

Witchcraft, Stereotypes, and Survival:
People with Albinism in Tanzania and throughout East Africa

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... the concept of witchcraft provides ... a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events. Witchcraft beliefs also embrace a system of values which regulate human conduct.
(Evans-Pritchard 1937: 63)

I was told that it is generally believed that albinos do not die: they merely vanish
(de Pina-Cabral 2013: 306)

Introduction

People with albinism (PWA) suffer discrimination and alienation in societies throughout the globe, but possibly nowhere more severely than in Tanzania. Apart from the health challenges PWA face with skin cancer and eyesight problems, as well as social stigmas that keep them from pursuing work that enables them to sustain themselves and engage as full members of societies, they are hunted and sometimes killed for their body parts used for “traditional medicines”. PWA live in constant fear for their lives. The goal of this paper is to investigate pervasive stereotypes (often termed “superstitions”) held by communities about PWA. I will attempt to use the influential ideas about witchcraft by anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard, from his monumental *Witchcraft, Magic, and Oracles among the Azande* (1937) to shed light on

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modes of thought and how stereotypes function in societies where violence against PWA occurs. Lastly, I will introduce an original idea I have for my future research in Tanzania, which is to connect the situation facing PWA to Victor Turner's idea of "liminality" from his influential work, *The Ritual Process* (1969).

In conducting research for this paper one of the things I have found is there is generally a lack of anthropological thinking about PWA in terms of cultural logic. I expected to find descriptions of abuse of PWA in the popular press and in the literature, and also by PWA advocacy groups, but I was surprised that even the anthropological literature on violence against PWA usually just describes the situation. Most of the available work just attributes violence to "culture", "witchdoctors", and recent "fetishization" (Axmannová 2019: 60). I am not saying that if we understand the cultural logic of violence against PWA it would then make it acceptable. Accepting horrific human rights abuses would be a warped sense of extreme cultural relativism. But it is important for anthropologists and activists to understand what has been happening for a long time to PWA and continues to make them victims and not simply describe the violence, and in terms that don't translate culturally or linguistically. What made the work of Evans-Pritchard important was that through extensive fieldwork on the ground, living with the Azande, he tried to understand, and then translate, the way witchcraft made sense and was real not because it could be verified through science but because it impacted the thoughts, actions, and worldview of the Azande.

In looking at the work of PWA advocates who are involved in public awareness campaigns as well as in how African governments have addressed the issue, I have often seen two responses. First, it is to vilify all *waganga* or so-called "witchdoctors", many of whom are

practicing legitimate and socially acceptable herbalism (Nichols-Belo 2018: 1). Secondly, PWA advocates spread scientific awareness about what albinism is to educate the public in order to counter false ideas about PWA. For example, education campaigns attempt to show that PWA are normal human beings and not “ghosts”, and that they simply lack melanin. The problem with this approach is that cultural logic and scientific logic can exist in the same realm and don’t necessary contradict each other. The question isn’t “why are PWA white?” (the scientific answer would be genetic, a lack of melanin), the question is “why does this person have albinism and not me?” (the answer being witchcraft or possibly breaking of taboos, which could have happened generations ago).

So what I am arguing is that if we are to understand the persecution of PWA through violence and stereotypes, which is not the same thing as accepting it, but understanding the logic (like Evans-Pritchard did), there could potentially be an opportunity to weaken violence against PWA by using the very “idiom” of witchcraft (as Evans-Pritchard called it; 1937: 64) in finding solutions to the widespread problems of violence against PWA.

PWA in Tanzania

PWA face constant threats to their very existence due to both human and environmental reasons, including being “raped, dismembered, maimed, mutilated alive, kidnapped, abducted, attacked, abandoned, ostracized, tortured, and killed” (Kaigoma 2018: 5). The situation facing PWA in Tanzania has even been termed “genocide” (Ladizinski et al. 2012: 1151). Some scholars claim that that the victimization of PWA is worse now than it has ever been before, but that fact is probably difficult to establish, and other scholars say that what has

changed is only more awareness and publicity of the problem than ever before. There are many examples of the persecution of PWA in Tanganyika/Tanzania and in Africa that pre-date the colonial period and it was definitely a problem during the colonial period. For example, David Livingstone wrote

During the time I resided at Mabotsa, a woman came to the station with a fine boy, an Albino. The father had ordered her to throw him away, but she clung to her offspring for many years. He was remarkably intelligent for his age. The pupil of the eye was of a pink colour, and the eye itself was unsteady in vision. The hair, or rather wool, was yellow, and the features were those common among the Bechuanas. After I left the place, the mother is said to have become tired of living apart from the father, who refused to have her while she retained the son. She took him out one day, and killed him close to the village of Mabotsa, and nothing was done to her by the authorities (1857: 576).



