

What is shaping culture? Hair

 By Brett Rogers 19 Apr 2021

For some 'hair' is just 'hair', but for many others it's far more important than that. For many it's a crown and statement to the world about who they are. We use our hair to tell the world our story and the world also reflects back at us what it feels about it.

Despite not being the largest country in Africa, South Africa is the continent's largest market for cosmetics and personal care products, and hair care makes up a massive portion of that market. In 2018, the sector recorded close to R50bn in revenue, with haircare the biggest category, contributing to 22% of that.



Natural haircare is the fastest growing hair trend in South Africa with many rejecting western ideals of beauty – viz our glorious Miss Universe, Zozibini, being one of the current vocal trendsetters for this act of self-love.

Someone who is also vocal about her passion for hair is Fezeka Mehlomakhulu, who podcasted with us to talk about hair in general and specifically natural hair. Something which came up strongly in our conversation was how people have “opinions” on black women's hair and are more than happy to tell these women what they prefer and what they “should” do with their hair.

What we don't realise is that, first of all, that's rude, and secondly black women have been told for millennia what they should and should not do with their hair, creating a level of anxiety that many of us have no comprehension of. I asked her “what if I have a compliment, surely that is ok?” To which she replied “if you are not a black woman, do not comment on black women's hair.”

Lesson Learned.

Someone who feels differently is writer and musician Arlin Bantam. He works his hair like a work of performance art, an expression that he is showing the world whether they like it or not. He has taken the shame that was imposed on black hair and is turning it on its head.



This is me right now. Pretty happy with where I'm at. Writing, reading, thinking and motherfucking individualizing. (Photo by Matt Ginsburg, @hustleblud)

My relationship with my hair has so many layers at this point. But suffice it to say that its primary aim now is imposing myself upon the world.

When I was a kid, it was kept short, tidy with that geometric square on my forehead they love carving into little brown boys - making them look like lego men come to life. It was restrictive, oppressive, the neatness. And as I gained more freedom, I guess I let my hair reflect it. At the moment my hair is a neon green mess of safety pins and years-old beach sand. Also liberty. Fucking finally.



We also spoke with student Sandy Qika; she is bubbly and friendly, and her hair journey echoes that lively energy. She has never seen hair as a static journey but rather one that evolves with her and her personality



Hair to me is an amazing accessory! I don't mind shaving, braiding or bleaching it just as long as I look good. Hair also makes/breaks an outfit. For example, if I'm dressed to the nines and my hair is not cooperating then I'm not going anywhere. It's a struggle I must say.



Where we cut our hair is also more important than just being a location. The salon or barbershop has evolved to a place where trends and culture are shaped. We visited Legends on Long street in Cape Tow to see how they are doing post-lockdown. The challenges they face are very difficult, as more than most places a barbershop is a place of faces, and communication. Legends follows strict protocols to keep the clientele safe. Despite it all, they continue to have a spirit that is uniquely that of a barbershop. Great music good vibes and a distinct sense of self.



“ Hair is part of you, it identifies you as a person individually. You see the kind of a person based on a hairstyle.”

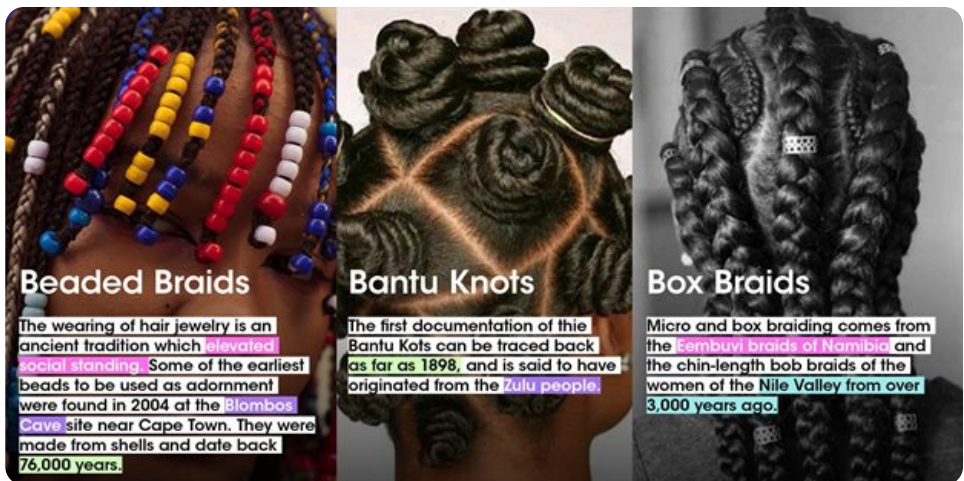
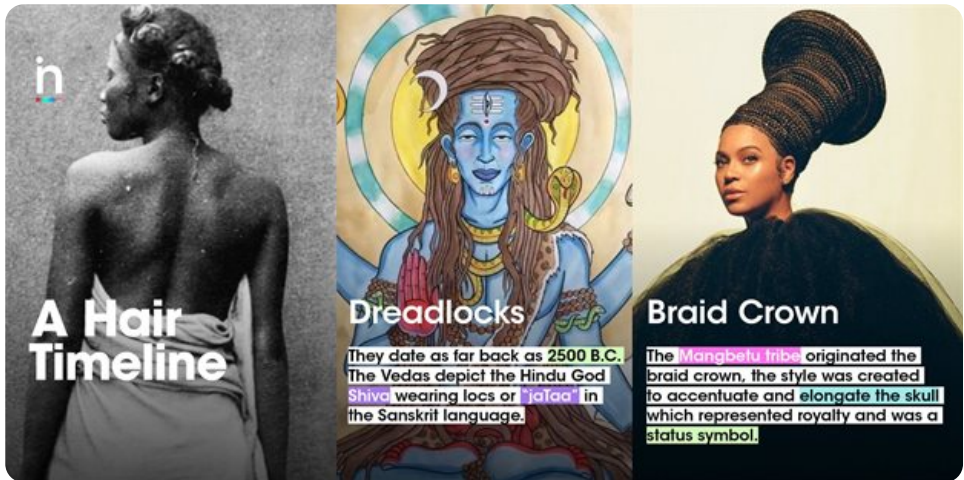
“ Hair means image
Hair means character
Hair means self-being
Hair is an identity thing
Hair is a feel good thing”

Hair is more important than you can possibly imagine.

Hair is politics, culture and economy.

Hair brings joy and tells stories, the crinkle in your cut and the depth of your step all tell something about you.

Hair is history, and it's essential to listen to it.



ABOUT BRETT ROGERS

Brett Rogers, culture lead at Cape Town advertising agency HaveYouHeard and content curator for In_, a channel of content, which showcases cultural forces that are changing the world. It aims to inform, inspire and entertain the viewer and does so with multimedia posts, including podcasts, videos, google trends, mini Q&A's and more. In_ talks to those interested in in-depth cultural exploration and those curious about the world we live in.

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