

## Expeditions Fund Report

It was getting close to the 25<sup>th</sup> November deadline; that was given to us, 2<sup>nd</sup> years, to decide the topics for our 3<sup>rd</sup> year dissertation. I was torn between two topics that were very close to my heart. I had finally decided that I would do my dissertation on Colourism. Looking back, deciding the topic was the easy part; I now had to figure out what I was going to research within colourism.

So what is colourism I hear you say...? In simple terms, colourism can be described as a system of privilege or disadvantage based on the colour of one's skin tone. It is essentially a form of internalised racism, occurring within races and ethnic groups. This means that it is members of your own race, ethnic group and community treating you differently depending on how light or dark your skin is. It is a term that is rarely used however; once it is described it is a term that many people of colour know all too well. It affects people in many different ways but the most recognisable, is its manifestation in people's everyday lives through the types of comments they receive. "She's so beautiful and light", "You'd be so pretty if you were lighter", "Don't go out in the sun for long, you don't want to get darker". These comments can come from anyone; strangers, members of your community, peers, friends and even family members. Colourism does not only manifest in snide and hurtful comments, studies have shown that it also has impacts on one's access to wealth, good health care, levels of self-esteem as well as good education.

I believe colourism is a very important topic and it is very dear to my heart, it is something that affects me personally as I don't want my sisters to be treated differently, or made to feel not worthy or successful because they have a darker skin tone. So in order to find out what to research on colourism, I looked at it from the lens of trying to combat it. I also looked at my own personal experiences with colourism or lack of, I should say. I had not noticed that the people who I knew that were using skin lightening creams tended to be older women in my community. I realised that I never really had met or heard of girls my age, around me (in the UK), using such creams, however, having said that it was still very common to hear people making rude comments about darker skin and making comparisons. I wanted to find out why this was, why girls didn't start bleaching. On the other hand, I would always be hearing stories of young girls and women using skin bleaching/lightening creams in other countries. Why was this? Was it to do with the accessibility of creams? If say, someone with dark skin was raised in another country instead of the UK, would there be more likelihood of them using skin lightening products compared to the likelihood of them using the creams if they were raised in the UK? This was the question I had asked myself and was the route I decided to take my research on colourism on. I decided that I would carry out my research in both the UK and Kenya to try and answer that question. Is there a difference in the way we experience colourism in the two countries which produces different outcomes?

By looking at these two countries it meant that I actually had to conduct half of my research in Kenya. This was due to the nature of the research methods I planned on using. To enable access to in-depth knowledge on the impact of colourism and peoples experiences with it, I needed to

use the qualitative research method, interviews. It was daunting what I had planned to do; I had never really conducted an official research project on my own before let alone doing it abroad. It was both unnerving yet an exciting challenge that I was looking forward to.

When I had decided that I was going to carry out this comparative study on the effects of colourism in the UK and Kenya, I stumbled across the Queen Mary University of London Expeditions Fund. I applied and I was awarded money to help contribute to the cost of my trip to Kenya. I am very grateful that I was able to benefit from this opportunity provided by the Annual Fund.

20<sup>th</sup> July was the day I set off to Kenya, the trip was an amazing experience where I spread the conducting of my research over the time I was there. As well as conducting interviews I was able to have many casual conversations about colourism, they were all very interesting conversations but saddening at the same time. As well as conducting the research I was able to just experience colourism in the society. What I mean by this is, I was able to observe the comments people say, I was able to observe the remarks people made about themselves, as well as being able to look at what is being represented on the media and on billboards. An example of this was, when I and my family, from the UK and Kenya, went to Mombasa, on the coast of Kenya. Much of the time was spent in pools, on the beach just generally outside in the sun. This resulted in a natural tan for many of my siblings and cousins. It also resulted in many jokes and comments being made by family members on how 'dark they've become' how 'they're spending too much time outside'. What was very disheartening to hear for me was the sadness my little cousin felt because she had tanned. She hated it and wouldn't accept it when she was told that it looked nice and she was still pretty. Young girls were exposed to the colourist ideology which was also what came out with the interviews I had conducted. An interviewee mentioned how many people would start lightening their skin in school for many reasons including peer pressure 'as everyone was doing it'. It was something very common and to some just a way of life and nothing surprising.

I was really happy with the interviews that I have conducted which enabled me to get an insight into the experiences of colourism in Kenya, as well as the UK with the research I conducted there. Doing research abroad on this trip has helped me develop from time management to communication and confidence skills. It was a very worthwhile trip and a great way to spend my summer doing. Without this grant I may have not been able to make up the shortfall and go on this trip to conduct my research in Kenya, I am grateful that there was such an opportunity. I would strongly encourage others to not only take advantage of this opportunity but also support the Annual Fund to ensure this opportunity can stay in place.

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**3<sup>rd</sup> year**

**BA Geography**