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# “All Women Talk”- A Study of Beauty and Female Identity in Senegalese Culture

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“All Women Talk”- A Study of Beauty and Female Identity in Senegalese Culture

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*Abstract*

The idea of Beauty is defined cross culturally, and is rooted in surrounding environment and larger values presented in the community. This study explores collective and individual understandings of beauty and its relationship to female identity. My hope with this research was to explore various attitudes that existed around beauty and understanding the motivations behind why Senegalese women are willing to put so much effort in altering their physical appearance in such extreme ways.

### *Introduction*

People don't pay attention to simple things, they notice things that are special" my host sister said justifying the amount of time she had spent getting ready. After just a few weeks in Senegal, I was exposed to the strong connection with the concept of beauty that existed within Senegalese culture and the various aspects of the cultural beauty ideal. I was curious about attitudes toward beauty and the crucial role it seemed to play in the way women present and think about themselves.

This study was conducted for several purposes. The first purpose was to define beauty in a Senegalese context and explore the different attitudes that surround the subject. I wanted to know what the ideal image of beauty looked like, and where those ideals stemmed from. So I asked myself what is beauty? First I needed a clear understanding of what was considered beautiful. I observed many ways in which women chose to alter their physical appearance to appear "more desirable." My most immediate experiences took place within my home stay. I helped my host sisters paint their nails and repaint them again the next week, and was told on multiple occasion that I should wear make up more often. As it became more apparent to me that beauty was a highly valued quality within my family I began to notice more about the community. I fell in love with the colorful, vibrant fabrics. I took note of the 15 beauty salons I passed on my way to school. I saw women with decorative henna covering their hands and their feet. I learned of Bin bins, a colorful band with beads on it that women wear often times as a symbol of their fertility. Women put time, effort, money into conforming into an ideal image of beauty, and very rarely did they want to be seen natural.

A poem written by Léopold Sédar Senghor titled, *La Femme Noir* is a reflection of femininity and beauty of black women. Léopold Sédar Senghor is a well known poet in Senegal, who also served as the first president of the Nation from 1960-1980. He is an author who wrote

of Senegalese history, culture and empowered people through the recognition of being black.. An excerpt below illustrates the preservation and celebration of natural black beauty.

...Femme nue, femme noire  
Je chante ta beauté qui passe, forme  
que je fixe dans l'Eternel  
Avant que le destin jaloux ne te réduise en cendres  
pour nourrir les racines de la vie.

...Naked woman, black woman,  
I sing your beauty that passes, the form  
that I fix in the Eternal,  
Before jealous fate turn you to ashes to  
feed the roots of life

The poem was considered revolutionary and unique for its kind. Senghor uses repetition with the phrase "Naked women, black women" to talk about women in their most raw and natural form. The theme of this poem honors a natural and naked women and praises the beauty of a black form. A very well known poem by Senegalese people, it does not seem to translate into their realities. I wondered why?

After my exposure to the various outlets in which beauty is expressed I began to question the motivations behind this deeply rooted relationship that women made with being beautiful. Which brings me to the second purpose of this study, which was to determine where these ideas stemmed from in a larger context. Studying the social discourses uncovered that understandings of beauty stem from traditional practices or cultural influence. The final goal was to understand how females themselves relate the ideal image of beauty to their own identity. The connection between female identity and beauty is so deeply rooted that women conform in ways

that jeopardize their health and negatively impact their overall well being, through whitening creams, genital cutting and gum tattooing<sup>1</sup>.

### *Methodology*

My research explored concepts of beauty, aspects of female identity, and ways of conformity. Upon my arrival in Senegal there were aspects of my physical appearance pointed out to me. There have been many occasions where my weight, hair, and clothes have been commented on. I have observed within my host family the value that is placed on beauty and physical appearance. I realized that this is reflected within the larger community. It is these experiences that have inspired curiosity about female identity and attitudes that exist in understanding beauty. Once I began my research I not only discovered the strong ties between women and aesthetics but came to realize what made this so interesting was the extreme lengths women went through to fit of mold of "being beautiful. "

