

**BODY DECORATIONS,
MALE-FEMALE RELATIONS
AND GROUP IDENTITY AMONGST
THE HILL DWELLING KOMA PEOPLE
OF NIGERIA¹**

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INTRODUCTION

In almost all human societies, basic distinctions exist between the male and female sexes in the treatment of the body and in the mode of dressing.

It is, however, a matter for protracted debate if these distinctions are explainable in terms of the Levi-Straussian Nature/Culture dualism or those of current feminist debates which tend to allude to the status of "women", the perversion of history, culture and justice (BROWN 1981 : 254).

The ongoing research amongst a relatively primitive hill-dwelling people of Koma in the Gongola State of Nigeria offers an ideal context for testing selected and relevant anthropological

¹Especial thanks go to Mr. G.M. Chaskda, a Kilda elite for his useful suggestions and incisive comments and to the Director-General of the Nigerian National Museums Commission, for encouraging this study.

hypotheses against empirical data such as have been collected so far amongst the Koma and neighbouring groups.

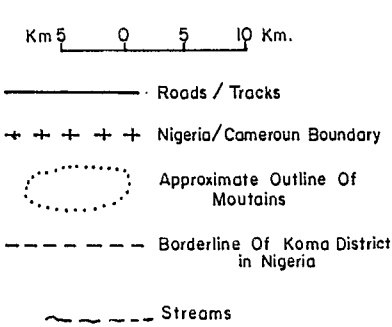
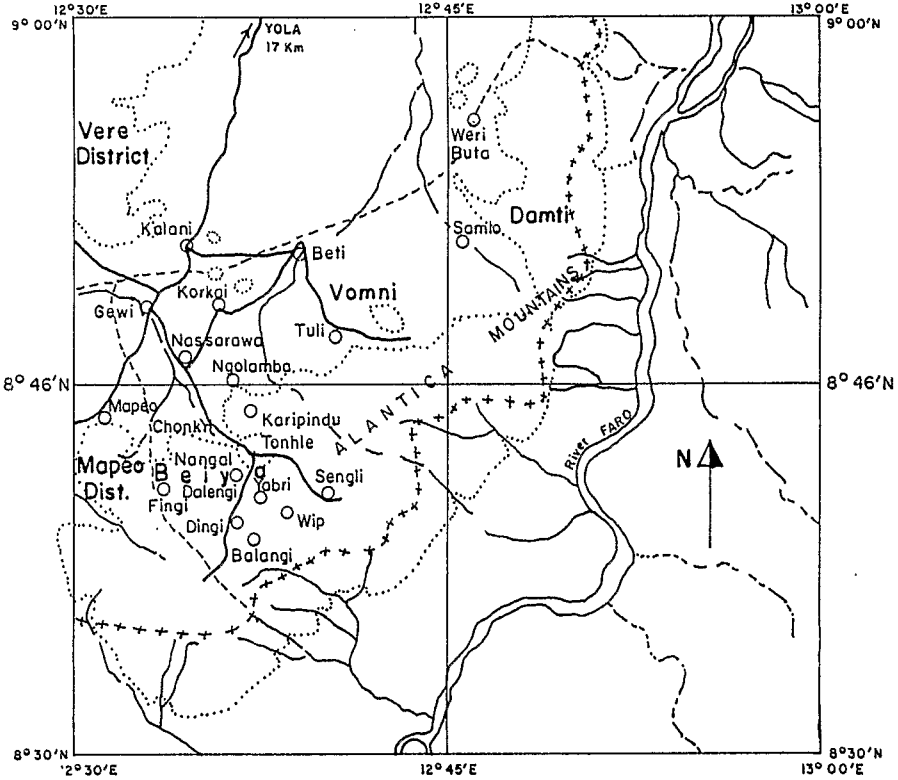
For a proper understanding of the issue under consideration, it will thereafter be necessary to go into Koma ethnography, with particular reference to their historical experiences, aspects of their leadership and authority relations, religious beliefs, economic relations, marriage and inheritance patterns.

A closer look at the difference in body decoration and dress patterns between male and female within the hill-dwelling and migrant Koma in relationship to their plain-dwelling Fulani and Verre neighbours will help to show that body decoration serves to differentiate between sexes for the greater purpose of identity.

Earlier interpretations of so-called primitive arts which include body decorations and dress, carried the notion that they were mostly directed to fetish/magical ends. Such forms of art were denied either creativity, logic, aesthetical or even ideological merits.

Recent studies have, however, proved that "tribal arts" like "modern" ones do not only have aesthetic functions but in addition carry with them symbolic meanings and weight which in fact serve social, economic and rational ends. It is against this background that the theories of the respected French Anthropologist Claude LEVI-STRAUSS have become revolutionary to and most accommodative of contemporary cross-cultural analysis.

Carte de l'aire koma



Sketch Map of the KOMA area ((Positions of some Villages are approximate).

Observing the Cudaveo Indians of South Brazil, LEVI-STRAUSS relates their body markings to the hierarchical and caste structure of their society. (L-S. 1955 :179). Body decorations, he says, become social markers of status, prestige and domination for the Mbayas who believe that they are predestined to rule mankind. In other words, body arts serve as symbols of identity between "We" and "They", also helping to single out the individual from the collective and ensuring the transition from nature to culture (*ibid.*)

On the basis of comparison with the neighbouring Bororo who are structured into two exogamous moieties, LEVI-STRAUSS postulates for the inbreeding and endogamous Cudaveo people, a libidinal phantasy in the body decorations of their women, who are seen as yearning symbolically for ideal social institutions which they have denied themselves by their sheer interests and superstitions (*ibid.*)

Victoria EBIN argues that since the body is the physical link between *ourselves*, our souls and the *outside world*, the use and presentation of it could nonverbally say precise things about the society in which we live (EBIN V. 1979 : 6). Citing examples from the Hammer of South Ethiopia and the Fulanis of Nigeria, she also sees body decoration as a vital element in ritual activity in the desire to gain mystical power. Thus, the Hammers smear their bodies with the entrails of a cow, while Fulani women paint their faces with cow dung to ward off evil spirits and illnesses.

