

'The Wax and Gold of Hairstyles in Ethiopia' Exhibition, Addis Ababa Museum, May 25–June 6 2021

By Abel Assefa

Contextual Background

The German Frobenius Institute sponsored various scientific expeditions to Southern Ethiopia between 1934/35 and 1974. The output of these expeditions has made the institute's archive a rich and extraordinary resource. Today it houses various written documents, more than 20,000 photographs and sketches, 83 film reels and around 1200 ethnographic objects from southern Ethiopia ([online image database](#)).

The concept and idea for an exhibition on hairstyles in Ethiopia emerged during a study visit to the Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology in Frankfurt, Germany. During this stay, in May 2019, I had the opportunity to access the institute's photographic archives and the artifacts collected from Southern Ethiopia by German anthropologists. The documentation included various reports, accompanied by photographs, about hair styles from different ethnic groups (Fig. 1). *The Wax and Gold of Hairstyle in Ethiopia* exhibition is the second collaboration between the Goethe-Institut Äthiopien and the Frobenius Institute since 2019, and the whole project was jointly funded and supported by the two institutes.



Fig. 1. Alabdu-Gudji Girl in dance jewellery for a dance festival, by Eike Haberland, 1954/55 (Photo: © Frobenius Institute, reg. no. FoA 27-KB100-29)

Ethiopian Hairstyles

Modern-day Ethiopia is inhabited by a wide range of people and ethnic groups who contribute to the country's cultural diversity. Although many of the distinctions among these ethnic groups have been blurred over the years by various factors, differences between them can still be observed in various cultural practices, which include traditional costumes and hairstyles. The clothes and jewelry employed for traditional costumes, for example, reflect both ancient customs and modern trends in decoration and beauty, and are as varied and interesting as the ethnic groups who make or use them. Ethiopian hairstyles reflect equally rich and varied cultural practices.

In Ethiopia, as in other African countries, hairstyles may indicate marital status, age, class, ethnic identity, religion, or the wealth and rank of an individual in the social hierarchy of a community. Hair is imbued with cultural and social meaning, but it also has an undeniable aesthetic value. Braiding hair can be seen as a creative artistic activity with sculptural qualities (Fig. 2). Hairstyling can thus also be considered as artistic practice that manifests the artistic creativity and skill of the people who have developed and practiced it.

Unfortunately, the hairdressing customs of many ethnic minorities in Ethiopia are often marginalized by the 'dominant' culture or are being supplanted by globalizing trends. Documenting and studying such cultural assets may contribute to their preservation. Unfortunately, aside for some occasional work done by the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH), the subject of hairstyles in Ethiopia has not been extensively studied or documented by Ethiopian institutes. Thus, the documents gathered by researchers from the Frobenius Institute, who described and photographed different social aspects of hairstyles, provide valuable evidence for studying these customs. In addition to photography, sketches were also used for documenting the hairstyles from different ethnic groups of Southern Ethiopia. These materials were later published in the three volumes (see references).



Fig. 2. Spiral braided hairstyle of young men from Alabdu-Gudji, by Eike Haberland, 1954/55 (Photo: © Frobenius Institute, reg. no. FoA 27-KB114-27)

Aim and Objectives of the Exhibition

In view of the above, one key objective of the exhibition was to assemble and present a broad range of hair styles that have been documented through photographs and sketches. It also aimed to contribute to a dialogue about the significance of hairstyle and the preservation and distribution of the information and knowledge contained in the photographs and films held by archives such as that of the Frobenius Institute. The project was timely in that it aimed to intersect with current discussions in Europe and Africa on topics such as decolonization by presenting an under-studied topic such as hairstyle and by highlighting its artistic and cultural significance. Finally, the exhibition set out to emphasize the Frobenius Institute's contribution to the field of ethnography in southern Ethiopia.



Fig. 3. Some of the photos on show at the exhibition (Photo: Abel Assefa)

Title

The phrase ሰምና ወርቅ (*samenna warq*), or wax and gold, is a fundamental concept in Amharic. Taken literally, it refers to the goldsmith's technique of casting pieces by making a clay mould around a wax core, draining the wax and then pouring the molten gold into the mould. However, in Amharic poetry, the phrase has come to signify the hidden, often spiritual, meaning (the gold) beneath the apparent meaning (the wax) of the language. Once the wax (*sam*) is removed, the gold (*warq*) can be appreciated.

The exhibition title was selected because hair, which can be more easily changed and shaped than other bodily features, has always been used for its aesthetic appeal and imbued with symbolic meanings. It is both wax and gold. As a natural biological signifier, hair is the wax, while its braiding or styling, imbued with cultural and artistic significance, is the gold.



Fig. 4. A general view of the 'The Wax and Gold of Hairstyles in Ethiopia' exhibition (Photo: Abel Assefa)

Exhibition Production

As noted above, the photographic collections of the Frobenius Institute includes more than 20,000 items, which made the selection for this exhibition a difficult task. In this regard, the field reports of the expeditions and other three publications were helpful. In the end, sixty-two photographs were selected to showcase the richness and variety of Ethiopian hairstyles traditions: these images were chosen not for their photographic composition or artistic qualities, but for their content and the information they convey on the subject of hairstyle (Figs. 3 and 4).

In addition to the photographs, the exhibition also featured sketches by a young artist called Biniyam Kassahun – a freelance architect, graphics designer and artist based in Addis Ababa. The sketches were produced by copying photographs from the institute's archive and have been included for two main purposes. First, to better present and emphasize the hairstyles by leaving out other components of the photograph. Second, to include hairstyles that were photographed but could not be part of the exhibition.

The Wax and Gold of Hairstyle in Ethiopia exhibition was on display at Addis Ababa Museum from May 25 to June 6, 2021. During the display the photographs and sketches were arranged to explore five themes: childhood, adolescence, womanhood, leadership and membership of the Hāmar and Sāmākko. The exhibition was well covered in the media, but it also received some heart-warming responses by individual visitors. Preparing a catalogue for the exhibition was also another important task: the 62-page volume contains a curatorial statement for the exhibition, three introductions from the institutes who were involved in the project, and three essays accompanied by 47 figures of photographs and sketches. The catalogue has been distributed to different cultural institutes, research centres and museums in Addis Ababa and also to a selections beauty training centres. A [digital version of the catalogue](#) is accessible at the website of the exhibition.

To reach a widespread and diverse audience, the content of the exhibition was digitized. A web-based version of the exhibition, which includes some additional materials, was prepared and is available at: <https://www.hairstylesinethiopia.com/>.

Conclusion

The exhibition organizers and partner institutes strongly believe that making these photographs accessible at their place of origin is important. The photographs taken by German anthropologists who travelled to the Lower Omo Valley from the 1930s to 1970s are rare testimonies of this time and place. Therefore it was paramount to have Jinka University as one of our partnering institutes, and in 2022 all the content of the exhibition will be donated and displayed at the South Omo Research Center of Jinka University.

References

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Banner: detail of the exhibition (Photo: Abel Assefa)
