

# LEARNING GUIDE



ON THE KREEGER THEATER STAGE  
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A CO-PRODUCTION WITH BERKELEY REPERTORY THEATRE AND CHICAGO SHAKESPEARE THEATER  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH MADISON WELLS LIVE AND LACHANZE

# JAJA'S AFRICAN HAIR BRAIDING

BY JOCELYN BIOH  
DIRECTED BY WHITNEY WHITE

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*"What kind of perfect immigrant are they looking for, eh?  
When it comes to us, the rules are alllllways changing!"*

— Jaja, *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*



# THE PLAY



It is a hot July morning outside an African hair braiding shop on 125th Street in Harlem, New York.

Eighteen-year-old **Marie** starts the day by opening up Jaja's African Hair Braiding along with hair braider **Miriam**. Marie oversees the ongoing operations of the shop which is owned by her mother, **Jaja**. Originally from Senegal, Jaja is away that day preparing for her wedding to her American boyfriend at City Hall.

While the air conditioning strains to cool a blazing-hot shop, Marie and Miriam are swapping early morning stories with each other when **Aminata** and **Bea**, both long-time hair braiders, best friends, and shop gossips, arrive at their shop stations.

As Afrobeats hits from YouTube fill the shop, **Ndidi**, one of the fastest and most requested braiders, arrives at her station. Then, things really begin to heat up in the shop as customers arrive and tensions smolder.

Customers and neighborhood regulars make their appearances throughout the service day; some provide comic relief, while others make you side-eye. In this comedy, the characters at Jaja's invite us to celebrate a true-to-life representation of braid shop culture, Black entrepreneurship, and the quest to be seen, heard, and valued.

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT JOCELYN BIOH

Ghanaian-American writer and performer Jocelyn Bioh was born and raised in New York City. She has written numerous popular plays, including *Nollywood Dreams* and *School Girls; or, The African Mean Girls Play*, which earned the Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Play. Also a screenwriter, Bioh has written for television, including *Russian Doll* and Spike Lee's series *She's Gotta Have It* on Netflix and Hulu's miniseries *Tiny Beautiful Things*.

Bioh debuted on Broadway as a stage performer in the Tony-Award winning production *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. However, in an interview with *Playbill*, she said she felt "called and led to really commit

more to writing." Much of Bioh's experiences growing up in New York City and being immersed in African hair braiding culture throughout nearly her entire life are woven throughout *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*.

Bioh shares with *Playbill*, "I have many, many, *many*, years of experience sitting in a chair for hours – seeing the myriad of different African women who all work in a salon, braiding people's hair, and all of their stories." Bioh hopes that *Jaja's* audiences embrace the messages of self-acceptance and appreciating one's own beauty. Bioh continues, "I'm a dark-skinned woman. I had my own journey of owning my own beauty, and really coming to love who I am and accept who I am as a dark-skinned woman; and that took me a very, very, very long time, well into my adulthood."

### VISIT YOUTUBE TO WATCH JOCELYN BIOH TALK JAJA'S

Hear from Bioh as she shares her inspiration for writing *Jaja's*, which she calls her "love letter" to braiding artists.  
<https://tinyurl.com/jahbjb>

■ Jocelyn Bioh



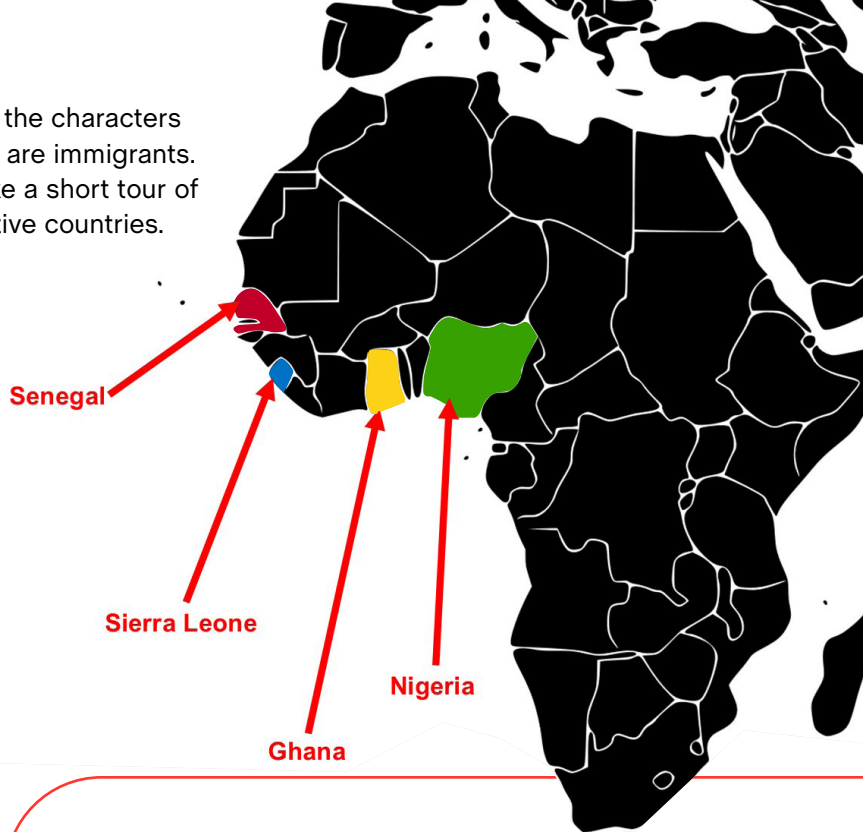
**"To many people, they are just 'hair braiding ladies,' random women people pass by on the street; but, to me, they are heroes, craftswomen and artists with beautiful, gifted and skilled hands."**

