

## **Government and Skin-Colour-Change Behaviour in Cameroon: How and why the State Penetrates the Body**

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**Abstract:** Individuals are naturally said to have hegemonic control and freedom over what to do with their skin and body, including what products to apply for aesthetic purposes. Today, individuals no longer have full monopoly over what to do with their skin. How and why does the state find interest in the treatment people give to their skin and, in particular, attempt to change skin colour using cosmetic products? What are the implications of state penetration in people's skin? The paper analyses a case of the Cameroon government's decision to ban the importation and use of cosmetic products in Cameroon. On 19 August 2022, Cameroon's Minister of Public Health signed and made public ministerial Decision No. 193/MINSANTE of 19 August 2022, banning the importation, production and distribution of cosmetic and corporal hygiene products that contain skin bleaching substances. The results indicate that while government concern for how people treat their skin could be regarded as an extension of public health policy, it is not always welcomed by a pro-skin bleaching public who sees in the decision a government attempt to control and influence people's corporal attitude and behaviour. This could also mean a violation of their right to the kind of skin colour they wish to have. State-government penetration in the skin reflects an extension of public policy towards health and a political attempt to limit people's corporal attitude and behaviour. The government intervenes by issuing bans on products used to change skin colour, usually from 'black to white'. The government penetrates the skin through public policy, which fundamentally involves governmental decisions to control what product should or should not be applied to the skin. This in turn limits the freedom and hegemony individuals enjoy over their body and skin.

**Keywords:** Government, skin-colour-changing, state penetration, corporal behaviour, public policy.

### **Introduction**

The skin naturally forms part of human beauty. We are attracted to others, and others are attracted to us because of the beauty of our skin. Our skin therefore deserves some attention as far as maintaining beauty is concerned. However, who deserves the sole or hegemonic right over what we do with our skin to reflect the beauty we want is a question that is still relevant today. Over the years, individuals have been unilaterally responsible for what they do to their skin, including the application of whatever product to look 'beautiful'. Corporal right has always been entrusted with the individual who is also considered the unchallenged proprietor of the skin. However, today, in some States, the right to corporal ownership is now shared to the individual and the State, and even further, with the State trying to take over hegemonic control of corporal behaviour, through policy decisions on what type of beauty product we apply or not to our body. While many have seen this infringement as normal and hence inconsequential, others find in it an attempt by the State to violate corporal freedom and democracy.

This paper analyses a case of the Cameroon government's decision to outlaw the importation and use of cosmetic products in Cameroon. On 19 August 2022, Cameroon's Minister of Public Health signed and made public ministerial Decision No. 193/MINSANTE of 19 August 2022, banning the importation, production and distribution of cosmetic and corporal hygiene products that contain skin bleaching substances. While government concern for how people treat their skin could be regarded as an extension of public health policy, it is not always welcomed by a pro-skin bleaching public who sees in the decision a government attempt to control and influence people's corporal attitude and behaviour. This could also mean a violation of their right to the kind of skin colour they wish to have. State-government penetration in the skin reflects an extension of public policy towards health and a political attempt to limit people's corporal attitude and behaviour. There are several implications to this decision that are not only personal and individual but also socio-political in the local, national and international sense of the term.

## **1. RATIONALES OF SKIN-COLOUR-CHANGE BEHAVIOUR**

This part of the paper comprises an attempt to describe the methodological approach as well as possible explanations of the reasons for skin-colour-changing change.

### **1.1. Methodological approaches**

This paper is based on primary research conducted with the help of a questionnaire among some 'mature' students from a state university and private higher institute of learning in Buea and Yaounde, respectively, to offer fair data on people's feelings and perceptions about skin-whitening behaviour and what that means or should mean to the government. It is seemingly a pioneering study that questions whether it is correct for the government to regulate our beauty desires and choices by setting a ban on the consumption of skin-whitening products in Cameroon. New concepts such as corporal democracy are introduced and used to test the extent to which people are free to define their own beauty standard and go by it without government intervention. Thus, through the ban, the political nature and culture of the government is revealed as being neo-illiberal, even though the official argument rests on the protection of citizens' health. The approach seems therefore to conclude that the government's ban is an 'arbitrary' penetration into the body of the citizen that could reflect a violation of the corporal right.

