

## Chapter 5

### Performing Black beauty: the Congolese Community in London

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#### Abstract

Drawing on an ethnographic study of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, this chapter addresses the ways in which a diasporic form of individual and collective representation of Congolese values and norms are actively re-produced and mediated, and how the young London Congolese use the cultural practice to debate everyday concerns affecting their community and the Black African diasporas at large. The paper demonstrates the significance of performance as a cultural vehicle that facilitates young Congolese to negotiate with their own cultural traditions and the imagination of homeland in the context of postcolonial displacement, and disturbs conservative beliefs perpetuated by African elders, tackling, and advancing controversial disputes regarding Black African women's rights, gender equality and socio-cultural stigmas. Additionally, the pageant disseminates notions of Black beauty and the 'natural' body, offering an Afro-diasporic alternative to the cultural representation of beauty dominated by Euro-Western aesthetic discourse. In conclusion, the *Miss Congo UK* becomes a meaningful site where 'new' racial, ethnic and gender identities are bodily articulated and the configuration of a forward-thinking mentality characterising the younger Congolese community in London is displayed.

#### Introduction

The chapter examines the cultural practice of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, aiming to reveal the dynamic socio-cultural and political meanings embedded within it. The case study highlights two major issues of investigation. Firstly, it demonstrates how the young London Congolese produce a contemporary form of cultural representation of 'traditional' Congolese customs and values and display a transnational and 'imaginary' sense of belonging to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Secondly, it illustrates how the cultural practice is transformed into an arena where everyday concerns affecting the young London Congolese and other Black African diasporas are expressed. The pageant arena serves to contest conservative beliefs perpetuated by elders, tackling and advancing controversial disputes regarding Black African women's rights, gender equality and socio-cultural stigmas. Additionally, notions of Black beauty and the 'natural' body are embraced as alternatives to conventional Western beauty ideals. Therefore, the meaningful and contradictory site of *Miss Congo UK* enables the public performance of 'new' racial, ethnic and gender identities and the configuration of a progressive mentality among young London Congolese.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first main section discusses the transformation of beauty competitions into sites of identity production and cultural agency, especially among minority groups. Next, it introduces the Congolese migration to the UK and settlement in London, and the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* as a major activity of the communities. The methodology used is also introduced. The main part of the chapter is devoted to a fine-grained ethnography and in-depth analysis of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* final gala night of the 2017 competition. It pays particular attention to some of the rituals incorporated in the show's segments and performed on stage by young contestants and other performers.

### **Performing beauty as a process of cultural production**

Beauty pageants represent an extremely popular phenomenon that span many different countries at a local, national, and international level, and acquire standard characteristics within the most diverse societies and cultures (Cohen *et al.*, 1996). A similar format is followed, usually once a year. It begins with a process of selection of the participants, who then embark upon a period of rehearsal until the final public event where each contestant performs and is judged in front of an audience. The winner is finally selected to serve as a symbolic representation of the community's or nation's collective identity during the following year.

The rich and interdisciplinary literature on beauty pageants points out how these competitions should be considered not merely as forms of entertainment, but as dynamic places where specific socio-cultural groups define, modify, and represent their cultural meanings (King O'Riain, 2008). Drawing on thirteen beauty pageant case studies from very different cultural contexts worldwide, Cohen *et al.* (1996) argue that pageants have a controversial nature, evoking passionate interest and engagement with political issues: 'struggles over beauty contests are also struggles over the power to control and contain meanings mapped onto the bodies of competitors' (Cohen *et al.*, 1996: 9). Similarly, Banet-Weiser's work on pageants in the USA highlights how these are 'profoundly political arena[s], in the sense that the presentation and reinvention of femininity that takes place on the beauty pageant stage produces political subjects' (Banet-Weiser, 1999: 3).

Beauty pageants are thus very interesting cultural sites where local identity and culture are publicly performed and made visible (Cohen *et al.*, 1996), where meanings of race, ethnicity (Craig, 2002), class, gender, and nationalism are rearticulated, and where conceptions of conventional, nationalised ‘femininity’ and idealised ‘beautiful’ bodies are reflected (Balogun, 2012). Pageants also provide a discursive space to produce moral, religious (Faria, 2010) and global dynamics (Crawford *et al.*, 2008). It is not surprising that national and international beauty contests have frequently represented sites of controversy, often being interpreted as cultural forms of oppression both in Western and non-Western countries (King O’Riain, 2008). Some studies emphasise the objectification and commodification of women’s bodies. These see pageants as exploitative spaces of profit-making that perpetuate patriarchal images of unrealistic beauty and bodily appearances and that indicate a loss of women’s purity and modesty (Faludi, 1992).

