

The Afro: more than a hairstyle

By Ary Gordien

Recent contentious comments on social media in France show that the hair of Afro-descendants is still stigmatized. How is one to explain this persistence of the stigmatization of curly hair? What are the underlying political stakes of these seemingly purely aesthetic considerations?

On Monday, April 1, 2019, the floral dress and especially the non-straightened hair of Sibeth Ndiaye, the new spokesperson of Prime Minister Édouard Philippe's government, generated much discussion. On Twitter, one commentator saw it as a “genuine provocation” and evidence of a “total lack of respect.” “Natural”—i.e., non-straightened—hairstyles of blacks and mixed-race people,¹ particularly women, continue to be perceived as shocking, unduly imposing, and insufficiently formal. Yet a change is underway in French society and, more generally, the global African diaspora. The idea that so-called “African” hair (i.e., curly or “kinky”) does not need to be thermally and chemically modified to be considered beautiful and socially acceptable is growing in popularity. Even outside of activist circles, more and more black women are, like Ndiaye, wearing and styling their hair naturally, including in professional situations.

¹ Indeed, it is impossible to define blackness as one must always take into consideration the criteria used to identify individuals or groups as black in a particular time or place. Put differently, if, in daily life, defining who is black and who is not seems obvious, these ways of naming differences of color, morphology, and even culture have, in reality, specific histories and meanings that it is necessary to analyze to grasp the mechanisms of identification at play. This is true of all the ethno-racial categories I use.

How is one to explain this (r)evolution and the simultaneous persistence, which at first glance seems paradoxical, of the stigmatization of curly hair? What are the underlying political stakes of these seemingly purely aesthetic considerations? The analysis proposed here is based on an understanding of the age of colonialism and slavery, that is, the context in which racist representations of black people and their hair were forged. In Africa, Europe, and the Americas, this colonial past explains why the European norm of straight hair imposed itself as a criterion of beauty, which black peoples internalized. In the 1960s, however, these trends began to be reversed. Alongside movements for the political and cultural affirmation of black people, practices began to emerge that valorized their hair. This brief genealogy provides a better understanding of the resurgence and current success of efforts to revalorize black women's hair.

Racial Categorizing: Skin Color, Facial Traits, and Hair

The term "race" spontaneously evokes the domination of individuals or groups categorized by others as inferior on the basis of visible physical criteria. Yet the history of racial categorization goes back not only to the persecution of Jews and Muslims in medieval Europe,² but also to the exclusion of peoples who converted to Christianity.³ According to the medievalist Geraldine Heng, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the physical differences between Christians and non-Christians were often imaginary. Jews and non-European populations were frequently represented as monstrous. The dark skin of the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa were associated with the color black, an ambivalent symbol of sin and damnation in monotheistic imagery.

Beginning in the fifteenth century, with the colonization of Africa and then the Americas, morphological differences between Europeans and non-Europeans began to serve as physical markers for the otherness they came to signify.⁴ Yet these criteria, as the anthropologist Peter Wade notes,⁵ cannot be considered totally objective since

² Heng, Geraldine, "The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II: Locations of Medieval Race," *Literature Compass* 8, no 5, 2011, 332-50.

³ Schaub, Jean-Frédéric, *Pour une histoire politique de la race*, Seuil, 2015.

⁴ Bonniol, Jean-Luc, *La couleur comme maléfice : une illustration créole de la généalogie des 'Blancs' et des 'Noirs'*, Albin Michel, 1992; Cottias, Myriam, *La question noire: histoire d'une construction coloniale*, Bayard, 2007, and Boukari-Yabara, Amzat, *Africa unite! Une histoire du panafricanisme*, La Découverte, 2017.

⁵ Wade, Peter, *Race and Ethnicity In Latin America*, London, Pluto Press, 1997.

only those that were deemed most relevant, because they were visible enough to signify difference, were used. In the context of African colonization and slavery, hair texture constituted, with skin color and facial traits, one of the primary criteria for categorization. The order of slave plantations and society was determined, in principle, by the equivalency between blackness, servility, inferiority, and negativity, on the one hand, and whiteness, freedom, superiority, and positivity, on the other.