After some initial observation, I refocused my study with the intent to understand beauty from the perspective of understanding the motivations behind extreme physical alterations, the origins of these ideas and practice surrounding the topic. I conducted my research in Dakar Senegal. I chose to limit this study to an urban setting in the interest of time and access to resources. I began this study by conducting secondary research using the SIT library, The West American Research Center (WARC), the Baobab Center to gathered general information. I then used this information to draft questions I was still curious about. My next step was to formulate questions so they were appropriate to use for in the field research, I edited them in a way that was helpful in gathering information without being leading. I developed a series of general questions that were asked in every interview. I accompanying those questions with more specific

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<sup>1</sup> Someone people refer to use the term Gum dying for this procedure



questions pertaining to each person's profession, or background for a more in depth interview. With help from SIT (School for international training) professor Fatou Kandji my interview questions were translated into French. The other reason I chose to present my questions in this way was to start with ideas on a broader scale, to avoid the participant from feeling vulnerable. Then my strategy was to ask questions that challenged the interviewer to respond in more detail as well as reflect on their own lives and practices.

After gathering general information through secondary sources and compiling questions I was curious about, I began setting up interviews. The bulk of my interviews were conducted with women in Dakar. While I wanted my research mainly to reflect a female identity, I wanted perspectives from a variety of generations, professions and back rounds so I seeked out several male perspectives as well. I targeted students, shop owners, or various people working in the fashion world.

### *Demographics*

I conducted a total of 4 in depth interviews. Two were males and two were with females. Of the people who participated the age varied from 20 to 40. Two of my interviews were conducted in English, while the remaining two were done in French. For the ones done in French, I used a voice recorded and a translator when applicable. Some of the quotes used in this paper are in French and have been translated into English by a native dual language speaker. My purpose for interviewing all age ranges and different genders was to get more diverse perspectives on why beauty is so important and its role within society. In light of a series of unfortunate events that resulted in a lose of a significant amount of my research, I decided to give out a questionnaire. Although a lot of the material was still available by my memory I had very little documentation of my initial research. As a solution, I decide a questionnaire would

enable me to obtain a significant amount of material in a timely fashion. For the most part I used original interviews questions, editing in a few follow up questions and back round information about the person. Although I would have liked to gain the information in a more direct and intimate way, face to face, this was a helpful way to fill in what had been lost.

### *Limitations*

Unfortunately, there were some minor setbacks as well as some major challenges throughout my study. The language barrier stands as a consistent and obvious challenge. Since I am not a native French speaker it was often difficult finding useful literature written in English. For that reason, my research lacks valuable information from French pieces and documents. The language barriers were also reflected in the interviewing process. Due to my limited knowledge of French I was unable to ask specific follow up questions to answers I did not understand. However, for the most part the language barriers were overcome with the use of a voice recorder, and help from a translator to transcript my interviews.

There were a few times throughout the interviewing process where the environment posed a challenge. Many times there was not a good place to conduct a private interview, which may have affected the information obtained. A lot of interviews were interpreted by external factors, the time for prayer, an upset infant, a phone call. In addition to that, most locations were noisy, making it not only challenging for both the participants and myself to have a discussion but also difficult to listen later with the recording device.

Conducting research as a foreigner posed several unanticipated challenges. Many times I felt as though my physical appearance played a role in the comfort of the participant, which ultimately affected the type of information, and how much of the information they expressed. As

a young American student it then became more nerve racking diving into the lives of strangers. After my first interviews I put more thought into how I presented myself when meeting with people. Since my project was about exploring beauty, I felt it was important to not express my own bias, so I aimed for a super simple look. inevitably people are affected by another physical appearance, which potentially resulted in withheld information because of my background.

While there were some downfalls during this project, most could be overcome with some slight adjustments. The major challenge during my research was the loss of all my electronically saved data. My computer was stolen mid way through the ISP period. As a result, I needed to re-gather the information I could, and start over on the material that was non retrievable. In addition, my monetary funds were taken which hindered my ability to conduct research outside of Dakar. My original trip to Thiès to speak with organizations, authors and a visit to the village was cancelled and my project was conducted solely in Dakar. Therefore, time limitations negatively impacted some aspects of my research. Scheduling interviews often got confusing, as I was often times working around the schedule of other people.

