

A Short History of the African Braid



The history of braids dates back to [3500 BC](#). Most of the traditions of hair braiding originated in Africa. One of the oldest known images of braiding was discovered along the Nile River, at an ancient burial site known as Saqqara. Braids have been discovered sculpted into the back of the head of the Great Sphinx of Giza.

In relation to time periods, Alysa Pace credits Africa with cornrows in 3500 BC; Egypt with afro box braids in 3100 BC; Greece with the halo braid in the first century; Native Americans with pigtail braids in the fifth century; Europe with the crown braid from 1066 to 1485; China with the staircase braid from 1644 to 1912; the Caribbean with modern cornrows in the 1970s; and the internet (of course) with braid tutorials becoming especially popular in 2005 when YouTube launched. (2)

If we consider other historical findings, they contain amongst others, a French ethnologist, and his team who discovered a Stone Age rock painting in the Sahara depicting a woman with cornrows feeding her child. Another Nigerian clay sculpture from 500 BCE showed a figure from the Nok civilization with cornrows etched onto its head. Depictions of women with cornrows have been found in Stone Age paintings in the Tassili Plateau of the Sahara, and have been dated as far back as 3000 B.C. As well as the cornrow style is seen in depictions of ancient Cushitic people of the Horn of Africa wearing this style of braids as far back as 2000 B.C (8)

Contrary to popular belief, [dreadlocs](#) (also known as dreadlocks) originated in Africa, not Jamaica. According to Dr Bert Ashe's book, *Twisted: My Dreadlocks Chronicles*, the style was first seen in 2500 B.C. in The Vedas, where the Hindu God Shiva was said to wear "jaTaa" (dreadlocs in Sanskrit). Locs were also seen in artefacts.

Over thousands of years, mummified pharaohs have been recovered with their dreads completely intact. (*Princess Gabbara, The History of Dreadlocks*)

Numerous African tribes, groups and regions decorated their hair for cultural belonging, meaning and hierarchical significance. Many of these hairstyles were highly complex and extremely diverse and have been passed down through generations.

In most African tribes, braided hairstyles defined belonging to an individual family and was a way to identify the tribe from which one originated. Braid patterns and hairstyles were an indication of a person's tribe, age, marital status, affluence, influence, and spiritual philosophy. Braiding has always been a social art tradition in most African communities.

It would start for example, with the mothers braiding their children's hair and then the younger children and siblings would start copying or practising on each other the traditional styles that had been previously used on them. This became a unique tradition of bonding, which was passed down throughout the different family tribes for generations. Due to the mass transport of over 12 million enslaved Africans throughout the Atlantic slave trade, this practice was then practised throughout the Americas.

Examples of Traditional Braids

Ghana braids were first seen in hieroglyphics and sculptures made in 500 B.C. Since then, the style has played a large role in Ghanaian cultural, social, and religious traditions. (1)

Fulani or feed-in braids originate from the Fulani (Fula) people in West Africa and the Sahel region. The large, nomadic community passed on the traditional hairstyle through generations of women. Known for its length and unique patterns, this style features braids that hang or loop on the sides of the head. There will also be a coiffure in the middle of the head. The hair is then decorated with beads, shells, wooden or metal accents, or even a family's silver coins and amber for heritage purposes. (2)



Box braids originate in South Africa and can be traced back to 3500 B.C. This braid style can take up to eight hours to create. Braiding was seen as a symbolic way to show economic wealth. It was also used to signify age and marital status. The braids were often decorated with colorful beads, cowrie shells, stones, and jewels. (1)



For the Himba Tribe, in the northwestern region of Namibia, hair indicates one's age, life stage, and marital status. Hair is often dreadlocked with a mixture of ground ochre, goat hair and butter. (1)



Still largely worn throughout West Africa, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia), cornrows can signify one's age, religious beliefs, kinship, marital status, wealth, and were also a form of self-expression. (8)

Similarly in the early fifteenth century, hair functioned as a carrier of messages in most West African societies including the Wolof, Mende, Mandingo, and Yoruba. Warriors and kings also used cornrows to show their status in society.



Near the Southern tip of Angola, reside the Mbalantu tribes of Namibia. Mbalantu women are known for their headdresses. At the age of twelve, young girls in Mbalantu tribes begin preparing their hair for the headdress. They cover their hair with a thick layer of finely ground tree bark of the omutyuula tree. This mixture is applied to improve hair growth. Within a few years, the thick fat mixture will be loosened so that the hair is visible. Fruit pips of the bird plum will be attached to the hair ends with the aid of sinew strings.

