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**EXCLUSION, VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL UTILITY. THE SOCIAL ROLE
OF CHILDREN WITH ALBINISM IN AFRICAN SOCIETY.**

ABSTRACT. The sociocultural phenomenon of children with albinism, who bring both bad luck and healing, marks a fate of marginalisation, violence and social exclusion. From a very young age, these children are outcasts, and as such, the victims of constant abuse and beatings until death. However, some cultures believe their uniqueness gives them healing powers, leading to muti killings (or medicine murder), criminal actions managed by illegal markets and fed by widespread and dominant cultural traditions; their organs are excised for their regenerating, healing and positive powers. Such a culture of violence and ignorance compromises childhood and violates the human, social and civil rights of those who, because of their diversity, are considered elements to be eradicated.

Keywords *Children, violence, exclusion, culture, organs*

ABSTRACT. Il fenomeno socio culturale dei bambini albini, portatori di sventure ma allo stesso tempo soggetti dai poteri taumaturgici, segna un destino di emarginazione, violenze ed esclusione sociale. Fin da piccoli vengono considerati rei e per questo vittime costanti di abusi e percosse sino alla morte. Tuttavia la

loro unicità, in alcune culture, li considera portatori di proprietà con poteri benefici. Da qui, i muti murder, azioni criminali gestite da mercati illegali e alimentati da tradizioni culturali diffuse e dominanti, volte all'espianto di organi con la convinzione che in essi risiedano poteri rigeneranti, riparativi e positivi. Una cultura di violenza, di ignoranza che compromette una infanzia e che lede i diritti umani, sociali e civili di chi, per la sua diversità, è considerato un elemento da estirpare.

Key words: *bambini, violenze, esclusione, cultura, organi*

The prevalence of albinism is one in 17,000 worldwide. In Africa, and more precisely in 23 countries on the continent, this congenital anomaly is dangerous for the family, village and for the child's very life. This view is vitiated by cultural suggestion, a rigid position originating from peculiar beliefs linked to witchcraft and that lead to persecution and actions of ferocious and unprecedented violence against children born in a place that considers them bad omens¹. Albinism² is a congenital

¹ For the link between African albinism and prejudice, see: **A. R. King**, G. C. Summers, *Facts about of Albinism*, 2003.

² The term, from the Latin *albinus*, derives from *albus*, white. It was originally used to indicate white-skinned blacks of western Africa and refers to a hereditary congenital abnormality involving the partial or complete lack of melanin pigmentation. See "Albinismo", *Dizionario di medicina* 2010; *various authors Naturally pale - Albinism: A livable diversity - knowing it helps to understand, sharing helps to grow up*, Galassia Arte, 2012. On 18 December 2014, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 69/170 proclaiming 13 June International Albinism Awareness Day. See 69/170. *International Albinism Awareness Day*, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/69/170, 19 December 2018.

disorder characterised by the complete or partial absence of melanin (pigmentation) in the skin, hair, eyes and body hair. It is also associated with vision defects and skin sensitivity to sun exposure. People with this condition may be socially segregated, and children barred from basic education and contact with other children to the point that appropriate structures offering protection and assistance in learning become required³.

Many associations⁴, including the best-known Tanzania Albino Charity, are working to eradicate a tradition legitimising violence against people with albinism, who are present in African villages at a prevalence of one in 5,000. While this datum indicates a high number of children with albinism with respect to birth indicators, it also raises a number of considerations and requires interventions in the sociocultural fabric where violence occurs. There has been unprecedented persecution in recent years⁵, due in part to inconsistent action by government authorities⁶ that have adopted

³ For clinical aspects, see by various authors, *Albinism. Metabolic and Molecular Bases of Inherited Disease*, McGraw-Hill, New York 2001.

⁴ The Under the Same Sun association, founded by Peter Ash, reports that there have been 151 victims in Tanzania alone since 2006. See Peter Ash, <http://albinism.ohchr.org/story-peter-ash.html>, 19 December 2018.

