

The Skin Bleaching Culture In Nigeria

Part I: History.

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SOME FACTS ABOUT NIGERIA

Nigeria, officially called the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is a country located in the West coast of Africa. The capital of Nigeria is Abuja. Built in the 1980s, Abuja is one of the most well planned cities in the country. It became the capital of Nigeria on December 12, 1991, replacing Lagos. Nigeria has a population of 173.6 million (2013, World Bank) and the currency is the naira. Official languages are English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. English is the **main** official language in Nigeria and is extensively used for education, business transactions and for official purposes. Nigeria is bordered by the Republic of Benin on the west, Chad and Cameroon on the east, and by Niger on the north. On the south it borders the Gulf of Guinea. Nigeria is a country covering a total area of 356,667 square miles. Nigeria is a country comprising thirty-six states and one Federal Capital Territory. The states are further divided into 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs). Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and is the seventh most populous country in the world. Nigeria is composed of more than 250 ethnic groups; the following are the most populous and politically influential: Hausa and Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo (Ibo) 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5%, Tiv 2.5%. As regards religion Muslim 50%, Christian 40%, indigenous belief 10%. Also there are minority groups of British, American, East Indian, Chinese, white Zimbabwean, Japanese, Greek, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants in Nigeria. Lagos is the largest city in Nigeria covering an area of 385.9 square miles. It is the third-most populous city in Africa with an estimated population of 7,937,932. As of now, it is the second-fastest growing city in Africa. It was once the capital of the country, and is the economic and financial capital of the country at present. The national day in Nigeria is celebrated on October 1

every year. The day is celebrated to commemorate the independence of Nigeria from the United Kingdom on this day in 1960. The country was declared a Republic on October 1, 1963.¹

SKIN COLOURS OF NIGERIANS

The geographic space called Nigeria today is inhabited largely by homogenously **dark skinned indigenous** African people. In the South there is an imperceptible sprinkling of biracial light skinned people from two different historical events: (i) products of miscegenation in the coastal regions of Nigeria's trade routes and (ii) descendants of Nigerians who travelled to Europe to study. With this exposure, some of them returned home with Caucasian wives and, of course, the resultant biracial offspring. These biracial people ('half-casts' or 'mulattoes' as they are usually called) constitute less than 1% of the Nigerian population. Interestingly, there is a high prevalence of inbreeding among them, probably a strategy to preserve or improve on whatever level of 'whiteness' they already have rather than 'risk' the dilutional effect of mating with a 100% dark skinned Nigerian. Furthermore, now that skin bleaching is in vogue, some of these biracial women have now joined the league of skin bleachers so that they now have a lighter level of pale skin than the characteristic *café au lait* colour of biracial people. When asked in the skin clinic why they found it necessary to bleach their skin further, they have consistently claimed it was to erase the darkening effect of the sun. One then wonders the psychology behind mulattoes wanting to consciously erase any vestiges of darkness on their skin while the Caucasians consciously torment themselves under the sun to acquire the tan.

In the northern part of Nigeria there are light



skinned Fulani (Fula) people, an ethnic group of people spread over many countries, predominantly in West Africa, but found also in Central Africa and The Sudan of east Africa. The Fulas are not a majority in every country they live, but in Guinea they represent a plurality of the population (largest single group). The Fulanis constitute only 9% of the Nigeria population. The Fulanis are traditionally a nomadic, pastoralist, trading people, herding cattle, goats and sheep across the vast dry hinterlands of their domain, keeping somewhat separate from the local agricultural population.

The early origin of Fulani People is most fascinating and deepened in mystery with widely divergent opinions. Many scholars believe that they are of Judaeo-Syrian origin. However, it is generally recognized that the Fulani descended from nomads from both North Africa and from sub-Saharan Africa. They came from the Middle-east and North Africa and settled into Central and West Africa from the Senegal regions. They created the Tekruur Empire which was contemporary to the Ghana Empire. Then, they spread in all the countries in West Africa, continuing to lead their nomadic life style. The history of the Fulani seems to begin with the Berbers of North Africa around the 8th or 11th century AD. The Fulani themselves believe they are related to the Tuaregs and Arabs.^{2,3}

Morphological analyses of the Fulani have been interpreted to suggest a Middle Eastern origin. The identifiable physical qualities of a Fulani are a light colour, slight bone structure, straight hair, thin lips, and above all, a long narrow nose. These are obviously 'Caucasoid' characteristics, and the natural explanation is that the Fulani have a partly Caucasian ancestry, either from East Africa (e.g. Ethiopian) or more likely from the North (e.g. Tuareg). From early times explorers and anthropologists have been intrigued by the appearance of the Fulani, which differs from that of the Negroid people around them. The Fulani are not basically of Negro stock, although it is clear that through the centuries Fulani populations have interbred in various degrees with the Negro populations among whom they are dispersed, retain non-Negroid physical characteristics to the greatest extent, and speak the purest Fulfulde. Interestingly "Whiteness" among this ethnic group is less about

skin colour, and more about "genealogical connection to important people in the historical and religious pantheon of Arab Islam. Blackness, by contrast, was defined most fundamentally by the lack of such connections."³

PRE-COLONIAL SKIN COLOUR PREFERENCE IN NIGERIA

Even in the pre-colonial past, there were African people who prized light-skin. Amadioha, the Igbo deity of thunder and lightning, is said to be the patron of light-skinned Igbos,⁴ and some scholars have argued that Igbo people admired whiteness before they encountered Europeans. Yet Igbo people do not have a tradition of skin-bleaching, at least not that I know of. Peter Frost extensively reviewed the literature on studies done as regards skin color preference in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ There is ample evidence that this aesthetic preference for light skin is native to Africa. Ardener found it to be widespread among the Igbos of Nigeria, including generations born before the colonial period.⁶ Peter Frost featured several extracts from ethnographic literature to corroborate this cross cultural preference for lighter skin in women. Among the Igbos of Nigeria, in the choice of a wife, 'yellow-skinned' girls are regarded as beauties, and other things being equal, they command higher bride prices. There are parents who would compliment their light-skinned kids on their "beautiful light skin", unaware of the potential psychological damage their comments might be causing. Suddenly the kid is made conscious of something he/she needs to maintain in order to be liked. Meanwhile, any dark-skinned kids overhearing the compliment start to have a complex about their skin tone and grow up with particular ideas about standards of beauty. Light skinned children are often fondly given the moniker—"Oyinbo" (the white man) while the dark-skinned child is called 'blackie.' We hear such compliments today, parents complimenting kids, men complimenting women based on skin colour, and women commenting on other women's skin tone.⁷

