

## **Skin bleaching as a metaphor for interrogating development crisis in Black Africa**

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**Abstract:**-Skin bleaching as expressed in various forms by some black men and women in Africa provides a rich text for us to interrogate the social construction and reconstruction of the human body towards social relations and as a metaphoric lens for the analysis of developmental issues in Africa. Skin bleaching, as a social and tangible experience on the continent of Africa, is a complex phenomenon that demands a multi-layered system of analysis. This paper draws its inspiration from Azibo's (2011) conceptualization of skin bleaching as a mental disorder characterized as "psychological misorientation and mental disorder". While skin bleaching, as a social phenomenon, may be variously interpreted as an intrusive experience, or the cognitive disorientation of those who engage in the practice to fit into a desired social class, in this paper, attempt is poignantly made to examine the phenomenon as a metaphor for the state of affairs on the continent of Africa in relation to its socio-economic policies that are formulated toward attaining long term development goals. The (re)construction of the body thus provides a theoretical framework in interrogating social, economic and developmental policies in Africa that is invoked in analyzing the state of affairs in Africa. The paper espouses that interrogating the body in whatever form, and in particular from a skin bleaching perspective, provides social scientists with a research vista towards an understanding of the socio-cultural construction of the human body and how the analysis of such construction can have significant influence on developmental policies and policy makers. It is concluded that such approach will become beneficial when we conceptualize the body as a dynamic project by locating it historically and acknowledging its social and economic significance in modern social and state formations.

**Key words:** *skin bleaching, the body, beauty, development, Africa.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Skin bleaching permeates every aspect of the African life. As a physical trait and a display of xenocentrism, it is only one of several outlets expressing the self-hate that characterizes people of color all over the world and particularly in contemporary African life (Charles, 2003). Besides skin bleaching, self-hate is expressed daily in the lives of Africans in various ways: formal medium of communication; education system; religion; medicine; architecture; poetry; and other forms of aesthetics, representations, and performances that simultaneously deny the authentic and celebrate the foreign. Skin bleaching therefore is only one of the visible traits of such manifestations. From a sociological perspective, it is a product of historical forces that produced a lack of social regulation due to the clash between traditional and foreign cultures leading to a rapid social change (and chaos) in the society. The increasing globalization process further deepens this crisis as Africans are inexorably drawn to the economic calculation of the West at the expense of endogenous developmental exigencies. The loss of a moral compass in defining national goals upsets the balance between people's circumstances and their desires to achieve self-defined goals within the society in which they operate and function. Such normlessness provides the ambient environment that provokes all manner of actions and behaviors for survival even if such actions reflect self-hate and/or self-denial. Human behaviors and tendencies, as expressed by various actions, including skin bleaching, are a function of social interactions, structural and institutional influence, as well as the historical, social, economic, political and cultural forces that shape the society in which individuals live and interact. At the micro level human actions and behaviors are influenced by the meanings and interpretations assigned to the symbols that are co-created in the process of human interactions (Blumer, 1969; Pierre, 2008). Such interactions play significant role in shaping people's perception of themselves and what actions to be taken to maintain the approval they interpret from those they interact with constantly. Hence the bleaching phenomenon is created and sustained by the society as a tacit display of an innate dislike of the authentic and a deep desire to embrace that which is foreign by a defined circle or group of individuals. Invariably, as individuals in the society interact with one another their behaviors and actions are reinforced by the positive gestures, comments and approvals they receive from those that make up their circle. In the absence of any approval or where there is a sanction against any action or behavior that is regarded as untoward, such actions are quickly checked and the behavior stifled and relegated to the backwaters of deviant act.

