Bleaching creams are by-products of colonialism—a view from French history

October 9 2017, by Ronald Hall

Window display in an African beauty salon in Paris (2014). Credit: Miguel Medina/AFP

Anyone passing through Paris' Chateau Rouge, a busy neighbourhood close to the Gare de Nord train station, will notice the numerous shops

selling "African" cosmetics. Young men of the Congolese, Cameroonese or Malian communities regularly call to passers-by of all races and backgrounds, but especially black women, encouraging them to get their nails or hair done in a salon or to buy cosmetics. Products that promise fair skin are prominently promoted and displayed in the various shops.

By 2024 it is projected that profits from the sale of skin-bleaching creams will reach US$31.2 billion worldwide. In addition to Africa, Asia is one of the fastest-growing markets, with the potential to add US$5.7 billion in profit over the next four years. Europe is also a major market: Today there are between 1 and 5 million French citizens who indicate some degree of African descent. In 2007 there were 170,363 immigrants who left Africa to settle in France. Of that number, 38,530 were from Cameroon.

Why have bleaching products become so popular, not only in Asia and Africa but also in the heart of Paris? To better understand how this trend has survived and grown across the globe, we need to look at France's colonial history.

The colours of colonialism

The 1920s were the heyday of the French colonial empire. At that time France controlled more land in Africa than any other European country. During the colonisation process they imported their language, norms and traditions to Africa, where they imposed on local populations. While these were the most visible aspects of colonial occupation, others, while less explicit, were no less present.

Among the world's human population, the highest concentration of melanin – the pigment that gives human eyes, skin and hair its colour – is found in African dark skin. Under racist colonial regimes, light skin was a socio-economic, political and class marker, and this became an

unsolicited choice of African peoples. Colonised populations sought to imitate the light skin of their colonisers in an effort to enhance their quality of life and improve their self-image. Among white Americans, the same tendency is shown in the popularity of archetypes such as "Breck girl". Her long hair, light eyes and alabaster skin were considered the standard of beauty for many years.

Prior to colonisation, the feminine ideal in Africa could be light or dark skinned. Afterward, light skin was elevated by the esteem associated with colonial power and which African subjects then internalised. This has led to a surge of interest in skin-bleaching creams and products in many former colonies, including Cameroon.

Bleaching in Cameroon

Between 1946 and 1960, French Cameroons was a French territory. In 1960 the country gained its independence, and the next year it joined its British counterpart to form the country of Cameroon.

The lingering effects of the French and British influence contributed to what became a thriving bleach-cream industry. According to the World Health Organisation, in Cameroon skin bleaching is "rife" despite its health risks. African countries such as Ghana have made some of these products illegal, but many remain popular.

Dencia before and after. Author provided

While the colonial era is long over, French companies continue to make a handsome profit from skin-bleaching products – the market is projected to reach US$19.8 billion by 2018. Clarins SA, a French company, has developed a popular product, Clarins White Plus, which it

markets to both men and women. According to documentation, Clarins' experts claim that one of its ingredients, acerola extract, "is able to control the overproduction of melanin synthesis at its source".

Cameroon celebrities both promote and sell bleaching creams, sometimes under the label of "beauty creams". Pop star Reprudencia Sonkey, known by her stage name Dencia, has promoted her own line of bleaching creams, Whitenicious. The marketing materials include dramatic side-by-side pictures of Dencia as dark-skinned before and light-skinned after. Within a month sales approached 20,000 units.

Like Clarins, Dencia does not promote her product as a way to lighten skin but instead as a means to remove dark spots. Nevertheless, thousands of African women purchase Whitenicious specifically to lighten their skin, which brought much criticism of Dencia from the black community in the U.S. and the U.K.. Despite her claims to be providing a product that will enhance the beauty of dark-skinned African women, critics contend that she is promoting black self-hate.

Ending skin bleaching

The origins of negative perceptions of dark skin tones are conveyed by the Bible and sustained by culture. Light-skinned people are seen as being able to "pass" for something other than members of a stigmatised group. In France, light-skinned blacks have a different experience compared to their dark-skinned counterparts – studies suggest they are better educated, earn more and have higher-status jobs. In the post-colonial era, dark-skinned Africans have not been able to assimilate with the same ease as lighter-skinned groups, even in African countries. This has served as a strong motivation for dark-skinned blacks to use bleaching products.

Rhetoric on ending "race" discrimination, as future president François

Hollande proposed in 2012, is not enough. To counter how people feel about their skin colour, France and other countries first need to take stronger actions and prohibit the sale of bleaching creams. This step has already been taken by several African countries, including Ghana. Second, education campaigns that address the health threats of such products must be put in place. Finally, popular culture itself is in need of some serious self-reflection.

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