A colleague of mine, a dermatologist in Nigeria, once told me she has a set of dizygotic (fraternal) twin sons—one light-skinned and the other, dark-skinned. She noticed that whenever friends or relations came to

visit them at home, the visitors **spontaneously** polarized towards the light complexioned one (of the twins), played with him and ignored the dark-complexioned twin brother. The mother of the twins, is understandably disturbed about this unsolicited preferential affinity for only one of her twin sons because the dark-complexioned son is already developing a complex and getting withdrawn, feeling unloved and may end up bleaching his skin later in life to attract attention and feel loved. Traditionally, adulation of the beauty of brides on their wedding day is often described in terms of their fair skin colour.

“It has never been a secret that Nigerian men prefer their wives, light, bright, and voluptuous. Anytime a man picks his future wife, there is high praise if she happens to be lighter than him. I remember attending several weddings as a kid, and hearing the grown-ups relentlessly discuss how gorgeous the bride was with emphasis placed on her light skin. A bride with a darker complexion never gets the same amount of attention.” **EzinneUkoha**⁸

Paradoxically, there is a clan in the South Eastern part of Nigeria, with genetically light skinned people called OSUs. For some ill-understood ancestral reasons, the OSUs are regarded as outcasts and, till date, it is regarded an abomination to marry an 'Osu'. Albinos too are light-skinned and regrettably, there still exists great prejudice against Albinos.

Among the Yorubas in the West the traditional beauty standard is full bosoms, wide hips, dark skin like ebony to contrast with the brightness of white eyes⁹ enhanced with the traditional cosmetic eyeliner 'tiro' (in Yoruba), 'kwali' (in Hausa) and 'otanjele' (in Igbo).

THE BEGINNING OF SKIN BLEACHING IN NIGERIA

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines bleaching as the “Intentional alteration of one's natural skin colour to one relatively if not substantially, lighter in colour, through the use of chemical skin lightening agents, either manufactured, homemade or the combination of the two.”⁹ Colorism refers to prejudices based on skin tone, which is typically practiced *within* races, as opposed to racism *between* races. Colorism creates a hierarchical relationship that privileges lighter complexions.

Nigeria is **not** a multiracial country where one race could dominate the other. Unlike the USA, South Africa and Liberia where racially black populations are often only a subset of larger populations, Nigeria boasts of a racially homogenous population and we are all predominantly of chocolate brown dark skin, stratified only by socio-economic factors, **not** color. In addition, independent Nigeria, at least, has never had official discourses and practices denigrating blackness and elevating lighter skin color. Nigerians **copied** the bleaching culture from the African-Americans and South Africans **but for a different motive**. Indeed at the inception of the bleaching culture only one or two brands of bleaching creams were available on the market—notable among them were Ambi, and Artra. Indeed, if a Yoruba son or daughter wanted to marry a Caucasian, it was often met with stiff resistance from the Yoruba family; and that prejudice against marrying a Caucasian still exists even in current times.

Education researcher, Irene Durasaro cites the 1940s as the beginning of the formal use of skin lightening products in Nigeria.¹⁰ On a regional level, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) experienced an escalation in the use of skin bleach products throughout the second half of the 20th century. South Africa's Drum magazine expanded throughout much of SSA, including Nigeria, and, by the 1950s, became the most influential vehicle for marketing skin lightening products to African women.¹¹ By the 1970s, “skin lighteners were common commodities in most of southern Africa” and the industry was effectively in motion on the continent.¹¹ It is actually difficult to personally recall with exact precision when the **current rage** of skin bleaching culture gained root in Nigeria as it crept in imperceptibly (See Figure 1)

THE ROLE OF LEGENDARY VICTOR OLAIYA

Sometime in the early 1960s, the most popular Nigerian highlife musician, Victor Olaiya, released an album in Yoruba with the lyrics – “Omo pupa leminfe” which literally means – “I love light-skinned women” or “I love to marry a light-skinned woman!”¹² That song literally controlled the music air waves and dancehall at that time as it was very popular at parties, radio, the homes etc. It was a

common sight to see men and women dancing ecstatically to that song. Apparently that musician was simply echoing the minds of Nigerian men like him and the song helped to cultivate and mold the minds of even more Nigerian men to develop a special affinity or taste for light-skinned women. The bleaching culture gained momentum and further acceptance among some men and women, and reinforced the craze to bleach the skin. That singular music was one of the factors that fueled the epidemic of skin bleaching, because, culturally, in Nigeria, the **ultimate goal** for a woman is to secure a husband once she has reached the marriageable age in her twenties; and any woman without strength of character, will succumb to societal pressure, and do whatever it takes to secure a husband. It was also common for indigenous composers of dance-hall music to express adulation for light skin women in their lyrics

It is tempting to play down the importance of the lyrics of Victor Olaiya's "Omo pupa leminfe" as a driving force in skin bleaching in Nigeria. **His high profile and celebrity status** in the music industry needs some focus.^{12,13} Victor Olaiya was born 31 December 1930 and is still alive at 85 years and still **continues** to play music from his rich repertoire of discography as he gets invited often to perform with new generation artists like Michael Odiong, Project Manager of the Premier Records. He still features with other celebrities, like 2face Idibia, Nollywood's finest, Director Kunle Afolayan of "The Figurine" fame, veteran producer/director Mr Tunde Kelani, and Navio from Namibia.

