

# Adventists and Hair Plaiting in Africa

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Braid patterns and hairstyles are an indication of a person's tribe or community, age, and marital status in many African cultures. Some Christians question whether braiding is compatible with biblical Christian lifestyle.

## Introduction

A braid (also referred to as a plait) is a complicated structure or pattern formed by interlacing three or more strands of flexible material such as textile yarns, [wire](#), or hair.<sup>1</sup> The materials used have depended on the indigenous plants and animals available in the local area. They have been made for thousands of years in many different cultures around the world, for a variety of uses.

Braiding is traditionally a social art. Because of the time it takes to braid hair, people have often taken time to socialize while braiding and having their hair braided. It begins with the elders making simple knots and braids for younger children. Older children watch and learn from them, start practicing on younger children, and eventually learn the traditional designs. This carries on a tradition of bonding between elders and the new generation. In several parts of the world, braided hairdos are a unique way to categorize each community or tribe. Braid patterns and hairstyles are an indication of a person's tribe or community, age, marital status, wealth, power, and religion. Braiding was and is a social art.<sup>2</sup>

## The Biblical View

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he seems to forbid a woman wearing her hair braided. What would be the reason behind this prohibition?

The full context of any passage, plus other relevant information elsewhere in the Bible on the same topic, must be employed to bring any ambiguous passage into clear focus. So, it is with reference to 1 Timothy 2:9-10. "Likewise, also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works."

Paul was here discussing how women should dress and carry themselves in times of public worship and in public prayer. In the days of the apostles, it was a custom among women in the world of Greek culture to exhibit

extravagant hairstyles and other adornments. While it is true that Paul was literally talking about how a woman should dress, his overall point was not only that women should dress modestly, but that the adornment be not merely external. Internal in attitude, deportment, and obligations toward God were also important.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis of this passage is upon the development of inner spiritual qualities, which could be obscured by outlandish attire. Paul is not condemning the items mentioned. What he is prohibiting is an excess that detracts from the woman's spiritual attractiveness.

## Origins of Adventists Involvement

Ellen White and other members of the evolving Advent movement were influenced by John Wesley's Methodism and the Puritans in New England. Like Wesley, early Adventists objected to the grandiose styles of the wealthy, which seemed to vainly flaunt their economic status.<sup>4</sup>

A number of Methodists came from the lower classes and considered luxurious clothing and jewelry as a sign of vanity, pleasure, and worldly life style. Wesley warned his members to dress in the simplest style and not "to ape the gentlemen." Because hair style was a part of the fashion mode of the upper classes, men in the Methodist Church combed their hair straight down, and this style of combing came to be known as "the Methodist fashion.

<sup>5</sup> Methodists were easily identified by their way of dressing and their attire. Biblical texts, such as [1 Peter 3:3](#), [1 Timothy 2:8-9](#), [James 4:4](#), and [1 John 2:15](#), became their support for simplicity and plainness.

## The Way Forward

African Adventists disagree on the matter of hair braiding where styles are a part of tribal or clan identity. The opinions expressed by the individuals who were interviewed for this article illustrate the array of opinions.<sup>6</sup>

Adventists are called to be a godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with biblical principles in all aspects of personal and social life.<sup>7</sup> From the contemporary views on hair braiding, several lessons can be observed:

One of the lessons we can learn from the early Adventists is that their understanding of right and wrong was conditioned by factors of culture and era. Contemporary culture should still be considered when taking position on personal appearance and Christian standards. Carrying a literal reading of biblical instructions on dress could effectively create unhealthy legalism and focus attention away from the gospel. Ellen G. White suggested that we should practice temperance in all things, including fashions and styles.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, she never forbade hair plaiting.<sup>9</sup>

Another lesson is the need to show respect and forbearance for differing opinions during discussion of the issue. The Apostle Paul admonishes Christians to bear one another's burdens in Galatians 6:2. When Adventists discuss matters pertaining to Christian standards, like hair branding, feelings and emotions are prone to

becoming intense. Therefore, members need to debate without fighting, educating one another in love.

Unity in diversity is also an important lesson from the discussion. Africa is constituted of many tribes, each with a culture different from another. Members are united in the word of God and in the mission of the Church, while able to embrace individual differences.

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## NOTES

1. Wikipedia contributors, "Braid," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, April 11, 2020, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Braid&oldid=950246812>.
2. Bert Ashe, *Twisted: My Dreadlock Chronicles* (Chicago: Agate Bolden, 2015), 13.
3. Edward D. Andrews, *First Timothy 2:12: What Does the Bible Really Say About Women Pastors/Preachers?* ([Cambridge, OH]: Christian Publishing House, 2019), 16.
4. Gerald Wheeler, "The Historical Basis of Adventist Standard," *Ministry*, October 1989, 8-11.
5. Ibid.
6. Addressing the issue of braiding, Habi Machiru says, "The important thing is your personal relationship with God and also how you live your Christian life. Is your light shining in your community for others to see Jesus? Or you are the source of problems and chaotic pressures of the

community and the church" (Habi Machiru, interviewed by the author, March 5, 2019, Misufini, Morogoro); Kigaba Mwaipaja says, "It seems everyone is getting something done to their hair at one time or another, black, white, alike. I buy hair clips to add to my hair. I don't really have an answer. Women always want to look at their best. Sometimes it just for themselves. . . It is a sensitive topic for sure" (Kibaga Mwaipaja, interviewed by the author, March 5, 2019, Misufini, Morogoro); Amina Mwimo suggests, "I don't have an issue with braiding my hair as I am able to do it myself to cut costs. What I can't understand is why this always comes up as an issue! I know there are Bible texts that people use to support the non-braiding of hair, but as women I feel we are to look our best (Amina Mwimo, interviewed by the author, November 9, 2019, Kwembe, Dar es Salaam); Citing the Bible texts of Romans 12:2 and I Peter 3:4, Toto Kusaga says, "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God." Peter writes concerning the apparel of women, saying, "Whose adorning, let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves (Toto Kusaga, telephone interviewed by the author, January 12, 2019, Ipagala, Dodoma).

7. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Boise ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2005), 311.
8. Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954), 936.
9. D. E. Robinson, "Is Plaiting or Braiding of Hair Forbidden by Divine Commandment?," Ellen G. White Estate, n.d., accessed March 3, 2020, <http://dev-egw.ellenwhite.org/media/document/9045>.

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