is used for natural hair do not damage their hair like perm products. Some participants agreed that chemical relaxers make straight hair unhealthy to keep. However, they seem to suggest that chemical relaxers damage their scalp and hair only because they have scalps that cannot withstand the relaxer creams. This perception is a myth: hair relaxers do not damage the scalp because the scalp is not the ideal type. Whether one's scalp is hard or soft (whatever these mean), relaxers are harmful to the skin on our head because they contain harmful chemicals. The chemicals are meant to relax hair, but they come into contact with the scalp because it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate hair from the scalp.

Due to the prevalence of chemical-related problems of hair relaxing, participants were asked whether they know the chemical composition of the hair relaxers they use. All participants who addressed the question said 'No'; they don't know the chemical composition of their relaxers and their effect on them. This disclosure shows that part of the prevalence of hair straightening among African women continues to be caused by a lack of information. Though hair relaxer cream producers have been writing the chemical composition of the creams on the boxes these days (not always), most African women seem not to even know what those chemicals are and how they affect their bodies. An ideal situation would treat hair relaxers like tobacco. Tobacco adverts spell out how the contents of the box affects users. African women would have more awareness if relaxer boxes clearly state how the chemical contents affect the health of the people consuming them. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Others say that the harmful side effects of weaves are the reason why they believe that natural hair is healthier to maintain. Participants explained in detail:

> Kinky. At least it is my own hair. I don't need to get it glued, stitched, or sewn-on. I have resolved never to relax my hair again because hair relaxers nearly destroyed my scalp. Since 2011, I still have the scar of that unpleasant experience at the back of my head. The scar [looks] like one gotten from a fall but is actually the result of a relaxer burning my scalp. (Participant 4)

Clearly, some hair relaxer damages are painful and irreversible. Participants were also asked how many times they experience an itchy head and how often they get chemical burns. All participants who relax their hair, except one, said that their scalp burns sometimes, most of the time, or all the time when they relax their hair. Only one person said that she doesn't get an itchy scalp.

Unfortunately, as this participant explains, even an overwhelming awareness about the many damages relaxers and weaves cause does not stop African women in straightening their hair and wearing weaves:

> Natural hair....there are lots of health implications of keeping permed hair. For instance, I receive lots of burns from the chemical relaxer anytime I relaxed my hair, severe headache, and red eyes as a result of sitting under the hairdryer, scalp irritations and dandruff. It's not really convenient cos I sweat under my hair a lot, and I have to visit the salon frequently. I can't even keep weaves for more than two weeks cos it will smell; it rather wastes my money, but I still keep it just to conform to the notion that straight hair and weaves look better. (Participant 5)

To her, being accepted by society is more important, so she is willing to continue to put herself in harm's way and the discomfort that comes with it to achieve straight hair.

Although the rest of the participants did not give an explicit explanation as to why they still wear weave and perm their hair despite the damages, stories they narrated about their hair experiences show that most African women who indulge in hair modification suffer the consequences discussed here yet still indulge in straight hair culture. Almost every participant said that it is healthier to maintain natural hair because perming involves harsh chemicals and weaves cause hair loss, scalp irritation, and discomfort. So, if their claims are true, then why do more people maintain their hair in perms and wear hair extensions than keep natural afro-textured hair? My answer is that the benefits of relaxing one's hair and wearing weaves outweigh the cost; the privileges that come with straight hair forms are much more important. Besides, the damages of stereotypes attached to natural hair are much more harmful than chemical relaxers. These claims are discussed in detail in the conclusion section of the paper.

Hairdressing and Styling

Another major determinant of hair form preference among African women has to do with hair styling. Hairstyling (same as hairdressing) involves people, skills, products, and tools. Whether African women relax their hair or keep it natural, wear hair extensions or not, and consider the hair forms they maintain easy or difficult, depends on the following: (1) availability of hairdressers and salons to style their hair, (2) availability of products and tools needed to maintain their hair in the market and salons around them, and (3) whether they know how to style their hair. To determine the extent to which hair forms among participants were influenced by these things, they were asked questions around the products they use, the salons they visit, hairdressers' attitudes toward them, and their personal hairstyling skills.

Availability of Hair Products

Natural hair wearers who took part in the study were asked whether they find products for their hair type easily and how they get the products. Six people said that it is not easy to get products. Fifteen people said that it is easy to find products. They said natural hair products could be found in the local market, supermarkets, special stores, and online. Some participants explained that they get product advice and products to buy on social media. Others said that they rely on friends and neighborhood businesses. Those who said it is difficult to get products said that products for hairstyles like locks are hard to come by. Also, the local markets are flooded with fake products since many people have heard that African women are going natural, and there is product deficiency.

