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## Socio-cultural Status of Albinism in Africa: Challenging Myths, Concepts, and Stereotypes

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## Abstract

This article analyses the socio-cultural status of Albinism in Africa and the role unchallenged stereotypes, irrational concepts, and unfounded beliefs play in the lives of persons with albinism. Following some beliefs, persons with albinism “do not die but vanish” to later “return as ghosts to haunt the living.” The author discusses this paradox about persons with albinism identified as hunted victims and simultaneously haunting perpetrators. The research examines the concept of albinism being a curse from dead ancestors or theodicy and its association with supernatural powers. By a comparative and diachronic approach, the study challenges unsubstantiated stereotypes. This study aims at social awareness by demystifying established myths and discussing study cases and examples referring to media, art, performing arts, literature, photography, and motion pictures.

**Keywords:** albinism, antonianism, Charikleia, Cushite, disorder, negritude, supernatural powers

## Introduction: Definition and Aims

Etymologically, albinism derives from ‘albin-o/ism,’ meaning “absence of pigments,” from the Latin “albus,” meaning ‘white’ and ‘αλφός’ (alphós) in Greek - “absence of pigments, white leprosy.” White or colourless skin, yellowish-white hair, “and eyes with pink or blue iris and deep-red pupils” are the standard features that make people with albinism stand out among other people (Merriam Webster, 1981, p. 49). Biomedically, the two forms of albinism are ocular and the most visible, the oculocutaneous, which concerns this research, is a genetic condition characterised by the congenital absence of any pigmentation (i.e., melanin) or colouration in a person, animal or plant resulting in white hair and pink eyes in mammals. (Baker, Lund, Taylor, & Nyathi, 2010: 169; Jablonski, 2006: 69; Taylor, 1969: 405–416).

As the term “negro” (from Latin niger = black) was used to describe the ‘black’ skin of a person; similarly, the term “albino” was used to denote the ‘white’ skin colour (“Albus”) of a person too. However, the latter being the result of a physical condition, the proper term to use is “person with albinism,” referring to a person’s physical condition rather than one’s skin colour. Since referring to a black person as “negro” was considered discriminative, offensive, and socially unacceptable, describing a black-skinned person, this term has been corrected

and reapplied by the movement of Négritude in a different context. Based on the French word *nègre*, the word Négritude defines the literary movement of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, initiated by the French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris, through an eloquent way to express black empowerment against the discriminating approaches and injustices of racism, colonialism, and assimilation. The term was banned in America in the 1970s and 80s (Martin, 1991, pp. 83–107).

Consequently, while today the word “negro” is considered derogatory due to the discrimination attached to the concept and semantics of skin colour, regrettably, a person with albinism is still commonly referred to as ‘albino.’ Similarly to Négritude, many activists and organisations are standing for albinism, which is to raise public awareness about the condition. To this end, and in line with the United Nations Human Rights Council in its first Resolution on the promotion of the rights and protection of persons with albinism (United Nations A/HRC/23/L.25: Adopted 10 June 2013), the establishment of the term “person with albinism” has become essential both lingually and semantically. It is believed that since it describes a person’s physical ‘disorder’, it places the ‘Person’ before the condition of albinism (Velle, 2018, p. 10), erasing thereby the pejorative character and depreciatory insinuations of the word “albino”. Indirectly, the linguistic swift is expected to strengthen sensible and reasonable thinking against irrational stereotypes, unsound concepts, and beliefs, as argued hereafter.

Based on the above definitions, I will examine the reasons, causes of prejudices, and consequences of the negative designations stigmatizing and victimizing persons with albinism. Starting from the distant past, I will focus on the ‘condition’ questing for the origin and early evolution of the concept of albinism, the direction it has followed, and where it has led. Secondly, considering how the idea has developed in modern times, I will assess its position in Africa’s contemporary socio-cultural, religious, and political framework. Through this approach, I believe I can better identify and comprehend the negative perceptions still in existence, especially in the African continent. Based on comparative information, greater knowledge and better understanding should lead to awareness, thus less stigma and greater distance from prejudices. The research can be utilised – I believe – in a positive way by activists, artists, reporters, and scientists. I will thereto view the condition of albinism diachronically, analysing the evolution and projections of certain

factors, qualities, or lack of them, as well as the pejorative views and characteristics found in their depiction.

