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'She is so Pretty, Look at her Hair': Perspectives on the Racialisation of Mixed-Race Persons in Ghana

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Abstract

This article interrogates the processes of the racialisation of hair and skin colour of 'mixed-race' Ghanaians in the specific context of Ghana. The article draws on the findings of a larger qualitative multisite study that explored the lived experiences and identity construction of Ghanaian mixed-race persons living in Ghana and Canada, Informed by race and racialisation theories, the article argues that hair politics cannot be discussed without considering how skin colour and gender also contribute to shaping the racial categorisation of mixed-race individuals in Ghana. The authors show how Ghanaian society 'others' and racialises mixed-race Ghanaians (for example, through school regulations on hair and hair style); how mixed-race individuals navigate the racial gaze, discourses and practices around their body; how they reproduce and challenge racialised considerations and imaginaries; and how they perform their own racial identities through their hair. The article links these narratives with the ideals of white racial hegemony that permeate society. Acknowledging mixed-race Ghanaians' experiences of privilege, the authors argue that the valuation of their whiteness by the majority population is not straightforward and does not lead mixed-race individuals to self-identify as whites. Mixed-race Ghanaians, rather, have fluid experiences in terms of privileges and discrimination based on context and interactions.

Keywords: hair, mixed-race Ghanaians, racialisation, skin colour, identity politics, whiteness, colourism, gender, intersectionality

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Résumé

S'appuyant sur les résultats d'une plus vaste étude qualitative multisite qui a exploré les expériences vécues et la construction identitaire des personnes ghanéennes « mixtes » vivant au Ghana et au Canada, cet article interroge les processus de racialisation de la couleur des cheveux et de la peau des Ghanéens « mixtes » dans le contexte spécifique du Ghana. Renseignées par les théories de race et de racialisation, nous soutenons que la politique capillaire ne peut être discutée sans tenir compte de la manière dont la couleur de la peau et le genre contribuent également à façonner la catégorisation raciale des personnes « mixtes » au Ghana. Nous montrons comment la société ghanéenne désigne comme « autre » et racialise ces Ghanéens (par exemple, par le biais de réglementations scolaires sur la chevelure et la coiffure) ; comment ils et elles naviguent à travers le regard, les discours et les pratiques raciales autour de leur corps ; comment ils et elles reproduisent et défient les considérations et les imaginaires racialisés ; et comment ils et elles interprètent leurs propres identités raciales à travers leur chevelure. Nous relions ces récits aux idéaux d'hégémonie raciale blanche qui imprègnent la société. Reconnaissant les expériences de privilège des Ghanéens « mixtes », nous soutenons que l'évaluation de leur blancheur par la population majoritaire n'est pas simple et ne conduit pas les individus « mixtes » à s'identifier comme blancs. Les Ghanéens « mixtes » ont plutôt des expériences fluides en termes de privilèges et de discrimination basées sur le contexte et les interactions.

Mots-clés : cheveux, Ghana, identités « mixtes », racialisation, couleur de peau, politique identitaire, blancheur, colorisme, genre, intersectionnalité

Introduction

> With your colour alone, a lot of people are like 'She is soo pretty, look at her hair, aii! If I had your colour errrh!' That alone makes me feel big and makes me feel that yeah, me too, I have advantages from my colour. People admire me for my colour alone and I am very happy with that. (Amanda, 18-year-old German/Ghanaian woman resident in Ghana)

> You see, growing up I never paid attention to this thing called colour. Yes, I was fair and men like fair women, women with long hair and so on. These things I had so without even trying. I was always getting men expressing interest. (Louisa, 69-year-old British/Ghanaian woman resident in Ghana)

The racialisation of hair and skin colour in Louisa and Amanda's statements above, and the underlying ideology of colourism built within them, set the tone for this article, which throws light on and unpacks ways in which racial meanings are attached to multiracial bodies in Ghana. As we examined

data collected from a study that explored the lived experiences and identity construction of mixed-race Ghanaians, our attention was drawn to the sheer volume of comments made by respondents about their hair. For girls and women, in particular, the handling of hair, especially within the school setting, was often emotive, hotly contested and constructed in such a way that they felt 'othered'. Theoretically, we cannot separate a discussion of hair from its 'owner'; thus, in exploring 'mixedness' (Varro 2008) we draw connections between hair and skin colour. Johnson and Bankhead (2014) have argued that 'hair mediates the effect of skin colour'. An analysis of processes of racialisation should thus pay attention to how discourses surrounding a person's hair are tightly intertwined with other aspects of the person's phenotype, especially her skin colour. Although the article's main focus is on the hair of mixed-race Ghanaians, we include testimonies that throw light on racial meanings and structures of power and privilege given to other corporeal aspects of the mixed-race person, such as skin tone, body shape and facial features. In this article we attempt to show how hair is racialised, and how the present-day Ghanaian racial gaze is influenced by history, colonialism and global beauty ideals.

Contemporary mixed-race Ghanaians, and mixed-race Africans in general, have received little or no research attention, especially with reference to their hair. There is a vast literature on black hair, particularly in the black diaspora (Thomas 2013; Ellis-Hervey *et al*. 2016; Mercer 1987; Johnson and Bankhead 2014; White 2005) and in South Africa (Erasmus 1997; Alubafi, Ramphahlile and Rankoana 2018; Madlela 2018; Netshia n.d). However, less is known about its significance for mixed-race people, especially in Africa. Our paper contributes to scholarship on hair politics and colourism, and to the emerging body of literature on mixed-race Ghanaians (Adomako Ampofo 2004; Darkwah and Adomako Ampofo 2008; Akyeampong 2006).

