

# The Rediscovery of the Beautiful Woman in African Societies | 2010

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## **Eurocentric Destruction of Indigenous Conceptions: the Secret Rediscovery of the Beautiful Woman in African Societies.**

by

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Western racist ideology has been entrenched among Africans and especially in the Black Diaspora for over two hundred years. The most humiliating consensus among all blacks spawned by this Western imposed epistemological hegemony, is that black women who use skin bleaching creams have a deep racial inferiority complex as they aspire to be as white as European women. This essay advances an alternative perspective. The essay proposes that there might be a symbiosis of the genetic-biological basis mediated through culture, for skin tone-related indigenous conceptions of beauty in African societies. These indigenous conceptions are diametrically different from the Eurocentric racial ideology driven conceptions. The essay makes the argument using evidence from indigenous Sub-Saharan people's appreciation of African women's physical beauty in which they employ gradations of African skin color tones. The essay further asserts that if the propositions are widely empirically validated, the information garnered could constitute a new epistemology that could cognitively liberate educated Africans and blacks in the Diaspora and lead to a new valuable appreciation of the nature of the black woman's physical beauty.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Race and racism are probably the most controversial in the Western and especially American society. Because of this, a little qualification of the title is necessary and also an explanation of what motivated the author to write the short essay. Perhaps like the majority of people who have been exposed to the Western ideology of racism directed at Africans and all people of African heritage in the black Diaspora all over the world, the author had been susceptible to and was often mute to the standard myth. The standard

Western mythology from the mythical history is that Africans were the most inferior race of people compared to other races four hundred years ago. White Europeans were the most superior and therefore were able to enslave Africans into the New World; the Caribbean, the United States and South America (Thomas, 1997). The genuine cause of European enslavement of Africans is only now being more openly formerly and systematically acknowledged (Kottak, 2002; ). The dark skin color since that time has been used in the West, North America, and elsewhere as the main criteria for racial discrimination and prejudice (Adade, 1994) establishing a racial hierarchy, and at worst racial exploitation, oppression, bigotry and genocide(Herbes-Sommers, 2003; Strain, 2003).

The varying racial gradients that exist in the United States, Europe, South Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean, South Africa, and elsewhere are all based on this assumed racial history and dynamic. The universal racial gradients and the deeply held beliefs that the black and the darkest skinned people are the most inferior and therefore at the bottom of the racial hierarchy in these societies are now taken for granted virtually all over the world. The discrimination against Africans is so insidious and entrenched all over the world as evidenced in incidents of racial discrimination, hostility and often violence directed at African immigrants in such places as the United States, Russia, Italy, Germany, and elsewhere.(Elings and O'Brien, 1997; Ankomah, 1997; Gboyor, 1992).

As one observer noted: "Everywhere in the world, particularly in Europe, Africans are subject to racial abuse and harassment. In Europe, things are getting steadily worse and incidents are routine, but African leaders, governments and African media seem to ignore what is happening rather than taking a stand against abuse."(Ogbaide, 1995:20) Taken for granted is also the reality that the Whitest and most light skinned people are at the top and are the most privileged in most of these societies. These racial beliefs may have caused the Eurocentric masking and at worst the destruction of indigenous skintone-based conceptions of beauty in Zambia and other African societies.

The focus of this essay is that this Western racial ideology may have penetrated the whole world and especially the African societies during the Atlantic Slave Trade and European colonialism in Africa. But it affected African Americans in the worst way as

their experience with slavery may have been so total that they may have internalized this false and anachronistic racial ideology.

Indeed today it is well accepted in the American society that African Americans who have the lightest skin and exhibit the closest characteristics to European physical features get the most privileges and acceptance among the white-dominated and Eurocentric majority. African Americans who have the darkest skin and exhibit the typical physical features of Africans from Sub-Saharan Africa are the least successful and least accepted by the American society (Haley, 1964; Schwartz and Disch, 1970; Fanon, 1967; Adade, 1994; Bennett Jr., 1984).

