

Cornrow: A Medium for Communicating Escape Strategies during the Transatlantic Slave Trade Era: Evidences from Elmina Castle and Centre for National Culture in Kumasi

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Abstract

Globally, it is amazing how power is attached to hair in various cultures. Hairstyles and shapes are definitive social markers used in determining, among other things ethnicity, religion, and age in Africa. In Ghana, most communities, over the years, from generation to generation have used indigenous hairstyles to symbolise and conserve their traditional socio-cultural beliefs and practices. Hence, the interpretation of art in connection to indigenous hairstyles cannot be underestimated by every culture. However, many people seem to be ignorant about the role that the cornrow hairstyle played during the transatlantic slave trade period. People appear to focus more on the beauty and the aesthetic qualities of the cornrow. The research design used was qualitative. So, descriptive and content analyses were used to analyse the data collected from the participants.

These five participants (i.e., one indigenous hairstylist, two directors of the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi, and two curators of Elmina Castle) were purposively selected. In-depth interviews were used to solicit data from them. The findings of the research revealed the origin of the cornrow, and how the Akans come into contact with it. Again, the study uncovered the role that Cornrow played in liberating some Africans from slavery. Based on the conclusion, recommendations about revisiting African roots (to learn and adopt some of its indigenous practices) were suggested.

Keywords: Servitude; Cornrow; Transatlantic; Hairstyle; Communication.

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1. Introduction

Transatlantic slave trading patterns date back to the middle of the 17th century. Around this period, trading ships would leave Europe towards the west coast of Africa with a cargo of manufactured goods [1]. Trading with African middlemen who raided towns far from the African coast and brought people who were young and healthy enough to be sold into slavery there was easier for European traders to do. Once full, the European trader's ship would travel the unfortunate "Middle Passage" to the Americas or the Caribbean. The slaves would be housed in the ship's hold for the duration of the voyage, packed closely together with little to no room to move. Numerous passengers died throughout the cruise due to the appalling conditions. European ships made their way back to their home countries on the last leg of the transatlantic voyage with loads of sugar, rum, tobacco, and other "luxury" goods. People numbering about 480,000 were reportedly held as slaves in the British Colonies by the 1790s [1]. As large portions of the American continent had been colonized by European nations, the bulk of those who were sold into slavery were destined to work on plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas. Products from these plantations, such as sugar and tobacco were intended for consumption in Europe [2].

The slave trade was defended by proponents as having produced significant economic and consumerist contributions to Britain [3]. Despite this, anti-slavery movements started to gain traction at the end of the eighteenth century. A pro-slavery West Indian lobby battled the "Abolitionists" (those who advocated for the abolition of the slave trade) vehemently since it was so profitable for those who engaged in it. Although the abolitionists also employed propaganda to further their cause, those who continued to defend slavery did so by using convincing arguments, sometimes known as "propaganda," to demonstrate the necessity of the slave trade [4]. It is frequently forgotten how important the efforts of slaves to end slavery were. Slaves in the Caribbean frequently showed resistance. Indeed, the island was taken over by slaves in the French colony of St. Domingue, and it was afterward proclaimed to be the Republic of Haiti. People like Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince significantly aided the cause of the abolitionist by providing their firsthand accounts to abolitionist literature [5].

1.1. Resistance and Attempt to Escape by Slaves

The Africans who were sold into slavery or faced the possibility of being sold into slavery throughout the trade repeatedly fought the brutal conditions of this institution [6]. To fend off raids by smugglers or hostile tribes, villages, and cities constructed fortifications and alert systems. Africans who were seized and forced onto ships for the Middle Passage rebelled, staged hunger strikes, formed armies, and even killed themselves by jumping overboard rather than being sold as slaves. Experts estimate that one in ten slave ships saw significant uprisings. These uprisings were expensive for European traders, who avoided areas like Upper Guinea known for this resistance tactic except when the need for slaves was particularly strong. As a result, fewer Africans from these areas participated in the transatlantic slave trade [3]. African Americans who were slaves engaged in both active and passive forms of resistance. The type of resistance most frequently used against slavery was "day-to-day resistance." Breaking tools, pretending to be unwell, causing slowdowns, and engaging in acts of sabotage and arson were all examples of slaves' resistance and expressions of their estrangement from their owners [6].