Human agencies, however, are themselves a product of social structures and societal institutions that are rooted in established patterned arrangements, norms, and values, all of which shape human behaviors. The covert and blatant privileging of light skin over dark skin in various institutions such as the media, schools, hospitals, the work place and other formal networks institutionalizes a color hierarchy that encourages the bleaching of the melanin in order for people with dark pigmentation to acquire the benefits and privileges that are associated with light skin (Fokuo, 2009; Charles, 2011; Blay, 2009, Hunter, 2011). The structures that discriminate individuals based on the tone of their skin color become the scaffold on which the building blocks that support the practice of bleaching is erected. But social structures and societal institutions are not amorphous, rather they are shaped by historical, economic, political, and cultural forces. As societies are established by these forces they are given direction and meaning by the orchestrated forces of history. Thus, human tendencies are not merely the expression of individual's or group's idiosyncrasies formulated in a vacuum; rather they are rooted, shaped, and expressed in institutional and historical foundations. Attempts at analyzing human actions or behaviors, including the bleaching phenomenon, purely from a micro perspective may therefore limit our in-depth and fruitful understanding of the phenomenon. On the other hand, a careful and perceptive interrogation of skin bleaching from a seemingly disparate perspective may shed light on a much more broad and complex social problem. This paper is a sociological analysis of the pervasive practice of skin bleaching in Africa, which interrogates the phenomenon by conceptualizing it as a metaphor for a more deeply rooted public issue that speaks to developmental problems in Africa. It argues that skin bleachers are victims of historical forces and of contemporary social arrangements that are beyond them but, which, nevertheless, exert enormous pressure on them in their bid to negotiate alternative forms for survival. It is concluded that skin bleaching, hitherto studied from a micro perspective, provides a rich text as both a symbolic and a metaphorical phenomenon that sheds light on Africa's development crisis in relation to the globalizing process.

## **II. THE DISCOURSE OF SKIN BLEACHING AND BEAUTY**

Various reasons have been advanced to explain the practice of skin bleaching by men and women in the Global South, some of which include for aesthetic purposes, to access racial capital, to mobilize social and economic capital, to attract rich spouses, for fashion, and towards a higher self-esteem (Brown-Glaude, 2013; Hall, 2010, Hope, 2011; Lewis, et al, 2009; Mahé, 2003). The literature is replete with copious analysis of bleaching as a social phenomenon globally focusing on the damaging effects on bleachers' health and the environment (del Giudice and Yves, 2002; Harada, et al, 2001; Lewis, et al, 2009; Olumide, et al, 2008; Anekwe, 2014; Ajose, 2005), the economic exploitation of multinationals (Xi, 2011; Razdan & Ali, 2005), and the effects on the global south in general in relation to global white supremacy (Blay, 2011; Hunter, 2011). Such studies are based on empirical data and theoretical analyses that are framed within historical, sociological, economic, and political hegemony of the global north in relation to erstwhile colonies of the global south. Scholars who have focused on the politics of skin bleaching and beauty have also identified an offshoot of what is closely related to skin bleaching: colorism. Colorism is based on social relations that are defined by discriminations based on the hue of one's skin color (Nittle, 2015). According to Hunter (2007) (quoted in Charles, 2011:376) colorism is "the process of discrimination that privileges light skin people over their dark skin counterparts. Colorism is concerned with actual skin tone, as opposed to racial and ethnic identity." Colorism is therefore not a racial issue but a problem in an endo-ethnic group/population but, which nevertheless, evolved from racial relations. Charles (2011) has traced colorism to the slave era when Mulattoes (products of mixed races) were favored in the plantations to serve as stewards to white plantation owners and supervisors to black slaves. Xi (2011) even traced the practice to ancient China where citizens with white skins were privileged over dark-skinned citizens, while Hall (2013) recounts that among the Japanese, light (or white) skin is generally considered the favorite color in defining beauty long before slavery and colonialism were entrenched as ways of social relations between Negroids and Caucasians in the past five hundred years. While these accounts represent the deep history of preference for white skin and the privileges that were associated with it, the wide scale bleaching phenomenon in Africa today, more than any historic desire, assumes a feverish dimension that calls for a more perceptive analysis of the phenomenon not only in itself but also in relation to development generally. The pervasive nature of the phenomenon reinforces the belief that its historical foundation (combined with modern factors), has shaped current attitudes and behaviours toward skin bleaching. What this means is that preference for white skin was deliberately shaped by white slave owners who developed a hierarchy of skin colour that placed white skin as the epitome of perfection and beauty with other shades of colour in descending order and the black skin being placed at the bottom of the color scale. It is therefore not surprising that contemporary societies have held on to that hierarchy through various myths as well as the institutionalization of such myths that perpetuate white supremacy (Hunter, 2011).