Unknown photographer. (1936). Staff and patients at hospitals, clinics and an orphanage in Tanganyika [photographs, gelatin silver prints]. Schlesinger Library, item sch_952431422492_img0068.fpx.

What is Albinism?

Albinism is a term that refers to a group of related inherited conditions which are a result of mutated genes that cause a deficiency in melanin production. *Oculocutaneous Albinism*, which is the condition of the individuals discussed in this paper, usually results in full absence of pigment from the skin, hair, and eyes, resulting in extremely pale skin, light brown or red eyes, and sandy colored hair (Brocco 2016: 229). The genetic mutation is detrimental to the health and well-being of those who have it, especially for those in underdeveloped nations in Sub-Saharan Africa where PWA face long hours in the sun. It is estimated that of Tanzania's roughly 40 million people, about 13,000 are PWA (Bryceson et al. 2010: 380). For context, in the United States the prevalence of albinism is about 1:37,000; in Tanzania it is about 1:1,429 (Brocco 2016: 229). Tanzania has one of the highest rates of albinism on the African continent and in the world (Ager 2017: 76-78).

Background to research

From July and August 2019, while I was in Zanzibar studying Swahili at the University of Zanzibar, I became friends with Abdalla Daudi, the director of a grassroots advocacy program for PWA called *Jumuiya ya ma Albino Zanzibar* (Association of People with Albinism in Zanzibar). Daudi is himself a person with albinism. Daudi invited me to follow him along in his work and engage with individuals and communities of PWA. I spent time with him in his office. I also accompanied him on a trip to the remote island of Tumbatu where I had a chance to engage in conversations with PWA of various backgrounds. On the very first occasion I met Daudi, while we were walking on the narrow streets in Stone Town, Zanzibar, I heard children

calling out *zeruzeru* at him. I asked him what this meant, to which he replied “Bad bad word for albino” (Tuchscherer blog 2019). I later found out that the word translate as “ghost”.

Persecution of PWA

According to Kaigoma, the persecution of PWA stems from the “local culture, [as] people believe in the supernatural power of albinism. These beliefs have been passed down through generations” (Kaigoma 2018: 5). In the Kiswahili language, PWA in Tanzania are referred to as *zeruzeru* (ghost) because of their white skin. This is also connected to at least two other ideas: first that they are ghosts because they never seem to have burials; secondly, because when Black people die their skin becomes “ashy” or almost “white” in appearance (there are examples of white explorers in Africa in the 19th century being mistaken for ancestors coming back from the dead). Also, PWA are called *dili* (deal) based on the fact that their body parts, which are thought to contain supernatural powers, are often traded by those involved in witchcraft (Brocco 2016: 230; Baker et al. 2010: 169-181). This second name is one that really terrifies PWA.

In order to fully understand the situation facing PWA in Tanzania, we must explore the historical and socio-political situations facing PWA in the country. Kaigoma shows that “According to the local culture, people believe in the supernatural power of albinism. These beliefs have been passed down through generations” (Kaigoma 2018: 5). Some of the other ideas about PWA are that albinism is contagious, that it is punishment, and that when men with HIV/AIDs sleep with women with albinism it will cure AIDS, which has led to rape and also the spread of HIV (Baker et al. 2010: 172). When a child with albinism is born in Tanzania, in many

cases the parents will kill it or abandon it out of shame and a belief that a person with albinism will bring misfortune to the family. Kaigoma puts the blame on witchdoctors, saying for example

When there is no cure for an illness, people turn to a witchdoctor for meaning and recommendations for what to do. People will trust and do what the witchdoctor recommends. People believe the witchdoctors because they are considered to have the final answers. They are the meaning makers. Witchdoctors claim PWA have magical powers. Indeed, this attitude creates a pattern of violence against PWA. This system of meaning making is an essential component of a people's culture (Kaigoma 2018: 8).