Ironically, maintaining natural in the US is, in some ways, easier than maintaining it in African countries. The issue is that, contrary to participants' claim that products are available,

there are more products available in the American markets compared to African countries if the two situations are compared. And this is interesting because there are more coily haired people in Africa than in America. But it is important to recognize that, whether a participant says products are available or not largely depends on what products they are referring to.

Products like traditional creams such as shea butter and locally produced items like afro combs are abundant. However, popular commercialized products, especially those natural hair wearers see in YouTube videos prescribed for hair maintenance, are scarce and expensive in the West African market. Even in America, there is the inconvenience of access to products since corner stores and megastores like Walmart do not always have natural hair products African women need. Even when they do, they put them in secluded corners of the store under the stereotypical "ethnic" labels, and supplies are not stable. Deductively, if those products are unable to reach African Americans in a country where there is a good network for product distribution, how much more Ghana, a place where "amazon" sisters like Jumia (online store are still in their budding stages.

The number of natural hair wearers affects both West Africans and Americans' access to products. Since they are in the minority compared to those who wear perm, weaves, and other straight/wavy hair options, they were not a major target for many mega cosmetic companies until recently. But as some participants have pointed out, the trend is changing; natural hair products are becoming more available.

The Difficulty of Finding Salons and Hairdressers

Access to hairdressers, in both America and West Africa, for natural hair wearers, depends on place and availability. Natural hairdressers are more common and more available in

some places than others. Sometimes, the bigger a city, the more likely a natural hair wearer is likely to find a hairdresser. But even when they do find a natural hair salon, due to the few numbers of natural hairdressers, they may not be able to style their hair immediately, or they may have to wait long hours or book appointments in advance to do their hair.

While some participants say the situation is better in urban places compared to the rural areas, in West African communities, it also depends on what style of hair one is doing. For most traditional natural hairstyles, hair stylists in rural areas make it better and far less expensive than their city counterparts. This has resulted in some rural hairdressers migrating to Urban centers to style natural hair. While they are unable to afford salons to operate from, they work in stands that are usually located in mega markets in the cities. They charge less, and they make hair better than their salon counterparts. Unlike their salon counterparts, they learned natural hair styling as part of their daily routine while living in rural areas. So, they are very good at it. Their counterparts, as mentioned severally, have been to formal hairdressing schools. But their training is based on perming and weaves, not natural hair styling. As Participants 6 accurately noted:

> Generally most of my salon experiences have been unsatisfactory and disappointing. It's the main reason I prefer to do my own hair. Probably it's because I know how to do hair so if it's not done properly I will know and have issues with the hairdresser. Also most hairdressers here treat hair with a one size fits all approach, forgetting that each person's hair is unique and hence studied and treated as such.

However, it is important to mention that, for achieving fairly new hair forms like sisterlocks, the salon hairdressers are the experts. This is because some natural hair forms require special training and certificates to be done. Since rural hairdressers do not have access to the training centers in Accra and Kumasi in Ghana or the USA, neither are they able to afford the

cost since it is very expensive, they are unable to access the skills necessary to do those styles. As mentioned earlier, they are only good at doing most natural hairstyles because it is a part of their daily lives in the rural areas.

Since some services and products are only available in the city, participants living in rural areas report that they have to go to the city to access them. A participant who had this problem said that "It is not easy at all. Maybe it's because I live in a rural area. I sometimes have to travel to bigger towns to have my hair styled". Another participant supported her by saying, "Most of them are not able to give me the style I want here in Ho [the capital city of the Volta Region of Ghana] compared to when I was in Accra (Madina)" (participant 7). This is another added cost to them because they have to travel to the major city centers.

Due to the lack of natural hair expertise, participants report that their hairdressers charge them more and complain about their hair and advise them to perm. Out of twenty-one people who responded to the question of whether their hairdressers complain about their hair, fifteen people said 'yes,' and six people said 'no.' Participants were asked what exactly their hairdressers tell them. These are some of the things they said they often hear from stylists when they go to the salon:

> I've heard complaints about having thick hair despite its softness. I initially wanted to go natural, but my first hairdresser advised against it and actually added the relaxer. That was the commencement of my natural hair journey. I've wanted to revere to natural but didn't have enough courage because not less than five hairdressers advised against it. "Your hair is thick", "natural hair is expensive and painful", "you can't keep natural because it requires lots of work", "why do you want to cut all these long hair after so

> much investment in it?", "if you transition, I cannot do your hair oooo." I, however, took the hard decision and haven't regretted it since; at least not yet😂 (Participant 8)

Partcipant 9 also mentioned that her "former hairdresser complained and told [her] to relax [her] hair, so [she] stopped going to her [saloon] and got a new saloon." The unavailability of hairdressers with adequate natural hair expertise has forced some women to go to multiple salons to fix their hair.

