

The Changing Face of the Ghanaian Culture: A Case of Earring in Men

P. A. Fening

Department of Industrial Art KNUST, Kumasi

Abstract

Parents, religious leaders, people in authority and the Ghanaian society are wondering why the emerging trends of earring in men. A survey was conducted in the Kumasi Metropolis using structured questionnaires to solicit the view of society on the issue. Results obtained indicated that the wearing of ear ring by men in Ghana was concentrated among the age group of 20 -30 years, most (76%) of who were unmarried. A number of reasons accounted for the wearing of ear ring with fashion emerging as the most important. Those who wear earring are of the view that if else where the practice is acceptable they see no problem copying and doing that in their own cultural setting too. There was varied response from the women who were interviewed concerning their acceptability of men who wear ear ring as their husbands. While majority (68%) detested men who wear earring, others were indifferent. The elderly were of the view that the desire to be like Westerners has suddenly made the youth promiscuous; doing things that were never imaginable several years ago.

Keywords: Culture; Fashion; Ghana; Jewellery; Modernization; Society.

1. Introduction

Culture, is the arts, customs, habits, beliefs, values, behaviour and material appreciation that constitutes a people's way of life" (Standage, 2005). Baffoe (2005) expressed culture as the totality of the way of life of a group of people that has been developed, shaped and practiced over the years. The development of these cultural norms and practices are shaped by the environment and the needs of the people. Culture is never static. It is dynamic, it is a continuous process of change but in spite of the change, culture continues to give a community a sense of identity, dignity, continuity, security and binds society together. The African society today is challenged from what is called cultural cringe, which is the belief that one's own country occupies a subordinate cultural place on the periphery, and that intellectual standards are set and innovations occur elsewhere. As a result of this mind-set, people who hold this belief are inclined to devalue their own cultural, academic and artistic life, and then venerate the seemingly decorated "superior" culture.

For example in Ghana today, the outfits that most people wear are western in style, but that does not make the society modern. People are moving away from the Ghanaian cultural values, life styles and pattern and the irony of the situation is the condemnation of our own great culture, patterns and resources.

No society can exist without a culture. Each culture carries its values, which influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of her members. Ghanaians emphasize communal values such as family, respect for the elderly, honouring traditional rulers, and the importance of dignity and proper social conduct. Individual conduct is seen as having impact on an entire family, social group and community; therefore, everyone is expected to be respectful, dignified and observant in public settings, and in most every aspect of life.

Ghanaians place great emphasis on politeness, hospitality, and formality. Upon meeting, acquaintances must shake hands and ask about each other's health and families. Visitors to a house must greet and shake hands with each family member. They are then seated and greeted in turn by all present. Hosts must normally provide their guests with something to eat and drink, even if the visit does not occur at a mealtime. If a person is returning from or undertaking a long journey, a libation to the ancestors is usually poured. If someone is eating, he or she must invite an unexpected visitor to join him or her. Normally, an invitation to eat cannot be refused (Berry, 1994).

Friends of the same age and gender hold hands while walking. Great respect is attached to age and social status. A younger person addresses a senior as father or mother and must show appropriate deference. It is rude to offer or take an object or wave with the left hand. It is also rude to stare or point at people in public (Berry, 1994).

The Ghanaian society has in recent times expressed worry over what they termed “the rapid decaying” of these traditions and cultural values especially on the part of the youth. This issue was the focus of discussion during the inauguration of the Central Regional Performers of Traditional Arts Union of Ghana (PETRAUGA), on April 2014. Other studies have also observed that the desire to be like Westerners by the youth in Africa has suddenly made them promiscuous; doing things that were never imaginable several years ago (Irele, 2010). There is need, therefore, for the flogging of the negative impact of Western civilisation and culture on Africa in all fora; so that society can begin to see the need to reappraise the principles of cultural revival. Cultural isolationism is not possible in the context of globalisation. Cultural ideas and values grow and flow across borders unimpeded, but that should not make us lose sight of our traditional cultural values. The main objective of this paper was therefore to solicit the view of society on the issue of wearing of earring by Ghanaian men.

