



**EVERYTHING
BUT THE BURDEN**

EDITED BY GREG TATE

**WHAT WHITE PEOPLE ARE
TAKING FROM BLACK CULTURE**

15. Afro-Kinky Human Hair

BY MERI NANA-AMA DANQUAH

AFTER TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OF LIVING in the United States, I decided to pack up my life and return to Ghana, my native country. It was a move that was probably long overdue. When my family emigrated to America, I was six years old and it was the early 1970s, a time when black was being regarded as beautiful and Africa was being celebrated not merely as a continent, but as a state of mind. It was the decade of dashikis, of Black Power fists and blaxploitation films, of afros, Alex Haley's *Roots* and Bob Marley's righteous reggae music. But not everybody black was feeling that kinship. Some folks weren't keen on having their consciousness shifted in the direction of racial pride; there were a number of black people who had no love for Africa and no use for the likes of me. If I had a dollar for every time, during those first few years after my arrival, that I was told (by both blacks and whites) to "go back to Africa," I might certainly have raised enough money to buy a plane ticket and make the attempt.

I didn't know much about Africa, only what had been told to me by family and friends, what little I had read in books or seen on television or at the movies. I definitely couldn't rely on the veracity of my own memory. The tiny bit that I could recall of the time I had spent there, in Ghana, was as vague and undecipherable as a dream. And sometimes I wasn't even sure whether those memories were real or whether they were recycled, faces from photographs that had found their way into my rather fertile imagination.

Whatever the case, I became fascinated with Africa, with the magic and the mythology of it, with the way it invoked such passion from both its

supporters and its enemies, the way that it was used as a symbol of all that was either right and attractive, or wrong and utterly repulsive, with blackness. The people who romanticized Africa, the ones who chose to believe that it was pure and good would make statements like "We can't ever forget where we come from" or "Back in the motherland, they like their women dark and plump." The others were not as beholden to our shared history. "I'm not from no damn Africa," they would say. "I'm from Chicago." For them, Africa, and all that it represented, was a source of shame, something from which they wanted to be distanced.

The older I got, the more I wondered what it would be like to live in Africa, to actually exist in a place where people who looked like me were the majority, the mainstream, the citizens empowered to shape language, set standards of beauty, define societal canons. I was tired of living in America; I was tired of being black in a predominantly white country. It was just too much like hard work, a constant uphill climb. I wanted to know how my spirit would feel living someplace where self-love did not always seem to be an act of self-defense, an emotionally exhausting effort to cancel out the effects of all the pervasive lies, stereotypes, and negative images of blackness. I wanted to be done with the intrusion of white supremacy and the internalization of my supposed inferiority.

I applied, and was selected, for a visiting scholar appointment at the School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana. So I decided to take myself and my nine-year-old daughter, Korama, back to the land and the freedom that was my birthright.

Just before the move, I went to get my hair done. For several years, I'd been wearing it short, close to the scalp. I hadn't cut it in weeks, so it had grown out enough for me to try a new style. Anything that involved chemicals was out of the question. The last time I'd had it permed, I was pregnant. Maybe it was because of the excessive hormones; but every time my hair was combed, brushed, or washed, it would fall out in huge clumps.

Not being a big fan of braids, I opted to go the rasta route. The problem was that I didn't want to be bothered with all the work that went into locking. All the twisting, re-twisting, waiting, worrying about whether or not it was actually ever going to happen, if those kinks were actually ever going to mat. I'd been there and done that, and would've just as soon preferred to skip that arduous, albeit necessary, part of the whole process. But I didn't know if that was even possible.

"Sure," Bee-be, an actress-cum-hairdresser friend of mine, told me. "They're called Nu-Locks. I can do them for you if you want."

Days later, she and I went to a huge store—a factory, really—that was owned and run by what appeared to be a family of Koreans. There, we bought several "loaves," as I learned they were called, of "Afro-kinky" human hair. They were small, neatly netted squares, each one about the size of a thick bar of soap. They were full of pure, grade A, 100 percent nappy Negro hair. This store was no mom-and-pop corner shop. It was a major operation, with a toll-free order number and clients all over the country. I had no idea that there was a market for such a thing. All those years I'd been shaving off my fast-growing 'fro and simply tossing it in the trash without even considering that it might actually be worth something to somebody!

