

Skin Bleaching and the Question of Identity of Black Zimbabweans: An Afrocentric Critique

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the extent to which the phenomenon of skin bleaching in Zimbabwe has been influenced by the colonisers' objective to degrade the black skin while at the same time elevating the aesthetic value of the white skin and culture to the lofty status of the ideal that every race ought to aspire to achieve and match (Tembo 2010, 19). For Street, Gaska, Lewis and Wilson (2014, 52), 'skin bleaching is the use of creams, gels, or soaps to lighten the skin and is known to cause a number of injuries, many of which are potentially life-threatening.' For the purpose of this study, we accept Street, Gaska, Lewis and Wilson's (2014, 52) understanding of skin bleaching but we add that in the context of the colonised world, it is an outcome of the colonial experience that has fostered psychological injuries to the colonised people that have led them to aspire to be like their colonisers in regard to skin colour and cultural values. In this regard, we are in agreement with Robinson (2011) that skin bleaching is a relic of colonialism.

Grounded on the theoretical framework of Afrocentricity, the present paper argues that the de-centering and dislocation that the indigenous people of Zimbabwe have suffered at the hands of the colonisers can be remedied through adopting an Afrocentric stance that enables them to regain confidence in regard to who they are. The paper focuses on the phenomenon of skin bleaching and how it impacts on the question of identity. Despite the ban of these skin damaging cosmetics in Zimbabwe, their use has become widespread. The paper proceeds to argue a case for the restoration of the agency of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe in understanding beauty in the context of a pluriverse and not a universe¹.

Skin lightening chemicals in use in Zimbabwe

The use of skin lightening products predates the nominal independence of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe from colonial rule in 1980 (Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker 1983, 226; Perry 2006, 1; Lewis *et al* 2013, 31). Skin lightening products are voluntary depigmentation agents that suppress melanin production leading to the lightening of the skin (Atadokpédé *et al* 2015, 1).² Their use rose throughout Africa³ from the 1930s to the late 1970s when some African governments outlawed all cosmetics containing high levels of hydroquinone and mercury that have serious side effects on the user's health (Menke 2013, 198). In the 1980s, skin bleaching continued to be a health menace in some African countries (Kpanake, Sastre and Mullet 2010, 352) including Zimbabwe (Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker 1983, 226). The practice remains in existence among the indigenous black people of Zimbabwe despite the banning of depigmentation substances because of their negative medical effects (Women's Health 2012, 2).

According to Zimbabwe's Customs and Excise Act Chapter 23:02 of 2014 (2014, 27), it is a punishable offence to import prohibited or restricted goods such as skin lightening substances. However, the Act is silent on what must be done to those who bleach their skin. The efforts to fight against skin bleaching through prohibition of the importation of skin

lightening substances is rendered largely ineffectual given that some of the substances used for bleaching are medicines that can be legally obtained in Zimbabwe by prescription.

We submit that academic research that focuses on the practice of skin bleaching in Zimbabwe and its effects on those who bleach. Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker's (1983) work titled, *'A Survey of the Constituents, Availability and Use of Skin Lightening Creams in Zimbabwe'* and Gwaravanda's (2011) *'Shona Proverbial Implications on Skin Bleaching: Some Philosophical Insights'* stand out as among a few systematic works that have attempted to situate and discuss the skin bleaching phenomenon within the Zimbabwean context. Local newspapers have also played an important role in informing the public about the dangers of bleaching the skin (Gumbo, *The Herald*, 8 October 2012; Chireka, *Newzimbabwe.com*, 7 May 2015; Magirosa, *The Patriot*, 14 May 2015; Moyo, *The Patriot*, 6 October 2015). These newspaper reports become an important source of information regarding the types of skin lightening substances in use in Zimbabwe and the extent of the potential damage they can cause to their users. We now turn to the skin lightening creams and substances that are in use in Zimbabwe.

