

Love the skin you're in? Is it possible to be black and beautiful in today's society?

18 September 2005 Deborah Gabriel

Where does the desire to be white stem from?

Historical Legacies based on religion

According to sociologist Dr Lez Henry, who appeared in Dami Akinnusi's documentary: *Bleach My Skin White*, part of the desire to have a whiter skin stems from a desire to be nearer to God. He told Black Britain:

“From a young age we are taught to worship all things white and beautiful, so therefore anything black isn't beautiful or desirable.

We are also taught that anyone in a position of real power is white, God is white, and Jesus is white.”

He describes such ideologies as Eurocentric and ethnocentric, because it puts Caucasians, as an ethnic group at the centre of everything.

“European standards and norms are the yardstick to measure everything, both good and bad.”

Dr Henry referred to Hinduism, the religion based on a caste system whereby the darker your skin is the more cursed you are. He said:

“According to the religion, you are not just cursed and damned in this life; you are cursed and damned for all eternity, for being black.”

However, this belief system was given to Hinduism by the Aryans who were a tribe who moved into the Indus valley in India some time between 1750 to 1200 BCE from areas surrounding Russia and the Baltic.

They introduced the varna system which is believed to be how Hinduism came to be based on the caste system.

The name Aryan means noble and therefore when the Aryans came to India they established a class structure whereby they placed themselves at the top of it and others below them.

Therefore the belief among Asians that it is more desirable to be a lighter complexion is based on the belief that this conveys a superior status in society.

“So this has a historical legacy [for Asian people] but for us [black people] it is slightly different”, said Dr Henry.

“During slavery, as Africans we were socialised into accepting that everything white was virtuous, true, honest, master and mistress.”

The images of Africans as negative were communicated to slaves through the Bible, using certain scriptures to tell them that they were savages.

Dr Henry told Black Britain: **“It wasn't by chance that all of a sudden Europeans were telling**

us that Africans are savages.”

This was written into European books and written into European vocabularies:

“They designed that to place us on the bottom rung of the ladder and themselves on top.”

The reason why these ideologies continue to pervade society is because **“nothing has been put in place for white people do deal with their own racism and that system of white supremacy”**, Dr Henry said.

Dr Henry refers to these ideologies as **“systems of power”** which exist **“without black people realising that they are being socialised and educated away from themselves.**

This is about socialising people to believe that they are inferior. Our society teaches you to hate and not to trust anything that looks like you if you are not white.”

Social and psychological factors

Dr Dele Olajide is a Consultant Psychiatrist at the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust who also appeared in *Bleach My Skin White*.

He told Black Britain that the majority of people who bleach their skin are women. However, it is not just black women from the UK but from south-east Asia, Japan, the Middle East, the African continent, the Caribbean, south and North America.

In other words, what we have is a world wide phenomenon of people who are not happy with the skin they are in. Dr Olajide told Black Britain:

“The people who bleach are people of colour who do so because the role model projected, the ideal women who are projected onto our TV screens are light-skinned women.”

Among the Indian population, women say that they lighten their skin because if they are dark it doesn't make them feel sexually attractive, it doesn't increase their dowry and they are mistaken as being lower class.

Women are kept at home when they are young to keep them from too much exposure to the sun so they don't get too dark.

This is well known among Asians although it is not openly discussed. Among Arab women plastic surgery is common as Middle-eastern women are restructuring their noses to look more European. Dr Olajide told Black Britain:

“When you look at how we, as black people have been colonized and enslaved, over the years the value of the subjugated is to aspire towards the master group.”

Therefore people of African descent are more likely to feel that white culture is superior to everything black, because that is what has been pumped into them since very early on in childhood.

A major disadvantage to black culture has been the lack of written African history, according to Dr Olajide.

Most African history is mainly oral and therefore most of the stories known about African history are recent and based on the media and what white people have written about black culture:

“So basically history tells us that Africans are primitive and white people are civilized.”

Dr Olajide told Black Britain that in his opinion as a psychiatrist, the people most likely to bleach are the more vulnerable members of our communities:

“The more fragile your ego is, the more likely you are to have low self-esteem and the more likely you are to aspire to the attributes of the superior race.

Those of us who are not strong emotionally tend to believe that. This is conditioned from a very early age.”

In America an experiment was carried out whereby black children were asked to choose between pink toys and black toys at the age of five and 70 per cent of the children picked pink toys.

Dr Olajide said: **“Black children picked pink toys because that is what they believed is a better colour to be, not black.”**

He said unless a child has a strong family to nurture them and give them confidence in themselves as a black person, there is a risk of falling victim to external mediums that portray black people in a negative light.

Commenting on the portrayal of black women in music videos Dr Olajide claims that darker skinned women are given the type of roles that flaunt their sexuality, perpetuating the stereotype that darker skinned women are sexual beasts. He asserts that the lighter skinned women are given more graceful roles.