Bee-be first braided and then extended the length of my natural hair with yarn. Starting from the scalp, she tightly wrapped strand after strand of the store-bought hair around the braids and the yarn, in much the same way one would wrap an Ace bandage around a sprained ankle. She then took each newly wrapped tress and rolled it smoothly between her palms. Twelve hours later, I had some very legitimate-looking dreadlocks.

The plan was to keep the Nu-Locks in as long as possible so that my natural hair would have a chance to lock. Once my own hair had locked and reached a desirable length, I could take off the fake-me-out hair and no one would be the wiser. After teaching me how to maintain my do and apply the wraps to my new growth every few months, Bee-be sent me on my way. Before going home to finish packing, I stopped at the grocery to

pick up a few food items—and wouldn't you know it? The customer who was behind me in line paid me my first compliment.

"Girl, your dreads are nice." She looked as if she was forcing herself to resist the temptation to touch them. "How long have you been locking?" Her question caught me off guard. Not sure what to say, I hesitated. If someone would have asked me that the first time I'd had dreads, I could have easily told them how long it had been, right down to the day, the hour probably. Back then, it wasn't about sporting a new hairstyle, it was about creating a new lifestyle, one that revolved around an acceptance of myself, without any additions or enhancements. Suddenly, I felt like a fraud.

I looked at the woman and wondered whether or not to tell her the truth. She wore her hair in a permed, asymmetrical bob. I briefly studied her face—wide-eyed, thick-lipped, high-cheekboned, chestnut-skinned—and immediately decided that she would look better in locks. This, of course, made me want to laugh. Me with a string of lies in my hair standing there trying to picture her without the lye in hers. "Oh, it's been about twelve hours." I laughed. "They're not real. They're extensions." Her smile shrank into a smirk. "Thanks, anyway," I quickly added, embarrassed. Then off I rushed to prepare for my move to Africa, my search for an authentic black experience.

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At first, Ghana seemed to be exactly what I'd imagined it would be: no spaghetti and marinara sauce, hot dogs, or apple pie à la mode. No half-naked blonds trying to scat like Ella or dance like Debbie. No Banana Republic, Pier 1 Imports, or other "ethnic fantasy" stores selling wicker, safari clothing, overpriced wood carvings, and faux kente cloth manufactured in Taiwan. At first, Ghana seemed to be a far cry from the Western world, with all its pretensions and appropriations. The airwaves were full of multilingual programs; the food was heavy and spicy, meant to be eaten with freshly washed fingers, not metal utensils. Everywhere I went, there

were people wearing traditional attire, women walking around in beautifully dyed cloths with deep, rich colors: indigo, olive, emerald, plum, lilac. And the men, the men, the men; damn, they were fine. A nation of Denzel, Wesley, and Don Cheadle look-alikes multiplied a million times over.

Often, we see only those things that we want to see, be they good or bad, those things that affirm whatever notions we have about ourselves, about the world around us. I suppose that's what happened when I arrived in Ghana. It was like stumbling into a dark room: you train your eyes to focus on one thing until you can find your bearings, but eventually your vision adjusts and you see everything as it is.

After a short period of time, I began conducting my daily negotiations not as a tourist or a newcomer, but as a full-fledged resident. I rented a house, opened a bank account, registered Korama in school, made a few friends, and figured out where I would shop, eat out, and go for drinks on a Friday night. And it was through those mundane activities, those tedious interactions with the banker, the market women, the neighbors on the block, that I came to realize that Africa wasn't actually all that Afrocentric, after all.

There is, certainly, a wealth of indigenous tradition and history that has remained intact, despite the many decades of colonization. But there is also a great deal of emphasis on, and admiration of, the ways and the wonders of the Europeans. A lot of the damaging effects of colonization are yet to be undone.

Like language. There are hundreds of languages spoken in Ghana; however, English is still the country's official tongue. Be that as it may, it is not enough to merely speak English, one must also sound like an Englishman, use words like "bloody" and "jolly." (So I should probably add that the Denzel, Wesley, and Don Cheadle look-alikes sometimes sound a whole lot like Tony Blair and Michael Caine.)

