



Vol. 23, No. 1, 2025

DOI: 10.14746/jgp.2025.23.1.4

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Beyond Facial Beauty. The Aesthetics of Yoruba Culture in Tiro Eye-Liner

ABSTRACT. There are many peculiar features of the Yoruba culture and tradition which distinguish the Yoruba people of South-Western Nigeria from other tribes. Cultural practices and their aesthetic values formulate the nomenclature of African society as an animistic continent. The beliefs that deify ancestors and some presumed supernatural beings engender the organisation of festivals and rituals that are subsumed in other physical adornments of the African people. This paper examines the application of Tiro Eye-Liner as an act that embeds other cultural meanings. However, despite the traditional values attached to tiro, the cosmetic is endangered by modern materials for facial beauty. Today, tiro has undergone modernization which devalues its connection to cultural and traditional practices concerning ancestral worship. There is a limited academic study of tiro as a traditional cosmetic adept with cultural values. This paper identifies and examines the connection of tiro to the worship of deities and other mystical beings in Yoruba performances. The study is done with close exploration of historical documents on the subject under study. As part of a phenomenal means of diving into the belief system and cultural values of a people, interviews in videos and personal presentations are examined to foreground the syncretism of tiro and cultural practices. Within the context of culture, many activities and practices have symbolic meanings which make them more metaphysical than physical. Tiro is a cosmetic that beautifies people, especially women. However, it plays a significant role in the culture of the Yoruba people, especially in relation to festivals and rituals. Tiro connects the living with their ancestors as some worshippers apply it during their ritual performances and sacrifices to the deities. Beyond facial beautification, tiro reveals the aesthetics of Yoruba tradition.

KEYWORDS: Tiro, culture, aesthetics, tradition, Yoruba

Introduction

The Yoruba people mainly constitute the South-Western population of Nigeria. Enriched with culture and traditional beliefs, this tribe active-

ly connects to the systems that accommodate the influence of ancestors through organised ritual practices. This group projects their cultural heritage to the world through festivals and traditional practices. Although some practices are said to be threatened with extinction, some traditional activities still hold sway among the people. Unarguably, rituals and festivals serve as forms of entertainment to indigenes and non-indigenes but are also symbolic of the society's connection to their ancestors. The Yoruba people spread across such States as Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Kwara and Kogi. They have varieties of dialects but the Yoruba language and culture unify them.

The Yoruba culture exists within the ambience of oral tradition which "constitute the most authentic expression of the creative intelligence and world-view of African people" (Akpoloro 2012:37). Basically, oral performances inculcate several artistic elements which project the aesthetic values of the beliefs and customs of African people. Actions, activities, rituals, festivals, clothing, food, skills, vocations and adornments are all aspects of culture which are symbols of the traditions of the Yoruba people (Akano, 2018).



Figure 1. Photo/Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit, Boston Children's Hospital. "The Nigerian tiro container and the powder that was applied to the lead-poisoned child's eyelids—Boston, Massachusetts, 2011".

Source: [Online] Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6130a3.htm>
[Accessed: 30 May 2024]

One of the most distinctive aspects of Yoruba culture is their cultural practices of facial and body beautification which is rich and vast amidst them. There are varieties of traditional beauty products like soaps, fragrances, oil, beads etc, which have been employed to enhance body beauty. This rich traditional inheritance has given way to the value of Western culture in Nigeria. In Yoruba indigenous culture, there is a fine line between products applied to the body/face for cosmetic and medicinal purposes. As mentioned earlier, the Yorubas make use of various traditional products for medical treatment and beautification, namely; soap, oil, tiro and *ori*. Among all, tiro is known for its unique and multifunctional roles in the Yoruba land.

Tiro is a popular and common facial enhancement cosmetic that has been in existence among Yoruba people for centuries. Tiro is a significant part of the Yoruba culture, and it plays a significant role in promoting cultural identity and diversity. Tiro has both cultural and spiritual significance to the Yoruba people, and it is used to express beauty, identity, spirituality. It also has medicinal benefits and performs skin-cleansing functions. Certain practices are inextricably linked to culture. Some people outside the confines of these beliefs may consider these practices as mere artistic display but among the practitioners, they are symbolic and possess metaphysical abilities. The metaphysical properties inherent in Yoruba items were engendered by mythical beliefs.