While the potentially damaging consequences and well-argued critiques embedded within the beauty pageant spectacle should be taken seriously, the culture, time, and context in which these competitions take place must also be considered. Pageants can be received in conflicting ways among diverse societies within different individual and collective circumstances (Crawford *et al.*, 2008). Beauty contests featuring numerous racial, ethnic, and diasporic communities, organised by and for individuals who belong to those specific minority groups, can become valuable vehicles in rearticulating cultural authenticity and difference (McAllister, 1996).

Maxine Leeds Craig, in *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Craig, 2002), highlights that African American beauty pageants in the 1960s represented fundamental sites of cultural agency, where notions of Black beauty were directly used as a counter-response to dominant representations of Western beauty. Pageants served as arenas for Black African women to contest centuries of stereotypically racist depictions of them as ugly, vulgar, and sexually available (Craig, 2002). The display of their natural beauty, that put Blackness and African ‘authenticity’ at its centre, developed as part of the symbolic repertoire against racial exclusion and the assertion of racial difference (Faria, 2010).

The mushrooming of beauty competitions among diasporic minority groups similarly resulted from an active reaction against the exclusion experienced in host societies. These competitions stood as a validation that ethnic women and their cultures should be considered equally beautiful to women belonging to dominant cultures. Pageants were produced for symbolic resistance and to claim greater acceptance (Faria, 2010). Organisers, participants, and audiences belonging to the same racial, ethnic, or national group have frequently experienced beauty competitions as cultural forms which imaginatively express a connection to their distant, original homelands, and display ‘authenticity’ (Mani, 2006). The pageant can be defined as ‘a local adaptation, a refashioning of a dominant cultural form to the particular needs for representation within the community’ (Borland, 1996: 75). Diasporic transnational beauty competitions particularly operate to reproduce socio-cultural norms involving gendered, racial, and ethnic ideals and to raise awareness around cultural identity stories while revealing internal conflicts and differences between diasporas (Faria, 2010). The performance of beauty contests deserves, therefore, to be analysed at the local level and in connection with those specificities that characterise each social group (Crawford *et al.*, 2008).

It is within this background that Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK is analysed. The Congolese pageant represents not a mere runway performance where young Congolese women are judged on their beauty, but rather a safe public sphere where young participants are able to voice their individual everyday experiences, interests, and ambitions, and where the audience can reflect on ordinary social life issues affecting their own communities. It involves a participant selection process, an intense training period, and a final public event ending with the queen’s coronation. During the castings, participants are interviewed both in groups and individually and selected only if they can show genuine interest in wanting to know more about their cultural heritage and getting involved with community work. The training process, usually spanning a period of three months preceding the final event, involves a series of workshops to prepare the contestants for the final show, mainly aiming at motivating the personal development of the young participants. These activities include dance classes, life and self-confidence coaching sessions as well as educational lectures on the history, culture, and politics of the DRC.

## **Congolese Migration to the UK and Settlement in London**

Compared to Anglophone Black African diasporas, the history of Congolese migration to the UK for political reasons is a more recent phenomenon: it began in the late 1980s and reached its highest level in the 1990s and 2000s. The collapse of the state followed by the overthrow of Mobutu's regime by L. D. Kabila's armed rebellion in 1997, the Second Congo War (1998–2003), and the implementation of very restricted immigration policies in Belgium, France and Switzerland brought many Congolese to seek asylum in the UK. Furthermore, the UK became the major destination for other Congolese groups. These 'Euro-Congolese', mostly from France, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Spain, saw the UK as a less discriminatory environment and with a better labour market (Garbin and Pampu, 2009).

Although remaining a 'minority within a minority' compared to Anglophone Black African groups linked to British colonial history, the Congolese community<sup>1</sup> represent the biggest Francophone African group among the Central and Western Francophone African groups, settled in the country (Garbin, 2014). The two oldest districts to have hosted the highest number of Congolese are Tottenham in north London and Newham in east London (Styan, 2003). However, the community has progressively expanded in many other neighbourhoods of north, east and south London (Pachi et al., 2010).

### Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK

To analyse the Congolese, London-based, annual beauty competition *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, the chapter<sup>2</sup> applies a multi-sited ethnographic approach, advocated by George Marcus, which traces 'a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity' (Marcus, 1995). In so doing, it follows *people* (young migrants); *things* (fashion garments), *metaphors* (signs, symbols, and images), *stories* (memories and everyday life narratives), *lives* and *biographies*, and *conflicts* related to the beauty pageant. Observational written field notes, mainly taken during other community events and gatherings, and face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup> were combined with virtual fieldwork, involving the analysis of data collected from a variety of media sources, such as social networking spaces, web channels and weblogs. The multi-sited approach suits well the investigation of young diasporic individuals' everyday lives in London since they are increasingly mobile, live in many places without having specific areas of gathering and their cultural events are often temporary, short-lived phenomena, spanning across the metropolis.

