

'NDONYA' OR LIP PLUG IN THE WAMAKONDE WOMEN

Dr. K. S GUPTA,
Dental Surgeon, Aga Khan Hospital
DAR ES SALAAM

The Wamakonde woman presents a striking facial appearance which is of interest to the dentist from the standpoint of esthetics and dental health. While based in Mtwara as Dental Surgeon for Mtwara Region in 1975 there was ample scope offered for observing and interviewing 143 Wamakonde females who fell within the age bracket of 25 to 42 years. 17 of them who were not conversant with the Kiswahili Language had questions put to them in their own tribal dialect by the Dental Assistant who was himself a Mwakonde.

The paper which is presented here is the result of the interaction of the author with the Wamakonde in Mtwara region over a period of 11 months. This paper will touch upon three aspects viz.

1. 'NDONYA' or Lip Plug, its description and historical background.
2. Ndongya and its effect on Lip and teeth.
3. Prosthetic considerations while constructing the Upper full Denture.

Its Physical Characteristics and Historical Background

The Mwakonde female displays a wooden peg beneath her nostrils on the upper lip in line with the septum of the nose. The upper lip bears an aperture in the midline above the vermilion border which accommodates the wooden peg. If a straw is passed through the opening the centre of the opening comes in line with the labial frenum.

The skin is everted around the edges of the aperture. The Upper lip in the region of the Ndongya is hyperplastic and is prominent in comparison with the lower lip.

The hyperplastic mass of the upper lip gives the female a pouting appearance. The wooden peg is round or cylindrical in cross-section, and black or brown in colour. It is 0.5 to 0.8 inch long and

0.25 to 0.4 inch thick. The plug is referred to as "NDONYA" by the WAMAKONDE. Its inner end rests upon the upper central incisors. Its outer end projects 1.25 to 2.50cm above the upper lip. The spigot can be removed at will and can be easily slid within the opening by the subject.

The Ndongya has a history that goes back to slave raiding days. The elders in the Wamakonde tribe maintain that the Ndongya had a tradition preceding the Wangeni raiders. However, the commonly held view is that the Ndongya was introduced by the Wamakonde during the American, British and Arab slave raids mainly to prevent the woman from being taken slave.

The pouting upper lip and the Ndongya lowered the sex appeal of the women. The notion that the Ndongya was an object of some 'mysterious power' could have been the reason why the Wamakonde women were looked upon with awe by the raiders. For the Wamakonde women the 'Ndongya' thus gained a significance bordering upon a spiritual plane with a deep seated sanctity.

Livingstone makes a reference of lip plugs made of ivory and quartz amongst the tribe of Malawi. In Tanzania the Wamakonde make use of ebony. 11 Women out of 143 examined had Ndongya which were comparatively longer. The inner end was longer than the end projecting out of the lip opening. The outer end was a metallic stud fitted onto the wooden base of the Ndongya. The metallic point coincided or rose above the line of the tip of the nose.

THE INSERTION OF NDONYA

Amongst the Wamakonde when a girl is five to six years old she is taken to one of the elder men of the tribe who has acquired proficiency in lip puncturing technique.

The upper lip is marked with ash. A thorn is used to pierce and form the aperture in the upper lip. Once this is done a blade of grass is inserted in the hole. A second blade thicker than the first is let in after three days. The grass blade is changed every four days until the twelfth day when a millet stalk, a little finger thick is introduced into the lip opening. Another millet stalk of the thickness of middle finger is substituted. Three

to four Ndonyas are used for toning of the lip. The second Ndongya is taken out after a phase of 2 months. The third peg is inserted about 4 months later. When the third Ndongya is set in position the child has her face incised with tribal markings.

The incisions are usually two or three small vertical lines about half inch long next to the eye. The Ndongya is never taken out in public and its exit may be for the sole purpose of washing it. The Wamakonde woman may even use lime to polish the Ndongya.

NDONYA AND ITS EFFECT ON LIPS AND TEETH

The Ndongya if large and bulky exerts a force towards the roots of central incisors. With a constant force applied to the apical ends of the teeth the crowns of the central incisors tend to protrude. The narrowing of the upper dental arch occurs. With frictional rub of the plug on the labial surfaces of the incisors the enamel gets abraded making the teeth sensitive to heat and cold.

126 out of 143 women examined showed upper central and lateral Incisors together with canines which had been filed. The upper incisors and canines were conical, with rough and sharp mesial and distal edges. 18 women had developed peri-apical abscess in connection with their upper Central Incisors or lateral Incisors. The peri-apical abscess was a direct sequelae of filing which had caused exposure of the pulp leading to acute pulpitis and abscess formation.

Though the need for Root-canal treatment was impressed upon them with subsequent construction of jacket crowns all of the 18 Wamakonde women insisted upon total clearance of their teeth. The author's suggestion that the Central Incisors could be replaced with a removable partial denture did not gain easy acceptance with them. Their insistence upon total clearance of teeth from their mouths bordered upon an 'idiosyncrasy' that was characteristic of the women. Out of 18 women with peri-apical abscess in Central incisors only 7 agreed to accept partial dentures after removal of the grossly filed Incisors and Canines.

The upper full denture in the Wamakonde woman esthetic considerations.

1. While taking the upper impression the impression material is moulded around the area of the labial frenum so that it gently emerges out of the opening in the upper lip.
2. The cast is made and the wax rim adapted onto it. When wax rims are tried in the mouth for recording the jaw relations the upper lip due to its hyperplastic state protrudes very markedly. A generous allowance is created around the labial frenum by removal of the wax around the Incisors and Canines. The wax rim is thinned down to a stage until the patient expresses satisfaction that her upper lip no longer pouts and therefore looks presentable. Carving a concavity around the region of the Labial Frenum in the wax will facilitate the seating for the Ndongya. During the try-in-stage, the patient is asked to fit in her Ndongya in the concavity thus made. Further minor adjustments may be necessary before the Ndongya adapts itself to the concavity. The final acrylic denture has a thin and flat labial flange with a depression above the central incisors for the snug placement of the Ndongya.

Should the practice of 'Ndongya' be sustained?

The days of slavery are long gone and dead.

They are a reminder of an era that characterised dehumanisation of men by the slave raiders who plundered the African continent with the motive of profiteering at the expense of human life and dignity. The Ndongya should be gradually discarded through systematic education of the Wamakonde. It is time the Wamakonde realised what Ndongya has outlined its traditional value and use. The Wamakonde should be educated to adapt to present day socio-cultural changes.

Mrs. Makila walked, unannounced, into her husband's office and discovered him eating his lunch at his desk, with a beautiful secretary parked on his lap. 'Charles!' stormed the wife, 'What is that girl doing on your lap?' The guilty husband choked on a piece of pie and said 'Would you believe that the waiter forgot to send up a napkin?'