Initially, Tiro was a spiritual and healing practice that was used to ward off evil spirits and protect the individual from harm. The practice was also used to cleanse the eye and promote good eye health. It is important to note that over time, the application of tiro to the eyes has transformed into a form of facial decoration and beautification. Today, Tiro is used as a form of self-expression and a means of enhancing the natural beauty of the face.

1. Literature Review

In the field of Yoruba facial ornamentation, Tiro has been a topic of interest due to its cultural and spiritual significance. Adegoke (2018:61) focused on Tiro as a cultural and spiritual practice that dates back to the 19th century in the Yoruba culture of Western Nigeria. However, the author's investigation of Tiro appears to be one-dimensional as it only explores its cultural and spiritual essence, leaving out its aesthetic part. The paper analyzes the developmental trend, functions, ethnographic signifi-

cance, and influence of Tiro on culture. The study revealed that Tiro has some skin-cleansing functions and medicinal benefits. In addition, the paper calls for more awareness and modernization of the process of application to promote global acceptability. However, the author did not delve into the aesthetic aspect of Tiro and how it enhances the facial appearance of individuals who wear it.

According to Adeniyi (2019) the use of Tiro has significant cultural and spiritual significance to the Yoruba people (255). The study conducted by Aladesanmi and Ayinde (2016:23) also confirms the historical and cultural importance of tiro as a traditional cosmetic and spiritual adornment in Yoruba land. In a 2018 YouTube video by BattaBox on the beauty and the danger of applying tiro, interviewees emphasized the medicinal purposes of traditional tiro for both young and old. They further indicate that some people use tiro for other spiritual reasons. This accentuate that the Yorubas believe in deities and mystical intervention in their challenges.

Another study by Aremu and Atere (2014:45) revealed that tiro has cultural and historical roots dating back to the ancient Yoruba kingdoms. The study noted that tiro was initially used by women as a spiritual adornment and a symbol of beauty, but over time, it evolved into a more multi-functional cosmetic product. Gansell examines the use of ivory figurines as representations of feminine beauty in ancient Mesopotamia and Syria. It compares and contrasts the figurines with other forms of facial decoration, such as Tiro, Kwali, and Uhie. It argues that the figurines reflect the ideals of beauty, status, and power that were prevalent in the ancient Near Eastern societies. It also explores the role of facial decoration in expressing identity, gender, and ethnicity. Over time, tiro became a popular form of facial enhancement among the Yoruba people. Today, tiro is mainly used for beautification and is an integral part of the Yoruba cultural identity.

According to Adeniyi (5), tiro is a reflection of the Yoruba people's beauty standards, and it has a significant cultural and spiritual value attached to it. The practice is deeply rooted in the Yoruba culture and is often passed down from generation to generation. Tiro performs many functions ranging from spiritual to medicinal and to adornment (Adeniyi 2019, Ford 2016, Akinmoladun and Olawole 2015). A study conducted by Aremu and Atere (46) revealed that tiro is also used as a charm to attract good fortune and ward off evil spirits. The study noted that Tiro's use as a charm is prevalent among traders, farmers, and hunters in Yoruba land.

Furthermore, Ojo and Olaitan (2014:43) emphasized that the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural practices like tiro are essen-

tial for the preservation of cultural identity and diversity in Nigeria. They argued that traditional cultural practices, like the use of tiro, play a crucial role in shaping the worldview and values of the Yoruba people. The authors suggested that efforts should be made to promote the use of tiro and other traditional cultural practices in schools and other educational institutions to preserve and promote Yoruba culture.

White (2010:73) analyses the role of art in various rites of passage in African cultures. He focuses on three examples: circumcision masks among the Bwa people of Burkina Faso, initiation masks among the Sande society of Liberia and Sierra Leone, and twin sculptures among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. He discusses how these art forms are used to mark important transitions in life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. It also examines how these art forms express cultural values, beliefs, and identities.

Tiro, in all spheres of its usage, is not a new tradition among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. It has been a part of their cultural heritage for centuries and has been used as a way of enhancing facial beauty, identity, spirituality, and healing. However, despite its longevity and cultural significance, tiro has received minimal attention in academic literature. Many authors and writers have only briefly mentioned the practice in passing, and few have thoroughly explored its roles in facial aesthetics. This lack of attention to tiro is a significant gap in the existing literature on Yoruba culture and facial enhancement practices. The limited coverage of Tiro in academic works is not reflective of its aesthetic and cultural significance as well as the importance of understanding its role in Yoruba society. This is the lacuna that this research aims to address by providing a comprehensive case study of Tiro's multifunctional role in the Yoruba culture.

