

Magic and Albinism in Tanzania

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Abstract

An article is focused on the approach to the people with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa, in particular in Tanzania where I was doing field research. That approach was transformed during time and during socio-economical changes into the shape which shows elements of fetishism. I mean, specifically, assigning of inseparable values and powers to the body parts of people with albinism. I was doing my ethnographical research since december 2015 till may 2016.

There were dozens of proved murders of albino people with ritual background in Tanzania during last ten years. These acts were condemned in media as “brutal acts, motivated by the relicts of so called primitive thinking”. Because this situation accelerated to the very critical stage due to the merging of different aspects without any obvious connection. Among them we can mention either economical reasons or serious socio-political changes inside the country. They started with the gaining of independence in 1961 and were manifested, among other things, by the transformation of the economic activities. They haven’t been based on “local resources” any more, but they have been started to be more centralized – in case related to our research object the bases emerged around deposits of gold and diamonds, which attracted big numbers of young males.

These young men came to the mine sites – for them very new and fragile environment. They were working under enormous pressure with uncertain perspective of livelihood. So one day they started looking for “shortcuts” – overall and fast easement of their situation. So somehow could arise demand for the fetish from albino bodies – it could arise from the merging of local beliefs about albinos and new kind of strong pressure, pushed on young men. But the roots of the phenomenon are leading much deeper to the past and my contribution tries to reflect it.

Keywords

Albino, albinism, fetish, fetishization, occult economy, artisanal mining, morder of albinos, ritual killing

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Introduction

This thesis is focused on approach to the people with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa, in particular in Tanzania where I have done my field research. That approach was transformed during time and during socio-economical changes into the shape which shows elements of fetishism. I mean, specifically, assigning of inseparable values and powers to the body parts of people with albinism. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is closely related to another phenomenon. The Fetish from the albino bodies has become a lucrative item in the field of the occult economy.

I am going to write about these values and powers in detail in this thesis. I did my ethnographical research since december 2015 till may 2016. During this period I was giving special attention to the participant observation, deep interviews, collecting of narrations, visual documentation of the data and analysis of local media and social networks.

There were dozens of proved murders of albino people with ritual background in Tanzania during last ten years. Real estimates are even much higher. These acts were condemned in media as “brutal acts, motivated by the relicts of so called primitive thinking”. But it’s important to try to look on these issues in complex way. Because this situation accelerated to a very critical stage due to the merging of different aspects without any obvious connection. Among them we can mention either economical reasons or serious socio-political changes inside the country. These changes, accompanied with the big social uncertainty and instability, contributed to the deepening of the original local beliefs about people with albinism and transformed them into “fetishism shape”. So the outside “intervene conditions” and the local beliefs about people with albinism were interconnected. Important social changes in Tanzania, started with the gaining of independence in 1961, have been manifested among other things by the transformation of the economic activities. They haven’t been based on “local resources” any more, but they have been started to be more centralized – in our case the bases have emerged around deposits of gold and diamonds, which have attracted big numbers of young males.

These young men have come to the mine sites – for them very new and fragile environment. They were working under enormous pressure with uncertain perspective of livelihood. So one day they started looking for “shortcuts” – overall and fast easement of their situation. So somehow could arise the demand for the fetish from albino bodies – it could arise from the merging of local beliefs about albinos and new kind of strong pressure, pushed on young men. The “business chain” leads from the “customer”, who buys the product from the local healer or “waganga”, the person with magical powers. Next segments are traffickers and “albino hunters” – their direct killers. All this chain is contributing to the creation of the general picture and general idea about albino people in the society. But the roots of these ideas are leading much deeper to the past. In this paper I want to analyse current context of the phenomenon and reveal some historical connections. The combination of both perspectives should guarantee the complex look on the issue.

Traditional social order in Tanzania and the economic, political and social changes after independence and decolonisation

In 1961, when Tanzania became independent, local society was built largely on a farming and pastoral way of livelihood. People were living in settlements and were leading by elders and heads of these settlements. The cultural environment was affected by so called “agrarian work ethics”.