In 1954 Olaiya formed his own band, the Cool Cats, playing popular highlife Music largely on love life in the Yoruba language. His band was chosen to play at the state ball when Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom visited Nigeria in 1956, and later to play at the state balls when Nigeria became independent in 1960 and when Nigeria became a republic in 1963. On the latter occasion, Olaiya shared the stage with the American jazz musician Louis Armstrong. During the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-70, Olaiya was given the rank of a lieutenant colonel (honorary) in the Nigerian army and his band played for the troops at various locations. The Cool Cats later travelled to the Congo to perform for the United Nations troops. Olaiya is known as the "godfather" and "The Evil

Genius of Highlife." Olaiya renamed his band to All Stars Band when they played at the 1963 International Jazz Festival in Czechoslovakia. In 1990, Olaiya received a fellowship of the Institute of Administrative Management of Nigeria. For a period, he was also president of the Nigeria Union of Musicians.

Michael Odiong, Project Manager of the Premier Records has this to say:

"It is pertinent that we bring back to the music industry what made Dr Victor Olaiya internationally known. His lyrics are still very relevant today and he has so many tracks that have an impact on people everywhere, and his classic love songs like "Omo pupa" "Fami Mora O" will withstand the test of time any day. We want to encourage younger stars to take advantage of these classic songs and do something new with them."

The legendary stature of Victor Olaiya explains the impact of his music "Omo pupa leminfe" which is akin to celebrity endorsement of the bleaching culture.

Response to skin bleaching by another legendary musician—FelaKuti (Anikulapo-Kuti, Ransome-Kuti) 1938-1997

Fela Kuti was a highly talented Nigerian multi-instrumentalist, musician, composer, pioneer of the Afro beat music genre, human rights activist, and political maverick.

The bleaching culture truly gained full acceptance in Nigeria in the sixties. At the time James Brown released the album- "Say it loud – I'm black and I'm proud" in 1968, bleaching was already on course though not yet so prevalent in Nigeria as at present. However at the time the Afro Beat musician, FelaAnikulapo-Kuti, a social crusader, released his "Yellow Fever" song in 1971, bleaching of the face had gained some grounds. Using pidgin English as a medium of communication, Fela identified the different types of fevers— malaria, jaundice, hay, influenza, inflation, freedom and yellow—and bifurcated yellow fever into original and artificial. Fela then chronicled the different symptoms of the original and metaphorically equated skin bleaching as artificial "yellow fever". He also described the signs of artificial "yellow fever" as well as the damaging effects on the skin. He called bleaching

“stupid thing, yeye thing, ugly thing, foolish thing”. Indeed haters of the bleaching culture ridiculed such people and called them “yellow pawpaw,” “Fanta face and Coca Cola legs”⁹ (Figure 2). However the art and science of bleaching have been so “perfected” in current times through the availability of Spas, bleaching injections and capsules, that the disparity in the colour of the face and legs (which existed some decades ago) has been largely eliminated.

How relevant is the history of colonialism to this body modification practice manifested by altering the skin colour?

David EJR and Sumie Okazaki define **colonial mentality** as internalized oppression.¹⁵ This oppression is driven by perceptions of ethnic and cultural inferiority created from centuries of colonial rule. Though historical indications of colorism existed before the onset of colonialism in Nigeria and some other African nations, racial hierarchies that were loosely forming beforehand were cemented during the British rule. Postcolonial African countries could be regarded as coeval in the skin bleaching practice though the rate of progression may differ.

The colonialism hypothesis for colorism essentially argues that the success in marketing and selling skin lightening agents today is “predicated upon European (colonial) promotion of idealized whiteness. It was colonization, this theory asserts, that decisively embedded skin-tone hierarchies into indigenous society in Africa. Regardless of class level, black Nigerians were residentially segregated from white colonizers, were denied quality jobs, and were regularly supervised by less-qualified whites. Nigerian elites indirectly helped cement a racial and cultural hierarchy that valorized the British. For example they could afford to send their children for quality education in England. Some of the original crop of the privileged elite who schooled in England returned home with Caucasian wives and/or biracial offspring with *café au lait* skins (mulattoes). Now that light-complexioned skin is in vogue, some of the biracial women are now proud to wear their skin tone like a collar and have joined the league of skin bleachers. Furthermore, they belong to the upwardly mobile that can afford the high-end bleaching products and some of them are now looking even light skinned like the white Britons.

On the most basic level, this colonial phenomenon equated whiteness with power and desirability. The material payoff of being or appearing white became omnipresent in everyday Nigerian life. If this race/culture-based power gradation was not enough to embed a bias towards fair skin into Nigerian society, the British also promoted white supremacist ideology and intangibly assigned morality to different skin colors. Colonialism and Westernization can be understood as intersecting rather than as distinct, unrelated phenomena. In its aftermath, colonialism left a region vulnerable to Western influences, including media images that portrayed lighter-skinned individuals as valuable and more powerful. Western media images reinforced the earlier racial hierarchies that were in place. Regardless of the impetus for colorism in Nigeria, the real propeller of the preference for lighter skin is the “global association of light skin with power. Is the booming skin whitening industry a result of this inferior mentality of Nigerians? The recent rise in the use of skin lighteners cannot be seen as simply a legacy of colonialism but rather a **consequence** of the penetration of multinational capital and Western consumer culture, cultural migration and feminism. Nigerians are just doing their own thing because they want to do it—possibly a **copycat mentality/the bandwagon syndrome** following African-Americans and South Africans who bleached out of expediency from pernicious racism and colorism. Once initiated into the bleaching culture Nigerians want to claim membership in a transnational, cosmopolitan culture. In current times skin bleaching in Nigeria cuts across all demographic characteristics and people from all ethnic groups in Nigeria engage in the practice. Several other determinants came in to propel the skin bleaching practice in Nigeria.

However, the fact that Nigeria and several other African countries had pre-colonial light skin colour preferences does **not** absolve Europeans of their responsibility for indoctrinating non-European populations with harmful racial ideologies because

(i) Africans used shared culture, language and traditions, rather than skin tone, as a means of identifications.

(ii) Pre-European skin colour preferences (PESCP) is fundamentally different from modern western racism or colorism. The language is different. The

word 'race' is a modern social construct by the Europeans who fabricated spurious "scientific evidence" to support the dichotomy, thereby providing an ideological justification for colonialism. In racism, race is defined not as a biological fact but on the processes—the institutions, ideologies and practices—that work to make race an organized principle for social relationship. Racism is the belief that humans are subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behavior and innate capacities and that be ranked as superior or inferior.

