

Voluntary skin lightening (Habou-béné Larabou) among domestic workers in Niamey: from imitation to acculturation

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Abstract: Voluntary cosmetic skin depigmentation, although a phenomenon that has existed for several decades, is a scourge that is currently little known and little understood by the domestic workers community, the target group of this article. Indeed, after the rainy season, many young Nigerien women and girls migrate from their villages to the country's major cities in search of paid work during the long period between rainy seasons. They are accustomed to domestic work from a very young age. Domestic work, therefore, seems like an easy task for them. The jobs they seek can be permanent or temporary (they can also be part-time, depending on the employer's needs), in anticipation of returning to their villages for the rainy season and religious holidays. Beyond these aspects, there is the allure of the city: more leisure time, less strenuous work, access to more beautiful things (nice clothes, jewelry, shoes, etc.), and even the desire to lighten one's skin, as some urban women do. However, the practice of "Toussou toussou" (a term referring to the practice of skin bleaching) among this category of women often has dramatic consequences because it is not carried out under the same conditions, let alone using the same methods. This article attempts to demonstrate the complexity, the dangers, and the lack of awareness surrounding the harmful consequences of "Toussou toussou" on the health and social relationships of domestic workers with those around them.

Keywords: depigmentation, imitation, acculturation, cough, Habou-béné larabou

I. Introduction

The deterioration of climatic conditions, coupled with poverty disproportionately affecting women (SRP, 2007), is driving many Nigerien women from rural areas to large urban centers in search of better living conditions. For these young women, without any training or future prospects, becoming domestic workers has been, for several decades, one of the few solutions to a multitude of constraints, including: earning an income to support their families back in the village, preparing for their future, and often escaping the harsh realities of village life (A. Traoré et al., 1997). Once in town, these women, commonly called "Hawrou police" or "street police" (a term used to mock their work), engage in certain practices, including cosmetic skin lightening. This involves using various products such as creams, gels, body lotions, or soaps to lighten their skin. [The term "Hawrou police" means "food police" in Zarma, referring to the fact that they wait like police officers on duty for their employers, the housewives, to serve their meals at noon or 7 p.m. Even if they prepare the food themselves, they don't have the prerogative to serve it.] As for the expression "street police," it's a reference to state employees who go to work at 8 a.m. and finish at 6 p.m., except that in their case, it's from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., often even later. [The term "street police" is used to mock their work.] According to a study conducted in Niamey in 2025 (ISSA Abdou K. et al., 2025), approximately 76% of young Nigerien women surveyed resort to this practice. Indeed, this widespread

practice among Black women in Africa has significant negative consequences for their physical and mental health (Sarah KOUROUMA, et al. 2009, A. PETIT, 2007). Thus, despite warnings from medical specialists and other public figures against the use of skin-lightening products, emphasizing their toxicity, and despite the health complications, the global market continues to thrive, and people persist in "bleaching" their skin (F. Rousseau DEUS, 2018). This article examines cosmetic or voluntary skin lightening among domestic workers in Niamey, specifically in the Cité Chinoise and Nord Lazaret neighborhoods. We observed a lack of data on this social phenomenon despite its prevalence in Nigerien society in general and within this social group in particular. How can a sociological analysis contribute to understanding the health and social impacts of this practice on domestic workers in the Cité Chinoise and Nord Lazaret neighborhoods? What motivates these women to engage in skin lightening? How do they obtain the skin-lightening products? What types of skin-lightening products do they use? How are they perceived by their communities once they have lightened their skin? The answers to these questions will allow us to better understand the various socio-cultural and economic realities surrounding this phenomenon.

II. Materials and methods

For this article, a mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) was chosen for data collection. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to the relatives of these domestic workers (preferably the mother or husband for those who came with one or both of these relatives), whenever possible. For qualitative data, focus groups were conducted with the domestic workers during their breaks. In addition, direct observation and semi-structured interviews were used as various techniques for collecting qualitative data in the field. Quantitative data were processed using Excel, while qualitative data were processed through triangulation of data from the target groups and the key informants involved in the fieldwork.

III. Results and Discussion

In this research paper, several interesting points are raised, discussed, and analyzed to facilitate understanding.