A second dimension of the methodology is to use the ban decision as a unit of analysis to establish the correlation between skin colour-change behaviour and governmental role/function in society. It shows that there is a positive correlation between the two given that it reflects there is no limit to the extent to which the government penetrates society and influences societal behaviour and behaviour towards beauty. Many would have least expected government to issue such a ban and at a time when public opinion thinks there are more important things government should be concerned about rather than devoting time and energy to influencing peoples' behaviour towards their skin. Even within the health domain, government has been known to be concerned with mega-health challenges such as pandemics and epidemics, the most recent being the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, it would appear that showing concern for people's beauty attitude would be considered a trivial role that the government should ever care about.

My interest is also to demonstrate that the skin is not only a matter of personal/private belonging but also a matter of political, strategic and international belonging. Our skin does not belong only to us; it belongs to the government, to the state and to the international community. Our skin is transnational. Government's outlaw or ban clearly shows that our skin also belongs to the political or that the political has right over our skin. The fact that it transgresses or challenges the global appetite for whiteness as beauty equally shows our skin belongs to and is determined by the international system. As Nina Kullrich puts it, skin has become the site and interface for questions of local, national and global belonging and identity to be negotiated and differentiated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kullrich, Nina. 2022, *Skin color politics*, Berlin, Springer-Verlag, p.3.

## 1.2. Skin- colour-change and skin-whitening

The ‘skin’ is understood from a *sociobiological* standpoint as the frontline of our body’s defense<sup>2</sup>, and because of this, nothing about its structure and function is escaping our scrutiny and that of government.

From a biological standpoint, skin colour is the most noticeable, obvious and salient physical characteristic of humankind. Skin colour is a concept with more significant social meaning than ‘skin’, which from a biological standpoint is limited to a physical part of the body. To understand skin colour, I question the socio-political functions or representations of skin colour over time. We form impressions of others and the world through what we see and through the colour of our skin. Skin colour facilitates our ability to put people into groups or categories based on similarities or differences in skin colour but above all based on the way governmental authorities act around them. Skin colour can form the basis of discrimination based on differences in appearance. A typical example is black and white skin colour, which has indisputably formed the basis of white superiority/supremacy complex and eventual black discrimination/segregation (inequality).<sup>3</sup> Skin colour, among others such as eye and hair colour, is a salient trait in creating social distinctions, labelling and stereotypes. Skin colour is the foundation on which differences among humans are framed and governmental policies determined.<sup>4</sup>

Black skin colour is my interest in this work for at least two reasons: first, most attempts at skin colour change are on black skin<sup>5</sup> (there is a stronger social desirability or preference for lighter skin), and second, the skin colour identity of Africans and Cameroonians is defined in black. It seems, however, that black is not truly black. Are black Africans truly black in skin colour? Whether they are light skin or dark skin, all Black people have ‘black blood’ in them, another way of saying that no amount of *depigmentation* will completely remove the blackness. Historical evidence shows that Black Africans have different degrees of Blackness. Stakeholders in the slave business used the following appellations to mean blacks of different categories: *negro*, *griffe*, *mulatto*, *quadroon*, while slave masters used colours of the spectrum such as purple, deepest black, dark brownish, deep copper, and yellow to describe skin colour.<sup>6</sup> Nina Jablonski believes that Africans are not uniform or uniformly dark in their skin colour.<sup>7</sup> Some of the dominant skin colours are light brown, dark brown and darkest brown.

In this work, I consider black skin colour as the general name given to those with black pigmentation, whose recent geographic origin is to be found in Africa south of the Sahara. However, in black or dark skin, I distinguish between dark-skin black and light-skin black men and women. This dualistic approach to understanding black skin is influenced by feelings that these are the two dominant skin tendencies among contemporary men and women in Africa. Dark skin black people are more likely to engage in skin colour change to obtain light skin, and light skin black people are also said to be engaged in light-skin maintenance or uplifting skin colour change practices. Therefore, these two tones remain the most common skin colour tones among contemporary Cameroonians.