From the foregoing historical roots, it is no surprising that in contemporary Black Africa and in the African Diaspora light skin commands high premium in mate selection (Fokuo, 2009; Charles, 2011; Hill, 2002). As a

form of social capital, beauty has been coveted by women all over the world for their upward social mobility and it is more so for women of color who live in societies in which white skin is associated with the perfection of beauty (Hunter, 2002). Fokuo (2009) and Charles (2011) have particularly documented how women of colour in Ghana and Jamaica, respectively, are under pressure to conform to some expected standard of beauty in order for them to win the favour of suitors or to be regarded as beautiful both by men and women. Fokuo (2009:141) noted that the “perceived need to be lighter (considered beautiful by Ghanaian men) appears to cause darker-skinned Ghanaian women to believe that skin bleaching or being of a lighter skin tone is a necessity in their evaluation of their personal beauty and self-worth”. In other words, as people interact with one another they interpret cues (of beauty) that may persuade them to lighten their skin color or reinforce the bleaching practice based on the approval of those around them. In spite of its long history, coupled with the demise of slavery and colonialism, scholars have associated skin bleaching with some form of mental disorder (Charles, 2009; Akbar, 1981). The most vociferous of these scholars is Azibo (2011, 1989), who has argued that the actions of skin bleachers are psychopathological and skin bleachers suffer from “psychological misorientation and mental disorder” because they display all the basic symptoms that define the mentally ill. Azibo (2011:220) defines psychological misorientation as “the overt and cognitive behavioural orientation to reality that derives from the ideation... based on Eurasian concepts, beliefs, and definitional system”. For Azibo the art of bleaching does not constitute beautification but rather a deliberate attempt by the individuals to mutilate or harm themselves. From this perspective, the concern for skin bleaching is not only for self-harm, but it is also a concern that skin bleachers are mentally incapable of preserving their own kind or race and should therefore be confined to specialized institutions for appropriate treatment (Azibo, 2011). This perspective is instructive if skin bleaching is considered beyond the physical action of individuals who are desirous to be like others by toning their dark pigmentation to the conceptualization of the act from a developmental point of view.

### **III. AFRICA’S DEVELOPMENT AND THE METAPHOR OF SKIN BLEACHING**

While it is true that bleaching should be understood within the context of white supremacy (Hunter, 2011:149), we need to turn the discourse on its head by framing it as a function of a lack of social and economic development driven by inferiority complex and other forms of xenocentrism. The practice of bleaching is a blatant attempt to be like others. That is, bleacherstry to become white through the alteration of their skin color, especially the bleaching of the dark melanin that shields the skin from the ultra violet rays of the tropical sun. Bleaching therefore, is not just the alteration of the human skin but the destruction of a vital part of the body. Hence the process of bleaching is a direct harm to the body and it is for this reason that Azibo (2011) categorizes bleachers as psychopaths who need to be treated of their pathogenesis. But the art itself may not necessarily be a pathogenesis as those who engrave tattoos on their body or have lip plugs and other forms of bodily disfigurement inflict severe pain on themselves to achieve the desired goal of scarification, beautification, and bodily alteration. What makes bleaching repulsive (and therefore a pathogenesis) is the idea behind the act which is a tendency for bleachers to deform (or enhance) themselves in order to become increasingly more like other people. It is this desire, much more than the bleaching process itself, that deserves scholarly attention and analysis. The desire to look like others (or becoming like other persons rather than oneself), will have to be analyzed from a historical perspective that identifies how beauty is constructed and how social relations are engineered, defined, and sustained. Slavery and colonialism as historical experiences have inevitably shaped how the victims perceive themselves in relation to their erstwhile slave and colonial masters.

Contemporary relations between Africa (including the African Diaspora) and the West have not ameliorated the hegemonic grip that once defined social relations. Even though slavery has long been abolished, and African countries have regained their independence from their colonial masters, the imposition of a false beauty hierarchy is still retained. It is from this perspective that bleachers, and Africa nations, may be said to be victims of history because the relationship between Negroids and Caucasians as dictated by the consciousness of one’s status is not directed to the real but to the illusion that was constructed in the past. But such victimization is not a justification for self-hate, self-blame or a desire to become complacent in the face of the monumental obstacles that challenge African nations in overcoming their bid for self-determination of becoming truly independent and taking their place among the comity of nations. The reluctance by African nations to craft an endogenous development paradigm that is independent of western framework belies the self-hate that characterizes developmental policies that are foisted on the sub-continent. The uncritical acceptance of foreign policies as the framework that undergird development ideals in Africa is one of the singular most important factor causing whole scale underdevelopment on the continent (Rodney, 1981). Such exogenous approach to development, without due regard to internal expertise, local cultures, knowledges, and institutions, is tantamount to skin bleaching that destroys the skin and health of the individual. Adopting Azibo’s (2011) diagnosis and recommendation regarding skin bleachers, African nations need not be ashamed of the vast traditional resources in medicine, politics, architecture etc. that are available to them on the continent and using them in framing developmental policies. The increasing reliance on the West in defining the path towards development is a direct