The important role in the society played a healer called waganga who, in addition to the treatment, shaped the spiritual balance in the settlement. He was a spiritual authority in that society, who also had the task of guarding the continuity of their cosmology together with the elders and the head of the settlement.

When in 1961 Tanzania became independent, all economic and political power was focused on agriculture. During the reign of president Nyerere, the wealth of minerals grew relatively rapidly, so the tendency was to transform the economic base from agricultural industry to the mining. Many families or individuals (in the vast majority men) migrated to north-west Tanzania to the area of Victoria Lake, where there was the largest occurrence of diamonds and gold. In addition to aggravation of the original social and family structure, there were also changes in economic and political terms.¹

Significant changes in the society have also led to the alteration of the original cosmology and the concepts of the material and spiritual world. In the area of Victoria Lake, the so-called friction between the indigenous farming population with their preservation of traditional values and the miners extracted from the original environment began, with the miners ambition to find as many diamonds and gold as possible.

Under the weight of these changes, the traditional agricultural and pastoral way of life was replaced by diamonds and gold extraction. People started to live in the cities and mining areas more often than in the settlements and small villages. The continual transfer of tradition was destroyed, elders lost their “key word” in the society. Young men were largely going to the cities and had different priorities. It has caused the destruction of old cosmology and social order and raised the time of liminality.

Rumours and the witchcraft practice in Tanzanian society

The most important role in tanzanian spiritual world is even today played by the ancestors, gods and spirits. The bridge between the secular physical world and the spiritual invisible one is what is called “witchcraft”.

The belief in magic and witchcraft is so rooted in tanzanian society that, despite the fact that most people identify themselves with the world religions such as Christianity and Islam, faith in spirits, ancestors and witchcraft is an integral and prevailing part of their

¹ Bryceson, D.F., Jonsson, J.B., Sherrington, R., “Miner’s magic: artisanal mining, the albino fetish and murder in Tanzania.” *The journal of modern African studies* 48, No. 3 (2010).

cosmology. Inside the society there are deeply rooted beliefs in offering. For example individuals sell their children or other kin to sorcerers in exchange for wealth-creating medicine – you must give something very important for your life and then you can get something big or you become rich. Common idea in the society is that some individuals pay sorcerers to create zombies recently dead to assist them or if you have to work as a worker on the field at night, the witch steals your spirit. These fixed ideas are parts of the whole local cosmology which are used just as examples in this article. There are other examples below to demonstrate thinking, mentality and the local belief in an invisible world affecting the lives of individuals and the whole society.

Living conditions of albinos in Tanzania

Albinism is a genetical disorder of melanin production. It is expressed by white coloured skin (without pigment), eyes and hairs. The presence of albinism is globally the biggest in sub-Saharan Africa and Tanzania has probably the largest population among those countries: according to the estimates, 1/1400 in Tanzania is albino, which would mean the total population of albinos of around 35.000 – 40.000.² Generally speaking, according to a 2010 Pew Research Center poll, 93% of Tanzanians believed in witchcraft.³

Tanzanian albinos face serious health problems caused by the sun shine (problems with eyes including blindness, skin cancer – it starts developing in the young age very often). They face poverty – an example can be the “partly albino” family which participated in our research (nobody has a formal job neither a better education), they have lack of working opportunities (eg. they can’t work in agriculture because of their health condition). Economical marginalization of albinos starts from the primary school (they can’t see what is written on the blackboard). One of the consequences of their generally low level of education is also that the albino community is almost “voiceless” in the fight for their rights, although it is slowly changing during the recent years. They are still facing discrimination, stigmatization, superstitions, prejudices and sometimes even physical violence. (The information was obtained from the personal interviews with one of the participants in research, albino activist Josephat Torner in January 2016.)

This “social degradation” of albino people has many faces, for example social isolation at school, mockery on the street, labour exploitation, mutilation, ritual killing and even violation of graves. The extent of this social exclusion is the worst in the “lake region” around Lake Victoria, and probably the best in the biggest Tanzanian city Dar es Salaam and the neighbourhood. (The information was obtained from the personal interviews with one of the participants in research, albino activist Josephat Torner in January 2016.)