The police and government have done very little if anything to protect PWA because the local culture and belief in the traditional healers or "witch doctors" is so strong. According to Kaigoma, in its present state the genocide facing PWA will continue:

This practice continues because it makes sense in the life of the people. People find meaning in the whole practice of violence. The society has a meaning making pattern which keeps the practice going. This meaning making is facilitated by various parts of the community such as the witchdoctors and business people. Witchdoctors prescribe what to bring in order for them to make a potion. The witchdoctors request certain types of body parts (like hair, blood), limbs (arms, legs), or organs (head) in order to make medicine. They provide guidelines on what to do and the circumstances the perpetrators need to consider for the purpose of making potions. Their prescription is also reflected in the amount of money rendered for specific types of organs or limbs. Guidelines also include the manner of killing PWA: The more terror felt by the victim, the more potent the potion will be (Kaigoma 2018: 16).

Apart from trying to protect PWA in Tanzania from harm, there are attempts underway to educate the public (Brocco 2016: 230). There are non-governmental organizations that are working to advocate on behalf of PWA such as Under the Same Sun (UTSS), as well as the United Nations and European Union. It is important to note that the Catholic Church has started

to advocate for PWA in Africa. Pope Francis helped launch an international awareness campaign called “Help African Albinos” regarded as “living symbols of the absolute periphery, the ‘last of the last’” (Pope Francis 2014). In addition, the organization UTSS met with Pope Francis and urged him to take action to protect PWA in Tanzania and in Africa more generally from those involved in witchcraft who were trying to obtain body parts of PWA due to their alleged supernatural power (Sanders 2015).

Understanding how albinism functions through the work of Evans-Pritchard

Evans-Pritchard’s fieldwork among the Azande of South Sudan and the northern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo did not concern PWA but can be an analytical guide to approaching the topic. His work has had “a profound impact on both the cross-cultural study of modes of thought and the philosophy of science and rationality” (Grinker and Steiner 1997: 294). Evans-Pritchard’s work argued, essentially, “that if we understand the cultural premises and social contexts of thought and action, then beliefs in supernatural causation no longer seem bizarre, irrational or fallacious. Indeed, they may seem perfectly reasonable” (Grinker and Steiner 1997: 294). Evans-Pritchard explains this himself in two insightful quotes:

... the concept of witchcraft provides them with a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events. Witchcraft beliefs also embrace a system of values which regulate human conduct (1937: 63).

To say that witchcraft has blighted the ground-nut crop, that witchcraft has scared away game, and that witchcraft has made so-and-so ill is equivalent to saying in terms of our own culture that the ground-nut crop has failed owing to blight, that game is scarce this season, and that so-and-so has caught influenza. Witchcraft participates in all misfortunes and is the idiom in which Azande speak about them and in which they explain them (1937: 64).

In short, the belief in witches and witchcraft, sorcery and power of ritual medicines, are part of a logic and belief system. This was true not only for the Azande as Evans-Pritchard found them, but exists in Tanzania and other parts of eastern and southern Africa.

In Tanzania, there is a widespread belief in the misfortune surrounding PWA (if they are in your family), that they are often despised (since having albinism is associated with sorcery), and that there is a widespread belief that their body parts used in ritual medicine can bring good luck. These points explain why PWA are feared and ridiculed, as well hunted for their body parts.

Advocacy has failed

Advocacy on the part of PWA has always been a top-down approach. Laws, dating to the colonial period, were not enforced. Banning witchdoctors has had little impact and has caused more problems because some of those called witchdoctors are really herbalists and healers who don't do anything illegal. The Pope has appealed to the largely Catholic population of Tanzania to stop violence against PWA but it has not helped. Advocacy has mainly taken the form of "educating the public" about what actually causes albinism from the basis of science. But increased scientific knowledge doesn't negate the "why."

A grassroots approach

Spreading scientific knowledge about PWA does not demystify or counter the deeply held stereotypes about PWA. The major stereotype about PWA is that they are ghosts who don't die. What if the public were exposed to the natural deaths and burials of PWA? It's not

the same as a scientific explanation but rather something observable by people in broader society. Would it be possible to make burials public? The possibility of regular people viewing burials of PWA was brought up by Baker et al (2010: 177).