(iii) PESCP was constructed on *benign* physical indigenous personal choices/preferences based on life-style and tradition, **not** the **poisonous** ideologies of Western white supremacy. Post-colonial racism is based on one's genotype, and by extension, its phenotypic expression determines one's circumstances in life, i.e. "if you are white, you will have certain privileges as a result of your biologic heritage." The idea of "biology **determines** destiny" is what undergirds modern Western racism.¹⁶ Hence all people with dark skin were confined within defined negative stereotypes constructed by the whites themselves.

(iv) The rise of skin bleaching around the globe can also be attributed to the constant, current mass-marketing of contemporary images of white beauty. Wealthy nations like the United States, Japan, and many European nations create many of the global images of white (or light) beauty. In turn, these same nations are also home to the cosmetics companies that produce some of the top-selling skin-bleaching creams, including L'Oreal, Unilever, Schiseido, Vaseline, Emami, Revlon and others. Supporting women in altering their natural phenotypes to conform to a Eurocentric beauty standard only validates the racism and colorism behind the beauty standard itself. Moreover, not only is skin bleaching ideologically problematic, it presents a myriad of health risks.

(v) The production and marketing of skin-lightening products offering the promise of lighter, and whiter skin has become a multi-billion dollar international industry.¹⁷ Skin lightening has been incorporated into transnational flows of capital and culture and is implicated in both the formal global economy and various informal, often underground economies.

Multinational corporations have jumped on the bandwagon and are spending large sums of money on research and development of both mass and specialized skin-lightening markets.¹⁸

(vi) The global beauty industry has re-invented itself in recent years in the image of multiculturalism. Many cosmetics companies that once exclusively featured white women have added **light skinned women of color** to their advertisements as spokespersons for their products. Hunter calls this maneuver the "illusion of inclusion".¹⁹ The Illusion of inclusion is a seductive marketing strategy to draw in women of color who might otherwise feel alienated from products marketed exclusively with images of white beauty. By including a few light-skinned, Anglo-looking women of color, cosmetics distributing companies appear to be inclusive of people of color, without their message that white bodies are beautiful. The inclusion of fair-skinned women of color like Halle Berry of the US (Revlon), Aishwarya Rai of India (L'Oreal), Genevieve Nnaji of Nigeria (Lux soap), or Terry Pheto of South Africa (L'Oreal) is designed to lull women of color consumers into buying these products and believing that their bodies and beauty are being valued.²⁰ Ironically as the marketing strategies have added a veneer of inclusion, there has simultaneously been a boom of products offered that all claim to lighten, brighten, or whiten the skin.

As this industry grows and more consumers are affected by its devastating consequences, ethical questions abound. Studies report the dumping of substandard products in the global south by overseas industries. Often these products were not passed for human use in their country of origin.²¹ Many of the mercury soaps used by Africans are manufactured in the European Union (EU), where they are allowed to be manufactured as long as the product is exported. EU manufactured soaps are reportedly smuggled back into the EU where they are sold to African and Caribbean immigrant communities.²² A number of third-world countries are believed to be used as off-shore production and distribution sites for Western-based pharmaceutical companies.²³

Antony Barnett and Zoe Smith in 2005 exposed the United Kingdom skin bleaching trade which clearly raises ethical questions

on Commodity Racism—the law that permits the manufacture of hazardous products in a country as long as they are for export. Writing under the title “Toxic creams for sales as thousands seek whiter skin,” part of the report is reproduced below

“The law allows companies here to make the products even though they contain substances banned in Britain as long as they are for export. The products are then smuggled back into the UK. One of the skin-lightening creams containing hydroquinone is named Zarina. It is made by Fairtrade International, based in Barnet, north London. Another, Rico Complexion Cream, is made by General Healthcare based in Hayes, west London. Spokesmen of these firms claim they make their creams for export and that it is not up to them to police the trade. ‘We have never sold one tube containing hydroquinone in the UK. We know it is illegal,’ said Eric Dupont of General Healthcare. ‘We used to sell it to the Middle East and North Africa where it is perfectly legal. We have no control over what happens to it after that.’ Pride editor Dixon said: ‘How can it be that a British company is allowed to make a product that can seriously damage somebody’s health and would be illegal to sell here, but be allowed to export it to developing countries knowing not only that it will be used by people not aware of the dangers, but also that there is a fair chance of it ending up back in Britain?’ Toxic skin bleaching creams made in the UK have been found in dozens of countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Dermatologist Sujata Jolly has treated many women whose skin has been damaged from using the banned creams. Although Jolly was instrumental in getting hydroquinone made illegal, she fears that, whatever action is taken by the authorities, it will not shut off the supply. ‘These creams are easily available over the internet, and as long as the demand is there will be somebody to sell them.’”

PAST RESPONSE TO SKIN BLEACHING BY THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT

Several research publications on the various aspects of the skin bleaching culture have been published by Medical practitioners and other scientists in

Nigeria.²⁴⁻⁴⁵ The regulatory body for monitoring Cosmetics and Drugs in Nigeria was the Food and Drugs Administration of Nigeria (FDA) until 26th February, 1993, when the change in Nomenclature to National Agency for Food and Drug Administration Control (NAFDAC) was gazetted.⁴⁶ Olumide was a member of the Governing Council of the FDA when the attention of the Hon. Minister of Health, Prof. Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, was drawn to the dangerous adverse effects of the chemicals in skin lightening products. The Federal Ministry of Health in 1987 then prohibited the use of mercury as an ingredient in all cosmetic products and limited the concentration of hydroquinone to 2% in all cosmetic products manufactured in Nigeria.