### *Data and Analysis*

Observation was a very effective tool in understanding beauty within the Senegalese context, although presents the risk of making inaccurate assumptions. I was able to gain more information from a wider audience and have another research source by distributing a questionnaire. There were a total of 10 questions, written in both french and english.<sup>2</sup> I asked people about their own definitions of beauty and reflect on ways it was present in their lives and within the greater community. I passed 20 questionnaires to students ranging from ages 17-23 attending the University BEM Bordeaux Management school located in Sacre Coeur 3. Out of

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix I

the 20 I received 14 completed surveys back.<sup>3</sup> Even though I am focusing on female identity, I felt it was best to get the perspective of both female and male students because they play a role in how women ultimately present themselves. The questionnaire was a great resource for me during my research. It not only allowed me to gain many different perspectives over a short period of time, but it was a positive way to ensure anonymity thus producing more honest answers.

<sup>4</sup>However, that being said, there were also some downfalls using this method. For one thing, there is the potential for error misunderstanding by the participant or interpreting on my behalf. The other problem with this questionnaire was the inability to ask follow up questions. The questionnaire supported that external beauty was highly valued by Senegalese culture, "in our society now physical appearance is very important for well being" said one student aged 19 who wished to remain anonymous.<sup>5</sup> The most mentioned physical attributes that seemed to work in defining beauty were hair and smile. Only 3 out of the 14 reported something about inner beauty and personality. When asked how beauty is defined, one student Nadiya who is 19 years old responded that "most women and also men first quantify beauty while focusing only on physical appearance, while some expectations, only a little part think about beauty in quality of beauty of mind and way of thinking and above all characters of the heart" It was apparent from the students responses that Senegalese women highly valued aesthetic beauty.

When asked why people pay so much attention to their physical appearance, a 20 year old female student, Amina explained that "Nowadays, everybody pays attention to that. If you are a good person, morally, people don't see that. [They] prefer to see the person who you are outside." In three responses inner and outer beauty were described as being not mutually

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<sup>3</sup> The remaining surveys were submitted to late for analysis

<sup>4</sup> The questionnaire provided the option to withheld your name for anonymity

<sup>5</sup> Providing age and gender was another aspect of the questionnaire that helped construct some personal background information

exclusive. The general theme of the responses differentiated the two, being that internal qualities of beauty are less important and physical appearances have a superior influence. Another notable response was the influence of male attention. The three males who participated in this studied, responded by associating beauty with women. "In my opinion men know the women who have the physical assets" responded an anonymous a male student aged 22. To the same question that asked about how beauty is defined, a female student responded that "Women are obligated to be beautiful to get the man's gaze." Males seem to play an important role in a woman's perception of herself, and how she chooses to portray herself.

Through the process of this questionnaire I made a conscious effort to not ask leading questions, as that could have been another downfall to this study. I asked participants to explain trends they witnessed within their communities. Without ever asking directly about skin whitening products, it came up in two responses. Following a question that asked about the ways in which Senegalese women choice to alter themselves to appear more beautiful, Maguette Fall 18 explained that women "Have the surgery, use whitening milks, creams, change themselves, which serves to make skin clearer. Many women use this method to be more beautiful but its not always nice to see." Another anonymous female student recognized this trend and commented on how the media further solidifies images of beauty , "When we see models with nice bodies and beautiful skin we ask ourselves why we don't have the same. And then we want to be like them. It doesn't help us because then we don't appreciate our own body." Figures in the media shape the way people understand beauty and influence the choices they make in altering their physical appearance.

*Pure Beauty- Female Genital cutting*

Female genital cutting is a traditional practice that involves the cutting or alteration of a female's genital. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) can also be called "Female Genital Cutting" (FGC) or "Female Circumcision." It is a practice performed across the world, many times stemming from religious obligation but is also demonstrated as a cultural practice. While it has before less common as a result of urbanization and educational programs, it is a practice that still exists in many communities and is not limited to Africa. The procedure is done in the early stages of a woman's life, ranging from 2 weeks old to 14 years old. It is classifying in four types of female genital cutting. Type II and type III are more commonly known to be practiced in Senegal. Type II is the excision<sup>6</sup> of the clitoral hood with or without removal of all or part of the clitoris. While type III is the excision of part or all of the external genitalia (clitoris, labia minora and labia majora) and includes stitching the vaginal opening leaving a very small opening for functioning.<sup>7</sup> It is an overbearingly painful process with deeply rooted cultural tradition and social values.