1.1 Globalization and African Culture

Globalization is defined as a process of linking the regions and/or nations of the world which is facilitated by information flow (communication) inducing changes in the pre-existing socio-cultural, political, economic etc., structure and systems of nations and peoples Nsibambi (2001). Globalization may also be defined as the spread of worldwide practices, relations, consciousness, and organization of social life etc that transforms people around the world with some transformation being dramatic (Ritzer, 2008). This is a cultural transformation that also affects cultural identity of people that are being transformed.

Africa's contact with the rest of the world started through trade, including the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This was the period when western merchants bought from African slave traders Africa's most valuable resources (able-bodied men, women and children). The second was the era of colonialism, when Europeans at a conference in Berlin in 1884 divided up Africa among themselves and instituted direct control and rule over African countries. This division was done without regard to ethnic, cultural, linguistic and other considerations. The next stage of Africa interaction with the world particularly Europe was during the era of independence from colonial rule. Western norms and practices have therefore transported across the globe and gradually becoming the acceptable way of behaviour. In view of this, the rich and dynamic African culture has been diluted.

Globalization has its own set of cultural attendants which exercise a profound influence on the life of peoples everywhere (Guillen, 2001). Actually, there are only a few scholars who accept that a global culture is in the making. A “culture ideology of consumerism” driven by symbols, images, and anaesthetic of the lifestyles and self-image-has spread throughout the world and is having some momentous effects including standardization of tastes and desires, (Guillen, 2001, Sklair. 1991).

1.2 History of Ear Jewellery

Ear piercing is one of the oldest known forms of body modification, with artistic and written references from cultures around the world dating back to early history. Early evidence of earrings worn by men can be seen

in archaeological evidence from Persepolis in ancient Persia. The carved images of soldiers of the Persian Empire, displayed on some of the surviving walls of the palace, show them wearing an earring. Howard Carter writes in his description of Tutankhamen's tomb that the Pharaoh's earlobes were perforated, but no earrings were inside the wrappings, although the tomb contained some. The burial mask's ears were perforated as well, but the holes were covered with golden discs. That implies that at the time, earrings were only worn in Egypt by children, much like in Egypt of Howard's times (Demello, 2007).

Earrings became fashionable among courtiers and gentlemen in the 1590s during the English Renaissance. A document published in 1577 by clergyman William Harrison, indicated that some lusty courtiers and gentlemen of courage do wear either rings of gold, stones or pearls in their ears (Demello, 2007). Among sailors, a pierced earlobe was a symbol that the wearer had sailed around the world or had crossed the equator (Tarnya, 2006). In addition, it is commonly held that a gold earring was worn by sailors in payment for a proper burial in the event that they might drown at sea. Should their bodies have been washed up on shore, it was hoped that the earring would serve as payment for "a proper Christian burial". Regardless of this expression, the practice predates Christianity and can be traced back as far as ancient Greece where the gold paid the ferryman, Charon, to provide passage across the river Styx to Hades.

Earrings were emblematic of poets during the 1660s (Sherrow, 2001). The practice of wearing earrings was a tradition for Ainu men and women, but the Government of Meiji Japan forbade Ainu men to wear earrings in the late-19th century (Ito, Masami 2008). Earrings were also commonplace among nomadic Turkic tribes. In the late 1960s, ear piercing began to make inroads among men through the hippie and gay communities, although they had been popular among sailors for decades (or longer). Modern body modification has taken on a more literal sense of vanity. In the late 1960s and early 70s, hippies and homosexuals adopted the wearing of earrings and the taboo quickly turned into a fad, catching on in the celebrity community, with punk rock bands and athletes beginning to pierce their ears as well. In the late 1970s, amateur piercings, sometimes with safety pins and/or multiple piercings, became popular in the punk rock community. By the 1980s, the trend for male popular music performers to have pierced ears helped establish a fashion trend for men. This was later adopted by many professional athletes. British men started piercing both ears in the 1980s; George Michael of Wham! was a prominent example. The heavily jewelled Mr. T was an early example of an American celebrity wearing earrings in both ears, although this trend did not become popular with mainstream American men until the 1990s.