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<sup>2</sup> Jablonski, Nina. 2012. *Living color: The biological and social meaning of skin colour*, Berkeley, Los Angeles London, University of California Press, p.72.

<sup>3</sup> An example is the descriptions of ‘indigenous’ Africans that emphasized differences in their skin colour, physique, dress, and customs compared to those of Europeans.

<sup>4</sup> For example, skin colour difference between Black and white skins is the foundation of racial policy and politics in racial America and Apartheid South Africa. Racial induced policies and the denial of certain procedural rights to blacks were essentially based on the colour of their skin in both countries.

<sup>5</sup> According to the World Health Organization, skin-whitening products are commonly used in many African, Asian and Caribbean countries by both women and men, and among dark-skinned populations in Europe and North America.

<sup>6</sup> Jablonski, p.148.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

I understand skin-colour-change behaviour as an artificial attempt to modify the original colour of the skin through the use of cosmetic products. A skin-colour-change behaviour aims at obtaining a skin colour that is different from the 'natural' one, although it is usually for 'white' or lighter skin. Skin whitening is a skin colour-change behaviour aimed at using cosmetic products to obtain a 'white' fairer or lighter skin, considered part of body beauty. Skin-whitening is also known as skin bleaching, a process of artificial *depigmentation* usually undertaken by people with darker skin to eliminate or reduce melanin concentration to obtain 'white; fair or light skin.'<sup>8</sup> Skin-whitening or skin-bleaching behaviour is to be found among people with dark skin, who believe that beauty lies in fairer skin. This category of people is to be found among people of Sub-Saharan African countries, where demand for skin lighteners and bleachers are high.<sup>9</sup>

### **Patterns of skin-whitening behaviour in Cameroon**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 40% of Africans engage in skin-whitening. Although the threshold of Cameroonians engaged in skin-whitening is below 50 percent overall, skin-whitening remains common and current among Cameroonians and, in particular, the female population. Today, approximately 77% of Nigerians, 27% of Senegalese and 35% of South African women bleach their skin; in Cameroon<sup>10</sup>, approximately 30% of women are said to be involved in skin-whitening. In Douala alone, the economic capital of Cameroon, and according to the Cameroon Dermatology Society (Socaderm), nearly 30% of people living there and a quarter of school girls use skin-whitening products. Douala is also said to have a greater number of Cameroonians practicing skin-whitening compared to other cities.<sup>11</sup> The same study reveals that Douala is followed by Kumba in the South West region with 24%, followed by Yaounde in the Centre region with 19.6%, then by Kribi in the South with 11% and by Bagangte in the West region with 10.3%.<sup>12</sup> In another study conducted by Emmanuel Armand Kouotou and colleagues, among 620 Cameroon female university students, 27.3 percent female students practice skin-whitening.<sup>13</sup> In a review of 714 medical files (418 females and 296 males) of some patients in the Yaounde General Hospital, more women used bleaching soaps for skin care than men (78.0% vs 22.0%).<sup>14</sup>

I measured skin-whitening habits among Cameroonians by finding how attracted they are to fair or light skin, how well they see skin-whitening as an attempt to look beautiful, whether they think there is any pressure from society to look fair in complexion and if they have ever considered using a skin-whitening product. In my provisional sample of 50 students randomly selected from two higher learning institutions, 42 are of the view that Cameroonians are attracted to fair skin, representing 84%. Thus, more than 50% of Cameroonians are implicitly interested and psychologically involved in skin-whitening given that they have a penchant for fair skin. Although an average number (25/50, i.e., 50%) believes there is no pressure from society to look

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<sup>8</sup> Skin can be made to look lighter by applying whitening cosmetics, through the use of bleaching agents to decrease the production of pigment in the skin, or both. Products that allow darker skin to pass for white include: hydroquinone and mercury. However, hydroquinone superseded mercurials in the 1970s and 1980s. Hydroquinone lightens the skin by suppressing tyrosinase and by releasing chemicals that are toxic to melanosomes (melanin-containing bodies within skin cells).

