

Poster showing cornrow braids in Amsterdam-West, 2016. Photo by Taufiq Hosen



If hairdressing is the simultaneous cultivation of hair, self and society, then cornrows are a bumper crop. For some people, these head sculptures mark ethnic identity and kinship. For others, they represent a flirt with the exotic. In both cases, what we do with our hair has great social and personal meaning.



Actress Cicely Tyson, a trailblazer in African inspired hairstyles, wearing cornrows 'Pineapple' style in the 70s. Photo by Ian Showell/Getty

Text by Sarah Cheang

CORNROW CULTURE

Walking around London and Amsterdam, I see cornrows. Long and swinging, tight and sculptural, they trace complex patterns in lines and curves across proud heads. Neat or showy, cornrows are a potent cultural signifier of Africanicity. In the words of my niece Thea, 21, who grew up in a largely Caucasian community in Britain and is of mixed ethnicity, wearing cornrows was a way of experiencing kinship with her Jamaican family, "like I was fitting in with that side of my heritage".



Kylie Jenner, 2015

Historians can point to a continuous tradition of cornrow braiding from ancient African civilizations such as the Nok of Nigeria, through the dislocations of slavery and into the present day hairdressing skill-set of the African diaspora. Even where hair straightening has been the norm, the practice survived through the braiding of young girls' hair to resurface on adult heads as fashions as the political climate changed. There is no doubt that cornrows are a highly creative and symbolically powerful way of dressing black hair and celebrating the cultural identities of people of African descent. But was the media furore justified when cornrows were fleetingly adopted by white Kardashian celebrity Kylie Jenner last year? When David Beckham comments that his 2003 cornrows were a 'mistake', does he speak of the cringing personal embarrass-



David Beckham, 2003

ment of any past fashion, or does the video footage of Beckham's braided head as he meets Nelson Mandela prompt a deeper consideration of cultural sharing and cultural appropriation when it comes to hair?



Floella Benjamin, 1977

Head hair is the most malleable and most socially visible part of the human body, so it is not surprising that the things we do with our hair have great social and personal meaning. I am a mixed 'race' Chinese/English woman — I have 'mixed blood', as Chinese people sometimes say to me — and my hair is a dark-brown melange of east and west. Though it is straight, it has a slight wave that undermines any attempt to achieve a chic Oriental curtain of hair, yet does not constitute anything so alluring as a curl. Growing up in the 1970s, I was aware of cornrows as a black style, positively exemplified by the braided and beaded heads of musician Stevie Wonder and television presenter Floella Benjamin, and negatively by Bo Derek in the film *10* (1979) because to me, somehow, it looked wrong. She was too skinny and so was her hair. However, as a young adult in the mid-1980s I begged a hairdresser friend for a perm so tight that my hair might stand up almost like an Afro, *but not quite*. At the time, I thought I was in pursuit of something unique — that my chemically-altered mop of corkscrew curls was an act of pure self-expression — but now, as a professional fashion historian, I am forced to reassess. At the same time as I was expressing my solidarity and personal identification with numerous positions of otherness, I realize that, like many other young Europeans in search of a perm, I was also caught up in fashion's more dubious cultural cannibalism, though I was blissfully ignorant of that fact.



Bo Derek, 1979

The Afro, also known as the Natural, is a potent symbol of black power because it exploits the natural texture of African hair. This texture was regarded in derogatory terms as ‘woolly’ by supporters of slavery in the 19th century, and ‘nappy’ or even ‘bad’ within 20th-century African-American hair-dressing cultures that favoured hair-straightening. ‘Nappy’ hair was finally accorded positive value in America in the context of the Black Rights movement of the 1970s. Black beauty was reclaimed with reference to the natural qualities of the African body as an emancipatory source of identity. But, at the same time, the Afro was a fashion statement, influencing a generation of ‘groovy’ as well as politically active white people to adopt Afro-inspired styles.