The existence of an underlying beauty ideal rooted in Ghana's colonial history and Western imperialism, as well as shifting cultural and political influences, affect the way mixed-race Ghanaians manage their hair, navigate their 'otherness' and negotiate their identities during their life. Jemima Pierre (2013) has argued that whiteness is an important site of racialisation in Ghana and a way to demonstrate the sustained global significance of racial hierarchies and white supremacy (Pierre 2013:106). Being associated with white people in a country where the majority population is racialised as black, Ghanaians who are mixed-race are admired and often described as *obroni*, an Akan word which designates people racialised as 'white'

in Ghana, but which currently goes beyond phenotype to include most foreigners of non-African heritage, including black African Americans, Chinese, Lebanese, Syrian migrants and visitors to Ghana.

In addition to various shades of skin colour defined as white in Ghanaian culture, *obroni* refers to a certain lifestyle, way of dressing, financial standing, manner of speaking and social status. The positionality and experiences of mixed-race Ghanaians within this racialised frame of categorisation demonstrate the relevance of studying whiteness in colour and race discourses as it articulates with beauty ideals and aesthetics, social class, social status and gender.

How this ideology affects the identity of mixed-race people in Ghana is also of interest. The introductory quotations by Louisa and Amanda clearly show the interconnections between skin colour, long hair and social perception. In this article, we draw links between mixed-race individuals, their hair and colourism as it plays out in the Ghanaian context, and briefly touch on the phenomenon of skin-bleaching as an aspect of the hegemony of white beauty ideals and their associated effects.

Through the narratives of mixed-race women and some men we illustrate how they identify themselves through their hair type, the politics around how their hair was 'managed' during their childhood, and how Ghanaian society otherises and racialises them through the categorisation of their hair type, school regulations, and the opportunities they derive due to their appearance. The narratives of mixed-race participants show that in Ghana, hair and skin colour are important signifiers that are used to mark difference. We argue, following Pierre (2013), that the current racialisation of mixed-race Ghanaians is linked to the country's colonial history and to contemporary ideals of white racial hegemony that permeate Ghanaian society.

In the next segment of this article, we present background information that sets the context for understanding the positioning of 'mixedness' in Ghana and the embodied experiences of mixed- race Ghanaians. Then we present the theoretical underpinnings and methodology of the study. Thereafter, we examine the research participants' narratives in the light of the literature on black hair, colourism and ideals of beauty and the meanings and perceptions assigned to the hair and skin colour of mixed-race individuals. We discuss four main themes: the racialisation of hair, hair and Afro-centred identity politics, hair regulations and management, and colourism and beauty ideals.

The Positioning of Mixed-Race People in Ghana: Historical Perspectives

The inscribing of mixed-race individuals in Ghana's history is linked to European and British trading interests from as far back as the late fifteenth century. From that period onwards, they became an important part of the coastal landscape, serving as brokers and mediators in the Atlantic slave trade and the colonial economy (Asante 2016). Europeans initially focused on this group for education and training, favouring them over black Africans for jobs. Due to their proximity to the European and British colonisers, they acquired the social capital that gave them access to local structures of power and influence (Lever 1970). Many of their descendants became members of the Gold Coast's professional class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and are an integral part of the contemporary Ghanaian elite (Agyeman and Amoako-Gyampah 2019); several still have Dutch, Danish and German ancestry and surnames.

We may attribute some aspects of contemporary Ghanaian attitudes towards people of mixed racial backgrounds to this historical context. The British and Europeans who traded on the coast did not settle on Ghanaian territory, which was then known as the Gold Coast, yet the children they conceived with local women, who in a way inherited some of their privilege and power through their blood lineage and carried their names, possessed the means and social capital to reach high echelons of society.

It is important to note that the respondents for this study do not directly belong to the social group described above. They are mostly first-generation Ghanaians with one European, Asian or Arab parent, who are all categorised as 'white' in Ghana (Omi and Winant 1994). As shown in the study, mixed-race people with such heritage are seen as a homogenous group of *obroni* in Ghana. In the section that follows, we discuss the theoretical foundations of the study and present the methodology.

Theoretical Underpinnings : Understanding Race and Racialisation

In this section we explain the theoretical concepts we employ, such as race, racialisation and colourism; we justify our use of 'mixed-race' as a concept and a category of identification, and we present our methodology. Discussions that centre around the concept of race require elucidation. Here we enter somewhat murky waters due to the extensive and often contentious discourses around race and concepts derived from it (Hochman 2019; Omi and Winant 1994; Gonzalez-Sobrino and Goss 2019). There are questions around the 'reality' of race, which most scholars perceive to be a social

construction and not a biological given. Following from this, the use of its derived concepts, such as 'racialisation', 'mixed race', 'racial formation', 'biracial' or 'multiracial', is problematic, since 'races' do not exist. Races might not exist, but the term continues to be used and even defended by mixed-race activists (Hall 2007). This is partly because the reality of racism and racial discrimination concretely impacts on the lives of people who are racialised – they are categorised in racial terms by 'gazers' (Paragg 2015). Further complicating the social construct of race is its fluidity, which changes in form and meaning and transforms through space and time (Mahtani and Moreno 2001).

The term 'racialisation' has gained currency in the social sciences mainly because it emphasises the constructed and processual nature of race. In this article, following Gonzales-Sobrino and Goss (2019: 505), we define 'racialisation' as 'the process of conferring racial meaning or identification to social groupings that were previously racially unclassified'. We also agree with Hochman, who claims that it is not races that are formed through the process of racialisation, but racialised groups. This process involves power and power relations: powerful groups racialise 'others', but groups also self-racialise; and self-racialisation may occur in individuals as well as in groups (Hochman 2019). The hierarchisation of groups and individuals based on skin colour involves gazing at others in a process of body 'dissection' (see Fanon 2008; Haritaworn 2009). In her work on mixed-race Canadians, Paragg (2015) also notes the power of the gazer: 'The external racial gaze imposes fixed racial categories onto people who belong to racialised groups. Reading people through "the act of looking" exerts power over the one who is "looked upon" and named (2015:26).