— Jocelyn Bioh, playwright



# CHARACTERS' COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Many of the characters at Jaja's are immigrants. Let's take a short tour of their native countries.



## SENEGAL



**Characters:** Jaja, Aminata, Eric, Marie

**Declared independence from France in 1960**

**Official language:** French

Many Senegalese immigrants who moved to New York City settled along West 116th Street in Harlem and established shops, restaurants, and various businesses. The area has been nicknamed Little Senegal, or Le Petit Senegal.

## NIGERIA



**Characters:** Ndidi, Olu

**Declared independence from Britain in 1960**

**Official language:** English

Although Nigeria's official language is English, other prominent languages in the country include Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. In 2020, Nigeria was included as one of the countries on a U.S. list of visa bans, preventing Nigerians from applying for permanent immigrant visas to the United States. The ban was lifted in 2021.

## GHANA



**Characters:** Bea, James

**First African country to declare independence from colonial rule in 1957**

**Official language:** English

According to a 2015 study by the Migration Policy Institute, New York City has the largest Ghanaian immigrant population of any metropolitan area. There are large Ghanaian communities in the Bronx, such as Little Accra (named after Ghana's capital) around 167th Street.

## SIERRA LEONE



**Character:** Miriam

**Declared independence from Britain in 1961**

**Official language:** English

Ten years after declaring its independence from Britain, Sierra Leone became a republic in 1971. Sierra Leone's official language is English, but the most widely spoken language is Krio.

# GLOSSARY



## BOX BRAIDS

A style in which hair is sectioned into boxy parts and each individual part is braided. Synthetic or additional hair is often added to the braids to give them volume and length. The size of the parts can be described using these terms:



**Jumbo:** box braids with very large parts



**Micro:** box braids with very small parts



## CORNROWS

A style in which hair is separated into rows and braided tightly to the scalp from one side to another. Cornrows are commonly used to make shapes out of the parts. Sometimes, additional artificial hair is fed into the braids to give them volume and length.

## NOLLYWOOD

Nigeria's film industry is known as Nollywood. With the increase in internet access, its worldwide popularity has been rapidly growing. Today, Nollywood produces the second largest number of films in the world, following Bollywood.



## PROTECTIVE STYLE

A protective style is any hairstyle that allows for healthier, longer hair growth by limiting the natural hair's contact with harsh styling practices. Natural hair with tight angular or coiled patterns can be quite fragile, making it susceptible to damage from regular combing. Locs, twists, braids, and braid extensions (which are formed by added pieces of human or synthetic hair) are all considered protective styles because they give the hair a break from daily styling. This break enables natural hair to grow longer and to be styled and maintained without significant breakage.



# THE JOURNEY OF BLACK HAIR IN THE U.S.

*Jaja's African Hair Braiding* shares a glimpse into the culture of Black hair in America and its roots in West African traditions. Since ancient times, hair and hair adornments have been an unspoken language among West Africans as an expression of identity. For example, one's hairstyle could indicate one's ethnic group affiliation, as in *Yoruba* or *Fulani*; One's headwrap or *gele* ("GAY-lay"), as it is called in Nigeria, could communicate marital or social status.

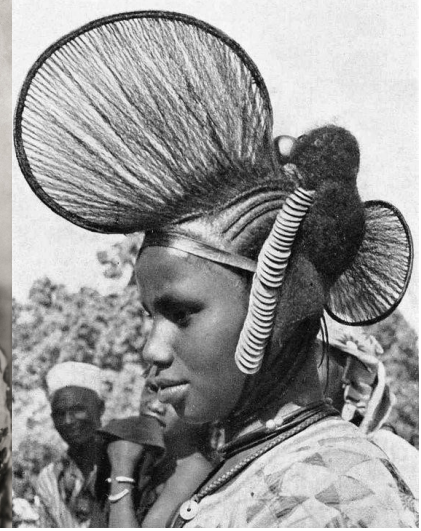
The roots of Black hair culture began in proud traditions. However, when Africans were brought to America to be enslaved, slave traders would shave the captives' heads, erasing their unique identities. Later, discriminatory laws enforced control over Africans' appearances. For example, South Carolina's Negro Law of 1735 and the Tignon Laws of 1786 in Louisiana forced Africans to wrap and cover their heads to distinguish them as enslaved. As a result, traditional headwraps and adornments that were celebrated in their West African ancestral lands became symbols of oppression in the New World.

