

# Shona Proverbial Implications on Skin Bleaching: Some Philosophical Insights

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## Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of skin bleaching from a cultural perspective and argues that Shona proverbs (in Zimbabwe) are part of wise sayings that can be used to overcome the dilemmas, contradictions and uncertainties of skin bleaching. The research is theoretically grounded in the Afrocentric theory that defends African value systems and critiques global white supremacy. The study presents results from an urban based survey which involved 97 Shona women in Masvingo city. The objective of the survey was to understand the motives of skin bleaching among Shona women in Zimbabwe. While the reasons for skin bleaching are varied, the paper challenges these findings through proverbial analysis. It demonstrates that Shona proverbs explore female beauty from a metaphysical point of view and make an important distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic beauty. From a moral perspective, a number of Shona proverbs show that dark skin is to be valued and no moral responsibility is given to anyone for being dark in complexion. Epistemologically, the Shona have proverbs that emphasize the importance of knowledge related to one's culture and identity. Conversely, the Shona have used proverbs to show the danger of ignorance of one's identity and thus skin bleaching reflects this danger. Logically, the Shona have proverbs that demonstrate the inconsistencies, incoherence and fallacies of denying one's natural appearance and by implication, challenges contemporary skin bleachers.

**Key words:** skin bleaching, Shona proverbs, metaphysics, epistemology, logic

## Introduction

This study explores the philosophical implications of skin bleaching by drawing lessons from selected Shona proverbs. For Hamutyinei and Plannger (1988), Shona proverbs demonstrate the Shona people's ability to respond to a variety of different life situations without being simplistic but with depth of thought. This entails that Shona proverbs can be used to evaluate the contemporary phenomenon of skin bleaching. The research gathered perceptions mainly on the reasons for skin bleaching from 97 Shona speaking women in Masvingo city because the city is a provincial capital and it is characterized by a high incidence of skin bleaching compared to other parts of the province. In addition, Masvingo city could potentially provide varied demographic information from participants since it has three tertiary institutions (Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo Polytechnical College and Masvingo Teachers' College), and is comprised of both working class and non-working class populations. The purpose of the surveys was to provide a factual understanding of the practice of skin bleaching before conducting a proverbial analysis of the phenomenon. Grounding itself on the Afrocentric theory and tracing the philosophical origins of white supremacy, this study examines proverbial connotations from the point of view of metaphysics, ethics, epistemology and logic. In each category, three proverbs are examined to give a total of twelve proverbs in the entire paper. The paper focus its analysis to Shona women in Zimbabwe, so by referring to skin bleachers in the female gender, the paper is not being sexist but reporting the results of the study. The paper is not assuming that globally, skin bleaching is a female practice since males also participate in it. However, within the Zimbabwean context, the majority of skin bleachers are females.

The metaphysical assumptions of skin bleaching is examined and it is argued that the Shona draw a fundamental distinction between inner beauty and external beauty (Materike & Mapara 2009); a distinction between identity and identity crisis; appearance and reality; artificial beauty and inner beauty. From these dualistic perceptions, important implications on skin bleaching are drawn. In the ethical sphere, the Shona have developed notions that dark skin is not a crime, they believe that real beauty lies in the heart and they have questioned the moral intentions of skin bleaching. Skin bleachers in the Shona culture appear to face moral dilemmas and the moral intentions of skin bleachers have been questioned from several perspectives. All of these views can reveal important insights that can provide moral evaluations to the phenomenon of skin bleaching.

Epistemologically, the knowledge base, justifications and defense of skin bleaching are based on a foreign rather than an indigenous knowledge system. As the result, the Shona skin bleacher has no justification for the practice of skin bleaching. Based on indigenous knowledge, the phenomenon appears to border around ignorance of identity or a crisis of identity. Logically, Shona proverbs have been employed to expose the contradictions, fallacies and confusion that is associated with skin bleaching and provide valid logical arguments in favor of dark skin.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Afrocentric theory (Asante, 1987, 1988,1990) can be defined as a philosophical paradigm which deals with the question of African identity from the perspective of Africans as centered, located, oriented and grounded. It is a conceptual scheme which emphasizes the importance of Africans, taken as a single group (and often equated with black persons), in culture, economics, politics, philosophy, and history. While taking cognizance of the various strands of Afrocentricity, the research focuses on Asante's ideas of Afrocentricity. The Afrocentric theory is appropriate in this paper because it is significant in giving value and pride to the black skin which has been historically marginalized, abused and displaced by the fallacies of white supremacy. Afrocentric theory aims at giving a cultural footing to Africans who have been misplaced, dislocated and mentally colonized to the extent of disliking their own skins. Dei (1994) argues that Afrocentricity is an alternative way of understanding the world; an investigation of phenomena from a standpoint grounded in African-centered values and a call for the validation of African experiences and histories as well as a critique of the continued exclusion and marginalization of African knowledge systems. Dei's analysis is important because it facilitates the validation of black skin using African perspectives and it offers a critique to the flawed argument of white supremacy. Afrocentricity is an intellectual theory deriving its name from the centrality of African people and phenomena in the interpretation of experience (Asante, 1987). The experience of skin bleaching is a process which involves the marginalization and dislocation of the African skin. Afrocentricity aims at repositioning the African person and African reality from the margins of European thought, attitude, and doctrines which have manifested themselves in skin bleaching and skin whitening. Afrocentricity finds its grounding in the intellectual and activist precursors who first suggested culture as a critical corrective to a displaced agency among Africans (Asante, 1988). In this regard, only the epistemological paradigm of African culture can truly validate dark skin.