Others said that they learn how to style hair themselves because of this situation. When asked to sum up their overall experience at the salons, both perm wearers and natural hair wearers reported a mixed feeling with some saying that their experience has been good while others pointed out several reasons that have made their salon experience unpleasant. To many of the natural hair wearers, their salon experience has been so bad that they decided to style their hair at home or keep it in basic styles that require little to no styling.

Among mediums through which they learn how to style their hair is social media platforms YouTube and Facebook. Out of the thirty participants asked whether they learn hairstyling online, only three said that they don't learn about hairstyling on YouTube and other social media sites like Facebook. The rest, making 90% said yes, they learn some form of hair styling online. Most participants who said they use social media to learn how to style their hair are women who wear their hair natural. This is not surprising because all participants said they use social media though, and all of them were recruited through social media, and the interview was conducted through social media.

Clearly, social media is a big part of the current hair culture among African women. For those who wear their hair natural, which is the majority of the participants, social media is a

major aiding tool in helping them acquire knowledge and skills that are necessary to their hair journey. The availability of this knowledge and skills, provided by fellow African women on YouTube and other sites, could be the deciding factor in whether one goes natural or not. This is partly because hair styling, particularly natural hair styling, is not part of many African women's training as some of the participants pointed out. Social media is filling that gap in their adulthood.

Participants were asked whether they knew how to care for their hair in its natural state. They were also asked to elaborate on their answers as to why they don't know how to or how they learned how to. Twenty participants said that they know how to style their hair. This is 67% of all participants. Six people, representing 20% said that they did not know how to style their hair. Four people making 13% said that they knew how to style their hair to some extent, or they don't need to know how to style. Many people said they know how to style their hair and some of them said that they don't blame their upbringing. Many participants mentioned that they learned how to style their hair by watching videos on social media and reading about natural hair online. A few said that natural hair styling was part of their upbringing. Two people said they know how to style their hair because they are hairdressers by profession. Overall, there is a positive correlation between the number of participants who wear their hair natural and personal hairstyling ability.

This study found out that there is a high deficit of natural hair knowledge, skills, and products that are needed to maintain natural hair. This has caused natural hair wearers a lot of pain and discomfort. Though many African women who participated in the study reported that they came up with various ways to handle these deficits, it is still an issue that needs to be looked at further by people interested in the African hair debate. If natural hair would become the norm

that it should be among African women, these issues must be handled. Because if people can't access hairdressers who can style their hair or products are for their hair are hard to come by, they will be forced to maintain perm hair or wear weaves since they seem more convenient in that their products and skills are more readily available.

Convenience and Versatility

Participants were asked how easy their hair forms are to maintain and whether ease and time are factors they consider when choosing a hair form/style. Their answers were neither 'yes' or 'no.' Most women presented a complex argument even as they prefer one hair form or the other. Many participants said that their hair form is easy to maintain. But an equal amount of people said that their hair form is not easy to maintain. What is clear in their responses is that participants argue against one hair form while they argue for the other at the same time.

Some participants presented the idea that natural hair is difficult to maintain. For example, a participant said:

> Yes, to some extent. I for one, I find natural hair so cumbersome and difficult to maintain (still learning my way with it). I end up spending most of the morning combing and trying to get a style right for the day. It's really difficult for me, but the satisfaction of having natural hair supersedes the pain, so I carry on. (Participant 10)

Many participants complain that natural hair is difficult to maintain, and some have pointed to the hair's coarse and shrinking nature as the reason why it is difficult to manage. But some of them agree that some of the perceptions that natural hair is difficult to maintain are dependent on whether they know how to style their hair or not.

Perm wearers point out that unlike afro-textured hair, perms are easy to comb and style. They could wake up in the morning and simply run a comb through their hair and tie it into a ponytail. Both natural parties agree that there is some difficulty in styling afro-textured hair. They point out that natural hair tangles easily, it needs a regime to be managed and there are very few salons for it. Some natural hair wearers also say that they are still learning how to manage their hair, so lack of skills add to the time consuming and styling difficulty problem. Others insist that they go natural despite the difficulty and time involved in maintaining it because their comfort matters to them more, it is more beautiful, and it is their identity. They also added that, moreover, there are straight hairstyles that take much more time and involves so much physical discomfort.

Some participants pointed out that whether natural hair is easy or difficult to maintain also depends on the style. Locks are easier but afros tangle easily. They require constant attention for moisturizing, and detangling. They are also painful to comb compared to perms. With perms, the comb runs through the hair easily without difficulty. But natural hair must be threaded, shea-butter applied, and water sprinkled before combed. But even with an afro comb and all the steps outlined here, the comb does not run through the hair as easy as permed hair. Participant 11 said that her trick to going around the natural hair styling difficulty and time-consuming nature is by wearing (dread)locks:

> Maintaining natural hair is not convenient as its high maintenance but can be done doing simple and protective styling. Locs, however, are super convenient to keep. One can put off retightening appointments for longer and locs still look amazing even when your hair is not done. I say locs for the win!