<sup>9</sup> Demand for skin lighteners is high in African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, and Kenya that have burgeoning economies and people eager to improve their status and prospects.

<sup>10</sup> Hall, Ronald 2021. "Women in color spend more than \$8billion on bleaching creams worldwide every year" *The Conversation* available at <https://theconversation.com/women-of-color-spend-more-than-8-billion-on-bleaching-creams-worldwide-every-year-153178>, accessed February 20th 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Fogueum Ariane, 2020. "Cameroon: Douala tops chart in skin whitening" *Journal du Cameroun*, available at <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroon-douala-tops-chart-in-skin-whitening/>, accessed March 1<sup>st</sup> 2023.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Kouotou et al. 2017 "Skin whitening among Cameroonian femal university students: Knowledge, attitudes, practices and motivations" *BMC Women's Health* available at <https://bmcwomenshealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12905-017-0385-z>, accessed February 20<sup>th</sup> 2023.

<sup>14</sup> See **Bissek, Anne Cecile Zoung-Kanyi et. al. 2011.** "Skin Care Habits of Dermatology Patients in Yaounde – Cameroon" *The Open Dermatology Journal*, 5, 15-20.



fair in complexion and about a quarter (12/50, i.e., 24%) have never thought of using skin-whitening products, there is nonetheless a majority with a preference for fair skin colour. This could justify why Cameroonians engage in skin-whitening attempts. Thus, there is stronger skin-whitening behaviour in Cameroonian girls and women than in boys and men overall. It is also in this regard that the cosmetic and personal hygiene market is said to have grown in Cameroon by seven percent in 2020 and was worth 380 billion CFA (approximately 580 million Euros).

Changes in our skin colour used to be a natural course of events<sup>15</sup>; however, today, black skin people engage in artificial methods of skin-colour-changing, such as the application of skin-whitening cosmetic products. When people engage in skin-whitening, they often carelessly ignore the negative consequences<sup>16</sup> of the long-term application of such products and are more concerned with their beauty outlook defined in light skin.

## **2. STATE-GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS OF SKIN-COLOUR IN CAMEROON**

This part of the work comprises a first section that describes when, why and how the state through government becomes interested in skin colour and a second section that presents the Cameroon state government anti-skin whitening policy decision. A third section examines the socio-political implication of government penetration in matters of the skin and body.

### **2.1. Governments and skin colour change policy**

Modern state governments have developed a wide range of powers, including the power to define and decide our beauty standards. The range of governmental powers to penetrate our body derives from the following governmental capabilities: power to enact a series of binding laws; power to sanction and/or reward our behaviour; power to investigate, know and keep data on various health issues, challenges and prospects; power to make reports over health issues and effects; power to measure health care costs; and power to prioritize health concerns. This range of capabilities has enabled governments to penetrate our body or to intervene in matters that concern our skin colour behaviour in some ways.

The government penetrates skin-colour change attitudes in at least three ways: by opposing, blocking or limiting skin-colour-changing attitudes; by promoting and encouraging skin-whitening; and by being indifferent or passive. Governmental indifference was common in the states of the ancient world (Egypt, Greece and Rome). Opposition was common with the emergence of Black as a beautiful movement and the toxic consequences of skin bleachers. Penetration to promote and encourage was common in racial America and other parts of the world for social equality and economic reasons. Where skin-whitening is seen as having little or no effect on state-society relations, it is most likely that state-governments remain neutral; where it is seen to affect state-society relations, state-governments come in to either promote or oppose it. However, opposition to skin lightening did not begin with government. It was society outside government that first took the lead by challenging skin bleaching behaviours through the Black is Beautiful movement. Under such circumstances and depending on the amount of pressure mounted, the government is likely to bounce back with restrictive decisions and measures. To promote and encourage skin lightening behaviours, the government can reinforce group stereotypes about colour.<sup>17</sup> In its support output for skin-whitening behaviour, the government