1.3 Types of Earring

The first types of earrings worn by men were typically made from carved wood, stone and ivory. Primitive Indian tribes often wore jewellery in their ears that resembled hooks or large bars with a sharp end. The earliest American earrings, worn by sailors, were often made of sterling silver and gold, and were shaped like hoops or studs. Today, there are a number of different types of earrings for men, ranging from classic studs and hoops to more elaborate forms of ear and facial modification. Gaged earrings, which create large holes, and the piercing of other parts of the ear, have grown in popularity in the last decade. Flesh tunnels and plugs are the most popular of the gaged earrings and require a large-gauge needle and subsequent stretching to create. Flesh tunnels allow you to see through the ear, while plugs are similar in width, but have solid jewellery plugging the hole. Modern and popular ear piercing techniques include, but are not limited to, the upper cartilage, tragus and the conch piercing.

1.4 Potential Spread of Earring in Men

Physical appearance has historically been attributed as a value to women, whilst men have been valued for other aspects of their lives such as work and intelligence (Calado, 2011). Male body image disorders have been invisible and apparently non-existent until recently as they would have challenged sociocultural preconceptions

regarding gender roles (Spitzer et al. 1999). However, since the beginning of the present century this scenario has changed with increasing pressure on men to conform to ideal body images as well. The stereotypes of mass media for males have been revised from heroes and male celebrities to muscular athletes and actors. Television and magazines now offer new categories that describe the ideal physical appearances men should aspire to and which are associated with certain lifestyles. All these categories have in common the imitation of messages linked to the association of celebrities, their physical appearance and success. The most famous representative is perhaps the footballer David Beckham. In fact, socialising agents and other actors realise that they have tapped into a new market, that these new models are accepted and imitated as ideal images (Farquhar and Wasylkiw, 2007; Leit et al., 2001; McCreary and Sasse, 2000; Spitzer et al. 1999. As in the case of women, men are now faced with ideal stereotypes based solely on their physical appearance but which promise success and wider social acceptance if obtained.

While male ear piercings have been around for centuries, they did not reach the mainstream until the late 80s and early 90s. In 1982, Lou Gossett Jr., wore a diamond earring when he stepped on stage to accept his Academy Award for the movie "An Officer and a Gentleman." Since then, there has been a strict following in the celebrity community, with stars like George Michael, Will Smith and David Beckham donning pierced ears. The popularity of ear piercing for men will only grow as the world begins to see it as an acceptable form of expression for both casual and formal affairs. With the advancements in the safety of body modification, coupled with the increased popularity and increased public tolerance, the male earring revolution has only just begun, expanding into a new arena of body modification that extends far beyond a small and delicate hole in the ear.

The exact period to which the trend, fashion or tradition of ear piercing in men began in Ghana is unknown. Unlike for example the Hindu practice in India where the practice of piercing is done on male when they attain the age of three or five, there is no such a practice in any known Ghanaian culture. What then could probably be responsible for this somewhat drastic change in culture? Could western lifestyle and the import of fashion be a trigger? Is it for fun or as a form of advertising ones professional character? These questions among others necessitated this investigation into why some men in Ghana are wearing earring contrary to their culture.

2. Methodology

2.1 The Study Area

The study was conducted within the Kumasi metropolis. The Kumasi metropolis was founded in the 1680's by King Osei Tutu I to serve as the capital of the Asante State (Fynn, 1971). Given its strategic location and political dominance, Kumasi as a matter of course, developed into a major commercial centre with all major trade routes converging on it (Dickson, 1969). However, it came under the influence of the British rule in 1890 (Adu Boahen, 1965). With time the city began to expand and grow thereby making it second only to Accra the capital city of Ghana in terms of land area, population size, social life and economic activity.

Kumasi is approximately 480 km north of the Equator and 160 km north of the Gulf of Guinea. It is between latitude 6.350 - 6.400 and longitude 1.300 - 1.350, an elevation which ranges between 250 - 300 metres above sea level with an area of about 254 square kilometres. The unique centrality of the city as a traversing point from all parts of the country makes it a special place for many to migrate to. The city is a rapidly growing one with an annual growth rate of 5.47 per cent (Regional Statistical Office, Kumasi). It encompasses about 90 suburbs, many of which were absorbed into it as a result of the process of growth and physical expansion. The 2000 Population Census kept the population at 1,170,270. Culture as the totality of the way of life evolved by a people through experience and a reflection in an attempt to fashion a harmonious

co-existence with the environment has made the city of Kumasi the citadel of Ghana's rich cultural heritage. Although the Kumasi metropolis is Asante dominated, almost all the other ethnic groups in Ghana are represented.