However, not all African women can wear locks. Locks may be easier to manage but they are the natural hairstyle that carries the most negative social perception baggage and face more scrutiny, sanction, and other unpleasant consequences. Also, locks could be very time-consuming. It takes more than eight hours to retighten six weeks of new growth of hair. Some women said that the difficulty and time-consuming nature of natural hair forms are precisely why they stay away from natural hair.

The management argument that favors straight hair is also a myth because, in addition to the issues outlined above, there are extension braids that take about seventy-two hours at the speed of four hairdressers to complete. An example of such hairstyles is the adored broomsticks style among Togolese, Ghanaian and Nigerian women.

Other natural hair wearers argue that in spite of the perception that natural hair is difficult to manage, their experiences show that it is more convenient to maintain in comparison to perms and weaves because:

- They can bath inside their hair anytime they wanted to
- They don't have to run when it is raining
- They wash their hair at home anytime they want
- They don't have to go to the salon
- They don't experience the discomfort that comes with relaxer burns and seating under hair dryers

For many African women, bathing in their hair is more like a luxury than a norm. This is because most African women make hairstyles that demand that water does not go into the hair. Especially when the hairstyle is made with weave and other hair extensions. Also, those who

perm their hair or straighten it with heat cannot put water in their hair except they want to wash it. Water in these hair forms causes damage to the style, scalp, and hair. So African women who wear such styles keep it for specific periods and wash their hair in between. The downside to these hairstyling options is that those who wear them cannot bath in their hair, stay under the rain or go swimming, especially without water-resistant swimming caps. So, to some of the participants who wear their hair natural, the chance to bath in their hair or stay under the rain anytime they want is an advantage worth the trouble of keeping their hair natural.

In sum, a substantial number of women said that natural hair is difficult to manage. Though some participants claim otherwise with some arguing that natural hair is easier and more time-efficient to maintain, a close analysis of current hairstyling techniques shows that the concerns raised here are valid. This means that better ways of managing afro-textured hair are not available, and that could be among the reasons why more women wear their hair straight despite the damages and discomfort that comes with them. No one probably wants to scream just because they are trying to comb their hair. And since a large segment of society continues to attach negative stereotypes to uncombed styles like locks, African women may be forced to keep relaxing their hair and wearing weaves.

Conclusion

Recap of Major Points of the Study So Far

The goal of this chapter is to address the specific research questions that were asked at the beginning of this study, which are as follows:

- How did straight hair become a norm, and in some instances, the more desired hair form, among African women?

- Is the situation just a matter of style choice and versatility, as some scholars have argued?
- Or are African women suffering from internalized racism and self-hate thus, straightening their hair and wearing weaves to look like white people?

The study started by describing the decades-old hair altering situation among African women. It pointed out that African women relax their hair and wear hair extensions more than they keep their afro-textured hair. Though women from all racial groups have attempted to alter different parts of their bodies for one reason or the other, no other racial group has a hair culture that alienates its natural hair and goes through self-damaging procedures to change the texture of their hair on the same scale as African people. Data collected during the study supports this claim. Out of the twenty-nine Ghanaian women and one Nigerian woman interviewed, all of them have worn weaves and perm their hair at least once in their lifetime. Also, only nine women among the thirty women wear their hair natural and without hair extensions.

Researchers who have studied the hair altering situation among African women are divided into two major groups. One group argues that African women alter their hair because of internalized racism and self-hate. This means that racism forced African people to believe that their own features are not good enough. So, they hate their features. Therefore, they attempt to change parts of their bodies that they believe marks them as racially inferior people. Their efforts are geared at looking like white people. The second group argues that African women's hair altering culture is simply a matter of stylization, versatility, and choice. All these pertain to self-expression irrespective and in spite of racial identity and racism. The study put these two schools of thought to test and found out that each is limiting in its explanation.

The study also stated that its focus is on continental African women's experiences since a lot has been written on African American women. I explained that Africa is where most African people with coily hair are located. It is rather unfortunate that the current direction of studies on African hair is determined by studies in America and other diasporic locations. The result is that the American situation is often generalized as the situation of all African people even though all African people have not had the same relationship as African Americans with whiteness. This is inaccurate and limiting. Thus, there is the need to know African women's experiences through continental African women and a study conducted away from whiteness.

