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Ethnic hairstyles in corporate life

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As an accountant at Ernst & Young in Manhattan, Melissa Theodore knows the uniform when it comes to corporate America: dark suits and sensible shoes. But when it comes to hair, Theodore, 27, wanted a little flair, so she wears hers in long, thin, braided extensions.

Her family, however, told her to be careful. Not everyone thinks ethnic hairstyles are professional, they warned. Theodore, of Huntington, didn't agree. Not only did she keep the braids, she threw in some burgundy highlights.

"My hair has never been a problem as far as my career goes," said Theodore. "It's neat and very professional."

To be sure, but black hair historically has been controversial -- especially when worn in its natural state in styles like Afros, braids, cornrows and dreadlocks.

Glamour magazine still is trying to put to bed an ugly matter that erupted five months ago when a staffer made racially insensitive comments about the appropriateness of black women's hairstyles in the workplace.

A panel on race and beauty

Tuesday, the magazine will host "Women, Race & Beauty," a panel that will explore the culture of beauty, with an emphasis on ethnic hairstyles in corporate America. About a hundred people, including selected readers who wrote in about the incident, will attend. The event is not open to the public, but the magazine will write about it for an upcoming issue, said Samantha Rosenthal, a Glamour spokeswoman.

"It was important to open up a dialogue on personal issues related to women, race and beauty," said Rosenthal.

"We wanted to do something to address the issue raised by the incident."

The incident that Rosenthal is talking about involves Ashley Baker, a white associate editor at Glamour, who touched off a firestorm last summer when she told a roomful of female attorneys at law firm Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton in Manhattan that Afro-styled hairdos and dreadlocks are Glamour "don't's."

"'No offense,' she sniffed, but those 'political hairstyles really have to go,'" reported American Lawyer magazine, which broke the story.

After Don Imus' "nappy-headed hos" comment about the Rutgers University women's basketball team in April, the remarks were shockingly hard to believe; some actually thought them a joke.



Glamour received hundreds of letters from angry readers, Rosenthal said. Editor in chief Cindy Leive posted an apology on the magazine's Web site. Baker resigned shortly after.

Still, the anger over her comments continued to foment, prompting Glamour to assemble tomorrow's panel in the Conde Nast auditorium in Manhattan, moderated by Farai Chideya, host of "News & Notes" at National Public Radio. Panelists include Essence magazine's executive editor, Vanessa Bush; Lisa Price, founder of Carol's Daughter, which creates natural haircare and beauty products for black women; Jami Floyd, news anchor and legal analyst for Court TV; Daisy Hernandez, managing editor of ColorLines, a magazine on race and politics; celebrity makeup artist Mally Roncal, as well as professors Venus Opal Reese, who teaches aesthetic studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, and Barbara Trepagnier, who teaches sociology at Texas State University.

Contesting the 'facts'

Baker declined to comment for this article, but she did send Newsday an e-mail:

"The so-called facts in this story have been misrepresented and sensationalized since the onset, and the media has already vilified me for opinions I do not have and statements I did not make."

"Black hair is sensitive," said Anna Holmes, who is biracial and the managing editor of Jezebel, a celebrity, sex and fashion blog for women, who followed the Baker story closely. "What Baker said was inappropriate, but was she inaccurate? No. She hit a nerve ... society is uncomfortable with ethnic hair, and it is uncomfortable about race. And it's tough talking about all of it because emotion gets in the way."

An undertone that natural hair is unacceptable, unprofessional and even ugly continues to exist in society.

Image experts, both black and white, subtly advise black women to remove their braids, dreadlocks or other ethnic hairdos before interviewing at corporate jobs, experts confide. A scan of major black magazines, among them Ebony, Essence and Black Enterprise, shows that, despite burgeoning pride in ethnic hairstyles, many black women -- especially those in high-ranking positions -- continue to chemically straighten their hair.

Newsday reached out to a wide array of people on the subject, including stylists, career experts, authors, journalists and a handful of high-ranking black women executives. A black executive at a well-known non-profit, who asked not to be identified, said a story on the subject was "irrelevant."

"Nobody is going to talk to you about this subject," said another high-ranking black woman.

Almost true. Calls to many were not returned. The calls that were brought mixed news: More corporate environments are accepting ethnic hairdos, but others quietly regard them as "unprofessional."

As long as "hair is neat and put together, there is no natural hair texture that is inappropriate for corporate America," said Jill Herzig, executive editor at Glamour. In fact, "it is increasingly important to show your personal style, no matter where you work."

Natural hairstyles are becoming more mainstream, said Donna Wallace, 52, a pharmaceutical sales representative from Westbury, "But there is still the misconception that straight hair is beautiful." Two years ago, Wallace got tired of straightening her hair and decided to get a braided style.

Her hairdresser, Beverly Joyner, owner of House of Hair in Freeport, gave Wallace a braided honeycomb bun, which was elegant, but understated. "Corporate America is still conservative and demands a certain look," said Joyner.

Styles can be professional

Wallace wears her hair straightened now, but said she would return to a braided style because she knows it's

professional. Patricia Mitchell, director of the Center for Career Development at Adelphi University, noted that the corporate world still largely reflects the tastes of reserved white males.

"I would never tell anyone with dreadlocks or braids to cut their hair," said Mitchell, who is white. But, she said, corporate image can be tricky. Mitchell recalled how one young woman was passed over for a second interview because "she was wearing a beige suit" and how a young man got low marks from a recruiter because his top shirt button was visible above his tie.

Not for job-hunting?

It's possible, said Mitchell, that an ethnic hairstyle, especially in regions where there is little diversity, could hurt a job applicant in a similar way.

Concerns about ethnic hairstyles aren't isolated to white-owned firms. Carl Dameron, who is black and owns a public relations and advertising firm in San Bernardino, Calif., said he has told his black female employees that, outside of short-cropped Afros, most ethnic hairstyles are a "no-no" in his office.

Hairstyles that distract are not considered professional, said Dameron. "White guys can't wear mohawks, women can't wear dreadlocks like Whoopi Goldberg."

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