

African American Women and Hair: A Theological Reflection

Jennifer Douglas, Spring, 2007

Hair is a big deal in the African American community, especially for Black women.

Growing up my grandmother would always voice her opinion about my hair style. I asked her why hair was such a big deal. Her reply was, “A woman’s hair is her crown and glory, and the Bible says a woman shouldn’t cut her hair.” My question was silenced for a short time. How could I argue against the authority of the Bible and Grandma? Now as an African American women in my late 20’s I realize that hair in the African American community is deeper than style and texture.

What makes African American hair different?

Most African American women can tell you from experience that caring for Black women’s hair requires a lot of maintenance. Why is this so?



COURTESY: HARPO INC.

Oprah

Black hair typically has a tighter curl pattern which makes our hair more fragile than others. What else makes our hair different? (See <http://naturalblackhaircare.com/waystogrowhair.php>.)

1. Our hair has a tendency to dry out or weather more.
2. Black hair is more prone to breakage due to wears & tears of the cuticle layers.
3. Our hair follicles produce more sebum than other ethnic groups, but due to its curly nature the oil cannot evenly flow throughout the hair properly. Therefore, causing the need for additional oils & other hair care products to make hair more manageable and to prevent unnecessary breakage.

This following hair classification system is for all ethnicities. However, the focus of this project is African American women (see <http://naturalblackhaircare.com/waystogrowhair.php>).

Andre Walker's Hair Classification System		
Type #	Hair Texture	Hair Description
1a	Straight (Fine/Thin)	Very Soft, Shiny, Hard to hold a curl, hair tends to be oily, hard to damage.
1b	Straight (Medium)	Has lots of body. (i.e. more volume, more full)
1c	Straight (Coarse)	Hard to curl. (i.e. bone straight) Most Asian women fall into this category.
2a	Wavy (Fine/Thin)	Can accomplish various styles. Definite "S" pattern. Hair sticks close to the head.
2b	Wavy (Medium)	A bit resistant to styling. Hair tends to be frizzy.
2c	Wavy (Coarse)	Hair has thicker waves. Also resistant to styling. Hair tends to be frizzy.
3a	Curly (Loose Curls)	Thick & full with lots of body. Definite "S" pattern. Hair tends to be frizzy. Can have a combination texture.
3b	Curly (Tight Curls)	Medium amount of curl. Can have a combination texture.
4a	Kinky (Soft)	Tightly coiled. Very Fragile. Has a more defined curly pattern
4b	Kinky (Wiry)	Tightly coiled. Very Fragile. Less defined curly pattern. Has more of a "Z" shaped pattern.

Natural Hair Verses Relaxed Hair

Those outside of the Black community may not realize that some women use chemicals to alter their hair. Natural hair is referred to as hair that has not been altered by chemical agents. Hair that is “relaxed” has been chemically processed—an irreversible process that breaks down the bonds of curls, causing the hair to be permanently straight.



Natural Hair (left), and Relaxed Hair

(Photos from http://hair.lovetoknow.com/Black_Hair_Style_Picture_Gallery)

With this being said one may be envious of African American women because of the versatility of styles and textures that they have for hair. The hair of Black women is deeper than just fashionable styles. There is history that not everyone is consciously aware of. When I would get my hair cut, my grandmother would always say “If you mother didn’t cut your hair, it would be all the way down your back!” I thought “It’s just hair.” After my exploration concerning the history behind hair and African American women, I understood why my grandmother was so concerned with my hair.

The History of Black Hair

Within the West African culture of the fifteenth century, “hair was an integral part of a complex language system.”¹ Hair was used to articulate one’s marital status, geographic origin, ethnic group, and more. Hours were spent on grooming and maintenance of African women’s hair using precious oils.

When Europeans explored the African west coast in 1444 they were amazed by the vibrant lifestyle of Africans in addition to their spectacular, artistic hairstyles. Trade took place between Africans and Europeans. However, things changed during the early sixteenth century. Labor was needed for the territories of North America conquered by the Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, British, and French.² Europeans took advantage of Africans trading in human cargo. There was such a high demand for labor that African “family members began to sell their own relatives, debtors, social outcasts, and prisoners of war.”³ Millions were sold and forced into slavery under brutal, horrible circumstances. There was no time to care for precious African hair. Survival was the main goal.