Slave uprisings were more likely to occur when slaves outnumbered whites, when masters weren't there, when the economy was bad, or when there was dissension among the ruling class. Additionally, they were most prevalent in areas where there had been a recent influx of large numbers of native-born Africans [7]. A classical narration revealed that black people were executed in large numbers as a key outcome of slave uprisings, 18 slaves were hung and 13 were burned alive in New York City in 1740 after a slave plot was discovered [8]. When Denmark Vesey's plot was discovered, Charleston's authorities hanged 37 black people. The neighborhood militia massacred over 100 black people after Nat Turner's uprising, and 20 more slaves, including Turner, were later put to death. The conditions for a successful uprising did not exist in the South. In general, Africans were more likely to take part in overt uprisings than slaves born in the New World. Many Africans had fought in battle before becoming slaves, and they also had fewer attachments to their families and communities that could have prevented them from fighting [9].

An additional method of resistance was fleeing, however, a description of the significant roles of African hairstyles in the fleeing efforts seems to be insufficient in the literature. Those who managed to escape only attempted to travel a short distance during their fleeing attempts. Instead, they were engaging in economic bargaining and negotiation by temporarily withholding their work. The pace of work, the amount of leisure time they would have, financial rewards, access to garden plots, and the opportunity to practice burials, marriages, and religious ceremonies without the presence of white people were all subject to ongoing negotiation while a slave [10]. A few slaves did attempt to permanently free themselves. While the Underground Railroad to the free states comes to mind when thinking of escaping slavery, in reality, more than half of these runaways traveled south, to cities, or natural refuges like marshes. Runaways were frequently reasonably privileged slaves who had worked as coachmen or river boatmen and had experience in the outside world. Fugitive slaves attempted to establish "maroon colonies," or runaway settlements, especially during the colonial era. Some of these villages, which were found in marshes, mountains, or frontier areas, defied capture for many years [10]. Slave revolt occurred in New York City in 1712 and on Long Island in 1708 during the early 18th century. Slaves conducted three uprisings in South Carolina [11].

1.2 African Hair Styles and Slave Trade

Natural hair is the hair that has not been straightened or chemically treated in any way [12]. Due to Africa's tropical climate, a natural cause of hair growth is kinky African hair texture. Natural hair is chosen for a multitude of reasons like texture, individual style choices, societal trends, and even religious convictions. In this study, the phrase "African hair" will refer to hair of African origin. African hair has a higher hair density than Caucasian and Asian hair [13].

Natural hairstyles come in other forms like an afro, braids, Nubian knots, twists, cornrows, and Bantu knots. The experiences concerning these types of hairstyles during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonial period have far-reaching consequences. For instance, the slave master's wives would shave the indigenous hairstyles of their female servants so that it would not confuse their white men [14]. It was believed that black women's hair kept in its natural state and texture was becoming desirable to white men. During the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, natural hair texture was regarded as "wild" and needed to be tamed whilst some

were to a larger extent referred to as "wool" [15]. African hair was negatively portrayed and labelled to disregard black culture and identity. The short African hair was equally described as peppercorn or sugar in Zanzibar and Mauritius. These crops were the major crops on which the African slaves worked [16]. In the same light, Africans' short hair was likened to inferior intelligence and deficiency [17]. It was also treated as inferior and unattractive. As a result, the period of colonialism-imposed standards of European beauty on African hair forms. The psychological, social, cultural, and physiological embodiment of cultural contact was strongly taken a huge toll on the indigenous hair practice and beliefs. Hairstyles such as the wearing of wigs and heavy makeup to signify the wealth and status of European colonialists were acculturated into indigenous lifestyles.

