THE FEMININE BEAUTY IDEAL AMONG CAMBODIAN WOMEN

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WHAT IS THE BEAUTY STANDARD IN CAMBODIA?

Before Western colonization, Asian societies had already established certain preferences involving skin color, facial features, height, and body shapes. These characteristics were created due to aesthetics and classism. After Western colonization took place, these standards were further intensified due to colonization rather than aesthetics. In Cambodia, these standards for the women were defined by having “white skin, height, a slim body, a full chest, and attractive facial features such as soft skin, a sharp nose, oval or V-shaped facial structure, two-layer eyelashes, white teeth, and long, smooth, straight hair.” Thus, if one had a darker complexion, they were assumed to be of lower status. This is because European standards considered darker skin to be the result of lots of exposure to sunlight which then led to the assumption that they did laborious work (e.g., farming). Therefore, those with white skin were favored within society because they were considered wealthy enough to stay away from laborious work.

Colonialism and Colorism

In the mid-19th century, the Thailand Kingdom and Vietnam Kingdom had conflict that had crossed onto Cambodian territory and almost resulted in the disappearance of Cambodia. Due to this event and Thailand invading Cambodia before, the Cambodian King asked France for protection on August 11th, 1863. Though France provided enough protection to Cambodia from its neighboring enemies, this protection had only lasted for a year before it turned into fully fledged colonialism (Chandler). Thus, causing Cambodians to view French colonialist with lighter skin complexion as higher-class. The ideals that the French had rooted within Cambodia would cause Cambodians to partake in colorism even to this day. In reference to Hunter (2007), “colorism, or skin color stratification, is a process that privileges light-skinned people of color over dark in areas such as income, education, housing, and the marriage market” (p. 287).
WHITENING CREAMS

Most Cambodian women who want to achieve the beauty standard do when they don’t have white skin. They resort to whitening creams. Women who can afford or have access to whitening creams will use them to achieve white skin in reference to Tali and Sukumaran (2017). Whitening creams or whitening lotions do not instantly turn your skin white; they will slowly lighten the pigment of your skin over time. Not all these products will work; however, ones that do work, if consistently used for a long time, a month, some users will see results. Though users may see results, sometimes the skin will look unnatural, most likely due to the fact that it is a chemical result and not a natural method.

Avoiding sunlight also because it is not one’s original skin complexion.

It is also important to note that these whitening products are not always safe; some women who have access to whitening products will have access to ones that are non-standardized production. These products “can cause allergic reactions and health issues, in particular, products that contain high amounts of iron, cadmium, zinc and other chemical substances found in lipsticks, hair dyes, and makeup.”

(March, 2020) The key ingredient that works to lighten the skin is mercury. According to the American Academy of Dermatology Association, skin lightening products that contain mercury can be damaging to your kidneys, nerves, and cause mercury poisoning. Since kidneys are sensitive, when in contact with mercury, it will gather in the kidneys and become exposed to its tissues, therefore, causing damage. In addition, when in contact with your nerves, it can lead to “permanent numbness or tingling in your hands, feet, or around your mouth.” Lastly, mercury poisoning can cause problems with eyesight, become irritability, sensitivity, and tremors.

IN CONCLUSION

The beauty standards that have circulated through Cambodia for centuries have caused women to put their health at risk. It has been rooted in our people for so long that some will even choose to listen to medical professionals with white skin and their fellow women who have a darker skin complexion. Though they are beautiful women, I hope our darker-skinned Cambodians will get the representation they deserve.
ANOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY


This article was used to describe the Cambodian history relating its past relationship with Thailand and Vietnam. In addition, Cambodia reaching out to the French for protection and resulting in colonization leaves the French to rule Cambodia for a total of 70 years and implementing Western European standards among Cambodians before their independence in 1953. Overall, many manipulations of Cambodian nationalism from French colonial rule to current reality leaves politics in flux.

This article was also used to describe the history of France’s colonial rule in Cambodia. The article goes into a more detail about the French influence involving the casinos of Cambodia and French army. Furthermore, this article discusses how the French unintentionally caused conflict between Thailand and Cambodia through promoting the expansion to Cambodia.


This article was used for its write-up regarding the definition of colorism. The article discusses how colorism has been a persistent problem in the United States for people of color. The article discusses the experiences of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans with skin color. Furthermore, this article discusses the benefits that lighter-skinned people experience.


This article describes the views of colorism in Asia that stems from Europe. This article was used for its description of different assumptions of darker skin compared to lighter skin. This article describes that darker-skinned folks were assumed to be laboring workers while those with lighter skin were considered higher class.


This article was used to describe the beauty standard within Cambodia. This article discusses colorism within Cambodia and the history of colorism. Furthermore, this article discusses how light skin in Cambodia increases women’s social capital and leads to the social construction of beauty.


This article was used for Lydia’s personal experience with colorism. From Cambodia as a nurse, she states that it is common for women patients to demand new comments about their health because she is of darker complexion whereas, if a white nurse had said the same thing, they would agree and say that the white nurse is very knowledgeable.


This article was used in support of Lydia’s claim of the negative effects of mercury. This article discusses the different types of mercury and the different ways to test for mercury levels within the body. This article also discusses how some people may be exposed to higher levels of mercury through diet.


This article was used to discuss the negative effects of skin lightening products. One of the negative effects of skin lightening products, mercury, damages your kidneys, nervous system, and brain. This article also informs readers on how to check skin lightening products on whether it uses mercury. Using the different names mercury goes by.


This article was used to describe how skin lightening products work. The article discusses that skin lightening products don’t always work, but ones that do will usually lighten your skin over long periods of time. In addition, the results aren’t always natural looking due to the chemicals in the product such as mercury.


This article was used for its write-up on what the ideal beauty standard is in Cambodia. The article discusses what the beauty standards are when beauty standards first appeared, why beauty standards exist, and what the negative impact of beauty standards have on Cambodian women. Only, women using whitening cream.