Based on the above lines of reasoning, we seek to throw light on how racial meanings are conferred and recreated on people of mixed-race heritage within the Ghanaian social landscape. Our use of 'mixed race' in this article is also done in full awareness of its contentious nature, and we do not intend to reify race by using the term, knowing that the act of 'naming' a social group as 'mixed race' in fact racialises them. However, we follow the practice in the burgeoning area of mixed-race studies/critical mixed-race studies that actually recognises 'mixed race' as a category of identification connected to identity politics in many places of the world (Daniel *et al.* 2014). We therefore acknowledge the importance of race as a factor of discrimination (Hirsch 2019; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Paragg 2017), as well as the agency of individuals in the performance of their racial identity. As Storrs argues: 'Racial identities are not simply imposed on individuals, but are achieved through interaction, presentation, and manipulation' (1999:200).

In addition to race and racialisation theories, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional theory highlights the complexity of mixed-race Ghanaian participants' lived experiences of privilege and discrimination. Intersectionality, rooted in black feminism, takes into cognisance the articulation of race, ethnicity, social class, nationality, gender, ability, migrant status and religion, and how they interact with and influence each other in individual and group social realities within multiple systems of oppression. Intersectionality is used to theorise the relationships between different forms or axes of power, vulnerabilities and social inequalities, and how they create unique experiences for people (Bilge 2010, 2020).

Our paper draws mainly on race and racialisation theories, and is inspired by intersectional theory, to examine the linkages and interconnections between the experiences of mixed-race Ghanaians. We look at how their race, gender, ethnicity, colour and social class interact to produce complex articulations of privilege and discrimination along axes of power that are grounded in the specific historical continuities and discontinuities afforded by globalisation processes (Rocha and Yeoh 2021). We suggest that being of mixed race in Ghana and having comparatively 'softer' or 'silkier' hair and fair skin creates privileges. However, the participants' embodiment of whiteness might also be experienced as a stigma because of its association with colonial oppression, among university-educated persons who are reflective and articulate about their position in a postcolonial context (Storrs 1999). In addition to Pierre's definition above, we follow Van Zyl-Hermann and Boersema's definition of whiteness, which, while it acknowledges the domination of colonial systems of power based on white hegemony, allows spaces of negotiation and redefinitions grounded in socially situated contexts – what Asante (2016:90) has called 'glocalised whiteness':

> Whiteness is here understood as a configuration of power, privilege and identity consisting of white racialised ideologies and practices, with material and social ramifications. This focus on racialisation and how power and privilege are bound up with the social construction of identity – that is, on the distinct yet connected constitutive elements of whiteness – is an important conceptual move. It allows us to begin to answer questions of how race operates in postcolonial contexts and how its power and meaning-making is contested' (Van Zyl-Hermann and Boersema 2017:652).

As whiteness is not simply valued in a straightforward and univocal way in postcolonial Africa, the embodiment of whiteness in mixed-race participants also creates mitigated approval in society. It intersects with other axes of power (such as class and gender) to create complex sets of privileges and disenfranchisement at micro and macro levels of analysis.

Methodology: Researching Mixed-Race Experiences

A head of hair impacts greatly on an individual's perceived beauty, colour and general self-image. Discourses on hair and ideologies of colourism are often gendered, with the perception that women spend more time and money on caring for their hair, which contributes to their subjectivity as beautiful (Banks 2000; Dosekun 2020; Patton 2006; Phoenix 2014). In this regard, how significant is hair for mixed-race Ghanaians? What meaning is attached to it? What is the role of gender? How does context inform social constructions and perceptions about 'mixed' hair and how does it factor in its racialisation? These are the questions that this article seeks to address.

We found that a qualitative framework was useful in addressing our research objectives, as it allowed us to unearth the lived experiences of mixed-race people[1] regarding the social perceptions of their hair. We collected life histories to delve deeper into individual's lived experiences from childhood to adulthood. This method encourages reflexivity (Bauer and McAdams 2000; Freeman 1993) as it enables the individual to reflect on how s/he is defined, perceived and shaped by social contexts. Through the narrative of participants, our methodology also contributed to illustrating how the Ghanaian population perceives mixed-race Ghanaians.

We used the snowball sampling method to recruit participants, initially through our contacts and networks of mixed-race Ghanaians, who in turn introduced us to others who self-identified as such. The difficulty with finding Ghanaians of mixed race led to a selection of participants from comparatively middle- to upper-class backgrounds. We acknowledge this as a limitation that shaped the type of results we obtained.

The data was collected between June and December 2019. Participants were drawn from different parts of the sixteen regions of Ghana, the majority coming from Accra, Ghana's capital. The data collection was informed by an intersectional lens, in that we paid attention to the entanglements of race, nationality, citizenship, location and gender, whereas the analysis focused on racialisation processes. The themes that were discussed in the interviews covered experiences of growing up as a mixed-race person in Ghana, schooling, life at home, and friends and family including extended family members. Other themes we explored were national affiliation and experiences of citizenship and racial identity. For the purpose of this article, the analysis focuses on perceived skin colour, hair type and texture, hair management, regulatory mechanisms in educational institutions, and issues of inclusion and exclusion.

We conducted a total of twenty-two life-history interviews with individuals who identified themselves as mixed-race persons in Ghana. The age of the participants ranged from as young as twelve to seventy-three. The young ones were interviewed in the presence of their parents after they had voluntarily expressed interest in taking part in the study. Informed consent and voluntary participation were ensured. Many of the participants were students, some were workers and there were a few retirees. We interviewed mainly first-generation mixed individuals; seventeen respondents identified as female[2] and five as male.

Even if four of the five men interviewed in this study made comments about their hair, hair remains a gendered topic and there were attempts at disregarding the issue. For example, the interview with Kobina, a sixty-six-year-old male participant of Lebanese and Ghanaian descent, illustrated the difficulties in addressing this theme with mixed-race men:

> Interviewer: Does your hair give you any advantages?
>
> Kobina: Oh no, I don't think so. Okay well my hair is part of my body, so you never know (laughs).