Medicines that are abused in order to lighten the skin in Zimbabwe include diprozone, movate, epidem, carolite, betasol and dematol (Moyo, *The Herald*, 8 October 2012). Skin lightening substances such as G 'n' G, bio Claire, '7 miracles', gentle magic, Caro light and Extra Clair are considered illegal because they are not certified by the Medicines Control Council of Zimbabwe (MCAZ). These substances are illegally imported into Zimbabwe (Kanhema, *The Herald*, 21 January 2006). However, in regard to substances such as diprozone, movate, epidem, carolite and betasol (Gumbo, 8 October 2012), these are medicines that people abuse in order to bleach their skin. According to the MCAZ, these substances were not intended to be used as skin lightening substances but as short-term therapy for inflammation and other skin problems (Gumbo, 8 October 2012). The substances

used to bleach the skin can fall under corticosteroids. According to Thomson, corticosteroids are used as therapy for the management of some non-endocrine disorders such as asthma and allergic conditions that produce an inflammatory response (Thomson 1995, 576). These medicines are often abused in order to lighten one's skin. Excessive use beyond the doctor's prescription can lead to the lightening of the skin. Lightening of the skin is considered as one of the side-effects of the use of the steroids such as betamethasone, miconazole, cortisone, prednisone and prednisolone (Trounce and Gould 1997, 180-182). In this regard, the lightening of the skin is unintended but is a side effect. In the case of skin bleaching, one voluntarily and intentionally abuses some substances such as steroids in order to lighten one's skin (Malangu and Ogunbajo 2006, 14). According to MCAZ director-general Ms Gugu Mahlangu (Gumbo, *The Herald*, 8 October 2012):

If one continues to use these particular creams they expose themselves to the long-term side effects of these medicines, which are meant to be short-term therapy for inflammation. People have to understand that these creams were not meant to be used as cosmetics. Once there is prolonged use of these creams, it speeds up the turnover of the skin cells, bringing to the surface immature cells which to an uninformed person look like lightening the complexion. Because of that there is a possibility of the creams being absorbed into the bloodstream.

It must be noted that they can be accessed if one has a prescription from a doctor which specifies the rate and manner in which the medicine is to be taken as well as the duration. Excessive use in disregard to the doctor's prescription constitutes an abuse of such medicines. So, the use of such medicines for skin lightening purposes is indeed an abuse.

A research that was conducted in 1982 by Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker (1983, 225-226) on the availability and use of skin lightening creams in Zimbabwe noted the following:

the creams were found to be used as multipurpose preparations for depigmenting, smoothing and removing blemishes from the skin. Adverse effects being suffered following use of the creams include irritation, sensitisation, dermatitis and hyperpigmentation with ochronotic changes.

Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker (1983, 225-226) identified the inorganic mercury salts and para-hydroxyphenyl derivatives such as hydroquinone as the bleaching agents that were in use in Zimbabwe. Even though both inorganic mercury salts and hydroquinone were found to be efficient skin bleaching agents, it was noted that their prolonged use give rise to side-effects that include damage to the nervous system, kidneys, inflammation, irritation and sensitisation (Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker 1983, 226). The continued use of bleaching agents with inorganic mercury salts and hydroquinone destroy the outer layer of the skin thereby leading to temporary or permanent lightening of one's skin colour (Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker 1983, 226). They damage the skin thereby making it susceptible to extreme photosensitivity, skin cancer and expose the bleacher to medical problems such as kidney failure, convulsions and headaches (Perry 2006, 9). In their study, Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker (1983, 225-226) observed that the hydroquinone containing skin bleaching agents that were meant for the blacks in Zimbabwe were not necessarily advertised as skin lightening creams. In our view, this was done in order to avoid detection given that bleaching agents containing hydroquinone and mercury were banned.

As a result of the dangers that skin lightening substances pose to human health, the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA)'s Custom Declaration Form classifies 'skin lightening creams containing hydroquinone and mercury' under the category of 'prohibited goods' (Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, Customs Declaration. Form 47 revised on 23 March 2011; *See also* Customs and Excise Act Chapter 23:02 of 2014). This means that the importation of such products is strictly prohibited. Medicines and Allied Substances Control Act [Chapter 15:03] regulates the importation of medicines (Medicines and Allied Substances Control Act [Chapter 15:03] of 2001) while ZIMRA is mandated to control the importation and exportation of such prohibited products. The control of such products is done in the interest of public safety.

However, such products are illegally imported into the country and are easily accessible to their users. Miconazole and betasol can easily be obtained by prescription. Skin bleaching remains in existence in Zimbabwe despite the fact that some newspaper articles (Chireka, NewZimbabwe.com, 7 May 2015; Magirosa, The Patriot, 14 May 2015; Moyo, The Patriot, 3 September 2015; Ngwebvu, The Manica Post, 14 October 2014) have been written to alert the public about the dangers of skin bleaching as well as the threats of arrest for selling or buying these products. It becomes necessary to establish the possible reasons for the continued existence of the practice of skin bleaching in Zimbabwe in the light of the dangers that skin lightening products cause to their users.