STRATHERN, who examines the role of body decorations in a stateless, competitive and warrior society, reads political, economic and social meanings into the art (1980 : 219). In the Hagen society, regulated by the local Moka exchanges, a strong contrast exists between the status and activities of men and women. Men control warfare and exchange transactions while women raise children and pigs and tend the gardens.

The politics of the Hageners are characterized by aggression, mockery and the desire to reverse the fluid superiority/inferiority relationship between rivals in the Moka exchanges. It involves latent rivalry between Bigmen which is expressed in the sizes of gifts, speeches and elaborate decorations. Decorations celebrate successes in the never-ending bouts of exchange; they serve to demarcate festival times from non-festive ones. Men are associated in different contexts with dark and bright colours, while women are generally associated with bright colours which make them more alluring and fertile in their roles as regenerators of society. The dual association with red, applicable to both sexes, STRATHERN says, represents the flow of friendly and positive communications between groups and between sexual partners.

Amongst the Nuba of Sudan as the Koma of Nigeria, FARIS asserts that body decorations and dress serve as status indicators between men and women, age groups and patriclan (FARIS 1972 : 50). In this society, where grooms do not pay bride wealth but rather pay bride service, body decorations serve as a means of "making signs" to

the world at large. People who cannot acquire prestige through economic power which involves competition through overt show of wealth and goods/commodities of all sorts resort to body decorations and elaborate dress to celebrate their god-given body and vitality. In other words, what human beings lose in one sphere is compensated for in other spheres of social structure. It is within this deprivatory / compensatory framework which re-echoes LEVI-STRAUSS that the significance of body decorations amongst the Koma and similar peoples of the world would have more logical meaning.

But I shall first go into the relevant ethnography as revealed in the ongoing research to support this assertion.

LOCATION, POPULATION AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION

The Koma people are divided into three main sub-ethnic groups - The Beiya and Damti, the majority of whom dwell in the hills, and the Vomni who live in the adjoining lowlands (see map). In the plains and lowlands are also other ethnic groups who over the years have displaced the hill dwellers - the Verre, the Bata, the Fulani, the Hausa and Chamba. (Leo FROBENIUS 1913 vol. II : 666).

The Koma proper, as the hill-dwellers are now called, are spread through the South and Southwest of the Alantika/Adamawa mountain ranges to the centre of these hills, where they

share common grounds with the Vomni - Koma related groups, most of whom are now settled in the foothills.

In the hills the taxable adult Koma population number about 14,829, as against the plain-dwellers who account for about 11,348. (Tax records 1986/7). The total population of females stands at about 18005, while that of the males is 8272.

Amongst the lowland Verre the taxable population of males stands at 1,437, while that of females stands at 2,772; the Chamba : males 120, females 200; Fulani : females 115; males 20; Hausa : males 100; females 9; Batta : males 9, females 36.

The mixed total taxable adult population for the whole Koma Vomni district stands at about 41,211. (Koma District Tax record). A large number of Koma have been reported living in the Cameroon side of the Alantika/Adamawa Mountain ranges¹.

Generally, the Koma groups can be divided into hill and plain dwellers. The Koma plain dwellers live in the periphery of the Fulani, Chamba, Verre, and Bata settlements in the lowlands, where they farm, live in temporary shelters, and attend markets. Most Koma plain-dwellers have ethnic links and permanent homes

¹Roger Blench a British Anthropologist/Development Consultant, also confirmed that some French Scholars such as Michel Die and Françoise Champion are working on a Koma related people in the Camerouns. Françoise Champion in a personal conversation (27/9/88) reveals that about 3,000 Koma live on the Camerouns side of the Alantika.

in the hills to which they retire seasonally, periodically or daily depending on the distance between lowland farm and uphill "homes".

The Verre share close ethnic and linguistic ties with the Koma; however, they see the Koma as inferiors and refer to them in Fulani as backward peoples. Even those among the Vomni who have in recent years come down from the hills refer to the Koma derisively as "load carriers" (Gomne).

These allusions are further understood from the brief historical account below.

BRIEF HISTORY

The history of the Koma people appears to have begun towards the end of the 16th Century during the successive waves of migrations of the Bata, Chamba, Marghi and Higi from the North and East of Africa towards the Upper Benue Valley¹. For nearly two centuries, these waves of migrations seemed to have involved a grim struggle of those invaders for dominance and control over this fertile region. The Koma, who were then a relatively small and unorganised group living around the Faro valley, were pushed up into the hills by the Bata people.

These internecine struggles also favoured the success of the Fulani Jihad of the 19th Century which led to the overthrow of a number of

¹United Kingdom Trusteeship Report 1949 p. 34. The waves of migration are corroborated from oral narratives and traditions from a number of local informants (Field notes 1987).

societies and the conquest of such groups as the Verre, who either became enslaved or escaped into the safety of the hills of the Alantika as the Koma did.

The lowland Verre, who became the middlemen of the Fulani, organised periodic tax raids on the hills. Hence the average Koma man and woman view the Verre with suspicion and would want to maintain his/her identity in many forms, body decoration and dress inclusive.

