

ORIGINS OF THE AFRO COMB

6,000 YEARS OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND IDENTITY



IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

This exhibition includes hundreds of hair combs, encompassing examples from ancient Egypt, from all over Africa, and from Europe, America and the Caribbean, is the result of an encounter between Sally-Ann Ashton, the Fitzwilliam Museum's Senior Assistant Keeper in the Department of Antiquities, and African, Black British and Caribbean community members in prisons— part of the Fitzwilliam Museum's extensive outreach programme which engages with prisoners in a number of establishments throughout England. Shown a 5,500 year-old ancient Egyptian comb from Abydos from the Museum's collection, the community members remarked upon its similarity to ones they used at home. Indeed it was, another tangible link between the rich cultural heritage of the Nile valley all those millennia ago, and present day Africa and the African Diaspora to America, Europe and Britain.

This line of descent had been noticed by pioneering Egyptologists, notably Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, who, as part of his scholarly studies into objects of daily use, collected combs from the Pre-Dynastic to the Islamic era, either through his own extensive excavations, or by purchase from antiquities dealers in Cairo and elsewhere. Petrie compiled and published the first, and what is still the only, typology

of ancient combs, and some of his type specimens are displayed in this exhibition - generously lent from the University of London's Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology. Petrie's excavations also yielded thousands of objects that were donated to the Fitzwilliam Museum. These included ancient combs, as did the donations and bequests of collectors such as Major R. G. Gayer Anderson. He was an avid collector of Egyptian antiquities, who had an unusual sympathy for, and interest in, contemporary Arab life and customs. The story of the later development of hair combs from all over Africa can be told from loans from the seemingly inexhaustible collections of Cambridge's own Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Not only has it been a pleasure working closely with another museum within the Cambridge Museums Connecting Collections, but the unusual richness of documentation which distinguishes this collection has enabled the curators to assign the different styles of comb to distinct and specific parts of the African continent, often crossing modern geopolitical boundaries. Generous loans of precious bronze and terracotta representations from the British Museum, and from the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria, allow us to show the astonishing richness, sophistication and invention of the African coiffure. A range of even more recent combs, some

of them especially sought out and collected for this exhibition by Dr Ohioma Pogoso, including some commissioned from living craftsmen trained in fast-disappearing techniques, bring the story of the African comb right up to date – in 21st century Africa, America and the Caribbean. This latest incarnation of an ageless theme – typified by a bevy of inexpensive plastic combs surmounted by a Black Power clenched fist, available in an alarming range of acid-drop colours – suggests that the development of the African comb is far from over.

It is fitting that this exhibition, which was inspired by the Fitzwilliam Museum's community work, has been very community focused. A Community Committee made up of Crystal Afro, Patricia Brown, K.N. Chimbiri, Andrew Crowe, Jahmal Crowe, Ampem Dako, Sandra Gittens, Felicity Heywood, Jacinth Martin and Michael McMillan have participated fully and generously in devising the exhibition, and advising on its selection and display. Three responses to the initial concept of the exhibition have been created by Michael McMillan, in the form of a cottage salon, barber shop and hairdressing salon; by Atta Kwami and Pamela Clarkson in the form of 12 prints entitled *Drawing Combs: Davunu / 'Afe Nutata*; and Russell Newell who has made 10 combs telling the story of the Jamaican Maroons.

The exhibition has also required the valuable input on an academic level from colleagues in Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana, as well as visiting fellows from the Institute of African Studies. We are grateful to the following Institutions for their generosity, enthusiasm and advice: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, British Museum, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments, and to private lenders: Crystal Afro, Elsbeth Court, Makeda Dako, Sandra Gittens, and Deborah Stokes. Special thanks are also due to Louise Jenkins, Chief Technician, for skillfully managing the mounting

and case arrangements and to John Lancaster, Andrew Bowker, David Evans and Rob Law for their assistance; and to Helen Strudwick, Exhibitions Officer. The project would also not have been possible without the support of Remke van der Velden, Curatorial Assistant. We are also grateful to Ayshea Carter, who designed the witty poster and other publicity material. Most of all, however, Sally-Ann Ashton should be congratulated for her hard work researching and curating such a fascinating and thought-provoking show. Finally, we are indebted to the Heritage Lottery and the Monument Trust, without whose enlightened sponsorship this exhibition would not have been possible.

