

Wearing a Mask. Voluntary Depigmentation among Continental Africans: An Aesthetic Revolution or a Post-Colonial Traumatism?

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For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for “denegrification”; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporal malediction.¹ Frantz Fanon

Abstract

For almost half a century, Continental African women have been using chemical products with strong depigmenting potency in order to lighten their skin. This article examines the socio-cultural and psychological motivations that lead Continental African women to use cosmetic de-pigmenting products in order to deliberately either lessen or completely get rid of the production of melanin pigments in their skin. Dermatologists and other health professionals have warned against the potentially damaging and even deadly health consequences of bleaching products since the early 1970s. Nevertheless, starting from the 1970s on, the use of de-pigmenting products has increasingly and dramatically become a social, cultural, and aesthetic trend in several African countries, especially among the women population. I argue in this paper that beyond being a mere fashion trend, voluntary de-pigmentation along with the cult of

whiteness that it embodies symbolizes a strong expression of an ill-resolved conflict resulting from post colonial traumatism on the African psyche. My contention is that Continental Africans have internalized Western beauty ideals (of which skin colour is the most outward manifestation) so much so that they have attached to light skin social, cultural, economic and political meanings and values alien and most of the time contradictory to their indigenous established social, political, cultural, and economic realities.

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Introduction

For almost half a century, Continental African women have been using depigmenting products in order to lighten their skin. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new trend in Continental African women's aesthetics emerged as skin depigmenting products invaded African cosmetic markets. This boom in skin depigmenting products reached epidemic proportions in the mid 1980s and early 1990s. Nowadays, the cosmetic use of depigmenting substances is a widespread practice in many African countries. Yet, it remains a relatively unknown phenomenon to the international community due to the lack of scholarship in the Social Sciences on the subject. Most of the available data have been collected mainly for medical purposes between 1974 and 2006 mostly in African urban cities, like Johannesburg (Dogliotti, Caro, Hartdegen & Whiting, 1974)²; Brazzaville (Didillon & Bounsana, 1986³ Ondongo, 1989⁴); Bamako (Mahé et al., 1993⁵ & 1994⁶); Accra (Doe, Asiedu, Achaeampong, & al. 2001⁷); Dakar (Sylla, Diouf, Niane, Guisse, Diop, Cisse & Diop 1994⁸, Wone et al., 2000⁹, Raynaud 2001¹⁰, Del Giudice, 2002,¹¹ & Mahé et al. 2003¹², Mahé and al., 2004¹³ Ly, 2006¹⁴); Lomé (Pitche 1998¹⁵); and Lagos (Adebajo, 2002¹⁶, Ajose, 2004¹⁷). The data from these different researches about voluntary depigmentation point to the fact that it is primarily an urban phenomenon in a continent where, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development, almost 70% of the population lives in rural settings. However, most of the studies about voluntary depigmentation in Africa have been focused more on the

description of the different “cosmetic” depigmenting products used, the physiological description of the phenomenon, of the different depigmenting ingredients and their potency, its medical prevalence and complications, rather than on the interpretation and understanding of the historical, socio-cultural and psychological factors that have favored and facilitated the explosion and cultural transmission of the practice of voluntary depigmentation in many contemporary African societies.

Although, some sociological implications incidentally resulted from a few of those medical studies on voluntary depigmentation, the discussion of the experience of the cosmetic use of depigmenting substances has been mostly done in isolation from its full socio-cultural and psychological context, thus leading to generalizations and misrepresentations especially in terms of the scope of its prevalence. Moreover, those studies failed to provide viable solutions for eradicating voluntary depigmentation which has been a persistent public health problem in the African continent over the past forty years. The aim of this paper is thus to provide an analysis of the historical, sociological, as well as the underlining psychological motivations of voluntary depigmentation in Africa.

Methodology

My discussion will be centered around the analysis of the available literature which mainly comprises several studies conducted in the major urban cities of different African countries, and African newspapers’ reports and internet discussion forums on the subject of voluntary depigmentation. I believe that newspapers and internet discussion forums have been extremely useful and helpful in understanding voluntary depigmentation as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Moreover, most of the debates on the subject have been so far done on the media (radio, T.V., internet) and have involved an exchange of ideas among African themselves about the pros and cons, as well as the potentially deadly health hazards of artificial depigmenting products. Indeed, has been a general outcry in the African journalistic media and in the internet circles about the epidemic proportion of artificial depigmentation in many African societies.

Since many African women who use depigmenting products are reluctant to openly admit their behavior, (as a result of the official bans of the products and the social condemnations of the practice) the anonymity of internet forums provides a safe place where bloggers can freely express their views.