Black people who wore afro-textured hair in its natural, coiled, kinky, or tight curly state were at the Centre of the trend. These people of African heritage decided not to use chemical products to relax their hair, letting it develop with its organic texture [18]. To use chemicals to straighten one's hair is to relax it. This can be carried out either by a professional or at home using a kit that can be bought at a food shop. Not everyone who wears their hair naturally will decide to forego all (non-chemical) straightening or style techniques. Additionally, "being natural" does not necessarily entail adhering to a rigorous regimen of products or styling, nor is it exclusively associated with a particular set of social or political ideals for many movement participants. The term "nappy," was historically used to disparagingly refer to Black people's hair. The organic era's understanding of the damaging effects of relaxers on the scalp, which can range from itching, red patches, and burns to alopecia, has sparked a return to natural hair. Despite the hazards, 98 percent of black women have had their hair straightened at least once in their lives, and relaxers account for at least 70 percent of the population's cosmetic purchases [19].

Statement of the Problem

Liberation is essential in every human endeavour. It provides the freedom to carry out activities that can enable one's vision to be fulfilled. Consequently, various attempts were made by Africans to free themselves from slavery. However, there appears to be little or no research on the role of cornrow in setting some categories of African free from bondage. Prior researchers (i.e., [20, 21, 22, 23, 24]) have focused mainly on the various laws which were passed to end the slave trade as well as the use of violence and breaking of slave laws by some captors. They also stressed the staged hunger strikes, the formation of armies, and the slaves killing themselves by jumping overboard. Though fleeing was addressed in literature yet a description of the significant roles of African hairstyles in the absconding attempts seems to be inadequate in literature. In light of the above, this study aims to uncover how some indigenous African hairstyles like cornrows aided in the liberation process of some slaves during the transatlantic trade.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

Generally, the paper seeks to examine the role of cornrows in liberating some enslaved Africans.

Specifically, the paper seeks to:

1. identify the origin of the cornrow, and

2. assess the significance of cornrow in liberating some African slaves during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

2. Cultural Representation of African Hairstyles

In Africa, hair is considered to be an extension of the head. It is considered to be the outward embodiment of intelligence and possessing a lot of hair is connected with high rank, particularly among the Tuareg people of North Africa's Sahara region [25, 26]. Hairstyles are constant in the fashion world, and they can express personal values, age, gender, religion, and ethnicity. Hair can be seen as a symbol of modernity because it changes people's lives and sends messages about political and cultural ideas. Cultural beliefs and ideals concerning the head and hair influence people's perceptions of decency, relevance, excellent grooming, attractiveness, fashionable styling as well as modernism [26]. A baby's mother in some West African ethnic groups may carefully retain the child's hair (which has been trimmed), in a specially woven indigenous basket as a symbol of protecting the child from harm, as hair in the wrong hands could be utilised for harmful purposes [27]. Specifically, within a West African tribe like Yoruba, babies with a lot of hair, referred to as *dada*, must keep their hair until it is severed in a ceremony [28]. Children's hair is supposed to symbolise the prosperity and success that they bring to their parents on this planet to some extent [29].

Similarly, in most Akan cultures, infants and toddlers, both male and female, may have their heads shaved, with tufts of hair left to protect the fontanel. Girls are given dolls to depict local hairdos, and these miniatures emphasise their mature responsibilities as mothers [28]. As a result, the Ghanaian woman carefully manipulates her hair to conform to social and cultural aesthetic standards. It is vital to remember that boys are subject to the same social attractiveness standards as girls when it comes to hair. Both sexes wear lengthy, "unkempt" hairstyles with various things such as gold, cowries, and coins for beauty and religious purposes [26]. In Senegal, a child is called when he or she is about one-and-a-half month old, during a process where a newborn's tresses will be clean-shaven. This act is followed by a ceremonious rubbing of the skull with special oil in front of eyewitnesses who consist of about five to six people [28].

In Ghana, especially among the Akans, the hair of newborn babies is cut before the ninth day of their lives to commemorate a life milestone. The designated day is traditionally commemorated as a day of social outings and the child's naming.