The above response suggests that, for Kobina, hair is an unnecessary, nonsensical question, possibly alluding to the fact that he did not attach importance to it. Most of our analysis is thus rooted in the narratives of female participants, except for a few insights into identity issues and racialisation processes, which affected both men and women.

Most participants' mothers were racialised as white with the majority of the fathers being identified as black. Ethical clearance was secured for the study from the University of Cape Coast's Institutional Review Board. The data was manually transcribed, coded and analysed using Miles, Huberman and Saldana's (2013) qualitative data analysis framework. We now turn to an analysis of the data, supported by the relevant literature.

Black Hair, 'Mixed' Hair

In the light of the specific history of 'mixedness', we focus on data that examines hair and its significance for black and mixed-race women. We later introduce the notion of colourism in an attempt to show the interconnectedness of the concepts and situate them in the Ghanaian context.

In traditional African societies, from the Ancient Nile Valley civilisations to the movement of Africans to the Western world, hair has been a significant aspect of life, with spiritual, social, cultural and

aesthetic dimensions (Johnson and Bankhead 2014:87). Africans had symbolic hairstyles that were connected to their tribal traditions. In the early fifteenth century, hairstyles in West African societies served as a carrier of messages. Hairstyles could communicate age, marital status, ethnic identity, religion, wealth, rank and geographic region (Byrd and Tharp, cited in Netshia, 2017). These cultural messages were carried over to the diaspora, but were suppressed by slave-owners, who shaved off the hair of enslaved African men upon their arrival because they considered the hair of Africans to be unattractive. The women were made to cover their hair with rough fabric (Johnson and Bankhead 2014). The negative connotations around the dense, tightly curled hair of African peoples and the racialisation of black hair have been traced to this era.

Black hair is a politically charged subject, with hairstyling and haircare routines governed by social, cultural, religious, economic and political factors (Madlela 2018). Hair has been interpreted as one of the most tangible signs of racial difference apart from skin colour (Mercer 1987). Nyamnjoh and Fuh (2014) state that it is linked to personal and social identity, mainly defined by Western ideals, and might be regarded as a form of creativity and expression. It is a complex, multifaceted and politicised issue that intersects with gender, 'race' and class (Erasmus 1997; Thomas 2013). Like skin bleaching, there is a huge multinational industry that supports and fuels hair and its styling, not only within the black world, but globally. Hair is a universal symbol, a way of expressing one's individuality (Ellis-Hervey *et al*. 2016). Women (and men) of all 'races'[3] and ethnic groups can relate to the trials of dealing with their hair, worrying about styling it, colouring it or changing its texture (Thompson 2009).

Racialising Hair, Embodying Whiteness

As observed by Erasmus (1997), hairstyling and hair politics are fluid and ever changing according to sociohistorical processes. Thus, from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the desire for types of silky and straight hair that were acceptable according to white hegemonic beauty standards caused black women the world over to go through a lifetime of making their frizzy hair straighter with the hot comb[4] and, later, through chemical relaxing. These methods of treating hair were widely available, through globalisation and international capitalist trade, including on the African continent and other parts of the African diaspora in the Caribbean and South America. Straightened hair was considered proper, neater and more acceptable within corporate settings and society in general. 'Nappy' or 'frizzy' hair was abhorred (Chapman 2007; Dione

Rosado 2004). Straight hair was seen as an identification with whiteness and provided privilege to people of mixed-race backgrounds, as the following narratives show. In fact, most of the seventeen women involved in the study had a lot to say about the texture of their hair:

> The hair at the back is whiter than the hair at the front which is more kinky, and the middle is like a mixture […] My sister too has it, especially the back hair. It tends to be silkier and then the one in front is kinkier, but generally, like, the general texture of my hair is … I've seen more kinky versions of it and I have seen more of the silky, so I think it's like in the middle sort of. (Lola, 22 years, Ghanaian/Moldovan)

Amanda shared similar views on hair texture. She described her hair as a 'half white and half black' mixture:

> It is kinky, it is curly. Okay I have different hair types with my hair. Actually, this side of my hair is very straight. My mum would say this is *obroni* and mixed race. Then I have some part of my hair very hard. She is like, 'That is your Ghanaian hair'.

Amanda's description of her hair emphasises her mixed ancestry, rooted in a narrative of racialised nationality. Here, hair texture is constructed as an ethnoracial identification marker first by Amanda's mother and then by Amanda herself, who adopts the same pattern of valuation and devaluation of her hair, dissecting her head into the part with Ghanaian racial markers and the part with white ethnicity markers. Defining hair as 'half Ghanaian' and 'half *obroni*' conflates racial ideologies with national identity. It also points to a perceived ethnoracial difference between mother and daughter.

Just as skin colour comes in different shades, hair comes in a variety of textures. Such shades and textures, when racialised, create opportunities for some and vulnerabilities for others. Johnson and Bankhead (2014: 88) argue that mixed-race black individuals in the US were given lighter tasks on the plantations and within the homes of slave-owners due to their comparatively lighter skin colour and 'fine features'. These privileges afforded by whiteness contributed to darker black people valorising lighter skin and sleeker hair as a means of gaining access to social and economic mobility and power (Johnson and Bankhead 2014:88). This perception is grounded in systemic racism and global white supremacist systems and still informs contemporary racial identity performances, such as passing[5] (Ahmed 1999; Storrs 1999).

In the context of postcolonial Ghana, 'silky' hair also opens up privileges associated with whiteness, since it is a white ideal of feminine beauty. For example, twenty-three-year-old Kukua, of Chinese/Ghanaian heritage, living in Ghana, remarked that the texture of her hair plays a major role in

how people perceive her. While she describes herself as having frizzy hair, her brother has 'wavy Chinese hair', but also dark skin. Kukua thus valorises her brother's hair, but it seems to lose some of its potency because his skin is dark and people identify him as Indian, which he dislikes.