⁵ Amnesty International reports that one child disappears every month in Malawi, being killed and dismembered by so-called healers who sell their body parts as talismans. On the persecution of people with albinism in Malawi, see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/06/albinism-in-malawi-stop-the-killings/>, 19 December 2018.

weak measures⁷ to protect them⁸ and track down this illegal organ market and these atrocities. As we have mentioned, this social violence originates in tribal beliefs and cultures that survive and are handed down over the generations, and that fear infection. Children with albinism are excluded from games, are bullied and are not even touched, since in some areas of Africa, the belief persists that albinism is contagious and can be caught through mere contact. Some African cultures attribute healing powers to body parts⁹, and the local medical system is replaced by superstition¹⁰ and witchcraft.

Clearly, being born and growing up under these conditions generates constant unease, related to a deep sense of exclusion that is not merely emotional, but

⁶ For example, although the Constitution of Malawi condemns violence against people with albinism, it is poorly respected and only half-heartedly applied.

⁷ Only 5% of cases of violence against people with albinism are reported, reflecting a deeply rooted cultural tradition that is difficult to eradicate.

⁸ The UN has harshly criticised certain governments that have adopted weak measures to protect children with albinism. The government of Dodoma has established reception centres through the Ministry of Education, offering refuge to persecuted children. The UN criticised the fact that, while these structures were intended to play a temporary accommodation role, they have precarious sanitary conditions and do not offer the protection for which they were established. It is important to add that in some of these centres, children are segregated, abused and separated from their families, totally severing familial ties.

⁹ For the healing power of body parts, see: M. Segalen, *Riti e rituali contemporanei*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2002.

¹⁰ It is widely believed that children with albinism are born of relations between a black African woman and a white man. Thus, the child reflects a betrayal of culture, incarnating European colonialism, feared and hated by society.

characterised by considerable difficulty in living a life free from prejudice and violence.

However, children with albinism are not only an omen of bad luck and punishment¹¹. Indeed, their uniqueness also makes them valuable on a black-market worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, where their body parts are sold following amputation¹², rape and murder. Here, power is attributed to a specific organ or body part by a humus of knowledge that is handed down socially, playing an implementation role both culturally as knowledge that influences habits and in terms of socialisation since it involves the exclusion, elimination and liquidation of persons considered either dangerous or useful anomalies in the social framework of the community.

The power contained in diversity not only has beneficial properties on earth, but, in some traditions, grants powers to intervene in natural phenomena that according to legends are punishments inflicted on mankind by the gods. This is the case of Cameroon, for example, where the 2006 eruption of the volcano in Douala was believed to be divine punishment that could be appeased only by sacrificing the blood of six children with albinism. Thus, these children represent a bridge with the afterlife, a connection and a dialogue, a request powerful enough to appease the wrath

¹¹ In this case, this is a deeply rooted socio-psychological condition among of the family members themselves.

¹² A single hand from a person with albinism is worth \$2,000, while the entire body can bring in \$75,000.

of the gods. On that occasion, the disappearances of six children with albinism seems once again to confirm massacres, based on folktales that are still present and as alive.

In some areas of the world, being born with albinism means condemnation to almost certain death or constant flight in an existence of unparalleled fear and terror. Segregation makes the child exceptional and sought after, a human being who is precious because he is unique, but, for the same reason, hunted and captured dead or alive (corpses are also mutilated and graves are robbed).

While culturally the norm is legitimised by a dominant tradition that resists the prohibitions imposed by law, we should reflect on the ways in which certain local governments are addressing the issue to protect these vulnerable subjects.

What social and cultural role do children occupy in these countries? Raising children means fulfilling a role in which women in the suburbs, villages and countryside, and in Africa more generally, play a prominent and indispensable role: namely dedicating themselves to their offspring. A childless woman may dishonour her entire family of origin, and is of no use to her husband, with whom she has contracted marriage by means of negotiations that may include the transfer of a dowry. So, if the woman does not fulfil her crucial role of procreation, her role and dignity are compromised.