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<sup>15</sup> According to a study by Jablonski, variation in skin pigmentation within Africa reflects long histories of natural selection, migration, and the occasional creation of new pigmentation mutations. See *Ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Prolonged use of cosmetics to whiten skin may lead to withered faces which may not be appetizing to see. Back in Europe, China, Japan and Britain, around the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, sustained use of white make up was known to produce withered faces like an ape, stinking breath, rotting teeth, and an evil air surrounding the entire body. Toxic lighteners and white face powders caused health problems in those who used them and in the children who came in contact with them. In Europe, the children of XVI<sup>th</sup> century women who used white makeup were said to lose their teeth before they could walk, and Japanese children born to samurai mothers who used white-lead face paint suffered what we now know to be lead toxicity and disturbances of bone growth. See Rablonski, *Ibid*, p.170.

<sup>17</sup> American racial politics and policies is rooted in this pattern. Similarly, the Mexican government's 2005 issue of stamps showing the cartoon character Memín Pinguin sparked outrage because it signified that the government supported the unfavourable portrayal of people of African ancestry. It was also a British government policy to cast

uses skin colour differences to develop policies to classify or draw up different categories of citizens. For example, classification of people by skin colour became an ineradicable part of American government as well as business and social life.

In Ancient Greece, skin colour distinction did not stand out as a remarkable issue in government and politics. Although slavery was an institution, skin colour did not figure in the Greek attitude towards slavery.<sup>18</sup> Even though Aristotle saw the Greek skin colour as comparatively superior, he did not think of it as influencing a governmental policy of any kind. As Rablonski puts it, to Aristotle, Greece's privileged intermediate geographical and climatic conditions favoured the development of humans with superior physiques, mental faculties, and social equipoise.<sup>19</sup> Among the Romans too, skin colour and physical appearance did not enter into the Roman judgment of the worth of others.<sup>20</sup> Patterns of skin colour were not thought of as influencing government policy in Ancient Greece and Rome because they were considered natural aspects of the human body or as being influenced by nature.<sup>21</sup>

It was in Africa, particularly in Ancient Egypt, that evidence of the first recorded contacts between people of different skin colours was recorded in the Nile Valley, which was a highway of human interaction.<sup>22</sup> However, the State in Ancient Egypt did not see the necessity to adopt a skin policy or engage in skin colour politics partly because at the time, and as in Ancient Greece and Rome, physical appearance and differences did not affect social status, marriage prospects, status of offspring and judgements of beauty.<sup>23</sup> Differences in skin colour were noticed and commented upon, but skin colour itself did not determine a person's value.

Overall, state penetration to regulate skin-colour-change attitudes and behaviours was limited in the ancient states of Egypt, Greece and Rome given that a person's worth was measured by the yardstick of citizenry, not colour. Noncitizens were fully human but were not considered naturally disposed to political development and governance over others because their ancestors had not benefited from the superior physical and climatic conditions of those polities.

The feeling of government to regulate or adopt patterns of skin colour policy is recent and was evident in American and European state-society life. It was in Europe in Spain, with the expansion of Christianity, Islam and the African slave trade in the XV<sup>th</sup> century that the state effectively began to adopt skin colour policies. It was the Church, acting as the State, in the XV<sup>th</sup> Century, which first thought of and adopted a governmental policy towards skin colour. The issuance in 1449 of the first Statute of the Purity of Blood by the municipal authorities in Toledo, Spain, was an attempt to distinguish between original Christians and recent converts from Judaism or Islam. According to this policy, higher status was accorded to families of lighter complexions who had not intermarried with Moors and Jews.<sup>24</sup>

The peak period of governmental interest in skin colour was between the XV<sup>th</sup> and XIX<sup>th</sup> centuries. This timeframe was a turning point in the political history of state-society relations worldwide. It was the period of major discoveries, the development of technology, trade routes

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dark-skinned Africans as less than humans which made it easier to expand the slave workforce without moral impediment. See Jha, Meeta Rani. 2016, *The global beauty industry: colorism, racism and the national body*, New York, Taylor and Francis; Hunter, Margaret. 2008, "The cost of color: What we pay for being Black and Brown" in Hall, Ronald (Editor) *Racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Empirical Analysis of Skin Color*, New York, Springer, 63-67; and Jha, Meeta Rani. 2016, *The global beauty industry: colorism, racism and the national body*, New York, Taylor and Francis.