Even though whiteness is a category of identification that tends to be broad and inclusive in Ghana, all 'white' groups are not the same and are not positioned equally in the hierarchy of desire. Louisa, the sixty-nine-year-old British/Ghanaian, explains her perspective:

> I just want to say that mixed-race individuals are not the same. European mixed-race are different from Asians, and the Americans. This is because they are of different backgrounds and looks. For example, the looks of a European mixed-race is totally different from the Asian so the experiences might be different. For example, in Ghana we are very much used to the European or American mixed race and not the Asians so if one is asked to choose between the two the former will be preferred.

Like Kukua's brother, fifty-four-year-old Lee, a woman who has a Ghanaian mother and Chinese father, also has very silky and long hair which, she claims, has been inherited by her children (their father is a black Ghanaian). Due to her looks and perceived embodiment of whiteness, as a young girl Lee was exempted from all house chores and was treated as a trophy child, in comparison to her black Ghanaian half-siblings. In this case, social class might have been one of the reasons Lee received favours that her half-siblings did not have. However, only two out of the twenty-seven respondents alluded to class as a factor in racialisation processes. For example, Otolina (thirty-five years old, Ukrainian/Ghanaian) stated that poorly educated Ghanaian women who married white men cultivated a sense of superiority in their children, which fed negative perceptions about mixed-race people in Ghanaian society. In other words, such mothers 'spoiled' their mixed-race children. Otolina implied that white and well-educated Ghanaian mothers tended to be more critical of white privilege and brought up their children 'well', respecting Ghanaian moral standards. Social class thus also emerged as a factor of differentiation in mixed families in Ghana.

Afro Hair, Natural Hair and Afro-Centred Identity

Hair and its styling are symbols of identity and national affiliation African societies and the diaspora. Most of the women and a few of the men we interviewed talked about how they styled their hair. While fifty-eight-year-old Pomaa kept her hair short, Alice wore hers in 'sister locks', a form of

hair locking ('dreadlocks') in which the natural hair locks are smaller in size than the locks popularised by artists such as Bob Marley. Some women had hair extensions. However, they kept their hair, all the styles had a meaning that was very often tied to identity politics. Hairdos were also monitored by parents and institutions such as schools, which added a layer of complexity to the (glocal) politics of hair for mixed-race persons.

The 1960s struggle for social justice through the American Civil Rights Movement led to changes in Black American hair styles. Many Black Americans began styling their hair in what became known as the 'Afro', to celebrate their black identity. This 'natural' hairstyle does not involve the use of chemicals, and goes against practices of hair straightening that were, and still are, widely used. Mercer (1987) argued that black hairstyling may be interpreted as a popular art form that articulates a variety of 'aesthetic solutions' to a range of problems created by ideologies of race and racism. Currently, there is a plethora of hairstyling techniques and styles available for black people globally, ranging from sleek wigs, relaxing creams, cosmetics for natural and braided hair, and artificial and natural hair extensions to create the type of long hair look that is generally associated with 'white' hair. This, of course, is supported by a huge multinational industry for hair products.

The hair question is complex, not simply a matter of the usage of natural versus fake or processed hair; nor is it a straightforward dichotomy between the acceptance of an African (or black) self, versus the internalisation of westernised beauty ideals. Black hair styles keep changing and people have several choices to pick from, making novel looks and identities possible. The question of identity in relation to hair is even more complex when referring to mixed-race individuals who are sometimes identified as black – as in the context of the US – or as white, in postcolonial Africa. In both contexts, however, hair styles facilitate group inclusion or exclusion – sometimes in subtle ways, at other times, more provocatively. As seen above, when one person's hair is categorised as half white and half black, there is always the possibility that people will use the 'other' half to exclude them from their group.

It emerged from the study that age and experience informed how mixed-race people wear or style their hair. Most of the mature female participants had experienced long journeys trying to navigate the various beauty standards, gendered norms and racial ideologies that structured how they perceived and performed their hair. Some had resorted to short natural hair (unprocessed, with no chemicals) and 'sister locks', the neater version of dreadlocks. The oldest participant, Sada (seventy-three years, Ghanaian/

Lebanese) and Pomaa (fifty-eight years) were in this category. Sixty-year-old Alice also maintained locks. The desire for and attention to natural hair can be linked to the natural hair movement that is currently gaining ground in North America and among other diasporic populations in the global West (Craig 2002; White 2005; Johnson and Bankhead 2014)[6] following the valorisation of black and African subjectivities (see for example, the *négritude* movement, Senghor 1966).

Hair was also significant in the male participants' identity. Twenty-three-year-old Katha, who has a Russian mother and a Ghanaian father, had much to say about his hair regarding its texture and styling. He wore an Afro haircut, which he described as being 'more on the African side':

> Interviewer: Do you always wear your hair like that?
>
> Katha: I started wearing it Afro after Senior High School, and then in university … Combing it every day is a lot of work. Because of how kinky it is, it makes it hard to comb. I have to wet it and use cream for it to be easy to comb. But if I comb it every day, it will break.

These ways of men and women performing identity and expressing belonging to a group – in these cases, African and Ghanaian – through hair styles may be attributed to the desire to *appear* more African for mixed-race Ghanaians, whose Ghanaian identity is constantly challenged by the majority black population. As Erasmus said, 'All hair is always worked on, and constantly processed by cultural practices' (Nyamjoh and Fuh 2014: 55); but we could add that it also serves as a means to shape one's body to fit into certain ideologies, thus nurturing politics of belonging.

Hair Regulations in the School Environment: Impact on Mixed-Race Individuals

Another theme that emerged in this study relates to the management of hair in schools. Though the school is a microcosm of society and an environment of regulation, the school context provided a picture of how mixed-race children were othered and racialised based on their hair. This part of their lives was significant in processes of identity construction. Many of the experiences involving participants' hair described in this section took place in boarding schools at the second cycle level, where children live for a good part of their youth and must navigate school regulations on appearance and hygiene as well as social life with their teachers and peers during the day and in the evenings. These were mainly painful experiences that made them aware of their racial 'difference'.