However, cosmetic skin lightening products containing mercury and high levels of hydroquinone manufactured outside Nigeria continued to flood the market in Nigeria to the extent that they overshadowed the local industries, because Nigerians preferred the imported products as they were found to be more effective in lightening the skin than the locally manufactured products with lower concentration (2%) of hydroquinone. The then Hon. Minister of health, through an Administrative Order in 1991 **completely** banned the manufacture and importation of cosmetic bleaching products containing mercury and hydroquinone at any concentration. This was published in the legal document through an Extraordinary Gazette on the 29th December, 1995.⁴⁷

The Regulation provides thus:

“No person shall offer for sale, import or manufacture any cosmetic products which are adulterated or which contains any skin bleaching agents, steroids, hydroquinone, mercuric compound and so on.”

Shortly after that, officers from the Federal Ministry of Health and Law enforcement agents, in the bid to enforce the law, raided the market and shops in Balogun West in Lagos that was regarded as the “headquarters” for the importation and distribution of the products in Nigeria because rows of streets in this geographical area were found to sell in retail and wholesale assorted skin lightening products imported into Nigeria. Some of the products on the market at that time were Symba medicated cream,

Mililo, Tura, Crusader, Neco, HgI, Amber, Asepso, Jaribu, Concorde among a host of others. The exercise of raiding the shops to forcefully confiscate the illegal products for destruction was a complete failure as it only led to panic and looting and the products that were confiscated by the law enforcement agents found their way back on the market stalls. Hence the market for the product continued to boom unabated.

Sometime in April, 1991, an Importer took legal actions against the Federal Government, Customs and Excise Revenue Division, for impounding some cosmetic products at the port of entry. The FDA Research/ Customs Laboratory analyzed one of the products and found it to contain 4.3%ww hydroquinone. Olumide was invited to court to help defend the case in favour of the Federal Government. Olumide had to enquire from the FDA what the true legal position of the Federal Govt. was as regards the importation of skin lightening products – as at April 1991. A hand written reply from the FDA – Federal Ministry of Health Drug Control Division revealed that both mercury and hydroquinone had been completely banned in cosmetics in Nigeria . The Federal Government Customs Department won the legal case against the importer and the illegal products remained impounded and eventually destroyed.

LONDON TV DOCUMENTARY ON THE SKIN BLEACHING INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

In June 1988, Olumide was invited to London by a Television Station BANDUNG Channel 4 for the recording of a documentary, titled “A Whiter Shade of Black”, on the sale of both legal and illegal dangerous skin-lightening cosmetics to black people.

The bitter irony was that the products were not permitted for sale in Europe but were permitted for export. Several companies that were household names engaged in the business and some even received grants from the EEC. At that time, some of the manufacturers of the skin lightening products were Reckitt and Colman, W & E Products, Shakespeare Soaps of Manchester, International Generics of Hove in Sussex, and Martal Cosmetics of London. Indeed over 20 factories within the EEC were producing mercuric soaps. The skin bleaching

trade in England was extensively documented by Lucy Hannan in African business (AB) journal.⁴⁸

Figures 3a, b. show parts of the article.

As at that time, European safeguards had outlawed the sale of certain hazardous cosmetics such as mercury soap and skin lighteners in European markets. But African Business (AB) investigations discovered that a number of European companies continued to manufacture these harmful products specifically for sale to African markets. AB's Lucy Hannan carried out on-the-spot inspections to see what was still on offer in the African marketplace and where it came from. During the January 1988 survey the petty traders of Lagos were evidently unaware that their goods were illegal and they unreservedly showed receipts that identified the suppliers. The source proved to be Balogun West, a major market on Lagos Island, where whole streets were devoted to an exclusive stock of all available brands of mercury soaps and skin-lightening creams.

While AB was unable to determine who the actual importers were, the thriving success of the trade at Balogun West was evident.

Lucy Hannan reported:

“It was also evident that the operation was not on a small scale, as new stock constantly arrived in vans carrying “Government Licensed Imports” labels – suggesting that the smuggling and trading involved corruption at a high level.”

The above observation by Lucy Hannan in 1988 corroborates **today's scenario**

“Unethical practices among many local manufacturers and dubious practices by the businessmen who import from overseas, substandard and proscribed items into the country, have contributed in no small measure to the menace.”

Tunde Alao—Staff Reporter.

*“Skin-toning is a huge money-maker that I'm sure has lined the pockets of enough politicians to allow it to keep being sold despite international outcry”*Kingsley 'Rukus' Okafor—Nigerian-American rapper.

Lucy Hannan further noted that a market flooded by

foreign goods in this way encouraged a consumer preference for imported products and has the additional effect of undermining the nascent domestic industries. Some entrepreneurs circumvented consumer demand by producing “Made in England” fakes, but the end result was a severely disadvantaged domestic market. For all these reasons, Lucy Hannan of AB investigators further noted that many African government officials contended that EEC must recognize the necessity of stopping **manufacturing** of any dangerous products at source, rather than leaving it to the importing countries to attempt to clear their markets through legislation.

The thrust of Olumide's message during the documentary by BANDUNG was that:

“The preservation of human health is the collective responsibility of all nations. If the manufacturers in Britain cannot do anything to better the health of people in Africa, at least they should not do anything to worsen the plight of Africans. It is totally immoral, totally unjustifiable to export these chemicals which have been banned in your countries to my people.”

This generated some controversy.

When the Irish Development Authority (IDA) provided a £750,000 sterling (\$1.4m) grant to expand W & E Products' mercury – soap operation in County Wicklow, it defended the decision by claiming that ***“IDA is not in the business of making moral decisions for other countries”***

Michael Tattersall, Financial Director of the main British factory of W & E Products, continued to insist, despite a public and parliamentary campaign to stop the trade, that the soaps were actually completely harmless – whether used according to the instructions on the packet (which carry a mandatory “poison” warning) or as a skin-lightener. According to Tattersall, mercury soaps have been available in Africa for over 50 years, and *“if there were any problems with it, they would have come to light by now”*.

UK Euro MP Michael Hindley, in whose constituency W & E Products operated, dismissed any excuse from the manufacturers for a trade which he says was evidently dangerous. Hindley claims,

*“Given the number of countries that have found it necessary to ban the soap, there is **ipso facto** enough evidence; even South Africa bans skin-lighteners, and South Africa is hardly known for protecting the interests of its black citizens.”*

Hindley pointed out that the economic and political situation in many of the African markets facilitated sales despite any appropriate legislation – and he had, in fact, produced samples of the soap found in British and Belgian markets. It was observed that some of the products were openly on sale in Britain and that 16 different brands could be bought in Brixton alone!