There is one persistent and perhaps most humiliating consensus and in certain cases debate among educated Africans, African Americans in the US and those in the black Diaspora in the Caribbean and elsewhere. This is the charge that blacks that use skin toning and lightening creams and cosmetics are unfortunate continued victims of the Western racist ideology that has just been explained. It is charged that the women who use the creams are insecure with being black and are aspiring to be as white as possible. It is charged that black males also may have internalized the racial inferiority and have equally been brain washed into only finding light skinned, and therefore, Caucasian looking black women most attractive. These charges may as well have some credibility. After all, it would be incredible for any group of human beings to have been subjected to the kind of vicious racial ideology the last three hundred years that Africans and black people have been subjected to, and expect to come out of it mentally unscathed. But however, I would like to propose and explore possible cultural, historical and genetic hypotheses as to why Africans in Sub-Saharan Africa may find “light” skinned black women in Sub-Saharan Africa the most attractive and beautiful. The author was compelled to explore these possible hypotheses in the most unusual or inauspicious way.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE ESSAY:**

There are five major objectives of this essay. The first is to describe and explore the possible indigenous conceptions of women’s beauty among the *Tumbuka* African society.

The author will argue that the skin color-related conceptions of women's beauty were diametrically different from the Eurocentric racial ideology-based conception.

Second, the African indigenous skin tone-related conceptions of beauty may be reflected in the indigenous language, music, and other significant aspects of the African peoples.

Third, the essay will explore how these indigenous skin tone-related conceptions of women's beauty may have been apparent in all Sub-Saharan African societies covering a wide repertoire of skin tones from the very darkest, for example among the Dinka in Southern Sudan to some of the mildest skin tones among Xhosa and San peoples in Southern Africa(Lamouse-Smith and School, 1998).

Fourth, the essay will conjecture the epistemological implications and cultural significance of this discourse on conceptions of skin tone-related beauty among Africans and black people in the Diaspora. Fifth, the essay will briefly explore the compelling evidence that suggests that there is no genetic or biological basis for all racial classifications; Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongloid. During the last four hundred years mountains of pseudo scientific evidence has been sought through Eurocentric scholarship that Whites and those with white skin have the highest intelligence and are therefore the most superior. Those with black or dark skin have the lowest intelligence and therefore the most inferior. Destroying this insidious racial ideology will finally free all of us in the world, and particularly Africans, to openly enjoy, rediscover, proudly reclaim, and cherish our African skin colors without the distortions, destructive, oppressive cloud, if not the undertone, of this Eurocentric racial ideology. This will indeed be the new refreshing form of genuine cultural and mental liberation after four hundred years during which Africans were enslaved, colonized, and oppressed on the continent and among people of African heritage all over the world.

The conclusion will discuss how these previously unexplored conceptions of indigenous African beauty of women may be simultaneously used to dispel the Eurocentric racial ideology-based conception of beauty that is entrenched all over the world to day. But at the same time encourage the secret rediscovery of indigenous African skin tone-based conceptions of the beauty of African women. Lastly, but probably most significant or

epistemological shattering, there is now in existence very important genetic evidence that may make it possible for Africans to finally freely enjoy various skin colors openly.

### **EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE**

The author would not have come up with these hypotheses without the type of children he has and his own personal reflections and experiences. He is an African male from Sub-Saharan Africa who is married to a White female. They have three male children. In July 2001, the author decided to take two of his three boys; eleven and fifteen years old to visit their grandparents and other relatives at his home village. It is located in the remote Lundazi District in the Eastern Province of rural Zambia in Southern Africa. In the country's Capital City of Lusaka, he borrowed an old pick up truck from his retired uncle. The three of them drove four hundred and fifty miles to the Lundazi small town. Then they drove the last twenty miles through a two-track dirt road until they reached the proverbial fork in the road somewhere near their home village. They took the wrong turn in the fork and were lost. The author stopped at the next village and came out of the pick up truck to ask an elderly woman where the road to his home village could be found. His two children were still sitting in the car. The woman immediately recognized the author as grandson of Headman Zibalwe and of course knew where he should go. But then she said, addressing his boys in the car, in the *Tumbuka bantu* African language:

*"Monile asungwana, muli uli?"* ("Greetings girls, how are you?")

At first, the author was flustered as he assumed the woman could not see very well since the boys were sitting in the car and their full bodies and clothes were concealed from her. The author corrected her. She didn't seem perturbed at all. He thought to himself how could she or anyone not see that these boys had no breasts, were not wearing earrings, blouses, or dresses. His pubescent fifteen year-old had even the beginnings of dark whiskers around his chin. The author dismissed the incident and did not reflect on it again. But a couple of times again, total strangers at a glance, while the two boys were sitting in the vehicle, referred to them in the *Tumbuka* language as "*asungwana*" or "those girls". What surprised him was that these comments were not made in a mean way or out of visual perceptual error. The villagers, who did not know he had a white wife or

boy children, made these comments in a matter of fact way. There was a suggestion that something about the physical looks of the boys made the people automatically and reflexively respond that way.