Most schools in Ghana require that all students, male and female, keep their hair natural and short. Sometimes the schools exempt mixed-race children from this regulation on account of their long and/or silky hair. As shown in the narratives, this situation creates tension and friction in peer groups, especially among students who resent the fact that the students who look 'whiter' are exempted from the rule:

> In secondary school there was discrimination even among the mixed-race ooh. Those with very straight hair and Caucasians were asked to keep it whiles those with curly hair like mine were asked to cut it. (Pomaa, 58 years, Irish/Ghanaian)

> Well, uhm, the schools I went to, I always had a lot of trouble with my hair because they've always wanted me to cut my hair and so my parents literally fought for me to keep my hair. So because of that there were a lot of tight restrictions like I always had to tie my hair in a bun, braid it and then tuck it in, like constantly, all the time, so my mom had to know how to do it. (Lola, 22 years, Moldovan/Ghanaian)

> And in JHS [Junior High School] we all had to cut our hair, which was a bit traumatic for me because I put a lot of identity on my hair. Because people used to compliment my hair when I was growing up. So, when it was gone, I felt I had lost something. So, I had short hair for six years, from JHS 1 to SHS 3. (Otolina, 35 years, Ukrainian/Ghanaian)

There are several issues from the above narratives that need to be unpacked. First, it appears that the mixed-race respondents' experiences with their hair were uncomfortable at best, and even, in Otolina's words 'traumatic'. Hair issues seemed to increase the complexity of their everyday hygiene routines, involving several people and various levels of authority. Hair was also significant enough to involve 'fighting' to keep it long, which further differentiated mixed-race students from other black Ghanaian students, who then employed various strategies to punish them for their privilege. On the other hand, the participants unanimously stated that they were referred to as 'white' or '*obroni*' in school and were admired for their hair. This shows that types of hair perceived as 'white' have the potential to become a form of social capital for mixed-race individuals.

Long curly hair represents an advantage in Ghanaian society. It brings status and recognition to its bearer. The straighter the hair, the 'whiter' it is, and the more privilege the mixed-race individual has access to. In the school context, as elsewhere in Ghanaian society, regulations are bent to preserve this form of capital. Even parents are ready to 'fight' against the system to keep the hair of their mixed-race children intact, as it becomes a symbol of the family's wealth, status and prestige. As mentioned, some Ghanaian parents regarded their mixed-race children as their 'trophy children', and

straight, or 'silky' hair became an integrated part of the racialisation of their bodies, as white and Western. Hair is thus part of a racial 'package' that includes skin colour and is associated with moral and intellectual values deemed 'superior', such as higher academic facility, financial wealth and punctuality.

However, possessing mixed ancestry is not enough to put mixed-race children above other children in school. We can see from Pomaa's narrative that there was a hierarchy in the classification of mixed-race children's hair. The longer and straighter the hair, the more privileges the children were given by the school authorities. This hierarchisation of hair based on colour and texture is a form of colourism that takes its root in white Western imperialism, but it is also shaped by the Ghanaian historical context and contemporary immigration landscape. For example, although Chinese entrepreneurs have been established in Ghana since its independence and earlier on the shores of Takoradi, it is only recently that they have started to be otherised as a group (Ho 2012:67). If they were still considered 'white' at the time of the study, the participants' narratives show that Chinese features, such as 'slanted eyes', were increasingly perceived as 'less beautiful' than body features constructed as 'white European'.

Unruly, Thick and Difficult: Managing Mixed-Race Hair

From their study based in the UK, Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) wrote: 'If your hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed, if your hair is nappy, they are not happy.' Their argument reflects how 'black hair' has become a site of postracial social control. Even though the contexts of racial relations in the UK and in Ghana are different, this study resonates with our findings. It appears that in Ghana, where the majority population identifies as black, the citation also applies.

Difficulty in managing the hair of mixed-race individuals emerged strongly in our study. As young children, some experienced painful combing and braiding sessions, mainly by their mothers. However, the evidence collected does not confirm the anecdotal claim in Ghana that white mothers of mixed-race children do not know how to manage their children's hair. Pomaa's white mother braided her hair:

> Interviewer: How did you manage it when you were younger?
>
> Pomaa: With great difficulty, just because my hair used to be extremely thick, quite coarse and it grows rapidly. Always uneven. My mother braided it. I do not know where she learned it from, maybe someone taught her. My hair was very unruly, and I do not think I liked my hair at that time. I wanted it to be more obedient.

In contrast, Emefa (seventeen years' old, with a Ghanaian mother and a white German father), expressed dissatisfaction with the way her mother had handled her hair when she was younger:

> Emefa: My mum did my hair by braiding it or doing a ponytail. She used to comb out my curls. I did not even know I had curly hair because most at times my hair was frizzy and straight and the curls would not really show.
>
> Interviewer: Were you happy with the way your hair was styled as a child?
>
> Emefa*:* As a child I did not really care, but right now, when I think about it, I realise they used to do my hair the wrong way, I ask my mum that 'Mummy why did you not learn about my hair?' And this probably damaged my hair.
>
> Interviewer: So, you think your mum was not competent enough to take care of your hair?
>
> Emefa: I think she did the best she could. At least she did not cut it off. She tried her best to keep my natural hair without perming it.

Both black and white parents, however, faced difficulty in managing the perceived unruly hair of their mixed-race children. For example, sixty-year-old German/Ghanaian Alice, who has a white mother and a Ghanaian father, was impatient with the idea that white mothers are unable to manage the hair of their mixed children. Her mother, like Pomaa's, managed her hair easily, even though work constraints compelled her to frequently delegate the task of braiding her hair to the house-help. As seen, some Ghanaian mothers, such as in the case of Kukua and Emefa, struggled with their daughters' hair. Emefa further reported that her white dad also learned how to do her hair. This is insightful since hair management and styling is very gendered and mostly handled by mothers, whether black or white.