2.2 Data Collection

This study is an empirical qualitative one. The target population was the general public in the Kumasi metropolis. However a simple random sampling technique was adopted to select 200 males and 100 females. Fifty per cent (50%) of the male population were those who wear earrings. In addition some religious opinion leaders and traditional rulers were also interviewed. The main instrument adopted for the collection of data was a structured Questionnaire. The questionnaire was pilot tested on 50 respondents and it yielded a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.83. This coefficient signified high internal consistency and reliability (Pallant, 2001). The data collection exercise was done between July and August 2014. Ten (10) enumerators were appointed, trained for the exercise and provided with the questionnaires. The questionnaires were orally administered to respondents using the local language where necessary to ensure more accurate information gathering. The survey sought information on age, educational background, profession, marital status, residence status, factors that influence wearing of earring by men, societal acceptance, cultural values and implications of wearing of earring by men and the perception by women. Data analyses were both qualitative and quantitative. Percentages and ratios were calculated, and tables and figures constructed and drawn respectively.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Men Who Wear Earrings

3.1.1 Age

The profile of respondents who wear earring as shown in Figure 1 indicates that majority (68%) came from the age group 20 -30 years. This represents the youthful age group who are active in every sphere of life, particularly fashion. There was a very small segment of the middle age group (42 -52 years) representing 12 % of the sampled population who wear earrings. The fact that none of the respondents sampled was above the age of 55 implies that wearing of earring among men in Ghana is an activity that is prevalent among the youth. This observation is in variance to what is normally observed in other cultures such as the Hindu practices where children and the elderly are found wearing earrings. Halliwell and Dittmar (2003) in their study of a male sample reported significant differences regarding ages. Younger males, who were more effected by sociocultural body image pressures, exhibited behaviours aimed at changing parts of their bodies they were dissatisfied with.

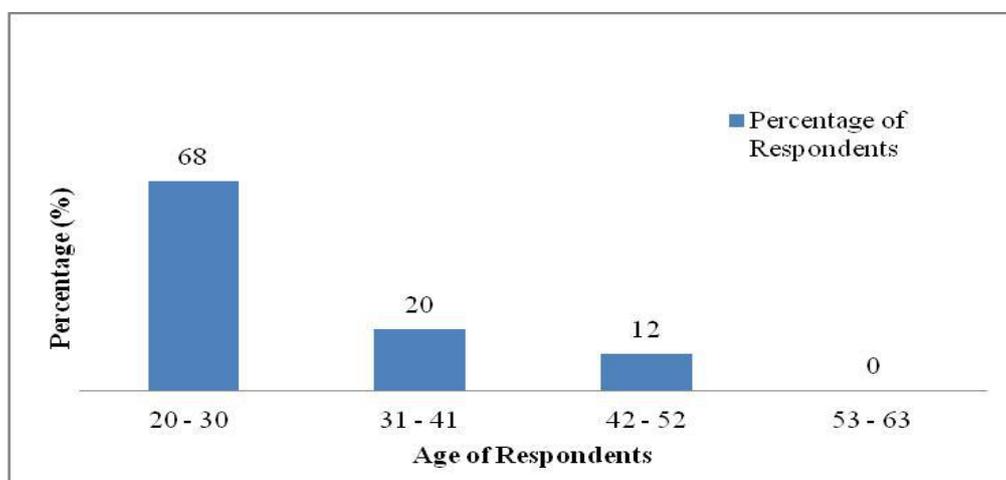


Fig. 1. Age of Men who wear earrings

3.1.2 Educational Background

Education has always been looked upon as a means for improving the socio-economic and cultural values of individuals in a society. The most striking revelation of this study was that all the respondents had some form of formal education. This is not surprising because the 2010 population census classified about 67% of the total population of Ghanaians as being literate (GSS, 2010). Interestingly 10% of the sampled population were students at tertiary institutions. This implies that the wearing of ear ring had no bearing on someone's educational background. The greater percentage of the respondents (72%) was people who had attained secondary education.