## **A Diachronic Overview of ‘Albinism’**

### ***‘Albinism’ in the Ancient Period***

The phenomenon of today’s ‘albinism’ has already puzzled the ancient world. From a historical point of view, albinism and its semantics, beliefs, and concepts are traceable in various Asiatic and Hellenistic African *religious, historical, mythological, and literary* sources. In the *Book of Enoch, the Prophet*<sup>1</sup>, chapter 105, Lamech and his wife are discussing their baby Noah’s strange characteristics, which evidently denote albinism: “... his flesh ...was white as snow, and red as a rose; the hair of his head was white as wool, and long; and his eyes were beautiful. When he opened them, he illuminated all the house, like the sun; the whole house abounded with light.” (Avigad & Yadin, 1956: 40; Hilton: 1998: 15, 20; Sorsby, 1974: 17–18, 256). Today, probably coincidentally, the name Noah is the acronym for the *National Organisation of Albinism and Hypopigmentation* (NOAH) based in the USA, which assists people with albinism through its workshops and conferences.

In the Biblical context, leprosy too is associated with the whiteness of the skin: in response to Miriam’s ‘racism.’<sup>2</sup>, because she objected to Moses’s marriage to a Cushite (Ethiopian) woman, God punished her by turning her leprous with her skin becoming as white as snow (Numbers, 12:10–12):

“...*Miriam’s skin was leprous —it became as white as snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease, and he said to Moses, “Please, my lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin I have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother’s womb with its flesh half eaten away.”*

Could the ‘white’ skin leprous disease given to Miriam, perhaps, be interpreted as an inflicted double punishment? First for the dreadful sickness and second

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<sup>1</sup> The *Book of Enoch* (first and second centuries BC) is an ancient Hebrew apocalyptic religious text of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection. Avigad and Yadin led the initial publication of the Genesis Apocryphon in 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Goldenberg (2003: 26–29) argues that ‘colour’ (i.e., racism) is not the issue here, although many scholars understood this incident as an ancient example of racism. He states that Miriam and Aaron complained against Moses marrying a Cushite because she was a non-Israelite.

for the snow-white skin contrasting to the Cushite/ Ethiopian<sup>3</sup> woman's black skin colour? As for the name *Ethiopian*, from the Greek, *Aithiōψ* ('burnt face'), defines dark-skinned persons from Africa, south of Egypt (e.g., Nubia, Meroë), and India (Ullendorff, 1960, p. 2; Vantini, 1981: 33–34).

Another story associating 'leprosy' and 'white illness' with the sun is found in Herodotos's account of Persians during the 5th century BC: believing that the reason for being afflicted was a punishment for sins committed against the Sun God, any Persian citizen with 'leprosy' or 'white illness' was prevented from entering the city or encountering other Persians, while they drove plagued strangers out of the country; the same rule applied to white doves (Beloe, 1814: chap. cxxxviii)<sup>4</sup>. The definition of albinism as the 'white (‘λεύκη’) lepra', its association with 'leprosy', a 'cursed' sickness, and the belief of the Persians that the 'afflicted citizens' were punished by the Sun God, demonstrate the persistence of *supernatural* elements in dominating people's collective consciousness diachronically. Furthermore, 'white leprosy' relates to the whiteness of the skin as a punishable sin and death.

A fascinating description of albinism is found in the *Aethiopica* (*Ethiopian Story*), a 4<sup>th</sup> Century novel written by Heliodoros of Emesa (Syria) (Hägg, 1992, pp. 78–99; Török, in Eide, Hägg, Pierce, & Török (ed.), 1998: 1043–1047) and relates the story of a Greek nobleman, Theogenes, and Princess Charikleia, daughter of King Hydaspes and Queen Persinna of Ethiopia (Meroë). When Persinna conceived, she had her eyes fixed on a painting of Andromeda, the mythical white princess of Ethiopia, and as a result, Persinna's daughter Charikleia was born white (theory of maternal impression). Only in Book 10 of the *Aethiopica* does Charikleia reveal her true identity, and Theogenes becomes her bridegroom.

Hilton connecting the whiteness of Charikleia with albinism as the central paradox of the romance, asks why Heliodoros "has portrayed his heroine in a way that so strongly suggests albinism ..." (1998: 21). The explanation is found

<sup>3</sup> According to Vantini (1981: 33–34), *Aethiopia* meant 'Land of the Blacks' and was applied in the 4th Century to the territories around South Egypt, including Sudan (Nubia).