Olumide dismissed Tattersall's claims. She charged that manufacturers were simply sheltering behind the difficulties all developing countries face when it comes to producing corroborative statistical and laboratory evidence.

Olumide described herself as being “propelled into research by the number of people who flood the clinic with hopelessly damaged skin” It is only the tip of the iceberg, she added as many people did not come to the clinic until the symptoms were for advanced. Moreover the systemic manifestations of adverse effects to these chemicals may take several years to manifest and many symptoms and signs of mercury poisoning, for example, mimic other diseases, so it may not be possible to statistically or forensically link them to skin lightening cosmetics when such patients present in other clinics e.g, Renal, Ear/Nose/Throat (ENT), Paediatric or Gynaecological clinics.

Olumide contended that “Banning the importation was not the panacea. Stopping the production from the source was manifestly the solution. In one year the Nigerians got through £20m (twenty million Pounds Sterling) worth of the stuff and that's not counting the dozens of other African countries where it was sold!

The UK Department of Trade & Industry (DTI), which had justified the policy of ***laissez-faire*** as being “based on the principle that all countries were responsible for the health and safety of their own consumers” responded to pressure by asking the manufacturers to substantiate their defence that the products were completely harmless. Sales of these products, which contained mercury and

hydroquinone, were banned in Europe although their manufacture for export was not, despite evidence to suggest that workers making them could suffer miscarriages and their children suffer kidney failures.

Although DTI acknowledged that it had been receiving many complaints from African governments, the main political leverage against the factories appeared to be domestic pressure concerning the effects of mercuric poisoning on the work force. A female worker who gave birth to a baby suffering from muscular spasms, stiffness and high muscle tone – all symptoms of heavy mercuric poisoning – took legal action. The baby was found to have 10 times more mercury in his body than the amount tolerable for an adult. Another woman working at W & E Products in UK gave birth to a baby with no kidneys, who died at three months. Both the BBC and The Observer of London drew attention to the controversy growing around mercury-soap production, which along with the pressure from Hindley, forced the DTI to reconsider its position.

Then in February 1988, as a result of the January survey in Lagos, Nigerian Health Minister, Olikoye Ransome-Kuti announced a ban of 34 brands of British-manufactured mercuric soap and skin lighteners and called on the exporting countries to “inform their industries that it was an offence to import into Nigeria any cosmetic products that contained mercury.” On 18 February 1988, the DTI wrote to the factories and told them to “stop exporting or supplying the products for exporting, or a prohibition notice will be served”. However, that was not the end of the trade. W & E Products simply moved its production to their Irish branch in County Wicklow and would in all probability profit from the closure of the other British factories.

According to Tattersall, over 20 other factories within the EEC were producing mercuric soaps, and many other countries were eager to get a share of the profitable market – estimated by those familiar with it to be worth of £20m (\$37m) a year for the Nigerian trade alone. He claimed that many of the brands were produced in the Far East and named Korea as one country that was eager to join the market. In Lagos, the effect of the Health Minister's new crack down paradoxically only fueled a dramatic upward surge in demand. Vendors of the banned products were reportedly buying up stock in the markets to

sell later at inflated prices, and some have removed them from the shelves to make more profitable under-the-counter deals.

Martal Cosmetics of London, which produced a range of skin-lightening creams called Symba, had been on the market for over 16 years and sold its products in the EEC as well as in Africa. Its content of hydroquinone was legitimate, at only 2%. Their packaging clearly states: “This product complies with the Federal Government of Nigeria Health Directives 1987”. Many legitimate manufacturers and distributors pointed out that the illegal 5% preparations on the market seriously undermined sales of products bearing the correct percentage because the users identified the difference in effectiveness and potency, abandoned the legitimate 2% hydroquinone products and patronized the illegal 5% preparations.

Lucy Hannan's survey also revealed that preventing these illegal soaps from coming into the country had proved impossible for Nigeria. Many of the brands found their way in through cross-border smuggling, which could not be curbed without massive resources to mount a counter-policing operation and which some British distributors openly exploit to sell their products. For example, Philip Winner & Co of London, which distributed a 3% mercuric soap called SukisaBango, were delighted to hear that their soap had found its way into Nigeria and, in response to an enquiry about supplies to Lagos, proposed a regular transaction through the Republic of Benin

Some comments by viewers in London on the Bandung TV documentary (Figures 3a & b)

“Some of these products are openly on sale in Britain where the black population is being sucked into the US and South African mentality of thinking “lighter is better” Ronnie Smith Morningstar

“Several decades after blacks declared themselves beautiful, there is a nagging feeling that beige is better. The most horrifying aspect is that it is blacks themselves who feel this and whites, surprise, are more than willing to exploit that feeling. It is a sobering thought that although we can intellectually dismiss all the shit about whiter being nicer, emotionally some of us still want lighter skins. The cost is not paid in cash alone, nor is it restricted to the silent shame that at some

subliminal level we too feel that white skin is superior. The penalty is paid physically as well as in moral and financial terms". Alkarim Jivani

"Not the least of the ironies of the modern world is that while millions of white people lie out under the sun to make their skins darker, large numbers of dark-skinned people smother themselves in preparations they believe will make them lighter. Horrific film from Nigeria showed the disfiguring rashes caused by chemicals in the skin lightening creams and compounds, while the mercury in the soaps can cause kidney failure, miscarriages and brain damage". Peter Patterson Daily Mail 22 June 1988.

"Bandung Files (C4) looked at the cynical way in which British companies illegally exploit the absence of consumer protection in Africa by selling toxic skin lighteners which can cause permanent, irreversible skin damage and which, in the case of soaps containing mercury, are linked with foetal malformation, abortion and kidney damage. Nor is the trade confined to Africa. In Brixton the team found 16 different kinds of illegal soaps on sale.