Do you watch MTV or other music channels? Do you agree with Dr Olajide? Tell us what you think by posting your comments onto the forum.

Dr Olajide stated that as people tend not to watch television programmes critically and analytically they fail to notice that generally the media tends to perpetuate the same stereotypes over the years:

“Black men are aggressive, virile and always ready and they are only objects of desire because they are studs. They are not intelligent.”

White men are portrayed as cerebral and intellectual but black men can be as wild as possible.

With black women, the darker they are the more they are seen as wild. There is no question of dignity. We have bought into this even as black people ourselves.”

Why it's good to be black and why black IS beautiful

Black pride and the legacy of Stokely Carmichael

The phrase 'black is beautiful' is not heard a great deal these days whilst so many within our community sadly believe that to be white is beautiful.

However, this proud declaration is attributed to Stokely Carmichael, a Trinidadian born in 1941 who later moved to America.

He was a prominent member of the 1960s Civil Rights group known as the Freedom Riders who trained in non-violent techniques and rode with black and white people who disobeyed laws and sat next to each other on buses as they travelled in protest through the Deep South.

In 1966 Carmichael made a rousing speech in Mississippi later referred to as the 'Black Power' speech where he called on **“black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage and to build a sense of community.”**

It was Carmichael who used the slogan “Black is beautiful” and who recommended a greater sense of black consciousness and black pride, rejecting European beauty and fashion.

It was from Carmichael that the 'Afro' hairstyle became a symbol of pride as well as a fashionable way to wear natural hair that became popular in Europe and the Caribbean as well as in the USA.

Dark Skinned women who love the skin they're in

It must be remembered that whilst as Dr Olajide pointed out, the less confident within our community may have feeling of self-loathing because of a darker complexion, there are still many of us who are proud to be black and are confident and successful.

One of the most successful dark-skinned models on the international catwalk is the African beauty Alek Wek, who with her tall, lithe body, short hair and mahogany complexion is visually striking and has a commanding presence that cannot be ignored.

Ms Wek was born in Sudan and left there as a refugee at the age of 12, moving to England. Since she made it big as a model she has supported several charities that work in Sudan.

As well as being a professional and highly-paid model she has also launched a handbag collection, from which she drew inspiration from the briefcase of her late father.

She has appeared in documentaries shown in America, and appeared as a guest lecturer at several universities. For Alek Wek, her striking physical African attributes have been a definite advantage.

Another aspirational dark skinned woman who has tremendous potential and who is doing very well in her career as a young journalist is reporter, Alinah Roberts.

She had strong feelings on this issue which she felt was important to contribute to this feature.

Ms Roberts said: **“Living in the UK it doesn't really matter what shade of black you are: black is black.**

I don't feel an employer is going to promote a black person on the basis of what shade of black they happen to be.”

Ms Roberts is convinced that the reason people chose to bleach are not economic but social. In terms of sexuality she said that in the past it was more common for black men to feel that lighter-skinned women are more attractive:

“The slave mentality goes very deep and this belief is still very much in people's minds.

However, as a dark-skinned woman I have no complaints – I get a fair amount of attention and I don't feel in the least bit inferior to anyone else.”

Ms Roberts said that how individuals feel about themselves is due in a large part to how they were brought up. She said:

“I had a good grounding within my family and was raised to believe that black is beautiful.

You just have to be comfortable with who you are and accept it. If you're not going to love yourself then who is?”

Ms Roberts feels that the reason skin bleaching is more prevalent within black societies in the Caribbean and African continents is because it is a way of black people differentiating between themselves and establishing their own class structure based on the legacies of slavery.

How we can learn to love the skin we're in

According to Dr Olajide, the problem of skin bleaching emanating from the inability to see black as beautiful is not insurmountable. He told Black Britain:

“There is hope for the future. We now have a young generation who is willing to challenge the status quo and we have among us people who are proud of their colour. However, we need to begin this process within our own families.”

Dr Olajide said that African civilization is as important and sophisticated as western civilization but what western society has done is to erase African civilization as if nothing good ever happened within African cultural history:

“If you are someone with low self esteem who has experienced adversity in your life then you are more likely to look at external factors to explain your problems, such as the shade of your skin.”

Such people tend to feel that they are unable to control their environment and see themselves primarily as victims.

“When we as a community openly acknowledge that people are bleaching for whatever reason, then we can ask ourselves collectively what we can do to change this.”

One of the things we can do, which Dr Olajide recommends is simply not to buy these products. The cosmetics industry purposefully targets black and Asian communities to sell these products:

“These products can harm us both physically and psychologically.

Dr Olajide said: **“Most of all we should celebrate our colour. There are various shades of black from light to dark and they are all of value”,** but the most important one: **“inner beauty is independent of skin colour.”**

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