result of the integration of African nations to the global market in Western terms, and the advanced technologies of the West that significantly compromise Africa's position and limit its development. Colonialism embedded racist ideologies among colonists while neoliberal ideologies reaffirm the dependency African nations must continue to perpetuate in its bid for illusionary progress and development. However, it is the complacency of African nations to extricate themselves from this apron string of the West that is the most disturbing in the developmental agenda of African states. This is expressed most copiously in the orientation that guides the formulation of policies and in the philosophy that bolsters its mobilization. Consequently, the character of the African nation is gradually being eroded primarily because it is not appreciated and identified as a store house for development.

By character of African nations is meant the distinctive attributes (including norms, worldviews, technologies, medicines, literature, architecture, etc.) that characterized precolonial Africa. By identifying with this character it is not suggested that other forms besides the African character cannot be appreciated, but rather the African character should be the basis in the formulation of policies. Along this thought pattern, just as bleachers' acts are condemned primarily because they do not only cause damage to themselves, but more importantly, because they perpetuate white supremacy and undermine Black Africans, so also exogenous policies are condemned because they cause harm to citizens and make African nations (and their peoples) subservient to Western nations. The perpetuation of a false dichotomy (white/superior vs Black/inferior) through inappropriate policies that favor the West, forces African citizens to operate in a prism of inferiority in relation to their white counterparts. When citizens take on to bleaching their skin to look like their white counterparts they only respond to a script that has been crafted by government and in the institutionalization of white supremacy hegemony. The power that relationship wields becomes a desirable object for some to acquire because of the privileges that accrue to the light skin in the society in which they function. This desire to look like others also finds expression in Africa's policy and its desire to ape the West in all aspects of the principles and spirit of foreign policies. In the same vein, just as bleachers lack any form of ingenuity in the production of the products they use so also African leaders seem to lack any creativity in developing endogenous policies that speak to the dire needs of citizens. Developmental process in Africa south of the Sahara is therefore self-destructive, due, in part, to the philosophy of adopting a unilineal approach to development, informed by the erroneous notion that development must inevitably take the path of western nations with the concomitant belief that traditional practices are inimical to progress and must be expunged from the developmental framework if African nations must be regarded as "developed" and "modern". The construction of modernity and the framing of development from this perspective impose an exogenous approach to development in Africa that eulogizes Western culture and traditions as superior and simultaneously restricts the endogenous development of African nations, which also project them as inferior to western nations.

The very fact that African nations (with few exceptions) do not have policies that ban or restrict the sale and distribution of bleaching products on the continent, only reflects the nonchalant attitude towards protecting citizens from the dangers that are associated with bleaching. In western countries where legislation prohibits or highly regulates the sale of bleaching products, it is Black African immigrants who still smuggle the products into such countries (Darj, et al, 2015). This practice is instructive within the context of Azibo's (2011) organismic survival maintenance propensity that accentuates the individual's maintenance of the self and to their own kind. The inability or reluctance of African leaders to protect their citizens from harm provides a plausible parallel between skin bleachers and the self-hate of African leaders as entrenched in their policies. For this reason, it has been rightly argued by Darjet *al*(2015) that rather than a superficial approach to the bleaching phenomenon in Africa, government needs to address the phenomenon from a developmental perspective, which targets social inequalities in the society that endorse colorism and privilege lighter skin over dark pigmentation. Beyond this, African governments need to craft their own development agenda that will not mimic foreign development policies but that which is endogenously developed for the benefit of the citizens and the continent.