In the 1950's a ban was placed on imported textiles which usually passed through the hands of the lowland Verre, Fulani and Chamba middlemen to the hill-dwelling Koma¹. Preference was expressed for the relatively scarce but locally produced cloth.

COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

The large population of Koma now found in the foothill and plains of the Alantika/Adamawa mountains is a recent development in response to the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, and also the result of various colonization policies adopted from 1900-1960 (NISSEN 1963 : 197).

German occupation of the area was shortlived and rather ineffective. The Fulani overlords (the Lamidos) continued to rule the Koma and extort taxes from them by organised raids to the hills. With the conclusion of the first world war the Germans renounced their claims to the Cameroons in favour of the Allied Powers. As a result, the Adamawa area, which includes the Koma, was placed under British Mandate.

¹Roger Blench's unpublished work list. Also confirmed by

A year after Nigeria's independence in 1961, as a result of a plebiscite the Koma became recognised as Nigerians along with the old Adamawa/Saduana provinces of the Northern Cameroons.

Today the Koma-Vomni District is one of the seven districts in the Ganye local government area, with head quarters at Nassarawo in the plains. The District Head of the Koma is a Verre man and has his operational headquarters in the plains.

One can, however, see Koma women proudly dressed in waist leaves and beads bringing their wares of guinea corn, beer, tobacco and fruits to the lowland-markets of Betti, Choncha and Karlahi (Map). No markets exist in the hills.

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

The occupation of the Koma hill-dwellers centres around farming, hunting and gathering.

Except for hunting, both men and women engage in cultivation, weeding and gathering. Women often have their own farms separate from their male counterparts. However, both cooperate at appropriate times in helping with each others' farms.

This has been made more easily possible by the three farming systems which the ecology favours - hill-top farming which favours multicropping of millet (maiwa), maize (Torrer)

and groundnuts; valley-farming, whose warmer temperatures favour cultivation of guinea corn and tobacco; and open-plain farming, which favours the cultivation of groundnuts.

ORGANISATION OF WORK

The nuclear family of a man, his wife/wives and adult children constitute the regular work force on a farm. While younger sons and daughters take care of the babies at home in the hills, the parents go to the valleys and plains to cultivate and tend their farm. The children at home also scare away birds and troublesome rodents from the domestic farms. There are no specialised chores of work which women are thought incapable of carrying out. Women weed, hoe, dig and harvest crops as men do. Men help to carry children on their backs with leather skins as women do. There is a high degree of cooperation and collaboration. Women brew, men weave and also cook.

Another source of labour is the organisation of work parties (SOL) based on reciprocity and equivalent returns. These are organised at the peak of the weeding seasons (July-September) when the domestic labour force becomes rather inadequate. Age-mates, friends and affines always constitute the core of work parties. The number of farm hands a man and his wife can muster depends on the number of such voluntary contracts they have entered into and honoured in the past, as well as on their general net of social

relations. The investment cost includes the provisions of meals cooked by women and wine provided by men.

During recesses from work, both men and women, husbands/wives sit in circles as they do in the markets, eating freely together, exchanging fumes of tobacco pipes and drinking from the same cup. Women are not usually segregated from men, whereas they are amongst the Higi and in most Islamised communities in the neighbouring lowlands, where women are kept in purdah. Nor is the Koma women's lot like that of their Gwari counterparts in the Niger State of Nigeria, who exist essentially as "donkeys" carrying loads for their husbands. In the latter society, only men till the land and harvest the crops. It is the duty of the husbands to provide loads while it is the duty of the wife to carry them¹. However, for carrying the loads, a certain portion of the yields goes to the wife as compensation for services rendered. From these, she buys essential requirements such as clothing for herself and her children.

However, the Koma field materials reveal a considerable degree of sharing, and cooperation in agricultural and most economic activities, between men and women. In fact, women have control over the granaries from where the daily supplies of food for the household are fetched.

¹Prime People, Vol.2 n° 41 March 11-17. Similarly, amongst the Ijo of the Niger Delta, it is the duty of the man to provide a fishing boat for the wife and thereafter the woman has a duty to fish for the upkeep of the husband and the family (Field Jan. (1988).

One cannot therefore talk of a strict division of labour in the agricultural sphere amongst the Koma people. However, it is only men who hunt. Hunting serves as a means of procurement of meat and protection for crops against the menace of monkeys, baboons and a variety of birds and rodents.

Both men and women gather forest products such as bananas, locust beans and canarium which is used for producing oil and used for body lubrication.

MARKETING

Markets do not exist in the hills but in the lowlands where the Koma trade with the Fulani, Bata, Chamba and other tribes. From them, the hill-dwellers procure scarce items of clothing which are used by men on ceremonial occasions. They also buy salt, beads enamel plates and agricultural implements such as hoes and cutlasses.

The Koma women usually bring their guinea corn, tobacco and millets down for sale. In turn, they use the proceeds to buy needed commodities. Large quantities of beer brewed by both men and women are carried in elongated baskets to the lowland markets for either sale or on-the-spot consumption.

Thus, the market is also a socio-spatial venue for interactions between distant hill and lowland friends, siblings and affines. The Koma hill-dwellers and their migrant lowland farmers sit in groups after the day's sales to drink, gossip

and exchange views. Males and females, bride and groom all sit down in circles to exchange pleasantries. The men in their textile dress and the women with their lubricated bodies and waist leaves feel apparently free and uninhibited in their interactions with one another. They show no signs of inferiority before their more elaborately-dressed Fulani, Chamba and Bata neighbours. The language of commerce between the Koma and other non-Koma groups such as the Verre is Hausa which the Koma hill dwellers are beginning to learn. However, the Verre, Koma and Chamba speak a related dialect (Momi), recently identified as part of the Verre Duru group of the Adamawa family of languages¹.