History of Voluntary Skin Depigmentation

Skin depigmentation, which has become a global social phenomenon, originated in the 1960s and 1970s. During this same period, the depigmenting properties of hydroquinone, a chemical compound used in industry, were discovered (A. PETIT, 2007; A. MAYOUGHOUE and M. A. WAMBA, 2017). Indeed, the pharmaceutical industry undertook the development of cortisone derivatives for topical application to treat certain skin conditions: dermo corticoids. These medications exhibited a greater capacity for skin depigmentation the more potent their therapeutic activity (A. PETIT 2007; A. MAYOUGHOUE and M. A. WAMBA, 2017; A. KOUAME, A. AMICHA, 2020). Thus, from the early 1970s, hydroquinone and topical corticosteroids became widely available to those wishing to lighten their natural skin tone. The United States, where the depigmenting properties of hydroquinone were reportedly discovered by chance in Black workers in the rubber industry, was the leading producer and consumer of these products (A. Petit, 2007). These products are now found in virtually every country in the world, with English-speaking African countries leading the way (J. Teclessou et al., 2018; F. Nyiragasigwa, 2021).

Motivations for Voluntary Skin Depigmentation

Cosmetic depigmentation (synonymous with voluntary or artificial depigmentation, also called skin lightening or bleaching) consists of reducing skin pigmentation through the voluntary use of cosmetics or medications containing active substances that lower melanin production (Morand J.-J., Lightburne E., 2009; F. Nyiragasigwa, 2021).

Numerous motivations for artificial depigmentation are described in the literature. These vary depending on the country, but the main reasons given all relate to notions of beauty, aesthetics, ignorance, history, seduction and appreciation, anthropo-sociology, and psychology (op. cit.). These perceptions are reinforced by media and cultural influences, which we will briefly outline.

Skin lightening as a weapon of seduction and social recognition

In Africa, with globalization, traditional cosmetology and ancient methods of beauty have been abandoned in favor of so-called modern methods since the late 1960s (J. Teclessou et al., 2018). At first glance, existing literature suggests that, in practice, the cosmetic use of skin-lightening products appears to be more frequent among relatively young (20-45 years old), urban women with professional careers (Kouame A., Amicha A. W., 2020). Thus, in major African cities, under the pressure of advertising from mainstream media, having light skin has become the primary beauty ideal for women (P. Del Giudice et al., 2003). Indeed, it appears from the main quantitative socio-anthropological studies carried out in hospital settings and qualitative studies in the general population that most women who engage in the practice do so primarily for aesthetic reasons (Ly, F., 2018). Along similar lines, the work of Diabaté et al. (2025) on male perceptions of skin lightening in Bouaké, Ivory Coast, reports that 59.3% of the men surveyed believed that a light complexion promoted a good social standing and that light-skinned women were the most attractive, while 50.9% believed that light-skinned women were the most beautiful. These assertions may be due to the radiance of light skin, as women with this complexion do not go unnoticed by men. Indeed, the reasons given by these respondents could constitute the main motivations for skin lightening among women. Other studies have shown that many women admitted to using skin-lightening products to improve their chances in the job and marriage markets (KOUAME A., AMICHA A. W. 2020; DIABATE, et al. 2025; P. Del Giudice et al. 2003). In the work of ISSA Abdou. K. et al. 2025, women who practiced voluntary cosmetic skin lightening believed that having a lighter complexion was a real asset for achieving a better social standing. Indeed, for this group of women, having light skin was synonymous with beauty, as they believed it made them easier to spot in the eyes of men. In other words, for those who practice it, successful skin lightening has a positive effect on social relationships, since a woman's lighter skin is a sign of ease and beauty, and, at the same time, a source of pride for the man, who, along with his wife, now enjoys greater respect from their social group. Indeed, it is important to understand that social constructs surrounding complexion, expressed through representations, have developed a symbolic image of beauty in terms of lightness, one that is free of flaws. Whether the goal is seduction in the pursuit of a good marriage, conforming to the ideal of beauty, the need for recognition, or the quest for prestige, skin lightening is considered to have a positive consequence if the result aligns with social norms. Consequently, voluntary skin lightening, as described today, has intensified with the marketing of topical corticosteroids and hydroquinone-based products available over the counter in local markets (J. Teclessou et al., 2018; A. Mayoughouo and M. A. Wamba, 2017). Based on these motivations, preliminary solutions are being considered that favor a multidisciplinary approach, encompassing not only medical but also socio-anthropological perspectives, to try to eradicate this problem (Ly, F., 2018).