² BBC, „Tanzania – Kidnapping of albino boy raises witchcraft fears,” accessed March 12, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-31509023>

³ Pew Research Center, “The survey on religious belief in sub-Saharan Africa,” accessed September 10, 2016. <http://www.pewforum.org/newassets/images/reports/sub-saharan-africa/sub-saharan-africa-full-report.pdf>

Ritual killings

The wave of “ritual killings” (and mutilation) of albino people started in Tanzania and whole Africa, according to media and the official records, in the beginning of this century. According to media reports, there have been dozens of ritual murders in Tanzania since 2000, which is more than half than in all other countries together. But we are talking only about statistics based on official documents and we can only deduce what is in the countryside really going on.

Anyway this wave of killings led to the establishing of protected camps for albinos (mainly for children). Their existence, on the other hand, contributed to the further deepening of albinos exclusion. Today there should be around 13 camps of that kind (e.g. Shinyanga city in northern Tanzania or guarded Island Ukurewe on Victoria Lake)

During years 2013–15 the known cases of killings dropped, probably because of some spectacular actions of the government (strict punishments for some killers, detaining of traditional healers suspected from the violence against albinos). On the other hand, there was documented the upsurge of violence in neighbouring Malawi and few other African countries since that period.⁴

The role of media

The “wave” of ritual killings is often interpreted as a result of the increase of magical beliefs and superstitions which claim that albino body parts bring health and good luck. We can doubt whether it's such a new phenomenon or whether it has only come to surface with the media expansion in the region. According to the globally most well known albino activist Josephat Torner, 50 years ago the birth of an albino child was understood as “bad omen” and therefore the infanticide was recommended to the parents of the new born albino, and sometimes it was even implemented. This practice is retreated today allegedly. So we might be observing a rise of ritual killings on one side and a decrease of cases of infanticide on other side.

For sure, mass media contributed positively to the better awareness about the difficult situation of Tanzanian albinos in the recent years. The importance of media for the albino community is mirrored in the words of the young albino activist Hamiz (the main actor of the movie *White shadow*, 2013): *“I would like to spread education and awareness about albinism through art, for example theatre in the countryside. Because art affects media and media affect society. And society can somehow easily understand thanks art and media, what you do.”* (personal interviews with the albino activist Hamisi Bazili)

⁴ Amnesty International UK. „Malawi – new wave of killings and attacks against people with albinism,” accessed June 25, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/malawi-new-wave-killings-and-attacks-against-people-albinism>

Despite that positive impact of media, their pictures of violence against albinos are significantly simplified – they usually show these brutal acts as a relict of “primitive thinking”, usually without a deeper explanation.

Albino fetish and historical context

Following more detailed analysis of the historical context of the albino killings phenomenon, we can't quite say that they are the acts of “primitive thinking”, as reported in the media. The world itself is not the sum of the individually isolated environments, just as the social groups living in these environments do not remain in the same state forever. They are still developing and adopting new social patterns, others modifying, shaping or damaging.

The world is one large interconnected organism and therefore, it is important to consider and approach the individual phenomena as a part of the whole. If we come back to the history, we can't see any precedents in traditional beliefs and practices for the killing of albinos and using their body parts as a fetish. On the first sight there is no symbolism and no direct connection. Just as we don't find any rituals associated with the fetish of albino bodies in the past.

The only practice that has been recorded and has probably been carried out under the influence of certain superstitions was a hushed practice of the mercy killing of albino infants. These families believed that the birth of an albino baby would cause misfortune, or that it was a punishment for wrongdoing in the past or the previous live. They placed them to the cattle kraal gateway and if they didn't die, they allowed them to live. Albinos were usually called *zeruzeru*.⁵ It means *zero* respectively *ghosts* or people who have no personhood so they can't die.

Families that moved to cities or mining sites due to the social changes began to believe that an albino baby would bring misfortune to the family of miners. (Bryceson et al., 2010) There we can see the preservation of the idea despite the changes. According to the testimonies of albino activists in my research the widespread idea claims that albinos are ghosts of colonialists or white men. This idea is corresponding with the theory of “whiteness”. People believe that they will get the attributes of a “white man”.