<sup>18</sup> Rablonski, 2012, p.110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.110.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> In Ancient Greece, skin colour was thought of being influenced by climatic and environmental conditions. Typical Greeks were lighter and they referred to those with darker skin as Ethiopians, a designation that included all people with darkly pigmented skin from the south of Egypt, northwest Africa and India. See Rablonski, *Ibid*, p.111.

<sup>22</sup> Jablonski, 2012: 104.

<sup>23</sup> Jablonski further explains that the greatest tolerance of physical diversity existed in Egypt, where the long history of population intermingling along the Nile had made contacts between people of different skin colours routine.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.120.

and networks and the rise of first territorial nation states or countries with clearly mapped out boundaries, the domination of Christianity and Islam, and the worldwide commercialization of black Africans in what was known as slave trade. Established state governments intervened to regulate skin colour by promoting White supremacist policies, which became the standard against which all other humanity was judged. This was the modern political basis of the skin colour distinction and racial policies.

In fact, skin colour became the basis of legitimate slavery and the slave trade. Governments of Europe and America officially considered darkly pigmented Africans suitable for enslavement and unsuitable for socio-political emancipation. Jablonski argues that as slavery became an entrenched part of America's economy in the nineteenth century, skin colour became the standard by which slaves of African descent were judged suitable for various types of work.<sup>25</sup>

The American government is one of the pioneer governments in the world to have engaged a modern governmental policy around skin colour with the help of the Black/White colour dichotomy complex. The three arms of government, namely, the legislature, judiciary and executive in America, have been involved in defining and imposing beauty and socio-political standards based on skin colour in varying ways. However, it is the judiciary that has been most remarkable in ostensibly and officially dealing with matters of skin colour.<sup>26</sup> The government has used policy to perpetuate racial discrimination, which ended up being considered a norm. The Supreme Court in the US in 1881 declared Native Americans to be 'aliens, and The Asian Exclusion Act of 1889 denied Asian immigrants the right to enter the country.<sup>27</sup>

Although the courts in America have played a significant role in influencing skin colour policy and politics, following the Black/White dichotomy complex, elsewhere, such as Cameroon, with an insignificant Black/White dichotomy, the executive power of government has been at the forefront in the adjudication of matters regarding the colour of the skin.

However, government promotion of skin colour policy was not limited to the desire to promote the supremacy of white over black. It was also economically and financially motivated by the profit such a practice would have to earn from the government and the state. Although the commercial development, production, and marketing of skin-bleaching products began in America in the post reconstruction era<sup>28</sup>, as segregationist Jim Crow laws restricted the opportunities and prospects of African-Americans, especially in the South, they soon spread across other regions and countries with neoliberal and capitalist behaviours, Capitalist governments have not hesitated to encourage skin-whitening attitudes and behaviours through policies that promote the production and use of skin bleaching products.<sup>29</sup> That is also why it became a somewhat worldwide policy for governments to (re)design policies that promote skin colour changing attitudes and behaviours.

## 2.2. Anti-skin-whitening policy in Cameroon

The government of Cameroon's behaviour towards skin-colour change has been to oppose and reject skin-whitening attempts and practices. The Ministry of Public Health has particularly been

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<sup>25</sup> Jablonski, p.148.

<sup>26</sup> Jablonski reports that two cases tried in America in 1857 reflect the adjudication of colour and freedom. In one of them, Chief Justice Roger Taney, a slave owner, ruled against Scott, a Black former slave seeking freedom, by denying citizenship and freedom, arguing that Negroes had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race either in social or political relations, and thus far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect. See Jablonski, p. 152

<sup>27</sup> For details and other examples, see Ronald Hall. 2010, *An Historical analysis of skin color discrimination in America: Victimism among victim group populations*, New York, Springer, p.7.

<sup>28</sup> Jablonski, p. 173.