Its practice is widely understood as a right of passage to womanhood and acceptance within a community. However, does not exist within all ethnic groups within Senegal, Seere and Wolof associated communities do not have ties to this ritual. While pulaar communities have been known traditionally to host such ceremonies. A deep running belief is that cutting a woman's genital defines her femininity, a woman is not a woman unless she has been cut. In some communities an uncut girl is considered "unclean" and "impure" and therefore also considered not marriable.

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<sup>6</sup> Meaning removal

<sup>7</sup> United States Department of State, Senegal. 2001. Report on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting (FGC). [accessed 24 November 2014] <http://www.refworld.org/docid/46d5787b32.html>

In 2004 a film written and directed by Ousmane Sembène called Moolaadé<sup>8</sup> was released reflecting the practice of female genital cutting in various African nations. While this film explores FGC it is successful at depicting themes of tradition and conformity. The film, Moolaadé follows the story of a woman in a rural village who goes against the norm to protect a group of young girls from the traditional cutting ritual, which is considered "a purification" process. Going against the norm of the traditional practice she creates unrest in the village. Her rebellion started with the decision to not have her daughter Amasatou cut. As time passes, Amasatou begins to resent her mother for not having her cut like the other girls and therefore sabotaging her social status. By the end of the film, the danger of female genital cutting is exposed and the practice is eradicated by the women of the village. (Coquery-Vidrovitch p.208) The ritual of FGC is understood as "protecting" the women and guaranteeing her virginity and ultimately her fidelity during marriage. A University Student in Dakar speaks about his sister getting cut at age 4 in his pulaar village, "People in the community believe without circumcision she will have relations with other men before marriage." he describes that the practice is viewed as a purification and a step in preparing for marriage within the pulaar village where he comes from.

Over the past two decades there have been many efforts and slow progress in eliminating this practice. In 1999, a law was passed making the practice of FGC illegal and punishable by 1 to 5 years in prison. Many NGOs aim to eradicate female genital cutting in rural communities who still hold such traditional practices. Tostan, an organization founded in 1997 had been working to eliminate the practice of female genital cutting throughout Senegal and other parts of Africa. Their name translates to "breakthrough" in the native Wolof language. With

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<sup>8</sup> Moolaadé is a film released in 2004 that illustrates the various conditions and practices of Female Genital Mutilation in numerous African Nations.

collaboration with other organizations like UNESCO and Orchid to offer education programs about human rights and health to groups of men and women in rural communities. As a result of these efforts, the practice of FGC has been eradicated in over 500 villages throughout Senegal.

Despite these efforts Female genital cutting or Female genital mutilation<sup>9</sup> is still a practice done in many rural communities. A report released in 2001 by the Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues declared that approximately 20 percent of the female populations have experienced these procedures. The fact is that many communities are not aware of this new legislation and as a result no notable change has occurred in many rural villages. So what good is law if it is not being effectively enforced to create real change? Additionally, even in the event of persecuting someone convicted of a Female genital cutting related crime is very rarely followed through. The other notable point to make here is the fact that these girls are normally cut at an early age and can rarely speak for themselves. Ultimately it becomes the mother's choice for their offspring. The same University student continues his understanding of Female genital cutting by explaining the effects of family dynamics, "I do not agree with this practice. But I do not talk to my mom of this. It is not my place. I cannot change it in my village." And says that it is due to a lack of education that this practice still exists in contemporary times, "It is all because people are uneducated. They do not know how it is dangerous."

All four types of female genital cutting have the potential to cause serious irreversible health problems for women. Its practice has many serious lingering health risks, starting from the initial steps until the end of a woman's life. The surgery itself is done without anesthesia and therefore leaves the women in an unbearable amount of pain with major blood loss. The use of not properly disinfected tools can expose the women to transmission of diseases and make her

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<sup>9</sup> Can also be written in the shorthand Female genital cutting (FGC) or Female genital mutilation (FGM)



more prone to infection. While the procedure itself is hazardous, it continues to put women at risk. Following the practice of female genital mutilation come both physical and psychological problems. Many times resulting in complications in pregnancy, birth and intercourse.

