

The radical history of the headwrap

Born into slavery, then reclaimed by black women, the headwrap is now a celebrated expression of style and identity



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Pop singer Erykah Badu performing in a head wrap in 2001. (Peter Van Breukelen/Redferns via Getty Images)

The headwrap has undergone several iterations throughout American history. As a descendant of the cloths that adorned the heads of women in ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa, it's come to represent the cultural and historical lineage black Americans have maintained with the African continent. It's also become a powerful shorthand for the kind of beauty that has been pitted as the antithesis of white femininity.

Initially, the headwrap wasn't intended to be an expression of black resistance or beauty. Like an offensive slur birthed in racism and white supremacy, it was appropriated by the very black people whose humanity it sought to undermine. In her article "The African American Woman's Headwrap: Unwinding the Symbols," historian Helen Bradley Gabriel explains that both the symbolism and functions of the headwrap "acquired a paradox of meaning" that could have been created only in "the crucible of American slavery and its aftermath." By looking at testimonials from slaves during that period, Griebel concludes that, while the headwrap adopted different meanings and purposes throughout time, it was ultimately the descendants of slaves who determined its significance and usage for future generations.

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Before the American Revolution, European colonies enacted laws to distinguish African slaves from their burgeoning white populations. The purpose of this legislation was to entrench the superiority of Europeans and an economic system that exploited the labor of African slaves. Under British rule, South Carolina passed the Negro Act of 1735, which provided stipulations on the type of clothing black people were allowed to wear, outlawing anything more extravagant than "Negro cloth, duffels, kerseys, osnabrigs, blue linen, check linen or coarse garlix, or calicoes, checked cottons, or Scotch plaids."

Governor Esteban Rodríguez Miró of Louisiana, which was still a Spanish colony, passed the “Edict of Good Government,” which required black women to wear “their hair bound in a kerchief” or a “tignon.” Additionally, black women were prevented from wearing the same “jewelry or plumes” as women of European descent.

Governor Miró was also concerned about the growing appeal of Creole and biracial women, often referred to as mulattoes, to men of European descent. Part of enforcing the wearing of headwraps was to discourage plantation owners and slave masters from pursuing women who were deemed beneath them. In South Africa, similar laws were passed at the behest of slave mistresses who felt that the headwrap would prevent white men from pursuing black slaves.

Speaking with South African radio host Eusebius McKaiser, economist and sociologist Hlonipha Mokoena emphasized that these laws were made on behalf of white women who felt that slaves with various “shades of brown [and] many different hair textures” were a distraction to white men. “There are reports and examples of white women almost forcibly shaving off the hair of black slaves,” Mokoena said. “White women used to complain that basically when they walk with their slaves, white men get all confused about who’s the slave and who’s the mistress. So it was much better to have black women in headwraps. That’s basically the account of the headwrap in slave societies.”





A group of slaves wearing head wraps in St. Augustine, Florida, circa 1850. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

In the antebellum South, enslaved black women were forced to wear kerchiefs or headwraps as part of their uniform. While the cloth protected their hair from lice and perspiration as they worked under the blazing sun, it was also used to designate their inferior status. White-passing slaves and mulattoes were required to don a headwrap so they wouldn't be able to pass as white. Fears over the consequences of violent white male lust coincided with suspicions over potential Negro rebellion. From plantation owners to politicians, forms of individual and collective black expression were treated as an indicator of impending upheaval. Regulating the dress code of the black population allowed white society to feel in control and to exercise the right to clamp down on any perceived civil disobedience or law-breaking.

Soon the headwrap became associated with the depiction of black women as “mammies” catering to the needs of their white masters and mistresses. Songs like “Aunt Jemima,” written and performed by comedian Billy Kersands in 1875, and products like the Pearl Milling Company's Aunt Jemima's Pancake Flour mix popularized the image of black women as sassy but motherly figures whose purpose was to coddle white America. But efforts to tie the dress code of African descendants to their inferior status under white supremacy created an environment where slaves adopted innovative ways to express themselves under the tyranny of their masters. What was used to reinforce the superiority of white society evolved into a proud marker of identity. As black studies and history professor Tanisha C. Ford said in an interview with *GQ*, the headwrap quickly became “a way for black women to reclaim their own sense of humanity.”

In the early 20th century, the first chemical relaxers were introduced to black hair care. Businesswoman Annie Malone's “Great Wonderful Hair Grower” and the more successful Madam C.J. Walker's “Wonderful Hair Grower” by Sarah Breedlove allowed black women to chemically straighten their hair and promised instant hair growth upon

application. While these chemically processed styles were criticized by activists like Booker T. Washington for encouraging the internalization of European beauty standards, their upkeep meant that the headwrap took on a more functional use: headwraps protected hair from sweat, water, and dust, which would interfere with the effectiveness of the hair grower.

An iteration of the headwrap is the durag, a pressing cap used to protect chemically treated hair from sweat, water, and dust. *Ethnic Dress in the United States: A Cultural Encyclopedia* cites the 1930s as the first period in which the durag was used, increasingly by black men, to maintain hairstyles such as the conk, which manipulated the hair into soft waves. The conk was sported by jazz musicians like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.

While the demand for chemically processed hair declined with the rise of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s and '70s, the headwrap and durag remained cultural staples in American fashion, with the latter gaining prominence with the rise of hip-hop in the 1980s. What was once a simple cloth meant to reinforce the lowly status of black Americans is now a powerful expression of identity.

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