<sup>29</sup> Well known skin-whitening products and their use include: the white lead (ceruse) used in Ancient Greek and Rome, mercury compound used for the same reason by Egyptian queen Cleopatra (69–30 BCE); makeup made from rice powder and white lead that was mixed with starch and used between 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century in Japan, while lead products and mercury and other ingredients in Mid 16<sup>th</sup> Century were described as product mixtures for skin whitening in books.

instrumental in defining patterns of beauty through skin-colour reformation among Cameroonians.<sup>30</sup> The Ministry has used public health policy to impose restrictions on the consumption of skin-bleaching products in Cameroon. On 19 August 2022, Cameroon's Minister of Public Health signed and made public ministerial Decision No. 193/MINSANTE of 19 August 2022, banning the importation, production and distribution of cosmetic and corporal hygiene products that contain skin bleaching substances. Some of the products listed in the decisions are hydroquinone and mercury.<sup>31</sup> Other skin-whitening products commonly used in Cameroon are potions, tablets and injections. The consumption of skin-whitening products has been identified as a public health problem, which is the dominant rationale in government decisions. Hydroquinone, for example, is said to cause kidney and liver damage, psychosis, brain damage in fetuses and cancer. The same consequences, including diabetes and hypertension, are said to occur with injected substances and tablets.

The decision of government is said to have also been prompted by political reasons. It came after opposition that MP Nourane Fotsing was criticized and vindicated by social media over her company that sells beauty products. The government is said to have been 'angry' that an elected official is making profits from the beauty business and decided to set the ban.<sup>32</sup> Although it was for predominantly public health reasons that the decision was signed, owing to the toxic effects of skin bleachers, there are sociopolitical implications associated with the decision.

### **2.3. Sociopolitical implications of government penetration**

African state governments have generally objected to skin bleaching practices and have outlawed skin bleaching products.<sup>33</sup> Hall states that in Gambia, the government outlawed all skin bleaching products, including Bu-Tone, Madonna Cream, Glo-Tone, and the American-made Ambi.<sup>34</sup> The decision by the Cameroon government to outlaw skin-whitening attitudes is therefore not new in its kind in the continent. However, the implication of the decision is of significant interest in state-society relations.

The outlaw and criminalization of skin-whitening practices is a political infringement on (corporal) democracy and, specifically, corporal rights and freedom.<sup>35</sup> The quest for some kind of beauty is a fundamental source of corporal right, including the right to use skin-whitening products. Where this right is denied through an authoritative decision, it is considered a violation of corporal freedom. Government ban is an attempt to manage and control people's behaviour towards their skin. It reflects a will to limit the power and authority individuals have over their skin in particular and body at large. The penetration of government in skin colour behaviour among Cameroonians is an illustration of an attempt by the State to set a limit on people's corporal beauty right and freedom. In doing so, the government is preventing citizens from reaching out to what they consider their full corporal potential, emancipation and beauty. From this perspective, government ban could also mean a regressive conservative democratic culture

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<sup>30</sup> However, there is difference in how skin colour cases are handled by government. In America, the court have played a significant role in adjudicating skin colour matters while in Cameroon, the executive seems to have significantly influenced people's skin colour changing behaviour.

<sup>31</sup> Hydroquinone in particular is in fact one of the most used in whitening products in Cameroon. It was banned in the European Union (EU) in 2001 because of the risk of cancer and genetic mutations.

<sup>32</sup> Redaction Africanews and AFP, 2022. "In Cameroon, skin-lightening products remain popular despite risks, and ban" available at <https://www.africanews.com/2022/09/29/in-cameroon-skin-lightening-products-remain-popular-despite-risks-and-ban/> accessed January 10<sup>th</sup> 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Opposition to skin whitening is also common among European governments who have also decided to outlaw skin bleaching products such as the government of Denmark, who outlawed skin bleaching creams and soaps, and have gone as far as travelling to a number of local African shops to collect the products. Hall 2008:38.