Yet much interbreeding resulted from the rape of black and mixed-race women enslaved by white colonizers, from so-called “interracial” unions that were more or less legitimate, and from unions between individuals whose backgrounds were mixed to varying degrees. The emancipation by certain colonizers of their mixed-race children led to the creation of an intermediary group consisting of, along with free blacks, the category of free people of color, which included slaveowners. Interbreeding thus problematized and complicated the socio-racial order, even as it allowed it to preserve itself.

The diversity of mixed-race physical types led to futile attempts at classification based on three criteria: skin color, hair length and texture, and facial characteristics. In all the old European slave colonies, a vocabulary still exists for naming these color-based distinctions. This language valorizes phenotypical traits that approach the white end of the spectrum. As early as the 1830s, the abolitionist Victor Schœlcher noted, when speaking of the black and mixed-race populations in French colonies, that “whosoever has wooly hair, an essential sign of the predominance of black blood in one’s veins, can never aspire to betrothal with straight hair” (Schœlcher, 1842 [1998]: 201). In most languages spoken in the old slave colonies of the Caribbean and the Americas, the current terminology shows that these representations have been handed down to the present: “good/tall hair” versus “bad hair” in English, “*bel chivé*” versus “*ti chive*” / “*chivé red*” in Creole, and “*pelo bueno*” versus “*pelo malo*” in Spanish. Described as “*beaux*” or “*grands*” in West Indies French, the hair valorized in this way is long or at least wavy rather than frizzy, a sign of a long practice of interbreeding with white, Indian, and Amerindian populations.

Schœlcher’s account also informs us that “[w]omen of color with nappy hair put themselves through horrible torture when doing their hair, pulling it in a way that makes it seem silky” (Schœlcher, 1842 [1998]: *Ibid.*). Of course, as hairstyling and braiding practices found in Africa and among black populations in the Americas and the Indian Ocean attests, a transmission process arose despite slavery and colonization. Long, smooth hair has nonetheless imposed itself as the ideal of feminine

beauty—one that remains unattainable for many women, but especially for most black women, unless they use techniques that are harmful to their hair and scalps. Today, in the West Indies and the entire black diaspora, many black women resort to hair straightening, which now involves chemical components that are particularly abrasive. Hair extensions and other synthetic or human hairpieces that are long and more or less smooth are also used. The goal of services offered by many “Afro” hair salons and commercial products available from specialized boutiques is to allow clients to approach this goal.

Despite the dictatorship of smooth hair, practices for tending to women’s natural hair are, in the black diaspora, nonetheless transmitted. A memory of certain gestures has persisted in the Americas, despite the acculturation imposed by slavery. Furthermore, since at least the 1960s, black movements have actively contributed to revalorizing Afro-textured hair and the hairstyles that magnify it.

Black People’s Hair Is Beautiful

In the 1960s and 70s, African American activists popularized the “natural,” i. e., the “Afro”: nappy hair shaped as a sphere. Beginning in early twentieth-century Jamaica, followers of Rastafarianism, a religious and political movement that rehabilitated black identity based on a reinterpretation of the Bible, made wearing locks (twisted strands of hair resulting in inextricable knots that are allowed to grow) a marker of identity. This hair-focused practice became popular well beyond the religion’s followers as a way of affirming—as later with the Afro—black pride. In this way of using one’s hair, an anticolonial and antiracist dimension, which seeks to turn the tables on stigmatization, is evident: saying “black is beautiful” implies a revalorization not only of skin color, but of all physical characteristics that are supposedly black, including hair. Beyond black communities in the United States and Jamaica, the Afro hairstyle, and later dreadlocks, have spread to the black population as a whole. The former was proudly sported by African and West Indian anticolonial activists in the 1970s and 80s. During the 1980s, wearing dreadlocks symbolized, for British youth of Caribbean origin, membership in an improvised black subculture.⁶ Since the late 1990s, in black diasporic communities, the hip-hop and reggae dancehall musical styles, baggy jeans and plus-size sports clothes, as well as certain hair-related

⁶ Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, Routledge, 2003.

practices (locks, braids, and Afros) are employed to signify a modern and globalized form of masculinity. Yet in Europe, Africa, and the Americas (with the exception of some Caribbean countries where Rastafarianism was finally recognized as an official religion), whether blacks form a majority or a minority, men whose hair is considered too long and particularly those who wear locks, braids, or Afros have long and are in some cases are still assumed to be delinquents.

