African Americans wrestle with color issues

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I'm no good if I'm this complexion."

Omara-Alwala's complexion is dark. She was born in Providence, R.I. to parents from Uganda in East Africa.

C. Yvette Taylor, a psychologist who counsels many women of color at the University of Virginia, and has heard many stories similar to Omara-Alwala's, says stereotypes based on color are not unusual.

"Certainly they still exist and they are age old," she says. "And they very likely will always be around. And the ramifications of them are myriad. Lots of people – women and men – struggle with the skin-tone issue."

Taylor argues that light-skinned African-Americans are favored because they more closely resemble the white majority in the U.S., which is depicted as the paragon of beauty in photographs, television commercials and popular culture. She also traces it back to slavery and the favoritism the master showed toward light-skin slaves, some of whom he had sexually exploited against their will.

"That is one theory as to the origin of it, the twisted mind of an evil white man who just wanted to separate and divide the black race so that we were pitted against one another as opposed to working collectively together to overcome," Taylor says.

Books, such as Delores Phillips' "Darkest Child," published earlier this year, addresses the issue of prejudice among people who have been the object of prejudice for years. She observes, "Attitudes of prejudice have been adopted by its victims. And the resulting struggle of those who are darker complected is a struggle, not only against outsiders, but against the closest of kin."

Omara-Alwala knows about that struggle.

"I can't remember the first remark ever made, but I can remember the snickering, the pointing," she says.

She recalls an instance when she was in the sixth grade at Matoaca Middle School in Chesterfield County, Va.

"I would get on the school bus and I would try to find a place to sit," she recalls, slowly. "It wasn't like I couldn't sit next to anybody, but if I tried to they would be like, 'No, this seat's taken.' Or, 'No, you can't sit here.' Eventually, some white kid would feel so bad for me that he or she would just let me sit next to them."

That was mild, compared to some of the other insults she faced.

"There was a [light-skin black] kid sitting by himself and I sat down. He picked his leg up and took his foot and like pushed me. I remember his foot against my back and he pushed me into the aisle. I didn't know what to do and everybody was like, laughing at me at this point. And the bus driver was saying, 'I'm not leaving until she sits down.'

"I found another place and I think at this point, one of the kids saw me coming. He kind of acted like I was the creature from the Black Lagoon, for lack of a better phrase. And he jumped over the back of the bus seat into the next seat. And everybody's like laughing and screaming and it's like the biggest joke ever and I sat by myself. This was on my way to school. This was like the start of my day every day."

With her voice almost cracking, she says, "I cried for the longest time."

After a string of similar incidents that followed her to college, Omara-Alwala eventually sought professional counseling.

Sandra Cox, director of the Coalition of Mental Health Professionals in Los Angeles, says the perceptions of African-Americans of themselves has changed little since the studies of husband and wife team, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, founders of the Northside Center for Child Development in Harlem. They conducted an experiment in which black kids were offered the choice between a black doll and a white one. Invariably, the children selected the white one.

"Nothing has changed among African-American people. You give a kid a doll in 2004, you'd find the same thing that Kenneth and Mamie Clark found over 50 years ago. In fact, it's probably worse."

She explains, "All you have to do is pick up Ebony and Jet or Essence or any of those magazines that appeal to African-American people, specifically women. You'll see it as clear as it was over 50 years ago. We are doing everything to not look African and to look as white as we possibly can."

Not Danielle Smith, a dark-skin cashier for a national grocery chain, in Washington, D.C.

Customers in her checkout line can also check out the "Black & Beautiful" tattoo that she wears proudly on her wrist.

"I was always self-conscious of my complexion when I was younger," Smith says. "Everybody wanted to talk to light-skin girls and they called me, 'Black girl' or made little names to make fun. It was like it was this disease or something because of my complexion, like it was bad to be dark-skinned."

Even some family members contributed. Smith recalls, "They just teased me, called me 'Little black girl.'"