Amongst the hill-dwellers, a moral economy which involves sharing, reciprocity and direct exchanges between neighbours, affines and siblings prevails. Money in the modern sense is only used in transactions between the hills and the lowland.

MARRIAGE AND INHERITANCE

Marriage amongst the hill-dwelling Koma, as with their Verre lowlanders is endogamous and polygynous. Levirate marriage is also practised amongst the Koma. All these serve to promote their cultural and ethnic identities, which they cherish in the face of historical and present-day realities.

¹David ZEITLYN, a Cambridge Anthropologist working amongst the Mambilla revealed this information during the Colloquium.

It is estimated that, between the ages of 10 and 14, both sexes undergo puberty rituals which involve circumcision for boys and extraction of teeth for girls. These are prerequisites for betrothal and marriage. They are also visible signs of maturity. The ceremonies are controlled in groups and at village levels (usually after the harvest season, between the months of October and January) by a group of ritual functionaries called the **Kene-Mari**.

At their proclamation all families assemble their "ripe" candidates for the initiation. In the midst of dancing and drumming, a male candidate is called forward. He is made to stand before a select crowd that excludes women. He is made to use a metal sickle to hold his neck and head in an upright position. He is not expected to shiver or show signs of fear while the Priest takes hold of his penis and removes the outer skin. His male supporters and father are expected not to shake their bodies or legs. This is done in homeopathic identification with the circumcising candidate. The candidate usually helps himself to concoctions of local herbs and brew which are believed to act as local anaesthesia. Should he yell, he brings shame to his family and friends. Such a boy is unlikely to find a marriage partner in his locality. A candidate who goes through the test/circumcision neither shaking nor showing signs of fear is a pride to his family. He becomes a man in the social/virile sense, and can thenceforth wear the penis sheath made of grasses. Such a candidate is symbolically liberated from the mother who may not, except under the pain of death, see the son's genitals

from then on. He is thereafter also qualified to adorn himself with ceremonial clothes.

In a separate group, the girls are organised for extraction of one of their upper incisor teeth by ritual experts. In similar settings, the ritual test involves pain and the final triumph of a nubile candidate, who thenceforth decorates herself with beads and rubs her body with oil and camwood (field observation, 1986).

Thus, between the ages of about 14 and 17, nubile boys and girls are free to interact and make choices based on village stories and gossips of successes and failures in rite de passage involted in the puberty rituals. Brides and grooms are then free to engage themselves to marry, and make their conjugal intentions known to their parents by reciprocal token gifts (*damsa*).

Initial relationships are accepted by payment of bride service in the form of weeding in a prospective in-law's farm or garden plot.

Finally, the man pays bride wealth in the form of goats, chickens and some token cash of about two Naira (approximately two French Francs).

Residence is initially virilocal and after a year or two of rendering service to the groom's parents and preferably at the birth of a baby, a couple moves out to build their own huts and granaries. The brief period of virilocal residence is also to enable both partners to accumulate some capital to set up a new home. This period also serves as one of tutelage under the eyes of the parents-in-law. The woman learns domestic duties, how to nurture a family and the nuances of

the culture of the community. At their new abode, the woman is expected to send periodic meals to her parents -in-laws.

At the death of a husband, fixed property such as his huts and farmlands go to his eldest living brother who takes care of the estate. This brother, also takes his wives, and children born of this new union will continue to bear the name of the deceased kin. However, a woman is free to remarry any other person other than the deceased kin's brother. Children from such re-marriage belong to the new husband.

At a woman's death, the daughters inherit her livestock, her farms, domestic utensils such as artifacts for body decorations, beads, pigments and decorated hoes. Any forms of nut products are regarded as a woman's exclusive property, while bows and arrows belong to the first son of the deceased male.

LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

Koma society is an acephalous one. There is no single tribal head over the whole of the Koma groups, which are made up of over thirty hamlets dotted over the Alantika hills and the adjoining lowlands. Each hamlet, however, has a group of all-male ritual functionaries (Kpane) led by a Priest King (Kene Mari). The Kene-Mari-in-Council settles disputes between individuals and groups within hamlets and between them. Cases of homicide between neighbouring hamlets are settled by vengeance if compensation is not made in good time.

Disputes between men and women, husband and wife come under the adjudication of the Ken-Mari-in-Council. Elders are also generally respected in the society.

At the family level, the head of the family, who may be a living husband or a brother to the deceased, has authority over disputes. Ultimately life is regulated by Kene, the hamlet deity on whose behalf authority and secular powers are invoked.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The Koma people believe in the existence of a supreme being variously called Zum or Nu. These words are also used for the sun. The neighbouring Chamba also use the same word Su for the sun, as well as for Almighty God.

In order to get what man likes within the unalterable wheel of God's arrangements, the Koma recognise the powers of local deities such as Kene which can be appealed to for health, vitality and fertility. Each hamlet and household has her Kene shrine under the charge of male ritual functionaries, Kene-Mari, who is assisted by male prophets, Kpani.

The Koma say that Kene decreed from time immemorial that while women should only wear girdle of local leaves (arama), the men could put on loins of leather or local cotton (Bentin).

Even when items of textiles and modern clothes started being donated by missionaries and philanthropic organisations in recent times, they were kept as special and prized possessions,

whose adornment by men was only approved by the Chief Priest. Thus the relative scarcity of these items made them prestige/ceremonial possessions over which women had no access. This was further sanctioned by religion.