During his three-week visit in the village, the author took many photographs of his extended family including parents, uncles, grandparents, aunts, nieces, cousins, relatives, friends and many other people. In fact it so happens that he had been taking pictures of Zambians since the mid 1960s when he was in Secondary school and as well as during research at the Institute for African Studies of the University of Zambia from 1977 to 1990. Over the last ten years, he has published magazine articles with his photographs as illustrations (Tembo 1997; Tembo 2002). He is in possession of hundreds of photographs of Zambian people from the urban areas to rural villages. He lived and grew in the village as a child and is steeped in the deepest aspects of Tumbuka indigenous culture. Over the last year the comment that his boys "looked like girls" was in the back of his mind as one of those conundrums and puzzles that once in a while swirl in everyone's brain and compel one to shrug one's shoulders with befuddlement.

Yesterday, the author had just finished writing another magazine article when he began to look through hundreds of recent photographs of men, women, and children from the village to select a few for possible publication. The eureka moment happened. His children, who have quite pronounced features of a Sub-Saharan African, but are light skinned compared to many relatives in the village, stood out in all the group photographs. There was nothing unusual about this obvious reality. But then he noticed something very subtle; all women had lighter glowing ambience to their skins than men although both men and women had dark skin tones. Some women had a definite characteristic glow to their lighter dark skin compared to the other women and the men. So in a very subtle intuitive way perhaps unnoticed by outsiders as well as insiders, light skin does exist among dark skinned people of Sub-Saharan Africa. This again may be hardly a surprise. There may be many explanations to these subtle variations that previously may not have attracted attention. Among many other possible explanations, the most compelling may be that the lighter skin, even among the darkest of indigenous Africans, may have been a

normal and natural biological marker and signal that the woman was very fertile (Houde, 1997; Starr, 1994).

### **THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE, OVULATION, AND SKIN TONES**

When a human female starts her menstrual cycle starting from ten to sixteen years old, this triggers a lifetime cycle of significant monthly physiological changes lasting up to her late forties and early fifties with the onset of menopause. The female menstrual cycle operates in a complex system involving many different hormones. At the beginning of each cycle, the hypothalamus in the brain secretes a hypothalamic releasing hormone known as Gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) which in turn forces the anterior lobe to release the Follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) and Leutinizing hormone (LH). These hormones in turn stimulate the ovaries to secrete two other hormones; estrogens and progesterone. “The menstrual cycle operates through feedback loops to the hypothalamus and pituitary gland from the ovaries. FSH and LH promote cyclic changes in ovaries. They also stimulate the ovaries to secrete estrogens and progesterone. These hormones promote the cyclic changes in the endometrium.”(Starr, 1994:516)

The relevance of these physiological events is that during ovulation there is an increased flow in blood in the woman elevating her body temperature in general and the ovaries in particular. “The progesterone causes blood vessels to grow rapidly in the thickened endometrium.”(Starr, 1994:518) Discussing the female menstrual cycle, according to biologists: “Early in the follicular phase, then, estrogen has a negative feedback effect on FSH and LH secretion, but later on it has a positive feedback effect of LH secretion..... During that twelve-day span, the high blood concentrations of progesterone and estrogen have a feedback effect on FSH and LH secretions”(Starr and Taggart, 1989:517).

It is the frequent circulation of the hormones, the increased flow of blood during ovulation, and especially during pregnancy that women in Sub-Saharan Africa may acquire a characteristic mild to quite remarkable red-orangeish glow to their skin. In fact an obvious tell-tell sign of being pregnant among married women and also among young girls who may have had sex out of wed lock, even when the pregnancy is not even physically visible, is the characteristic lightening of the skin-tone whether the woman is

light or very dark. Among the *Tumbuka*, *Chewa*, *Nsenga*, and *Ngoni* people of Eastern Zambia, several terms are used to describe the state of being pregnant. “*Ali ndi pakati*” means that “the woman is in between”. Because the majority of women in African societies prior to modern medicine had very high deaths and faced danger during the birthing process, the woman was said to be literally “between life and death” or “living with uncertainty”. “*Ali ndi mimba*” means “the woman has a stomach” referring to the obvious bulging stomach of a pregnant woman. The most relevant term to this discussion is “*ali ndi pathupi*” which means “the woman has a body” (Salaun, 1969; Price, 1970) which refers to the characteristic light skin tone or the visible obvious glow the woman assumes when she gets pregnant.