The community event, which takes place every year, is today organised and promoted by its main founder Luke, owner of *Disk and Jockey Entertainment*, a Congolese events

management company. Luke is a thirty-three-year-old Congolese who describes himself as ‘an entrepreneur, a businessman, an event organiser’, who is also the founder of the *Voice of Congo*, a Congolese diaspora-based web news platform. The beauty competition was initially held in conjunction with the Congo annual independence celebration on the evening of 30 June. It was only from 2013 that the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* became a community event per se. Up to the present day, the organisational team is composed by a small group of young London Congolese men and women. These are considered to be intellectual experts in their fields and successful professional figures within the young community. Along with Luke, they lead the casting and training process of the pageant as well as participating in the final event either as performers, hosts, or judges.

The event has significantly been cast by research informants as a ‘cultural pageant’, insisting mainly on the intellectual dimension of the contest, in order to portray a well-educated, middle-class and open-minded trajectory of the communities. Such interpretation was made very clear to the contestants from the casting process documented in the *Official Miss Congo UK* YouTube channel. As expressed by one of the organisers, Vava Tampa, a community political activist founder of the charity *Save the Congo*:

‘*Miss Congo* is definitely not just about you being pretty, believe me we had so many pretty girls applying. We want more than prettiness, we want substance! So here are a couple of hints: you need to be informed and aware of what is going on across the world, you should mention watching the news and read papers, learn about new Congolese stuff! This is gonna be beyond being gorgeous and ‘having the body’ or being ‘pretty’, is gonna be beyond all of that! You need to have what people say in French – and forgive me because I am gonna sound very colonial – the *bagage intellectuel* (intellectual baggage, knowledge). This is gonna be about bringing that *bagage intellectuel* which can also simply mean ‘having something in your mind’. So just go home and look around and be sure to come back and bring that here!’ (Official Miss Congo, 2017).

In accordance with this, during the training process, organisers were mostly oriented to stimulate candidates’ intellectual abilities and to assess young women’s determination to become active agents of improvement both in the London diaspora and back home. Contestants were offered educational lectures on the history, culture, and politics of the DRC, with the aim of expanding young women’s knowledge and passion about their Congolese heritage. In Luke’s words in interview: ‘we want to teach them everything they need to know on the Congo’ (Interview: 21 April 2017). This was also evidenced by Vava on the *Official Miss Congo UK* YouTube channel: ‘only when you understand your story, your history, where you come from, where you were before, only when you enter that image it becomes

much easier to kind of dream large and big and to sort of being “confident” (Official Miss Congo, 2017).

### Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017 final gala night

The *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017* final gala night was held in the ‘prestigious’ Stratford Town Hall venue, in Newham, on the evening of 1 April, from 7pm to 12am. It was promoted on the official pageant on–line booklet as: ‘A gala night to celebrate Congolese beauty and empower Congolese women. One of the most prestigious African beauty pageants in Europe’, involving ‘beauty, knowledge, power, talent and culture’.

It featured nine young Congolese women between eighteen and twenty–five years of age, who were mainly university students settled in London. Very few of them were born in the DRC and only one was born in London. The majority were born and grew up in other European countries such as France, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Germany before moving to London, and had never visited the DRC.

The event was sold out and attended by both generations of London Congolese. These were mainly family members and friends as well as community leaders and businesspeople who had come to support contestants for the title. Members of the audience also included individuals from other Black/African diasporas such as Nigerians, Ghanaians, African–Caribbean, Ugandans, and Sierra Leoneans.

The final gala night followed a standard format of segments similar to other beauty pageants: traditional dress catwalks, a talent show, questions and answers, and an evening gown catwalk ending with the winner’s coronation. In addition to the young contestants’ appearances, performances, and speeches, music concerts and a poetry recital also took place, together with short speeches by the former *Miss Congo UK*, other African beauty queens, members of the audience and those promoting upcoming Congolese events.

### Embodying Racial and Ethnic ‘authenticity’

The pageant talent show segment was opened by thirty–one–year–old British Congolese man JJ Bola. He is a well–established poet, writer, educator, and political activist of the young community and that evening he performed one of his spoken word pieces, *Something Beautiful*:

‘Something beautiful is happening.

Right here, right now, in this room.  
 Lifting the gloom from our consciousness,  
 (...)

Something beautiful is happening.  
 (...)

I dreamed, when I was two, my grandmother sat me  
 on her knee and *said mokili oyo ezali ya yo  
 na maloba na yo oko komisa yango kitoko.*<sup>4</sup>  
 And just like you, I didn't understand what was  
 she said, but the feeling stayed with me  
 and when I got older, I asked my father and he  
 replied your grandmother talked because she  
 didn't have much time left.  
 I haven't seen her since,  
 but wherever she is, she stays with me.  
 A woman that I never knew.  
 On that day,  
 something beautiful happened.  
 When I first wrote poetry,  
 (...)