Recognizing that African culture was denigrated during colonization, the Afrocentrist discovered that the interpretative and theoretical grounds of her own skin had been stigmatized by the colonizers. Therefore, Afrocentricity stands as both a corrective measure and a critique (Asante, 1990). Whenever African people, who collectively suffer the experience of dislocation, even of their skin, are relocated in a centered place, we have a corrective measure. By recentering the African person as an agent, we rebut the hegemony of European domination in skin, thought and behavior, and thus Afrocentricity becomes a critique. On the one hand, it seeks to correct the sense of place of the African, and on the other hand, it makes a critique of the process and extent of the dislocation of dark skin caused by the European cultural, economic, and political domination of Africa and her diaspora. It is possible to make an exploration of this critical dimension by observing the way European writers have defined black skin in history, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology. To condone the definition of African dark skin as marginal, and to fringe people in the historical processes of the world, including the African world, is to abandon all hope of reversing the degradation of the oppressed. However, Afrocentricism is not a form of counter racism. Afrocentrists have expressed no interest in one race or culture dominating another; they express an ardent belief in the possibility of diverse populations living on the same earth without giving up their fundamental traditions, except where those traditions invade other peoples' territories. This is precisely why the Afrocentric idea is essential to human harmony and co-existence of human complexions. The Afrocentric idea represents a possibility of intellectual honesty, a way of viewing reality that opens new doors toward human understanding, including the reality of skin color, which has been historically distorted by European philosophers as demonstrated in the next section.

## **Eurocentric views of black skin**

It is important to examine Eurocentric views on black skin because of the impact of such views in the victimization of black persons as manifested in skin bleaching. In addition, the Eurocentric views are the objects of deconstruction from an Afrocentric theory. Eurocentric perceptions of the black skin have been systematically developed by western philosophers such as Locke, Hume, Kant and Hegel. All these philosophers made either explicit or implicit reference to skin color in an attempt to provide the intellectual basis for white supremacy which was used to justify colonization and exploitation of Africa and denigrate black skin. To start with, Locke argued that skin color is a nominally essential property of men (Bracken, 1978). This means that skin color is important in the

identification and naming of important qualities of human beings. The consequence of Locke's thinking is that the white skin is equivalent to the essential skin, while the black skin is considered to be less important in defining humanity. Locke provides a model for counting skin color among essential properties and we see the same ideas in the arguments of the skin bleachers that they change their complexion to become important. Secondly, Hume (1987:269) maintains, "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites." Hume's suspicion is clearly based on white supremacy and this has influenced colonization. White supremacy, in radical opposition to black inferiority, leads to a false dichotomy. Hume (1987:270) adds that skin color determines civilization when he asserts, "there was never a civilized nation of any other complexion than the whites." Hume's racism has intellectual consequences since colonizers thought that they were rationally superior to blacks. This view is the basis of scientific racism. Intellectual superiority is therefore based on white superiority and skin bleachers are victims of this assumption.

Thirdly, Kant's racism was more emphatic, "humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower, and the lowest are a part of the American peoples" (Kant, 1974). Kant also argues that the order in skin color corresponds to mental and general ability. The consequence of Kant's racism is clear, the black skin is inferior since it comes out at position three out of four. Lastly, Hegel (1975) further compounds racism by attempting to exclude sub-Saharan Africa from world history. The term 'sub-Saharan Africa' is racist because it is where "real" blacks are found geographically. Hegel's thinking crystallized, justified and fixed European prejudices about Africa (Ramose, 1999). Hegel saw Africa as a dark continent devoid of historical consciousness of itself. 'Dark' is a deliberate specific reference to skin color. The blacks are therefore seen as inferior by virtue of skin color and this thinking partly contributes to the psychological causes of skin bleaching. The prestige given to light skin during African colonization is still evident today in the behavior of the skin bleachers who lighten their complexion in response to the lingering colonial values.

## **The phenomenon of skin bleaching among Zimbabwean women**

The practice of skin bleaching among the Zimbabwean women in general dates back to colonial times when European thinking started to displace uniquely African perceptions even in matters to do with complexion. The practice has

recently resurfaced especially among young, working and unmarried women of between 18 to 30 years (Kanhema, 2006). Smit, Vicanova and Pavel (2009: 5326) maintain that skin whitening products are commercially available for cosmetic purposes in order to give a lighter skin appearance. These commercial products are being increasingly used by Zimbabweans in an attempt to improve skin quality and complexion. Pichte *et al* (2004) define skin bleaching as a process where different products are used for the purpose of lightening normally dark skin. Thus, daily use combined with minimization of exposure to the sun is required for persistence of the lightening effect. The practice of skin bleaching is found among young black Zimbabwean women despite the fact that the government of Zimbabwe banned skin lighteners and skin bleaching pills (Kanhema, 2006).

Kpanake *et al* (2010) identify the need to be recognized, the desire for beauty, appreciation of light colored skin, being modern and the need to secure social security as the main motives of skin bleaching among the Togolese. Although Kpanake *et al* carried out the study in Togo, the motives appear to fit well among Zimbabwean young women because firstly, the reasons for skin bleaching appear to intersect and secondly the effect of colonialism on skin color in both Togo and Zimbabwe appears to be similar. In Zimbabwe, skin bleachers argue around the notion of having embraced ‘modern outlook’ and demonstrate a ‘departure from tradition and conservatism’. They see the practice as flexible, dynamic and consistent with the trends of globalization. The skin bleachers talk of a new self-understanding, which also demonstrates personal freedom and assertiveness in contrast with traditional norms.