The revalorization of curly hair has nonetheless simultaneously and durably popularized the critique of the hair techniques available to women and, to a lesser extent, men on the grounds that their hair is hidden beneath artifices and its texture has been modified. Thus black activists have, to a degree, exposed the historical, social, and political mechanisms that imposed the idea that black people's hair is abnormal. In retrospect, what seems troubling is that letting one's hair grow the way it is genetically programmed to has been and still is seen as revolutionary or inappropriate.

The British art historian Kobena Mercer notes that the rehabilitation of Afro-textured hair uses a "back to the natural" rhetoric that is not that different from the hippie movement.⁷ Yet he asks us to deconstruct this essentialist idea. Hairstyles that use natural Afro-textured hair belong to an ensemble of *cultural* practices. It is a fact known only to black people and those who regularly interact with them that letting grow, washing, unbraiding, combing, hydrating, and styling Afro-textured hair requires a lot of care and very precise procedures. In this way, there is nothing "natural" or—still less—negligent about these hairstyles. Making nature a value often led, moreover, to the indirect condemnation of black women who straighten their hair or add hair extensions. Criticism of this kind hides the contradictory demands that are made on black women: to conform to the hegemonic criteria of beauty to which most people? (black and white) adhere, while also embodying black authenticity. At present, despite the initiatives of black movements, the ideal of long, straight hair continues to dominate. In megalopolises, hair treatments that seek to create the illusion of long, straight hair have become central features of black sociability. Despite the cost and occasional pain they entail, this treatment cannot be interpreted solely as passive acceptance of the cannons of white beauty. They also reflect the inventiveness of identity constructions that make possible the negotiation of ambiguous positions. At the same time, another form of technical knowledge concerning Afro-textured hair is spreading worldwide.

⁷ Mercer, Kobena, 2000 "Black Hair/Style Politics," in Owusu Kwewi (ed.), *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, Routledge, London 561 p. First published in (1987), *New Formations* 3 : 33-54.

The Nappy Renaissance: Globalized “Woke” Consciousness Embodied?

Afro-American political and cultural movements have long influenced the activism and stylistic practices (clothing and hair) of black populations across the globe. For different generations of French blacks (in overseas territories as well as in the metropole), the civil rights movement, Black Power, as well as jazz, rhythm and blues, and especially (as we have seen) hip-hop are key cultural references. Personal and collective experiences of racialization in France are conceived through this prism, even if their specificities are also emphasized. Among the youngest generations, one sees new interest in these reference points.

The use of the internet and social media has created a form of black cyber-sociability. In France, its most eloquent manifestations are podcasts (Le Tchip, Kiffe ta race) and YouTube videos dedicated to racial issues and specially to the black question. Participants include individuals with book learning acquired through university curricula or self-education. They embody a new way of asserting black political consciousness known as “wokeness.” Being “woke” consists in conveying and acquiring knowledge of the abuses to which black people have been and still are subjected. Wokeness also means familiarity with political academic texts and black activist artistic subcultures. The goal is to deconstruct more or less evident manifestations of racism such as white privilege, cultural appropriation, and blackface. The latter refers to an American tradition that consists in putting on black makeup to act out the racist stereotype of the ignorant, uncouth, and lazy African American. In France, black antiracist associations such as CRAN (the Representative Council of French Black Association) have, for several years, been condemning iconography and practices that evoke a comparable colonial imaginary. Hence the protests against the publication, with no warning, of *Tintin in Congo*, protests against the “*Au Nègre joyeux*”’s sign, and Antoine Griezmann’s disguise, in which he made himself up as a black, Harlem Globetrotters basketball player triggered politicized and media-reported indignation. Last March 25, an alliance of black antiracist organizations prevented the performance of Aeschylus’ *The Suppliants* at the Sorbonne on the grounds that the production made use of blackface—questioning, in this way, the legitimacy of any facial makeup used by white actors, whatever form it might take. Some saw this criticism as anachronistic and ignorant of ancient history. In any event,