Unfortunately, there is also a superstition that having sex with albino virgin will heal you from AIDS and HIV, which is widely spread in Tanzania. It is not a coincidence that this superstition is the most widespread around the mining areas, in places where there are many young male miners living alone without a family. The incidence of HIV and AIDS is higher than in other areas, and therefore the superstition has probably spread. However, this superstition is, according to the boss of the guarded camp for children with albinism in Shinyanga, widespread throughout almost whole Tanzania. *“In camps for children with*

⁵ Bryceson, D.F., Jonsson, J.B., Sherrington, R., “Miner's magic: artisanal mining, the albino fetish and murder in Tanzania.” *The journal of modern African studies* 48, No. 3 (2010).

albinism, many girls are just the victims of these superstitions, which after the rape gave birth to the child and live together in these protective institutions.”

Albino fetish as a new mental construct

All the indicated social changes were leading to the current chain of interventions – hunting and abduction of albinos, murder and dismembering parts of the body (albino hunter), selling sorcerer in Swahili called *waganga* (directly or through another person – “dealer”), *waganga* make the “medicine” and sell it to the client (miner/fisherman). (from the testimony of one of the participants in the research Al Shymaa Kway-Geer a Tanzanian politician)

The bones are usually pulverised and buried in the mine pit, or are used for bathing or as amulets – they believe that it helps them to find the gold or diamond stones or personal protection.⁶ Also they use another parts and excrements of the body (blood, internal organs, fingers).

According to existing researches, the brutal acts towards albinos can be driven by different motives. Mostly suggested are these ones:

- a) **People are looking for “shortcuts”** to get rich in the society with huge inequality of resources distribution – albino body parts can be one of the “shortcut” (theory of Josephat Torner) – there is no social permeability
- b) **It is result of social and economic changes of post-colonialism period.** The notion that albinos are “ghosts of colonialists” or “bigger demand for fetishes” around gold and diamond mines, or among fishermen, are all widespread in the Tanzanian society.
- c) **It is simple economic motive.** Market value of “complete set of albino body parts” is around 75.000 USD according Red Cross estimates.

Complex studies focuses on the topic

After a detailed study of the issue, I have to regret to say that found only a few studies and articles focused on this phenomenon. For a deeper understanding of the whole issue, I chose two articles that I perceive as the “pivotal”. The first article *The Fetishization of Albinos in Tanzania* by Caroline Ackley is describing the process of fetishisation of albino bodies and outlines the possibilities of creating this mental construct.

The second article *Miner’s Magic: Artisanal Mining, the Albino Fetish and Murder in Tanzania* by Deborah Fahy Bryceson, Jesper Bosse Jonsson and Richard Sherrington focuses on the link between mineral extraction as a new way of livelihood for young men and the source of wealth and albino killings.

⁶ Bryceson, D.F., Jonsson, J.B., Sherrington, R., “Miner’s magic: artisanal mining, the albino fetish and murder in Tanzania.” *The journal of modern African studies* 48, No. 3 (2010).

For a wider anchoring of the whole issue, I would like to introduce one more title here and that is *Occult Economy and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from South Africa Postcolony* by Jean and John Comaroff. This title refers to the impact of significant changes in post-colonial South Africa on the occult economy, the promises of modernity, and the disillusionment of post-modern neoliberal times. Jean and John Comaroff also draw attention to the methodological use of the terms “local” and “global” as analytical constructs instead of explanatory terms or empirical reality.

In addition, I also use the data from my field research carried out from December 2015 until april 2016 in Tanzania (Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam, Shinyanga).

A generally supported opinion explaining the phenomenon of albino killings is that the “albino magic and medicine” is a reformulation or a reinterpretation of past occult beliefs and practices. We can also meet with the opinion that this new phenomenon may be based on the fetishization of “whiteness” and its attributes (eg. wealth and power). All articles suggest that occult beliefs have and will continue to evolve and adapt to social, economic, and political changes in Tanzanian society.