## **Skin bleaching among Shona women**

The Shona people of Zimbabwe constitute nearly 75% of the total population (Mberi, 2009) and so the Shona are the dominant cultural group. A survey was carried out to investigate perceptions on the practice of skin bleaching among Shona women for the purpose of gaining insight of the actual motives before subjecting the phenomenon to proverbial analysis. Perceptions on skin bleaching among Shona women were gathered from 97 women in Masvingo City through questionnaires and open interviews in the period between 21 August and 20 September 2010. Participants in the study were allowed to use Shona or English as a medium of communication. The research results are mainly a collection of responses to the reasons for skin bleaching which were made in the form of comments either in writing or in recorded speech. Other questions on the

questionnaire required respondents to state their age ranges, their marital status, whether they are employed or not, type of job, their complexion, if they are skin bleachers and if so the type of cream or pill used, whether the practice was good or bad, why the government of Zimbabwe banned skin bleaching creams, and their attitude towards dark skin vis-a-vis their attitude towards light skin. The phenomenon of skin bleaching is common among Shona women especially among the working class ladies (Kanhema, 2006). However, this does not imply that only working class Shona ladies practice skin bleaching. The unemployed are also involved, provided that they have a steady source of income to constantly purchase skin bleaching creams or pills (Kanhema, 2006).

The positive side of skin bleaching among Shona women was presented mostly by skin bleachers. One reason is that skin bleaching is done because of the love of light colored skin. A 20-year old single and employed woman maintained that she feels great in bleached skin. On the reason for skin bleaching, she wrote; *"I feel great, I feel good... it's like I am in a new dress every time."* The need to look attractive was also seen as a major reason for the practice of skin bleaching among Shona women in Zimbabwe. One respondent, age 19, wrote that *"If I am to keep my boyfriend from being snatched away by other ladies, skin bleaching is the only solution."* Skin bleaching is also perceived to be a fashionable trend. The following extract was among some of the comments from a 24-year old single student: *"I cannot use the same lotions with my mother, let alone my grandmother, the reason for skin bleaching is that I have to go beyond them a little bit. I have to catch up with the girls of my age."* The desire for a job was seen as another motive as captured by the following comments by a 27-year old unemployed single woman, *"Kana kuchidiwa matill operator kuSupermarket yemutown, ukaenda nekaface kemahara hapana chaunobura nekuti vanopa basa havafi vakakutarisa, vanosvotwa neface yako zvekuti vanobva vatarisa divi"* ("If a supermarket in town is recruiting lady till operators, and if you present a scruffy face, those responsible for recruitment will never look at such a face, they will rather get bored to the extent of looking aside"). Other respondents maintained that skin bleaching is done out of the desire to appear important because dark skin is both "embarrassing" and "humiliating." A 30-year old married woman wrote, *"Vanhu havanyanyi kukujairira kana ganda rako riri nani"* ("People will not take you for granted if you have a better skin").

The negative side of skin bleaching among Shona women was presented mostly by non-skin bleachers. A 42-year old married woman wrote that the practice was mainly "evil" since it is done mostly by prostitutes and divorcees

who have the bad habit of snatching other people's husbands because no decently married woman can be seen with a bleached skin. For another woman, age 32 and employed, the practice is seen as an attempt to make up for ugliness: "*Vanhu vanoita zveskin bleaching vanoita izvozvo nekuti vakashata zvekuti dhuuu*" ("Those [ladies] who practice skin bleaching do that because they are very ugly"). Although skin bleaching is not just for the face, most Shona women apply the creams just to the face so as to reduce expenditure. Other comments basically revealed that skin bleaching is a form of cultural crisis, a loss of identity and a departure from truth and reality. The following comments from a 54-year old married woman capture this type of thinking "*Muchivanhu chedu hapana munhu aichera midzi kuti agochinja ganda rake, uku ndiko kurasika kwevanasikana vemazuva ano*" ("In our Shona culture, no one would dig herbs for the purpose of changing skin colour, this is a real disorientation from our present daughters"). Another married woman, age 50, could not see any reasonable justification for skin bleaching but she saw it as an insult to God: "*Ndiko kutuka Mwari ikoko, kana Mwari akakupa ganda dema, dada naro kwete kuswera uchizvikuvadza nemishonga isina basa*" ("That is a real insult to God, if God gave you a dark skin, be proud of it and do not waste time damaging your skin with useless chemicals"). The above discussions summarize key positions that appear representative of the motives for skin bleaching and critiques the practice. Having gathered these perceptions, the researcher hopes to transcend the contradictions and complexities of skin bleaching by subjecting the phenomenon to an Afrocentric cultural analysis via selected proverbs. Proverbs have been chosen as a tool of analysis because unlike the perceptions gathered through survey, proverbs are largely free from the influence of colonialism, globalization, Christianity or Islam, and as such, proverbs demonstrate a uniquely Shona cultural perspective.

## **Shona Proverbial Insights on Skin Bleaching**

### ***Shona proverbs as Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)***

Mieder (1980:119) defines a proverb as "short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, memorable form which is handed down from generation to generation." Shona proverbs arguably contain all the characteristics mentioned by Mieder. Shona proverbs contain Shona metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and logic. It is important to note that the task of exposing the deep and intricate meaning of Shona proverbs is difficult because it requires careful, analytical and



systematic reflection (Gelfand, 1968; Gelfand, 1981). The Shona, just like any other ethnic grouping in Zimbabwe, have intellectual curiosity about their surroundings resulting in keen observation and reflection of nature. Thus, proverbs reflect the Shona people's ability to find answers to these problems without being merely informative and simplistic. Proverbs are used for the education of the young among the Shona. Proverbs give weight to ordinary speech among the Shona. One whose speech is colored with proverbs is seen as thoughtful, analytical and highly intelligent. Proverbs therefore represent codified intellectual resources among the Shona people.