Despite the fact Female Genital cutting has become more rare in recent decades, it is still a practice that exists. It is a practice that is very difficult to fight because of its strong traditional ties. It is the a ritual that defines female identity and femininity, by separating the women from the girls. A cut women and a beautiful women are one in the same, one who is uncut risks being shamed from the community. People believe this is what they need to do in order to be beautiful, in order to be pure and in order to be considered desirable when finding a spouse. (Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine. 1997. 59-73) <sup>10</sup>

#### *Permanent Beauty- Gum Dying*

A practice done in by some ethnic groups and rural communities within west Africa is gum tattooing. It is considered to be a thing of beauty, and an ancient tradition that makes a woman's smile more attractive. This aspect of beauty was not one that I had noticed right away, since it is not heavily practiced in urban areas. I uncovered more about this topic gradually over time by asking questions and observing. A beauty boutique manager says that "it happens here, everywhere. It can be hard to see."

While it is done as a practice of beauty, it is also believed to help one with dental hygiene, many describing that it "eliminates everything bad in the mouth." The procedure uses a black pigment derived from burning oils and Shea butter or clay and costs around \$1 or 1,000CFA. The mixture is applied to the gums and a needle to repeatedly poked into the gums.

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<sup>10</sup> Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine. 1997. African Women: A Modern History (Social Change in Global Perspective) WestView Press

To get the most full noticeable effect it is recommended to have 7 layers done. Gums are dyed in order to emphasize contrast between dark gums and strictly white teeth. Women believe that men are more attracted to women who have a beautiful smile that stands out.

Common among diverse cultures in the Sahel region that stretches from west to east Africa is tattooing songs. Even though this procedure is solely for the purpose of beauty, the songs that accompany it demonstrated deeply embedded traditional social values. While a woman is undergoing the procedure of having her gums and sometimes facial areas dyed, the other women in the communities surround her and recite various songs. The word for these tattooing songs in Wolof translates to "woyu njam". The songs are arguable used as a form of anesthesia, they encourage and distract women to push through the pain of the procedure and stay still. Often times the women are encouraged not to cry, as it shows signs of courage and strength. While this procedure is used as a beautification method, it also signifies personal cleanliness and dedication and inevitably grants a woman more respect within her community.<sup>11</sup>

### *Bleached Beauty- Whitening Products*

The need for contrast and emphasis on physical features escalates when women go as far as altering their natural complexion to one more fair toned. Some women chose to do so with the use of American make up, while a large portion of the female population seek out more extreme methods and use skin lightening creams. My first interaction with this trend was in a boutique. When I entered a small beauty store I was overwhelmed to find that majority of the products were used to whiten skin. When I asked the manager of the store manager to help me find a cream, he too had trouble finding one that was not for the purpose of skin lightening. I

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<sup>11</sup> Hale, Thomas A. Sidikou, Aissata G. 2013. Women's Songs from West Africa edited by Thomas A. Hale, Aissata G. Indiana University Press. [Pages 151- 171]

expressed my curiosity by explaining how people in America try to find ways to darken their skin. He explained to me that he supplied the store with these products to meet the demand of his consumers looking for the newest ways to lightening their skin. The method of skin lightening in Senegal is usually described with the word Xessal. He described that skin lightening products are very easy accessible, found in majority of beauty shops and market places. The prices can range anywhere from 1,000CFA to 10,000 depending on the quality and strength of the product. but why did African women have such a desire for lighter skin?

Skin care advertisements line the streets of Dakar and are found commonly on TV's and radios. The media is dominated by pale skinned women presenting an ideal image of beauty, which translates to lighter skinned women being associated with being more successful and getting treated better. As a result, African women search for ways to conform, have lighter skin and be "more beautiful." When I asked a Senegalese women about her experiences with the product she expressed that these products help women stand out, "When my skin is black I am ignored, but when it is light people want to talk to me."