I knew both where I was going  
 and where I had come from.  
 Where I belong,  
 (...)

Because like the universe, I am mostly darkness,  
 and darkness dwells alone,  
 in the corners of dimly lit rooms  
 or the backs of your mind.  
 Darkness is unknown, undiscovered,  
 Unrelenting' (Bola, 2015).

The piece is taken from JJ Bola's poetry collection entitled WORD. It reflects a story of self-discovery: from the dreamed attachment to the homeland where he encounters his Congolese grandmother in his imagination, to his perpetual search for identity in conversation with his Congolese father in London. He is aware of having partially lost his Congolese, Black African roots, highlighting his inability to understand the native language, Lingala, expressing the problem to many other young Congolese in the audience who probably share similar feelings. The figure of his grandmother could also be interpreted as a metaphorical reference to the 'myth of Mama Africa', the collective idea that the ancestral African continent exists as a nurturing spirit inside every Black individual (de Santana Pinho, 2010). The poem plays a symbolic connecting role with African cultural memories while also echoing a conflicting 'double consciousness' (Du Bois, 1903), of being both Black African and British in one body. JJ Bola's performance during the pageant could be described as a



multi-sensory experience, emphasised by his tall and strong bodily presence, the escalation and sudden drop of the tone of his voice, the very fast or very concise pace of his reading, and the gesture of his right hand often close to the chest. In so doing, JJ Bola probably aimed to resonate a collective transnational narrative, performing for the Black African communities, defining his own racial and ethnic identities (Craig, 2002).

Once JJ Bola left the stage, the nine contestants were then individually reintroduced by the hosts for the talent show segment. Each young woman was allotted fifteen to twenty-five minutes to perform their acts, elaborated and rehearsed during the training. These ranged from singing to spoken word poetry, and stand-up comedy to dramatic monologue.<sup>5</sup> During the question-and-answer segment (Figure 1), judges addressed questions to each contestant mostly concerning the homeland, such as history, geography, politics, religion, gender empowerment, cultural production, charitable work, and future plans. Some contenders were asked, for instance, to give the number and the names of all the neighbouring states bordering with the DRC, to explain the reasons for the geographical proximity of the capital of the DRC (Kinshasa) and the capital of the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville),<sup>6</sup> while others were asked to give personal opinions on why the DRC has not yet had a woman as President or describe who was the religious leader, Kimpa Vita.<sup>7</sup> The last common question addressed to all was to explain individual action plans if they were crowned as winners.



Figurer 5.1: Contestants on stage during the question-and-answer segment. (Photo credit Letitia Kamayi).

The pageant segments described above clearly attempted to present a night of cultural ‘authenticity’ (McAllister, 1996), with the ‘authentic’ notion relating to how cultural identities are constructed in the present (Schackt, 2005). Sets of traditional Congolese cultural practices and knowledge, such as the display of folk fashion clothes, dance movements, poetry enacted and discussions of key information regarding the homeland, were ‘preserved’ and ‘reinvigorated’ (Schackt, 2005) by the contestants and other performers, and exercised within a communal gaze (King O’Riain, 2008).

In displaying a spectacle that had many ‘authentic’ elements of the Congolese heritage, organisers and performers satisfied audience expectations that they were taking part in an ‘originary’ story. The staged performance of racialised and ethnicised bodies became allegorical signifiers of a Congolese cultural identity as well as of a communal Black African selfhood. The finals were designed to represent and celebrate the very essence of what it means to be Congolese, African and Black in the diaspora, and therefore produced as a vehicle to reclaim a transnational narrative of everyday experiences.

### **Crowning a Queen with ‘A Cause to Fight For’: A Symbolic Statement Towards A Cultural Change**

With a throne in the middle of the stage, the contest concluded as all pageant organisers, judges, former *Miss Congo UK* winners, other beauty queens and hosts clambered on stage to announce the final results. Twenty-two-year-old student Horcelie Sinda Wa Mbongo was proclaimed as the new queen, becoming the new ‘ambassador’ of the young Congolese community. Significantly, the final public crowning of *Miss Congo UK 2017* symbolised a strong socio-cultural and political gesture. Being affected by the HIV virus and well-focused on her ‘cause to fight for’, the winner embodied a quite controversial mentality and cultural shift among young London Congolese. The queen was chosen not only as a symbol of ‘authentic’ culture but also as a symbol of cultural progress.

During the talent show segment of the finals, Horcelie had performed a semi-autobiographical play, written by herself (Figure 2). The play was set in a secondary school in Kinshasa and was acted out in collaboration with two other seventeen-year-old Black African girls, affiliated to Horcelie’s church. The first scene included the appearance into the ballroom of the Townhall and on stage of the three young women interpreting fifteen-year-old classmates during an ordinary day at school. They were all dressed in female school uniforms composed of white shirts and knee length dark blue skirts. The play’s dialogue

revealed that the young girl played by Horcelie was experiencing verbal abuse and discrimination for her health condition by the two schoolmates.