There was this man—I will call him Kwame—who lived in my neighborhood. Kwame was a journalist, a liberal-minded fellow who had been

educated abroad but immediately returned to Ghana upon his graduation so as to not contribute to what he called the “brain drain,” the permanent loss of the country’s brightest and most promising minds. Kwame took it upon himself to ease my transition, to help me navigate my way through the system. If I needed to get directions, I called Kwame; if I had a question about proper cultural etiquette, I asked Kwame; if I wanted someone to accompany me somewhere, I invited Kwame.

On one of our regular trips to Makola, the huge open-air marketplace in downtown Accra, I came across a merchant who was selling jars full of an ivory-colored cream that resembled mayonnaise. I was curious about the cream, curious about the ingredients used to make it, about what the benefits of using it were. Since I’d been in Ghana, I’d been learning quite a lot about local herbal remedies. Earlier that week, I had come to Makola and purchased—for next to nothing—a vat of shea butter, which comes from the nut inside the fruit of the karite, a tree that is native to West Africa.

Shea butter is similar to cocoa butter in that it nourishes the skin and hair, protecting them from the sun and other harsh elements; it reduces scarring after childbirth and surgery; it has even been said to alleviate dermatological ailments, like eczema. When I went home, I saw that the oh-so-expensive lotion I had brought from the States with me contained shea butter—as did the majority of the “upscale” skin care products that I owned. I thought perhaps this ivory-colored cream was another natural, “old world” treatment that some huge North American cosmetics company was probably bottling up and selling for goo-gobs of money.

“What does it do?” I asked the woman.

“It brightens the skin,” she said. “Makes it pretty.”

“Like, it brings out its natural glow?” I asked, repeating a marketing slogan I had heard countless times on television commercials.

“Yes, yes,” she confirmed. “It will make the skin glow. It will make it light.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll take one. What’s in it? How does it work?” While I was waiting for her response, I pulled out some crumpled bills from my purse to

give to her. Just then, Kwame walked up. He'd been buying smoked fish from another merchant nearby. He watched me hand the money to the cream-woman.

"Oh hey," I said to him. "I just bought . . . um . . . what's it called again?" I asked the cream-woman.

"Skin bleach," Kwame said, before she could reply.

Skin bleach? "What? Did you say skin bleach? As in—"

"Yes, skin bleach," he repeated. "As in one application a day helps to rub the dark skin away." I was totally speechless. I turned to the cream-woman, shot her a look that said *Please, help me out here*. I guess I was hoping that she would tell Kwame he was mistaken. Instead, she offered this: "It brightens the skin. Makes it pretty."

Skin-bleaching creams—which are sometimes referred to as skin toners, fade creams, blemish/spot removers, lightening lotions—are solutions that usually contain a very small percentage of hydroquinone, a potent chemical agent that reduces the skin's pigmentation by inhibiting its production of melanin. The creams (which are used worldwide by people of all races) are intended to combat acne scars, liver spots, freckles, melasma, and other conditions that cause discoloration. But in Africa, these bleaching creams are popular for their ability to combat a condition that is, apparently, even more undesirable: being black.

"So even here," I said, "in the middle of Africa. Even here, the women want to get as close as they can to being white?"

"Yes, but it's not just the women," said Kwame. "The men bleach themselves, too. And it's not just us. Even the half-caste people do it. And the Indians that are here bleach themselves, and so do some of the darker Lebanese. They all want to be lighter."

"Even here," I muttered again, to no one in particular. This is sick, I thought, this plight to be white. It is a sick, sick joke.

"All except the white people," Kwame continued. "Like them." He nodded his head toward a trio of white women who were walking by us. They were wearing sandals, dresses sewn from batiks with matching head wraps and beaded bangles. "They," Kwame announced, with a mischievous smile

slowly spreading itself across his face, “they want to be black, like us. They know what it’s worth.”

. . .

When I was growing up, I used to love seeing the photographs in magazines like *Life* and *National Geographic* of tall, radiant dark-skinned beauties wearing those intricately braided crowns on their heads. I assumed that the women I’d meet in Ghana would look as if they had just stepped right off those pages. Sure, a lot of them wore braids, but a lot more of them had weaves and relaxers.