2. Application and Health Hazards

The traditional process of applying tiro involves the use of powdered gelena mixed with plant-based oils and ointments (Ford 2016:45). However, there is a lack of awareness and modernization of the process of application, which may hinder the safe usage of tiro (Ojo and Olaitan 41). A study conducted by Akinmoladun and Olawole (124) revealed that the use of Tiro-based cosmetics can lead to health hazards such as lead poisoning. The study noted that lead was detected in some tiro-based cosmetics samples and advised that the raw materials for tiro-based cosmetics be refined for safe and sustainable production.

Regarding the health hazards associated with the use of tiro-based cosmetics, a study by Oyedele and Adejumo (2019) examines the heavy metal content of tiro-based cosmetics and its potential health implications. The study reveals that some tiro-based cosmetics contain high levels of lead, which can result in serious health problems such as convulsions, coma, and harm to the brain, kidneys, and bone marrow. The study emphasizes the need for the refinement of the raw materials used in the production of Tiro-based cosmetics to ensure safe and sustainable usage.

Another study by Aladesanmi and Ayinde (25) noted that the use of tiro can cause skin irritations, allergies, and infections. The study advised that caution should be taken when applying it to avoid health hazards. Tiro has undergone several modifications over the years, and there are various cultural variations of the practice. For instance, in some parts of Yoruba land, tiro is used to indicate the marital status of women. According to Aremu and Olatunji (11), unmarried women wear tiro on their lower eyelid, while married women wear tiro between both eyelids. This cultural variation of tiro serves as a form of identification for women in Yoruba society.

3. Methodology

Historical methodology was adopted for this study. Historical methodology entails the investigation of written and digital documents such as books, journals, reports, video tapes, and recorded oral interviews. Oral interview is a qualitative research conversation where questions are asked to elicit information. Interviews are used to uncover the meanings of central themes peculiar to the subject(s) under study through people's opinions, knowledge and experiences. This process will provide readers with more understanding of people, places, objects and events as suitable details that create sensory images are unveiled.

4. An Examination of the Nexus of Tiro Eye-Liner and Yoruba Culture

4.1. The Cultural Significance of Tiro

Tiro is not only a form of facial decoration but also a significant cultural practice that has great significance in the Yoruba community. The use of tiro is often associated with festivals and other cultural events, where it is

used to express cultural identity and pride. Tiro is also an essential part of social life in Yoruba land as it is used to signify important events such as weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals. This cosmetic is deeply rooted in Yoruba culture and has multifunctional roles beyond cosmetic purposes. In addition to its aesthetic value, tiro is used for medicinal and spiritual purposes.

The use of tiro in Yoruba land is a multifunctional practice deeply rooted in the culture of the people. It is an ancient Yoruba cosmetics that involves the application of powdered galena (a natural mineral form of lead (II) sulfide (Pbs) also known as dyestone) mixed with plant-based oils and ointments to the face and body for beautification. It has been used for centuries in Yoruba land for the purposes of beautification, spiritual protection, and medicinal benefits. Unlike other forms of facial decorations, Tiro is unique in its use as a natural product and intricate designs to create a more beautiful look. Yoruba women widely used tiro to beautify their facial expressions through the eyeballs. Beauty in the traditional sense has a deeper spiritual meaning than what is considered beauty in modern times. Akporobaro (2012) translates the eulogy of the Osun goddess regarding her beauty. A close reading reveals that beauty in the Yoruba culture is more spiritual than physical. This attests to the importance of adornments among Yoruba women.

Owner of brass.

Owner of parrots' feathers.

Owner of money.

My mother, you are beautiful, very beautiful,

Your eyes sparkle like brass.

Your skin is soft and smooth,

You are black like velvet.

Everybody greets you when you descend on the world.