Ocholla (2007:1) defines Indigenous Knowledge (IK) as a "complex set of knowledge and technologies existing and developed around specific conditions of populations and communities indigenous to a particular geographic area." The complexity results in the use of the word 'system' because it is an interrelated process with different components such as knowledge and technology. Indigenous knowledge has been defined as institutionalized local knowledge that has been built upon and passed on from one generation to the other by word of mouth (Osunade 1994; Warren 1992). Accordingly, Shona proverbs fit well as a form of IKS.

Furthermore, postmodernism, in its deconstruction of enlightenment epistemology, argues against grand narratives and the marginalization of localized knowledge. In the postmodernist critique of the enlightenment project, the argument is that, since no culture is universal, knowledge cannot be universal because every culture is historically situated and particular (Moodie, 2003). This gives space for the validation of Shona IKS in the plurality of epistemological schemes because Shona thought systems are simply in coexistence with other cultural forms of knowledge. IKS approach human epistemological activities as historically and contingently constituted natural phenomena conducted by reflective human beings (Ntuli, 2002; Moodie, 2004) as shown by Shona proverbs. The nature, aims, norms, theories, concepts, and province of Shona epistemological activities as demonstrated by Shona proverbs are to be understood in terms of the life context in which these activities are organically rooted and sustained, rather than pre-existing epistemological facts or principles.

There is stimulating and enriching wisdom in the Shona proverbial lore that is significant in influencing contemporary views of skin bleaching from a uniquely cultural standpoint. Presently, studies of skin bleaching in Zimbabwe largely ignore IKS primarily on the grounds that since skin bleaching is a

contemporary phenomenon, IKS is viewed as both anachronistic and irrelevant for contemporary needs. In contrast, the paper argues that the classic wisdom of Shona proverbial lore transcends historical epochs and the beauty of Shona proverbs lies in its applicability to different contexts and times. Although Shona proverbs are formulated in specific, historical and localized situations, it does not follow that they cannot be applied to contemporary life situations that include skin bleaching. Further, the paper advances the position that the use of IKS in addressing the uncertainties, contradictions, dilemmas and existential paradoxes of skin bleaching is home grown, contextual, open, flexible, and dynamic. Accordingly, this paper selects appropriate Shona proverbs and traces their implications in the context of skin bleaching among contemporary Shona women in Zimbabwe.

### *Metaphysical Thoughts*

Ramose (1999) sees Metaphysics as the study of being from an African perspective. For Ramose, being is understood in three levels namely, the living being (which makes speech and knowledge of being possible); the living dead (those who physically died but whose souls are still living) and potential beings (those yet to be born). This study makes use of Ramose's first level of being since it is appropriate to the context of skin bleaching. Ozumba (2004) argues that African Metaphysics is the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions among beings and reality in general. In the context of the present study, focus is on the interaction between the skin bleacher and her bleaching creams and the possible metaphysical assumptions and reasoning that possibly inform such interaction. Viriri and Mungwini (2009) argue that Shona metaphysics is the totality of the Shona perception of reality. The Shona people of Zimbabwe formulate metaphysical insights that focus on the universe and on human existence. The metaphysics of human existence is the important aspect of this paper because it is linked to skin bleaching.

The Shona people of Zimbabwe have a holistic metaphysics of the human being which considers spiritual and material aspects of the person. In skin bleaching, this total understanding has been fragmented by global white supremacy and replaced by the metaphysics of the surface as manifested in skin bleaching. The metaphysics of the surface predicated in white supremacy, is damaging from a Shona cultural standpoint. It is damaging because it distorts the rich Shona conception of beauty. In the Shona metaphysical framework, notions of reflecting on dark skin centre around appreciation and defense of the natural

skin. Skin bleaching, in the Shona conceptual scheme, is a movement from reality to an appearance. What is real is the dark skin and in skin bleaching, the appearance light skin takes shape. This means that the original skin is altered. By implication, light skin which results from skin bleaching is seen as unreal or an imitation of the white skin. White skin is understood by the Shona as a foreign complexion which is associated with colonial domination and oppression. The skin bleacher is seen as having an artificial and not a natural skin. For the Shona, the practice of skin bleaching is therefore an act of pretence rather than reflection of reality because the skin bleacher finds herself behind a 'mask'. Traditionally, the Shona have made a fundamental distinction between intrinsic beauty and extrinsic beauty. Intrinsic beauty is viewed as beauty of the heart, beauty of character and therefore more important than physical attractiveness. The practice of skin bleaching is therefore seen as centered around appearances or external outlooks as opposed to character formation or the development of a real African mindset. It is a departure from real identity and a manifestation of an identity crisis.

Shona proverbial lore can be used to comment on, evaluate, describe and analyze the phenomenon of skin bleaching. The proverbial expressions give deep insights and classical metaphysical truths which are useful in the face of identity crisis created by skin bleaching. Metaphysical proverbs which can be applied to skin bleaching develop notions of appreciation, beauty and value of one's own identity as reflected in one's natural complexion.