Questions listed above were explored through theories that argue that whiteness must be divorced from the study of African women's hair culture and the politics surrounding it. Scholars who make the argument suggest that, in place of centering whiteness as many of the previous studies on the subject have done, blackness should be the major framework of studies on African people's hair. So, this study tried as much as people to not quickly read participants' experiences as rudiments of colonial legacies and mental slavery. The researcher allowed the women interviewed to speak for themselves even as the researcher's own experiences and perspectives were added. The study also kept in mind the historical relationship between Europeans and Africans.

Data used included movies, the researcher's personal experiences, news articles, data collected from social media sites, and interviews mainly. The study used a qualitative data collection and analysis method. The focus throughout the study was to know participants' experiences and what it means when it comes to understanding how straight hair became a norm and more desirable among African women.

The study found out that hairstyling among African women is dynamic as the case study of Ghanaian women exemplifies. African women maintained their hair in various forms. Their stories indicate that they alternate among hairstyles. Also, they indulge in hair altering partly as a social norm rather than (uninfluenced) personal choices. In addition to these, several factors were identified as reasons behind African women's hair decisions. Major factors identified in the study are divided into two categories: stereotypes and privileges attached to hair forms and other factors. The other factors include cost, convenience, health implications, styling issues, and identity. African women consider these factors when choosing which hair form to maintain. Some play more central roles while others play marginal roles in forming African women's hairstyling habits. This will be discussed further under the section where I address the research questions.

Addressing Research Questions

The study asked whether hair altering culture, particularly hair straightening and hair extension wearing, among African women are simply matters of stylization, versatility, freedom of choice in terms of self-expression as some scholars have suggested. The study found out that African women's hairstyling is not simply a matter of style or choice or versatility. Throughout the data analysis, discussions based on, and supported by, participants' comments indicate that there are social, political and economic implications attached to hair. Most of which revolve around stereotypes and privileges attached to hair forms, in addition to social norms. The study found out that while women who wear their hair natural contend with various stereotypes, those who wear straight hairstyles enjoy various privileges.

Most social norms have to do with two things: transition practices and employment practices and perspectives. Adults maintain elaborate hairstyles that involve hair straightening

and the wearing of weaves in Ghanaian societies. School kids, on the other hand, wear shortly cropped afro-textured and non-extension braid hairstyles. As a result, newly graduated Senior High School young women relax their hair to mark the end of their non-tertiary education and the beginning of their adulthood. Also, straight hair is perceived as the normal/right hairstyle for formal work environments. What is important to keep in mind is that in as much as hair straightening and wearing weaves as transitional practices and corporate standards are concerned is, they lay the ground for stereotypes that imply that natural hairstyles are for immature people and social misfits.

Those who wear their hair natural are often told that their hair is inappropriate and needs changing to fit social norms, particularly corporate standards because natural hair is seen is unkempt, not neat and ugly; a hairstyle for social deviants. The hair form is also perceived to be a symbol of certain religions and read as indications of poverty, illiteracy, inability to keep up with current trends, hairstyles for villagers and people who do menial jobs.

Contrary to previous scholarly arguments and popular notions, the stereotypes attached to African hair do not emanate from colonial legacies and western ideologies alone. Though colonial legacies and western cultural infiltration in African societies cannot be totally ignored in determining African people's attitude toward hair forms, traditional African cultural values, particularly those regarding hair and social conduct, played a larger role. African people did not consider hairstyles like dreadlocks normal and desirable hairstyles. They were reserved for religious purposes and mental conditions. In other words, it was children of the gods, priests, and mad people who wore matted hair, not 'normal' or average people.

African women consider the stereotypes and privileges they know about the hair forms to make decisions as to which hair form to keep and which ones to avoid. Though some of the

natural hair wearers have decided to stick to wearing their hair in its afro-textured form despite the consequences stereotypes about the hair form brings, they also say that the stereotypes are weakening to the extent that sometimes, they also enjoy benefits. Another important to keep in mind is that, throughout the study, no participant made conditional statements about straight hair, but many of them constantly mentioned that, for natural hair to be accepted, especially in formal settings, it must be well taken care of. This point is important because it shows the depth of negative assumptions made about afro-textured hair. While some people are not heavily affected negatively, some people are denied opportunities because of this.

The study also found out that, in addition to social norms, stereotypes, and privileges, African women consider cost, convenience, health implications, styling, and identity when choosing hair forms. Though some of these factors also attract stereotypes and privileges, they are based more on issues that participants say influence their life tangibly (without attached meanings). Data collected shows that the hair form an African woman keeps or even the hairstyle she decides to make with her hair form involves these processes/question/factors:

- How much does the hair cost to maintain? Is it expensive or cheap? Do hairdressers charge more or less? Are the products used in maintaining the hair expensive or cheap? Can I afford it or not?
- Does the hair form I am opting for making my life easier or more difficult in terms of personal comfort and time efficiency? Do my hairstyles allow me to bath in it anytime I want or do I have to rush to the salon each time my hair comes into contact with water i.e. rain? How long does each styling session for my hair form take? How many times do I have to visit the salon and at what intervals?