When young girls reach the age of sixteen, their Fruit pip headdress is discarded and replaced with one of sinews. The style is again changed once the girls reach their Ohango Initiation ceremony. The hair is then styled in 4 long thick eembuvi braids. Once the girls make it through their initiation ceremony, they are considered ovafuko (brides) and then an additional layer of tree bark and fat is applied to their hair. The hair is later taken up and styled into elaborate headdresses throughout their life. (9)

Often favored for their easy maintenance, cornrows can be left in for weeks at a time if carefully maintained. Braids pulled too tight or worn for longer lengths of time and on different hair types can cause a type of hair loss known as traction alopecia. ("*Braiding 'can lead to hair loss'*". *BBC News*. 24 August 2007. Retrieved 30 April 2010.)

According to Dermatologist Crystal Aguh, who specializes in hair loss, nearly 50% of black women experience some form of hair loss.

Currently, cornrows are now worn by all genders and have become a massive commercial business. Many film and theater stars wear cornrows and other styles of braiding to show cultural or national pride. In recent years, there has been substantial disputation surrounding braids and braided hair and has become a topic of heated debate. While to some European people they seem like just another fad or hairstyle, many Africans and People of African Descent feel that it is part of their cultural tradition and that using these traditions of hair braid without belonging to the culture is an example of cultural appropriation.

How Cornrows Were Used to Escape Slavery.



During slavery, many enslaved people were forced by their slave masters to shave or cut their hair so that they would be more “hygienic”. The actual objective was to divorce Africans from their cultural identity and heritage.

Not all slaves would shave their heads. And this is how cornrows became popular among enslaved Africans. Many would just braid their hairs tightly in cornrows. In that way, the enslaved Africans “maintained a neat and tidy appearance.” But in the era of slavery, braiding also shifted from intricate designs to practical plaits due to a lack of time and proper tools. The term “cornrows” was introduced during this time, as the hairstyle looked like rows of corn in a field. Cornrows were also a sign of resistance. Enslaved individuals hid signals and maps in their hair in plain sight of slaveholders. (7)

Black women used braids for another important use: a secret messaging system for slaves to communicate with one another. People used braids as a map to freedom. For example, the number of plaits worn could indicate how many roads to walk or where to meet someone to help them escape bondage. (Sherrow, Victoria (2006). *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History*. Greenwood Publishing Group. p. 97)

Modern black women are still plagued with colonial programming that depicted their natural hair as an object of shame.

As the study of American history has revealed, the slave trade not only inflicted physical damage but also left emotional and psychological scars.

The most devastating scar, still reflected today, is that done to the slave’s self-image. This is especially true as it relates to hair and skin color. As they both became the framework for determining race. (10)

Following the abolition of slavery and the beginning of segregation in America, African American people were told that the only way they could be recognized, respected, and treated differently from their African ancestors was to assimilate into Euro-centric society standards of cultural beauty. As a result, many African Americans began to conform to Western culture to gain employment, be seen as socially “acceptable,” and have any chance of being treated as equals.

In the 60s and 70s, African Americans had its first revolutionary “back to the roots” Movement when members of the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement began to wear afros and cornrows in rejection of Euro-centric beauty standards. African hair became a political statement and once again, a symbol of Black pride.

Over the decades, cornrows, alongside dreadlocks, have been the subject of several disputes in U.S. workplaces, as well as universities. To this day, many women of color are discriminated by the texture of their hair and the braid styles they wear in corporate settings. Some employers and educational institutions have considered them unsuitable and banned them. Employees and civil rights groups have countered that such attitudes evidence cultural bias, and some disputes have resulted in litigation. (12)

In 2011, the High Court of the United Kingdom, in a decision reported as a test case, ruled against a school's decision to refuse entry to a student with cornrows. The school claimed this was part of its policy mandating "short back and sides" haircuts and banning styles that might be worn as indicators of gang membership.

However, the court ruled that the student was expressing a tradition and that such policies, while possibly justifiable in certain cases (e.g., skinhead gangs), had to accommodate reasonable racial diversities and cultural practices. (*School braids ban 'not justified'*. *The Independent*. 17 June 2011. Retrieved 17 June 2011)

In the US state of California, the CROWN Act was passed in 2019 to prohibit discrimination based on hair style and hair texture. (*July 4, CBS News; 2019; Am, 8:48. "California becomes first state to ban discrimination against natural hair". www.cbsnews.com. Retrieved 13 May 2021.*)

Hair braiding trends have come full circle with the re-emergence of various protective styles popular to various African tribes such as Bantu Knots and Fulani braids. In spite of the history Black people have endured, braids have consistently been an inseparable part of Black history. Today, braids are used to celebrate and honor one’s ancestral roots as well as express personality and style. They have carried on from Africa to southern plantations, to the inner-cities of the North, and beyond until today where Black women continue to proudly wear and reclaim the hairstyle of their ancestors.

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Pictures: Schuttlestock, Google commons

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