The first proverbial expression with important implications on skin bleaching is *chakanaka chakanaka mukaka haurungwi munyu* (what is perfect is already perfect, salt cannot be added to milk). In its literal connotation, the proverb captures the understanding that milk is adequate in terms of its dietary requirements and taste such that it would be unnecessary to add any other ingredient to it.

In its deeper sense, the proverb is applied to a variety of contexts including skin bleaching. The irony is that for the Shona, when the skin bleacher is attempting to alter her dark skin, she acts like someone adding salt to milk. The proverb challenges potential and actual skin bleachers to appreciate their real, dark and natural skin and develop a positive mindset towards it. In addition, the proverb points towards the idea of perfection. The Shona see their dark skin as perfect, natural and adequate in its own right. Skin bleaching is therefore seen by the Shona as a movement from perfection to imperfection. The natural and

original dark skin is seen as more realistic and stable while the bleached skin is idealistic (the skin bleacher has a colonial mentality of ideal skin). The bleached skin cannot escape instability because it is an artificially developed skin which require chemical applications to sustain its state. The Shona have argued that appreciation of natural dark skin is a better alternative than a transitory, unstable and borrowed artificial skin. From an Afrocentric perspective, the proverb advocates for cultural footing through the acceptance and appreciation of one's complexion. The pride in 'black beauty' is the point of convergence between the above mentioned Shona proverb and the Afrocentric theory.

The second metaphysically inclined proverb with implications on skin bleaching is "*matende matsvuku huvanza doro*" (light colored gourds make beer sour). In the literal significance of the proverb, beer which is served in attractive containers is usually sour. For the Shona, the taste of beer is more important than the containers which are used to serve the beer. In its application, beyond the context of beer containers, the proverb entails that what is intrinsic is more important than external features. In relation to skin bleaching, the proverb entails that light skin, as a result of skin bleaching, does not necessarily translate to goodness of character (*unhu*). In traditional Shona thought system and even in contemporary Shona society, the development of good character is more important than changing complexion. This belief implies that the Shona see the skin bleacher as missing the point. For the Shona, a good woman should accept what she is, she should develop self-tolerance first before she accepts others in society. A good person should develop and cultivate the virtues of ubuntu that borders around respect, sociality, solidarity, care, sympathy and related notions. Virtue development comes out of self examination and self evaluation. This is the road to inner nature. In relation to inner nature, the outer nature, which has to do with complexion, is seen among the Shona as both unnecessary and irrelevant. It is unnecessary because it adds nothing to the intrinsic goodness of character. It is irrelevant because it misses the point of Shona metaphysical thought. However, this must not be misconstrued to mean that the Shona totally disregard issues to do with complexion, they do appreciate physical appearance but the point is that physical appearance has secondary and not primary significance. This places Shona experiences at the centre of analysis so as to avoid marginalization and this makes Afrocentricity relevant for this study. In short, the Shona have to rely on their own analytical tools such as proverbs to displace white supremacy since they cannot legitimately argue against white domination using foreign ontological assumptions.

The third metaphysically inclined proverb is *Gunguo nyangwe rikageza sei, idema chete* (even if the crow washes itself thoroughly, it remains black). Literally, the proverb connotes that the more the crow washes itself, the more it paradoxically reveals its color. Instead of changing its color, the color becomes more manifest. In a deeper context, the proverbial implication is that genetic factors cannot be changed artificially. Accordingly, the proverb is evaluative of the phenomenon of skin bleaching. The metaphysical dilemma of skin bleaching is that the black skin is revealed more because a skin category, which is both outside original skin and the targeted white skin, is developed. In reality, the identity of Africans in general and the Shona in particular, is marked by dark skin. Another deeper implication is that skin bleaching cannot change black identity. Even if the black person uses the strongest of skin bleaching creams, the blackness is simply altered but in essence, it is not lost. Interestingly, the skin bleacher acquires a new form of dark skin which is not the desired light skin of their counterparts. The irony of skin bleaching is that it fails to achieve genuine light skin. A new category of dark skin, namely, a bleached dark skin is inevitably formed. However, the bleached skin is still a form of dark skin. This entails that those with bleached skins are still considered as black persons and they cannot run away from this fact. In the Shona metaphysical framework therefore, the bleached skin does not lose identity of being black but there is simply alteration of complexion. The above discussion calls for self-respect among the Shona, as advocated by Afrocentricity, because a natural black skin gives ontological dignity and value to the self as subject. In skin bleaching, one treats herself as the 'other' because she desires to look 'foreign'.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Bewaji (2004) maintains that ethics is made up of norms and values that govern human behavior and a morally upright person is one who exhibits virtues such as honesty, respect, decency benevolence and so forth. Among the Shona, global white supremacy has created illegitimate ethical dilemmas resulting in some women acting against their conscience, their skins and their moral choices. The Shona have classical proverbs whose application can be used to cut across any human activity, phenomenon or development. While Shona proverbs may have been formulated in the past, their application is still holds even in contemporary situations. In the moral sphere, the Shona have developed proverbs that centre around human behavior in terms of good and bad. The first morally inclined proverb with implications on skin bleaching is *kusviba haisi mhosva* (dark skin is not a crime). This proverb is used to shape and sustain a positive