Another relevant factor to skin tone is that among the *Tumbuka*, young pubescent or single women are said to have “*moto*” or “fire” such that elderly men have to avoid these women for fear of being “burnt”. One of the key requirements of the girls’ initiation ceremony is to instruct the girls to be careful with this “fire” and how to handle it. These beliefs and expressions may be alluding again to the distinctive physiologically driven characteristic red-orangeish glow in their skin tones and the heat they may emit that many of the young women may experience as a function of the hormones in their particularly active reproductive cycle. The characterization of the women as having heat should not be dismissed as mere tribal exotic “superstition” as a biologist describes the human female reproductive system: “They are fertile intermittently, on a cyclic basis. The times of heat and fertility are not synchronized.”(Starr, 1994:516)

Female reproductive hormones and the body temperature-raising heat they may induce may have triggered the nearly unnoticeable lightness in skin tone among the very dark skinned women to the very obvious light skin tone among the very light skinned women. Indeed, young women among the *Tumbuka* and else where in black Sub-Saharan Africa may have a natural glow that may be an attractive genetic-cultural characteristic as a signal that may naturally appeal to the males through biological predisposition, socialization, and cultural conditioning. This is probably why the men may be find such girls and women attractive.

So the villagers who were strangers who did not know that the author's children's mother was white, may have been responding to a time tested subconscious normal genetic-cultural signal among the indigenous African people that anyone who was black, but was as light skinned as his children, had to be a "girl" or a "woman". In this case the author's children may have been subconsciously representing the atypical extremely fertile, ovulating, pregnant young girls, and women. The children may also have been representing what the German sociological theorist Max Weber calls the *ideal type*. An ideal type is a model that does not exist in reality but is a social construction against which society may measure or evaluate actual cases. "An ideal type is a construct, a made-up model that serves as a measuring rod against which actual cases can be evaluated"(Schaefer, 2001:13) In this case, the biological and social ideal type woman among the *Tumbuka* and other indigenous African peoples may be young, healthy, ovulating, very fertile, and very remarkably light skin toned. As is discussed later in the essay, this gender ideal type of the beautiful woman may be based on biological and cultural forces.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

This observation has so many implications in our understanding of the dark skin color among people of Sub-Saharan Africa. There is a possibility that that there is a marked biological differentiation in skin color tones among indigenous Africans that may not be apparent to outsiders and insiders might not even be conscious of them. Of course, there is the usual glow when a woman is pregnant. But the author's argument is that there might also be a marked genetic and perhaps physiological difference between the men and the women.

In this indigenous environment, largely removed from modern Western characterization, perceptions, and the modern media, African cultural sensibilities may find light skinned women attractive not because of the Western racist ideology that white women are the most superior, but due more to the symbiosis between biological and cultural predisposition. For the author, this solved many of the puzzles and apparent

contradictions where in the *Tumbuka bantu* African language people describe women's beauty saying: "*Mwanakazi mswesi ndiye muwemi comene*" which translates as "A woman who is red-skinned is most attractive". This is more accurate than what would be the conventional translation: "A woman who is light skinned is most attractive". "Light skin" equivalent in the Western Eurocentric racial sense, does not exist among the *Tumbuka* and perhaps elsewhere in indigenous Africa.

Indeed, although the author does not condone skin bleaching, the women who use skin-toning creams in Sub-Saharan Africa tend to achieve a "reddish-orange" skin rather than the "white" skin, which is the preferred and dominant connotation in contemporary discourse. This is not a trivial semantic distinction but has much deeper epistemological implications. In associating skin "whiteness" in the Western racist ideological sense, the author, Africans, African Americans and blacks in the Diaspora are unwitting victims of the Western racist ideology and mentality. This also implies that indigenous cultures among the Sub-Saharan people, and perhaps elsewhere, may have a biological and cultural justification to continue to define these black women as attractive. These are the girls and women who have the *Tumbuka* language adjective "*uswesi*" or other indigenous linguistic equivalents, which is more of a warm reddish bright orangeish glow to the female black skin even among some of the African women who have the darkest skin as opposed to "White" or "light" skin.