The product that comes up the most when talking about these methods is Kness Petch translated to mean "all white." It is the newest, so thought of as "miracle cream" that promises "fast results" and "lighter skin in just 15 days". Its release was accompanied by drastic before and after shots of women, as well as major backlash from the community. An online petition for the ban of these products received 1,000 signatures in just 4 days. The public retaliated with a movement called Nuul Kukk meaning "All white" that quickly grew to promoted pride in naturally black complexions. <sup>12</sup> The Campaign took off with mass advertising attempting to

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<sup>12</sup> <sup>12</sup> "Beauty Whitewashed: How White Ideals Exclude Women of Color." Beauty Redefined. [accessed November 30th 2014 ] <http://www.beautyredefined.net/beauty-whitewashed-how-white-ideals-exclude-women-of-color/>.

reach all parts of the community. A strong leader in the movement was Aisha Deme, the creator of Agendakar a cultural website, who believed it need to be shown that black women were beautiful, it wasn't enough to say it. With collaboration of various organizations the movement responded by documented African women and natural beauty with the words "Black is beautiful." And attracted many local supporters a well as celebrities like actor Awa Sene Sarr and rapper Keyti. A major figure in the movement became artist, Ndiolé Tall also known as Black Diamond, for her dark complexion. As a celebrity who has not indulged in the use of lightening products it is her main mission was to eradicate "Khessal."<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, other type of retaliation was taken from. A documentary titled "Cette Couleur qui me derange" and translated meaning "The color that bothers me" shows the harsh realities of skin lightening products. The director, Kharidata Pouye says that she purposely used shocking images so women would know the extreme effects of what was happening to them. To further support her point she includes various opinions from health care professionals. A dermatologist representing the Institut d'hygiene Sociale within the film indicated the many risks women are putting themselves in, Scarring, cancer, infections, Disease. Kharidata expressed that the solution lies not only in education but also in further regulations in banning the import of these products.

There is a deeply rooted idea that fair skin is more beautiful, and results in many women changing their natural physical appearance without anticipating the negative impacts of their bodies. The problem is many women are not educated of the health risks they face, but beyond that they don't seem to really care. Although the campaign Nuul Kukkk fights back against mass media beauty ideals, it has not eliminated the practice of skin lightening methods. Women still seek out extreme ways to lighten their skin. Despite the fact that regulates are in

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<sup>13</sup> The term for the skin lightening process

place by the government, banning creams with more than promotes 2% corticosteroid it is poorly enforced and is unsuccessful at controlling the markets for these products. Along as the demand persists for these products, people will find a way to supply it.

### *Exploring Why*

Media and the beauty industry work hand in hand to socially construct an image of beauty, creating perceived flaws in women. Billboards, multimedia, news sources all stand as current examples of the type of messages people are exposed to everyday which has only been on the rise. Not to mention major technological advance in just the last decade alone. There has been major technological advances which enables constant communication among people within communities but additionally communication internationally. (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997:228)

As a result of this development people have new opportunities and access to a wide range of news, information, and the media, which is largely embedded with an westernized ideal for women. With majority of participants during this research who used the word Toubab in their definitions of beauty. The dominance of western ideals have alienated women of a darker complexion. This distorted image of beauty puts high levels of pressure on women to conform to fit a certain mold of what is beautiful. A female university student describes her relationship with american culture and stresses the importance of staying updated on the newest trends,

"Nous recherchons toujours ce que les filles américaines font. Nous utilisons leur maquillage et le style de nos cheveux comme ils le font"

"We always research what the american girls are doing. we use their makeup and style our hair like they do"

Beauty ideals of straight long hair, light skin, thin body leave women of a darker complexion underrepresented. The media works parallel to the beauty industry and conditions women to think they are not respected, accepted or beautiful if they do not conform to fit a certain mold.