However, I am also aware of the limitations of such material. Therefore, I am using them only as an additional tool of information about voluntary depigmentation in Africa. For the sake of this argument, I chose to use in this paper the terminology “Voluntary Depigmentation” used by several French speaking African researchers who have studied the physiological and sociological phenomenon of the practice in Africa, as opposed to “skin bleaching”. Voluntary depigmentation conveys best I believe the fact that the person of color who engages in this practice intentionally and consciously undertakes to either diminish the level of physiological pigmentation of his/her skin, or to completely inhibit it. Furthermore, it not only translates the reluctance that many users of bleaching products show in openly discussing their habits, but also the addictive dimension of this practice. Voluntary depigmentation also implies a distinction between the “moderate” usage of cosmetic depigmenting products, and that of pharmaceutical products (mostly those used in dermatology), as opposed to the “excessive” usage of those products. The terminologies of skin bleaching; skin lightening or skin whitening as used in the medical and social sciences in America and in other English speaking countries are too broad, and generally refer to the skin bleaching phenomenon as practiced by the general population. They therefore, neither specifically address the issue of the different ways the depigmenting cosmetics are used by the target populations (for example the “moderate” use as opposed to the “excessive” use) nor do they address the more important issue of the intentionality involved in the practice of voluntary skin depigmentation. Other terminologies such as “Cosmetic Use of Depigmenting Products”, used by Mahé a dermatologist from Mali focuses more on the practice itself than on the intention to ‘lighten’ or ‘whiten’ that it implies; “Artificial Depigmentation”, which

stresses the process of using chemical products in order to ‘whiten’ or ‘lighten’ the skin has been used by Dr. Fatimata Ly who is a dermatologist in Dakar, Sénégal and who is the President of the Association of Information about Artificial Depigmentation. Finally, the Moroccan dermatologist Aumjaud has used the terminology “Savage Depigmentation” to underscore the excessiveness and abuse that is made of bleaching products.¹⁸

Historical Background

Joseph Ondongo (1992), a Congolese Clinical Psychologist at the Ethno-psychiatry division of the Hospital of Avicenne, France defines depigmentation as “the use of chemicals with high levels of toxicity – either as cosmetics or as pharmaceutical substances- diverted from their initial dermatological indication, and used for other treatment than they were originally prescribed for, in order modify the color of the skin.” Ondongo goes on to state that “those who engage in voluntary depigmentation want to achieve a skin discoloration of the epidermis which thus takes on a light complexion.”(pp.93) [My translation]¹⁹ Voluntary depigmentation is consequently practiced for the unique purpose of altering one’s physical appearance by modifying the quality of the skin by getting rid of the pigment, the substance that gives the dark color to the skins of Africans from brown to white. (Ibid.pp.91) This practice thus, constitutes a deliberate effort on the part of an individual Black person to take dramatic health risks, both aesthetically and medically in order to “lighten” or “whiten” his/her skin.

Continental African women who first started to lighten their skin in the early 1960s (when the practice was relatively very new, unknown, and unheard of) were viewed as single and lonely women who were desperately looking for a man. Actually, the word for a woman who practices artificial depigmentation in Bambanankan (the most popular language spoken in Mali) is “tchatcho muso” which implies a single and lonely woman seeking a male partner.²⁰ These women were portrayed in social circles as women with loose morals and were mostly stigmatized as prostitutes. Part of the stigma attached to

voluntary depigmentation in many African societies nowadays derives from its perception as a practice characteristic of prostitutes who excessively use chemicals to lighten their skin in an attempt to seduce as many men as possible. That stigma, along with the official bans that many African governments have put on the practice of voluntary depigmentation accounts for much of the reluctance that many women, users of those products have in openly admitting that they are artificially depigmenting their skin. Most of the time, they would claim that it is their natural skin complexion, or that they are using the products to simply treat dermatological problems, and not to lighten their skin.

However, this negative perception of artificial depigmentation soon changed when very influential women with high social status in political and artistic circles (especially the wives of some Presidents and some music stars) started to bleach their skin. Subsequently, voluntary depigmentation quickly became a symbol of status and luxury that only those who are wealthy can afford. The ultimate goal of its practice was to make the person more beautiful, more attractive, and more socially accepted. This drastic shift in the perception of the practice of voluntary depigmentation from its beginnings in the late 1960s through the 1970s to its dissemination as a real social phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s, through the twenty first century; undeniably accounts for why the prevalence of voluntary depigmentation has reached alarming proportions in many African urban cities.

For many Africans, being beautiful, attractive has become synonymous with being White. Light skin came to be associated with beauty, self-confidence, sexual attractiveness, social status and intelligence, and to some extent with the desire of women to break away from the weight of a society that limits freedom, and dictates what they can do or cannot do with their bodies. As I have mentioned earlier, the practice of voluntary depigmentation is primarily an urban phenomenon, which, according to Mahé and al.' (2004) is commonly associated with modernity, fashion, seduction, beauty and "savoir vivre." Its prevalence is estimated at 25% of adult women in Bamako

(Mali); 59% in Lome (Togo); and between 26% to 67% in Dakar (Sénégal) (pp.876) ²¹ The cosmetic use of depigmenting products among continental Africans has been also documented among African populations living in Europe.

If Africans have been using voluntary depigmentation for over thirty six years, the discovery of the bleaching properties of hydroquinone, the active ingredient in most depigmenting products was a simple accident. According to Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, authors of *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (1992),

In June of 1938, workers in the Greiss-Pflieger tannery in Waukegan, Illinois, were issued new rubber gloves that contained monobenzyl ether of hydroquinone (HQ), a substance designed both to reinforce the gloves and to prevent discoloration of the leather the workers handled. Black employees in the plant [mostly immigrants from Liberia] soon began to complain about the appearance of bleached spots on their arms...The tannery experience awakened entrepreneurs to hydroquinone's skin bleaching qualities.)²² (pp51-52)

