Irreducible Alterity? Violence and Activism Surrounding Oculocutaneous Albinism Type II in Tanzania, 1880-2022

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Right: Posters in Swahili and English show the conference's theme—“Our goal: to make attacks, stigma, and discrimination a faint memory.”
Above: A collection of headlines from mainstream media sources describe the violence committed against people with albinism in Tanzania, East Africa.
THE LAKE ZONE, where practices of "albinocide" have been most acute.
American geneticist Murray Brilliant stands at a podium with the conference theme behind him, speaking about the evolution and inheritance patterns of Oculocutaneus Albinism Type II (OCA2) in Africa.
Oculocutaneous Albinism Type II (OCA2)—
• Caused by a deletion on the P gene; possibly offers protection against leprosy.

Fetish—
• The over-valuation of a thing, usually by attributing to it a power it does not "really" have.

Dawa—
• Swahili word usually translated as ‘medicine.’
“For my brothers and sisters with albinism in Africa, their biggest problems aren’t bodily; they are bogus spiritual beliefs and the fact that African traditions don't understand albinism.”

– Peter Ash
Above: Hair pedigree from an ‘albinotic family.’ In Pearson et al. 1911. *A Monograph on Albinism in Man.*

“The natives, Dr. Stannus says, have no special word for albino... They are not accounted for in any way; they say they have been sent by mlunga—a word which embraces known powers. Probably they were killed from time to time at birth” (147).
The slash-and-burn killings of albinos in eastern parts of Burundi and several regions of north-west Tanzania – the general area between Lake Tanganyika and Lake Victoria – were first brought to light by journalists, initially from Africa then from the global news media. In October 2009, at a ceremony in Stockholm, the Tanzanian journalist Richard Mwangi was awarded the Lannonnac Journalism Prize for Africa for his coverage of the Great Lakes albinism emergency.

Perhaps most famously, the outside world’s attention was drawn to the albinos’ plight by the undercover report, produced at great risk to their life, by the BBC’s Dar es Salaam bureau chief, Victor M近些 years, itself a Tanzania (see box: The reporter’s story). More recently, at the time of writing, the story was being covered by the ABC network in its NOVA programmes.

As this report was being drafted, a three-month-old in the albinos killings in Tanzania came to an end with a brutal attack on a family in the Chyota dis tice, of Iringa region. A 10-month-old albino baby, Gospa Sylwa, was killed on 23 October by husband who fled with her legs, which they hacked off in front of his family having first bludgeoned him to near death using a metal pipe. His neighbours and his black father, who was left fighting for his life in hospital, had tried fruitlessly but unsuccessfully to protect him.

The last reported killing of an albino had been on 18 July, and the whole of Tanzania had hoped that the film action tales – including the anonymous passage on these albino hunts from the Shiraye region convicted of the murder of 13-year-old albino schoolboy Marion Daudi – had finally put an end to the killings. The news of Gospa’s murder caused dismay nationwide.

The oficial death toll now stands at 44 albino killed in Tanzania and 12 in the eastern Burundian province of Cankuzo, Kirundo, Muyinga and Ruyigi – or near the border with Tanzania. This figure for Tanzania is the

Thousands of albinos are no longer able to move around for fear of the hunters

one given by police to the special parliamentary committee investigating the killings. Private organisations and some media in Tanzania have put the number higher, at more than 70 deaths.

But albinos – no less shocked by the killings than their Tanzanian neighbors – believe the market for albino body parts exists mainly if not exclusively in Tanzania, generated by big-money buyers who use them as talismans to bring luck and above all wealth. Senior police officials in Dar es Salaam said a complete set of albino body parts – including all four limbs, genitals, ears, tongue and nose – was fetching the equivalent of 75,000 US dollars.

Left: The first page of the 2009 Red Cross report on albinism. A black hand and a white hand are interlaced with text beside it. Below: An inset of text from the report is highlighted, showing the flimsy claim that a “full set” of albino body parts is worth 75,000 US dollars.
Above: Well known albinism rights activist sit behind a long table, each before a microphone and taking notes. The audience watches on as Kenyan Justice Grace Ngugi speaks into a microphone.
This research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation, Fulbright-Hays Program, the University of California, and Denison University.

Thank you to friends and colleagues in Tanzania who enabled this research, especially to Ester Rwela, Mariamu Stanfod, Vicky Ntetema, Elisha Kazima Maganga, Peter Ash, Murray Brilliant, and all the folks at Under the Same Sun and the Tanzanian Albinism Society.

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