Nowadays, with the gradual opening-up of the Koma country by the present Nigerian administration, Koma men are much more receptive to wearing modern clothes at most times/occasions. Thus clothes are climbing down from the prestige sphere to the reach of almost everyone except women.

The belief still holds firmly that if women wear clothes, they would incur the wrath of the gods with visitation of either death or barrenness.

When the government authorities made it mandatory in some markets for people to wear clothes, the women would put cloth wrappers over the leaves only in the market, and remove them on their way back to the hills (field observation).

I will now give a brief summary of the forms of male and female body decoration and dress amongst the Koma, vis-a-vis their Chamba and Fulani neighbours. This should help in the analysis and explanation of the rationale behind these dichotomies in relationship to the available ethnographic materials already examined.

DRESS AND BODY DECORATIONS

The Koma people's mode of dressing is unique when compared to these of their lowland neighbours.

Novice boys and girls, before their puberty rites go almost nude with only small patches of leaves to hide the pubic and genital regions from public view. Their hair is left undecorated but cut with locally-fashioned metal blades at regular intervals.

Old Nigerian and Cameroonian coins, and talisman made from leather are often strung on the neck of children.

After the puberty rituals which confer nubile status on both sexes, the girls then begin to deck their waist with coloured beads of red, white and blue upon the local leaves which are changed daily.

The girls begin to lubricate their bodies with red camwood mixed with oil from the sheabutternut or canerium which gives them alluring appearances. According to the Koma, the extraction of girls' upper incisors also adds to their beauty and nubility. Mammary glands are also lubricated and fashioned by mothers to give them fresh, ripened and glittering appearances.

Young girls and women keep their hair shining by the application of brown alluvial clay mixed with the same oil giving the head dressing a Rastafarian appearance.

Decorated hoes are prestige and status symbols for women who have borne many children and have demonstrated economic well-being by their ability to feed the household from their numerous granaries. These non-utilitarian polished hoes are hung on the right shoulder as part of leisurely dress worn at such occasions as marriage ceremonies and drinking parties held at

various market places. The greater the degree of decorations and designs on the hoes, the greater the number of children and economic power the women are likely to have. Such women now enjoy the privileges of owning tobacco pipes just as their male counterparts do. During menopause, women are free to sit with men and exchange drinks and tobacco, even with men who are not their husbands. These groups of elderly women also carry the privilege of wearing labial rings on their lower lips.

Men, on the other hand, do not put on leaves but wear special waist pants sewn from either leather or cotton. Shirts and various combinations of traditional and western-styled dress are today worn by men alone. On festive occasions, Koma men put on the Hausa/Fulani type of flowing garments (Babariga) similar to those of their lowland neighbours.

The males wear penis sheaths, under their clothes/leather skin. A man is identified by his bow and arrow, a leather bag, a double-edged knife tucked on a waist belt and the smoking pipe.

On the other hand, the lowland neighbours of the Koma have been acculturated into the Islamic pattern of life with its accompanying mode of dressing. Men and women do not expose "sensitive" parts of their bodies. Any woman married under the Islamic tenets always covers her head and the greater part of the face. The men don hats on most ceremonial occasions but there are no prohibitions against leaving male hair

uncovered. Young Fulani girls decorate their hair, enlongating it with additional strands inherited from their mothers or matrikins.

On the whole, what in the lowlands are everyday forms of dress, assume prestige and ceremonial roles amongst the Koma hill-dwellers. However, most migrant Koma, except the females, are beginning to adopt their lowland neighbours style of dressing.

Thus, the Koma women stand out as unique symbols of Koma resistance to change before non-Koma and outsiders. Within the society itself the women exercise a remarkable degree of economic power in their access, control and deployment of resources. How then does one explain the differences in the mode of male/female body decorations in relationship to more or less egalitarian socio-economic relations between the sexes? It is to this complex question that we shall now turn.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Although we are not yet in a position to suggest a general theory of body decorations in terms of male/female relationships, we do nevertheless have relevant "partial", theories and can examine to what extent they apply to the Koma field situation. It is for this reason that this discussion began with citations from LEVI-STRAUSS, Victoria EBIN, STRATHERN and FARIS.

Men and women are both biological beings and social individuals and amongst their responses to external or internal stimuli, some are

wholly dependent upon their nature, others upon their social environment (L-S 1969:3). Furthermore, the human species could not survive if men and women could not recognize that they were both alike as members of one species and different as individuals of the opposite sex (LEACH 1982 : 87). Closely related to this taxonomic patterning is the basic distinction between "We" and "They" which the hill-dwelling people of Koma also make in relationship to their plain-dwelling neighbours who regard themselves as having "high" culture.

It has been observed for the Koma that first marriages are preferred between Koma of the same village as against marriages between Koma of different villages. Marriage is prohibited between Koma and non-Koma. Exchanges of goods and women in the hills are based upon the principles of reciprocity and presentations, whereas token money and Nigerian currencies enter into other transactions between Koma hill-dwellers and non-Koma plain-dwellers. All these are not unconnected with historical and present-day socio-political realities.

Only foot and horse paths exist between the semi-urban administrative settlements of Karlahi/Nassarawo in the plains at the bottom of the hills. The hills themselves are extremely difficult to reach. Thus, only relatively recently have the Koma hill-dwellers, forced by population pressure, begun to come down to farms on hired lands (which they claim were originally theirs) (Leo FROBENIUS 1913 : 669). Items of clothing and decorations have been extremely scarce to come

by for the hill-dwellers, who had remained in isolation in the face of the hostile relationships with their more opulent neighbours. The textile materials which are woven locally by men are inadequate for everyday use by everyone. Thus they have become male preserves which are used on ceremonial occasions.