The most commonly depigmenting agent found in most cosmetic bleaching products is hydroquinone and its derivatives, as well as some dermocorticoids. Hydroquinone prevents the production of melanin, the substance that the body naturally produces in order to protect itself against the ultra violet rays of the sun. Hydroquinone lightens the skin by killing healthy melacocytes in an effort to prevent the production of melanin. As a result, the skin weakens, leading to premature aging and cancer, and other deadly diseases. Voluntary depigmentation constitutes a health hazard because the skin is removed off its natural color, which therefore becomes vulnerable. Hydroquinone is medically used in the treatment of hyper-pigmentation including age spots, melasma, sun damage, and

other skin discolorations. Skin depigmenting products can be classified in three different categories. The first category encompasses drugs used in dermatology and referred to as dermocorticoides. They are usually drugs that are diverted from their original medical use. For example, drugs that are intended to treat boldness, rheumatism, or acne are used in order to lighten the skin. The second category is comprised of cosmetic products containing most of the time hydroquinone and its derivatives. And the third category which is particular to the African context is the mixture of different chemicals (salts of mercury, bleach, hair relaxing chemicals which contain lye and shampoos with egg ingredients, synthetic steroids as the ones found in corticosteroids) most of which are not indicated for dermatological use at all.

Thus wise, from the tannery experience was born a multi-billion dollars skin bleaching industry that will allow people of color to artificial modify (at varying degrees) their skin complexion. According to Ondongo (1989), most of the giant industries that make cosmetic products with depigmenting properties are found in the U.S.A. especially in Chicago where Black business men used to hold the monopoly of those skin bleaching manufacturing companies) and in Great Britain. On the African continent, countries like Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, were the first ones that started to make cosmetic products with depigmenting agents, most of the time under British and American licenses. They were later on followed by Mali, the two Congos, and Senegal. Ondongo also states that pharmaceutical substances containing cortisone were first introduced in Africa in the 1970s.

Skin color has been and still remains an extremely controversial and emotionally charged issue. Most of the debates about voluntary depigmentation in Africa have opposed those who argue that it is purely an aesthetic revolution, characteristic of young, urban and modern African women, (Mahé et al. 2004) and those whose view the practice as symptomatic of a post colonial traumatism (Ondongo, 1984, 1989; Didillon & Bounsana, 1986; Petit, 2004-05; Hall 2006).

Sociological Motivations

Voluntary depigmentation is both an individual and social behavior found worldwide. In Africa, this phenomenon has since the late 1960s dramatically evolved into a serious health and social nightmare. Commonly referred to as “maquillage” or “kobwakana” or “kopakola” in both the Democratic Republic of Congo and in the Congo; “Xessal” in Sénégal; “tchatcho” in Mali, Burkina-Faso, and Guinea; “bojou” in Benin; “décapage” in Cameroun; “Dorot” (name of a skin bleaching soap) in Niger, voluntary depigmentation is a process through which African women (and an increasing number of men) use a plethora of “cosmetic” chemical combinations in order to alter their dark skin by ridng it of its natural melanin producing properties. The use of depigmenting products among continental African women was first noticed in the late 1960s. However, it is during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s that the phenomenon has taken alarming proportions in Black Africa. According to a study conducted in 2006 by the Senegalese dermatologist Dr. Fatimata Ly of the Social Hygiene Institute of Dakar, Sénégal, 58% of Togolese women over 16 years-old living in urban areas bleach their skin, compared to 52% Senegalese women, and 25% Malien women.²³ One of the first researches regarding the physiological complications of artificial depigmentation on Africans was conducted in 1972 in Kenya.²⁴

If the use of skin depigmenting products became a symbol of social status and beauty in many African countries in the 1980s and 1990s, in most pre-colonial African societies, a woman was beautiful because she was a good person. Her qualities as a good and beautiful person were based on her ability to procreate, to nurture, to cook, to do household chores, to be a good mother and wife, good care of her husband, and to maintain good rapports with her in-laws as well as co-wives constituted some of the most important criteria that brought social recognition to a woman. Similarly, a man’s status in society was determined by his ancestry as a noble man, a chief his heroism, hard work, his productivity in the farm, his ability to meet his family’s needs, the number of wives and children he had, and his sense of honor, responsibility, honesty, and his age. Skin color

was therefore never a determining factor of social status. It only during the past forty years, that education and skin color replaced those so-called "outdated" and "backward" indigenous African social stratifications. Commenting on the historical importance of blackness in Kemetic Africa and its eventual devaluation, historian Runoko Rashidi says that:

From the beginning of history the concept of blackness was very different. In Egypt they called themselves the Black people, and Kemit, the original name of Egypt, means "the land of the Black people." In the ancient Congo they took so much pride in being Black, the blacker the child was the better. They put babies in the sun to become darker. But today there is nearly universal condemnation of blackness."²⁵ (pp. 166)

Nevertheless, skin-color variations have become a determinant factor of social status in countries where skin color was originally insignificant and irrelevant. For many African women in post-colonial Africa, marriage, family, and access to a better life come to depend on a woman's location within Western ideals of beauty. Consequently, in this new post-colonial social order created by Africans, Arogundade (2000) points out, "the colonial influence is manifested in the value and amount of prestige that is associated with skin color and other physical criteria."²⁶ (pp156) Many African believe that lightening their skin will lead to an elevation of the quality of their lives. The authors of *The Color Complex*,(1992) drive that message home when they assert that, "as long as differences in skin color determine access to wealth and privilege, many who are dark will continue to search for new and better ways of embracing whiteness."²⁷ (pp.61)