attitude towards dark skin. In the Shona moral conceptual scheme, the proverb only serves as a moral attitude that can be used to assess the practice of skin bleaching. The underlying assumption is that, if dark skin is not a crime, why should one bother to alter it? For the Shona, dark skin is a natural element and no one is held morally responsible for it. Moral responsibility for the Shona, occurs when one does something that can be praised or blamed. The proverb therefore challenges the skin bleacher to appreciate her own natural skin and understand that she cannot be blamed for her natural dark skin. If dark skin is not a blameworthy state, then the Shona should not bother themselves by bleaching their skins. There is a high moral tolerance of dark skin and there is a convex condemnation of skin bleaching among the Shona. At a stricter level, the proverb underscores the fact that the skin bleacher should not even condemn herself for her skin because dark skin is a genetic aspect. Instead, the Shona are of the view that one should develop positive moral attitudes towards one's own skin and these include assertiveness, pride and high self esteem. This moral attitude helps against the expenditure of gradually damaging one's skin. It also guards against the potential side effects of skin bleaching. A Jose (2005) identifies the following as consequences of skin bleaching: risk of skin cancer as a result of a combination of prolonged use of skin bleaching agents, with loss of skin protection and exposure to the sun; premature aging due to damage of elastic fibers of the skin; paradoxical increased skin pigmentation; skin irritation; skin infections; skin thinning; poor wound healing; development of high blood pressure and diabetes and mercury poisoning. With these consequences, skin bleaching therefore appears to fail the moral test.

The second ethical proverb is *kunaka kwemunhu kuri mumwoyo* (a person's beauty is in the heart). In the Shona moral thought, the heart is seen as the source of good behavior, good character or desirable moral traits. Real beauty is therefore in the heart for the Shona. In the long run beauty even of the skin cannot be achieved by skin bleaching because of the side effects of skin bleaching. Skin bleaching is an attempt to achieve beauty of the skin and it cannot add any goodness to the heart. For the Shona, character is more important than external outlook. As such, there is no logically and necessary connection between skin bleaching and a good heart. At the same time, this does not mean that skin bleachers are evil in their hearts. In the Shona moral reasoning scheme, therefore, beauty does not lie in the bleached skin but in the goodness of heart. A Shona proverbial and cultural standpoint, to be consistent with the Afrocentric theory, can truly validate Shona moral reasoning. In Afrocentric thinking, only a cultural

standpoint can appreciate the true sense of beauty within the Shona moral scheme.

The third morally inclined proverb with serious implications on skin bleaching is, *mukadzi mutsvuku akasaroya anoba* (the light skinned woman is either a witch or a thief). Traditionally, the Shona thought system viewed light skinned women in general with caution because physical appearance was not supposed to be the sole criterion in choosing a lady for marriage (Materoke and Mapara, 2009). In addition, extremely light skin (*matsvuko*) is traditionally understood by the Shona as a physical defect in the form of excess. The proverb was meant to warn to young men not to mistake the attractiveness of light skin for beauty of the heart. The dichotomy created for the light skinned woman between witchcraft and theft is meant to show that the deeds of the light skinned woman require careful moral questioning. The light skinned woman may look physically attractive, but for the Shona, this attractiveness does not necessarily translate to goodness of heart. As such the Shona have shown that light skin can lead to hasty moral judgment wherein the light woman may be mistakenly taken as morally good.

In Shona traditional society, light skinned woman were therefore viewed with moral skepticism because they were generally associated with promiscuity. The association of the light skinned woman with promiscuity is fairly easy to understand because of her potential to attract several male suitors. However, it does not necessarily follow that only light skinned women can be prostitutes but light skinned women find it easy to tempt men sexually in comparison to their dark counterparts. In contemporary Shona society, the above proverb can be used to examine the motives of skin bleaching. The skin bleacher's intentions are not very clear. Although skin bleachers themselves defend their actions on the basis of fashion trends, the underlying motives -- the desire to look attractive and enjoyment of light skin -- are judged to be morally questionable. However, comments made by non-skin bleachers criticize the practice of skin bleaching. Among the Shona, most skin bleachers are seen as morally loose, prostitutes, women with multiple sex partners and so forth. Although these views may not be necessarily true, they reflect the supposedly hidden motives of skin bleaching. A visit to nightclubs and bottle stores in the urban area of Masvingo demonstrated that most female commercial sex workers are skin bleachers. For commercial sex workers, the evidence that skin bleaching is done to attract male partners is overwhelming. Skin bleaching is also manifested in what Zimbabweans call 'small houses'. Small houses are extramarital affairs by men and the woman in the small house bleaches her skin to outdo the woman in the main house or

official home. If skin bleachers have mixed intentions, the reason to question the moral intentions of skin bleachers is clear. Skin bleaching is therefore a form of dislocation to use an Afrocentric concept and Shona proverbial wisdom attempts to bring self-acceptance among skin bleachers.

### ***Epistemological Perspectives***

Gwaravanda (2011) sees Shona epistemology as a reflection upon the nature, sources and limits of knowledge within the Shona context. In Shona society, global white supremacy has given a false universalism of knowledge thereby fragmenting the cultural knowledge of skin bleachers. Epistemically, the Shona have used knowledge related sayings to evaluate the practice of skin bleaching. The practice of skin bleaching is seen by the Shona, to be a result of surface knowledge claims and a deeper analysis demonstrates that the skin bleacher may lack adequate foundational knowledge about her own culture and identity as a result of falling victim to colonial mentality and the trends of globalization. The skin bleacher lacks firm epistemic justification of her practice when she is seriously interrogated.