<sup>4</sup> According to Beloe (1814: I, 187, notes 181-182), 'white leprosy' referred to one type of 'leprosy.' As to the story, when Aeschines was on his way to Rhodes via Delos, the inhabitants of this island were affected by 'white leprosy' because - they believed - the Sun God, Apollo, punished them for having interred the body of an important man, against the island's customs. Liddell & Scott (1978: 1044) also define *λεύκη* as "a cutaneous disease, so called from its colour: a kind of *leprosy* or *elephantiasis*."

in the veneration of the Sun (*Helios*) as a powerful deity, protecting or punishing. The name of the author himself, Heliodoros, and the literary style of the *Aethiopica*, are pivotal in reference to the Sun: Heliodoros describes himself as a descendent of the Sun (Heliodoros = the Sun's gift), Medea, a member of the "same race" descendants, as the granddaughter of Helios and Persinna's reference to Helios as the founder of her "race." In the same context belongs Charikleia's unusual birth and character. Hilton (1998: 23)'s conclusion is that Heliodoros, whatever his own knowledge of albinism, chooses "to portray his heroine as a unique and daimonic (sic) being ... neither Greek nor Ethiopian, neither entirely human, nor wholly divine". Moreover, when Charikleia was born, she was "not recognised by her father and family and emphasises the loss of her status and inheritance..." and while in most cases, the father would have given a name to the new-born baby, this was evidently not the case with Charikleia (Hilton, 1998, p. 236). He writes that Charikleia's mother feared that her daughter's chances to survive were few due to her condition; therefore, she gave Charikleia away to be adopted by the Greek priest Charicles Hilton (1998: 16).

Prejudiced people indeed believe that persons with albinism cannot be beautiful. Hilton (1998: 12, n. 41), expressing his disagreement with this clearly discriminating opinion when they discuss Charikleia, notes: "I fail to comprehend the view that Charikleia is presented as a beauty and could not, therefore, be an albino. Experience and aesthetic theory tell me otherwise". Indeed, nowadays, both males and females with albinism excel as professional models and presenters. Interestingly, Hägg (1992: 82) sees the beauty of Charikleia not as much as a physical than as a moral one, lauding her innocence and her respectability while "Heliodoros avoids giving a detailed description of his heroine's appearance-instead he simply states that she was 'beautiful and wise'" (Hilton, 1998, p. 13).

These discussions define two aspects of the African identity, the individual and the collective: a. physical punishment (leprosy) caused by the negative contrast between the unfamiliar 'white' versus the predictable 'black' of the African skin. b. social discrimination: racism, when 'whiteness' is interpreted as repulsive sickness. This whiteness, often associated with the Sun (as 'god'), gave punishment a supernatural connotation, related to a 'punishable' white skin and death itself. On the other hand, I have also identified an opposite concept: the negative association with the Sun and the whiteness of Charikleia and some of her ancestors to separate the latter members of a race. These racial

sentiments are expressed in *Aethiopica* through the fears of Charikleia's mother about her daughter's limited chances of survival. Assuming Heliodoros had also believed a person with a condition like Charikleia's to have limited survival chances, thus, superstition and punishment had already played a part in the ancient conception of 'albinism.' Consequently, this may explain the origin of the creation of relevant prejudices.

### *Conceptions of 'Albinism' in the 'Modern' Times in Africa*

Modern times conventionally begin at the end of the Middle Ages with the fall of Byzantium (1453), the 'discovery' of America by Columbus (1492), or the Renaissance and the Reformation in Europe, accepting the European viewpoint as defining the historical periods. However, Wolf (1982:18–23), pointing at the interconnection of all peoples, socially, economically, culturally, and politically, has explained that the European concept of the historical periods has broadened considerably since the so-called "*the people without History*" and the non-European historical facts, even these of the "Native societies," were united with the European ones into world history. This holistic worldview has radically altered the viewing of African history and culture from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century onwards.

Keesing (1981: 333–335), pointing at the universality of problems about natural phenomena and the *Human condition*, drew parallelism between 'magical thinking' and 'religious thinking,' as both aim at explaining irrational causes of happenings through logic, tangible way acceptable to the human brain. Geertz (1973: 171–174) explains that *Man* can mainly approach the *profane*, either through a formal, *legal-moral code* based on *ethical commands* sent to humans by the Divine through holy writings, prophecies, etc., or, individually and directly, through spiritual, mysticism, insight, intellectual and physical experiences. Despite their differences, both approaches ought to make a clear distinction between the different 'modern sources' available and used to analyse or define irrational conceptions related to the *Human condition*.