Another piece of cultural reality that seems to further buttress the above argument is the definition of the concept of beauty among the *Tumbuka* people. The word "*towa*" in *Tumbuka* means "beauty". The adjective "*kutowa*" is used to describe virtually anything that a speaker perceives as having beauty. For example, a rainbow, a house, a cow, a frog, and a song could all be described as beautiful. A woman who is beautiful is referred to as "*mwanakazi wotowa*" which translates as a "beautiful woman" or more literally as "woman who is beautiful".

What is further striking is that "*mtowa*" is the name of a very common tree, which is very beautiful when it is young. When spotted in the bush, the young tree usually stands out because it has a smooth reddish-brown-orange to ebony dark-brown smooth surface. It often grows up to the height of five feet before it has any leaves or branches on it. At this

tender age, the tree is very slender, straight and is used for a variety of purposes including men using it exclusively to build or weave good-looking chicken coops and other structures known as *nkhokwe* and *chilulu* used for food storage in the villages (Tembo, 1981; Tembo, Hayward, and Mwila, 1982). The tree's elasticity makes it most suitable for making bows for hunting and traps for catching wild pigeons and guinea fowls. Its elasticity also makes the tree suitable for use as a whip or *luswazu* for herding cattle and training working bulls.

It may not be a mere coincidence that the Tumbuka people characterize women who are beautiful as resembling the physical elegance and beauty of the “*mtowa*” tree whose bark is very smooth and closest resembles the skin of the indigenous young beautiful woman who has a glowing reddish-orange skin. This term, *mtowa*, may also have been used as a symbol of the central and fundamental role that women may have played in the traditional African communities. This line of argument may also be consistent with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Kottak, 2002) in anthropology that raises fundamental thought provoking questions that explore the possibilities that language shapes or determines how we conceive the world and also that what we find relevant in our physical environment impinges our language. This author's argument is that hundreds of years before Western foreign influence, the Tumbuka people, and perhaps thousands of other ethnic groups and tribes in Africa, may have had their own conceptions of beauty determined by what they experienced in their social and physical environment of the settled farming village. At that time, the concept of the “light skinned” or “white” woman may not have existed. The reddish-brown-orange woman's beauty (*kutowa*) was logically extended to the beautiful looking (*mtowa*) tree or it could as well as have been the other way round.

Another one of the numerous puzzles this hypothesis may solve regards indigenous creative expressions that celebrate the physical beauty of the Sub-Saharan African woman. Alick Nkhata (1991) was a Zambian prolific composer and singer whose songs were enjoyed widely on the radio among Africans during the 1950s in the then British colonial Northern Rhodesia now Zambia. One of his numerous songs at the time titled “Maggie”, had the following lyrics first in the *Nyanja* or *Chewa* Bantu language:

*Sopano bwera*

*O tivine*  
*Maggie, wabwino*  
*Tamvera iwe*  
*Usamaopa*  
*Maggie, wabwino*

*Ndikonda miyendo yako*  
*Ndifiga yako*  
*Maggie ulinso*  
*Mkazi woyera*  
*Sopano bwera*  
*O tivine*  
*Maggie, Maggie wabwino*

English Translation:

Now come here  
So we can dance  
Maggie, you are good  
Listen to me  
Don't be afraid  
Maggie, you are good

I love your legs  
Your figure too  
Maggie you are also  
***“A White woman”***  
Now, come here  
So we can dance  
Maggie, Maggie  
You are good

The lyrics that translate “A White woman” have been inserted in quotes and italicized to illustrate the point about the kind of cognitive distortion that contemporary Western racial ideology and dialogue may have introduced. The indigenous speakers of ChiChewa and ChiNyanja group of Bantu languages will attest that “*woyera*” is a ChiChewa adjective that means “white” or “bright light” but does not in any way denote or imply “white” in the sense of “white woman” in Western-derived contemporary sense. Alick Nkhata may have been referring to “*Mkazi wofiyira*” or a “woman who has reddish-orange glowing skin tone”.(Salaun, 1979; Price, 1970).