African hair which was once seen as beautiful was now viewed as hideous and substandard when compared to European hair. “White slave-owners sought to pathologize African features like dark skin and kinky hair to further demoralize slaves, especially the women.”⁴ Slaves who worked inside plantation houses sought to fit in by wearing wigs and styling their hair in the fashion of their masters for approval. Because the European standard of beauty was ideal, Africans and African Americans believed that straightening their hair would be a means to fit into this new world. Dangerous risks were taken by women to fit the European beauty standard. “The most mordant device used to straighten hair was lye, mixed with potatoes to decrease its caustic nature. This creamy concoction straitened curls ...and could also eat the skin off a person’s head.”⁵

During the nineteenth century the biracial progeny of Africans with Europeans’ loosely curled hair and light complexion would often indicate a freed status.⁶ Thus, some biracial slaves could pass for white and they would escape to freedom. The distinctive tightly curled African hair would mark a distinction between slaves and non-slaves. Furthermore, biracial offspring with fair complexions and loosely curled hair were given domestic roles in the house instead of the back breaking labor of the fields give to dark skinned, kinky haired slaves. This was the beginning of the interracial tension between African Americans with light skin and “good hair (loosely curled or straight hair)” verses “bad hair (tightly curled or kinky hair).”

This interracial discrimination of this time affected worship in the church among African Americans.

The earliest church in America established exclusively for Negroes was the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), founded in 1793 in Philadelphia. By 1870, with color increasingly dividing the Black community, the lighter-skin worshippers split off to form their own denomination, called Colored Methodist Episcopal.⁷

If this was not degrading enough, paper-bag tests, and comb tests were used as requirements to enter certain churches.

The paper-bag test involved placing an arm inside a brown paper bag, and only if the skin on one’s arm was lighter than the color of the bag would a prospective member be invited to attend church services...And in still other ‘houses of worship’ throughout Virginia and in such cities as Philadelphia and New Orleans, a fine toothed comb was hung on a rope

near the front entrance. If one's hair was too nappy and snagged in the comb, entry was denied.”⁸

The Black church where African Americans were supposed to come together as a community for healing and wholeness from God was another breeding ground for painful discrimination.

Hair Straightening

White owned companies since the 1830s placed advertisements for hair straightening products targeting African American women. “In public discussions of the social consequences of hair straightening, manufactures of products urged African American women to straighten their hair to foster societal acceptance.”⁹ African American women were constantly bombarded with a standard of beauty that they were unable to attain.

Madame C.J. Walker had short, and patchy hair due to trying multiple straightening products. She believed her life situation could be changed by improving her appearance and self confidence. “One night in 1905 she had a dream. ‘God answered my prayer,’ she was to explain to a reporter. ‘For one night I had a dream, and in that dream a big Black man appeared to me and told me what to mix up for my hair.’”¹⁰



Madame C.J. Walker

Madame C.J. Walker is known as America's first self-made millionaire. She had a method of straightening hair and made the hot comb, a tool for straightening hair, popular. Walker "did not challenge the prevailing notions of beauty that existed at the time...but sought to create safe, affordable products that would give all classes of Black women the means of [attaining the] straight-haired ideal."¹¹ Her company gave African American women means to get out of domestic work and advance in society. However, she was criticized for continuing the idea that African American hair was not ideal in its natural form.

During the 1960's hair became a political statement for African American women. Many women stopped straightening their hair and picked up the slogan "Black is Beautiful." "At first part of a larger political manifesto, Black beauty was overwhelmingly translated into wearing African derived dress, such as dashikis, and most significantly, the Afro hairstyle."¹² Hair was a way to "show a visible connection to their African ancestors and Blacks throughout the Diaspora."¹³ It was during this time that the Civil Rights movement was advancing. There was a rejection of White standards. However, this new standard of beauty caused a different type of intercultural racism. Those who were unable to get their hair into the afro were viewed by some as not Black enough. Also, afros were viewed as making a political statement when that was not always the intention of those one wearing this hairstyle.



Angela Davis

(www.vanderbilt.edu/.../amnesty/Davis1974.jpg)

During the late seventies this hairstyle's political voice deteriorated into just another hairstyle. Women went back to chemically straightening their hair.

In the 1980s various hairstyles were worn. Unfortunately African American women were still being discriminated against because of their hair. Even with the "Black is Beautiful" movement black hair did not fit the image of beauty. "In 1981 Rene Rogers, a ticket agent from American Airlines, was fired for wearing cornrows."¹⁴ She went to the judicial system concerning discrimination based upon her hairstyle. Her braided hairstyle that reflected her African descent was not considered professional.