- Does the hairstyle I am opting for result into itchy scalp, scalp burns and boils on my head? Are the products I use connected to serious health issues like fibroid and cancer?
- Do the hairstyles I maintain allow me to do a lot of styles and change styles often? Are they easy to style on my own or in salons? Do I know how to style that hair and would I be able to? Are there hairdressers and salons in my community to style my hair? Are products available for my hair and are they easy to get?
- Does identity show when I wear my hair in this form? What are the implications?

In terms of cost, the study found out that African women opt for hair forms irrespective of how much they cost. In other words, whether participants keep their hair natural or not and wear weaves or not does not depend on cost. There is no correlation between hair forms and cost. Therefore, a person's hair form does not say whether they are poor or financially okay. There are natural hair forms that cost as much as perms, and there are weaves that cost as much as the average maintenance cost of maintaining natural hairstyles like sisterlocks.

Also, debates among participants and discussions in the data analysis sections indicated that the perception that natural hairstyles are limiting when it comes to styling is false or at least debatable. No hair form was voted as the easier one to maintain when it comes to styling. While perm wearers argue that perms are easier to comb and natural hair wearers agreed with them that afro-textured hair is hard to comb, natural hair wearers also pointed out that they don't have to go to the salon always; they could just style their hair at home, unlike perm wearers. In terms of style options, discussions throughout the study show that natural hair could be worn in numerous

styles. Thus, contrary to popular perceptions that natural hair is limiting in terms of style options, there is no versatility limit when it comes to natural hair. Participants who wear their hair natural pointed out that afro-textured hair is a hair type that can be straightened, locked, combed into an afro, and pretty much do any hairstyle.

Healthwise, all participants except one said that natural hair is healthier to maintain. However, most women interviewed wear weaves and perm their hair. There is a conflict here. Most of them said that they suffer from scalp burns, itchy scalp and get boils when they relax their hair and wear weaves. Yet, despite their belief that natural hair is healthier and their assertion that they suffer health damages from perms and weaves, they still prefer to relax their hair and wear weaves. This contributed to the study's conclusion that when stereotypes and privileges attached to hair forms are considered, the benefits participants gain socially, politically and economically, outweigh the health implications they suffer. That is why they still wear extensions and perm their hair.

In terms of identity, many participants connected the hair forms they maintain with their racial and ethnic identity. Even though some people said that they did not consider their hair form a part of their identity and hair does not play a role in performing their racial/ethnic identity, many participants who wear their hair natural said that they do so, despite the negative socio-political perceptions surrounding the hair because they are Africa. According to them, coily hair is what grows on top of their heads, and they don't really have a choice. They explain that afro-textured hair is as good as any hair and it is important that they accept themselves and not try to look like other racial groups. To some of the participants, it is African people's duty to show the world how African hair looks.

Considering all factors explored and highlighted through participants' hair experience in this study, straight hair is a norm and more desirable among African women because there are stereotypes attached to natural afro-textured hair and privileges attached to straightened hair and hair extensions. The stereotypes and privileges emanate from traditional African values as much as colonial legacies, media images from the West. However, the statistics are changing more as more women are opting to wear their hair natural even as they wear hair extensions. Though it is too early to tell whether the hair trend will change into a situation where natural hair becomes the norm and a more desired hairstyle, participants' responses indicate that the stereotypes and privileges are weakening. This means that African women are considering more tangible factors like cost, convenience, health implications, and identity.

Yet, in as much as African women's hair forms and styles are an expression of their ability to create art, wear different styles, show who they are as well as exercise their freedom of choice, how society perceives their hair forms play a bigger role. In other words, the hair form or style an African woman decides to wear takes into consideration how she will be seen and how that will affect her image in her community, whether she will get a job and be promoted and if she will be allowed to have access to education benefits. In addition, African women consider how the hair forms they maintain will affect the tangible aspects of their lifestyle; hairstyles are also determined by cost, convenience, identity, and health implications among others.

To sum up, it is inaccurate to say that African women's hair habits pertaining to hair straightening and hair extensions is simply a matter of style, versatility, and choice. It is more than these things.

The Role of Whiteness in Understanding African Hair Culture and Politics

This study asked whether straight hair normalization and preference among African women stems from internalized racism and self-hate as some scholars argue, particularly in the case of African American women. To address this question, the study breaks down the question:

- How much role did colonialism and European cultural influence impact continental African women's relationship with their hair?
- Are continental African women who relax their hair and wear hair extensions trying to be white?