⁸⁸ “*Au Nègre joyeux*” (“At the Happy Negro”) refers to a sign for an old (and no longer existing) store on the rue Mouffetard in Paris that has been the subject of ongoing controversy.

this controversy illustrates the rise of a new antiracist interpretive framework and the distinct ways in which it has been adopted in France.

The burgeoning revalorization of Afro-textured hair is one of wokeness' manifestations. The internet abounds with texts, images, and especially videos offering hair advice and promoting acceptance of Afro-textured hair. This new ability explains why the French press refers to a new "nappy" movement. The English adjective "nappy" has been redefined as a portmanteau word that combines "natural" and "happy." Except for the fact that it is now growing, the novelty of this movement lies rather in the fact that the revalorization of Afro-textured hair is not systematically tied to a well-defined political-institutional movement. This is a trait that it shares, incidentally, with wokeness. Yet it does all the same overlap with the branch of antiracism that makes the identity-based claim to represent the minorities that have been most affected by racism. The form of black self-assertion emphasized by wokeness and the nappy movement is characterized by its deeply individualistic and embodied nature.

From the Hair Question to the Race Question

Over and above (or beneath) partisan differences, the controversy triggered by Ndiaye's hairstyle reveals the paradoxes of the politicization of the racial question in France. The growing importance given to race is criticized as a threat to republican universalism. At the same, it has become flagrantly apparent that a majority of the population is almost completely ignorant of the most ordinary forms of life and experiences of ethno-racial minorities. The "Ndiaye controversy" demonstrates great ignorance not only of the loaded history of Afro-textured hair, but also of a trivial fact: the special violence to which black women must subject themselves to make their hair acceptable and consistent with the dominant criteria, and the social sanctions they receive when they do not yield to these rules. This lack of mutual understanding between social milieus and ethno-racial groups is explained by complex mechanisms of social segregation that prove, in some cases, to be ethno-racial.

Invoking universalism as a reason for not addressing these questions results in a failure to question the often banal social norms that perpetuate a form of racism. By leaving things unsaid, one does not give well-meaning white people an opportunity to realize that they themselves have perhaps unconsciously adopted the racist or at

least ethnocentric idea that only hair resembling their own is attractive, acceptable, and professional. Thanks to the “nappy movement,” perhaps it will no longer just be black people or those who know them who understand the price they pay for having long, smooth hair. Though it does not resolve socio-racial inequalities, this movement might lead to the recognition and normalization of physical differences that could be insignificant, yet which still clearly continue to shock people.

More broadly, the acceptance of Afro-textured hair could make it possible to give greater consideration to other non-white women. It is also an occasion to take stock of the lack of clarity surrounding what it means to be white. The war waged against curls is also raging among non-black populations in Europe, the Mediterranean, and elsewhere. In France, whether wrongly or rightly, non-smooth hair, along with tanned skin and dark eyes and hair is a stigma of foreign origin. This raises a major question: what precise physical traits are spontaneously attributed to the “French type,” beyond the fact that they are visualized as white? We should question an ordinary French expression. To describe someone as “having a certain type” — *typé* — is a way of referring to visible traces of interbreeding with colored races, as well as a deviation from the white norm, despite the fact that the latter is very different from the majority of the French population, which arose from France's indigenous populations and various European and Mediterranean immigrations. It is indeed curious that a “Nordic-type” person is never considered *typé*. Yet it is statistically far less common to cross paths with someone like this than someone who is more tanned and whose eyes and hair are dark — or even (?) whose skin is black. We could use a major study explaining why Frenchness continues to be defined by skin color, facial traits, and hair texture, rather than, in keeping with republican universalism, nationality and citizenship.

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