Ignorance and Inferiority Complex as Motivations for Skin Lightening in Africa

Many women engage in voluntary skin lightening because they are unaware of the consequences. During our interviews, a dermatologist confirmed this fact. Indeed, according to him, almost all women who lighten their skin are completely unaware of the consequences this can have on their health (skin cancer, itching, stretch marks, unpleasant odors, avoidance, self-exclusion, etc.). This specialist's comments demonstrate how the lack of information for these women jeopardizes their physical, psychological, and overall well-being. The issue of inferiority complex related to skin color in women is quite evident. Indeed, during our interviews with domestic workers who practice voluntary skin lightening, it became clear that their initial dark complexion needed to be perfected. They mentioned enhancing their appearance, increasing their beauty, perfecting their complexion, improving their lives, attracting men, etc. All these women, indirectly, desire to lighten their skin in order to be more beautiful, more elegant, and more attractive. Their comments reflect an inferiority complex cultivated around the supposed superiority of white skin over black skin.

Voluntary cosmetic skin lightening in Africa: a practice under Western economic and media influence

Initially considered a fashion trend in the early 1970s, this practice has become, over time, a veritable aesthetic ideal for many Africans, with considerable socio-economic and health impacts. Thus, for many, the idea that drives people to "whiten" their skin is more toxic than the skin-lightening products themselves. In other words, the existence of prejudices that equate light skin with beauty, cleanliness, and purity, and contrasts with dark skin, which signifies ugliness, dirt, and impurity, constitutes a toxic colonial legacy that is gaining momentum with consumer capitalism (Déus, F. R., 2021). In principle, it is necessary to know your skin type to better adapt a cosmetic treatment to each individual skin type (based on lipid production and hydration of the stratum corneum). Dermatologists distinguish four skin types: normal and combination skin, oily skin, dry skin, and skin with abnormalities (NYIRAGASIGWA, Françoise, 2021). However, those who practice voluntary skin lightening disregard the advice of skin specialists, their sole objective being light skin at any cost. Skin lightening has become commonplace, a situation that financially ruins those who practice it and subsequently destroys melanin. Despite awareness campaigns aimed at its eradication, it continues to grow. The scale of the voluntary skin lightening phenomenon is often linked to strong social and advertising pressure in its favor (ISSA ABDOU, K. et al., 2025). Indeed, more generally, advertising for skin-lightening products has ended up invading the African public sphere. Consequently, in many African capitals and their suburbs, one's gaze is constantly drawn to large billboards extolling the virtues of skin-lightening products, in blatant disregard of basic ethical rules governing advertising (Bonniol, 1995 cited by J. Teclessou et al., 2018). This author also reports that the financial returns of the skin-lightening cosmetics industry constitute a veritable windfall: whitening products represented 10% of the cosmetics market, or 2 billion euros in 2007.

The health risks of voluntary cosmetic skin lightening in sub-Saharan Africa

Skin lightening has several physical consequences (stretch marks, a multitude of skin tones on a single person's body, foul body odor, burns or bruises, skin cancer, etc.) and social consequences (feelings of shame, self-isolation, avoidance by loved ones, etc.) for those who practice it. Four main types of products are used by those who practice voluntary cosmetic skin lightening: hydroquinone and its derivatives, topical corticosteroids, heavy metals, and caustics. Hydroquinone is the most well-known to the general public and users (A. PETIT, 2007). Consequently, this quest for light skin, considered ideal, most often ends in failure. Those who use skin lightening products, the majority of whom are young Black women, find themselves with a transformed body, and maintaining a balance between beauty and ugliness becomes a risky exercise. Indeed, the continued use of skin-lightening products is frequently accompanied by dermatological complications that those who practice it try to camouflage with tricks that prove ineffective (F. NYIRAGASIGWA, 2021). The same source indicates that these people then enter a vicious cycle because the more they apply skin-lightening products, the more visible the harmful effects on their health become, often with dramatic aesthetic consequences. For example, according to dermatologist Valérie Hessou, quoted by F. NYIRAGASIGWA, 2021: "The skin damage is irreversible and leaves scars on the bodies of those who practice skin lightening." According to the specialist, "when the face and body become so dark, it's complicated, even impossible, to repair, and the trap is that when these symptoms appear, users try to make them disappear with other products made by their suppliers. Therefore, the more they try to find a solution, the more entrenched the side effects become." This is what is commonly called "incomplete skin lightening," characterized by uneven skin tone. Inappropriate skin lightening is generally achieved using low-quality products, resulting in redness and darkening of certain areas of the face and body. In such cases, the approval sought by the individual is instead met with mockery, ridicule, and, to some extent, implicit rejection. The individual is thus categorized as not conforming to the social norm, or in this case, the aesthetic ideal of beauty. The realm of social relations, in terms of relationships with others, is strained by this stigmatizing mark (NGOUWOUE NZEKET Maïmouna, 2024). Thus, in Niger, for example, those who practice skin lightening are called by all sorts of names (naturally derogatory), including: Habou béné Larabou = Arab from the big market (meaning that their light complexion is the result of using cosmetics bought at this market); toussou izé = the one who has lightened their skin. Consequently, instead of achieving the mixed-race complexion they desire, the