The second scene of the play portrayed Horcelie reciting a monologue, *The gift of time as suffering*:

‘The daytime stood still was the day I knew myself well. It was then I saw everything I missed (...) Time treats us all differently. For some kindly and others harshly (...) And forgiveness (...) When time is asking you and I to forgive it is difficult to surrender to it freely. But even if it means crying, I must cry. Even if it means dying, I must die (...) Time whispered in my ears, though they’ve done you wrong you must forgive (...) *Kombo na nga Horcelie. Ba boti na nga ba kolisa nga na maloba oyo; kozongisa mabe na mabe te. Libisa ba oyo ba sala yo mabe. Mwana tango abotamaka na pasi ayebaka pasi te.*<sup>8</sup> (...) In this human life pain is inevitable but a gift to the human soul. A gift to the wise, a gift to the poor, a gift of mine. This innocent cry of a new-born child is my new beginning, the definition of my name.

Hi, my name is Horcelie Sinda Wa Mbongo and I am one among other 2.5 million children in Africa that were born HIV positive. My bravery is not telling you that I am positive, but my bravery is that I chose to live as HIV positive woman (...).



Figure 5.2 Horcelie’s performance of a semi-autobiographical play written by herself. (Photo credit Letitia Kamayi).

Horcelie's performance aimed to describe the everyday experiences, characterised by many difficulties, of living with HIV in Africa and among its diasporas. It emphasised how HIV positive Congolese and Black African individuals are still victims of a deep social stigma which results in bullying and discriminatory behaviour, bringing suffering and isolation from a young age. Horcelie's final poem also embodied a spiritual message, referring to the role played by Christian beliefs in her life and the significance of learning how to truly forgive. Performing on stage, in her own narrative, became a form of prayer.

In the play, Horcelie alluded more precisely to her own childhood experience of social discrimination in the DRC. She remembered what school peers have said or done to her during childhood when she was not aware of her condition.

'We had no idea I was positive, but some spots started to appear on my skin (...) I went to school, and (...) when you are early for school in the Congo you have to (...) stand beside one girl or one boy and wait to get in (...) Nobody wanted to stand next to me and they were saying stuff about my spots and they thought they would catch the same and they did not want any contact with me (...) I had to stay at home (...) until all the spots kind of disappeared. I did no blood test in the Congo; I don't know if it was because my mum couldn't afford it or because everyone kept telling me that it was nothing (...). So, traditionally they would take a (...) yellow rock and they would crash it down to make a sort of yellow liquid and they would add water and other herbal stuff. (...) they put this cream onto my skin and the spots surprisingly disappeared (...). Only when I grew up, I realised the reason why I had those spots on my skin' (Interview: 19 June 2017).

Similar memories of verbal and physical segregation experienced in the Congo were evoked in the first scene of the play, when the two classmates derogatively described Horcelie's character as 'the girl with AIDS', mentioning that they had to wash their hands after touching her or to avoid touching or speaking to her for fear of catching the disease. Significantly, the spectacle of the pageant represented a platform to finally disclose her disease to friends and relatives who were not aware of it. Some discovered Horcelie's story at the finals and others after hearing her interviews with Africa BBC and BBC Afrique. These online reports were discussed internationally, not only in the UK but also in Denmark, Michigan (US), Makurdi (Nigeria), Sierra Leone, Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) and Doha (Qatar).

Horcelie is today a health and HIV and AIDS campaigner within the Black African diaspora in London. The beauty pageant represented a battlefield for Horcelie to articulate cultural and political agency. Winning it and being in the 'spotlight' for some time acted as a reinforced springboard for her campaign on raising local and global awareness of AIDS and HIV and

speaking about her story. She is now actively participating in talk shows, volunteering activities and church cultural events organised by and outside the community in London, Manchester, Birmingham, etc. Her story and activism were featured in Black African and other magazines, for example *Mambo* (Figure 3), as part of HIV Prevention campaigns in England.



Figure 5.3. Horcelie featured on magazines as a health and HIV and AIDS campaigner (Image credit *Mambo Magazine*).

Furthermore, in 2018, Horcelie founded a Congolese health and wellbeing community organisation, *Lobiko ya Congo*,<sup>9</sup> based on educational lectures to open the discussion not only on HIV/AIDS but also on mental health, sickle cell disease, diabetes, disabilities, etc, which affect the Black African diaspora. Horcelie's symbolic coronation at the pageant as a leading 'ambassador' of the young London Congolese community signified a willingness from the organisers and judges to trace a counter-story on how to deal with HIV/AIDS and other

health issues, therefore portraying a forward-thinking narrative of the young London Congolese community.