The perceived unruly nature of mixed-race hair reflects a form of mystification of 'black' hair at the global level, and complexifies (and racialises) the idea of competence attached to hair management. White mothers were expected to experience more challenges managing the hair of their mixed-race children, because it is situated beyond their cultural competence. As Louisa contended: 'From my interactions with mixed-race families, I have come to the realisation that if the mother is black, the children are able to learn the language and other traditions faster than when the mother is a white.' However, in reality, black Ghanaian mothers also experienced difficulties. Parents thus had to learn how to navigate 'mixed-race' hair in its complex articulations with identity politics, racial capital, social expectations and institutional rules and regulations.

Having examined issues regarding the hair of mixed-race people in Ghana, we now turn to a discussion of the ways skin colour and mixed-race hair intersect through the framework of colourism.

Hair, Colourism and Beauty Ideals

The correlations between hair, skin colour, identity and beauty ideals emerged strongly in our study. Colourism ideologies reproduced ideals of beauty for mixed-race individuals grounded in white hegemonic standards. Colourism, for Hunter (2007:237), is the 'process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of colour over their dark-skinned counterparts'.[7] The persistence of colourism in Ghana through the centuries is linked to an intricate system that Yaba Blay (2011) and Jemima Pierre (2013) define as 'white supremacy' (the ideology that supports the superiority of white persons) fuelled by 'commodity racism'[8] (Chin 2015). Accordingly, the mixed-race participants' narratives highlighted the advantages of embodying light skin and other phenotypical traits racialised as white in Ghana. Akua, a twenty-six-year-old German/Ghanaian woman had this to say about her skin colour and the status it bestowed on her:

> People call me 'half-caste', like, most at times, I go out with my friends at night and when we go to these fancy, fancy places, funnily enough, they favour the light skin girls more than the black. So, when you get there, they will not even bother to stop us like, 'Oh, you won't enter', they will just open the door and let you enter.

'Fancy, fancy places' here refers to expensive nightclubs in Accra, which are usually policed. Akua revealed that the bouncers do not insist that light-skinned girls adhere to the club's regulations regarding dress code, as the following example shows:

> So, when you get there, you are supposed to wear high heels to enter. Me, knowing I am fair, I can wear sandals and they will allow me in. But let a dark girl wear sandals they won't allow her in.

Interestingly, Akua does not necessarily identify herself as a light-skinned person. She calls her complexion 'chocolate', but others perceive her as a light-skinned person *in relation to* darker-skinned young Ghanaian women. In addition to her complexion, she has 'aquiline' features and 'soft' hair, which has the effect of 'whitening' her skin colour. On the advantages of having light skin, Akua added:

> People around you make you feel like there are advantages to it, they make you know that a majority of the Ghanaian guys now want girls who are light-skinned, so they can have pretty kids or pretty children, features like, maybe

> curly hair, nice nails, feet, all these things. Black men actually think that if you are light-skinned or you are half-breed or anything it is a good thing.

From Akua's narratives, it is clear that, in the Ghanaian context, colourism conveyed social benefits because her skin appears lighter in colour than that of black Ghanaian girls, even though she does not define herself has light-skinned. Her hair texture also contributed to her 'passing' as white(r). Pomaa, Emefa and Chantelle also mentioned that they were often sought by photographers for modelling assignments because of their hair and skin colour. Pomaa has been featured on billboards in Accra.

> Interviewer: Now back to the issue of advertisement. Do you think it is about your skin *colour* or your hair?
>
> Pomaa: Oh, it is my hair … He has been filming me for adverts. My first advert was for a bank. The bank showed him how the person should look like. They gave him a picture of a woman who was not biracial but fair with grey hair. He said he looked and looked. Honestly, I can count the number of women of a certain age with grey.[9] It has been more of my grey hair than my skin colour. If it is about my skin colour, they would have given me a different role. It is always about my hair.

Like Pomaa, seventeen-year-old Emefa has been sought out to model clothing, a situation she perceived as a form of favouritism. She argued, 'I model for some photographer who asked me to model for him; and my friend asked why, and he said: "Oh, she is mixed and I want mixed-race girls to model."' Chantelle reported modelling for an advertisement for a hotel in the country. Thus, young and old mixed-race people secured modelling opportunities as a result of their 'mixedness'. The intersection of the women's skin colour, hair and gender that corresponded to beauty ideals in Ghana became a form of social capital, as it brought them modelling opportunities on the one hand and confirmed the continued normalisation of white dominance on the other hand.

Embodying Whiteness: 'Are the Negatives More than the Positives?'

As seen, the bodies of mixed-race women are the focus of much admiration in Ghanaian society. However, mixed-race individuals are also confronted with discrimination and even bullying. Their racialisation affects different dimensions of their lived realities and shifts depending on social interaction. Chantelle, a nineteen-year-old Ukrainian/Ghanaian, describes an instance when her schoolmates thought she had received high marks because of her skin colour:

> Yes, and I think there was also a time when, I think they made all of us, everybody did bad in an exam, I think I did good and the whole class was angry and attributed my performance to my colour. They argued that they gave me the mark because I was an *obroni*.

Louisa recalls being bullied at school so much that, at one point, she became shy about her skin colour. Selina, a thirty-four-year-old woman whose parents are Lebanese/Ghanaian and Scottish/Ghanaian, had a similar experience:

> Outside my family there was a constant need to belong. I always had to justify that I am a Ghanaian. Schooling was no different. It was quite difficult, especially in secondary school. There were a lot of offensive tags like '*tsoobi*' (doll), 'go to your country', and so on. It got to a point I had a confidence issue. I felt like I do not belong to any of the races.

Selina's narrative shows the downside of privilege for mixed-race individuals in Ghana, where the flip side of admiration is envy:

> There are times that because some view fairness as beautiful, they will give preferential treatment. This same colour attracts negativities like envy and dislike. For example, if two ladies go for a job interview and the lighter one is selected, the obvious thing people will say is that she got selected because of her complexion. Meanwhile it might not be the case. Some see light-skinned women to be morally weak because they are always being chased by men. So, I think sometimes when I think about all these, I am tempted to think that the negatives are more than the positives.