The study found that African women do not hate their hair (and other features), and they are not trying to alter their hair to look white: white beauty is not iconic to them. They said that their hairstyle choices are made by looking at other African women, not white women. To most of the women interviewed, it is unfair to read their hair choices as rudiments of internalized racism and self-hate, and a desire to be white. They mentioned other reasons why they straighten their hair and wear hair extensions.

African women do not hate their hair. As pointed out in the data analysis sections, African women believe that afro-textured hair is the more beautiful and healthier hair. Twenty-nine out of the thirty participants said that natural hair is beautiful. Twenty-one women chose it over straight hair. And as many as twenty-nine participants said that natural hair is healthier to maintain. When participants were asked what would they tell coily-haired African girls who believe that their afro-textured hair is not good enough, they responded with statements that indicated that they believe afro-textured hair has many qualities that make it better than perms and weaves. Most of them said that natural hair is beautiful, versatile, convenient to maintain, and makes African people unique, among others. In their view, even though wearing the hair form comes with challenges that straight-haired people do not face, it is still worth being

maintained because it is the hair that grows on top of their head; their hair is a part of their identity and deserves not to be hidden. People who hate their hair would not speak about their hair this way.

Though only three participants' responses indicate that some African people desire white features, the greater views shared by participants in the study indicate that African women's reasons for altering their hair do not include achieving white hair. Whiteness is not one of the factors participants mentioned directly or indirectly. African women who took part in the study made statements that showed that their hair decisions are made around concerns about stereotypes attached to hair forms, and the consequences and stereotypes that emanate from them, identity performance, convenience, and health implications among others. As hinted earlier, throughout the study, only two participants said that they would like long straight hair and light skin, and only two people said that African women's hair altering indicates that they are trying to be white.

The data collected also shows that African women do not perceive white beauty iconic. When participants were asked whether they modify other parts of their bodies in addition to perming their hair and wearing hair extensions, they said no. Also, when they were asked whether they would opt for changes like blue/green eyes, and light skin, among others, if science and affordability made it possible for them to permanently alter their bodies in those ways at a cheap price, they said no they wouldn't. Only two people (each said) they would like to get long hair and lighten their skin. The logic here is that if African women truly perceive white beauty iconic, they would jump at the opportunity to modify their bodies as much as they can in approximation to whiteness.

By extensions, they are not trying to make themselves, particularly their hair, look white. When they were asked which hair color they often wear or prefers, most participants said that they wear their hair black. Even though some participants mentioned other colors such as gold, coffee brown, and wine, some of them explained that it is more of the hair art they are creating. If African women were concerned with making their hair look like white people's hair, they would have opted more for colors like blonde and wine. These are colors that are peculiar to white people. And in the case of blonde hair, it is the most celebrated color according to European beauty ideals.

Also, the style forms that African women wear when they maintain their hair in perms and wear hair extensions do not always hold resemblance to European hairstyles. The most popular extension hairstyles among continental African women are braids. Women who relax their hair and those who wear their hair natural do extension braids. As many as twenty-one of all participants in the study wear braids. This is not white people's hair art, and it is something they rarely wear. If African women were trying to be white, they would have styled their hair in ways that have a resemblance to white people's hair. Lastly, it is important to note that African women wear their hair straight, but it is not only white people that have straight hair. In fact, the so-called Brazilian weaves African women wear are usually human hair gotten from Indian temples when Indian women and men sacrifice their hair to their gods. So, it is inaccurate to read African hairstyles as mimics of white hair forms and styles.

The majority of participants in the study believe that it is unfair to say that African women are trying to be white when they alter their hair. To most of the women who responded to questions on whiteness desirability and hairstyling, they said that their hairstyles are choices made from agency. In some participants' views, hair altering is more of a social norm than a

deliberate act to look non-African/white. Many of them pointed out that altering their hair does not make them white because there are other features, i.e. dark skin that marks them African/black irrespective of the hair they have on. They said that even if African women's hairstyling decisions reflect white attributes, it is not because they want to be white. Rather, it is because they are forced to wear white masks so that they can be accepted. As one participant said, "Unfair yes. They do it not to be white but to be accepted by whites. And because they've been conditioned to feel beautiful that way."

The women interviewed specifically mentioned that they tailor their hairstyles mainly after other African women, not white women. This point is both essential and problematic. It is essential because it shows that, contrary to the claim that African women perceive white women as beauty idols and role models, they do not. Their beauty role models are their fellow African women, not white women. However, while a good number of the people they mentioned as personalities that influence their hair choices are African women who wear their hair natural, the greater number of them wear weaves and straighten their hair. People like Kim Kardashian, Beyoncé, Oprah Winfrey, and Michelle Obama are women who wear straight hair as their signature look. This raises questions as to how these people mentioned as hair role models came to wear straight hair more than they wear afro-textured hair (if they wear it at all).