Concerning *albinism*, there are two kinds of 'sources' of information to be considered in Africa. As illustrated in the Old Kingdom of Kongo history, the one covers traditional beliefs, often incorporating superstitions interconnected with religions, magic, and the supernatural. The other 'sources' concern stories and presentations of albinism in popular literature, paintings, and other creative and performing arts forms. These two kinds of 'sources' should not be confused

with scientific observation and studies on albinism, especially if definitions are still connected with non-scientific notions.

Traditional beliefs surrounding people with albinism are greatly embedded in the mythological and supernatural. In the contemporary period, one finds most references, including studies, to the traditional/ 'modern' beliefs and myths on albinism. It is generally stated and accepted that many beliefs and superstitions go back to a distant past.

A Dogon myth tells how a Yasigui who gave birth to a child with albinism, instead of the expected twins, was seen as punishment for transgressing tribal rules (Baker, 2007, pp. 79–80). In fact, in some pre-colonial African societies influenced by myths and superstitions, twins with albinism were socially marginalised, and even killed (Kimbassa, 2016: 77).

Alice Werner (1995: 174) had already noted that the Mayombe, considering children with albinism as spirit children, “observe particular ceremonies on the birth of such’ a child, while the Aandonga believe that the esisi (person with albinism’) is an ogre. Though Mayombe and Aandonga, both tribes in Central Africa and respectively from the Old Kingdom of Kongo and (Old) Kingdom of Loango, their interpretations and beliefs about albinism differ. In the Kingdom of Loango, being one of the first to have a special relationship with the white coloniser in the western coastal city of Kongo, a person with albinism was venerated because, by association, the white skin colour correlated with the possession of a genius spirit. According to this belief, white skin colour was a gift, and a white-born child from black parents was considered a spirit child. By contrast, in the Kingdom of Kongo, where people started hating the submission payment of tax and fought against the coloniser, a white-skinned child was seen as a scary person. These facts can explain the association of fear with the white-skinned colour of an ‘ogre’ child.

Relevant information is given on the episode of the Kongo prophetess Dona Beatriz (Kimpa Vita, 1684–1706), who reformed Catholicism in a Kongo Catholic Movement known as *Antonianism*. The former Nganga<sup>5</sup> prophetess was burned at stake by King Pedro IV under the direct influence of two Capuchin Missionaries (Hendrickx & Molefe, 2010, pp. 439–450). Since Nganga beliefs, syncretised with the Christian tradition, associated ghosts and

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<sup>5</sup> Nganga = ‘docto,’ witch doctor, medicine man, or shaman.’In Swahili = *mganga*. The name was given to a person who communicates with the ancestors (Knappert, 1990, p. 173).



spirits with the supernatural and white colour with death, Whites were associated with the supernatural and the world of the ancestors and as nkita (ancestors, spirits, dangerous ghosts). In contrast, Blacks are human; therefore, the black colour defines humanity and life, while white means death (Thornton, 1998, pp. 42–44). Dona Beatriz does not per se exclude the Whites from Church, but the latter's perception of Catholicism is - she believes - incomplete and incorrect. It was used by the Whites to suppress the Kongolese Kingdom and to exploit the Black people. This explains Dona Beatriz's hate against the Capuchins, whom she identified as witches (Hendrickx & Molefe, 2010, pp. 440–445).

### *Contemporary Views*

Technically, the contemporary period's dates are as varied as the others. Some make it start in ca. 1750, others prefer the end of the 19th Century or 1899-1902 (Boer War), and others 1945. Relevant research in the contemporary period started with Sir Archibald Garrod in 1908) who identified albinism as a condition. Research on albinism, nevertheless, became not only a part of medical research. In fact, traditions, myths, and superstitions remained omnipotent, but literary scholars and anthropologists researched these beliefs and analysed their causes, or at least their manifestations, knowing the distinction between presentation and fact. These often-contradicting features define the identity of persons with albinism as problematic, which Baker has explored in the fictional works of three authors, Guinean Williams Sassine, Didier Destremau, and Patrick Grainville (Baker, 2007, pp. 71–80). Baker, who refers to Destremau's novel, *Nègre blanc*, and translates as "a Whitened Black," describes the killing of a baby with albinism in an African village. Baker explains that the act is being compared with the killing of a disabled baby with the following significant difference: while the disabled child is carried out secretly and discreetly, the killing of the baby with albinism is portrayed as a sacrifice, a symbolic, shared public ritual, whereby "an albino (sic) child is lifted by the Nganga, the local Medium, towards the sky and to a background of incantations, and then thrown into the raging water of the river." (Baker, 2007, p. 80).