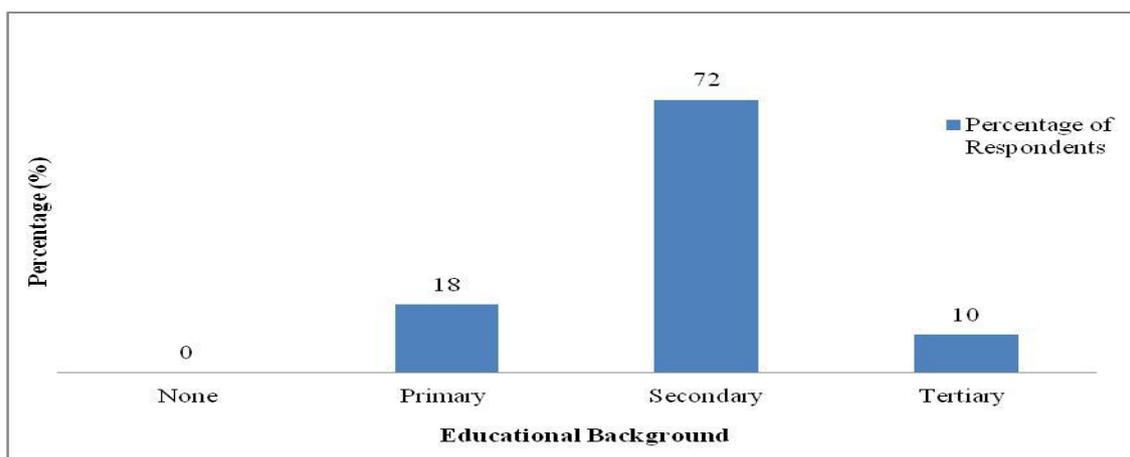


Fig. 2. Educational background of Men who wear earrings

3.1.3 Profession

The survey revealed that the respondents had varied occupation. Some were students (10%), others were self-employed (48%), sportsmen (12%), artistes (26%), pressmen (2%). The results showed that none of the respondents worked in the formal sector. This may probably be due to the work ethics of the formal sector.

3.1.4 Marital Status

It is unclear whether there is any relationship between marriage and wearing of earring in men. This is because it was observed that the majority (72%) of the respondents were unmarried. This is however unexpected and can be explained by the fact that most males in Ghana usually marry at or after the age of 30 years. The conception of the elderly interviewed is that men who wear earrings are suspected to be homosexuals. Though there might be no aorta of truth in this assertion, the elderly believe that could also influence the marriage pattern observed.

3.1.5 Ethnicity

No specific trend was observed in the wearing of earring by men in relation to ethnicity. Since the study was conducted in an Akan dominated population one would have expected that to manifest in the results obtained but that was to the contrary. The practice therefore cut across all cultures and traditions.

3.2 Reasons for Wearing Earring

Clothes and appearance are the most powerful nonverbal communicators not only of our socioeconomic status, but also of our moral values. We are what we wear. This means that the outward appearance is an important index of a person's character.

Body image research has argued that body gender stereotypes change from one culture to another and over time. Thus, ideal beauty would be different for every culture as every culture establishes standards that are adopted by varying expressions according to the historic period of the society (Frith et al., 2006). These beauty standards generate anomalous concerns and behaviours linked to body image and directed at obtaining these

ideals. However, because of globalising dynamics and global access to Western socialising agents' messages, there appears to be an increasing trend in ideal body image homogenisation regarding gender.

The results obtained for reasons accounting for the wearing of earrings by the respondents indicated that a sizeable number (52%) of the sampled population wear earrings as a fashion trend (Figure 3).