To begin with, the proverb *ziva kwawakabva nekuti mudzimu weshiri uri mudendere* (know your origins, the bird's nest is its rescue place). This proverb points to the fact that it is always important to *know* one's roots. The roots of Afrocentric thinking in the West is the oppression of Blacks in the United States where black intellectuals laid its foundation in the context Civil Rights Movement in United States of America. Adequate knowledge of the roots and identity of dark skin results in pride and self-assertiveness. For the Shona, ignorance about one's own identity may ultimately lead to skin bleaching as a form of identity crisis. Knowledge of one's cultural identity or background obtained through proverbs is important since it leads to appreciation of dark skin. In the African context, dark skin is a symbol of African origin and it should be appreciated as such. Knowledge of black existential reality is a necessary requirement for a positive appreciation of dark skin. However, this does not mean that skin bleachers are ignorant of their existential reality but they have been made victims of a colonial system that has devalued their own skin. As a result, the skin bleacher should resist the victimization of racist ignorance and affirm African knowledge about identity. The Shona arguably see dark skin as a source of identity and pride even in the globalised world and this is consistent with the thinking of the Afrocentric theory.



In Shona culture, reflections on identity have to be taken seriously especially in the globalised world because identity gives guidance in the confusion of cultural practices. For the Shona, the black person should see himself or herself as such before assuming any other identities. The skin bleacher is seen by the Shona as lacking the necessary knowledge foundations to give pride to Blackness. In Shona thought, one who lacks foundational knowledge is seen as scratching on the surface (*kubatira zvinhu pamusoro*). As a result of a shallow knowledge base, the skin bleacher is carried by the wind. The Shona therefore see the skin bleacher as following the crowd without a deep philosophical reflection of the epistemological underpinnings of skin bleaching. In depth knowledge about culture, history and vision gives one gives a rational defense and justification of dark skin. As a result, the skin bleacher finds insufficient epistemic roots to justify bleached skin. The paradox of skin bleaching, therefore, lies in little knowledge although the skin bleacher claims to know modernity, fashion and standards.

The second epistemic proverb to evaluate skin bleaching is *kusaziva kufa* (ignorance is death). For the Shona, “ignorance does not attract learners but it sends them away” (Gwaravanda and Masaka, 2008a: 11) The skin bleacher may not attract learners since others will see nothing to learn from skin bleaching. Knowledge is required to furnish justification if the skin bleacher is faced with the option of skin alteration. The Shona therefore, see skin bleaching as, to some significant extent, a consequence of ignorance. This ignorance is a result of failure to think above the false white supremacy created by colonialists. The dark skin is understood in European terms as a symbol of lower emotions, baser emotions and the dark side of the soul (Henry, 1997). Black skin is seen as symbolizing evil and ugliness while the white skin symbolizes goodness and beauty. This false analysis is a result of imposition of supremacy by whites and it takes knowledge of one’s culture to refute and rebut such falsity. The Shona therefore feel pity for the skin bleacher as a victim of colonization and imperialism and as a result, compare her to someone who is dead. The analogy of death is appropriate in the context of skin bleaching because it symbolizes lifelessness, lack of hope and potentiality. The skin bleacher, therefore, lacks knowledge of culture, history and identity. Her own side of history is dead but paradoxically, her white supremacy-influenced mentality is alive. While the skin bleacher may try to escape from her own identity, she may never develop sufficient knowledge and depth of the white skin and culture. Consequently, the skin bleacher may face the dilemma of remaining ignorant of her own black existential reality and the supposed white supremacy. In the face of skin bleaching knowledge has to be interpreted within the Afrocentric perspective in general and Shona thought in particular to gain insight

of cultural identity.

The third proverb which may be of epistemic application to the phenomenon of skin bleaching is, *dai ndakaziva haitungamiri* (If I had known does not come first). The Shona use this proverb in the context of any regrets that occur due to ignorance. For the Shona, a wise person makes a thorough research and makes wide consultations before undertaking an action. If research and consultation are not done, the probability of regretting is very high. In other words, the Shona require epistemic responsibility for any action including skin bleaching. The skin bleacher, carried away by the apparent attractiveness of white skin, forgets to find out about the health hazards of skin bleaching and may eventually face the unfortunate health hazards such as possible cancer, skin thinning, skin fungal infection, diabetes and slow wound healing (Ajose, 2005). The health problems are grave in Zimbabwe because the health sector is not fully funded due to slow economic growth. Skin bleaching is carried out either in total ignorance or with very little knowledge about its side effects. In the final analysis, skin diseases will result in the loss of original dark skin and the skin bleacher may be in endless regrets (*dai ndakaziva*). Afrocentric theory is against violence and skin bleaching is a form of violence against one's skin. This is the point of agreement between the above proverb and Afrocentric thinking because if the skin is damaged through skin bleaching, restoration of original skin may be difficult to achieve.

### ***Logical Analysis***

Gwaravanda and Masaka (2008b) argue that logic, in the Shona conceptual scheme, is the analysis of concepts and principles of reasoning in the Shona language. From the point of view of logic, the skin bleaching arguments can be evaluated in terms of validity and soundness. The Shona have a well developed system of reasoning and they demonstrate logical skills in use of language (Gwaravanda and Masaka, 2008b). The Shona logical conceptual scheme is unique since their reasoning is focused on practical affairs as opposed to speculative thought. Logical analysis of skin bleaching therefore focuses on the assessment of reasons and arguments for skin bleaching. However, the fallacy of global white supremacy has destroyed the Shona logical scheme among skin bleachers.

