

## Somali Beauty Practices and its Extensive Colonial Shadows

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Dec. 8, 2023

One of my first experiences with beauty was in a South C neighborhood beauty salon in Nairobi, awaiting my turn for my hair to be straightened. It was the day before Eid, and women of all ages were gathered for a spectrum of beauty rituals, from intricate henna designs to fresh blowouts. This was a unique occasion, as it was the first time that my mom had entrusted me to navigate the Nairobi beauty salons alone.

I observed the lively interactions around me. There was a familiar cadence of Somali chatter, Swahili chatter, and *Af-Rahanweyn* chatter, my native Somali dialect. I sat amidst the unfamiliarity; Nairobi culture was something that overwhelmed me. I scanned the plethora of beauty products that adorned every surface— a straightener ready for action, a potent hair relaxer awaiting its turn, a container of jet-black henna dye, and the ubiquitous Fair and Lovely cream. A jar of turmeric face mask stood proudly beside another variant of hair relaxer. Another skin whitening product – this time without a label.

In this salon, I explored this small world, a microcosm of cultural expression informed by a history most would prefer to overlook. Unspoken talks about beauty standards, identity, and self-care played out in front of my eyes, with each product offering a tale about interconnected experiences. Colonial echoes ricochet through private beauty practices that leave an everlasting effect on the identity of Somali women. Skin bleaching and hair relaxing, once unfamiliar in this region, have become commonplace, silently telling the story of Britain's and Italy's historical actions. The implications are transcended into the cultural and health spheres, which cast complex shadows that continue to this day.

To understand the development of Eurocentric beauty standards in Somali culture, it is crucial to recognize the colonial era that conducted a profound rewiring of the cultural DNA that had flourished for a millennium. Beauty, which was once a marker of cultural expression and identity, became a battleground for colonial powers to show their dominance. Britain and Italy

enforced Eurocentric beauty standards that stood in stark contrast to the complex and rich fabric of Somali aesthetics, propelled by an elitist notion that their ideas were superior. Somali skin's deep melanin, formerly cherished as a symbol of beauty, resilience, and adaptation to a harsh environment, has now been marginalized as a result of Eurocentric beliefs that favor lighter complexions. Hence, colonization foregrounded the opportunity for Somali culture to be seized and reconstructed.

Ethnic minority groups in Somalia, including the Somali Bantu population, bore the brunt of this social hierarchical reordering. For instance, according to David Ryan Blaha in his paper "Pushing Marginalization: British Colonial Policy, Somali Identity, and the Gosha 'Other' in Jubaland Province, 1895 to 1925", British colonial policy created the concept of the Gosha 'Other' for the Somali Bantu population that lived in the Gosha region to instill societal hierarchies that persist to this day. British colonial rulers purposefully shattered the cohesiveness that had long defined Somali identity by labeling certain communities as the "Other." As a result, "Somali identity, once porous and accessible, became increasingly more rigid and exclusive." Somalia was a society with common values, a sense of community, and a sense of oneness, but othering became a vehicle to attack the core of Somali culture and destroy the bonds that united the society.

The effects of this "othering" can be pictured in a variety of forms, as it has been instilled into the structure of Somali culture, politics, and society, but it can be seen no better than in the domestic setting of the home, the *guri*. In nearly every Somali home, two things cannot be missed: the scent of incense mingling in every room and a variety of skin-lightening creams and hair relaxers from the bathrooms to the bedroom vanities.

Somali family dynamics pressure young girls, like I was, to conform to Eurocentric norms. These pressures erupt into beliefs that some physical features are more desirable than others. The daughter with looser curls will be treated better than the daughter with tighter curls. The daughter with lighter skin will be pampered, swooned over, and called *cadey*, an endearing term that translates to whitey. The daughter with darker skin, however, will be the less beautiful child, the child overshadowed by the lighter daughter. And since these beauty rituals have been handed

down from mothers to daughters, they bear the weight of generational continuity and create a historical tapestry of conformity.

Despite the end of Somalia's colonial era, the beauty rituals that were created to conform to Eurocentric norms remained infused with the nature of the beauty standards in Somali culture. The now post-colonial Somali identity is one that has been ravaged by civil war, with the Somali community taking form around the world: Minneapolis, Minnesota, Stockholm, Sweden; Toronto, Ontario; the cities are continuous. Despite the enduring effort to forever preserve the cultural identity, the *dhaqan*, the process of assimilation into these Western norms and identities resembled another cycle of colonialism reclaiming notions of beauty.