In a metaphorical sense the actions of African leaders can be discussed further within Azibo's nosology that classifies abnormality (and therefore lunacy or mental disorder) based on two criteria: universal mental health and organismic survival maintenance propensity (Azibo, 2011). The first principle recognizes that self-preservation is a priority of normalcy while the second principle holds that people's actions and behaviours must not be self-destructive and must be geared towards perpetuating their kind (that is, their race). Any deviation from this expectation may be regarded as abnormal as it threatens not only the individual's survival but also the obliteration of their own racial group. Although Azibo's analysis may tend to focus primarily on skin bleaching, the actions of African leaders that tend to jeopardize Black Africans may be analyzed within this framework. Chinua Achebe (1988), in a similar observation, once commented thus:

*We have given ourselves so much to selfishness [in Africa] that we hurt not only those around us, but ourselves even more deeply, that one must assume a blunting of the imagination and a sense of danger of truly psychiatric proportions.*

In defense of this conclusion, Achebe recounted how African leaders amass and appropriate national treasuries at the expense of citizens and recalled the destructive greed of some African leaders who accepted gratifications from Western countries to allow the deposition of toxic waste on the African coastal regions. The obscene opulence most African leaders display in the face of abject poverty their citizens are subjected to is a form of self- and group- destruction that qualifies for Azibo's (2011) classification of "psychological misorientation and mental disorder". From this psychosomatic perspective, skin bleaching is supremely displayed not by individuals who use various harmful chemicals to remove the melanin that protect them from the ultra violet rays of the tropical sun, but the collective actions of African leaders who have mortgaged the future of successive generations because of their self-hate for their kind. What is clear in this analysis is that for the practice of skin bleaching to abate, African governments must not only shun corruption at all levels, but they must develop endogenous policies that will empower their citizens and promote their dignity to counter the white superiority mentality. The reversal of economic and social structures that privilege light skin over dark pigmentation will empower citizens of color to be confident of themselves and project an image of self-dignity that empower Black Africansto shun any form of inferiority complex. This new orientation can only be sustained if citizens are provided with appropriate platforms to display their confidence and serve as models for the younger generation. Platforms and institutions such as the media, beauty pageants, the airline industries among others, need to project broadcasters, beauty queens, air hostesses, and others with the characteristic African features rather than project and give ascent to a false white ideal on the African continent.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Skin bleaching as a pervasive practice in Africa is enabled by the socio-political context that privileges white skin over dark skin pigmentation primed by an inferiority complex. As people interact with one another they create symbolic preference for white skin, and as institutions reify this preference, conditions are set in motion that encourage people of color to engage in skin bleaching. Those who engage in the art of skin bleaching therefore, may be regarded as victims of their society. These victims merely engage in the practice in order for them to be acceptable or gain some social privileges associated with white skin by negotiating the social labyrinth towards achieving higher social status in the society. If these conditions are not present skin bleaching will not thrive. Beyond individual skin bleaching however, it has been highlighted in this paper that African nations, through their leaders, engage in skin bleaching of another form. The psychological explanation of skin bleaching as self-hate and a desire to be like others provides a rich text for us in examining skin bleaching from a metaphorical framework that discusses various actions of African nations as a form of psychological skin bleaching. This takes the form of African policies that adopt Western paradigm, which promotes foreign ideals rather than the authentic thus becoming the anathema to both citizens and continent. Such Eurocentric approach to development provides the superstructure that promotes psychological bleaching in every aspect of Black African lives expressed in their fashion, language, architecture, politics, and everything that alienates them from their authentic self. Thus, various acts (both political and private) that tend to copy Western ideals and mimic that which is foreign denies the self and presents a condition that is tantamount to a mental disorder that erodes individual's confidence and pride and, therefore, is inimical to the development of Black Africans on the continent. From this perspective, the obsessive desire for the acceptance of African states into the comity of nations, without being true to the authentic self, creates a difficult pathway for endogenous development of Black Africa.

The central point of this paper, therefore, is that most often skin bleachers are castigated for their self-hate practice without considering other forms of skin bleaching that is practiced by African leaders. The destructive nature of exogenous policies adopted by African leaders that create widespread poverty on the continent and its people provides the enabling environment for people to adopt various actions (including skin bleaching) to be like others in the bid to survive. Furthermore, the looting of national treasuries by government officials for self-aggrandizement at the expense of the majority of citizens is a form of lunacy or what Azibo (2011) has characterized as "psychological misorientation and mental disorder". Because such actions by government officials do not prioritize the collective good (by way of preserving the collective), such behaviours aptly deserve to be regarded as a form of skin bleaching. Skin bleaching therefore assumes different shades and forms of manifestations and it is this complexity of the phenomenon that developmental issues may be interrogated in Black Africa.

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