This means that while whiteness is not what African women are chasing after when they choose to relax their hair and wear extensions. But whiteness cannot be entirely divorced from African women's hair practices because it played a role in starting and maintaining hair straightening among African people. In other words, in as much as African women's hairstyles emanate from their agency, they are also mirroring the historical relationships between African

people and European people. Some of those historic factors have their roots in white supremacy. Whiteness is a concept backed by white supremacy and reflected through racism.

How Straight Hair Became a Norm and More Desirable Among African Women

The study set out to understand how straight hair became a norm and more preferred among African women. I argue that traditional African values and colonial legacies in addition to recent western cultural infiltration worked together to create straight hair dominance observed among African women. Though participants' responses indicate that whiteness is not an explicit aspect of African women's practices and perceptions about their hair, I showed that there are implicit reasons embedded in their responses that challenge the claim that whiteness is not one of the reasons why African women alter their hair. When participants' experiences are explored within historical and cultural contexts, it shows that whiteness played a role in how hair straightening came into being and how the various hair forms are perceived among African and non-African people.

Hair altering was and still is, about traditional African values and African people's agency, as much as it is about European contact and the cultural domination that followed it in the form of slavery, colonialism, segregation, and racist systems and structures. Though continental African women did not adopt perms and hair extensions because of racist conditions like slavery and segregation, it is important to note that African descents' reaction to racism gave birth to the very act of Afro-textured hair altering and its proliferation among African American people; the people from which continental African women may have copied the practice. Though continental Africans initially adopted hair altering more out of stylization than the need to survive in racist/colonial systems and structures, colonial legacies and recent western cultural

infiltration (particularly through the media) that favored European cultural values over African ones, quickly changed that.

Hairstyling, particularly hair straightening, developed into a class marker, and this came with privileges for certain segments of the African population and consequences for others. Straight hair became the signature hairstyle for highly educated people, leaders, wealthy and financially okay people, urban dwellers, and trendy individuals among others. In addition, Judeo-Christian and Islamic religious infiltration and the powerful place they occupy in African societies introduced cultural values that encourage hair concealment and also favored straight hair over natural hairstyles. This resulted in some African women covering their hair unlike before Islam, Europeans and Christianity permeated and altered the continent's lifeways and values. These, combined with traditional African cultural values that favor well-combed hair and extensively styled coiffures, resulted in stereotypes that projected certain Afro-textured hair and Afrocentric styles negatively. Dreadlocks, for example, came to represent hairstyles for traditional African religious people, Rastafarians, and social misfits.

Even though these values have been challenged (and continue to be challenged), and discussions in the data analysis section showed that stereotypes attached to hair are inaccurate/false assumptions, they continue to occupy a significant place in influencing African women's attitudes toward hair forms. Many African women are opting to wear their hair natural. Some of them have added the extra work of making the people around them see that the stereotypes are false. But as participants' experiences and views in this study have shown, stereotypes hold real consequences that African women are forced to deal with. Since wearing one's hair natural could result in denial of education and employment and lack of social capital, many African women opt to wear their hair straight even when their preferred hair form is

natural hair as a way of surviving and growing. To many of them, the privileges that come with straight hair matter more.

Therefore, I conclude that African women's hairstyling practices are not simply a matter of stylization, versatility and personal choice. But they are also not trying to be white. They do not hate their features, and they do not perceive white beauty iconic. Beauty is culture-specific even as it is global. African women have their own beauty standards. Moreover, the ideal beauty global women are modeling today is an amalgamation of features from people all over the world. It is not just one feature emanating from one iconic racial group. This is not to say that stylization, versatility, choice, and whiteness plays no role in their decisions. They do. But in addition to these things, African women also consider other factors. They consider their ethnic/racial identity, social attitudes toward hair forms, health implications of their hair choices, convenience and cost. Ultimately, however, stereotypes and privileges attached to hair forms are the most impactful factors in determining the hair forms African women maintain and the ones they avoid. These stereotypes have roots in traditional African cultural and religious values regarding hairstyling. So, it is inaccurate and limiting to continue to explain African women's bad attitude toward afro-textured as outcomes of internalized racism and self-hate or stylization, versatility and choice.

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Interviews: I included interviews I conducted with thirty West African women in the study. Twenty-nine of the women I talked to are Ghanaians, and one is a Nigerian. The interviews were conducted between May and November 2019 through social media app, WhatsApp. Since hair experiences and opinions are sensitive issues in some cases, I did not include participants' names to protect their identity.

Facebook Posts and Comments: I used data collected in natural hair groups, comments made under news articles posted on Facebook, posts and comments made on my Facebook page, *Dela Goldheart*, and conversations that took place among Facebook users who are my friends or on

posts in which I was tagged. Specific names are not listed in the study or works cited to protect Facebook users whose comments and posts I used.