2.1 Challenges of African Hairstyles

Some authors underrate the beauty of indigenous hair. For example, some schools of thought, since colonial times till the present, perceive Ghanaian kinky hair as having an unkempt look, without any cultural significance, whereas straightened hair is more used to represent a more civilized woman [19]. Short African hair has been linked to a lack of intelligence and deficit in some cases [30]. The exhibition shows in other aspects of art are often performed, whereas exhibition shows that showcase diversity of ingenuity in indigenous hairstyles in Ashanti and Central Region regions of Ghana are usually organized on a limited scale. In the year 2000, objects on African hairstyles were presented in travelling exhibitions at the New York Museum of Art

[28]. The exhibits showed how African natural hairstyles reflected status, ethnic origin, personal preference, as well as unusual and aberrant situations, through photographs and sculptures. For example, traditional Asante priests grew their hair into *mpesempese* (i.e., dreadlocks), which could be the origins of today's locks/Rastafarian hair in Ghana [28]. Because it is uncut and neglected, society may link the *mpesempese* hairstyle with lunatics. *Mpesempese* hair is also worn by royal executioners to frighten people and symbolise that they are untouchable. Today, if someone's hair isn't correctly combed, people sometimes humiliate that. Some people even associate bushy hair with madness, criminality, and witchcraft activity. In a similar vein, reality shows that portray the beauty, history, and cultural significance of indigenous hairstyles are not many.

Artificial alteration of scalp hair changes our identity and personality, which in the long run affects African culture [31]. It was also stated that not only does it have an impact on our culture, but that the rising artificial alteration of scalp hair, particularly by women for the goal of aesthetics, threatens its significance in this regard. It causes a lot of discomfort and health-related issues like headaches and catarrh. It is much peculiar to note that most of these olden-day hairstyles are only done by people mostly in the royal family or related to traditional religion.

2.2. Situating Cultural Relativism Theory in the Context of African Hairstyles

Franz Boas developed cultural relativism as fundamental in anthropological research in the early twentieth century, and his students popularized it. Although Boas first proposed this concept in 1887, the phrase gained popularity among anthropologists after he died in 1942 [32]. The principle of cultural relativism is that a person's ideas and actions should be understood in the light of their own culture. Cultural relativists also claim that one's cultural norms and values should not be judged against the norms and values of another culture.

Thus, cultural relativism is the ability to appreciate a culture on its terms rather than making judgments based on one's cultural standards. The aim is to increase awareness of cultural traditions that are not normally found in one's own culture. When viewed through the lens of cultural relativism, no one culture is superior to another when it comes to systems of tradition, law, politics, value, art, and beauty. This means that cultural relativism aims to cultivate an understanding of cultural traditions and symbolism that are foreign to other cultures, such as the consumption of specific foods, hairstyles, and dance.

Based on the tenets of cultural relativism, it can be argued that music, clothing, technology, and beliefs are all products of culture and that Western culture should not be seen as superior to African indigenous culture. Thus, Africans need not look down on their culture. Africans, particularly Akans, should place a high priority on their culture when it comes to their native hairstyles. They should not consider Western hairstyles as superior to their indigenous hairstyles; rather, they should consider the indigenous hairstyles as forms of art and representation of Ashanti culture, and find ways to promote them. When viewed through the lens of cultural relativism, no one culture is superior to another when it comes to systems of tradition, law, politics, value, art, and beauty. This means that cultural relativism aims to cultivate an understanding of cultural traditions and symbolism that are foreign to other cultures, such as the consumption of specific foods, hairstyles, and dance [32].

2.3. Situating Communication in the Context of Hairstyle

Communication is the transmission of written or spoken information. In another dimension, it can be explained as providing or exchanging information, signals, and messages by talk or gestures, or writing [33].(Newman, 1961). Communication is social intercourse. Indigenous communication, which predates the development of modern mass media, a formally structured bureaucratic system of communication, is local communication that is specific to a given culture and society [34]. Despite the changes brought on by technology, this native communication mechanism continues to be used today. Consequently, indigenous hairstyles are ways of providing unique communication among members of a society [35]. For instance, they communicate one's age, tribal affiliations, ethnicity, religion, social standing, marital status, and more.