Cornrows (left) and Alicia Keys with braids
 (http://kroeshaar.com/dagboek/mireille/septembero4/cornrows_top.jpg)

Even those who do not want their hair to make a political statement may still be accused of an agenda. Audrey Lorde, a poet and essayist, suffered discrimination for her hair at an airport.

Wearing newly fashioned dreadlocks (a style in which hair is either braided, twisted, or clumped together in separate strands all over the head), Lorde arrived at the Beef Island airport and was told by the immigration officer – a Black woman with heavily processed hair – that her entry was denied. ...Lord demanded to speak to the woman’s supervisor and was informed that her dreadlocks marked her as a dope smoking Rastafarian revolutionary.”¹⁵

Once again African American women’s hair is not the norm and seen as counter-culture if it is not straight.



Dreadlocks on Lauren Hill (left) and Whoopi Goldberg

Today

In 2007, African American women wear a variety of hairstyles. However, the image of beauty that prevails is often still long straight or loosely curled hair. This project helped me to understand that my grandmother's concern for my hair was built upon her desire for me not to be rejected from society because of my hair.

There are Black women who are unaware of the internalized racism that exists within themselves and others because they do not meet the European standard of beauty portrayed on magazines, television, and movies. There are women who may argue that they love how they look, and that they do not feel pressured to try to conform to societal beauty norms concerning hair. However, healing does need to take place. Many African American women speak about their hair using negative terms, and allow others within and outside of the African American community to continue to degrade the image of Black women and their hair. How can healing occur in the community?

Theological Reflection

African American women come from a community where the Bible is believed to be a book of authority and wisdom. It is a text that is interwoven within the community life. Some Black women believe that natural, chemical free hair makes them feel closest to God. However, Madame C.J. Walker believed God answered her prayer by providing a way to safely straighten the texture of the kinky hair she was born with. It is possible that African American women could be criticized concerning hair whether it is chemically straightened or not. Perhaps God is involved with both circumstances. How do we heal from not matching up to a certain beauty standard?

Scripture as a tool of wisdom can be used on the road to healing. For example:

[Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. \(Proverbs 12:18\)](#)

One of the most important things we can do as African American women is to not speak negatively about our hair. So often we are the culprits of repeating derogatory language about our own hair, or the hair of other Black women. By doing this we continue the cycle of verbal abuse in the community. It is important that *we* lead by example of calling our hair beautiful. Regardless of whether one's hair is natural or relaxed, as a community it is important to encourage and uplift each other.

The second thing we can do is hold others accountable for their words. If we allow others (African Americans or not) to continually degrade our hair then the cycle of verbal abuse will continue. It is important to be aware of the history around our hair, and educate others concerning hair so as to dispel the myth that beauty comes in only one image.

God's healing for a community can begin by using wisdom in with our words.



More hairstyles: Jill Scott Toni Morrison

Bibliography

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Rooks, Noliwe M. *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

Russell, Kathy, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.

<http://naturalblackhaircare.com/waystogrowhair.php>

For More Information

Natural Hair (<http://naturalblackhaircare.com/waystogrowhair.php>)

Black Women's Hair (<http://www.salon.com/news/1998/12/07news.html>)

Black Women and Fashion (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/07113/780189-314.stm>)

Madame C.J. Walker (madamecjwalker.com/)

African Hair (<http://www.africanhair.com/>)

I am Not My Hair (Video: India Arie;
<http://www.mtv.com/overdrive/?artist=1162154&vid=81230>)

Olive's Hair Salon (More info for women with relaxed hair;
<http://www.olivestextures.com/index.html>)

Dreadlocks (www.howtodread.com/dredlocks.html)

Notes

¹ Byrd, Ayana D. and Lori L. Thorps. *Hair Story: Untangling the roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001), p. 2.

² Ibid, p. 9

³ Ibid, p. 10

⁴ Ibid, p. 14

⁵ Ibid, p. 17

⁶ Ibid, p. 17

⁷ Russell, Kathy, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*. New York: Doubleday, 1993, p. 27.

⁸ Ibid, p. 27.

⁹ Rooks, Noliwe M. *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996 p. 13.

¹⁰ Byrd, Ayana D. and Lori L. Thorps. *Hair Story: Untangling the roots of Black Hair in America*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001, p. 34.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 35

¹² Ibid, p. 53

¹³ Byrd, Ayana D. and Lori L. Thorps. *Hair Story: Untangling the roots of Black Hair in America*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001, p. 51.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 104

¹⁵ Russell, Kathy, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*. New York: Doubleday, 1993, p 85.