This shift is a result of the fact that Africans have been constantly bombarded with images of a world that elevates whiteness as the epitome of feminine beauty, and have consequently been pressured into internalizing Western values of

beauty. More and more, we notice now in many African countries, a social hierarchy based on light skin color that did not exist prior to the colonial occupation of Africa. In many African societies, a true woman is a married woman and a mother. Therefore by using depigmenting substances, many women hope to attract men who will fall for their light skin, thus allowing them to climb up the social ladder. Social behavior and practice tend to consider lighter skin as more attractive than darker skin. Therefore, many believe that altering their blackness will lead them to financial and romantic success. Indeed, the increasing number of African women and men who use artificial products to lighten their skin and the fact that light skin is seen as the way nowadays to attract and to seduce means that the concept of light skin has superseded indigenous traditional and cultural African canons of masculinity and femininity. As Hall (2006) puts it, Africans “who are in the shadow of Western prestige harbor concepts of beauty and attractiveness that are more Western and less native in substance.”²⁸ (pp.65)

Undeniably, skin color is a socially constructed concept resulting from the Western elevation of light skin on the African psyche. Although many Africans have become color conscious, they live in societies where race does not dictate the everyday social, economic, political access to power, privilege, and status. Many Africans think that artificial depigmentation makes them more beautiful, more noticeable, and more fashionable. They also associate lighter- skin color with higher social status, success, and respect. Arogundade underscores that popular mentality among continental African women when he notes that “the culture of ethnicity-altering cosmetology carried within it the notion that people of color had to overcome their blackness in order to be successful.”²⁹ (pp.156) So, to be able to alter one’s skin color from dark to light is seen as better, as more beautiful because social gratification will automatically follow. Yaba Blay made this salient commentary on the relationship between light skin color and social status in an interview to a Ghanaian newspaper:

It appears that in the context of global White supremacy, skin bleaching represents an attempt to gain access to the social status and mobility often reserved not only for whites, but for lighter-skinned persons of African descent.”³⁰

Many of the women who use depigmentating products despite the obvious dermatological complications and overall health issues are clearly making poor aesthetic choices based either on misinformation or lack of information. Many use these products because the practice has been ingrained in the culture. I have seen many women in Mali and Burkina-Faso actually “prepare” their skin anywhere from months to weeks before a major social event such as a marriage or a naming ceremony. In Mahé et al.’s (2004) study conducted in Dakar, Sénégal, among the 69 pregnant women who were using depigmenting products, 7 have stated that they have actually doubled the dosage during the last trimester of their pregnancy in order to have an evenly light and spotless skin tone on the day of the naming ceremony; 48 stated that they just continued their practice as usual; and only 14 stated that they stopped using the products during their pregnancy.³¹ (pp13) [My translation] Such alarming data regarding the cosmetic use of depigmenting products cannot but be understood as not only a result of ignorance, but also as an identity crisis. Hall (2006) makes the correlation between the use of depigmentating products and the subsequent health risks when he says:

Light skin has been idealized to the extent that few will not hesitate to apply “bleaching” substances that are intended to bring about a desired degree of skin lightness... The consequences of using such substances can severely threaten the physical well-being of consumers to the point of causing death. It is an extension of Western colonization that is called skin bleaching.³² (pp.89)

Africans are using depigmenting products to lighten their skin to be accepted in the social circles of the successful and the modernized. It is hip and it is in. In this case, lighter-skin becomes synonymous with more attractive, more beautiful, and more intelligent, and most importantly, wealthier. Consequently, in a poverty-ridden continent, for many urban women who are dark, poor, and who have neither the level of education nor the skills necessary to compete on the job market and therefore to access social, economic, and political success, artificial depigmentation is the cheapest and most effortless way of securing social status. Marita Golden (2004) underscores that reality when she says:

In underdeveloped countries where a college education, with its promise of upward mobility and success, is an out-of-reach fantasy for most people, skin lighteners are a cheap and easily obtainable alternative, a fast but hardly painless way to attain “beauty” and status.”³³ (pp.157)

In a world where everything is about physical appearance, leaving a first good impression has become a ticket to a higher social status. In many African countries, light skin color had become a symbol for social status and the ability of both men and women to acquire light skin has meant a better life. This reality is well captured in the following assessment of Irene Njoroge, a Kenyan cosmetologist and anti bleaching Activist:

Women in Africa are economically dependent on men...Women need men in their lives to survive. If the general view is that light-skinned women are more attractive, then it's an investment to try to lighten one's skin. They are not just buying cream. They are buying a dream of a better life.³⁴ (pp.155)

Some married women use those products in order to stay married by making sure they are not competing with any other women out there. In polygamous societies like the ones that exist in Mali and Sénégal, some co-wives now compete for their husbands' love and attention on the grounds of who is the lightest, rather than who cooks better or takes better care of him and the family. Africans who are well off think that they can do anything they want with their bodies. In fact, being able to financially sustain the expenses involved in the long term use of depigmenting products is seen by many as a symbol of social status.