Even the dusty, rail-thin homeless girls who sold PK gum (Wrigley’s equivalent of Chicklets) by the side of the road wore their hair permed. Not styled, mind you, because it was too hot and humid. Only people who could afford air-conditioning could manage to hold crimps or any other type of curl. The less fortunate had to just settle for it being sun-dried and straight, which appeared to be good enough for them. Very few people had dreads. The people who did were almost always the blacks from the Diaspora who were there on holiday, the fetish priests, the musicians, and the madmen who had wandered off from the mental asylum.

The students wore their hair in short naturals. Boys and girls. It was a requirement at all the schools except the international ones, which were attended by the privileged offspring of expatriates and upper-crust citizens. I had wanted Korama to go to a regular school, but I didn’t understand why she had to sacrifice her hair to do so.

“Give me one good reason,” I told the administrators at the prospective schools.

“That is the rule” was the sole reason that I was given again and again.

“But why?” I pushed. “What is the point of that rule?” For weeks, I got the same stock answer again and again. Finally, just when it seemed like nobody was gonna ’fess up, an honest answer.

“Because our hair is too troublesome and time-consuming,” the headmistress at one of the schools informed me. Needless to say, I ended

up enrolling Korama in the American international school, where she, like all the other students, was able to wear her hair any way she wanted.

So, now that I had come to a decision about the fate of Korama's hair, I had to come to one about the fate of my own. By the time the school year started, we were three months into our stay. My roots had grown out and it was time to re-wrap them. But I had been so anxious to leave the States that I hadn't thought ahead. I hadn't brought along any extra loaves of the Afro-kinky human hair. I phoned one of my aunts and asked her if she knew where I could get my hands on some.

"Afro-kinky human hair." She said each word slowly, deliberately, as if it were its own sentence. My aunt suggested a wig shop, the largest in the city, and assured me that if it was being sold anyplace in Accra, it was being sold there. The next morning, I went to the shop.

"What?" the Lebanese woman behind the counter asked. "What is that, Afro-kinky?"

"It's kinky hair," I said, realizing that I wasn't providing her with any new information. "It's nappy hair like . . ." I glanced at all the Caucasian-flesh-colored mannequin heads displayed in the shop to see if any of them was fitted with an afro wig, but I couldn't find a single one. "It's like, um, um, that." I pointed to a man who was walking by the shop's front window. "That kind of hair. Kinky, I mean, nappy hair. Black people's hair. Do you sell any?"

"Oh," she snickered. "No, nothing coarse. We carry only silky hair. Why don't you try that? It would look very nice on you." When I declined, she suggested that I try to find it at another wig shop across town that catered more to "those kinds of things."

The next morning I went to the second shop (which was a stone's throw from the Ikea—yes, Ikea—outlet), where I was attended to by a rather hostile clerk who couldn't fathom why anybody would want to buy black hair in its original state.

"But I do not understand. Is it not the very same hair that grows from

your head?" she wanted to know. "If it is that kind of hair you like, then why must you buy it? Why not simply grow it yourself?" That is when the brilliant idea of pilfering came to mind.

"You're right," I shouted, jumping up and down excitedly. It was the perfect solution. I was so thrilled I could hardly contain myself. "You are absolutely right." The clerk grinned and cautiously stepped away from me. Looking back on the whole scene, what with my dreads, my seemingly nonsensical request to purchase hair that I was quite capable of producing myself, and my joyful outburst, I wouldn't be surprised if she thought I was a recently released asylum patient.

But right then, I couldn't have cared less. She had placed the answer to my problem directly into my lap. Korama. Why hadn't I thought of that before? Korama had a head full of thick, gorgeous, unprocessed hair. Starting that day, whenever I did my daughter's hair, instead of throwing the loose strands that she had shed away, I would pull them from the brush or comb, untangle them, and then put them away for safekeeping. Within a month, I had gathered enough to successfully complete my re-wrap.

It seemed like no time at all before I was due for another re-wrap. But there was no hair. While cleaning, the housegirl had discovered my hidden stash and dumped it in the garbage. Most households, mine included, had domestic help—housegirls/boys. Even the poor had help because there was always someone poorer, someone—usually a distant relative from the village—who was willing to do the menial chores in exchange for food, shelter, and the slightest chance of a better life. In a country that idealizes long, blow-in-the-nonexistent-breeze hair, I can only imagine what my housegirl thought when she found that bag full of gently organized naps. What else could she, or anyone, do with hair like that except throw it away?