The tragedy here is less the vast profits being made by the companies concerned, more the discontent and inferiority felt by millions of black women and men who long to have lighter skin. Colour prejudice is felt among blacks as well as between blacks and whites. Black magazines go for lighter skinned models. Blacks with lighter skins find it easier to get jobs. Here were uncomfortable issues well aired, and an excellent justification for minority programming."

Lesley Garner Daily Times 22 June 1988

"Bandung File (Channel 4). An insidious and profitable spin-off from – racist attitudes is the huge market for skin-lightening products for black people. For many who use them, particularly in South Africa, skin-lighteners are used for pragmatic, not cosmetic reasons. The market raises moral issues—but on top of that there is an alarming medical aspect. Tonight's report presents evidence that skin-lightening soaps and creams are causing irreversible skin damage to thousands, increasing susceptibility to cancers; that they are responsible for kidney failure, brain damage and miscarriages, and that 40 percent of black South African women are suffering from their effects. Many of

these products, although banned by the EEC for sale in Europe, are being made in Britain for export to Africa—by companies which are household names here"

A lighter skin can lead to a better life – for some. But at what risk to health?"

Sandy Smithies 21 June 1988

"Bandung File (C4)'s magazine programme, aimed at ethnic groups, often boasts some of the most professional and comprehensive journalism on television. Tonight's programme contains a report on the horrifying effects of the skin-lightening creams and soaps which are used by those people who don't have the bank balance of Michael Jackson." ST June 1988.

RESPONSE TO BANDUNG TV DOCUMENTARY IN NIGERIA

Bandung TV gave Olumide two copies of the cassettes containing the documentary used by television houses, to give the Nigerian TV Stations for Nigerian viewers so that they would be aware of the hazards and the concern in foreign lands about their health. A copy of the cassette was given to the then Hon Minister of Health and the second copy to the main national TV station in Lagos at that time. That same year, the Toiletries and Cosmetics Manufacturers Group (of the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria), organized the 1st National Awareness Seminar with the theme: "Nigeria's Health and Body-Care under siege". It was held at the Lagos Sheraton Hotel, Ikeja on Wednesday 23rd November, 1988 (figure 4). Olumide was invited to present a one hour Paper at the Seminar. The title of Olumide's presentation was "Some Observations On The Cosmetic Culture of Nigerians – Problems and Solution".

On arrival at the venue on the day of the Seminar, to her utter dismay, the official printed Programme for the day had a **full page** advert on the full range of cosmetics under the brand name Venus de Milo—showing, among other cosmetic products a "**Complexion Cream**" with the picture of a black African on the left transforming to a milky white Caucasian on the right, with by-lines which read:

"So many ways to make a woman look and feel beautiful" "**Beauty is clear**, radiant skin enticing lips... gleaming nails... an air of freshness and

fragrance. Venus de Milo cosmetics make the dream come true, for the woman who wants to look and feel good in every way. Choose venus de Milo... and make the most of your charm and attractiveness... so quickly ... so easily... every day".

Worse still, at the seminar several members of the group, at different times, boasted to Olumide **“that documentary on “the whiter shade of black” that was beamed on London Channel 4 TV “will never see the light of day in Nigeria”!** At first Olumide thought it was a joke and simply replied that the main Television Station in Lagos already had a copy of the cassette which *BANDUNG* told her was suitable for TV Projectors, and another cassette was also given to the Honourable Minister of Health. When the boasts persisted, Olumide asked one of the members whose Company had nothing to do with the manufacture of skin-lightening products why they thought the documentary would not be shown in Nigeria – he replied “no TV station will show any programme which is not in the interest of its sponsors; and a major transnational company, indicted in the documentary was a major sponsor, of the TV Programmes”. After waiting for several months and the documentary was never aired, Olumide went to see the senior officer of the TV station who collected the cassette from her and asked for the reason for not airing the documentary; he said it was because the **“cassette was not suitable for their projectors”**, and he immediately returned the cassette to Olumide!

NAFDAC later **endorsed** a new cosmetic product – Venus Skin Toning Cream, manufactured by a major transnational Company – PZ industries. NAFDAC not only licensed the product and gave it a NAFDAC registration number, but also helped to market it. A very senior member of staff of NAFDAC boldly and approvingly stood in front of the glittering cameras to launch **Venus Skin Toning products**, at a special event hosted by PZ industries during the botched Miss World Beauty Pageant in 2002 in Abuja. Abuja is the capital and administrative headquarters of Nigeria! Olumide gathered that PZ action was “legal” because the new skin lightening product did not contain any of the prohibited chemicals in the Federal Government Gazette and that the product was a “toning” product and not a “bleaching” product as stated in the Federal Government Gazette!

SOME OTHER ACTIONS TAKEN IN RESPONSE TO THE MENACE POSED BY THE USE OF BLEACHING PRODUCTS IN NIGERIA

- (i) The Medical Women's Association of Nigeria (MWAN) has mounted several programmes over several years to create awareness and sensitize people about the dangerous effects of the use of skin lightening products at different fora – market place, schools, women's conferences etc. The subject was also the main theme of a symposium on Wed 25th Feb 1987. MWAN also published a 37 page book titled **“BLEACHING OF THE SKIN: What Everyone should know”** in 1988.
- (ii). The Nigerian Association of Dermatologists (NAD) has been in the forefront of the campaign against the use of Skin Lightening products. Indeed at its annual conferences in Ibadan 2012 and Lagos 2014, NAD carried its awareness campaign rallies, tagged 'I'm proud and black', to the grassroots in the market places.