Background to Skin Bleaching

We submit that the colonisers left cultural models (Hickling and Hutchinson 2000: 94) that have immensely influenced the aesthetic standards and values of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. The European aesthetic standards have now unjustifiably become the standard reference points of beauty. The imposition of an alien paradigm of beauty on the indigenous people of Zimbabwe substantially put to question issues of identity and sovereignty in terms of thought, way of life and political space. It is for this reason that we argue that skin bleaching is an outcome of the colonial experience that inferiorised the skin colour of the black people. The colonisers deliberately imposed their own paradigm of beauty as *the standard* that the colonised must strive to imitate. This position is defended by Charles (2003, 2) when he argues that:

self-hate or low self-esteem is often posited as the explanation for the bleaching phenomenon. Slavery was a traumatizing experience for the enslaved Africans. They were brainwashed to hate themselves by the elevation of British values over African ones. The descendants of enslaved Africans through socialization have internalized the negative attitudes about themselves. Skin bleaching is the contemporary evidence of the deep-rooted and lingering psychological scars of slavery in particular and colonization in general.

In our view, to conceive whiteness as a defining character of beauty and as a culmination of perfection is problematic. wa Thiong'o (1981, 9) calls these 'white lies' which, he argues, are carried by the English language that has been imposed on the colonised at the detriment of the languages of the colonised people. The use of the imposed language translates to the acceptance of the values that it carries. For wa Thiong'o (1981, 9), the values attached to blackness in the English language portray it in the negative sense. The term 'black' is used disparagingly in expressions such as 'black day', 'blackmail', 'black spot', 'black sheep', 'black listed', 'black book' and 'black market' to point at sad, scary, evil occurrences, moments and places (wa Thiong'o 1981, 9). The black skin is thus portrayed as abominable (Tsiwo-Chigubu 2005, 6). On the other hand, whiteness becomes exalted and is portrayed in positive light.

wa Thiong'o (1981, 9) blames the christianity that was imposed on the colonised people by missionaries for reinforcing the 'white lies' that the 'African' has no religion, is superstitious, and worships idols and a multiplicity of Gods. These lies have misled the colonised people into thinking that to be is to be white. For wa Thiong'o (1981, 9), the God of the colonisers is considered as the only one there is and:

this God is white: his angels are white; and when the saved finally go to heaven, they will wear white robes of purity. But the devil is black; his angels are black; sin itself is black; and when the sinful finally go to Hell, they'll be burnt to black charcoal. Is it surprising that the African converts sing in pleading terror: Wash me Redeemer and I shall be whiter than snow? Is it any wonder that African converts wear white robes of virgin purity during their white wedding? And is it any wonder that African women often buy red, blond or brunette wigs to hide their black hair? And is it any wonder that African women and men will apply *Ambi* and other skinwhitening creams to lighten their dark skins? Whiteness becomes a christian virtue as in Smith's Rhodesia⁴ and Botha's South Africa.

In this light, the imposition of the colonisers' paradigm of beauty on the colonised can be blamed for the practice of skin bleaching among the colonised people. It becomes necessary to note that the indigenous people of Zimbabwe have endured mental and physical

subjugation at the hands of the colonisers one of whose unjust outcome is desire to imitate the skin colour of their colonisers through use of skin lightening products (*see* Cabral 1991, 10). For Asante (1991, 177), it is ‘no wonder many persons of African descent attempt to shed their race and become ‘raceless’.

The availability and promotion of skin lightening products among various black communities could just be one neo-colonial strategy to inferiorise the black skin and engender a sense of lack of self-worth, dignity and confidence within the black people (Kpanake, Sastre and Mullet 2010, 362). Though at present skin bleaching is not necessarily forced on the black people, it is reasonable to situate its emergence to the black people’s colonial experience where the black skin was degraded while the white skin was exalted. Suffice to state that to equate beauty with whiteness reflects a mindset that is an outcome of long years of colonial domination. For Fanon, ‘in the man of colour there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence’ (Fanon 1967, 44). With respect to the existential problems of identity that confront the black people, Fanon (Jinadu 1980, 33) blames white civilisation and European culture for occasioning an ‘...existential deviation...’ among black people.