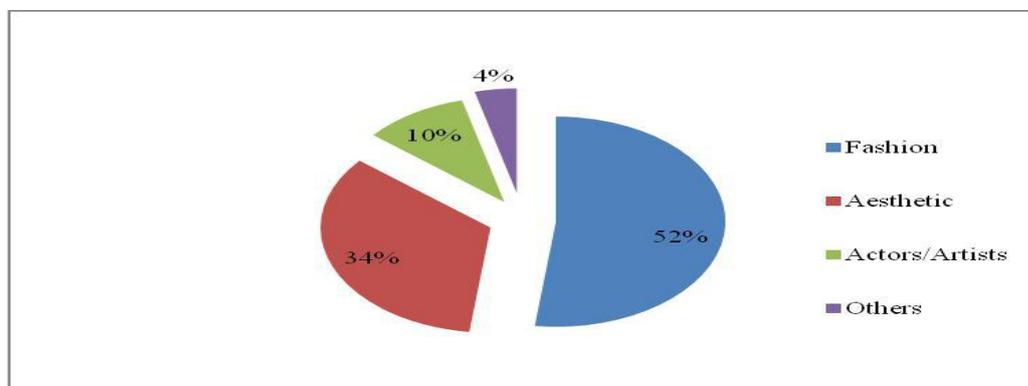


Fig. 3. Reasons for wearing earrings

Studies have shown that reading fashion magazines, exposure to television music videos and access to specific content through internet or social network websites, such as Facebook or Twitter (Cusumano and Thompson, 1997; Hatoum and Belle, 2004; Hogan and Strasburger, 2008), were associated with fashion amongst adolescents due to reiterative exposure to idealised beauty images and, in turn, triggered the desire for particular body adornment including the wearing of earring among men. Images that are represented by the media tend to transmit and reinforce dominant cultural ideologies as well as reject representations that question these stereotypes. Calado (2011) shows that these stereotyped body messages generate discrimination dynamics regarding gender roles and convey false ideas of reaching this ideal through processes of body transformation and of social success associated with specific body images, as well as possibly trigger unhealthy behaviours. The association between a certain type of personality traits and success is also reinforced by the mass media through the portrayal and glorification of celebrities.

However, the majority of society is exposed to reinforcing messages by the mass media that may cause body image dissatisfaction and does not develop unhealthy attitudes and/or behaviours. The question, therefore, would be to ask what psychological processes are triggered in a person by which he or she becomes more vulnerable to the group of beliefs, values and attitudes received by socialising agents.

Plain aesthetic value was cited as the second most important reasons for the wearing of earring by the respondents (32%). For the actors and artistes earring is worn so that they could fit into their respective professional roles and that accounted for 10%.

The number of years by which respondents have been wearing earring varied between 2 and 12 years with the majority having worn it for over 5 years. It can thus be deduced that the ascendancy of the culture began in the late 1990s or early 2000. During the survey it was interesting to examine the link between the residence statuses of the respondents. Analysis of the results showed that 24% of the sampled population have been to abroad (Holland ,Italy, London, USA), where all styles and fashion are permissible (Haralabos and Holborn, 2008).

Also staying abroad usually changes the work culture and life style of people and that probably could be responsible for this observation.

Asked whether those who wear earrings have had any negative comments from society, majority were quick to say yes. Some of these negative comments include verbal insults, disgusted looks, muttered comments, and job discrimination.

3.3 Perception of Women and Men Who Do Not Wear Earring

Table 1 provides the age composition of women and men who were interviewed.

Age	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
				%	
20 - 30	18	28	46	39.13	60.87
31 - 41	54	48	102	52.94	47.06
51 - 61	23	18	41	56.1	43.9
71 - 81	5	6	11	45.45	54.55

The table showed that the largest number were in the 31-41 years age group. This represents the active and working age group of the population most of who are married (Ware, 1983). This age group also represent those who have the tendency to be influenced by global culture change and way of life. The age group between 71 -81 was the smallest segment of the population sampled. This is because the group represents those who are no more in active service and usually at home. Similar to the results obtained on the educational level for those who wear earrings, it was observed that the minimum educational level of these two categories of the strata of the study was secondary education. The sampled population were both public and private sector employers with the majority (58%) being private sector workers. When asked whether any of their male family members/friends/colleagues wear earrings, 96% responded no. Both the women and men interviewed indicated that the male age group between 15 – 30 are those who usually put on earrings which, favourably agrees with the results obtained in the survey of men who put on earrings. The majority of the women interviewed indicated that the putting on of earring by men did not in any way attract them. Rather they considered such men as rascals, gays or irresponsible. To them the wearing of earring is not masculine. They agreed that cultures do change, however changes such as wearing of earring in men are not right emphasizing the fact that the wearing of earring is traditionally a feminine thing in Ghana. All the strata of population interviewed indicated that the wearing of earring in men is not a cultural practice in Ghana and did not also know of any tribe in Ghana that practices the wearing of earring in men.

4. Conclusion

The central point of this paper was to examine whether it is appropriate culturally for Ghanaian males to wear an earring. Results obtained have indicated that the wearing of earring among Ghanaian males is a borrowed culture and that the trend of western culture has become very pervasive and prevalent, taken precedence over our values and culture with the latter regarded as inferior to the former.