Neoliberal and occult theory

The article “The Fetishization of Albinos in Tanzania“ by Caroline Auckley includes a theory based on an assumption of the causality between economic conditions and spiritual context. The decline of the fishing industry has prompted the people living around Lake Victoria to create and utilize a new economy, an occult economy based on the magic and medicine of albinos. A simplified version of the neoliberal argument proposes that albino killings are a result of failed post-colonial structural adjustment policies.⁷

A similar theoretical approach to the issue was already in the second half of the 1990s, by Jean and John Comaroff, who were examining the impact of significant rapid socio-economic and political changes on society. The practice of witchcraft and the occult economy has largely spread. Jean and John Comaroff (1999) see a direct link between the liminal period of a particular state and the increase of witchcraft and the occult economy.

The phenomenon of the occult economy respectively trade in human organs can take place in a real physical or a more subtle abstract form of rumors and superstitions. Even so, it can wake up a wave of fear. For example, a mass panic broke out in South America in the 1990s in connection with alleged theft and sale of human organs. The actors of these thefts should be unscrupulous gringos.

A similar case was recorded at the same time in the Czech Republic but in a milder form. At the time of post-revolution, there were urban legends about theft and trafficking of human organs among people.

⁷ Auckley, C., “*The Fetishization of Albinos in Tanzania*”, Univesity of Chicago (2010). https://ecitydoc.com/download/the-fetishization-of-albinos-in-tanzania_pdf (accessed March 21, 2018)

An enormous disillusion that came after in post-colonial South Africa, where the hope, the sense of usefulness and the ability to live in a free and rich society replaced the hopelessness, the feeling of vanity and the widespread problem of increasing crime, sorcery, occult economics, zombie and invisible workers in the case of South Africa daily experience of poverty. At this time, there was also a markedly uneven regulation of global wealth and the emerging hatred of the young generation against the old. The young generation perceived unfavorable changes in society as the betrayal of the old generation and generally the whole society, and the inability to secure favorable conditions for life. The only way of getting rich is the already mentioned illegal activities.

Manipulation of moral hierarchies to maintain legitimate authority and power

We can also see the another point of view. Ackley also presents the theory built on an case that rumors and superstitions serve an important function for Tanzania's cultural elite. *It allows them to represent themselves as proponents of "modernity", "rationality", "civic engagement", and "economic individualism"*.⁸

International organizations can then see all the important indicators of good governance and a successful democracy. *"These indicators include prompt foreign bodies to give more aid money, rectify the moral hierarchy of occult beliefs and placing the cultural elite at the top of that hierarchy."*⁹

That practices would be similiar with "showing of the body curiosities" in the turn of 19th and 20th century in Western society which allowed to show "us normal" in contrast to "those different abnormal" and maintains or re-establish hierarchy in society.

Albino fetish and global market

Albino killings, fetishising their bodies and occult economy in general are often associated with the global market¹⁰ and the current mentality of people in a complex society that is driven by the principle "As much as you can get in the shortest time" (the participant of my research Josephat Turner), which is in the direct opposition to the original tradition.

The Old generation puts a lot more on long-term handover of proven practices and access. *"Only what you earn or get through the sweat on your forehead, you deserve."* Yet this is often the case in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the case of the early generations who are prudent in the event of rapid gains or sudden profits. They see it only as a shortcut to achieve the objectives through black magic.

⁸ Ibid., (2010), 55.

⁹ Ibid., (2010), 55.

¹⁰ Comaroff, J., *Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South Africa Postcolony*, *American Ethnologist* 26, No. 2 (1999).

In general the study *Miner's magic: artisanal mining, the albino fetish and murder in Tanzania* explains the significance of the contextual circumstances of an artisanal mining boom firmly embedded in a global commodity chain and local profit maximisation. The murders are generally connected to gold and diamond efforts to secure lucky charms for finding minerals and protection against danger while mining.