Method

Questionnaires were administered to 17 Great Zimbabwe University students with the objective of soliciting their views on the skin bleaching practice in Zimbabwe. The questionnaire was focused on a sample population of Great Zimbabwe University female and male students for the reason that though skin bleaching is predominantly practiced by women, some men also bleach their skin (Muchadeyi, Thompson and Baker 1983, 226). All the 17 questionnaires were completed. The first set of questions was focused on the demographic information of the respondents. 10 female and 7 male students responded to the questions. Of the 7 male respondents, 4 were married while 3 were single. Of the 10 female

respondents, 3 were married and 7 were single. The students responded to 10 questions. In each of the 10 questions, they were supposed to give a short explanation to their responses. We are going to use these explanations in the subsequent sections of this study.

Table 1.

The table below shows the answers to the 10 questions that were posed to the 17 respondents:

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Comments
1. Skin bleaching is practised in Zimbabwe.				12	5	The respondents are unanimous that the practice of skin bleaching is being practiced in Zimbabwe.
2. Skin bleaching enhances one's beauty.	6	4	1	5	1	The responses are varied. These responses show that people are not in agreement whether skin bleaching enhances beauty of the individual or not.
3. Skin bleaching enhances one's attraction to a person of opposite sex.	2	3		7	5	The majority of the respondents are in are in agreement while some disagree.
4. Skin bleaching is common among black communities		1	2	10	4	The majority of the respondents agree.
5. Skin bleaching destroys the black skin colour as an identity mark for blacks.	2	3	1	6	5	While the responses are varied, the majority are in agreement.
6. Skin bleaching is a result of the colonial experience in Zimbabwe.	3	1	3	5	5	While the responses are varied, the majority are in agreement.
7. The black skin is good as it is. It must not be bleached				6	11	There is unanimity that the black skin is good as it is.
8. The blacks who bleach their skin want to be like their white colonisers.		3	3	6	5	The responses are varied but the majority are in agreement to this claim.

9. Since skin bleaching is harmful to the bleacher's health, they must be banned.	1			7	9	All except one are in agreement to this claim.
10. Skin bleaching in Zimbabwe is done by both women and men.	2	4	2	6	3	The responses are varied but the majority disagree.

From the questions posed to the respondents, the observation that we make is that although the practice of skin bleaching is generally condemned, it is a common practice in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the Afrocentric theory. Molefi Kete Asante is considered its originator and one of its greatest exponents (Mazama 2001, 394). For Asante (1991, 171), 'Afrocentricity is a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person.' It is an emancipatory movement that seeks to question the belief that the perspective of one race overrides that of the others (Mazama 2002, 219). In the context of this present study, the black people in Zimbabwe must be allowed not only to define themselves, but also to see themselves as subjects and not objects of study.

Afrocentricity stands as critique of Europe's domination and supposed exclusive entitlement to define reality (Oyebade, 1990, 234). It seeks to re-locate the African person as an active agent in human history (Asante 2006, 646). It thus falls within the tradition of resistance of African people to the supposed domination of Europe in world affairs (Mazama 2002, 219; Asante 2006, 649) where Europe's worldview assumes undeserved planetary dimension. Mazama regards Afrocentricity as a paradigm (2001, 390). In regarding it as a paradigm, Mazama (2001, 390) invigorates Asante's understanding of Afrocentricity and its emancipatory agenda by adding the functional aspect. Asante (2007, 16) recognises Mazama's contribution to the understanding of the term 'Afrocentricity' when he states that:

I have defined Afrocentricity as a consciousness, a quality of thought, and an analytical process based on Africans viewing themselves as subjects, that is, agents in the world, but with the intervention of Mazama it now becomes clear that there has to be a functional component to the concept.

For Mazama (2001, 403-404), the functional aspect enables Afrocentricity to make realistic difference in people's lives. It must lead to genuine liberation of the colonised from the colonisers' grip.