### *Superstitions*

Nefarious superstitions surrounding people with albinism still influence Africans to the point of hunting them for 'muti,' body parts that are believed to

carry good fortune. Myths such as ‘albinos don’t die but vanish,’ ‘albinos bring good fortune,’ and ‘albinism is contagious’ have been attested in reports, more contemporary ones stating that sex with an ‘albino’ cures ‘AIDS’ (Baker et al., 2010: 176; Dunn, 2016; Kimbassa, 2016: 76, 78). It is one of the standard belief systems in regions of Africa such as Central, East, West, and Southern Africa. Subject to their cultural system, beliefs about a person with albinism differ from one region of the continent to another. The tragic irony in all these beliefs is the contradiction between the primordial albino-phobia causing aversion from any physical contact with conditioned persons and the acceptance of intercourse with a person with albinism as a cure of a ‘modern times’ disease.

Nevertheless, people still believe that touching ‘persons with albinism’ will turn them the same white as the ‘albino’ or cause the birth of one like “them.” Lund (2000: 103) relates a story about a young South African girl with albinism; as the mother explained to her daughter, her condition was due to something she had ‘caught’ by touching a child with albinism” during her pregnancy. According to the mother, during her pregnancy, she encountered a woman with a baby in a blanket unsteadily strapped to her back. Trying to help that woman tighten the blanket, to her fright, she realised that the baby was with albinism. For her pregnant mother, who gave birth to a child with the same condition, the only rational explanation of the phenomenon was to consider it as the direct result of this encounter.

On the origins of stereotyped pregnancy superstitions, Pearn and Sweet (1977: 146–153) explain the phenomenon as follows: directly, by tradition, accepted and adopted, they serve as an explanation for the birth of a child with different features from the expected. Unquestionably, they have been generated into a convenient reason which turned into a stereotyped justification of the phenomenon. Indirectly, based on general tribal law, pregnancy superstitions became behaviour norms and taboos, especially concerning pregnancy. Associated with “special mystique and significance,” the unintended connection “of a known rite-transgression with the subsequent birth of an infant with a congenital malformation,” in our case condition, would cause the reinforcement of the “original tribal law .”Pearn and Sweet believe that regardless of their origin, such concepts, “once generated provide a flexible and adaptable framework for ego-defence and tension-release .”The only solution, thus, to the socio-psycho problem of contemporary parents caused by such a birth is the use of “scientific explanations,” which, they trust, should “ensure similar safeguards to assuage parental guilt .”Without undermining the socio-psychological

problem of such parents, the (old) beliefs about the condition of albinism can take horrific dimensions. Research by Baker et al. (2010: 173) refers to the rural areas of Zimbabwe and Venda, where it is still believed that babies born with albinism should be killed at birth. John Makumbe (2006), the founder of ZIMAS, narrates that he nearly died at birth as the nurse was too scared to assist a baby born with albinism. In 2019, in Malawi, four persons were sentenced to death for killing children with albinism.

### *Albinism in Contemporary Art*

Due to destructive superstitions and prejudices not only in Africa but also in Europe and the USA, 'albinism' remains a global problem. Artistically presented in Visual Arts, literary works, theatre plays, and movies, albinism has been projected from different optical angles. Based on fiction literature, contemporary films depict villain characters as persons with pale skin tone, silver-blond hair, and occasionally pink or protruding eyes. These films, produced mainly by Americans or Europeans, generally impact African viewers. Albinism is unfairly represented in most of them, as characters revolve around their condition. Thus, the portrayed character with albinism often plays the role of a villain, a supernatural being, or a figure in a comical part. Destructive stereotypes are mainly confirmed by films such as *Village of the Damned*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, *Die Another Day*, *The Princess Bride*, *The Benchwarmers*, *Powder*, etc. Characters fall under three categories: a) the antihero or villain, b) the paranormal (supernatural, ghostly), and c) the comic type or being backward.