Due to negative experiences in encounters with darker-skinned Ghanaians throughout her life, Louisa reflected:

> Ghanaians are racist. They think all Ghanaians are supposed to be dark-skinned and so, having a mixed one, you do not fit.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the significance of hair for mixed-race Ghanaians living in Ghana at different levels of analysis (micro and macro), and its interconnection with skin colour and paradigms of whiteness. We have looked at how hair is racialised, zooming in on the specific context of the school setting. We have highlighted its importance in performing afrocentric identities. The way parents 'managed' their mixed-race children's hair and their relative racial and cultural competence was also discussed. Finally, we explored how the hair and skin colour of mixed-race women fits into 'glocalised' beauty standards in Ghana, using the perspective of colourism.

Mixed-race people in Ghana were referred to as *obroni*. The data shows that whiteness is constructed in particular ways that are not all positive. It is attributed to, and valued in, mixed-race bodies differently, depending on context and social interaction. The variety in treatment meted out to some mixed-race individuals could be interpreted as the reflection of a complex and uneasy relationship between Ghanaians with groups of people they racialise as white. The dark-skinned Ghanaians' gaze towards mixed-race persons tends to reproduce the category 'white people' and its inherent power relations, possibly exacerbating the ambivalences, difficulties and complexities from the colonial past and the contemporary problems of underdevelopment and foreign aid. In this study, the racialisation of mixed-race people was based on appearance, and was mainly produced through discourses and practices focused on hair type and skin colour. Other non-physical traits associated with whiteness included financial wealth and beauty, but also, questionable morals, in particular when applied to women.

The mixed-race participants thus grappled with different aspects of their racialisation experience, often informed by Western beauty ideals. In Ghana, they differently embodied the symbolism of white supremacy, some of them being next to white foreigners of European origin in the hierarchy, while others were not considered more special than black Ghanaians, mainly due to their darker skin tone or the 'frizziness' of their hair. In school, where 'othering' processes played out clearly, they were both favoured and traumatised by their hair experiences. Although most Ghanaian mixed-race participants enjoyed being admired for their hair and skin colour, they also received opprobrium and discrimination, particularly when they were given preferential treatment.

The mixed-race participants in our study found themselves in an ambiguous position in reference to the category of *obroni* in Ghana, because they embodied whiteness to varying degrees. Their skin colour and hair texture were central to their positioning in this hierarchy of white privilege. Some accepted their position of privilege and self-racialised as *obroni*, whereas others detested the term and reacted against it regularly, especially when their Ghanaianness was probed and contested. Intersections based on class, nationality and colour, as well as the age and level of education of respondents, informed the degree of reflexivity found in their narratives.

We have attempted to situate the racialisation of mixed-race people within Ghana's history of colonisation by white Europeans. The Ghanaian admiration of fair skin and both their desire for and hatred of mixed-race individuals derive from the colonial legacy and its subsequent engendering of a worldview of white superiority and power. This situation is reinforced

by global racialisation processes, identity politics, civil rights movements and the vast international cosmetic industry, which has created products that enable people with dark skin to 'lighten up', process their hair in a wide variety of ways, and transform themselves into people of lighter complexion, and enjoy the related societal benefits. Mixed-race individuals fit into these dynamics in ambiguous and complex ways.

The racialisation of the Ghanaian mixed-race participants in our study intersected with colourism, complexifying their access to privilege and power, especially because it is informed by the immediate comparison of individuals' skin tones and hair textures.[10] However, the reality of white racial hegemony made them aware that their *obroni* status in Ghana is a construction that does not necessary hold in the global setting. In fact, all participants stated that while in Ghana they were labelled as *obroni*, they were racialised as black or coloured when they travelled to Western countries and thus lost the privileges attached to their perceived whiteness.

We hope that our paper, in this era of #BlackLivesMatter and black racial consciousness-raising, contributes to interrogate the concept of 'race' and disrupt its fixedness in a 'black society' like Ghana, where ethnicity holds sway. Similar to Jemima Pierre's work (2013) on the 'predicament of blackness', our paper draws attention to the global political economy of race and racialised processes where white privilege, power and supremacy continue to reign and shape the rest of the world. As Rocha and Yeoh contend:

> Mixed-race racisms and racialisation processes bring into focus the untidiness of race as a concept that is continually redrawn by the interplay between fixed hierarchical notions of race on the one hand and the fluidity of intermixing inherent in mixed-race identifications on the other (Rocha and Yeoh 2021:6).

Notes

1. Mixed-race people in this paper refers to the progeny of phenotypically white, Asian or Arab people and black Ghanaians.
2. We are conscious of the bias that arises from interviewing a majority of female participants. Narratives on the themes of perceptions and types of discrimination indicated that there might be a marked discrepancy in the lived experience of men and women, as supported by the literature on the topic (Bettez 2010; Joseph Salisbury 2019; Lafond 2009).
3. We are fully aware that 'race' is a social construct and not a valid category of analysis. This has been paraphrased from Thompson 2009.
4. In fact, one of the study participants now aged 60 recalls using the hot comb as an adolescent.

5. The situation whereby a light-skinned person of black heritage chooses to integrate in and identify with white social groups.
6. There are several Internet sites on You Tube and Pinterest that inform the reader about natural hair. On trends in West Africa, see for example http://www.beautygeekng.com/2017/03/20/7-nigerian-natural-hair-bloggersvloggers-know. Retrieved 13 June 2020.
7. Charles (2012) has pointed out that colourism also occurs among whites.
8. Chin (2015) explains 'commodity racism' as a system in which race and commodities mutually reinforce each other.
9. Pomaa's statement refers to the fact that many older middle-class women in Ghana tend not to 'show' their grey hair, preferring to dye it, or wear wigs or extensions that cover their grey hair.
10. There are other factors that could combine in an unequal, discriminatory colourist system (such as body size, social class, wealth, level of education), which this study does not consider.

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