Two other aspects of the Tumbuka and other Zambian cultures further validate this perspective. The Tumbuka word –*tuba* means the color “white”. The adjective *kutuba* means to be white. Among the Tumbuka people if someone has become fat, it means they have been eating very well and have generally abstained from any physical work in the son. When someone has become fat then, the Tumbuka will say: “*uyu munthu watutuba*” which means literally: “this person has become white”. But the twist is that this refers to someone who has become fat who naturally becomes very light skin as in becoming “*uswesi*” or acquiring the reddish-orange skin tone.

Miti and Mugala (2010) also confirm the existence of this concept of *kututuba* or *uswesi* when they describe the traditional Zambian girls’ initiation ritual called *chisungu* among the Bemba and *chinamwali* among the Chewa and Ngoni people of Zambia. The two authors describe how the young girl traditionally was kept in seclusion in a hut for at least a month. During that time she was fed and taught various custom of woman hood. When the girl emerged out in a public ceremony a month later, she was fat, beautiful, “By the time the girl comes out of the “girl house” she is a fully formed “butterfly” her childlike state left behind. Visible physical transformation will have taken place, her body looking more filled up and carries herself with grace and dignity, her skin a glowing “orangeish /red” or *uswesi* in *Tumbuka* or *usweshi* in Bemba, consistent with hormonal changes which go with puberty”. (Miti and Mugala, 2010:19)

The point about all of this is to emphasize that this doesn’t constitute just an ordinary linguistic translation difficulty, but rather reflects the indigenous appreciation of women who have a light reddish-orange glow to their skin tones even among women who have some of the darkest skin from Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, all the way to the Southern tip of the African continent. This is the skin tone that among modern educated Africans and blacks in the African Diaspora is erroneously called “White” because their cognition has been distorted by Western racist ideology especially during the period of European colonialism in Africa. “European racism helped to convince at least sub-Saharan Africans that one of the most relevant criteria of their Africanity was their skin colour. Until the coming of Europeans south of the Sahara, Blackness was taken relatively for granted.”(Mazrui, 1986: 104). In fact this author would argue that the very ideologies of negritude as espoused by Leopold Senghor in another heated contentious ideological and political

racial colonial climate (Senghor, 1965; Shapiro, 1970; Cesaire, 1972) from the 1950s and 60s may have helped mask some of these African indigenous conceptions and cognition of African skin beauty.

The author realizes that these ideas may be provocative and may stir a fierce hornet's nest. In the contemporary intellectual monolithic climate buttressed by paradigms of globalization, political correctness, post-apartheid era, multiculturalism, emphasis on political racial unity in the Black Diaspora, these ideas might appear retrogressive, reactionary, smacking of the so-called reverse racial arrogance, and even being needlessly racially divisive. But that thinking would be putting the cart in front of the horse or the ostrich burying its proverbial head in the sand.

Because upon careful and deep reflection and if these ideas are properly empirically tested and validated, they could racially and therefore cognitively liberate educated Africans and black people in the African Diaspora. The idea to day that indigenous Africans who are removed from the suffocating Western racist ideology might have enjoyed or might still enjoy a unique perception of indigenous black skin tones might be radical and alarming. After all, aren't we, the educated, the best informed?

The idea that these African indigenous conceptions may have been overlooked is consistent with Mead and Baldwin's observations that knowledge is always from the perspective of those who claim to know. In this case the knowledge brokers in the perspective of this essay are both the Eurocentric and the educated African perspectives that perceive the world in racist Eurocentric driven perspectives. "Because we have always spoken from the point of view of the people who know, the other people are ignorant because they don't know." (Mead and Baldwin, 1971:126) This is consistent with the sociology of knowledge that argues that knowledge always reflects the perspectives of the dominant groups (Cornforth, 1987; Holzner and Marx, 1979; Manheim, 1936). In this case, Europeans introduced the racial ideology that assigned the most inferior status to all "black" Africans. In counteracting this racial ideology, the African intelligentsia on the continent and the Diaspora may have embraced the concepts of "black" "negritude", "black power" as expressions of cultural unity, pride, and dignity among Africans and people of African descent. But in this necessary process, the

indigenous African conceptions might have been overlooked for the sake of forging black unity in Africa and her Diaspora.