In the movie *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), Paul Bettany, an actor without the condition, is in the role of the *antihero* Silas, a character with albinism. In response to public outcry, Dennis Hurley, actor and writer himself with albinism, makes fun of Hollywood films that give incorrect depictions of people with albinism. In his short comedy, *The Albino Code*, imitating *The Da Vinci Code*, Hurley, among the defects in the portrayal of Silas as a skillful assassin, points at a contradiction to the fact that most people with albinism have impaired vision!

In Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Christ's *supernatural* antagonist, Satan, appears to Him while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, as a woman (Rosalinda Celentano), who turns into an 'albino' serpent! The socio-cultural offence here is twofold: first, towards people with albinism, and

second, to women being directly associated with evil and harmful supernatural powers!

Can the link between the snake and albinism, perhaps, be traced to ‘primordial beliefs?’ In Venda, following a traditional belief, inside every pregnant woman exists a serpent monitoring and protecting her pregnancy. Only when the snake turns away, the unborn baby is left unprotected. To explain the birth of a baby with albinism, a Venda elder suggested that the woman, while pregnant, encountered someone with albinism (maternal imprint), whose appearance caused the snake to turn away, leaving thus the fetus defenceless to the condition (Baker, 2010, p. 172).

In the American fantasy film, *Powder* (1995), a young man with albinism’s brain holds electromagnetic charges, and he is seen as a freak. His condition is also inappropriately associated with supernatural powers which he obtained in his mother’s womb when she was struck by lightning. The baby is rejected by his father – most probably the closest real case scenario because he expected a pigmented child or so-called normal child (Kimbassa, 2016, p. 80).

The science fiction film *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) caused great controversy due to the main twin characters, who, as ghosts, portrayed a negative image of people with albinism (New York Press, 2003). In the same category, in *The Village of the Damned* (1960 and a remake in 1995), based on Wyndham’s novel *Midwich Cuckoos*, ten women mysteriously and simultaneously fall pregnant. Their children are born with pale skin, silver-platinum hair, and cerulean eyes with violent supernatural abilities. Poignantly, James Dunn (2016), reporting on a Tanzanian village that protects people with albinism, designates the same title, ‘village of the damned.’ Thus, instead of speaking of a ‘city’s collective memory as ghostly trace,’ the label tells of a village’s collective effort to protect the ‘ghosts’ from being hunted down for their body parts. The ‘village of the damned’ gives power to those great in numbers, yet ‘damned,’ as they are confined to survival restrictions in terms of time (as for the sun’s harmful rays) and space (fleeing their homes).

On social rejection, exclusion, or separation that defines ‘albinism’ as identity and not as a condition, Baker interestingly observes: “...the boundary emerges as a means of social control that is closely related to the organisation of power in society, for boundaries function both to protect and to differentiate” (2007: 75). Unfortunately, the above-mentioned Tanzanian ‘safe-haven’ brings

segregation, regardless of the motives, and retells Herodotos's story of the ostracism of the Persians during the 5th century BC. What society needs is inclusion and acceptance to make people with albinism feel they belong to their community!

In *The Benchwarmers* movie (2006), one of the characters, Howie, who is afraid of the sun, lives in a closet. Unfortunately, the film fails to educate the public on the damage the sun may cause to people with albinism and makes a mockery out of Howie's fears. Due to their skin sensitivity, people with albinism need protection against the sun, as UV rays can cause cancer. Consequently, keeping children with albinism indoors during the daytime has wrongfully been interpreted by the community as a sign of the child's rejection. Similarly, their sunlight sensitivity and visual impairment have been interpreted in parts of Africa as estranged persons who are blind in daytime "noctambule" as night owls (Kimbassa, 2016, p. 12).

### *Awareness through Arts*

In Visual Arts, mainly *photography*, the snake's biblical, evil power - wrongly associated with albinism - has been challenged by Justin Dingwall's creations. Aiming at socio-cultural awareness and change, the internationally acclaimed artist in his collection, ALBUS, includes portraits of model Thando Hopa, the first woman with albinism, on *Vogue's* cover page (2019) and Sanele Xaba (Lasane, 2019). Confronting negative perceptions around albinism and the snake, Dingwall captures both discriminated 'creatures' harmoniously united in a visually striking ensemble. Award-winning artist Rick Guidotti (1997) also uses his camera as a tool to promote awareness about albinism. Inspired by the unique beauty of a woman with albinism, he founded the arts, advocacy, and educational organisation, 'POSITIVE EXPOSURE,' to celebrate human diversity through the Arts.

