

The Evolution of the African Headwrap or Scarf



The Africa woman head-wrap (*dhuku*) holds a distinctive position in the history of African dress both for its longevity and for its potent significations. The head-wrap usually completely covers the hair, being held in place by tying the ends into knots close to the skull.

The headwrap originated in sub-Saharan Africa and serves similar functions for both African and African American women. In style, the African American woman's head-wrap exhibits the features of sub-Saharan aesthetics and worldview. In the United States, however, the headwrap acquired a paradox of meaning not customary on the ancestral continent.

The headwrap originated in sub-Saharan Africa and was often used to convey modesty, spirituality, and prosperity. Even men in Africa wear head wraps to symbolize wealth and social status. Head wrapping is a way that Africans for centuries have been able to non-verbally communicate their place in life. (6)

These headwraps were initially worn by African women during and often indicated their age, marital status, family lineage and prosperity.

Many queens from various areas adorned the traditional headwear, including Nubian queens who chose elaborate and rich fabrics woven with exotic and beautiful flowers. (5)

Across Africa, the head wrap goes by many names. In Malawi the Duku, in Botswana it is the Tukwi, in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa the Gele and the Moussor in Senegal just to name a few. Each country and Tribes in Africa will have varying uses and attach different meanings to these wraps and the styles and colours used. (1) Weaving colourful threads into hair is a practice that dates back to ancient Egypt. During that time, women adorned their hair with ribbons, flowers, diadems, and coronets. Beads were also used to stabilize wigs. (7)

The Africa woman head-wrap (*dhuku*) holds a distinctive position in the history of African dress both for its longevity and for its potent significations. It endured the travail of colonialism and never passed out of fashion. The dhuku represents far more than a piece of fabric wound around the head.

This distinct cloth head covering has been called variously 'head rag', 'head tie', 'head handkerchief', 'turban', or 'headwrap'. The head-wrap usually completely covers the hair, being held in place by tying the ends into knots close to the skull. As a form of apparel in Zimbabwe, the headwrap has been exclusive to women of African descent. (4)

In Nigeria, the head-ties are known as *gele* (a Yoruba-language word) and can be rather large and elaborate.

In Ghana, the opportunity to wear a *duku* usually falls on a religious day of Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. This depends on whether the wearers are Muslim, Seventh-Day Adventists or Sunday church-going Christians.

Headwraps have evolved to be significant, and they possess immense cultural values in today's world. In Yoruba tradition, for example, the *gele* can tell if a woman is single or married. If the end goes to the right she's married and if it tilts to the left, she's single.

In South Africa and Namibia, the Afrikaans word *doek* (meaning "cloth") is used for the traditional head covering used among most elderly local women in rural areas.

Malawian head-ties are usually small, and conservative compared to the Nigerian style. Women wear *duku* at special events like funerals. Urban women with plaited hair also wear a *duku* when visiting rural areas out of cultural respect. In addition, women may wear *duku* during sleep to protect their hair. In South African church services women may wear white "dukus" to cover their heads. The Shangaan women in Zimbabwe and South Africa wear 'dukus' as fashion accessories, and at other social gatherings in Zimbabwe women may wear a *dhuku*)).

In Zulu culture, a woman is expected to cover her head when she visits or is in the presence of her in-laws to show respect. Some Xhosa women are also expected to wear *iqhiya* in the presence of in-laws as a sign of respect. For a Sotho traditional wedding, in-laws give the *makoti ituku*, as a sign that she has been accepted into their family. (11)

Spiritually, African women and Black women have adopted head coverings as a religious aesthetic. From hijabs in the Islamic tradition to White lace coverings in the Catholic and Ethiopian Ort Orthodox Church, Black women have known that covering one's head is an act of faith. In traditional African religions, a new initiate (*Iyawó*) is easily identified by wearing White from head to toe, including a headscarf that must be worn at all times.

This is true in Ifá, Santería, Candomblé, Lucumí, and many other derivatives and contemporary faiths. Sangomas, South African healers, cover their heads with wigs and scarves, often with ornate beads and threads. And even the plumes of modern-day Baptist church hats harken back to the same shared ancestor – the headscarf.

Traditional celebrations are where most people flourish with headwraps.

And while the Ghanaian *duku* and Nigerian *gele* have been worn by women for generations, they have grown to become the ultimate fashion accessory at most events and a head-turning work of art.

Even some African men wear headwraps as a fashion statement, and as a wealth and social status symbolism. Men and women have worn and continue to wear some type of fabric head covering in many societies. What does appear to be culturally specific, however, is the way the fabric is worn. In other words, the style in which the fabric is worn is the ultimate cultural marker.

During the Transatlantic Slave Trade, they were one of the few cultural pieces enslaved Africans were able to bring to the Americas. In style, the African American woman's headwrap exhibits the features of sub-Saharan aesthetics and worldview. In the United States, however, the headwrap acquired a paradox of meaning not customary on the ancestral continent.

During slavery, wearing a headwrap as a badge of enslavement was imposed on the enslaved Africans by white overlords. Later it evolved into the stereotype that whites held of the 'Black Mammy' servant.

In America, the headwrap was a utilitarian item, which kept the slave's hair protected from the elements in which she worked and helped to curb the spread of lice. Yet, as in Africa, the headwrap also created community -- as an item shared by female slaves -- and individuality, as a unique thing to the wearer. The enslaved and their descendants, however, have regarded the headwrap as a helmet of courage that evoked an image of true homeland -- be that of ancient Africa or the 'newer homeland' of America.

The simple head rag worn by millions of enslaved women and their descendants has served as a uniform of communal identity; but at its most elaborate, the African American woman's headwrap has functioned as a 'uniform of rebellion' signifying absolute resistance to loss of self-definition.

During the 1970s, headwraps became a central accessory of the Black Power uniform of rebellion. The headwrap, like the Afro, defiantly embraced a style once used to shame people of African descent. Black is beautiful, the saying went, and kente cloth headwraps were an Afrocentric aesthetic celebration.

Throughout the Caribbean, enslaved women continued the African tradition of head wrapping as a means for protection from natural elements. Often accompanied by the use of straw hats, the fabric used for headwraps varied in colour from the dull blues, greys, and browns, required by their slave owners to the more ornate madras cloth used to design intricate headpieces.

African and African descendant cultures, headwraps have been around for countless generations, but they were not simply a mark of Black women's fashion. The headscarf has been the core of black female identity, cultural recognition, and social status, all originating from our rich ancestry on the continent of Africa. At its core, the head wrap has been used in hot climates to protect women's hair and scalp from heat and sun exposure.

Tying a piece of cloth around the head is not specific to any one cultural group.

African headwraps have persisted over thousands of years, even during colonization when European powers attempted to change the culture of Africa and African beauty standards. Today the headwrap is in vogue yet again. As the natural hair movement gains momentum, many women are turning to them as a political statement and as a fashionable protective style option.

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