Another idea that is becoming clearer to me as I continue to explore the subject, is that I have never encountered an example of a female witchdoctor using body parts, any woman charged with hunting PWA for body parts or killing PWA, or even an example of a woman charged with using “medicine” taken from PWA. I am not aware of any scholars who have studied the problem who talk about gender and albinism. Does it help to suggest that there is something gender-related going on, that about 50% (men) of the population is more the problem than the other 50% (women)? I have thought about this and there is a lot going against the idea, since even if men are the segment of society engaged in medicines from PWA body parts and violence against PWA, the beliefs about PWA are held by all genders. Also, when one examines subjects like warfare and other forms of violence in Africa, we also see that it is basically men who are the chief actors. So, I see the problem I would encounter in making the argument about men.

Nonetheless, I have found scattered references to **women being inclined to protect PWA** from husbands who wish to kill them. The Livingstone quote above refers to this and I found it to be the case when I visited Tumbatu Island and met a woman who stayed with her child even though her husband left her out of shame (Tuchscherer blog 2019). Some scholars have pointed out that mothers are often blamed for giving birth to children with albinism by sleeping with spirits, and this explains why their husbands leave them (Baker et al 2010: 172). I have found photographic evidence that illustrates the point:



Unknown photographer. (1969). Nubian women's group Muchumwa. Kenya Nubian Council of Elders. From Greg Constantine, Kenya's Nubians: Then & Now website, Open Society Foundations, <https://www.movingwalls.org/moving-walls/19/kenyas-nubians-then-now.html>

The photo gives the impression that the women are protecting the boy with albinism, and the fact that he is placed front and center in the photo seems to recognize his dignity and humanity. Future fieldwork on the topic of gender and albinism might reveal new and important insights.

Goal for future research: "Betwixt and Between" of Victor Turner

In addition to the analytical framework provided by Evans-Pritchard for analyzing PWA, Victor Turner's concept of "liminality" may be useful in helping to arrive at a deeper understanding of how Tanzanians incorporate PWA in their worldview. This approach may break new ground, as I have been unable to find any anthropologists who make the connection. A clear-cut example of the concept of liminality occurs, for example, among the male age-grade society among the Mende of Sierra Leone, which is called 'Poro'. The Poro society shows a clear pathway following Turner: separation from society, a liminal experience with other boys transitioning to manhood, and then reintegration into society. There are many metaphors and symbols of "death" in Poro that mark the liminal stage, including covering the initiates who are transitioning with white clay. Returning to PWA, PWA are also separated from society and live on its margins, even if they are seemingly never reintegrated. PWA seem to linger, not in a permanent state, but possibly in a liminal phase, Turner's "betwixt and between." As noted earlier, PWA are often perceived as ghosts.

Some of the scholarship describing the place of PWA sounds a lot like liminality. For example:

In southern Africa, the 'death myth' is closely associated with the notion of the intermediary nature of people with albinism, who are considered to belong to both the living and the dead (Baker and Djatou, 2007, 66). The association of people with albinism with the afterlife is an enduring one. In their study of Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, in which we find the character Lazarus, a person with albinism, Karen and Morell note that people with albinism are positioned between two worlds: ... 'the person with albinism is, in effect, a twilight creature who doesn't entirely belong in our world; he's a physical symbol of the in-between' (Karen and Morell cited in Chevrier 1995, 273) (Baker et al. 2010: 177).

In Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1969), he studied the Ndembu people of Congo and was influenced by the earlier work of Arnold van Gennep. When Turner describes "liminality" it sounds as if he is describing the betwixt and between position of PWA:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ("threshold people ") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon (1969: 95).

While I want to continue looking into liminality as an analytical approach to understanding the world PWA occupy, I understand the problem. If PWA are in a liminal state, what is their subsequent reintegration? Is it possible to consider something a final stage if it happens after death? I am just not sure what some of the Tanzanian cultural conceptions are at this point to go deeper into this. Fieldwork is necessary. No matter what the case, I can say that I have never seen anyone ever refer to Victor Turner and liminality when looking at albinism.

Conclusion

I have attempted to look at stereotypes of PWA in Tanzania and in eastern Africa, and how witchcraft is part of the worldview that people have of albinism. I have found that the work of anthropologists Evans-Pritchard (1937) on the logic of witchcraft, and Victor Turner (1969) on the idea of liminality, have the potential to help create an analytical understanding of albinism in societies. Finally, by understanding how witchcraft and stereotypes of albinism exist

– especially that PWA are ghosts and that they don't die but just disappear – there is a possibility of considering interventions in making funerals public for PWA.

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