However, in other major aspects of social and economic life, it is observed that no clear distinctions exist between male and female activities. In fact, the women tend to be dominant in the control of and access to productive resources and activities. This is unlike what one would find amongst the Islamised Fulani, Verre Hausa and Batta whose women own virtually no farms (GROVE 1983 : 69).

Amongst the Koma men and women, those who are not spouses sit down freely, chatting and exchanging drinks, tobacco pipes and even patting one another openly in a way which could be regarded as abominable amongst the non-Islamised Edos and Yorubas of Nigeria. Such free interactions between men and women are much more prohibited amongst the Islamised Fulani, Hausa and Batta. Koma women perform the same chores of work as their male counterparts and they have considerable access to and control over the products of their labour.

However, amongst the neighbouring Verre it has been observed that a woman has more ritual importance than her Koma counterpart but has very limited economic power¹. FARIS has

¹Personal Communication 8/11/87 with Rev. Father (Dr.)

tried to relate aesthetic systems such as the body decorations of the Nuba to the mode of production of the society. Significant social relations basically stem from productive activities within the society (FARIS 1978 : 319). Art in classless societies celebrates human productive activity and thus make it the basis of consequent universal creativity. FARIS thus argues that in situations where producers are alienated in some way from full control over the products of their activity or from full control of their labour power, such circumstances must be justified, sanctified and legitimized by mystification or religion. In as much as social relations are basically exploitative, symbols of them and peoples ideas about them must be mystified (ibid.).

The above assertion does not seem to apply to the Koma, whose women are not alienated from full control of their products and labour power. Yet the form of women's dress is given ideological and religious rationalization on the basis of God's (Kene) decree. How does one relate egalitarian social relations on the ground to "inegalitarian" modes of dressing?

This is where I am fascinated by the structuralism of LEVI-STRAUSS and of his intellectual interpreter to the British, Sir Edmund

Adrian Edward C.S.S.P. former Head of Ethnography, Federal Department of Antiquities (now National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria). This was also observed personally during subsequent field researches amongst the lowland Verre neighbours of the Koma.

LEACH. Both have been misunderstood by contemporary feminists and chauvinist scholars alike.

LEVI-STRAUSS nature/culture and LEACH's humanity/animality categories are meant to be working paradigms which can be applied to both primitive and modern systems of classification.

This model can be further localised into the "we"/"they", man/woman (Mari/Maki), "house"/"Forest" (Gbai/Tor) dualist categories which exist clearly in Koma thought, vision and practices (contrast STRATHERN's "No nature, No culture" proposition).

For instance, the Koma distinguish between his/her hill-dwelling colleagues and those of the lowlands; between the built-up space (houses/huts) and the wild areas where the monkeys, baboons and rodents live. They distinguish between young boys/girls; men and women as revealed in their language and initiation/puberty rituals and practices. The distinction in body decoration between male and female is an overt expression of these dichotomies/taxonomies. They are not oppressive categories as feminists would want us to believe; they are binary codes aimed at ordering the world and placing species within it.

At one level of abstraction, the distinction in body decoration serves to establish the transfer from one status to the other, as we find amongst the Cudaveo as well as the hill-dwelling Koma. In Koma, the idea of effeminacy, which body-painting, hair-doing, hoe-carrying and bead-wearing signify, can at various times and spaces serve as "sign makers" of allurements and

indicators of status for individual interests and groups within Koma society. Body decorations celebrate the healthy/nubile body and advertise it to the world outside. Similar patterns are observed amongst the Nuba of The Sudan.

At another level of interpretation, we should remember the historical/economic factors which have made items of clothes/textiles so scarce that their control and distribution have become restricted to as small class of men, the Priests, who dictate their use and distribution. Over time, this practice/tradition has become imbued with religious idioms and ideology. If one were to follow FARIS' argument, it is the women who, as controllers of productive activities/resources, should have had greater access to such scarce commodities as textiles. I think what is crucial here is the communal ideology and superstructure which have made the women accept faithfully the *status quo* to the extent of rejecting modern items of dressing and defying government legislation against nudity. Indeed, amongst the Verre, where women have ritual power but limited economic power, they wear textiles similar to those worn by their male counterparts. They have also been influenced by the Islamic ideology which places a high premium on enrobement of the body. In the Koma country, clothes/leaves, body-painting/penis sheaths have been adopted as modes of primitive classification between male/female. These choices have been dictated by the elements of cultural and natural repertoire available to the hill-dwellers.

Groups in isolation always tend to have or retain unique symbols by which they identify themselves (ROYCE 1982 : 148). Thus for a symbol to be effective, it must have meaning for both the people who display it and the people to whom it is displayed. The most powerful symbols are those that have some universal implication or those that have been forged in the interaction between groups (Ibid.).

More than anything else, the body (eg. skin colour, body shape, hair) is a badge of identity that instantly distinguishes between "we" and "they" (following Victoria EBIN). Thus the Higgs, Margis and Kilbas of the Adamawa mountains and the Angas of the central Jos Plateau have similar ways of distinguishing between men and women, as well as between their own people and their lowland neighbours. These distinctions could arise first from historical, topographic and economic circumstances but later become rallying symbols for social action or even phantasy such as LEVI-STRAUSS postulates for the Bororo in South Brazil.

Isolation, endogamy and inbreeding tend to be associated with one another. Thus the Koma hill-dwellers tend to marry within their group rather than marry their Verre, Fulani and Hausa lowland neighbours. Just as goods are exchanged on a reciprocal basis in the hills, so marriages ties have become factors for the promotion of alliances, inter- and intra-village relations and an overall Koma identity.