Beginning in colonial times, European beauty became the standard of beauty in the U.S. Generations of Africans and their descendants assimilated over time by contorting their naturally coiled and kinky tresses into longer, straighter, Eurocentric versions. This was accomplished through harmful chemical processes, such as lye-based relaxing, or extreme temperatures, like the use of hot combs. Black men and women adopted these practices, in part, to be more accepted in a dominant Eurocentric culture, where natural Black hairstyles have been discriminated against as unprofessional or too ethnic for the workplace.



■ A Senegalese woman with braided style and headdress

By Senegalese photographer Mama Casset



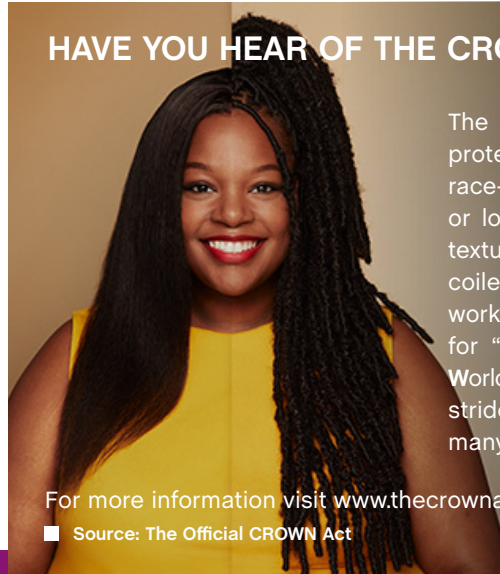
■ A traditional Fulani woman



■ Angela Davis, iconic civil rights activist, wearing her hair in an afro

With the revolutionary movements of the late 20th century, including the Civil Rights Era and the Black Power movement, Black people began to defy Eurocentric standards of beauty and take pride in wearing their own natural kinks, coils, and curls in afros and braided styles. Today, natural Black hair styles have become more commonplace. Afrocentric headwraps have gained popularity as an expression of cultural pride. The demand for natural hair services has led to an increase of Black-owned natural hair salons and product brands, while stylists of Black hair continue to innovate more creative and complex natural hair designs.

## HAVE YOU HEAR OF THE CROWN ACT?



The CROWN Act is legislation that protects against the discrimination of race-based hairstyles, such as braids or locs, and natural race-based hair textures, including curly or tightly coiled hair, in public schools and workplaces. CROWN, which stands for "Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair," has made strides against hair discrimination in many states, but not all.

For more information visit [www.thecrownact.com](http://www.thecrownact.com).

■ Source: The Official CROWN Act

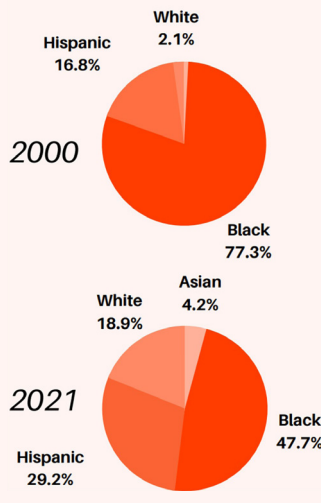


# AFRICAN HAIR BRAIDING IN HARLEM

Hair braiding salons can be found all along Harlem's 125th Street, where this play takes place. African immigrants often use the braiding techniques they were raised on to create a living in the United States. Rather than being paid an hourly wage, braiders typically negotiate a price with their clients and pay a commission to the shop in which they work. Known internationally as "the Black Mecca of the world" and as a neighborhood with a predominantly Black population, Harlem became a central spot for African hair braiding services. However, gentrification has shifted its demographic makeup. Housing prices have increased by 247% over the past ten years, displacing many of Harlem's original residents.

## HARLEM POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS

These factors have led to a decrease in clients for African hair braiding businesses.



## BLACK SALON AND BARBERSHOP CULTURE

West Africans and Black Americans have a shared culture when it comes to the salon or barber shop experience. Just like Jaja's shop, Black hair shops are more than just a place to get grooming services. They are community hubs where Black culture and well-being is promoted, preserved, and protected. They are sacred spaces where Black people feel safe to convene and unload their stresses. They sometimes confide in their barber or stylist, who can become an unofficial counselor or life coach to their clients. The play opens the front door of Jaja's shop and welcomes the audience in to experience a day from opening to closing.

## HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience.

To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the seat indicated on your ticket.
- Ushers are there to help you!
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms, and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games, pictures, or recording.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry, and gasp. However, don't distract the performers onstage.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Intermission is the best time to discuss the show and visit the restroom.
- If you must leave during the show, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Be sure to applaud at the end! During a musical, audiences sometimes clap after a song or dance. If you love the show or a performer, you can give a standing ovation. The actors bow to thank you.

# THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What connects the women and brings them together?

2

How does music help tell the story?

3

If you were to write a play, which part(s) of your culture or everyday life would you bring to the stage?

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