Tim Knox FSA
Director
June 2013

Additional list of acknowledgements

Rosemary Bodam
Lissant Bolton
Mark Box
Fiona Brock
Lucilla Burn
Tao-Tao Chang
Alan Clapham
Lynda Clark
Julie Dawson
Jo Dillon
Jocelyne Dudding
Eclipse Hair and Beauty
Pia Edqvist
Catherine Elliot
Mark Elliot
Trevor Emmett
Sean Fall
June Forbes
Abigail Granville
Imogen Gunn
Rachel Hand
Tracy Harding
Ellie Hickling
Julie Hudson
Canice Ikashi
Jane Ison
Michael Jones
Verena Kotonski
Nessa Leibhammer
Patricia Livingston
Anna Lloyd-Griffiths

Sara Manco
Jennifer Marchant
Jean Michel Massing
Tom Matthews
Cynthia McGowan
Andrew Norman
Tonya Nelson
Ben Okri
Elisabeth O'Connell
Sean O'Neill
Shaun Osborne
Julia Putman
Stephen Quirke
Anuradha Radhakrishnan
Sue Rhodes
Paola Ricciardi
David Shaw
Rachel Sinfield
Thyrza Smith
Neal Spencer
Amy Staples
Charlotte Stephenson
Rachel Swift
Lucy Theobald
Nick Thomas
Daria Toma
Dr. Yusuf Abdallah Usman
Phil Wheeler
Barbara Wills

THE IMAGE OF THE (AFRO) COMB IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN ART

Ohioma I. Pogoson
Institute of African Studies,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan



© Museum of
Archaeology &
Anthropology

Going by the sheer number of combs in the Northcote Whitridge Thomas (NWT) collection in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) of the University of Cambridge, the combs must have indeed been personal objects of great value. For good hygiene and health combs were scarcely shared. Everyone owned at least one. We now know that the collector of the combs had his 'methods' but it is not unusual, at all, as we also now know, for subdued and impoverished peoples to willingly surrender their valuables in time of need. It is no wonder then that there is a large number of combs in the NWT, MAA collection and that they now form a large percentage of the combs being shown in this exhibition. Combs are incontrovertibly an important item in the lives of Africans, indeed man. Some of the earliest known combs are from ancient Egypt where they were obtained from archaeological contexts and were associated with the burials as part of the grave goods of the deceased. Until quite recently interest in the recording, studying and understanding or displaying of combs, especially in Africa, has been scant. It was limited to their common use for straightening out hair and their images being used and represented in the arts in Nigeria, perhaps elsewhere in Africa. What is clear to the recent observer, however, is that the attention paid to combs here in Africa today is quite different from elsewhere in the world.

This paper sets out to discuss the use of images of combs in some contemporary Nigerian arts, how they are represented, what meanings they convey and what their users and viewers think of them in their new context. As a product of art, the comb is fairly well documented in many Museum collections in the UK and elsewhere. Rendering itself to being decorated, many carvers over the years have found the spaces between the actual comb teeth, as well as the handle itself quite the perfect space for ornate decorations. Thus decorated, on their own, combs are art. Carvers are known to have made combs for purely decorative purposes as well as for utilitarian purpose but in addition, they have been used in recent paintings and sculptures. Artists who use them belong to the group that has been classified as those employing traditional images in their works. Such artists dwell in exploiting traditional patterns, designs and images and used them in their works. They are the ones who seek to preserve in their works some of these materials that are thought to be dying out today. African penchant for decorating objects is well known. I must add that with the coming of and popularity of plastics, traditional hand-made wooden combs and the art of carving them have suffered a great setback such that it is no longer commonplace to find traditional wooden combs or their makers.