2.4. The Cornrow

Weaving the cornrow braid might take up to five (5) hours, depending on the amount and width of the braids. Cornrows, which are popular for their ease of maintenance, can be left in for weeks if properly cared for with gentle washing and natural scalp oiling. Braids are a protective style for African curly hair since they allow for easy and rejuvenating development. However, this style can result in traction alopecia, which is a kind of hair loss caused by braids pulled too tight or worn for prolonged periods. Women with cornrows have been seen in Stone Age artwork from the Sahara's Tassili Plateau dating back to 3000 B.C. [36]. He also indicated in his work that, as far back as 2000 B.C., representations of ancient Cushitic inhabitants of the Horn of Africa wearing this form of braids have been found [37].

Cornrow hairstyles for women have remained popular throughout Africa, particularly in the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and the remainder of the continent [38]. In Nigeria, varieties of local names are used to represent cornrows. In nineteenth-century Ethiopia, warriors and rulers such as Tewodros II and Yohannes IV were represented with cornrows. In the Caribbean, the name also refers to either corn or sugar cane fields. This idea is widely believed to have originated with Benkos Biohó while he was a slave in Colombia [39]. Religion, kinship, status, age, racial diversity, and other aspects of identity can all be expressed through cornrow hairstyles in Africa. Braiding is also significant since it transmits cultural values between generations, expresses friendship relationships, and creates the role of professional providers in diverse fields [40].

Cornrows made a reappearance in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, and then again in the 1990s and 2000s. Cornrows were worn by NBA basketball stars; Allen Iverson, Rasheed Wallace, and Latrell Sprewell in the 2000s. Cornrows and dreadlocks became major tropical disputes for some years at various workplaces and universities in the United States some years back [41].

Wearers of cornrows had been banned by several employers and educational institutions because they are deemed undesirable. Employees and civil rights organisations have argued that such views demonstrate cultural bias and some disagreements which required legal action [42].

In California, the Crown Act was passed in 2019 to eliminate discrimination based on hairstyles and hair texture [43].

2.5. Historical Background of Kumasi Cultural Centre and the Elmina Castle

The Centre for National Culture, Kumasi is located within Bantema. The Centre serves the entire Ashanti region [44]. Due to the craving for colonial culture by the natives of the land, Mr. Kyeremanten established this Centre in 1951, with the primary aim of preserving the indigenous culture of the land. Its central functions are to offer artists and cultural workers within the region an opportunity to develop their talents and work through cultural and artistic programmes and exhibitions. The Centre also produces, collects, and exhibits various arts or crafts for sale or educational purposes. It organises drama, dance, and choral competitions or festivals for groups, it also holds weekend school for the public in various traditional performance and artistic fields. It also houses visual art artifacts which are depicted in visible forms like paintings, ceramics, sculpture, and architecture. It is usually done by professionals in the craft industry. The visual art department of the Centre produces textiles (Kente), ceramic wares, and sculpture pieces for sale and exhibition. The institution is made up of individuals who are well-versed in the history and culture of Ghana [44].

Elmina Castle, on the other hand, is located within the Central region of Ghana, specifically Elmina. The Castle was built by the Portuguese. The Portuguese were the first European to come to the Gold Coast (Ghana). They arrived in 1471 and built a castle in 1482. They named it Sao Jorge da Mina (St. George of the Mine). It was used as a trading post for goods. Later, slaves who were waiting to be transported to Europe and the Americas were kept in the castle. In 1642, the Dutch seized the castle from the Portuguese and took over all the things that the Portuguese had in the Gold Coast. Elmina Castle is now a world heritage site for United Nation Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) [45].

3. Method

Relying principally on the qualitative research methods, interviews, observation, and archival investigation were used to collect data., Specifically, descriptive research was used in assessing the content of the data collected. Since our study involved the collection of data about the historical background of cornrow and its significance, the selection of the qualitative design was appropriate.