Social creativity

According to David Greaber, social creativity is a tool for cope with sudden and significant changes in the society. It has to adapt to the change and the result of the social creativity is a social contract, which may appear in extreme cases in the form of a fetish like in Tanzania where the result of these big changes were albino killings, shaping their fetish and belief in bringing happiness, health, money or power to you.¹¹

Certain similarities can also be found in the case of a witch hunting where women are sometimes accused of witchcraft. The only reason for this can be the fact that a woman after the death of a man is self-sufficient, starts for example with a small business, and is self-employed. This approach is so unknown and novel in most places in Sub-Saharan Africa that the woman's surroundings are convincing that a woman must be a witch or in connection with witches.

The most significant sentence used often in this case is the quotation from Evans-Pritchard: "*The new situations require new magic and it is just up to us how we interpret it.*"¹²

Traditionalistic theory

Interpretation of rumours and superstitions provide more detailed insight into Tanzania beliefs and daily life and serve as a collective representation of Tanzanian social and political moods.

The power of rumours and superstition also illustrates the impact of social constructs in the organization of everyday life. You can find a legitimate faith in witchcraft because it is rooted in its routine and has the potential for real and sometimes harmful consequences.¹³

The accumulation of wealth through sorcery at the expense of poor people

The big problem that we can find in the cases of witchcraft, the killing of albinos and the fetishism of their bodies is a big business that is connected with the whole phenomenon.

¹¹ Bryceson, D.F., Jonsson, J.B., Sherrington, R., "Miner's magic: artisanal mining, the albino fetish and murder in Tanzania." *The journal of modern African studies* 48, No. 3 (2010).

¹² Ibid., *The journal of modern African studies* 48, No. 3 (2010).

¹³ Ackley, C., "*The Fetishization of Albinos in Tanzania*", University of Chicago (2010). https://ecitydoc.com/download/the-fetishization-of-albinos-in-tanzania_pdf (accessed March 21, 2018).

It is a typical phenomenon in whole Africa – misusing of social position, large economical differences in the society, few percent of people with accumulated financial capital. It drives people to search services of *waganga* and use the fetishes in belief that it will bring them better future. If there is no social mobility and there is no legal way to get better, people are often forced to use other way such as witchcraft. Especially when they believe this path.

The situation with regard to albinos is still unfortunate due to the very slow lawsuits with albino hunters and all people involved in the chain of albino bodies. There is very slow reaction of the Tanzanian government to the murders of albinos and low numbers of convicted participants of albino murders.

In this case we can see also similarity between witch killing and albino killing. A deep social transformation and following social creativity which create a new “social construct of reality” or the so-called contract produce a new social exclusion and social victimization. Moreover, albino activists participating in my research claim that Tanzanian government covers these murders. “There are money and power,” told me the respondents.

Conclusion

What does an albino body fetish mean to its users? Perhaps it is a way to “whiteness” and to get their attributes, but at the same time it can suggest the way where the user could get if he did not achieve his goals – excluded at the edge of the society as well as *zeruzeru*.

As we can see the albino fetish symbolizes two different social orders, that interfere: the traditional agrarian order and new interconnected mining network that is an integral part of the global market. In Tanzania, as well as in other post-colonial African countries, people are often driven by unexpected and harsh changes. Because of these stormy changes, society often produces violence as a commonly agreed and shared form of action. *Wagangas* and miners dehumanised and marginalised albinos and make them the object of getting rich, respectively goods in the market.

This terrible phenomenon has led to the awakening of activism from organizations focusing on human rights and also people with albinism. This has resulted into the shift of the whole problematic and beginning with the persecution of people involved in business with albino bodies. Albinos are starting to be active in defending and changing the whole situation. In the society of albinos is a number of activists who call for fetish deconstruction through the education, media and art.

Unfortunately this process of deconstruction takes long time, because still the fascination regarding body parts as well as rumours and superstitions deeply rooted in human imagination persist. It's deep written in people's mind. But there can be ways out of this sometimes painful social situation. “The only solution is long-term education in all sides which can uproots the myths and superstitions,” told me Josephat Torner, enormously active albino activist who set foot on the summit of Kilimanjaro and survived number of violent attacks.

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