The validation of these ideas would lead to a better understanding and appreciation of the insignificance and irrelevance of race as advocated by Western European racial ideology to the creative enjoyment of the African physical beauty and therefore African indigenous culture. This perspective is consistent with renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead, who asserts that before European or external influences that conveyed negative messages about them, tribal peoples all over the world may have had tremendous pride and dignity toward themselves and their culture. Discussing that virtually the whole world including the Polynesians themselves thought the Polynesians in Samoa were beautiful people on her first trip there, Mead tried to understand why since physically the Polynesians were not necessarily the most pretty looking people. "I've now figured out why: that for maybe two or three thousand years they never saw anybody but themselves, and they think they're beautiful and they are so impressed with themselves that everybody else thinks they're beautiful. If you think you're beautiful, you move like a beautiful person."(Mead and Baldwin, 1971:25)

One could argue that indigenous African people may have had a similar outlook of pride about themselves before the arrival of European colonialism and racism. But their pride and dignity may have defied and transcended colonialism and is reflected in some of the skin tone-related conceptions of beauty that may still exist today among remote peoples of African who are far removed Western modern education. The author presumes that these dark skin-color-based indigenous conceptions of beauty are buried and embedded in the culture and especially thousands of languages of rural remote people of Africa from Liberia, Mali, Ghana, Nigeria, Mali to Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Angola to South Africa.

### **RACIAL CLASSIFICATIONS AS NONSENSE**

Never in human history has a concept been used not only to harm millions of people but to develop a degrading and evil ideology about them over three hundred years and counting: race and European racism. Millions of Africans were shipped into slavery to the Caribbean, South and North America during the 1600s and 1700s. After slavery had

been outlawed, European colonialism officially started in 1885 at the Berlin conference. Mazrui (1986) suggests that European racism directed at people of the black skin color in Africa was one of the leading ideologies that were used to justify slavery and colonialism.

If one explores the deeply entrenched and insidious persistence of racism, one would not know that scientists, educated, and other progressive people have determined in recent times that there is no scientific biological basis for racial classifications. People cannot be grouped into discrete racial groups using skin color, hair types, height, weight, and eye shape. It is even more problematic to classify people into discrete groups of intelligence, dancing ability, sports, musical ability, and many other deeper and less visible qualities of human beings. (Strain, 2003) The racial classification and hierarchies in which whites have been believed to be the most superior and blacks the most inferior are all myths or false and have never been based on any biological scientific facts. “Since the 1960s, anthropologists are nearly unanimous in agreeing that as applied to humans “race” is not a scientifically useful term. Human populations are not classifiable into discrete groups that can be defined in terms of the presence or absence of particular biological traits.” (Ember and Ember, 1996:138). What does all this have to do with the gradations of skin color among Sub-Saharan African in Zambia and elsewhere as discussed in this essay?

This knowledge should be welcome with tremendous relief and joy among all people all over the world. This means that all Africans and Zambians no longer have to be afraid that discussing or exploring our skin color is somehow betraying the cause of African or black unity. According to the perspective of this essay, Africans should be able to enjoy and rediscover the significance of the indigenous skin color gradations in all our cultures, languages, tribes, and ethnic groups. No longer should indigenous African men have to wage psychological battles of defending and fending off charges of racial inferiority if they so much as say they love the African woman who has “*uswesi*” or orangeish-red skin tone. According to this essay, this attraction is culturally acceptable and in fact may have a biological basis.

African women who have dark skin should no longer have to reject the celebration of these rich skin tones. Although the author does not condone the use of harsh chemical

skin bleaching creams among African women, this essay argues that the women's desire to achieve the "*uswesi*" or orangeish-red skin tone, may have a biological basis that is embedded in the indigenous cultures among the men of the *Tumbuka*, *Bemba*, *Chewa*, and perhaps thousands of African tribes, languages, and ethnic groups. African men who may be attracted to women who have these particular skin tones should no longer have to feel guilty and defensive about charges that they harbor an inferiority complex as they have bought into the European racist belief that "white" women are the best and most attractive. Because these African women may not be trying to become "white" but may be carrying on something that was present in the indigenous African culture before Europeans established the racial ideological hegemony.

Educated Africans unfortunately also inherited this racial ideological hegemony. African women will no longer have to defend themselves against charges that they are trying to be like the "white woman" in a racist demeaning sense when they apply creams or use other natural methods to achieve "*uswesi*" of their skin. White women will no longer feel like they are on a pedestal to which all women in the world are looking to or secretly aspire to become as originally advanced by Europeans since the days of African slavery and later colonialism.