3.1. The Participants

The participants (main respondents) for the study who provided key data were two (2) tour guides of Elmina castle and two (2) workers of the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi as well as one (1) natural hairstylist. These five (5) respondents were purposively selected. In the case of the tour guides, they are responsible for giving data to any person who visits the Castle. These five (5) respondents provided data on the origin and the role of cornrows during the transatlantic slave trade. The choice of Elmina and Kumasi enabled us (the researchers) to gain cross-sectional data from both the southern and middle belts of Ghana. It is worthy of note that slaves were accessed throughout the country (Ghana).

3.2. The Data

The data for this paper (i.e., the structure of the cornrow and its historical connotations) were solicited from

Elmina Castle and the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi. Also, we gathered data from the following libraries: Sam Jonah Library, Cape Coast; KNUST Main Library, Kumasi; and the Internet. A period of four (4) months (i.e., from September 2022 to December 2022) was used in collecting the data. The library information was particularly used for the review of literature related to the study.

3.3. Instruments

In-depth interviews and observations were the two main instruments used in collecting data from the respondents. Interviews provide information that cannot be obtained through observation, or they can be used to verify the observation used for the study. The lead interviewer from the researchers asked relevant questions concerning indigenous hairstyles and the respondents also gave relevant information to the questions asked. The observation helped us to obtain in-depth information that the interview could not solicit.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data collected were assembled, described, and interpreted. Afterward, these data were descriptively analysed, and conclusions/recommendations were made. Thus, the content of the data was analysed using the objectives of the study as themes. Usually, such conceptual analysis aid in examining the existence of selected terms in the data [46].

4. Findings of the Study

The finding of the study provides a brief background to the origin of the cornrow. The local *Twi* word used for cornrow and its symbolisms were explained. This section also discusses the processes involved in weaving cornrows, as well as its worth in liberating some Africans from servitude.

4.1. Origin and Processes Involved in Making Cornrow

The interviews revealed that cornrow is a style that involves interlacing three segmented strands of hair in rows. The respondent at the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi disclosed that cornrow is of African origin, particularly Egypt, and spread to other parts of Africa like the Akan and the Yoruba communities, as a result of trade contact and migration. The origin of this hairstyle dates as far back as 3000BC and was mostly worn by women though few men also wore it. This style was used as a communication medium among various African societies who were later forced to migrate to American society as slaves. This hairstyle played a significant role in liberating some African slaves from servitude. In a more elaborate interaction, it was further revealed that among the people of Asanteman, cornrow is locally referred to as *emesa* in Asante *Twi*. The terminology was coined from *mme* (palm trees) which is the plural form of *abe* (the palm tree). The adaptation of this name was based on the fact that the palm leaf resembles the shape of the cornrow. Spiritually, it is a symbol of purification. The Indigenous priest uses palm leaves for cleansing. The data from the field showed that cornrow is an English terminology used by the Europeans to describe the shape of the hairstyle adorned by Africans during the era of the slave trade. The name was given to it because it resembled corn in a row (please see Figure 1). The Deputy Director of the Centre for National Culture provided the following narration:

“Cornrow is not our native language it is an English term that was used when our forefathers were working on a foreign plantation. In Twi, this hairstyle is known as *Emesa*. Akans usually attach symbolic meaning to most words. They specifically attach so much importance to numbers. Consequently, the use of three hair strands interlaced together led to the coining of the term *Emesa*. *Emesa* is derived from the Akan word *mmienesa* which is translated as number three in English. It symbolically portrays the basic existence of the human being. Every human being needs a body, soul, and spirit to be able to thrive on earth. The absence of one of these elements terminates the very existence of humanity. Though it's mostly done at the salons, few individuals can weave it on their hair.”



Figure 1: *Emesa*.