In South African *Performing Arts*, Arthur Molepo, as author and actor, has exposed albinism and relevant superstitions through his play, 'Mama, I want the Black that YOU are' (2019). The title itself expresses the desperation of a child with the condition, Matlakala, to establish her identity in the African context. Molepo questions what, in fact, defines who is considered Black and who is White. If the issue is defined by skin colour, the child with albinism in the play does not belong anywhere. Kimbassa (2016: 18) confirms that in Southern Africa, the social identity of persons with albinism, "too white to be black or

“black in a white skin,” depends mainly on politico-historical context. Influenced by past apartheid laws, national identity is defined by skin colour, manipulating thus social classification and acceptance in the collective community consciousness. Accordingly, Baker (2007: 74) challenges the concept that “all Africans are black,” as albinism is not defined as Black or White. Yet, both features exist in the absence of pigmentation in the African “albino skin.”

Molepo also highlights the hunting down of people with albinism and the mutilation of their body parts traditionally used in *muti* (medicine) by witchdoctors in Africa: Matlakala’s biological mother was killed by *muti*-hunters at birth, while a woman named Anna, to redeem her wrongdoings, rescues Matlakala and raises her as her child. Having mothered a girl with albinism, Anna was forced to give her to the elders to be killed as impelled by customs. This reflects the tragic fate mothers of children with albinism are faced with: “abandon” or “kill,” following the belief system of a particular region (Kimbassa, 2016: 16, 19). The plot is strongly supported by a fair balance between *word*, *action*, and *peripeteia*: powerful tragic features evoke social awareness through empathy gradually built by emotions of *pity*, *fear*, and *katharsis* (Butcher, 1907: VI, 23).

Allegorically, the child is named Matlakala (= rubbish in Sotho): derogatory nicknames are commonly used to define the skin colour of the condition, such as “Whitey”, “Yellow-bone,” “Ghost,” or “Phenomenon.” Depending on the ethnic group of origin, nicknames that relate to animals (in Xhosa, “Inkawu” = monkey) clearly illustrate dehumanisation of the labelled person lifting thus collective and individual moral consequences in case of murder (Kimbassa, 2016, p. 78; Robson 2010: 19). Notably, Trevor Noah, by using the expression “day walker” in a stand-up show in 2009, indirectly established it as another denoting nickname (Kimbassa, 2016, p. 12).

After public awareness was steered by Vicky Ntetema (BBC News, 2007) on brutal attacks and killings of persons with albinism in Tanzania, Peter Ash founded the Canadian charity association, *Under the Same Sun* (UTSS) to promote the human rights of persons with albinism in 2008 (UTSS, 2012) in both countries. Remarkably, a Memorial Monument was unveiled in the town of Sengerema in Tanzania: artists with disabilities created the life-size sculpture in memory of killing people with albinism and honoured 139 victims. The statue

represents a family of three: a young boy with albinism and his parents pigmented, protecting their child from sun rays.

### **Conclusion**

This article has demystified destructive stereotypes about albinism through factual information tracing the origins of their creation and causes of persisting existence. This study has demonstrated that this medically identified condition is a genetic disorder refuting thus any association with supernatural intervention, primordial curse, or a spell.

Furthermore, it has revealed two aspects of albinism: one external, extremely damaging, and harmful, based on primordial beliefs, stereotypes, and irrational superstitions that refer to social, collective. The other one, internal and incredibly positive, is built by persons with albinism. Based on their determination, skills, and will, persons with albinism have demonstrated globally, mainly through Arts, their capability to fight social injustice and claim their rightful position in this world, not of a supernatural cosmos. Unfortunately, the older the origin of collective stereotypes, the more difficult to uproot them. In promoting awareness, this research has projected the Arts as a powerful tool able either to destroy antisocial stereotypes associated with myths or to alter conceptual views: photography has advocated social transformation and change by projecting the primordially hunted as evil, snake, and albinism, into an aesthetically admirable synthesis of two victims of social injustice, animal/human. Cinematography, on the other hand, through its highly influential capability, was able to change the image of the *hunted* victim to a *haunting* power, yet both refer to 'supernatural' beings. Finally, since classical times, the theatre has proved its unique diachronic ability to create awareness by educating through direct, live contact with the audience, challenging human nature to feel emotional and reason.

Thus, *knowledge* through *Research* and *Education* through Arts can promote *Awareness* about human differentiation, *in casu* albinism.

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