### **EMPIRICAL VALIDATION**

In the tradition of the inductive theory approach (Babbie, 1989), the author would like to pose some key questions and propose some ideas with the objective of grounding some of these propositions. Because so far some of these propositions amount to narrow theoretical postulates at best and at worst mere anecdote-based conjecture which may have not been properly empirically validated and begging to be generalized across Sub-Saharan societies. There are more than two thousand ethnic and language groups (Lamouse-Smith and School, 1998) which used to be referred to as "tribes". On the African continent, there are more than eight hundred major languages (Bohannan and Curtin, 1995).

Before European penetration and influence into the continent, the Africans had their own indigenous skin tone-related conceptions of beauty. Some of these conceptions may still exist to day. It would be useful to determine what these conceptions were among the over

two thousand ethnic groups through exploring their indigenous concepts of beauty through language, music, art, folktales and many other significant aspects of these African cultures. The range and repertoire of skin tones ranging from African culture in which the people have the darkest to the lightest extremes would be explored. For example, are there any conceptual and linguistic equivalents (Frey, 1970) in other African ethnic groups of the *Tumbuka* adjective “*uswesi*”, Bemba *usweshi*, and ChiChewa “*kufiyira*” which are used to describe a woman’s reddish-orange skin tone? If these indigenous conceptions are empirically validated across the Sub-Saharan societies, as the author has tentatively argued on behalf of the *Tumbuka* people, this would cognitively liberate Africans and the people in the so-called black Diaspora. The Eurocentric epistemological hegemony in which all Africans were called “Negro” or “Negroid” and later referred to as the generic and politically correct “black” could be challenged. What would be gained from this systematic inquiry is a new and better-informed esthetics of African skin tone-related conceptions and cognition of beauty.

An exploration of all languages in Sub-Saharan Africa would probably lead to the discovery that there might have been a differentiation between women who had a "red glow" to their body as opposed to their skin being "white". This is not a trivial matter because for so long, the Western racist ideology and its interpretation directed at Africans and other black people have been accepted without any challenge or indigenous- based perspective critical analysis. Conceptions of indigenous African physical beauty have been distorted or denied including skin color and the beauty inherent in the subtle gradations of skin color among especially the women in Sub-Saharan Africa. We, as Africans, have tended to deny any of these indigenous subtleties for fear that we will be called racist ourselves. It makes more politically correct sense for all people of African heritage to be simply "Black" (Steele, 1998). But ironically this is the same minor genetic phenotypical marker (Kottak, 2006) that Europeans specifically exploited to enslave Africans and continue to exploit and oppress many people of Africa and African heritage (Herbes-Sommers, 2003; Strain, 2003).

These hypotheses introduce prickly issues and questions: can black men and women in outside indigenous Sub-Saharan Africa appreciate these skin tone differences in a

positive sense? Can Sub-Saharan Africans who live in the urban environment appreciate these differences? Can a dark skinned woman with the characteristic glow be able to appreciate this genetic-based physiological quality if she lives in the United States, the Caribbean and Brazil? Will the black male in these cultures be able to appreciate this quality in the dark-skinned black women or has his biological predisposition been already corrupted and usurped by Western racial ideology, which continues to be heavily reinforced in contemporary Eurocentric-driven media and information technology? Will these dark skinned women but have a reddish-orange glow continue to be victimized in the Black Diaspora because of the Western racist ideology?

## **CONCLUSION**

This essay asserts that Europeans established a racial ideology and hierarchy all over the world in which whites were dominant and at the top of the social hierarchy and blacks were subordinate and at the bottom. This racial gradient entrenched the belief that the white skin is the most superior and the black skin is the most inferior. These beliefs may have destroyed African indigenous conceptions of the beautiful woman. The essay challenges these assumptions. The essay proposes alternative genetic-cultural based indigenous conceptions of the African Sub-Saharan beautiful woman. The essay proposes that a wide spread empirical investigation and validation of these indigenous conceptions on the African continent would epistemologically liberate Africans and Black people in the Diaspora. The discovery of these indigenous conceptions would liberate black people everywhere to validate and appreciate the salient skin tone-related conceptions of beauty of African women.

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