Thus women have become the cultural ambassadors of the Koma to the non-Koma. They go to the lowland markets to trade their wares

and buy needed items. What is more, the Koma language is not restrictive enough to establish exclusive identity, since it is understood by non-Koma such as the Verre and Chamba. Their unique modes of dress in this context have become dominant symbols of Koma identity. The lowland markets are the most ideal social spaces for meeting and interacting with far-flung and nearby hill-dwellers. Like tribal marks, Koma modes of dressing and body decoration become means of recognising one another in the multi-ethnic setting of the market.

Body decorations are non-verbal means of first identifying a Koma from a non-Koma. Language then verbalises this and other relationships in a conviviality which the lowland markets offer.

The women's solid identification with communal ideology is a demonstration of faith in their community and cosmos, which involves loyalty to their gods and the cause for which they stand. They do not view their world and mode of dressing as results of male chauvinism or the perversion of history and culture. Rather, Koma women are as conscious as their male counterparts of their deprivation arising from historical and topographic circumstances. The women are proud to be identified with the men, whose bows, arrows and knives are symbolic of the historical past and the realities of the present. The tobacco pipe which both sexes freely share represents a flow of positive relations between them; it reflects more of egalitarianism than dominance.

Body decorations in Koma society cannot simply be explained in terms of simple male/female or nature/culture categories. One could reassert COHEN's position which states that in both simple and complex societies, there are extensive patterns of normative non-rational, non-utilitarian behaviour which play crucial roles in the distribution of power, expressed through symbols which evoke sentiments and impel men/women to action (COHEN 1974).

The arts associated with the Koma mode of body decoration have more of aesthetic, political and religious significance than economic ones. The preponderance of leaves, beads and oil as elements in female decoration as opposed to men's leather skins, bows and arrows is a function of cosmology, history, ideology and the environment which manifests itself at appropriate contexts and times within Koma systems of classification, as well as within the basic distinction which all cultures make between man as a category as opposed to woman.

THE FEMINIST ISSUE AND THE KOMA SITUATION

Some scholars have, however, argued that the apparent universality of male dominance, at least in the public and political domains, should be the main issue in the study of the anthropology of women (KESSEING 1935 : 598).

It is not the belief that social groups tend to define themselves in "we" and "they" categories that the feminists objects to (BROWN and

JORDANOVA 1981). What they dislike is the way in which the nature/culture dichotomy has been associated with that of women/men in anthropological theory (STRATHERN 1980). But this association is rooted in western philosophy and history, which are quite different from those of such traditional societies as the Koma where the basic categories nevertheless exist. It is the misapplication of the basic concepts that has created the confusion.

Indeed, the reason for assuming in Africa that women have always been occupied in cooking and caring for children is that during the Colonial period, this was the ideal their Europeans brought with them (Lucy MAIR 1984 : 67). Europeans were quite aware that women worked in the field, sometimes more than men, but they disapproved of African men who made their wives work.

In Muslim and Hindu societies, men are proud to put their wives in seclusion. Europeans living among such societies saw very little of village life. In the cities, Europeans mainly had close contact with the well-to-do who could attain the ideal of female seclusion. This was widely assumed as a universal phenomenon (Ibid. : 68).

The Koma field material, so far available, points to complementarity between male and female in social and economic spheres. The peculiar historical and topographic circumstances that have resulted in their isolation in the hills must have encouraged the Koma as a people to relate more on egalitarian principles to one another than on hierarchical ones. In fact, until recently both the male and female population

wore no clothes. The robes now used mostly for ceremonial occasions by men were worn only after consultation with ritual/secular functionaries (Kenemari).

The Western feminist argument that the act of female body beautification/adornments tends to turn the person into an object and sexual desire does not apply to the Koma as revealed in the pattern of social relations and interactions. Symbolically, the Koma seem to say that people wear clothes just to prop up a false personality that was not there in the first place.

As no strict division of labour exists along gender lines in Koma society, so are body decoration/treatment, not related to the tasks men and women do. Body treatment is conceived less in terms of male dominance than in terms of communal ideology and values.

If one considers the complex nature of most traditional African societies, where the political, economic and religious spheres of life are intertwined, the Western feminist/ anthropologists' attempt to compartmentalise roles in such societies as Koma into neatly-defined categories must be done with caution. There is a sense in which one can argue that the apparent exclusion of females from ritual roles is a symbolic recognition of their potency (Mary DOUGLAS 1966). This could also have political implications.

Empirically speaking, female control of economic/productive resources implies influence, however covert, in all other domains of life. Millet, food, beer, and cattle form the "food" of the gods, and are cultivated and reared by women and men

together. In fact, the male ritual-secular functionaries in Koma society are more in confinement than the women are. They do not appear in such public places as the lowlands market as the women do. Their huts and shrines are the only structures in the hills that are enclosed in round fences, away from public viewglare. No doubt, this is to promote elements of secrecy and sanctity, which such offices in both Western and non-Western societies require for social control.

It has been observed that in Koma, women share with males the models of their entire society and identify with one another as a group vis-a-vis other goups. In a sense, this communal ideology has political implications in which the females are the dominant symbols of Koma exclusiveness and identity as prescribed by endogamy and their by unique mode of body decoration. Thus, Koma women and men participate both in the public and private domains of life. It is only when women's and men's world views differ that sex differences need be invoked. (MATHIEU 1978 : 55-65).