The first logically related proverb on skin bleaching is *zundu kugara mundove hanzi neni ndava mombevo* (The caterpillar, by habitating in cow dung,

thinks that it is also a cow). This proverb is used to demonstrate the lack of logic in all forms of pretence. In skin bleaching, the skin bleacher like the pretence of the said caterpillar, erroneously thinks that she is part and parcel with light skinned persons. Logically, the Shona see the practice of skin bleaching as a form of a logical pretence. It is a pretence because the reasons of skin bleaching are based on faulty assumptions and flawed reasoning processes. The first assumption is in thinking that white color is superior to black color. Logically, there is nothing in skin color that makes one color superior to the other. As a result, skin lightening is a pretence to have light skin and the Shona proverb see this as unreasonable. The second assumption is that black is evil, ugly and undesirable while white skin is seen by skin bleachers as good, beautiful and desirable. Again, this faulty assumption is based on unjustified condemnation of black skin by the white community. The faulty assumption can be refuted by Shona proverbial knowledge as demonstrated by the imperative that one should have logical justification for self acceptance. In addition, the so called white argument against black skin is based on the fallacy of false cause. Kant (1974) argued that since the black person is dark from head to toe, nothing reasonable can come out of his or her darkness. Kant's assertion can easily be refuted by the evidence of Shona thought systems such as proverbs because they demonstrate a high degree of logical thinking among the Shona in particular and black persons in general. The skin bleacher should therefore fight against the fallacy of condemning black skin and adopt a reasonable attitude towards her own skin. The proverb is therefore an Afrocentric critique of European domination as shown in skin bleaching.

The second proverb with a logical slant on skin bleaching is *zvikoni zvikoni mimba haibvi negosoro* (what is impossible, is impossible, coughing cannot cause miscarriage). This proverb is used by the Shona to show logical and empirical impossibility. In the Shona reasoning scheme, reasons have to be justified on the basis of soundness and validity (Gwaravanda and Masaka, 2008b). In the context skin bleaching, the cited proverb entails that logically, skin whitening is a temporary or short term practice which cannot in the long run, eradicate dark skin. For the Shona therefore, it is logically impossible to think of a situation where dark skin can be permanently removed as a result of skin bleaching. This logical analysis is made possible by observation of the bleached skin. The bleached skin remains within the range of dark skin and it can never be white. The logic of skin bleaching is therefore faulty in the sense that it assumes the formation of a new complexion in the process. Paradoxically, the skin bleacher reveals blackness more in the process of skin bleaching. The proverb explains the Afrocentric tenet of making sense of one's existential situation and in this context, the above

proverb becomes an analytic tool that requires making sense of one's skin.

*Zhou hairermerwi nenyanga dzayo* (an elephant does not feel the heaviness of its tusks) is the third and final logically linked proverb in this study. It is a mistake in reasoning for one to think that the elephant feels the heaviness of its tusks. Transferred to the present study, the skin bleacher sees a burden with her own skin. She apparently dislikes her own natural skin because from the study carried out in Masvingo urban, 68% (28 out of 41) skin bleachers saw dark skin as embarrassing and humiliating. The logical contradiction in the skin bleaching process is that of self dislike and self destruction. The faulty logic of white supremacy again causes the above contradiction. Dark skin in relationship to the individual, just like tusks in relation to the elephant, is part and parcel of nature and it is logical to appreciate dark skin rather than disliking it. For the Shona, the skin bleacher is a victim of the white supremacy argument that white skin is good since it is attractive and dark skin is bad since it is ugly. Such logic is fallacious since it is based on racist assumptions rather than reasoned analysis. The apparent burden of dark skin is therefore logically mistaken. In the Shona notion of beauty, dark skin is seen as natural and desirable and sound reasoning requires one to appreciate it as such. The skin bleacher is therefore challenged by the above proverb to examine the assumption behind her argument, the pattern of inference in her argument and the basis of her skin bleaching conclusion. If all the three logical steps can sustain logical evaluation, then perhaps the skin bleaching practice can be logically justified. This proverb like the others discussed are critical tools of analysis within the framework of Afrocentric theory.

## Conclusion

The paper has explored the potentiality of Shona proverb as analytic tools given the paradox of skin bleaching. The significance of the study is to place a marginalized tradition of Shona proverbs on the centre of a contemporary issue such as skin bleaching to demonstrate the perennial applicability of the timeless and classical wisdom of the Shona sayings. As an Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) the Shona proverb gives Afrocentric grounding and meaningful understanding of the phenomenon of skin bleaching especially among contemporary Shona women. The broader implication of adopting IKS lies in the potential significance, reliability and functionality within the Shona validation scheme. Proverbs are part and parcel of Shona discourse and as such they are transferable in communicating ideas on the phenomenon of skin bleaching. The paper constitutes a critique of Eurocentric views of black skin while premised on

the Afrocentric theory. Skin bleaching is based on the Eurocentric negative attitude toward black skin that can be traced back to Hume, Kant and Hegel and it requires an Afrocentric perspective to restore pride on the black skin. The paper has explored Shona proverbial implications on skin bleaching and it has argued that the skin bleaching exercise has metaphysical, ethical, epistemological and logical connotations from the context of Shona philosophical thought system. Further, it has been demonstrated that the skin bleacher's metaphysical assumptions are questionable from a Shona cultural standpoint; the moral intentions of the skin bleacher appear suspect from a uniquely Shona moral scheme; the skin bleacher appears to have little cultural knowledge of her own roots as a result of global white supremacy and she has the difficult task of coming up with valid and sound logical arguments to justify skin bleaching from a Shona logical scheme because of the fallacies and incoherence imposed by globalism. Based on all the above views, it is clear that Shona proverbial lore has necessary and sufficient insights that can be used to offer an alternative paradigm to contemporary study of the phenomenon of skin bleaching among the Shona of Zimbabwe.

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