As a result, social differences are created in many African societies, based on the quality and cost of the different depigmenting products used by women from different social statuses. Voluntary depigmentation has created new social cleavages in Senegalese society, according to Senegalese Dermatologist Assane Kane. In an interview to Grioo, an on-line Senegalese newspaper, he stated that during important social and family gatherings like naming ceremonies, marriages, etc., light-skinned women segregate themselves from dark-skinned women by sitting together and far away from them.³⁵ [my translation] According to the grand polemarch of Kappa Alpha PSY Fraternity, this "color differentiation is a product of insecurity, a product of a slave mentality just as slave masters showed favor with our forebears based on the color of their epidermis, so have we also shown favor with color when it comes to each other."³⁶ What I find quite impressive in the African context in many countries with a high prevalence of women and men who engage in voluntary depigmentation, is that positions of power based on economic, social, and political status were not previously determined by skin color. Seen from that angle, voluntary depigmentation definitely marks a departure from all known canons of African beauty.

Actually, even those who cannot financially sustain a continuous use of depigmenting cosmetic products, fall back on cheap local imitations. Anything goes, as long as the lightening effect is achieved. Counter fit products and cheap imitations of cosmetic and pharmaceutical products are legion in Africa

because of the standards of living in Africa. Many of these imitation products made in Nigeria, The Congo, South Africa, Sénégal or imported from Taiwan or Singapore have, according to some friend dermatologists and pharmacists from Burkina-Faso I spoke with, neither the same active ingredients, nor the same properties as the original European and American brands. That explains why the use of corticoids is most frequent among poor urban women. According to Mahé et al. (2004), they are cheaper and easily available on the market. Furthermore, corticoids have a faster and more aggressive bleaching effect, and are easily noticeable by the frequency of secondary cutaneous side effects. Mahé et al. (2004) go on to say that social stratifications are created among women, solely based on the type and quality of depigmenting agents that they use. While the financially less fortunate and low class women tend to use corticoids, wealthier women use depigmenting products that contain hydroquinone. Hydroquinone is not only more expensive, but it also has more discrete and refined bleaching properties. Moreover, the use of hydroquinone based depigmenting products is said to have less visible cutaneous complications, and is more tolerated because it is seen as a “moderate” voluntary depigmentation (“leeral” in Wolof), as opposed to the “excessive” one (“xeesal” in Wolof).

As a result, Mahé et al.’s research reveals there exists in Senegalese society, a distinction between the practice of “moderate” depigmentation which is condoned and morally accepted, and characteristic of the high social status urban women; and the “vulgar/excessive” depigmentation which is portrayed as morally wrong, reprehensible, and distinctive of the most economically deprived and illiterate women, and sometimes, of prostitutes.³⁷ (pp.23-24) [My translation] Furthermore, many women have recourse to “cosmetic” products that have contents of hydroquinone between 1-35%, sometimes even more. According to Bently-Phillips B., Bayles Mah, (1975), a concentration of up to 3% is said to be safe for use in cosmetics for black skin.³⁸ Many European countries have banned the use of cosmetic products containing hydroquinone) and other scouring agents which ultimately produce a hyper-pigmentation.

Most of the products on African markets induce a faster cutaneous depigmentation because of high and unsafe levels of hydroquinone. According to the same article, “most of the adverse effects occur from misuse, excessive, use and the application of multiple preparations.”³⁹ (pp.1394)

For those women in the influential social circles however, voluntary depigmentation is a sign that they are wealthy because they can sustain the economic demands of a practice that is financially costly, especially if one were to use expensive European or American cosmetic depigmenting creams and/or pills. Those who can sustain long years of depigmenting products that contain hydroquinone use their lightened even skin tone to show off their financial stability and social status. Dr. Jamila Kizuwundu underscores that reality when she affirms that “the biggest misconception about the color complex among people of African descent is that it is about beauty. The color complex is about power, status, and privilege.”⁴⁰ (pp.51) This is particularly true for many women because they feel that a sudden stop to the practice, even as a result of medical complications, might send the wrong message that they either can no longer financially afford to lighten their skin, or that they are experiencing marital problems (since the husband is the one who finances the practice in 33% of cases). It could also result in being ridiculed or made fun of by a co-wife or co-wives, close friends, or other rivals, according to a 2004 study done in Dakar, Sénégal by Mahé et al. The same study shows that only 58% of women who were experiencing an adverse medical complication related to the use of depigmenting products stated that they will permanently stop the practice. The remaining 48% said they will only temporarily suspend the use of depigmenting products.⁴¹ (pp.11) [My translation]

Several studies have documented women getting off the practice following medical side effects, just to return to it after treatment of the skin trouble. According to Mahé et al., (2004) most of the addictive tendency is explained by either the fear of hyper-pigmentation which might leave a woman who has used depigmenting products with a much darker skin color than her natural skin-tone before she started the practice, or the fear of

some dermatological complications related to the sudden discontinuation of the practice.(pp23) [My translation]

Mahé et al. (2004) have classified voluntary depigmentation as a uniquely aesthetic phenomenon, characterized by distinctive features such as urban residence (55% of women who lighten their skin live in Dakar) ; age (63.5% of women who use depigmenting products are between the ages of 20 and 40); gender (voluntary depigmentation is practiced by 52.7% women); marital status (58% of married women or women in a relationship are the ones who practice voluntary depigmentation the most); education (64% of women users of depigmenting products have at least a primary school level of education); a sales or costumer service related occupation (71% of women users of depigmenting products tend to be seamstresses, head dressers or hold a small business that assures them a financial independence. The issue of image becomes very important to these women who are in constant contact with customers); and a certain social status or life style (65% of the women who have recourse to voluntary depigmentation have access to 4 or 5 of the following consumer goods: a T.V., a phone, a refrigerator, air conditioning, a stove, a car, employ a maid). The collected data from their research points to the fact that the practice of voluntary depigmentation “works like a fashion phenomenon, with both identification to a group (mainly female friends) and a claim to certain values, especially urbanity, modernity, adult femininity, power of seduction, and access to a certain social level, a wish of emancipation toward classical patterns of women seems present.”⁴² (pp.32)