### **Questioning the Community' Ideologies and Trying to Subvert Global Standards of Beauty**

In opposition to many national and international pageants which request participants to meet quantifiable bodily measurements, such as specific heights, weights and sizes, bodily specifications were one of the least important aspects required to participate in *Miss Congo UK* and to be selected as queen of the year. The Congolese competition thereby criticised the strict boundaries placed on women's bodies in standard pageants (Oberhauser *et al.*, 2017), indicating that international beauty concepts should include a broader variety of appearance ideals (Balogun, 2012). As testified by the experience of Anna, one of the pageant participants I interviewed: 'I am 5'10 and quite curvy and I am not typically model or pageant material' (Interview: 15 April 2017).

Although Anna was the only young Congolese woman with a curvaceous body, while all the other contestants were relatively slim, tall, and sporty, her presence, and the claimed openness towards other women with similar shaped bodies, demonstrated the willingness of the organisers to promote diversity and naturalness. Because cultural aspects were central to the pageant, young women were not excluded based on their looks, nor selected for their 'thinness and tallness', but rather for their interest in appreciating their Congolese background and actively influencing a progressive mentality within the community. As testified by Horcelie in her interview: 'we were all different body sizes and that's what Miss Congo is trying to show (...) We had curvy girls, we had some short girls, and I am also not tall enough to be a model. [The pageant] mostly [focuses] on how much you want to know about your own community' (Interview: 19 June 2017).

Importantly, *Miss Congo UK's* inclusivity sought to push forward the community's ideologies on beauty expectations. In conversation with other contestants, it emerged that, until recently, the Congolese diaspora's preferences with regard to women's appearances have been deeply influenced by Western criteria of beauty, not only concerning body measurements, but also regarding other physical attributes such as skin tonality and hair texture and colour. According to Lucrèce, the winner of the 2016 competition, women with 'fair skin and straight hair' have always been considered 'more beautiful and attractive' in the DRC and the Congolese European diasporas: 'mixed race girls, especially mixed with

Whites, have usually been favourite!’ (Interview: 25 May 2017). For this reason, older generations of Congolese women and men would commonly bleach their skin using very popular cream products.

In this regard, during the talent segment, young Congolese contestant Victoria Bangu, performed a poem entitled *You are pretty, but...*, which targeted the skin lightening issue. Its symbolic socio-cultural and political message was to openly persuade the Black African members of the audience to be proud of the beauty of their skin and of their ‘Blackness’ as a whole. Victoria opened her talent act by highlighting to everyone that ‘no matter what shade you are, you should always know that you are beautiful!’ and she continued to recite:

“‘You are pretty, but... you’d be prettier if you was lighter!’” he said to me. – I was sixteen then, I am now twenty-four, but those very words are haunting me for the longest of time. – Why is everyone in the Congolese community trying to be yellow? (...) For you see, no matter how light you become and (...) what your tone, your kids when you birth them *bako funda yo!*<sup>10</sup> – How are we to raise our daughters and our sons to appreciate their melanin, (...) the skin they are in, if we’re yet to understand that beauty is not defined solely by the shade your skin is in (...) ‘cause you’re Black, Black is beautiful to a shade that is unrecognisable. For we are coming newer shades, let’s embrace it, proclaim it!’ (Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK, 2017).

In accordance with Victoria’s performance, several studies demonstrate that skin whitening is a widespread habit which extends across races, ethnicities, gender, and age. The use of bleaching cosmetics aims to reduce or interrupt the physiological production of the melanic pigmentation of the natural skin (Abraham, 2017). Despite the severe side effects resulting from the use of skin lightening products, the practice is extensively used in numerous African countries, especially among the dark-skinned sub-Saharan African population and Black African diasporas in the West (Petit *et al.*, 2006).

This very complex habit results from the collective cultural assumption that, as expressed by Lucrece, ‘lighter skin is better than darker skin’, (Interview: 25 May 2017). Giovanni Vassallo underlines that the mass consumption of expensive bleaching cosmetics in the DRC indicates that a big section of the population seems to believe that ‘whiter’ is ‘more beautiful and healthier’, with light-skinned pop stars such as Beyoncé often taken as a reference point (Vassallo, 2011). These cultural beliefs are deeply reinforced by billboard advertising, print and electronic media messages in Africa which still often portray White-skinned individuals as ‘icons’ of beauty (de Souza, 2008). Thus, the percentage of Congolese people who have experienced collateral effects from voluntary de-pigmentation is very high (Vassallo, 2011).

