

Black Folk's Hair

Secrets, Shame & Liberation

Revisited

Kamau & Janice Kenyatta



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Albrightsville, PA

Black Folk's Hair: Secret, Shame & Liberation - Revisited

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Introduction

We are fully aware that the subject matter of this book is one that is sensitive for Black people in general and Black women in particular and that it touches a tender and age-old wound. With this in mind, note that we view this work as an effort to heal this wound and not as an attempt to administer unnecessary pain. We do not, however, apologize for the pain that some will encounter as they progress through the book. We know that is a necessary part of the healing process because it dares to address one of the deep wounds that remain unattended from the enslavement and the colonization of African people.

Although it addresses an external feature of our African-ness, it really speaks to a deeper psychological malady. And while we specifically direct the contents of this book toward Black women, our aim is not to bash these women. Neither is it our intention to overlook those Black men who engage in the practice of straightening their hair or those who ridicule Black women who wear natural styles. The latter group remains part of the ongoing problem. Nevertheless, our experience indicates and evidence shows that Black women straighten their hair in far greater numbers than Black men. That cannot be logically or intelligently contested.

Responses To The Book

Since writing the first edition of this book under the initial title *Black Folk's Hair: Secrets, Shame & Liberation*, a few things have happened that are worthy of mention. First, the response to the book was received and welcomed in places we had not intended nor anticipated.

For example, the positive responses and reactions of white women to the book was completely unforeseen. But even more shocking is the fact that many of them bought additional copies to give as gifts to their "Black girlfriends." Along those same lines we found that many white women who have children by Black men have bought the book in great numbers in order to better understand the hair of their children from those unions. This was not an intended market for the book but one that, nonetheless, has been beneficial to many and one that we see as a necessary part of the discussion.

Secondly, the rapidity with which news of the book spread into other parts of the world was a welcomed surprise. Two specific occasions regarding this come to mind. On one occasion, we received a phone call from the Netherlands from Black women seeking copies of the book and inviting us to speak at a conference there. On another occasion, we received orders for copies of the book from Germany that totally floored us.

Thirdly, the impact the book has had on women has been tremendous. Some have read the book and immediately decided to go natural. Others have gone natural after much debate, inner turmoil and soul searching. For example, several of my former students who argued with me (Kamau) as to why they would never wear natural hair have come back a few months or a few

years later wearing natural hairstyles. Others have taken a defiant stance claiming they wouldn't be caught dead with so-called "nappy" hair. Still there are those who have had to change to natural styles due to health reasons.

In all the cases that we've witnessed, where women have gone natural, no one has ever expressed any remorse or regret about their decision. None of them became ugly or uglier (as some thought they would) because they had previously accepted the notion that they would and could not be beautiful with their natural hair. To our knowledge and experience they are all happy and delighted with their newfound beauty. There is no power like the power of being yourself—none.

Another unexpected surprise has come from Black men who have purchased the book to give to the women in their lives—mothers, sisters, wives, nieces, cousins and girlfriends. It is also worth mentioning that our predictions in 1996 that more women would begin to wear natural hairstyles has been proven correct. We also predicted that there would be an increase in the number of natural hair salons around the country and that, too is proving to be correct.

Why We Changed The Title

The title of the book has been changed back to the original first edition title. We thought that changing the title to ***The Truth About Hairstyles: The Whole Story Revealed***, would have a broader appeal and help with the sales of the book. That has proven to be untrue. And so, we have returned the book to its original title. We consider this work as part of the overall Afrocentric project, which endeavors to restore, reconstruct, and return African people to themselves.

What You Will Find In The Book

In Chapter 1 we discuss the unique quality and beauty of African hair, while also broaching the subject of enslavement's psychological implications and impact on Black folk's hair. Chapter 2 looks at the origins of the present attitudes African people have regarding their hair as a result of the European enslavement of African people.

Chapter 3 discusses the ways in which we speak of our hair and the aesthetic value(s) we have internalized. We also discuss the different techniques used to straighten Black hair.

In Chapter 4 we provide the results of surveys we conducted among women who straighten their hair and among those who wear their hair natural. In addition, this chapter highlights some of the current practices evidenced in the shift toward natural hairstyles by more Black women.

Chapter 5 examines the impact chemicals may have on the health of those who receive relaxers and those who apply relaxers. In the final chapter, we look at the economic factors associated with the Black hair care industry and provide a list of hair products by Black-owned companies and White-owned companies.

Throughout the book we have used the words Black and African interchangeably, and we have intentionally used the uppercase lettering for Black.

Although we have used African Americans for most of our examples, this book and its subject matter is not only addressing that group of Africans. The practice of straightening African hair is found among practically all African groups whether they reside in the Americas, the Caribbean, or on the continent of Africa. This work, therefore, is directed toward African people wherever they may be found.

The Purpose of This Book

It is our hope that this work will create an atmosphere where the subject of Black hair might be openly discussed and given more careful and reflective thought. We hope that such an atmosphere might create a renewed appreciation and love for our natural hair. We also hope that this work will (1) motivate and inspire sisters (and brothers) to wear their natural hair proudly, (2) help Black men become supportive of women who go natural, and (3) challenge the system that penalizes us for being our true selves and true to ourselves.

We must learn to love our hair just as it is and we must totally accept ourselves, and those like us. If we cannot accept ourselves entirely, it may be because we do not really love ourselves, or our people as we may profess, and thus we run the risk of becoming false, fake, and phony. African people are a great people, but as long as we hate any part of ourselves, we are doomed to the exile reserved only for those who fail to see their own greatness as humans.

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