



The Evolution of African American Hair Care

Imagine this:

You're a woman in a Senegalese tribe 500 years ago. When your day's work is done, you look forward to the time you'll spend visiting and gossiping with the other women, and according to custom, you'll spend this time in a circle of grandmothers, young women and little children, talking and laughing while styling each other's hair. It might be just an average day, where hair would be washed, combed with a wooden pic which had been decorated with symbolic designs, and then braided with mud or animal fat and dyed with red earth. Or it might be a special day, perhaps in preparation for a wedding. The bride would be lovingly groomed by her kinswomen, who would decorate her hair with beads, shells, leaves and ceremonial shaved patterns.



The indigenous people of Africa have always loved and honored their hair, and assigned it great social, aesthetic and mystical powers. Hair grooming and the crafting of ceremonial or art objects made for (and from) hair was an integral part of family and spiritual life in thriving villages. But when the slave traders appeared, hair care rituals, along with so many other sacred customs, were lost. As the people were kidnapped and taken away without even the clothes on their backs, they had to leave behind everything precious and familiar to them, including their highly-revered hair care tools. For the next 400 years the people who would come to be known as African Americans struggled with their hair, deprived of their traditions, their tools and their dignity.

It wasn't until the early 1900s that an entrepreneurial African American woman named Madame C.J. Walker started marketing products specifically formulated for African hair. Her first product was a scalp conditioning formula called "Madam Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower," and in the ensuing years she became famous worldwide for her hair care products, her philanthropy and her pioneering role as an internationally successful businesswoman.

Despite the determination of slave owners to discourage the practice of African traditions (a slave found with an African pic comb could be severely punished), many of the tools and the rituals managed to survive, and most of our modern hairstyles and styling techniques can be traced back to early Africa. The community gathering habits also survived, many of which are in evidence today, as described in this excerpt from an article in the African American Registry:

"Beauty salons and barber shops have become a place not only to get your hair done but to serve as a location where Blacks can talk about their community. In the barber shops you could usually find a couple of men playing a game of chess, cards, or dominoes while talking about what is going on in the neighborhood. In the beauty salons you usually could jump into a conversation about the town gossip. Many film adaptations of African American themes use these businesses to show Black culture in the United States; Coming to America, 1988, Malcolm X, 1992, and Barber Shop, 2002 are examples. Over

the years, beauty salons and barber shops have come to provide a unique social function."

These gatherings, whether held in barber shops, on front porches or around a tribal fire, are now big business. Hair and skin care expert Diana Dudas, G.C.H.S.R.H. recalls early childhood memories of little girls sitting on their front porch steps having their hair braided by their elders, and how the transition was made from an ancient custom to a fashion statement.

"Now, this old time tradition has turned in to a multi million dollar business," says Dudas. "Braids have come a long stretch from tradition and are now an elaborate art form. It seems as though salons specializing in braids and weaves have popped up almost overnight. This new talent is highly respected."



With the popularity of braiding, straightening, weaving and head shaving as an art form, beauty salons, barber shops and beauty supply stores are more important than ever to African American customers who have an eye for style. But at the same time that many women are willing to spending up to \$1000 on braiding sessions at upscale salons, there's a growing movement toward "going natural," which not only embraces natural African hair but encompasses the tradition of women gathering together for grooming sessions. A web site called "A Nappy Hair Affair" acts as a support center for African American women who choose natural and African-inspired hairstyles. The founder, Linda Jones, is a journalist who's written extensively about the lifestyle and culture of people of African descent. Her organization evolved from a series of informal hair sessions she hosted in her home in response to concerns expressed by her friends who wore their

hair natural.

"Was I trying to revive an African tradition of women getting together to do each other's hair?" Linda asks. "As much as I appreciate some traditions of The Motherland, what I originally had in mind had nothing to do with heritage. I simply wanted to offer a space where my friends with African-inspired hairstyles could feel at ease. I wanted to provide a place where their hair would be celebrated, not denigrated."

And this celebration is good news for hair care providers and retailers. In America, the natural-hair care industry has been growing steadily since the mid-1980s, and today generates an estimated revenue of \$300 million a year, according to the American Hairbraiders and Natural Hair Care Association

The "denigration" of natural African hair began with the idealization of straight, smooth hair during slave times, a value perpetrated by the white upper class. In this book "400 Years Without a Comb," Dr. Willie Morrow, a historian, inventor and author who owns more than 100 hair-related patents, points out that modern tools such as straightening irons were not created by African people, but by white Europeans with curly hair who brought these tools to America. The curly-headed settlers wanted straight hair so that they would not be mistaken for having African blood in their ancestry. While the white people struggled to remove their kinks and curls, the slaves had no means at all of managing their hair, and resorted to covering it with scarves or tying it in rags. This was the ultimate degradation to a proud and beautiful culture that considered hair to be "the most elevated point of the body, which means it is the closest to the divine."

Morrow's knowledge and insight is extensive, especially in his detailed descriptions of ancient hair practices and their similarity to the styling methods used today.

"In Africa they braided with coconut oil, and sometimes weaved in Spanish moss from the trees or animal hair to give it lift," Morrow explains. "Really big hair was important for weddings and special

days. They took thread and wrapped the hair in small braids and brought the braids up to the top or back of the head to make a little basket-looking thing. Then they'd cover the shorter hair with mud and draw designs of animals or other symbols, depending on the occasion. Hair styling was extremely important to specific events like a big hunt, a wedding or going to war."



Morrow also tells us that African pic combs are the oldest comb in modern history that's still used today, but until the 1960s they weren't made into trade items or manufactured for sale (Morrow himself carved an early prototype and was the first to manufacture and mass produce them). Now everybody uses them, regardless of race or hair texture, and even Ava Gabor has one on the market that bears her name.

Other than the products and tools for creating smooth, straight hair (blow dryers, relaxers, flat irons), the tools for managing natural African hair haven't changed much over the centuries. Pic combs, razors, braids & weaves, oils, waxes and conditioners are not much different than they were in the days of Madame C.J. Walker. Even contemporary celebrities who can afford the best stylists use the same basic products. Fan websites that tell Halle Berry's beauty secrets aren't telling us anything new... the superstar gets her hair razor-cut and uses styling gel, straightening balm and pomades, just like the rest of us. But while straightening is a hot trend that produces a healthy cash flow for beauty stores, natural hair -- and the products associated with it -- can present new markets that are potentially just as lucrative. One website that promotes natural African hair is Nappturality.com, which tells its visitors that "it's all about accepting our hairtype and not carrying false expectations of what it can or can't be or do. And it's NOT about destroyoing our hair through continual straightening."