Contributing factors to the spread of the concept of skin bleaching throughout the African continent and its diasporas can be found in history and, consequently, in individuals' cultural memories. During the slave trade and colonisation, White supremacist and hegemonic ideologies, based on the assumption that Western cultures were 'racially superior' to other cultures and dark skin had an 'inferior' social meaning, strongly shaped a 'colour caste system' (White, 2005: 295) which divided social groups, where an order 'from high to low parallels the skin colour from light to dark' (Westerhof, 1997: 574). Next to Whites in the social structure, were (and still are) mixed-race individuals, estimated to be of a superior class to the full-blooded Africans (Cooper, 2016). These ideas persist among the Congolese and endorse 'a hierarchy that suggests the more European one's features – the lighter one's skin, the less ethnic one's facial features and the straighter and longer one's hair – the greater one's social value' (White, 2005: 295). The system has, consequently, institutionalised racist dynamics and incentivised the internalisation of self-hatred and low-esteem behaviour within Black African communities and their diasporas (White, 2005).

Drawing on Frantz Fanon's seminal work (1952), the skin bleaching phenomenon developed in Africa and its diaspora can be related to the inferiority complex of Blacks in relation to Whites perpetuated during colonialism (Begehou, 2014). Fanon examines how the complex of inferiority was indoctrinated by colonists into the minds of the colonised through psychological mechanisms of racism. 'Whiteness' was a symbol of purity, justice, truth, virginity, defining what it meant to be civilised, modern and human, while 'Blackness' represented the exact contrary, a symbol of ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality, ignorance, and inferiority. Colonised subjects inevitably began (or were forced) to identify themselves through the eyes of colonisers. They experienced a dynamic of internalisation of this inferiority, which Fanon calls 'epidermalization', where their self-esteem and self-motivation evaporated. Black men started to emulate their oppressors, to wear 'White masks' in an attempt to 'turn White': pushing away the negative connotation of Blackness to gain recognition and be accepted as men by the colonisers (Fanon, 1952; Sardar, 2008).

The legacy of slavery and colonialism has profoundly shaped the ways in which many Black Africans have come to see themselves and experience their everyday lives. Many have maintained this 'distorted view' believing in their 'ugliness' and in the possibility of being 'beautiful' and less discriminated against only through a lighter skin colour (Begehou, 2014). Explanations behind skin bleaching, therefore, include an assumed direct connection between light skin and beauty, health, and advanced social status (Kamagaju *et al.*, 2016). The



practice has for a long time been experienced as a means of becoming more attractive, accepted, and economically strengthened, with Africans in Europe not only continuing the practice but also spreading it among individuals who never performed it in their native countries (Petit *et al.*, 2006).

Similar to skin bleaching, Black Africans also modify their natural hair towards Eurocentric standards. Within the aforementioned coloured caste system, natural hair, together with skin colour and facial features, carries deep historical and social baggage (White, 2005). As expressed by Lucrece in her interview, Congolese often use unhealthy and expensive chemical products to relax the hair texture and obtain a straightened hairstyle and/or to dye the natural colour and switch it to a lighter one. Adding hair extensions or wearing full scalp wigs is also a common habit. Regarding her mother's generation of Congolese women, Lucrece noted: 'first thing is the hair, they usually have very eye-catching and bold hairstyles (...) they would do a very bright blond sort of thing but also sometimes red, sometimes they would dye their hair using the colours of the DRC flag' (Interview: 25 May 2017). However, a difference between generations was also pointed out: 'this is not everyone because now actually, so many young people are ditching those trends and just go for who they are!' (Interview: 25 May 2017).

Accordingly, the *Miss Congo UK* pageant aimed to highlight a generational distinction within the communities regarding how a stereotypically beautiful Congolese woman should look, thereby embracing a counter-story on beauty standards. It sought to symbolically support younger generations to eliminate the negative bleaching and straightening cultural habits. Self-representation of the body, involving how a woman wears her hair, dresses, and uses cosmetics, whether she decides to use skin-lightening creams or not and whether to straighten her hair or not, is strictly connected to the cultural values of her community (Faria, 2010). Although some contestants still straightened their hair, the winners of both the 2016 and 2017 competitions had very dark skin and natural curly hair, embodying a naturalness, appreciation, and symbolic pride in their origins and aesthetics. In discussing natural beauty with Lucrece, she stated: 'I did not see myself winning so when I won, I thought "Wow so that actually means that I am beautiful!"' (Interview: 25 May 2017).

The forward-looking story of younger London Congolese was manifested during the community event, and its metaphorical meanings have probably been shaped by the current social debate on beauty standards. Western criteria in relation to bodily appearances are

slowly shifting towards a wider global diversity and inclusivity, as reported daily in the media. The relative exposure to more diverse beauty images, especially in cyberspace, seems to inspire young Black Congolese women to recognise, appreciate and embrace their physical and cultural features. In Lucrece's experience:

'On the internet you see a lot of documentaries about people who tell how they used to bleach their skin and relax their hair but now they've stopped and maybe part of it is because we can actually see darker skinned models or actresses with natural hair in magazines (...) this is helping us to see the beauty of our colour, of who we are and how we were born (...) because how can you appreciate yourself if you don't see yourself in magazines that are considered beauty magazines?' (Interview: 25 May 2017).