By re-centering the African person as an agent rather than an object of history, Afrocentricity denies the hegemony of Europe in thought and behaviour. It is a quest for the liberation of the colonised from the colonisers' physical and mental bondage. It does not seek to portray their own perspective as the only one there is but as one among other perspectives. In this regard, the colonisers' perspective of beauty must be regarded as one among other perspectives of beauty. Thus, the claim to transcultural appeal of the colonisers' perspective of beauty becomes questionable and must be duly rejected.

Skin colour as a status symbol is one aspect that has been entrenched in the colonised people through colonialism. The majority of the respondents to our questionnaire accepted that skin bleaching is an outcome of the colonial experience that demonised the colonised people's skin colour and portrayed that of the colonisers in high regard. Afrocentrists seek to challenge such a myth. The supposed independence of the colonised from the grip of the colonisers has not translated to their realistic freedom from the physical and mental bondage of the colonisers. Kwame Nkrumah (1965, xiv) calls this type of 'independence' 'nominal independence' principally because the colonisers have relinquished power in theory while in reality they are still in physical and mental control of the colonised people. This is called neo-colonialism. In our view, the practice of skin bleaching squarely reflects the reality of mental colonisation which still lingers after the supposed end of colonialism. Neo-colonialism becomes a real threat to the genuine independence of the colonised from the colonisers' salient physical and mental grip. We now turn to a discussion on the practice of skin bleaching and the question of identity.

Bleaching and Identity

Though skin bleaching is predominant among females in Zimbabwe, it is practiced by both females and males. One common reason behind skin bleaching is to enhance one's beauty and social standing (Lewis *et al* 2013, 31). It is a practice that has a global dimension and is common among various black communities. A variety of products are applied to specific areas of one's body or to the whole body so that one's natural black skin is replaced by a lighter one. It is common among black Zimbabweans to see a person with an extraordinarily lighter face skin and from the neck going down to the toes, one is dark skinned. Instead of enhancing the 'beauty' of the user of these skin altering creams and tablets, the user becomes a subject of mockery. In some cases, one's whole body turns lighter as a result of the consumption of skin lightening substances. The quest for a lighter skin in place of one's dark skin must be understood within the context of the colonisers' unjust imposition of their paradigm of humanity and beauty on the colonised people at the expense of their own.

For Kpanake, Sastre and Mullet (2010, 362), people may develop a tendency to bleach their skins, mainly as a way of '...coping with the psychological suffering that some Africans experience as a result of persistent historical affliction-colonial and slavery state of mind-along with current Western cultural and sociopolitical oppression...' It is a practice that has occasioned a serious existential predicament among the black people of the world.⁵ Hall (2013, 1) argues that the Western influence on the colonised people has forced them to '...in the end come to idealise concepts and behaviours that are of an alien origin' at the expense of their own.

For Hall (2013, 2; *see also* Williams 2010, 110), the colonised people have endured various episodes of psychic assaults at the hands of the colonisers. Hall (2013, 2) argues that 'today, each of these psychic assaults is manifested in various forms of inferiorized

subjugation.’ One of the responses to the colonisers’ inferiorisation of the colonised black people is what Hall (2013, 2) calls the ‘Bleaching Syndrome.’ Hall (2013, 2) understands the ‘Bleaching Syndrome’ as ‘...a conscious and systematic process of self-denigration and aspiration to assimilation on the basis of alien ideals, resulting from colonial domination.’

The globalisation of the notion of beauty means that the dominant cultures overpower and suppress the supposedly weaker ones.⁶ The colonisers’ understanding of beauty becomes the standard that the colonised must necessarily accept. For Li, Min, Belk, Kimura and Bahl (2008, 444-445):

during the colonial era, and arguably before and after as well, rather than a homogenizing blending of skin color, there has instead been an attempt to distinguish the dark Other as “primitive” and inferior, thereby supporting the mission of the light skinned colonialist to conquer and control the natives of Africa, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Polynesia. A part of this project has entailed equating dark skin color with dirt, filth, and defilement.

The notion of beauty as understood by the colonisers devalues the black skin and its psychological impact on the colonised people has led to self-hate (Hall 2005, 28). Nyamnjoh (2004: 138) argues that ‘such “cultural estrangement” in the place of cultural engagement has served to reinforce in Africans self-devaluation and self-hatred and a profound sense of inferiority that in turn compels them to “lighten their darkness” both physically and metaphorically for the gratification of their colonial and postcolonial overlords.’ In our view, the skin changing antic on its own cannot transform a person into another race. Those who bleach the skin mistakenly think that they are doing it in the spirit of modernity⁷ when in fact such a practice expressly embodies the white supremacist myth that all that is white is good and that which is black symbolises evil, misfortunes and low-grade civilisation.

