

In Tokyo, Much Ado For a 'Do

By Wayne Lionel Aponte
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As I stood before a rotating barber's pole in central Tokyo and looked at myself in a mirror, a wave of fright swept over me. Hair spread wildly down the back of my neck. It was remarkably uneven, with the left side longer than the right.

The more I studied the reflection, the more I realized that the thick, bushy growth -- the result of considerable neglect -- wasn't close to any acceptable hairstyle. For months, I'd been trying to convince myself that I didn't really need a haircut in Japan. I was wrong.

I'd already replaced my brush with my older brother's Afro comb -- the one with the metal teeth and closed fist as a handle. At New York's Kennedy Airport, he had predicted, with a wide grin, that I'd need it.

Old friends would have laughed if they'd seen my half-year's worth of outgrowth. "My, my, my," I could almost hear them shout, "that's a bird's nest." My new Japanese friends, on the other hand, had complimented my coiffure. "You need lots of hair in winter to prevent sickness," one said.

Counterparts from other English-speaking countries say that, amid all kinds of foreignness here, their straight hair connects them to the locals, making them feel at ease in barber's chairs. But as an African American male with bushy, tightly curled hair, I didn't have that luxury.

From the moment I'd landed at Tokyo's Narita Airport after accepting a scholarship to work for a Japanese company, I'd been paralyzed by an inability to locate a barber experienced in cutting my texture of hair. The few similar people I encountered around the city had adjusted by having dreadlocks, Afros, perms, braids or shaved heads. So I'd developed an unhealthy skepticism about whether a local barber could cut my hair as I like: no line in the front, a square back, a little off the sides and none off the center because I'm thinning.

Maybe it worked both ways. Based on the wide-eyed look of the Japanese barber who stared at me through the window that afternoon, I could tell that he too felt uncomfortable. But desperation inspired me to find *some* kind of professional service.

I entered in the middle of a conversation about a sumo wrestling match. Three barbers dressed in white tops and black pants rushed to a corner of a room, where they decided who should take on the task. In the interim, I was politely offered a seat.

Five televisions decorated the main area. Customers viewed an American sci-fi movie on all the sets, while a high-tech stereo system played an American pop melody.

Tonics, after-shaves, powders, razors and clippers were lined up on a shelf beneath a mirror. A wooden stand held Japanese comic books and magazines. One man kept his eyes closed while a barber applied lotion to his face. A female barber massaged oil into another customer's scalp.

As I waited my turn, I wondered if I should have cut my own hair. Doing so would make me self-sufficient. But the last time I tried that, I had to shave my head clean to hide the bald spots.

"Customer!" shouted a barber in Japanese. I looked up to see a slim man with short, gelled, straight black hair waving me over to his chair. Armed with a dictionary, I explained in detail the kind of cut I wanted. The barber wrapped me in white cloths like a dead samurai, then proceeded to timidly comb my matted locks. His slow combing exaggerated the hair's thickness, and his hand shook.

I began to feel sorry for him. But when he gestured to the staff for further instructions, I sensed trouble. Another barber approached my chair and took control, telling me that he had an American client who comes to the shop regularly.

He grabbed a razor blade in his right hand and was about to apply shaving cream to the back of my neck. Bad idea. Because I didn't know how to say "ingrown hairs" (that bumpy, painful state experienced by men with woolly locks after sharp-edged devices remove whiskers) in Japanese, I raised my arms and shook my head.

Next he grabbed a pair of scissors before switching to clippers at my suggestion. Throughout, the other barbers watched carefully, making me feel like the subject of an experiment.

In the United States, the function of a barbershop has never been just to cut and style hair. In the best sense, it serves as a center of news, bets, entertainment, scandal, gossip and diversions. But here, in my case, it was all about the hair. I didn't want to interrupt my barber's intense concentration, given that I had enough hair for three separate cuts. Indeed, the task would be a challenge for even the most gifted American barber. So we approached the job together: step by step, inch by inch, snip by snip.

He finished in a little less than an hour. I retrieved my eyeglasses and found that the results looked much better than my previous personal attempts at hair cutting. I was pleased -- and relieved -- with the outcome. I caught a glimpse of the barber watching me survey the new contours of my head up close. He was smiling and nodding with approval.

I gave the barber the Afro comb as a souvenir. He gave me a discount and urged me to return. I paid the \$30 tab, made a future appointment and shook his hand. At the door, the staff thanked me in Japanese and bowed in unison.

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