The desire of emancipation or departure from traditional gender roles that young African women are said to translate in their almost tedious and persisting usage of skin depigmenting products constitutes according to Mahé et al. (2004) a questioning, and even a rejection of traditional African values, as well as religious values that tend to depict women as respectful of religion and traditions, dependent on and submissive to their husbands or partners. Voluntary depigmentation according to them signals a desire on the part of young urban African women

who are financially independent to exercise their right to use their bodies as they see it fit; to express their sexuality through their power to seduce the opposite sex, independent of the traditional constraints of gender roles and free from the pressures of their male counterparts.⁴³ (pp.24-25) [My translation] Arogundade (2000) draws the parallel between voluntary depigmentation, and freedom of expression when he asserts that “in the millennium age, a person can be anything they want to be, as modern beauty is an interchangeable kit of parts, free of the gender and race restrictions of the past.”⁴⁴ (pp.160)

This explains why, despite the fact that 85% of the women in their study claim to be aware of the medical dermatological consequences of their practice, and 49% state that their husbands and partners disapprove of the use of depigmenting substances, they still persevere in the practice. This sends the message that, contrary to the claim that most women make according to which they engage in voluntary depigmentation in order to, either seduce or please their men; the decision to bleach their skin remains first and foremost, a personal one. Their perseverance stands for the personal and social gratifications that result from the practice of voluntary depigmentation, no matter how strong the pressures from partners, society, immediate friends and family members might be.

Despite the presence of all the consumer goods characteristic of modernity and city life style that Mahé & al. attributed to the spread of voluntary depigmentation, they still maintain that the practice as a symbol of the internalization of Western beauty ideals has not been validated by any of the women surveyed. They claim that only 9% of the 368 women surveyed stated that they use depigmenting products in order to become white. That conclusion is debatable because the very fact that voluntary depigmentation has been shown in every single study done in Africa on the topic to be an urban problem in a continent where almost 70% of women live in rural areas proves that it is easily linked to external influence. Mahé et al.’s own research points to factors such as modernity, progress, financial independence, power of seduction, presence of a television, a

car, and other consumption goods as facilitating factors in a woman's decision to begin voluntary depigmentation. It is also well known that those markers are not only representations of Western "civilization", but also tokens of Africans' assimilation of those symbols. Additionally, the role played by T.V., and other media in the imposition of Western cultural values throughout the world is no longer a subject of debate. Marita Golden (2004) clearly explains the relationship between the prevalence of voluntary depigmentation and urbanism when she states that "the use of the bleaching creams is also, part of the overall urbanization, modernization, and Westernization"⁴⁵ (pp.154) of many African countries. Being Westernized in the African context means getting rid of one's African roots as a cultural reference point. Therefore, although Mahé et al.'s study does reveal the socio-cultural motivations of voluntary depigmentation particular to the Senegalese social context, its own findings cannot deny the internalization of Western ideals of beauty (contrary to the authors' conclusion that voluntary depigmentation cannot and must not be explained in term of a post-colonial syndrome or a color complex).

Historically speaking, political consciousness and the use of cosmetics derived from White beauty standards have been so intertwined that the question which always arises is whether the concept of Black beauty can be devoid of its political consciousness. Can a Black person who deliberately uses chemicals to rid his/her skin of its pigmentation be proud to be black? Should a bleached skin constitute a barometer for measuring one's black consciousness? The importance of light skin in determining a woman's chances of attracting a marital partner in Africa is such a determining factor that in a 2001 study by Mahé A. and F. Ly in Dakar, Sénégal, 91% of women claim to use depigmenting substances to achieve a lighter skin color. The same study reveals that 89% of women say to bleach their skin for purely aesthetic reasons.⁴⁶ (pp.1S30) The fact that colonized people maintain their former colonial powers' system of social and cultural hierarchy based on racism, (of which skin color is the most visible manifestation) constitutes in the words

of Hall (2006), “a psychological continuation of colonization.”⁴⁷ (pp43)

Psychological Motivations

The practice of using artificial products in order to lighten dark skin originated in North America, but quickly spread like a wild fire to the entire African continent. The African continent has gone through many cultural influences coming from the West, slavery, as a result of colonialism, and neo-colonialism. This explains why, for many people of color both men and women, skin color is loaded with symbolism about self-esteem, pride, hatred, about social and identity politics. Although the concept of beauty is subjective because it is both personal and culturally determined, any meaningful discussion of the issue of African beauty in the post- independence context has to begin with the understanding that light skin as a sought after ideal is a concept that is totally foreign to Africa. Hall (2006) translates that reality best when he declares that, “of all the physical dimensions characteristic of the human population, light skin color has emerged as the ideal consequent to Western prestige”⁴⁸ (pp.56). In order to understand the psychological impact of colonization upon Africa, we need to note that the French and British systems through their direct and indirect rules of colonial administrations aimed at turning their African subjects into black French and British men and women by teaching them to emulate Western values and to look down on their own “backward” ways. The colonization of the African continent by former colonial power such as France and Britain to name but a few, as well as more than a quarter century of neo-colonial occupation that followed have led to a systematic subordination of African values, and an internalization of Western ideals of beauty that are detrimental to indigenous African canons of beauty.

