

CROWNS IN DISGUISE

"In the evening my mother comes home from work, releases a deep sigh, and goes to the bathroom. I can hear her washing her hair from my room. This always takes so ridiculously long that after 40 minutes I go and see what's going on. My mother says to me, 'I am expected to do something that I cannot deliver.' Wearing my hair loose at work is a job and I prefer to wear my hair in an Angisa, Gele or Bonnet. She takes the coloured cloths from her closet and very carefully begins to tie her hair. I ask her, 'why can't you just wear these headscarves to work?' and looks at me despairingly and says, "Fidel, in this white-oriented western world you have no choice but to just adapt to their cultural traits and shut up if you want to keep your job. Apparently, my culture is not the representation of what they want to stand for and I am not allowed to wear this."

It isn't difficult to find people with a non-western descent who can speak about how their headwear has affected their lives in both subtle and substantial ways, ranging from veiled comments from co-workers to ultimatums from bosses to look "more professional" or to find another job. They are based on racist standards of appearance; they perpetuate racist stereotypes that say non-western headwear are unprofessional or improper.

A hijab, angisa or any other cultural-religious headwear is often, from the outside looked at as something that's threatening, provocative, unnecessary. The power of shame has been built over millennia, and many societies and social groups all over the globe have experienced punishment with intent to publicly humiliate as a deterrent to others, and to enforce conformity to establish social norms. Shame always requires an audience or at least the perception of one.

As I got older and became intrigued in discovering my own identity and what it was built on, I asked my mother why I had to behave in these manners and strongly obey to it. "To not draw any negative attention towards yourself", she responded with a sharp tone. From the way she stared at me blankly, I immediately understood that this was the question she was not waiting for. She couldn't tell me why she and many others are still so silenced and afraid to speak on these societal problems. As a Creole-Surinamese in Western civilisation, starting to speak up about these matters was an endless path in the dark. My relatives watched me from the side lines as I lost myself in an everlasting journey. After having had several dialogues with them, I noticed that they did not find meaning in speaking up about certain problems rooted within society and their own community even. Slowly but surely, I realised they never started or even wanted to tackle these deep-rooted problems, that they never found the courage to demand for answers to their long-awaited questions or to even finish their quest of searching for their identity.

The different expressions of oneself, from different cultures, is not being discussed in schools. It's not taught in communities how to take care of our hair for example. That's how fragmented we are from who we are naturally. Ultimately the ratio of other stories being told is still disproportionately low. To access our personal power, we must acknowledge the collective identity that we share with those who came before us, and those who will come after. Through respectfully highlighting cultural motifs, this story exemplifies the vital connection one must have with their community, to uplift, inspire, and reach their full potential. I feel like the current panorama of headwear is lacking narratives. These stories could have helped and educated me to guide my way through western society and wash of the shame and inferiority of my faith and culture, shaping me as a person.

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