



Azle Malinao-Alvarez Emerald

Natural hairstyles such as twists and braids are common among African-American women. Although they can take much time to achieve, these hairstyles are significant to many people as a reflection of their history and culture.

## Hair-dos

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ucts that create them sound as foreign as Swahili.

Hair is a part of any culture, but in African-American culture it takes on a unique role, a role that many never have the opportunity to experience.

"Just how white people have different types of hair — some have curly hair, some have red hair, blonde hair — black hair is just as diverse," said Etopi Fanta, a freshman biology major whose parents are both African. "Black hair comes in different shades and textures."

Brandy Alexander, a sophomore pre-journalism major, said, "In the new century, it's all about style." Alexander, who claims ownership to many of those 27 hair products, wears her hair straight. Dig around in her bathroom drawers and you will also find flat irons, hot combs, curling irons, hair dryers, rollers and anything else she and her roommates need to get a desired style.

### More than fashion

But to African-Americans, it is not — and has not always been — only about style.

Hairstyling can act as a psychiatrist's couch, a family photo-album, a gossip tabloid and a center for political debate. Today, many African-Americans have the luxury of thinking of hair in terms of fashion and nothing more. The historical importance of hair, however, cannot be so easily ignored.

Edwin Coleman, professor emeritus in English and folklore, tells his students that in the days of slavery, white slave-owners would perform a "comb through" test to determine if a slave had "good" or "bad" hair.

Good hair was generally also associated with lighter skin, and those who had light skin and hair that could be combed through were assigned more favorable tasks, such as work in the house instead of the field, he said.

Dr. Vivian Barnette, staff psychologist at the University Counseling Center, said women today have a lot more flexibility with what styles they can wear than they had in the past.

Even today there are cases where women face discrimination on the job because of the hairstyle they wear, Barnette said.

"If it looks conservative — well groomed — that's how America would like you to look," she said. "It would be lovely if everyone thought you were acceptable how you are, but it's not always that way."

### Getting the look

In parallel with the civil rights movement, there was also a movement for African-Americans to cut off their perms and wear natural hairstyles. The slogan "Black is Beautiful" came out of this movement, as did a surging popularity of the Afro.

There may still be some social pressure to conform to mainstream concepts of beauty, but in the new century, women are finding more freedom than ever to be who they are. Fashion and beauty magazines geared toward African-

American women, such as *Sophisticate's Black Hair* and *Hair*, stress beauty that is uniquely black. The magazines also highlight the wide variety of styles women can choose from.

"I think your hair, at least from the black perspective, tells you a lot about someone's character," Fanta said.

Women strive to have hair they can be proud of. "Hair is so valued in black culture," Alexander said.

Having hair to be proud of is not always easy. Maintaining most styles costs money, and often women burn themselves with their heated hair tools. It also takes time, especially if the hairstyle is braided.

### Playing with plaiting

Braiding a full head of hair takes time, there is no way around it. But the time spent braiding passes quickly by watching TV, talking and relaxing.

When African-American women wear braids, they often hear comments such as "I could never be that patient." But they say wearing braids is not only about achieving a hairstyle.

"Braiding is so much more," Fanta said. "You don't just sit there — you talk about stuff. That is the time your mother tells you stories or your grandmother teaches you lessons."

Amber Starks, a University freshman, whose mother braided her hair until she was in seventh grade, takes a more practical approach to wearing braids. She braids her own hair, a process that takes her eight hours to braid and eight hours to take down. Wearing braids is her trademark, she said.

### Difference matters

Another major difference that sets African-American hair apart from other types of hair is how frequently it is washed. Most black women wash it two to four times a month.

"A white person's hair works better when it's clean — ours is the opposite," said Kim Jabbie, whose hair is braided with extensions. "It works better, not necessarily when it's dirty, but when it has more products in it. It's easier to deal with, and it's not all tangled. That's why we don't wash our hair as often."

The availability of hair products and services can also be problematic. In predominantly white communities the prices of products designed for black hair are higher because they are so scarce the retailers who do carry them can charge more, Fanta said.

When Alexander lived in the dorms she said people asked her a lot of questions and she felt like she had to represent all black people.

"You become the social consciousness of all black people when you talk about hair," Alexander said. "You meet some white people and they want to ask you everything about being black, and their number one question is about hair."

But Jabbie, Fanta and Alexander all said they don't mind answering questions, and for Fanta, talking about hair helped her become closer with her roommate.

"It opens doors; it is something to talk about that is not as tense as racial diversity."

The UO Cultural Forum presents

# Norm MacDonald

After a five-year stint as the anchor of *The Weekend Update* on *Saturday Night Live*, MacDonald crossed into film, starring in *Dirty Work*, with appearances in *Billy Madison*, *The People vs. Larry Flint*, *Man on the Moon*, etc. Norm now stars as Norm Henderson in ABC's hit, "The Norm Show."

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