<sup>34</sup> Hall, *Ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Corporal right is understood as the right over our physical body or skin. It is related to the authority individuals have over the treatment they choose to give to that physical and visible outer layer of the body. It is the power and authority to independently dispose of the skin without fear or favour. Corporal democracy is the freedom individuals have over their skin. There is no legislation regulating corporal democracy. Conventional instruments of democracy have focused on other aspects of freedom such as freedom to use other parts of the body (freedom of speech, movement, etc.) but nothing is said about freedom of beauty or make up type.



that typically denies the democratization of beauty. A neoliberal government according to neoliberal theory will reduce state and government intervention in people's lives as a means of achieving individual liberty for its citizens; in this case of a ban, government is rather being illiberal or *neoliberal* or a kind of neoliberal-conservative. While the government could be interpreting the use of skin-whitening products as harmful, hence an unconscious act of corporal punishment<sup>36</sup>, liberal minds find in it a violation of corporal right and a denial of corporal democracy.

Government penetration to regulate skin-colour-changing is also a nationalistic and emancipator decision—it could be seen as an attempt to preserve African/Cameroonian colour identity. Citizenship is also reflected in identity, and identity is reflected in skin colour. By issuing a ban on the production and use of skin colour-change products, the government of Cameroon could promote the status of darker people.<sup>37</sup> The decision comes at a time when worldwide movements condemn black discrimination through the 'Black lives matter' and 'Black is beautiful' movements. By issuing the ban, the government is denying to negotiate social differences based on skin colour. In doing so, the government is creating room for non-accommodation of diversity based on skin colour. If the government of Cameroon is indifferent in the use of skin bleaching products, most of which are also imported, it will indirectly support Western multinationals and their governments in the spread of Western values through the marketing of their cosmetic products and the consumerist culture. Thus, the decision is also political, as it is about protecting and controlling Cameroon culture or preventing it from being influenced by foreign culture. From this perspective, the ban also stands as a soft power tool to limit the influence of Western culture in a continent and country that has had its own fair share of 'imposed' foreign influence at its own expense.

Another sociopolitical implication of the outlaw of skin-whitening is that it is a challenge to the long-standing belief that beauty is associated with the fairness of skin. Beyond that, it is a challenge to or transgression of the global cultural pattern of whiteness as beauty. There is therefore a transnational dimension to the ban; it was thought had just a national impact.<sup>38</sup> Beyond being a health issue, there are also political reasons underlying governmental decisions to control skin colour behaviour. Thus, refraining from *depigmentation* or keeping the *natural* black skin colour could be, from this perspective, viewed as a positive act of patriotism or support patriotism (at the national level), black emancipation and black power (at the international level).

## Conclusion

The objective of this work was to identify and analyse the role of the state through the government in patterns of skin-colour-change behaviours and their socio-political implications in Cameroon. Through its health and social policy, the government of Cameroon is playing a decisive role in defining people's attitude and behaviour towards the colour of their skin by outlawing and criminalizing the consumption of skin-whitening products. This was the substance contained in the Minister of Public Health's decision No. 193/MINSANTE of 19 August 2022, banning the importation, production and distribution of cosmetic and corporal hygiene products that contain skin bleaching substances. Although this decision is said to be for public health

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<sup>36</sup> What comes closest to corporal right is corporal punishment, which in fact is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) interpreted as 'any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light' (General Comment No. 8, 2006, para. 11). Would it be a corporal punishment if individuals take the decision to apply certain cosmetic products government considers harmful to the body? Is it not time for governments to think about a corporal beauty legislation?

<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, like in America, the responsibility of government has rather been to reduce the status of darker people in America. By making it impossible for darker-skinned people to move from the city and to have access to more and better jobs, the government also assisted in the discriminatory effort to reduce people of colour in status. See Ronald Hall, *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>38</sup> In India for example fairness as beauty has precolonial roots and it is strongly embed in the belief system of Indians that any governmental attempt at regulating it may have little or no impact. See Kullrich, *Ibid.*, p.2.

reasons of limiting the toxic consequences of the consumption of bleaching products, it also reveals a political infringement on corporal democracy, corporal beauty right and freedom, hence a neoconservative political culture; it also stands to promote the status of black people and Africans as it challenges the long-standing belief that beauty is associated with fairness of skin that in turn transgresses the global cultural pattern of whiteness of the skin as beauty.

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