In my hometown of Lewiston, Maine, the small yet incongruous Somali and Somali Bantu communities stood at a stark dichotomy with the overwhelmingly white population in the whitest state in the United States. In my childhood, hostility was ever-present, with expected angry glances while grocery shopping, discrimination by neighbors, and prejudices by teachers despite being one of the high achievers in the classroom. One of my first memories was a severed pig's head being thrown into the local mosque in my town, attended by predominately Somalis. This aggression was something that I could not escape, could not ignore, and could not become used to. I constantly desired to be more like my white peers, who received praise and attention from my teachers so much easier than me. What I didn't realize, however, was that it was not a matter of my character, but rather my identity as a Black, Muslim girl, a Somali girl.

I wanted to have straighter hair, fairer skin, in essence, be just like the white students in my classes. I begged my mom to relax my hair and got angry at her refusal when my older sisters had their hair relaxed countless times. Despite my judging of Somali aunts who would use whitening creams, I failed to realize my own identity being formed around colonial representations of whiteness as the clear indicator of beauty. Unlike my siblings and parents, I was born in the United States, but I was being colonized in the mind.

There is a clear cyclical relationship between colonial practices and a beauty industry that profits predominately from Africa and South Asia, with Somalis in and around the diaspora being no

stranger to this. European countries like France and the United Kingdom are the main producers of skin-whitening and hair-relaxing products, with L’Oreal, Revlon, and Unilever being at the forefront of the two industries’ market trends. Unilever, for instance, is the British company that sells one of the most popular skin-lightening products in Asia and Africa, Fair and Lovely. It seems ridiculous, too ironic that the nation that played the largest role in 19th and 20th-century colonialism all around the world, is still profiting from the ramifications of forced colonial rewiring of beauty standards that are directly attributed to white supremacy. And yet, Eurocentric beauty ideals have been commodified to directly profit the colonizers, while the countries that were colonized are still struggling to establish themselves in their post-colonial identity.

These companies may be rejoicing in the profit, as the hair relaxer products market size is at \$690 million and the skin lightening products market is at \$7.05 billion, but the women who are using these products are facing the health effects of repeatedly applying such harmful and chemically infused creams and regimens. According to a study titled, “Skin-Lightening Practices and Mercury Exposure in the Somali Community” by Amira Adawe and Charles Oberg, Somali women who use skin-bleaching products are at an increased risk of being exposed to inorganic mercury, which poses numerous health effects, such as “bacterial infections and damage to the nervous system,” and can be passed from mother to infant through breast milk. Furthermore, the study, “The dark side of skin lightening: An international collaboration and review of a public health issue affecting dermatology” found that the absorption of steroids like clobetasol and betamethasone can cause diabetes, hypertension; glaucoma and cataracts; all of which disproportionately affect Somali women. This is not limited to skin-whitening products, as hair products have been linked to the cause of breast and ovarian cancer, according to the study, “Use of Straighteners and Other Hair Products and Incident Uterine Cancer” by Che-Jung Chang.

This pursuit of Eurocentric beauty ideals, the pinnacle of beauty in a post-colonial Somali culture, has become a public health crisis. Practices that have been passed from mother to daughter, hidden yet omnipresent in the community, have become a leading factor in the adverse health complications amongst Somali women. From a health lens, it would be obvious to put a halt to products with clear detrimental consequences. However, these are products specifically targeted to ethnic minority groups, groups that have been continuously marginalized in the West.

As these European companies continue to exploit white supremacist practices that have impacted women and beauty, Somali women will continue to obtain these products as colonial practices have been wired into their ideological framework.

Are these products even working as Somalis integrate into the United States and other Western nations? From my experience growing up in a predominantly white town, I could see that there was a clear marginalization of the Somali community, despite our efforts to assimilate with the broader community. Lewiston, which was in severe economic decline due to the dying mill industry, was revived by Somali businesses, farming, and a growing workforce. Despite that, I can distinctly remember when my third-grade friend told me that her parents would no longer allow her to play with me at recess because I wasn't "the same" as her, something that I couldn't understand at the time.

Now, I look back to eight-year-old me, who was ignored by her friend, and thirteen-year-old me, who witnessed the communion of beauty practices in its truest form, and I wish to tell her that this seemingly ubiquitous notion of beauty is something that can be unlearned and that the history of the colonized is my history because it is my culture's history. I have had to decolonize my own mind and unlearn the perception of beauty that is not from my culture, but from a colonized culture. I have come to learn that beauty is not in the eyes of the beholder, but rather, the colonizer.