The field data showed that the main artistic tool used to make *emesa* is the comb. The comb is used to detangle and divide the hair into sections. The style is done by all categories of people. The commencement of the style is marked by moisturizing the hair which could be optional. This is further preceded by combing and dividing the hair into segments. The segmented sections are worked on, one after the other. Each segment is usually partitioned into three strands. These three strands are interlaced with each other at the root while moving in a horizontal direction at the base of the hair. It also came to light that some people confuse *alata* (a type of hair-do) with cornrow. Though both look very similar the only difference is that while *alata* is woven within, cornrow is woven out. A worker at the Centre for National Culture, Kumasi explained that some traditional priests adorn themselves with this type of hairstyle. Since this hairstyle involves the use of three strands, it reminds individuals of the adage that, *three makes life* (*mmiensa ye nkwa*) which implies that if any of the three basic elements (i.e., body, soul, and spirit) is missing, it makes an individual lifeless or incomplete. Hence, it represents an earlier stage of completeness. One cannot do without the other. In addition, cornrow with external hair attachments means learning to embrace other people's opinions. This implies that one should always treat the opinion of people with importance since one can make use of external opinions to achieve one's goal or vision. A natural hairstylist provided her opinion on how cornrows are done:

“I have been weaving cornrow hairstyle for some years now, and I can testify that cornrow is a hairstyle that is admired by a lot of people and it mostly takes less time to complete it. It is done mostly by adult and young female persons, though occasionally men also style their hair this way. Usually, it does not require sophisticated

equipment to make it. Cornrow styles range from simple to complex styles. In simple front-to-back rows, the steps involve combing and detangling the hair. This is followed by parting the hair from front to back. One is required to divide the first row into three small sections. Both hands are required in the process. With one hand holding a single section of hair and the other holding two distinct sections. The process requires Moving the left or right section over and on top of the centre section, taking either the left or right section in your fingers, to begin with. After that, switch the present centre piece with the section on the other side so that it is in the centre. Each braid stitch should be completed with a tiny piece of hair from the row underneath it. Cornrow without extension takes less time to weave and undo. It fosters quick hair growth. However, cornrows when pull tightly at the root can cause pain and hair breakage.”

4.2. Cornrow as a strategy of Escape from Servitude

When people are entangled or find themselves in uncomfortable situations, they use various ways and means to regain their comfort. During the period of slavery and the slave trade, the ingenuity of some African slaves caused them to figure out a way of escape through the use of hair. Indigenous hairstyles were discovered as an avenue that was utilized judiciously to aid their escape.

One of the tour guides of Elmina Castle provided a historical description of the significance of the cornrow. He explained that it was important during the transatlantic slave trade in liberating some of the Africans from servitude. Thus, the escape of slaves during the transatlantic slave trade was made possible with the aid of cornrows. Cornrow is not restricted to a specific tribe. It is worn by people throughout Ghana and other communities in Africa and the world.

The Principal Tour Guide made the researchers understand that depending upon how it was designed, it signified one's ethnic group, wealth, religion, marital status, and social position. According to the guide, it could be worn by people of all ages. In a further discussion he narrated that when the slaves reached their final destination (the Americas), the captors rip them of their culture by cutting off their indigenous hairstyles completely in the name of keeping them hygienic. However, some Africans considered this as a symbol of cultural demise and forfeiture of self-respect. The tour guide held that when the hair of the slaves began to grow the captors adopted cornrow which was considered a very simple neat hairstyle used to keep their heritage close to them. Short afro hair is enough to style one's hair into a cornrow. The use of cornrows later created an avenue for some of the slaves to escape. Thus, as a result of the ingenuity of Africans, they managed to design their cornrows in the form of maps which aided in their escape. The tour guide accentuated that this strategy was adopted to avoid their captors from discovering their secrets. The consequences of knowing their confidential messages will result in greater and more grievous punishments. The male respondent further explained that cornrow was used to convey messages of intent. One of the styles was "departed cornrow". It had thick, tight braids, braided closely to the scalp, and was tied into buns on the top. In the braids, they also kept gold and hid seeds which in the long run, helped them survive after they escaped. Interestingly, these seeds were used as hair decorations on their hairstyles. These were later planted to serve as a starter for their lives. The narration of the Assistant Tour Guide confirmed the assertion of the Principal Tour Guide:

It's amazing how Africans can be so creative and genius. Necessity, they always say is the mother of invention. It always surprises me how ordinary hairstyles can aid in informing people on when, how, and where to escape. Our fathers are great people with marvelous intelligence even though the majority had no formal education. Black people who were captured and sold into slavery used hairstyles called cornrows (braids) to transfer information and create escape maps Back home in Africa. Thus, braids were a way to show people who they were. They signified treasure and religious affiliation. However, since slaves were not allowed to read or write they learned to pass information through cornrows. It is believed that this messaging system originated in Colombia, South America where women were encouraged to style their hair in the form of directional maps & deliver messages through their cornrows. One style had curved braids, tightly braided on their heads. The curved braids would represent the roads they would use to escape. Also, in their braids, they kept gold and hid seeds which helped them survive after they escaped. They used the seeds to plant crops once they were liberated.

It can, therefore, be concluded from the above narration that cornrow became a very significant tool and a noticeable feature that facilitated inter-human communication among people with diverse language backgrounds. It provided diverse signals at different times and Africans were able to interpret them without being discovered by their captors. Consequently, relying on the slave house as the original focal point, the styling of the hair to the left side of the slaves, means, the left direction of the slave house had to be used first in the process of escaping.



Figure 2: Curved Cornrow.

Source: Archives from the Elmina Castle

The Principal Tour Guide presented his opinion on the assertion of the Assistant Tour Guide:

“What happened is that at a point in time, the enslaved Africans who were held in the dungeons and the plantation farms were asked to work in the farms for longer hours. When they went to the dungeons and the plantation farms to work, some already had in mind plans of escaping. So, those who got the opportunity to go out and work on the farms would bring information concerning the way out on the farm. Because most of them did not speak the same language, the only way to communicate was through the use of sign language. So, the lines in between the hairstyle were used as the directional map for the escapees.”

The opinion of the Principal Tour Guide corresponds with the perception of the Deputy Director of the Kumasi Cultural Centre as follows:

“Slaves were rarely permitted to write (or even if they did, such notes or maps may get into the wrong hands and cause a lot of difficulty for the people involved). Because nobody would question or suspect that someone could conceal complete maps in their hairstyles, it was simple to spread them without anybody seeing them. As a result, cornrows were the ideal styling solution. During the slave era in Colombia, hair braiding was used to communicate in diverse ways. Women, for instance, would braid their hair in a style known as ‘departs’ to indicate that they wanted to flee. It was knotted into burns on top and had thick, tight braids that were braided close to the scalp.”

In summary, the Christian doctrine introduced by the Europeans teaches against braided hair (cornrow and twist). This instruction can be found in 1 Peter 3:2-3, which says, "Do not let your adorning be external like the braiding of hair". Surprisingly, it is this same hairstyle which provided a way of escape for some African slaves. The way the African slaves were handled by the Europeans was unjust and unfair. The African captors were treated anyhow by the Europeans who introduced Christianity to the continent for their interest. Due to this, Africans desired to be free by initiating indigenous measures like the weaving of the cornrow which is tied to African roots.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

From the analysis and discussion made, it is obvious that the origin of the cornrow (which can be braided with or without extensions) is Africa. Cornrow can indicate one's age, religion, kinship, marital status, and wealth, in addition to its aesthetic appeal. Again, it played an important role in liberating some African slaves from bondage. Cornrow was a sign of resistance for slaves because they use it as maps to escape from slavery, and the slaves used to hide seeds in their braids. The seeds served as a means of survival when they reached their new destination.

Based on the conclusion, the study recommends that Africans need not look down on their culture because of the belief that Western culture is better. Africans, particularly Akans should place a high priority on their culture when it comes to their native hairstyles. They should not consider Western hairstyles as superior to indigenous hairstyles, rather Africans should consider indigenous hairstyles as forms of art and representation of culture. This notion will propel Africans to find ways of promoting their culture. The periodic organisation of exhibitions and fairs as well as reality shows could portray the forms of cornrows and their significance to the outside world, specifically, the way the hairstyle aided the escape of slaves. The map-like cornrows can be put in various visual art forms for incoming generations to learn and appreciate.

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