Polygamy illustrates another link between female identity and the pressure of an ideal beauty represented by culture. Polygamy is the practice of having more than one wife, by Islamic rule a man can take up to four. It is a widely understood practice within traditional African cultures, Senegal having the highest percentage of polygamous partnerships in West Africa. The institution of marriage in Senegal reflects Islamic values in which a couple can decide to be in a monogamous or a polygamous relationship. Although given the statistics very rarely do couples end up in monogamous relationships, for reasons of gender roles and stigmas that are prevalent within the communities. A polygamous relationship is said to be more beneficial for both parties. A man is considered to be more of the man, a devoted Muslim the more women he has and can support. The unfortunate reality for the women is that all the blame of a cheating husband in a monogamous marriage is put on her. If the women does not do enough to satisfy her husband, he will compensate by seeking another. And so it is said to be in her best interest to agree on polygamy, to eliminate pressures and stigmas.<sup>14</sup>

Even though Islam demands that a man treat his wives with equal respect and resources, although that is not always the case. (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997:223) Undoubtedly Polygamy inspires co wives to compete for resources, love and respect. They work not only to maintain a beautiful home but also appear to be aesthetically beautiful all the time, sometimes going to extreme lengths to do it. A 21 year old male University Student who has witnessed his

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<sup>14</sup> Freund, Bill. 1998. *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society Since 1800*. Lynne Rienner Publishers

father take on two wives says "A women is going to do anything she can to make a man happy. They are afraid that there will be other women." Polygamy illustrates another link between female identity and the ideal beauty represented by culture and begins to explain why women feel the need to go to such extreme lengths to appear beautiful.

### *Further Studies*

I would recommend exploring this topic with perspectives from other regions of Senegal. I feel as though perspectives, observations and research from rural areas as well as other urban area would significantly contribute to the further development of this idea. It would provide a range of new perspectives and first hand research. Personally I would have liked to conduct studies in rural areas of Thies, and urban areas of St. Louis. For reasons being that, Thies offers a range ethic groups who practices various traditional values. St. Louis stands as a beneficial option because of the French colonial Influence and fashion and beauty industry that is represented there.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

A desire to be beautiful is a natural tendency, But at what costs? I chose my ISP topic because of the gender roles and expectations of beauty that I not only observed but experienced the pressures of. I was curious about how people understood beauty and how that translated into their own self perception. I decided from there I wanted to go a step further and really explore why women feel the need to put so much time and effort into their appearance. This is important to me because I to have experienced my own cultural pressures regarding beauty and have been effected by gender roles both in this culture and my own. This study explored the relationship

between beauty and female identity and the various origins of beauty phenomenons within Senegalese culture.

Ideas of beauty play a major role in shaping how both women and women identity themselves. The characterization of “beautiful” are values that exist within a community on an aesthetic basis, shaped largely on the surrounding community. Beauty is a highly thought about, and strongly valued subject within Senegalese culture. Women faces daily pressures to conform to the ideal image of beauty understood by the larger community, often times subjecting themselves to extreme alterations to ensure their physical beauty. High social standards of beauty change the way women practice beauty, often times resulting in drastic changes with lasting negative impacts.

Concepts of beauty are shaped by religious values from popular Islamic beliefs, deeply embedded traditional values of purity, womanhood and femininity in rural communities and strong cultural influence from the media. Its these connections that are a factor in motivating women to seek out drastic ways to change their physical appearance like dye their gums, use whitening products and circumcising their offspring.

Despite efforts for social change, women continue to try and conform to obtain a high standard of beauty, “I think that alot of people want to be beautiful and for them its important the fact of being beautiful so they are ready for anything to have a perfect physical appearance” a female university student in Dakar commented. The problem is that the desire for change is so strong that women are willing jeopardize their health and overall well being.

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### *Interviews*

Abdoulaye Ly (University BEM Bordeaux Management school) Conducted November 18th at 7:00pm Amitee III in local Restaurant

Yerhim Congo (Senegalese man) Conducted November 21st in Amitee II

Aida Diop (Senegalese Women) Conducted November 20th at her house located in Amitee II 6:30 pm

Fatou Kandji (Professor Point E at SIT) Conducted at November 20th at SIT from 10:30am-12pm

### **Appendix I**

Questions for participants.

I Basic information I

Name, Age, Profession

General Questions: Adults (18 years old and above) both men and women.

What is your favorite thing about yourself?

What is the first thing you notice about another person?

Has someone ever commented on your physical appearance? In what ways?

What is beauty?