Skin bleaching actually gives the bleached person a fictionalised image. It leads to self-deception. Chitando and Chitando (2004, 4-5) argue that skin bleaching in Zimbabwe ‘is an expression of the desire to become white. Beauty [is] defined in white terms.

Consequently, to be beautiful [is] to leave the black skin and to assume a white identity.’ Here, the irony of deception of skin bleaching is apparent in that in as much as the individual tries to change his or her identity, still the individual remains the same in terms of being a black person no matter how much one tries to shed off his or her skin pigment. In this regard, the individual has the logically impossible task of trying to change his or her skin colour as an external mark of identity. Identity is one such natural feature that continues to weave through one’s life episodes no matter how one tries to change it through skin bleaching.

The attempts to be like the colonisers in deeds, acts and above all, skin colour, is not only a confirmation of the mythical and ‘...magical invulnerability and power of the oppressor’ (Freire 1972, 39), but also the impact of the alien mindset that has been imposed on the colonised black people. This condition of black existential insecurity reflects the cruel brain washing and dehumanisation that the black people have suffered at the hands of the colonisers since colonial and slave trade times. The very structure of their thoughts and actions have been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete existential situation by which they were shaped (Freire 1972, 39) whereby they are forced to question their beingness, humanity and self-worth. We are in agreement with Chitando and Chitando (2004, 4) that the mimicry of being white ‘...has often been carried over to the period after decolonisation’ and such a condition reflects the racially constructed inferiority complex among black people.

Commenting on the attempt to change one’s ethnic identity, Presbey (1997, 164) argued that ‘although excessive clinging to...identity can be harmful in so far as one learns to care only about others who are like oneself...the willingness to shed [one’s identity] as if it were an outmoded fashion is surely not realistic.’ This is true of racial identity of the black people.

The way forward

We have so far argued that the desire for skin bleaching among black Zimbabweans can largely be blamed on colonial stereotypes which have tended to regard the black race and skin as inferior to the white race and skin. Hoskins (1992, 248) makes an important observation with respect to the racism of Eurocentrism when he argues that ‘Eurocentric ideology has refused to accept Africans on the basis of their humanity because of the color of their skin.’ It is the submission of this present study that Afrocentricity as an ideological standpoint is important in instilling confidence and self-worth among the colonised black people in the face of the questionable superiority of the people of Europe on the basis of their skin colour and supposed high levels of civilisation. This will enable them to reject such colonial stereotypes of inferiority of the black skin and the supposed superiority of the white skin. If the black people are to succeed in exposing and critiquing the myth of superiority of the white over the black race, then they will be able to have confidence in what they are.

We are in agreement to Asante’s (1991, 177) thesis that ‘one’s basic identity is one’s self-identity, which is ultimately one’s cultural identity; without a strong cultural identity, one is lost.’ When one is de-centered from his or her culture, one becomes lost and essentially becomes an object of manipulation by the agents of such acts of de-centering and dislocation. In this regard, it becomes imperative to deal with the condition of slavery and colonisation that have brought about the existential situation that black people face in the contemporary world if we are to deal the problem of lack of confidence and self-worth among the black race as reflected by the phenomenon of skin bleaching. Beauty must be defined from within the context of the culture of the indigenous people of ‘Africa’. This is opposed to the status quo whereby the colonisers undeservedly apportion to themselves the exclusive right to define beauty for all people from other geopolitical centres.

Acceptance of otherness or alterity (Dussel 1995, 12) especially from those who harbour Eurocentric ethnocentrism is necessary if we are to allow the co-existence of the colonisers' paradigm of beauty and that of the colonised black people. In this light, Dussel and Ibarra-Colado (2006, 505; *see also* Dussel 2009, 514) propose a pluriverse as opposed to a universe. For Dussel (2009, 509), Eurocentrism fosters as monolithic understanding of the world, that is, the world is understood from Europe's geopolitical centre which is regarded as the authentic yardstick of, for example, culture and beauty. What is particular is thus given planetary dimension. More specifically, the thinking is that Europe's understanding of beauty, as of necessity, ought to have planetary application and acceptance.