At the 2014 annual Conference of NAD, the Director General (DG) of NAFDAC was invited as the special guest of honour so that he could personally listen to the scientific presentations on the subject and sensitize NAFDAC on the need to take stricter measures to stop the manufacture importation and sale of the products in Nigeria.
- (iii). The Nigerian Association of Dermatologists (NAD) and the African Society of Dermatology and Venereology (ASDV) devoted a special session to the subject at the 2016 Congress in Abuja, Nigeria.
- (iv). Journalists in the Print media in Nigeria have repeatedly featured awareness articles on the adverse effects of skin bleaching in Newspapers and magazines. Some of the articles are listed in Table 1 below

**TABLE 1. LIST OF SOME FEATURE ARTICLES IN THE NIGERIA PRESS
ON THE SKIN BLEACHING CULTURE IN NIGERIA**

- i. Tunde Alao. Staff Reporter. Lagosians and the bleaching scourge. THE GUARDIAN. Thursday, February 6, 2003 p 13.
- ii. Bleach perfect: Nigeria No. 1 for skin-bleaching products. June 22, 2012. naija.com/bleach-perfect-nigeria-no-1-for-skin-bleaching-products-says... 1 for skin-bleaching products says World Health Organisation. DoyinJaiyesimi. The Punch.
- iii. Help! Nigerian women are killing themselves / National MirrorNationalmirroronline.net/.../help-nigerian-women-are-killing-themselves/ Jun 27, 2012 – An array of bleaching cream in Nigerian market... Amid classification by the World Health Organization recently that Nigerian women are...
- iv. 9jatravel – Nigerian Women Lead the World in Skin Bleaching.
<http://www.facebook.com/9jatravel/posts/422175034556421>
- v. Nigerian women lead in skin bleaching – WHO – Vanguard...www.vanguardngr.com/.../nigeria-women-lead-in-skin-bleaching-who/ June 3, 2013
- vi. Nigerian women Lead in Skin Bleaching – WHO– Fashion...www.nairaland.com/1312406/nigerian-women-lead-skin-bleaching/ 8 June 4, 2013
- vii. Interview by Aljazeera. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/04/201345148459>
- viii. Lara Adejoro. What would make an older woman bleach?
<http://www.dailytimes.com.ng/article/what-would-make-older-wom.....> Daily Times NG. Article May 10, 2014
- ix. Britni Danielle. Jan 20, 2014. Nigerian Singer Releases ‘Whitenicious’ Skin Lightening Cream and its sold out. <http://www.xojane.com/issues>
- x. Kingsley “Rukus” Okafor. In: Britni Danielle. Jan 20, 2014. Nigerian Singer Releases ‘Whitenicious’ Skin Lightening Cream and its sold out. <http://www.xojane.com/issues>
<http://www.xojane.com/issues/nigerian-singer-releases-whitenicious>
- xi. JideOjo. Nigeria as the world capital for skin bleaching. <http://www.punching.com/opinion/nigeria-as-the-world-capital-of-sk...> March 26, 2014.
- xii. Danielle Kwateng. Nigerian Singer pushes Bleaching Products/Style Blazer
<http://styleblazer.com.ng/21109/denia-skin-bleaching/> Jan 16, 2014.

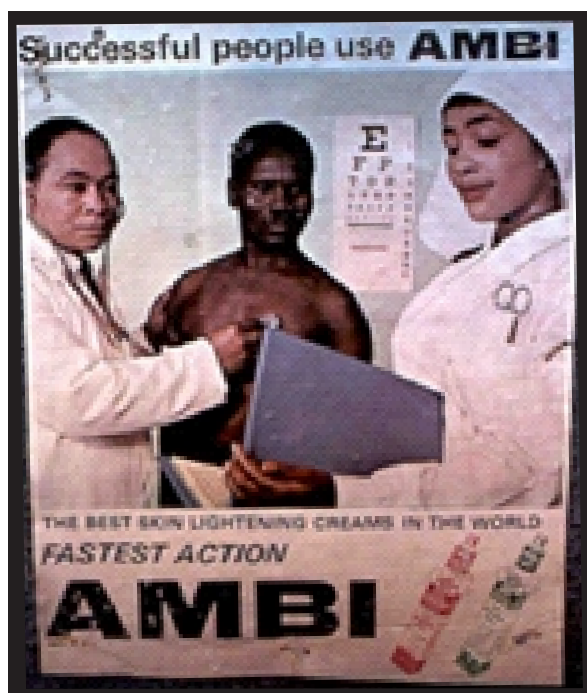


Fig. 1: Skin Lightening cream advert



Fig. 2: "Yellow fever -Fanta face/coca cola body"

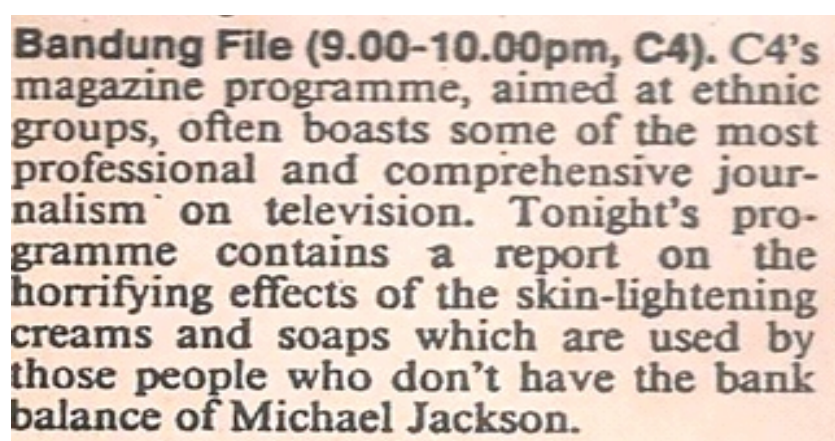


Fig. 3a & b: Newspaper cuttings reacting to the London BANDUNG TV programme

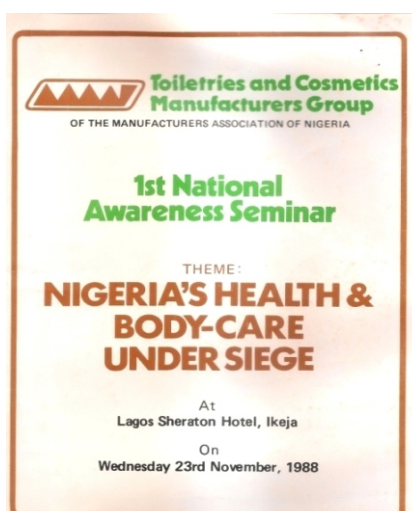


Fig. 4: Poster for seminar

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