It would therefore be more helpful to view men and women in Koma society as mediators between nature and culture, and to regard the distinctive mode of body decoration/dress as a means of differentiation, not discrimination between sexes.

This is more in accord with LEVI-STRAUSS, who rightly says that both men/women are both biological beings and social individuals... (1969 : 3). One can rephrase the structuralist argument as

Mac CORMACK does in her analysis of LEVI-STRAUSS by saying that both men and women undergo social transformation, such as culturising their natural sexuality through marriage and other puberty rituals, which could, one assumes, include forms of body decoration.

CONCLUSION

The complex nature of such traditional social systems as operated by the hill-dwelling Koma, the complementarity of relationships between male and female, the economic power of women, the organisation of work and the existence of a common world view make it rather difficult to explain differences in body decorations between male and female solely in terms of male dominance.

It has therefore been argued that body arts amongst the Koma owe much to the peculiar historical, topographic, economic and ideological factors which have contributed to the shared experiences and reactions of the hill-dwellers over time in opposition to their lowland neighbours.

Women, as agents of production and reproduction have thus become appropriate bannars for the retention of Koma identity, particularly since their language is not sufficiently restrictive to provide such an identity. Female body arts have thus become non-verbal signals for immediate recognition of fellow Koma in the multi-ethnic settings of the lowland markets where far-flung peoples meet and "signs" are made through body language.

It is within this context that the persistence of a leaf-wearing culture amongst Koma women and the principles of endogamy take on meaning.

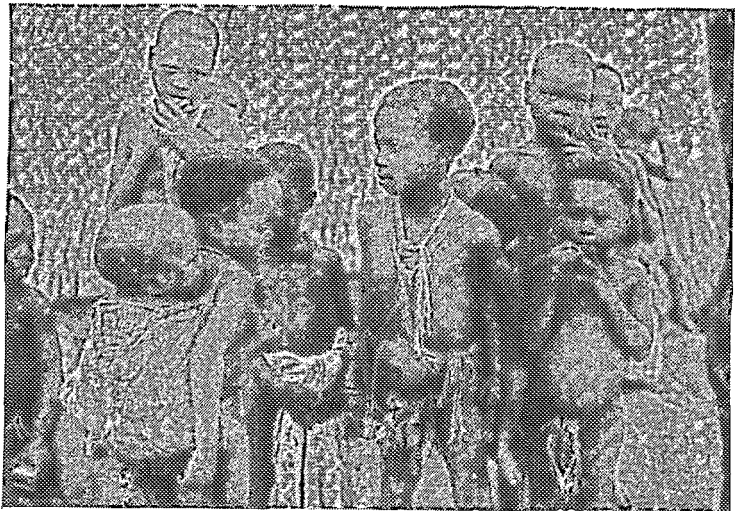
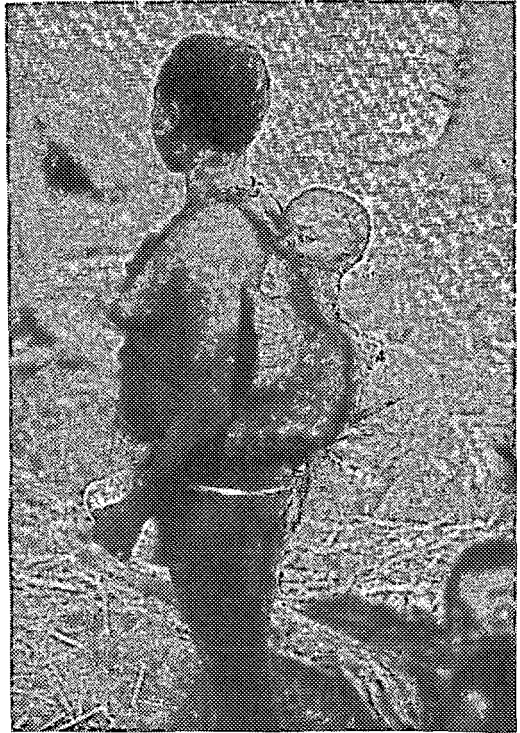
At one level of abstraction, differences in body decorations between sexes are social and status markers; they serve as ways of ordering the world and placing species within them - common practises in all human societies.

At another level, body decorations are adopted as appropriate symbols of ethnic identity and preservation; they provide a means of distinguishing between "We" and "They", between hill dwellers and lowlanders, between Koma and non-Koma. Body decorations will naturally vary from culture, to culture depending on a number of historical and philosophical variables.

It is thus argued that the Western feminist theories do not seem to apply strictly to the Koma field situation, since the history and philosophy of Western and traditional societies differ remarkably. Yet it would be misleading to say that the concepts of nature/culture do not exist in such a traditional society as the Koma, where internal classifications are made along these lines.

The Nature/Culture dualities do not however, carry oppressive/feminist meanings as they do in the West. Amongst the Koma, nature and culture complement each other just as men and women do in most spheres of social life.

Photos 3-4



Joseph EBOREIME

"Body decorations, male-female relations and group identity amongst the hill dwelling koma people of Nigeria"

Abstract

It is argued that historical and topographic factors have helped to generate a feeling of ethnic exclusiveness among the hill-dwelling Koma of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderlands. The differences between male and female body decorations are shown to be of greater significance within this context than in the feminist ideologies of the West.

Résumé

L'auteur avance la thèse que des facteurs historiques et topographiques ont contribué à produire un sentiment de spécificité ethnique parmi les Koma, habitants des collines situées sur la frontière entre le Nigéria et le Cameroun. La différence des parures et des vêtements entre les hommes et les femmes ont davantage de signification dans ce contexte que dans celui de l'idéologie féministe occidentale.

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