The term 'universal' is now in dispute because its pretensions to planetary application when it is in fact a one-sided perspective from a particular geopolitical centre. A pluriverse, as opposed to a universe, is a liberating concept that ensures alterity whereby the values of the suppressed cultures find their footing. For Grosfoguel (2012, 102), 'the "pluri" as opposed to the "uni" is not to support everything said by a subaltern subject from below, but a call to produce critical decolonial knowledge that is rigorous, comprehensive, with a worldly-scope and non-provincial.' Pluriversality would then allow the black people retain their paradigm of beauty as opposed to the monolithic conception of beauty and skin colour that is constructed from the geopolitical centre of Europe. A pluriverse enables every culture to protect its own identity and at the same time interact with other cultures (Dussel and Ibarra-Colado 2006, 505). Pluriversality becomes a defining aspect in the struggle for liberation from Eurocentric hegemony on the construction of beauty of an external nature as reflected by skin colour.

Conclusion

The paper focused on the practice of skin bleaching among black Zimbabweans. It noted that the widespread use of skin lightening products among black people in Zimbabwe can be linked to the historical legacy of colonialism that degraded the black people's paradigm of beauty and imposed that of the colonisers. This has been backed by 64.71 % of the respondents who affirmed the claim that 'the blacks who bleach their skin want to be like their white colonisers.' Grounded on the theoretical framework of Afrocentricity, the paper sought to reject the supposed superiority of the colonisers' paradigm of beauty over that of the colonised people. We argued that the Afrocentric paradigm is necessary questioning the supposed supremacy of the white skin over the black skin. After rejecting the supposed supremacy of the colonisers' skin colour, we proposed the possibility of living with otherness whereby the other previously suppressed paradigms of beauty are given their deserved space for recognition and to co-exist with the colonisers' paradigm of beauty. It thus becomes imperative to reject the pretensions to planetary appeal of the colonisers' paradigm of beauty.

End Notes

¹ The term 'universe' is problematical because it takes that which is particular to reflect planetary dimension (Dussel 2006, 505). For Dussel (2006,505) the term 'pluriverse' is more appropriate because it accepts and gives place of recognition to cultures that have been previously discarded and regarded as useless. These previously marginalised cultures are thus given their deserved recognition among global cultures.

² According to Atadokpédé *et al* (2015, 1), 'the term voluntary depigmentation is often used in the literature to put special emphasis on its intentional aspect.' We take depigmentation agents as voluntary in so far as their use is intentional and not a side effect of the use of certain medicines that are taken for other purposes other than to bleach the skin.

³ The term 'Africa' is not innocent of meaning. It is a term that was coined and defined by outsiders to refer to the people of this present day continent. Its foreign origin makes it susceptible to misrepresentations in reference to the people of this continent if one were to consider its etymological root that essentially speaks to the climatic conditions of this continent and not necessarily its inhabitants. Oyebade (1990, 237) argues that in order to deal with the distortions contained in Eurocentric writings in reference to people of this continent, '...the definition of Africa must be Africa-centred.'

⁴ The then Rhodesia is now present day Zimbabwe.

⁵ It is critical to note that use of skin colour as a criterion of constructing races is in dispute not only because of its apparent origin in Eurocentric ethnocentrism, but also because there is no race that is realistically white or black unless these terms have some special meanings ascribed to them in reference to human beings.

⁶ Provincial and particular opinion of Europe was supposed to have a planetary effect whereby what it considered as a superior culture, race and skin colour was as of necessity supposed to be accepted without questioning by the rest of the planet. Even though coming from a particular geopolitical centre, such opinions are elevated to facts that the whole planet has to accept and respect. This thinking needs to be critically questioned.

⁷ The concept of modernity is problematic in regard to its usage especially as it is seen as an antithesis of tradition. Modernity is erroneously identified with the Western civilisation and it has been regarded as a stage of human development characterised by, among others, scientific thinking and progress (Gyekye 1997, 217) while tradition has, from a Eurocentric standpoint, been defined in reference to culture, philosophy and epistemology of the indigenous people of Zimbabwe and 'Africa' in general as that which is unchanging, prelogical, backward and unscientific. However, it is not true that there are cultures that do not have their own internal modernising attributes. It thus, becomes imperative to use both the terms 'modernity' and 'tradition' with caution.

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