What is a comb? At a general and simplistic level, a comb, as it pertains to human usage for the hair, is simply a toothed tool for straightening out curled or kinky hair. Because of the nature of African hair, often described as 'kinky', African combs often have wider gaps between their teeth and require a stronger and firmer handle to be able to force the curled/kinky hair loose as it is combed. Apart from their function as comb for the hair, they have been used to decorate the hair; they are also being used as art; as a thing possessing aesthetic value and a thing of culture. Combs are the products of the well known and prominent lineage based vocation of woodcarving and in some cases they have been used



© Museum of
Archaeology &
Anthropology



IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY





as symbols to give unction to, serve and enhance the potency and efficacy in traditional religion, spirituality and power dynamics. Among the Yoruba for example, the comb is called *oyiya* or *ooya*, verbalized to mean literal separation (of hair) but not of hair alone. It is usually used to wish separation from all things bad, evil and inimical to human existence. Therefore in Yoruba religion and indeed in Ifa, combs are symbols of potency. On the other hand according to David Doris, "the comb (ooya) on its own - the issue of suffering (iya) never departs (ya) from it." This is a play on the word 'ya' to which in this case, Doris elects to add the prefix 'i' which then changes the meaning from 'separation' to 'suffering', two very important concepts in the vicissitudes of life. A taxi driver may be provided with a protective charm comprising a comb tied up with all sorts of 'things' to help 'separate' him from death by accident. It is interesting that all over the Southwestern part of Nigeria, combs share relatedness in how they are made and called. *Oyiya* is a common name for comb among most Edo groups and is perhaps the only name used by peoples from the northern parts of Edo from where Northcote W. Thomas collected the combs in the MAA collection. They also carry the same significance and importance.

Nigerian artists, sated with a politically motivated pressure to source images for their works from within their cultures, have begun to pay significant attention to and acknowledgement of the local colour and imagery of the past traditions for their works, employing and deploying combs and a large number of other cultural images. What we find today is a deep desire on the part of artists to dig deep into history and the traditions and the local culture for inspiration and materials. Artists, painters and sculptors alike, such as Bruce Onobrakpeya, Moyo Ogunidipe, David Dale, Tola Wewe and many younger ones have adopted and adapted numerous local signs and symbols in their works. They research the culture deeply and use the materials they collect to create their art. Indeed it is now quite easy to compile a

repertoire of such images. Among some commonly used zoomorphic ones, in and on textile for example, are the lizard, the chameleon and the tortoise, local flora, as well as coded signs and symbols. The comb is an 'object' that has now taken its place among other culturally symbolic objects.

In a classification of the contemporary arts of Africa, Nigeria in particular, Adepegba (1995) refers to a group of artists as possessing a tendency to revisit and adapt traditional forms in their works. This group of artists, according to Adepegba, did not begin to look at traditional forms for their intrinsic qualities and possibly adaptations until the mid 1960s. From Adepegba's now popular thesis we hear of names like Etso Ugbodaga Ngu exploiting the equestrian form common in Yoruba and Benin wood and bronze art respectively, Ayo Ajayi's deployment of forms adapted from Northern Yoruba and Nupe door panels and Solomon Irein Wangboje's summation of the historical and artistic significance of Ife to the Yoruba in his now invaluable prints. Other artists that have paid much attention to and pioneered the adaptation of traditional forms include Ademola Adekola, the Nsukka group that has adopted the use of traditional Igbo body paintings in their works, the likes of Tayo Adenaike, Obiora Udechukwu, Chike Aniakor and Uche Okeke.

Recently a number of artists have started to pay more detailed attention to the use of traditional forms. They have recorded a huge success of it indeed. Conscious of their meaning and significance in and to the culture, these artists select, research and use these traditionally relevant and powerful cultural symbols in their arts. The hair is an important part of the body and in many southern Nigerian cultures an enemy may seek strands of one's hair in order to use them to do harm. Hair strands can be easily obtained from people's combs, especially the wooden ones that easily develop tears and breaks and get strands of hairs hooked on them. It is also worthy

