Journals ON-LINE Publishers Since 1933
ISSN 0972-0073
THE ANTHROPOLOGIST
International Journal of Contemporary and Applied Studies of Man
Special Issue

 Anthropologist Special Issue No. 3: 209-214 (2007)

Human Skin Colour, Its Genetics, Variation and Adaptation: A Review

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KEYWORDS Skin colour. Melanin. Reflectance Spectrophotometry. Ultra Violet Radiations. Irradiation. Multiple Genes

ABSTRACT Human skin colour is the most studied characteristic of man and was responsible for the first racial classification. Variation in it is chiefly due to variation in the melanin pigment in the melanocytes while haemoglobin, carotene and melanoid marginally contribute to it. It is a polygenic trait and recent works suggest many genes working together in very complex additive and non-additive combinations to influence its phenotypic expression. However, skin tanning potential seems to be under the influence of fewer genes. Pre-pubertal increase in the melanin is a consistent observation in almost all the populations studied so far. Selection favours high levels of melanin in areas of high UV radiations. The political overtones of variation in skin colour have been devastating.