References

- [1]Adu-Boahen, A. (1962). The caravan trade in the 19th century. *Journal of African History*. iii (2) 349 – 359.
- [2]Baffoe, M. (2005). These obsolete customs and & traditions must be scrapped!! www.ghanaweb.com.
- [3]Berry, LaVerle (1994). *Ghana, a Country Study*. 3rd ed
- [4]Calado, (2011). *Liberarse de las apariencias: Género e imagen corporal*. Madrid: Pirámide

- [5]Cusumano, D. L., and Thompson, J. K. (1997). Body image and body shape ideals in magazines: Exposure, awareness, and internalization. *Sex Roles*, 37 (9-10), 701-721.
- [6]Demello, M. (2007). "Encyclopedia of body adornment". ISBN 978-0-313-33695-9.
- [7]Erica, Weir (2001). "Canadian Medical Association Journal – Navel gazing: a clinical glimpse at body piercing". Cmaj.ca. Retrieved 2012-06-10.
- [8]Farquhar, J. C. and Wasylkiw, L. (2007). Media images of men: Trends and consequences of body conceptualization. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 8, 145-160.
- [9]Frith, K., Shaw, P. and Cheng, H. (2006). The construction of beauty: a cross-cultural analysis of women's magazine advertising. *Journal of Communication*, 55, 56-70.
- [10]Fynn, J. K. (1971). *Asante and its neighbours, 1700-1807*. Longman, Northwestern University Press, Harlow Evanston, Ill.
- [11]Guillen, M.F. (2001). "Is Globalization Civilizing, Destructive or Feeble? A Critique of Five Key Debates in the Social Science Literature", *Annual Review of Sociology* 27.
- [12]Halliwell, E., and Dittmar, H. (2003). A qualitative investigation of women's and men's body image concerns and their attitudes toward aging. *Sex Roles*, 49, 675-684.
- [13]Haralambos, M. and Holborn, M. (2008). *Themes and Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [14]Hatoum, I. D. and Belle, D. (2004). Mags and abs: media consumption and bodily concerns in men. *Sex Roles*, 51, 397-407.
- [15]Hogan, M. J. and Strasburger, V. C. (2008). Body image, eating disorders, and the media. *Adolescent Medicine - State of the Art Reviews*, 19, 521-546.
- [16]Irele, F.A. (2010). Westernisation. <http://science.jrank.org/pages/8152/>.
- [17]Ito, Masami (2008). "Ainu: indigenous in every way but not by official fiat". *The Japan Times*.
- [18]Julie, Pallant. (2001). *SPSS Survival Manual: a Step by Step Guide to Data Analysis Using SPSS for Windows (Version 10 and 11)*. Open University Press. ISBN 0 335 20890 8
- [19]Leit, R. A., Pope, H. G., and Gray, J. J. (2001). Cultural expectations of muscularity in men: The evolution of Playgirl centerfolds. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 29 (1), 90-
- [20]McCreary, D. R., and Sasse, D. K. (2000). Exploring drive for muscularity in adolescent boys and girls. *Journal of American College Health*, 48, 297-304.
- [21]Nsibambi, A (2001). "The effects of globalization on the state in Africa: Harnessing the benefits and minimizing the costs. Paper presented at UN General Assembly, second committee: Panel discussion on globalization and the state, November 2, 2001.
- [22]Ritzer, G. (2008). *Sociological Theory*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill
- [23]Sherrow, Victoria (2001). *For appearance' sake: the historical encyclopedia of good looks, beauty, and grooming*. Greenwood Publishing Group via Google Books. p. 101.
- [24]Sklair, L. (1991). *Sociology of the global system*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- [25]Spitzer, B. L., Henderson, K. A., and Zivian, M. T. (1999). Gender differences in population versus media body sizes: a comparison over four decades. *Sex Roles*, 40 (7), 545-565
- [26]Standage, T. (2005). *A History of the World in Six Classes (6th ed)*. New York: Walker and Company.
- [27]Tarnya, Cooper. (2006), *Searching for Shakespeare*, National Portrait Gallery and Yale Center for British Art, Yale University Press, pp. 54–61
- [28]Ware, H. (1983). Female and male life cycle. In Oppon C, (ed). *Female and male in West African*. London, George Allen and Unwin.