



Abantu Today's hair choices are not so black and white

Traditionally the domain of darker-skinned women, Abantu Beauty Products has grown with the times and now plays host to the hair desires of a much broader, whiter audience.



CLIPS AND CURLS
Abantu's current hottest seller is the 7-piece Clip-in System. You can add volume or length with human hair that can be cut, curled and styled. There are no damaging side effects and at \$85-99 Clip-ins won't hurt your budget either

Thirteen years past in Burnaby's Metrotown district, when the Okoth family launched the first of its two stores, the developing hair extensions industry was aimed almost exclusively at Afro-Canadian women. Bound by an almost singular ethnic disposition of tight, dark curls, it may stand to reason that the craft of weaving or sewing hair to one's head was pioneered by the black community in an effort to bring some variety to hair styles worn by Afro-Canadian women.

"In '93, most of our clients were black," says Birgit Okoth, who co-founded Abantu with husband Michael a decade after their move to Vancouver from Kenya. "We always had a hard time finding hair-care products for our two daughters. In retrospect, by first looking out for our own daughters, we have in effect been filling a void for the entire black community. We've since done great business with the movie industry and professional hairstylists also, who work with all types of women, but our initial public market was always black."

Was is the key word here, because since the autumn of 1993 a heady array of hair-extension and hair-care products have swept the industry and opened everything up to women of all walks and curls. The range and ease of products, in combination with changing attitudes toward hair extensions, wigs, and hairpieces is driving a silent but sassy revolution in personal expression.

"You'd be surprised how many women are wearing some sort of hair accessory," says son, Mark Okoth, whose knowledge of hair products is as broad as his duties as general manager between the two family stores. "The old notion that wigs and extensions are for old ladies and rich movie stars was never true, and today we see a terrific number of young women altering or accenting their hair styles regularly, not just for special occasions."



Abantu's product line has adapted considerably since 2000, the year that Birgit pegs as the revolution, and in 2003 the Okoth family launched the second store on West 4th in trendy Kitsilano to meet the demands of a rapidly growing and changing market. Today, Abantu employs seven full-time staff members in that endeavour, and Mark is proud to note that Abantu's staff know its product. They are essentially professionals in their own rights and frankly, they will not tolerate bad-hair days. Style is their game, and Abantu is built to deliver the possibilities.

In fact, Abantu delivers more than just hair. "We also educate our customers about the different hair extension methods and products, provide specific training on the Fusion Extension System and, most importantly, advise how to maintain a healthy head of hair regardless of styles and treatments," Mark says. "That's worthy of note and should comfort women whose early experiences with wigs and extensions and all too many perms may have damaged both their hair and pride."


The range of new products virtually eliminates many former nightmares, and Abantu is quick to review all new developments, such as the popular seven-piece Clip Extension System, and put the best of them on the shelf. Abantu's extensive product range is also available online at its Web site, and via mail order.

"Our web and mail-order business is most respectable," said Mark, who's also the current webmaster since the company's 2000 launch. "We supply over 200 salons via mail order across North America and internationally, but our individual customers usually prefer to touch and see the hair products before buying. That's understandable because hair is both a tactile experience and extremely personal."

To that end, Abantu carries an enormous inventory at all times. Consider over 200 styles of wigs alone, in a hair-raising multitude of colours and lengths, in both high-quality natural human hair

and affordable synthetics, and you will get some idea of how much hair is out there. Add to the racks a vast array of fusion hair, weave and clip accessories, applicators and removers, brushes and over seventy-five brands of hair- and skin-care solutions, and you have the largest and most stylish inventory in the Lower Mainland.

Abantu's large stock, fair prices, and expertise in the field haven't gone unnoticed and over the years some of the biggest stars have graced its aisles including Vanessa Williams, Halle Berry, Lynn Whitfield, Ashanti, Kelly Osborne, Margo Kidder, Darryl Hanna, and Pam Grier. Abantu has also played a role in hundreds of movies big and small and in just as many local TV productions, and has supplied wigs for the entire cast of many theatre productions including Vancouver's popular *Bard on the Beach*.

For the Okoth family and Abantu's two locations, there's simply no slowing down in sight. With darker roots and thirteen years of great-hair days behind them, the future of hair extensions is bright indeed and infinitely more colourful. 

Abantu has two locations: Kitsilano at 2908 West 4th Ave, 604.734.9447; and Burnaby at 4633 Kingsway, 604.431.4588 or 800.615.9899. For more information, visit www.Abantutu.com.



PRICES THAT WILL GROW ON YOU
Given the sheer range of high quality hair products on the market today, Abantu can offer a completely new Updo, Ponytail or hairpiece for under \$13, which has proved most popular with wedding parties and women celebrating all occasions that call for something a little extra.

BRISTLING WITH GOOD IDEAS
You wouldn't know it but this little gem, with its looped bristles, is a revolution in hair care, much like the crystallized Keratin glue. Abantu's range of innovative hair products has steadily increased over 13 years as the industry itself has continuously reached a larger audience