Why do people pay so much attention to their physical appearance?

What are some ways women alter themselves to “be more beautiful”?

Who defines what is beautiful? Where do our ideas of beauty stem from?

In what ways is Beauty defined differently between men and women?

Do you think this definition of beauty has been influenced by other cultures? What other cultures? And In what ways?

In what ways does the media play a role in how people view themselves?

**Topic specific: Sometimes people chose to alter their physical appearance in extreme ways in order to fit an idea of beauty**

*Genital cutting has been used to purify women in traditional cultures*

What does this practice entail?

Do you think it is fair?

Where does this practice take place?

Who is involved?

What do you think can be done to change these traditional practices?

Why does this practice exist for girls?

Where did the practice of genital cutting originate?

*Whitening lotions are used to lighten skin*

Why do people want their skin lightened?

Is it something for men and women?

Where did this trend come from?

What do you think of these products?

Have you ever used these products?

What type of attention do these products get?

How do people in the community feel about these products?

*Gum dying is a method of tattooing gums in order to have a prominent smile*

Have you meet people who has chosen to have their gums tattooed?

Why do you think people do it?

Where did this practice come from?

Who chooses to go through with tattooing their gums?

In a 95% Muslim population is it against the religion to alter someone's body in this way?

What do you think of this practice?

Is it for men and women?

### **French Version**

| Informations de base |

Nom, âge, profession,

Questions d'ordre général: Enfants (moins de 18 ans) et les adultes (18 ans et plus) les hommes et les femmes.

Est-ce tu aimes dans ton apparence physique ou dans ton corps ?

Quelle est la première chose que vous remarquerez chez une autre personne?

Quelqu'un a déjà commenté votre apparence physique? De quelles façons?

Qu'est-ce que la beauté?

Pourquoi les gens font beaucoup attention à leur apparence physique?

Quels sont les moyens que les femmes utilisent pour changeur leur apparence physique pour être "plus belle"?

qui définit les critère de beauté? D'où viennent des ides que nous avons sur la beauté ?

Pensez-vous que cette définition de la beauté a été influencée par d'autres cultures? Quels sont ces autres cultures? Et comment?

comment les media nous influencent-ils sur notre façon de voir la beauté ?

Profession particulière: Modèle

On quoi consiste le travail d'un top modelé ?

Quelle est la chose que tu préfères ou tu que préfères le moins en tant que top modèle?

Comment et pourquoi avez-vous choisi cette profession?

Comme une figure gens se tournent vers, quelles sont les responsabilités pensez-vous que les modèles ont?

En tant que référence, Quelle est la responsabilité des tops modèles par rapport aux gens qui s'inspirent sur vous ?

Sujet spécifique: Parfois, les gens ont choisi de modifier leur apparence physique de façon extrême pour adapter une idée de la beauté

L'excision a été utilisée pour purifier les femmes dans les cultures traditionnelles

Que peut entraîner cette pratique?

Pensez-vous qu'il est une pratique juste?

D'où vient cette pratique?

Qui est impliqué dans cette pratique?

Qu'est-ce qui peut être fait pour changer ces pratiques?

Pourquoi cette pratique existe pour les filles?

Quelle est le origine des la pratique des mutilations génitales?

Lotions de blanchiment sont utilisés pour éclaircir la peau

Pourquoi les gens éclaircir leur peau?

Est-ce que L'éclaircissement de la peau est pratique pour les hommes et les femmes ?

D'où vient cette tendance?

Que pensez-vous de ces produits?

Avez-vous déjà utilisé ces produits?

Que pensent les gens sur ces produits?

Comment les gens dans la communauté considèrent ces produits?

Gum dying est une méthode de gommes de tatouage pour avoir un sourire de premier plan

Avez-vous rencontrer des gens qui a choisi de tatoué leurs gencives?

Pourquoi les gens le font?

D'où vient cette pratique?

Qui décide de faire le tatouage des gencives? (Les parents ou bien la jeune fille ? )

95% de la population sénégalaise est musulmane, islam est-il contre le fait de changer sont apparence physique ?

Que pensez-vous de cette pratique?

Est-ce c'est pour les hommes et les femmes?