Lionel Ritchie, 1983

By the 1980s the Afro became outmoded and the Jheri Curl ruled supreme, a change in hair fashions that can be demonstrated by simply comparing Michael Jackson album covers across the period. The Jheri Curl was a chemical treatment originally designed to create tight curls in Caucasian straight hair, but which was subsequently adapted to make looser curls in black kinky hair. It was undoubtedly a crucial factor in the styling of a generation of young Caucasians with corkscrew perms in mainstream fashion. To my 18-year-old self, having already tried punk and goth, not-quite-Afro hair was merely the next phase

*Cornrows are a highly distinctive practice that is indisputably part of African tradition*

of my search for something beyond the nice-girl’s perm, something rebellious and cool. Like the blackface style of the Japanese *gangura* girls or the dreads of Japanese ‘Yellow B-Boy’ rappers in the 1990s, what is ‘cool’ and ‘just fashion’ might seem like harmless play, but it is still part of an important conversation about racial politics and body styling. Often, it is a historical underpinning that is absent from the fashionable consciousness.

Not everyone can wear their hair in a glorious Afro — even the most vigorous perm could not really achieve that — but any hair type can be woven into cornrows. With skill and patience, the hair is divided into multiple sections, and each section is tightly and often painfully braided against the scalp to form a closely held line. While many cultures can lay claim to the plaiting of hair, cornrows are a highly distinctive practice that is indisputably part of African tradition. In common with most cultures throughout history, hair-dressing in Africa has been closely tied in with expressions of rank, ideals of beauty and fashion. In some areas of Africa, sculp-

tural effects on the head have also been important. To this end, braiding can be used to produce striking raised patterns, a variety of textures, and further levels of artistry can be achieved using the stiff braids to create gravity-defying bunches, hat-like coils and loops in the air. The inclusion of beads adds eye-catching colour, and also sometimes a delicate percussive sound as they swing together.

All cultures borrow from one another in search of artistic inspiration, design solutions and cosmopolitan consciousness. Fashion cultures use ‘foreign’ or ‘exotic’ motifs, shapes and materials to produce a novel or edgy look, but in the process the originating cultures are mythologized or even ignored. In the fashion media, non-western cultures as a whole are frequently regarded as the providers of traditional, timeless raw materials that western designers can claim to ‘discover’, ‘improve’ and make aesthetically viable without needing to credit or financially reward the skilled artistry of the cultures that created them. Having social permission to flirt with the exotic with no negative effects on status and opportunity is also a key aspect of white privilege when it comes to the history of Caucasian cornrows. While some white women wore them as a fashion statement in the Bo Derek era, court cases reveal that African-American women were facing dismissal from the workplace because their well-groomed, practical and culturally appropriate cornrows were being branded an ‘extreme’ style by their employers.



Venus and Serena Williams, 2000

The argument that Caucasian cornrows honour black culture rather than exploiting it is also hard to sustain where much fashion journalism is concerned. In 2014, model Kendall Jenner’s small patch of

cornrows above her left ear was cited as taking braids to ‘a new epic level’, a statement that gives no cultural credit to the rich history of black hairdressing and instead suggests that the use of cornrows within mainstream fashion is some kind of improvement that African cultures have never made. The braiding and beading of white tourists’ hair on a Caribbean beach is harmless enough, but the fashionable framing of Bo Derek and the Khardashians overwrites the creative genius of the African diaspora.



Ludacris, 2003

Dress historian Carol Tulloch writes in her latest book *The Birth of Cool* that black cool has historical depth; it is an act of black aesthetics as well as a tool for being black in everyday life. Both my niece Thea and her brother Joshua knew that their cornrows were a cool way to mark their specific ethnic identities in a sea of British whiteness at school and experience their sense of otherness in a way that drew admiring and envious glances. As a young mixed-race male, Joshua remembers that his point of reference was the rapper and actor Ludacris. But going to his mother to ask for gangsta-style cornrows also involved him in hours of weekly braiding sessions that wove more than just hair. The time, attention and physical proximity of this kind of hairdressing enables the creativity of mothers, sisters, aunties and friends to be interwoven with close relationships and a sense of connection, at home or in the salon. Hairdressing is, after all, the simultaneous cultivation of hair, self and society. A fine crop of cornrows is personal as well as spectacular. They may be planted on any head, but where and how the roots grow is another matter.