Occasionally, *Miss Congo UK* contestants themselves became promoters of 'new' standards of natural beauty images, displaying their dark skin and curly hair. For example, Lucrece got involved with the promotion of *Knatural*, a Caribbean London-based hair brand which specialises in the production of human hair extensions for Black women. The brand aims to encourage Black women to enhance and embrace their natural hair textures and Lucrece featured as one of the models on the company catalogue. She posed on the front page with a product called 'Afro-kinky', referring to the type of Afro hair textures which most Black women naturally have.

As Lucrece's personal experience in London testifies, Black women can, therefore, assume an important role in the daily proliferation of cultural meanings. In positioning themselves as active agents in the production of Black natural beauty images, they acknowledge their racial and ethnic identities and reshape notions of Black 'womanhood' and 'femininity'. Lucrece's contribution, in particular, has confirmed the idea that race and ethnicity are socially rearticulated during day-to-day cultural life, and are co-constructed with gender rather than being the products of nature, entirely constituted biologically in the body. More generally, European and American beauty standards reified in Miss Universe and Miss World competitions were subverted by the story embedded in *Miss Congo UK*. The pageant has attempted to symbolically challenge Western conceptions of bodily appearances, showing how the performance of racial, ethnic and gender identities is always demarcated through a fluid interaction between individual practices and collective actions (Craig, 2002).

## Conclusion

A major cultural practice, *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, organised every year by the London Congolese diaspora, was investigated in this chapter. Special focus was given to the illustration of the 2017 final gala night, with three foremost poetry and theatrical performances analysed in detail.

*Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* resulted in a fascinating cultural site where local identities were publicly transformed and made visible not only to the eyes of Congolese but also to many other Black African London diasporas. On the one hand, through the performative act of their spoken words and bodily gestures, young London Congolese showcased a pride in racial and ethnic ‘authenticity’ and transnational attachment to the homeland. On the other hand, however, they simultaneously openly challenged Black African older generations’ core values and habits towards fundamental socio-cultural and political issues such as gender inequality, health misconceptions and stigmas, and Westernised beauty standards. The analysis of this case study, therefore, demonstrated how a cultural practice organised by a specific diasporic group bears larger implications for the understanding of life histories and everyday experiences of other ethnic minorities in London.

## Notes

(1) According to the latest Census of the Office for National Statistics of 2011, the DRC Congolese in London numbered 10,388. However, a 2006 report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated between 20,000 to 40,000 Congolese officially settled in the UK, with 13,000 to 17,000 Congolese estimated to be living in the Greater London area. Therefore, it remains very difficult to estimate the precise number of the Congolese population currently living in the UK and London, as it is likely to be higher than what official statistics convey.

(2) The data based on which this chapter is written come from a more in-depth case study analysis of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, as part of my PhD thesis ‘Performing cultural identities and transnational ‘imaginaries’: fashion and beauty practices as diasporic spaces among young London Congolese’ (Morsiani, 2019).

(3) The interviewees for this case study were fourteen young Congolese women and men, between twenty to thirty years of age, who were mainly university students, political activists and entrepreneurs and acted as contest’s organisers, contestants, and attendees.

(4) English translation: ‘The world is yours, in your words you can make it beautiful’.

(5) A spoken word poetry and a monologue performed by two of the contestants are analysed later in this chapter.

(6) The proximity and rivalry between the two African capitals lies in colonial roots, when the capitals were established in the 19th century. The French and the Belgian colonial empires were competing for the conquest of the strategical geographical area, the last possible point where ivory, rubber and other goods could be carried by ships on the Congo River and the best spot to build railways to the Atlantic Ocean. When France founded the capital city of Brazzaville on the northern bank of the Congo River, in 1880, King Leopold II ordered his own explorer Henry Morton Stanley to establish Léopoldville on the southern Congo riverbank, in 1881 (Pakenham, 2015). The legacy of European imperialism has brought these twin capitals to be the symbol of the current strong competition between the two Congos (Burke, 2017).

(7) Kimpa Vita was a Congolese woman who lived between the 17th and 18th centuries. She founded and led the Antonian Movement, a mass Christian and political movement with thousands of followers, which aimed to end a long-lasting civil war and restore the broken monarchy of the Kingdom of Kongo. It also represented a popular movement which fought against the slave trade. The Antonian movement was violently suppressed and Kimpa Vita was burned as heretic in 1706 (Thornton, 1998).

(8) English translation: 'My name is Horcelie. My parents taught me this lesson; not to seek revenge. But there is so much pain. Through pain a child is conceived but pain is not known to their child.'

(9) English translation: *Aid for Congo*.

(10) English translation: 'They will tell on you!' or 'they will accuse you!'.

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