Everybody sings your praises (335)

The "blackness" of tiro is culturally symbolic of the African skin colour. In addition to its significance especially in relation to aesthetic value, tiro is believed to provide protection from evil forces and has significant cultural and spiritual significance to the people of the Yoruba region. According to Aremu and Olatunji (2014:10), tiro was initially used as a form of healing by the Yoruba people. The black dye used in tiro was believed

to have healing properties and was applied to the eyes to treat various eye infections. Adegoke (2018:61) focused on tiro as a cultural and spiritual practice that dates back to the 19th century in the Yoruba culture of Western Nigeria. However, the author's investigation of tiro appears to be one-dimensional as it only explores its cultural and spiritual essence, leaving out its aesthetic part.

Tiro has its roots in the religious beliefs and cosmology of the Yoruba people, who worship a supreme deity called Olodumare and a pantheon of lesser deities called orishas. Each orisha represents a natural force or an aspect of human life, such as thunder, river, war, love, etc. The Yorubas believe that humans have a destiny that is determined by Olodumare before birth, and that they can communicate with the *orisas* through divination, sacrifice, and rituals. Tiro is one of the Yoruba people's way of connecting with the *orisas* and expressing their identity and status. Akporobaro (2012) affirms and validates the realities of spiritual beings thus:

Man by his nature is a spiritual being, he is also superstitious and he projects his identity and consciousness into nature. He anthropomorphizes and deifies forces and imaginings which he cannot control and which he imagines bring death, disappointments, or success to his anxiety-laden life. May folktales, myths and legends utilise as characters and protagonists' spiritual beings, who behave like human beings with wider infinite powers (65).

It can be adjudged that tiro is more than a cosmetic for facial beauty. It embodies the channels of communicating with metaphysical beings. This is culture and tradition. Cultural activities like festivals are often corroborated by several other activities like dance, songs and facial and body adornments. Tiro, among Yoruba people, serves both physical and metaphysical purposes, and of course, within the concepts of what is admitted as culture and tradition of people involved. Aesthetics is achieved through expressions, appearances, adornments and other forms of oral performances (Jegede 2021:29). Women are significant to culture and their appearances speak volume of their personalities. Therefore, beauty is a signifier of existence to them. The presenter of "Ohsehn" in a YouTube video of January, 2024, accentuates that tiro is used for different purposes by hunters, dancers and traditional religious worshippers. The video also highlights some ceremonial activities in which tiro adornment plays significant roles. While doing this, the cultural aesthetics of tiro is emphasized by the presenter.

4.2. The Uniqueness of Tiro in different Yoruba communities

Tiro is made from galena, a metallic mineral that is rich in lead and silver which is believed to have spiritual and medicinal properties, including the ability to protect against evil forces, improve vision, heal eye diseases, and promote fertility. Tiro is also used for cosmetic purposes, as it improves the wearer's beauty and attractiveness. In the selected Yoruba towns mentioned below, tiro has played a significant role in their historical and cultural development.

In Oyo, tiro has a rich historical significance as one of the cultural products that emerged from the powerful Yoruba state that dominated most of West Africa in the 17th to 19th century (Adisa, 20). Tiro was used by the aristocracy as a symbol of their status and was an important aspect of their traditional regalia. The use of tiro was not limited to the aristocracy alone, as it was also used by ordinary people to enhance their appearance during festivals and other cultural events (ibid).

In Ile-Ife, tiro has a unique historical significance as the place where it originated in the 14th century. According to Yoruba mythology, the goddess of beauty, Osun, invented tiro as a way of enhancing her own beauty. From Ile-Ife, the use of tiro spread across the Yoruba kingdom and beyond, becoming an essential part of Yoruba culture (Adisa, 20). During *Osun-Osogbo* festival in Osogbo, devotees of the goddess Osun wear tiro as a symbol of their devotion to the goddess (Adisa 21).

In Abeokuta, tiro has a historical significance as an important aspect of the Egba people's cultural identity. The Egba people were one of the groups that migrated from Ile-Ife to settle in the Abeokuta region, bringing with them their culture, including the use of tiro. Tiro is still used in Abeokuta today during important cultural events such as weddings, festivals, and funerals (Ogunwale, 55).

In Kwara, tiro has a significant cultural significance in important events such as weddings and funerals. It is believed that tiro enhances the beauty of the bride during weddings, making her more attractive to her husband. During funerals, tiro is used to express grief and sadness, with the color of the tiro indicating the degree of mourning (Ogundiran). Here, tiro is a symbol that expresses people's mood.