Without the hair that I had been saving, I was back at square one. It was an utterly ridiculous dilemma. How is it possible, I wondered, that shelves upon shelves in a Koreatown store in Los Angeles could be stocked with Negro hair, but the shelves in all the beauty supply stores in

Accra, a city with Negroes by the numbers, were only stocked with what resembled Asian hair?

For almost a year, I had been living in Africa. Africa, the dark continent, the motherland, the one place I had imagined that I could be black—I mean *really* Black, Negritized—without explanation or envy, without penalty or apology. I had moved there because I figured that there *had* to be one place that was there for us, governed by us, and all about us. If Africa wasn't that place, then where was it? I was completely disillusioned, confused, downright bitter.

Tired of the charade, I had the Nu-Locks removed and, ultimately, I caved in and allowed my hairdresser, a local woman named Peace, to give me a perm. She had been pressing me to do it since the first time she laid eyes on me. "If you permed all of that, it'd be flowing down your back," she'd once told me. The saddest part of the situation is that when Peace was done, when she turned the chair around and let me look in the mirror, I actually recognized the person that I saw. Peace was right. Chemically relaxed, my hair was long, almost as long as the Nu-Locks had been. It was exactly the way I used to wear it when I was a teenager, one of a handful of black girls in a predominantly white school.

Those were the days I used to dream of Africa, the days I used to sit in the library flipping through the pages of *National Geographic*, wanting so much to be there, in those pictures, with those women, those regal-looking ebony-skinned, corn-rowed women, whom I thought were far more stylish and sophisticated and breathtaking than any of the models I had ever seen on the covers of *Vogue*.

Seeing myself in the mirror like that, remembering the misery and self-hatred I felt during those years in boarding school, made me think of a story that Kwame told me. He had also attended a boarding school, an exclusive all-boys academy in Europe. His family lived on the outskirts of Accra, but he rarely spent time there, only when he was home on holiday.

"No matter how long I had been gone, being in that house used to always bring me back to myself," he confided. "My grandfather built that house. He built everything inside of it, too. The cabinets, the furniture, everything. That house had been the same since the day I was born."

One Christmas vacation Kwame came home from school to find that his father had redecorated, taken all the mahogany furniture pieces and replaced them with Formica tables and Italian-style leather sofas. "It's not as if I minded the new things," he said. "It was a change. It was a different experience. What I believe truly hurt my heart was that—"

"—he sold the things your grandfather made?" I asked.

"You know, there is a saying that if there was a sea in Kumasi, the Asantes would have sold it by now. We Africans do sell a lot of things that should be kept in our family, in our culture. That is a source of anger and frustration, yes. But when we sell our belongings, we at least make it known that they are of some value to us. We at least give them a price. My father did not sell those things. He gave them away to some missionaries. And that is what hurt most of all. I have come to believe, Nana-Ama, that we are the enemies of our own progress. Who can complain about the taking? Who can say what white people are taking from us? It is not theft. It is not a crime to take what is being given freely. And we give so much of ourselves of our history away. Too much. What will there be left, Nana-Ama, once we have given it all away? What will there be left of us?"

"I don't know" was my immediate response to his statement. And that day, after hearing that story, I really didn't know. I couldn't fully grasp what he was saying. What I can remember, though, is how comfortable and free I had felt just hearing my name, my proper and preferred name being spoken, being pronounced correctly. No one in Ghana ever called me Meri, the Christian name that had been given to me at birth, which I'd insisted upon using in the States because so few people ever attempted to say Nana-Ama properly. It was so freeing to be called by my true name. It was the sort of freedom I had wanted to experience in every other aspect of my life there in Ghana. I just wanted to be whole. Not in spite of my history, but because of it.

Sitting in front of the mirror at the salon, staring at myself—curled bangs and all—I realized that I did know. I did know the answer to what Kwame had been asking. I looked around the salon at the other clients, their permed hair and bleached-bright skin, their fancy mobile phones bleeping and ringing every two minutes. I might as well have been in

America, in some 'round-the-way beauty shop. Disgusted, I turned my gaze to the milk-chocolate flesh of my hands, which had been resting on my lap, clasped together, as if in prayer. I held one hand up, spread the fingers apart, and then ran them, like a comb, through my newly straightened hair. "This, Kwame," I said softly to myself. "If we're not careful, *this* is what will be left."