Consequently, although the formal colonization of many African countries ended in the 1960s, the brutality of the trauma inflicted to millions of colonized Africans is still present and the internalization of light skin as the essence of beauty is one obvious indication of that ill-resolved colonial experience. African women and men, by idealizing light skin color, are

consciously or unconsciously perpetuating Western canons inherited from colonialism and neo-colonialism. Ronald Hall (2006) drives that idea home when he affirms that:

The Western concept of beauty suggests those who are dark-skinned may be perceived as of African descent, the most socially damning of all statuses...[Africans] who aspire to be beautiful do so to satisfy some internalized Western ideal.”⁴⁹ (pp76)

Voluntary depigmentation seems to be the response of post colonial continental Africans to Western cultural domination, a domination that was first translated in the intellectual acculturation of Africans through their mimicking of European cultural and political models shortly following the independence era in the 1960s.

It is very interesting to note here that it is specifically in countries that had had the most brutal form of colonial occupation, aggression and oppression which have the most idealized whiteness. Consciously or subconsciously, Africans have internalized a strong admiration and desire for the physical characteristics of whiteness, and skin color constitutes a very critical element of that desire. Having internalized ourselves Western racist biases related to skin color, Africans have become in turn, the social believers and conveyers of those biases to the extent that some start to loath and reject their own cultural and biological make-up. We have become complaisant actors in the destruction of our own identity. Voluntary depigmentation stands for that rejection of black identity, and is indicative of how much Western ideals have invaded African values.

According to Ronald Hall (2006), there are two colonial factors that are responsible for the internalization of Western beauty ideals by women of color. The first one is the elevation of whiteness as the essence of feminine beauty, and the second one is the subsequent invasion of African markets by Western cosmetic products that promise a lighter skin in a tube.⁵⁰ (pp.31)

The growing recourse of continental African women to depigmenting products, as well as the fact that more and more men still have a preference for lighter skin women shows that the color complex has returned with a devastating vengeance. According to Arogundade (2000), “there will always be an identity crisis within black beauty as long as women are taught that in order to be somebody, they must first abandon their blackness. The fact that so many have been affected by the weight of oppression or cultural habit suggests that people of color are actually lacking in narcissism.”⁵¹ (pp.168) Indeed, the lack of black aesthetic role models and cultural imagery to draw upon justifies African women’s idealization of Western beauty ideals at the expense of their own.

Although 91% (Mahé et al. 2004) of continental Africans who voluntarily seek to ‘whiten’ their skin claim to do so for reasons other than a conscious and deliberate desire to be white, (“to be more beautiful”; “to be more attractive”; “to be fashionable”; “to be cleaner”; “to clear up dark spots”; “to treat pimples”...), the truth of the matter is that the pervasiveness of voluntary depigmentation among post-independent African women and men testifies to the fact that they have indeed internalized the concept of light skin as the ideal for beauty. In the words of Ronald Hall (1995) Africans “may develop a disdain for dark skin because the disdain is an expression of dominant culture ideals.”(pp.73)⁵² As a result, many Africans gradually started to abandon their indigenous beauty standards and adopted new and alien European cultural values.

This explains why on a deeper level, artificial depigmentation is the outward manifestation of cultural oppression. The issue is really a cultural one in the sense that it translates Africans’ unwillingness to assume their cultural identity. By succumbing to Western beauty ideals as their reference point, the psychology of the excessive desire for lighter skin at all cost embodies the perception that those who artificially lighten their skin consciously or sub-consciously want to emulate whiteness. Despite the fact that, for example 89% of Senegalese women living in Dakar and using artificial depigmentation claimed in a study conducted in 2006 by

dermatologist Fatimata Ly of Sénégal that they do so for purely aesthetic reasons (although this might actually be true), they fail to acknowledge the influence of Western beauty ideals on what might seem to them as free personal choices regarding their bodies. Ben Arogundade (2000) underscores this idea when he asserts that:

Most of all, the past century has illustrated the extent to which so much of our taste and so-called “free choice” is shaped and controlled by the dominant culture, sometimes in ways so subliminal that we remain unaware of the creep of its influence. Perhaps understanding the history of beauty will allow us to recognize the forces that are perpetually at work on our hearts and minds, and in doing so, help us come to terms with who we are.(pp.168) ⁵³

Light skin becomes the ideal of beauty and therefore, skin-tone variations are held to the highest consideration, thereby taking on social and psychological meanings in African societies. Hence, through the use of chemical procedures, (most of the time at the expense of their mental and physical well being) some Africans literally pull their dark skin out so that they can look anything but black. In the words of Arogundade (2000), blackness becomes “an undesirable and correctable condition.”⁵⁴ (pp.164) A condition whose ‘cure’ can be found in the cosmetic industry. According to Hall (2006), “Western industries have created a booming business to accommodate such women who are convinced that they are too dark to be considered beautiful.”⁵⁵ (pp.89) In the same token, psychologist Ferdinand Ezeibe from the Democratic Republic of the Congo states that the practice of artificial depigmentation among continental Africans stems from a deep post-colonial trauma. Such aping of the West led not only to the political dependence of Africa on the West, but also to their cultural internalization of Western canons of beauty. In Arogundade’s words, “this demonstrated the extent to which black beauty values had become conditioned by the dominant

White aesthetic paradigms. These products acted as a form of ideological vaccine for the problem of unfashionable Afro beauty.”⁵⁶ (pp.30) As a result, many women as well as an increasing number of men are using toxic chemicals that are destroying both their physical and psychological health. Certainly, Europeans might have left Africa more than half a century ago, but their presence is still being transmitted through the mass media. In post colonial Africa, the power of Western culture and its ability to impose its ideals through the mass media is a well known reality.

Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall (1992) draw the same parallel between light skin and mental alienation when they assert, “the desire to lighten one’s skin and alter one’s features can be seen as a form of Black self-hatred”⁵⁷ (pp.54). The self-alienation many Africans suffer from had led them to denigrate and to devalue themselves. According to Fanon, “Insofar as he (the black person) conceives of European culture as a means of stripping himself of his race, he becomes alienated.”⁵⁸ (pp.224) It is very interesting to note that blacks who seek to alter their skin color are constantly looking for an ever elusive lighter skin. They use scouring chemicals to rid their skin of its pigmentation. Their desperation is translated through the nature of the depigmenting chemicals used, many of which are not even intended for dermatological use. Some women from Cameroun have been reported to also use drugs that treat rheumatism like Quinacore as injections in order to evenly “whiten” their overall skin complexion.⁵⁹ The recourse to such extreme measures to achieve light skin stands for the physical and mental self-destruction of the African identity. The self-inflicted physical consequences of the prolonged use of skin depigmenting products among many Africans cannot but symbolize a collective malaise, and uneasiness about our dark-skin, about our identity, and about our blackness.

Similarly, tackling the issue of the invasion of Africa by Western aesthetic values transmitted through the media Marita Golden (2004) affirms that:

The invasion of European and American films and television programs, with their exaltation of White female beauty, White male heroism, White economic and social power, White life, and, by extension White skin, are only part of the problem. Mass media is an intoxicating drug, a potent form of propaganda. But this ongoing cultural narrative has interacted with African minds poisoned by generations of “psychological colonialism” and shame among some at many things Africans.⁶⁰ (pp.151)

Many African women who artificially lighten their skin are actually very self-conscious about not only what they are doing, but about those who condemn the practice. This is what explains their reluctance about openly admitting that they use depigmenting products. Paradoxically, at the same time that artificial depigmentation seems to be a taboo subject in many African societies, it is at the same time a socially accepted practice.

Conclusion

The cosmetic use of depigmenting products has been documented in many African countries since the early 1970s. The pervasiveness of voluntary depigmentation in twenty first century Africa relates to the lingering effects of our history of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Yet, the scarcity of studies on the subject relatively to the seriousness of the problem constitutes both a social and medical impediment to finding viable solutions to eradicating the problem. The phenomenon of voluntary depigmentation, despite its physiological and psychological health implications remains for the person of African descent an issue related to the fundamental questioning of his/her place and role in the history of humanity. The truth of the matter is that the origin of humanity is black. Therefore, to deliberately work at removing the physiological characteristics of one's blackness, of one's identity for whatever the reasons might be, constitutes a negation of that history and humanity.

Consequently, the Black person who desperately tries to whiten his/her skin, beyond that physical act itself, undertakes then to renounce to himself/herself as a bearer of that culture, of that civilization, the Black civilization. That is why artificial depigmentation cannot simply be reduced to or interpreted as a mere fashion phenomenon. The preference that African men and women exhibit for the light complexion as the symbol of ideal beauty cannot but denote a feeling of being ill at ease with one's skin color and therefore, with one's own identity as a black person. Not only Africans been denied their identity by Europeans in the past, now, they are denying it to themselves. The elevation of skin color by Africans as the ideal of feminine beauty has undermined both socially and culturally the ability of Africans women to anchor their concepts of self, self-worth, and beauty in their own traditions. As a result, light skin has become a determining criterion in the way many African women not only perceive themselves, but also the way society perceives them as attractive and beautiful. The desire to achieve whiteness, knowing very well that one is not white testifies to the fact that voluntary depigmentation is more a psychological issue than a physical or aesthetic one. There is no denying of the fact that the cosmetic industry is a white-dominated business built on European ideals of beauty. Voluntary depigmentation is a violent act against one's black skin that masks a more painful mental anguish of being black in a world where blackness has become irrelevant. It is that uneasiness that pushes so many African women and men to artificially strip off the marker of their cultural identity, no matter how physically and emotionally costly that denigration might be. This inferiority complex that many Africans have with regards to whiteness and their participation in their own denigration are manifestations of a malaise that blacks have in a civilization in which they have become mere objects of consumption rather than subjects. The violence with which Africans women use skin bleaching cosmetics to aggress their skin in order to change its natural pigment cannot but reveal a disdain for their identity as Blacks. Africans have lost control over their aesthetic representation in the media. White cosmetic companies know very well that their

black consumers have internalized European beauty standards. They therefore constantly draw on those racial insecurities and sensibilities as a marketing tool. Africans seem to have lost their historical and cultural compass. Hence the urgency for Blacks to reevaluate and reeducate our collective sub-conscience so as to allow us to redefine Black beauty according to our own aesthetic canons, instead of desperately and tragically try to mimic Western ones.

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