The usage of "tiro" by Yoruba people was basically to enhance their appearance and produce appealing effects on their eyes. It is not limited to the female gender. It is also used by men for religious purposes. Its usage was first noted among traditional religious worshippers like San-

go and Obatala, as well as by uninitiated women. This action proves and demonstrates the people's affirmation and dedication to their respective faith (Adegoke 65). Traditional religion worshippers will not consider the usage of tiro as a cosmetic or an attraction because they believe it is beyond fashion.

4.3. The Varieties and Multifunctional Roles of Tiro

Tiro played a significant role in the social and cultural life of the Yoruba people. It was used for various occasions such as weddings, festivals, ceremonies, rites of passage, etc. It was also used to indicate one's status, profession, lineage, affiliation, etc. For example, tiro ileke was worn by royalty and nobility; tiro alawo was worn by hunters and warriors; tiro abaja was worn by traders and artisans; tiro oju was worn by diviners and priests; tiro imi was worn by singers and dancers; etc. This traditional cosmetic has been identified as useful for personal spiritual purposes; both for positive influence and negative actions (Ayandare Lukuman, YouTube video, June 3, 2024). Tiro was also a source of economic activity, as it involves the production, marketing, and trade of galena and other related products (Adegoke 5).

4.4. The Symbolic Nature of the Eyes in Yoruba Culture

According to literature, Yoruba believe that eyes symbolise the light of the body. The portrayal of the eye in Yoruba sculpture, especially the "*Ibeji* sculpture," has symbolic meaning. The enormous head and eyes of the *ibeji*, where the Yoruba believe spiritual power lives, are indicative of its powers. The Yoruba refer to this ability as "*ashe*" which is interpretation in English as "authority" (Adegoke 64). The eye is the lamp that guides one through life.

The lamp of the body is oftentimes referred to as the jungle of life. When a person loses their vision, it is analogous to a paradigmatic black-out, which results in fumbling in the dark and a power outage. If there is no cure for blindness in humans, it is equivalent to going completely blind for life (Adegoke 64). Without the eyes, the body is in total darkness. Therefore, the eyes must be given an hundred percent attention.

Generally, physical appearance through various adornments determines the degree of positive acceptability in any social gathering. This is peculiar to both traditional and modern methods of beautifying oneself.

In many societies, there are specific beauty standards that individuals are expected to meet in order to be considered attractive or socially acceptable.

In Yoruba land, it is believed that facial appearance is important because the face is often the first thing that people notice about each other, and it is a major factor in forming first impressions. In many cultures, facial features are also believed to be an indicator of a person's character, personality, and social status (Fakayode 75). For example, in some African cultures, a broad nose is considered a sign of strength and leadership, while in some Asian cultures, double eyelids are considered more attractive and a sign of good luck (Ogundiya 29).

Conclusion

Tiro is an integral part of the Yoruba concept of aesthetics. It is an ancient Yoruba practice that involves the application of powdered *gelen* mixed with plant-based oils and ointments to the face and body for the purpose of beautification. The origin of Tiro can be traced to the pre-colonial era, when the Yoruba people used it as a form of adornment and protection against evil forces. Tiro is also associated with royalty, nobility, wealth, fertility and sexuality. Tiro is applied to different parts of the face, such as the eyelids, eyebrows, forehead and nose, using different patterns to create various effects and meanings. Although it is a traditional cosmetics, it connects to certain cultural beliefs in regards to festivals, rituals and ceremonies which ventilate and appraise the beauty of Yoruba culture.

The Yoruba religion is based on the belief in a supreme creator, *Olodumare*, and a pantheon of deities called *orisas*, who are intermediaries between humans and the divine beings. Tiro is used as a form of adornment and protection against evil forces, as well as a way of honoring the *orishas* and ancestors. The religious significance of Tiro is also evident in some of the rituals and ceremonies that involve its use. For example, Tiro is used during initiation rites for young girls who are entering womanhood or joining a religious society. Tiro is also used during divination practices, which are methods of seeking guidance from the *orishas* through sacred symbols and verses. Tiro is also used during festivals and celebrations, such as *Egungun* or masquerade festivals, which are occasions to honor the ancestors and invoke their spirits for propitiations.

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