to note that an easy way of identifying depression, apart from being unkempt, is by the state of the persons hair; Rasta dreadlocks notwithstanding. The hair, especially when long, is on the other hand a thing of beauty in women. Women's varieties of plaited and decorated hairstyles are abundant. They are often decorated with well-designed hairpins and combs. Combs and the hair and other associated materials have thus caught the interest of the artists. A famous Nigerian photographer; Okhai Ojeikere, has in fact dedicated much of his life to photographing hairstyles that are mostly now obsolete, leaving only his pictures as evidence of the richness of Nigerian hair styles. Decorative combs are now to be found hanging in foyers and sitting rooms, in paintings, textiles and sculptures etc. but the combs are scarcely being made today. In December 2012 I attempted to locate comb carvers in Benin, Ibadan and Oyo towns. My survey revealed that the business of carving combs was no longer profitable for the few extant craftsmen. Chinese manufactured plastic combs have flooded the market and people have moved on to buying them.

The Nigerian combs from the MAA Thomas collection in this exhibition are indeed a bridge between the old and the new. It is no wonder then that the accompanying illustrating plates of this paper contain images of combs as represented by modern and contemporary Nigerian artists from the southwestern part of Nigeria. Some of the images represented are caricatures that have been adopted and aesthetically imbued with 'local' spirit and used in recent representations of them. Ohiolei Ohiwerei is challenged by the richness of female hair and the comb that combs and shapes it to attraction. He represents the hair in a bun to form the handle of his pair of decorative combs (Plate 1, Comb 1 and Comb 2).

In another work by the same artist, he imports a whole comb in his relief poly marble sculpture pasted on ebony wood (Plate 2, Julian).



Plate 1a
Decorative Comb 1 and
Decorative Comb 2
(Ebony)
Ohiolei Ohiwerei, 2011

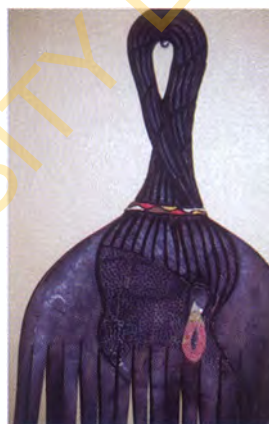


Plate 1b
Close-up of Decorative
Comb 1
Ohiolei Ohiwerei, 2011

Another artist, Ifeanyi Onwuakpa (Plate 3, Untitled) says he picks on forms that are common in Africa and combines them to make his pictures and hence it is possible to have a stand-alone comb. The comb to him is a tool of beauty that has stood the test of time; hardly changing in form over the long period it has been here in Africa.

Coming back to the Thomas combs, they possess significant intrinsic qualities. They are produced in a wide variety of materials such as brass, wood, bamboo and animal bones and horns. They carry a great variety

of decorated patterns that incontrovertibly fit into the repertoire of designs from Northern Edo land. These range from geometric and lineal designs to combs with circular handles and checkered designs. The uniqueness of the combs indicate they are the products of many different artists, some even possessing further northern Islamic influenced designs. Their sizes are pointers to their possible specific and particular uses. From the double-headed combs meant for very short and very long hair to combs with pin pointed handles possibly meant for parting the hair while plaiting, to wide and narrow combs; some of them bear human figure handles, scarcely known in the arts of Northern Edo land. This is an indication of local capacities of the carvers to deal with the human figure, be it stylized or naturalistic. They were proficient carvers of wood, bone and bamboo, and skilled bronze casters. The works of these master-carver artists that are being shown for the first time today have not been seen or viewed by people from their producer-culture since they were removed from Northern Edo land between 1909 and 1913. This exhibition thus provides a welcome opportunity to start a much-needed contextual interrogation of the Nigerian comb and its usage.

Bibliography

C. O. Adepogba. 1995. *Nigerian Art: Its Traditions and Modern Tendencies*. Ibadan, Jodad Publishers

D.T. Doris. 2011. *Vigilant Things: Of Thieves, Yoruba Anti-Aesthetics, and the Strange Fates of Ordinary Objects in Nigeria*. Seattle. University of Washington Press.



Plate 2a and 2b

Julian with Comb and Close-up (Relief Poly-Marble on Ebony)
Ohiolel Ohiwerei, 2008



Plate 3

Untitled (Oil on Metal)
Ifeanyi Onwuakpa

BRADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The
Fitzwilliam
Museum

CAMBRIDGE