opposite effect occurs, much to their dismay. This situation, in turn, leads to psychological and social consequences, including dependence on skin-lightening products, self-exclusion, and feelings of embarrassment or shame. To these social consequences must be added the ridicule and stigmatization associated with a number of labels such as "Fantasy face-and-Coca-Cola feet," "sheet metal painting," "panther," and "French taxi (yellow and black)" that are attached to women who use skin-lightening products. This even pushes some women who have undergone skin bleaching to wear the full veil to camouflage their bodies, damaged by the toxicity of these products. Furthermore, studies have reported that most women who lighten their skin smell bad, especially during periods of intense heat (A. Mayoughouo and M. A. Wamba, 2017; Déus, F. R., 2021; Ly, F., 2018). Indeed, the particularity of our target group (domestic workers) stems from the fact that they are already a social group in constant contact with fire (working in the kitchen). The practice of skin bleaching by these women and their other activities are incompatible. Furthermore, in Niger, other incidents illustrate the rather complicated situation faced by those who practice skin bleaching. Indeed, during the months of March, April, and May, taxi drivers hesitate to pick up women who have bleached their skin, claiming they smell like rotten fish, and once in the taxi, they disturb the other passengers. It is also very common to see passengers get out of taxis because the driver has picked up a woman who has bleached her skin. Also, at weddings, baptisms, or even funerals, women who have not bleached their skin (natural skin) very often refuse to eat from the same dish as women who have.

Measures taken by states to eradicate this scourge

Several countries around the world have implemented strategies to ban the sale and use of these skin-lightening products, such as Côte d'Ivoire with its Decree No. 2015-288 of April 29, 2015, regulating cosmetic and personal hygiene products. Another example is Senegal, where, as Ly, F., 2018, states, "Decree 79-231 of March 9, 1979, prohibits the practice of artificial depigmentation or Xessal among students, under penalty of temporary or permanent exclusion from school." In Niger, our study area, the authorities have not yet taken official measures to ban the practice, even though the population is somewhat aware of the dangers and health consequences for those who use it.

IV. Conclusion

The skin is an important organ for human beings, and understanding it is therefore essential before using any cosmetic products. Its deterioration has serious health consequences. Furthermore, voluntary skin lightening is a scourge that is currently little known and poorly understood by the female population (mostly illiterate) in general, and by domestic workers in particular. A light complexion is perceived as a mark of prestige and honor. It embodies well-being and is accepted as a sign of social success. These domestic workers, although belonging to a disadvantaged social class, nevertheless feel the need to feel more beautiful by achieving a lighter complexion. With their limited financial resources, they are more likely to opt for low-end products, particularly lotions, creams, and tubes priced between five hundred and one thousand francs. In other words, the practice of skin lightening has a significant impact on social interactions, depending on whether the result is admirable or deplorable. Its effects can also be seen in both health and economic terms. Finally, those who engage in voluntary skin lightening do not necessarily achieve the desired effect of clear, spotless, and flawless skin, but rather the opposite. Thus, given the scale of the phenomenon, the health implications of voluntary skin lightening are considerable and can be considered a public health issue.

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