

How 'Black Panther' Got Its Gorgeous Afrocentric Hair



From left, Lupita Nyong'o as Nakia and Letitia Wright as Shuri in "Black Panther." Credit...Matt Kennedy/Marvel and Disney

By Crystal Martin Feb. 14, 2018

In "Black Panther," the audience first gets to know King T'Challa's mother, Ramonda, played by Angela Bassett, when her hair is covered in a series of headdresses, the height and stateliness of which are befitting to a queen mother. After the film's climax, in a moment of both existential and emotional vulnerability, the queen's hair emerges. It is downy, white and in dreadlocks. Taupe and brown hair accent the ends.

"That was intentional," said [Camille Friend](#), the head of the "Black Panther" hair department. "In her day-to-day, Ramonda was regal." And Ryan Coogler, the film's director, she said, "really wanted to show a transition. He wanted her to be more regular looking to show that they were going through a hard time."

Much of "Black Panther" occurs in the fictional, incomprehensibly wealthy and technologically advanced African nation of Wakanda. That world is animated by [visual references to African cultures](#), combined to sumptuous effect. The hair, in particular, punctuates character and plot. T'Challa, played by Chadwick Boseman, wears an understated mini-Afro that stands in contrast to the semi-shaved head of M'Baku, one of his fiercest rivals, played by Winston Duke.



Image

Winston Duke as M'Baku. Credit...Matt Kennedy/Marvel and Disney

"M'Baku is the leader of the Jabari tribe, who are great Wakandan warriors," Ms. Friend said. "Each of the Jabari guys has his own look. And they're all inspired by the hair of Senegalese warriors."

Princess Shuri, T'Challa's young sister and the genius tech master of Wakanda, has microbraids, but in some scenes she has them up in two buns, a girlish look. "The girl is on the brink of womanhood," Ms. Friend said. "She's supersmart, but with her brother she acts kind of bratty. That personality translates to her hair. Her clothes were really high-end and stylish, but her hair keeps that innocence."

Inspiration came from books, like the collection of black hairstyles shot by [the Nigerian photographer J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere](#) and the images of tribal cultures compiled in "Before They Pass Away," by the photographer [Jimmy Nelson](#). The film used a crew of 25 hairstylists and a rotating team of braiders from Atlanta, where much of the movie was filmed.

“We’d start our days at 5 a.m. and work on our first wave of actors,” Ms. Friend said. “People come in, get breakfast and talk ‘trailer talk,’ which is just like salon talk. We’re discussing what’s happening in People magazine.”

Editors’ Picks

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From left, Danai Gurira as Okoye, Ms. Nyong’o as Nakia and Florence Kasumba as Ayo.Credit...Matt Kennedy/Marvel and Disney

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Actors weighed in on their characters’ hair, especially in defining moments. Okoye, played by Danai Gurira, is the head of the Dora Milaje, the elite all-female Wakandan special forces that protect King T’Challa. The Dora are bald, with their heads sometimes painted in geometric designs. When Okoye goes incognito on a mission, she must, to her disgust, cover her head with a straight-haired bob wig.

“Danai had a lot to say about this,” Ms. Friend said. “We were trying to figure out if we were going to do something more Afrocentric for her. And she goes, ‘No, it should be something that Okoye would not wear.’ That’s when we started looking for straight hair. When Danai said that of her character, I totally got it.”

The moment lasts only a few seconds in the film, but it is striking and lasting in its message. Straight hair isn’t bad, of course, but the notion that it is somehow preferable to kinks or curls or a bald head is. Okoye’s wig moment rejects that idea, nonchalantly.

“We did a totally Afrocentric, natural hair movie,” Ms. Friend said. “There was not a pressing comb or relaxer on set. That wasn’t happening. We’re in a moment when people are feeling empowered about being black. And that’s one thing you see when you watch ‘Black Panther.’ The hair helps communicate that.”

Image



From left, Angela Bassett as King T'Challa's mother, Ramonda, and Ms. Wright as Shuri. Credit...Matt Kennedy/Marvel and Disney

'Black Panther' Hair for the Real World

Wakanda's lead hairstylist, Camille Friend, shared hairstyling gems that work wonders off the big screen, too.

On Wakanda knots "People are calling the Lupita character's signature hairstyle Bantu knots, but they're not. The difference is the Bantu knot is raised. We're basically starting with a flat knot. Meaning, we're taking the hair by sections and twisting it upon itself, twisting it down to what I call a flatter, cinnamon-roll shape. We let the hair dry, then lift it slightly at the roots, so it's off the scalp, but keeps that round shape."

The hands-down best moisturizing products "L'Oréal Paris is one of my favorite lines. My favorite is to mix the [L'Oréal Paris Serum de Soie Sublimateur styling serum](#) and their [L'Huile Secret de Beauté](#). Sometimes when you put just an oil on the hair, it sits on top. With this combination, the cream helps deliver the oil into the hair. I use it on everybody."

How to be free from razor bumps and ingrown hairs "We had a three-step process for shaving the Doras' heads. First, we just got the hair down with the [Wahl Balding Clipper](#). Then we'd apply a powder stick, the [Remington FaceSaver](#), that lifts the hair up off the scalp.

We cut the hair down further with [Andis T-Outliner T-Blade Trimmers](#), going in a circular motion with the hair-growth pattern. The third and final cut was with a [Wahl Professional Finale Shaver](#) to get the head bald. To finish, we'd apply a steam towel, ingrown-hair-treatment solution and, finally, a natural oil like almond or jojoba."

On great braids "I think the reason Shuri's braids looked as great as they did was first the size, but also the color. I chose shades of dark brown, medium brown, golden red and honey blond that looked great with her skin tone. I'm a longtime braid wearer, and it's important to pick tones that complement the skin."

Correction: Feb. 14, 2018

An earlier version of this article rendered incorrectly a quotation from Camille Friend, the head of the "Black Panther" hair department. She identified M'Baku as the leader of the Jabari tribe, not T'Challa.

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