

## Historical Evolution

*By Sheila Johnson*

My maternal great aunt Dally, made me sit on the floor, with my head between her knees while she sat in her chair and tugged, pulled, and twisted my hair so tight, that my eyes became slanted, my forehead popped out with sweat beads, my hairline broke out in tiny stress bumps, and I had a headache that lasted for several hours. I went through this process every weekend through my grade school years to ensure that my hair would stay fresh all week.

I am just one of the millions of women of color who have historically been made to feel inferior to women of other cultures whose “locks” are similar to the long, silky hair that grows on the heads of European women. Hair that has “roots” in Africa, South America, and other countries of dark skinned people from around the world is notably different in texture, length, oiliness, and color. Growing up, I was comfortable with my hair except on those occasions when I went swimming and the water would cause my hair to shrink up. I was not concerned how it looked at the time, but I knew my mother would insist that I go through the traumatizing process of getting it “straightened” out, braided, and hot curled-receiving several burns on my scalp, neck, and ears. My two beautiful daughters grew up tying rope, yarn, and long skirts to their head pretending to have long, silky hair. As their mother, this was extremely painful to me as I always encouraged them to wear their “natural” hair however they chose to do so. My children grew up and went to schools in predominately white schools and were pressured on so many levels to blend in and give up their own culture.

Zine Magubane, an associate professor of sociology and African diaspora studies at Boston College, wrote a defining expose in 2007 about Don Imus, Jr., an American radio host and humorist after he called the Rutgers University basketball team a bunch of “nappy-headed ho’s”. In her written words, Ms. Magubane stated, “He brought to the fore the degree to which black women’s hair has served as a visible marker of our political and social marginalization. Nappy, a historical derogatory term used to describe hair that is short and tightly oiled, is a preeminent example of how social and cultural ideas are transmitted through bodies. Since African women first arrived on American shores, the bends and twists of our hair have become markers of our subhuman status and convenient rationales for denying us our rightful claims to citizenship.”

Today, in 2018, I am grateful that antiquated perceptions of black hair have evolved into a natural display of beauty as seen in television commercials, magazine advertisements, and Internet blogs. The world is changing by the second and we cannot afford to allow judgment of others to stifle our world. As for me and my curly top, we are locked in to stay.