On the other hand, becoming pregnant means assigning to oneself a role within a social and cultural framework that grants her respect, social ascension and importance within the community. It is of little consequence if the family's economic

conditions are modest and precarious; the social objective is considered to have been met. In many countries, education is rarely available and housing, training facilities and tools through which children can be offered an education are lacking. The daily lives of families differ greatly in cities, suburbs and villages from country to country. It is not possible here to map every single territory, highlighting its elements of social and culture organisation. However, there are some prominent and widespread elements throughout a good part of the continent, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, represented by endogamic households in an extra-urban context, that involve social fragmentation imposed by subjects operating within political government and diplomatic, military and administrative frameworks, as well as wealthy families. So, the management of children with albinism becomes of such concern that interventions are required, although responses from central governments have been lukewarm.

In Tanzania, for example, one local government established an orphanage for both children with albinism and for blind and deaf-and-dumb children. These places lack decent basic housing, reflecting the total disinterest of the authorities and the staff, who are almost indifferent toward the children who are abandoned to themselves and whose primary needs are not being met.

Although these children live in precarious sanitary conditions, in a state of total neglect, it is important to note that these orphanages are safe places, protecting them from a "black" society that repudiates and hates them. At the same time, they

transform the children into objects to be protected for their social and local medical value. We have mentioned their exclusion; although contact is often avoided due to the fear of contagion, it is sought obsessively in other cases. Some traditions, for example, believe that people with albinism can cure HIV. Therefore, sexual violence against them is frequent, based on the conviction that sexual relations with them can protect against sexually transmitted diseases or heal who have been infected.

This social utility cannot preserve the child's life since any protection involves an act of violence that offers immunising power to the person committing it. This belief legitimises culturally motivated abuse, since it is supported by a community that, while deifying their existence as protectors and healers, on the other hand confirms and emphasises the child's role as the bearer of calamities and misfortunes. This establishes these children's social role in a dual vision: they are dangerous (and therefore must be excluded from society) but also able to heal and protect from sexually transmitted diseases. Regardless of the social value attributed to them—whether exclusion¹³ or appropriation of their divine healing power—we must remember that this value involves violent practices causing atrocious suffering and excruciating pain. This is also attested by the belief that their blood, dyed with local food, brings good luck and wealth.

¹³ The exclusion of children with albinism continues into adolescence and becomes dramatic and relevant when they become attracted to members of the opposite sex but are rejected and marginalised because of their diversity.

It is also important to add that their role or condition of suffering is not limited to abuse as a tool to protect against infection. Their hair, skin, and even genitals and limbs are considered precious ingredients in magic potions. This belief is behind persecution that has lasted decades of which the community seems to be unaware. The removal of certain organs or body parts in local traditions is referred to by the term Muti murder¹⁴, i.e. crimes committed for the benefit acquired from a part of the body. This traditional medicine¹⁵ is very widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa and involves the excision of organs and body parts in order to transfer their presumed properties to the buyer. Therefore, the scheme requires the presence of a victim, the belief that his body has transferable beneficial properties, a “traditional healer” (witch doctor) or human trafficker, and a customer willing to pay for the precious and miraculous commodity. So, it is clear that the market and organ trafficking exist

¹⁴ This term refers to the removal of living organs from a human to be combined with other ingredients in the preparation of “traditional medical” practices, in order to resolve another individual’s problems, which include impotence, circulatory or nervous system malfunctions. More generally, it is believed that this may bring “success”. *Muti* means “medicine” in Zulu. So, we understand how associating this term with a crime can be considered offensive to the culture of the Zulu community and, to African culture more generally. *Muti murder* has been rooted in African culture for centuries, but was made illegal by Western culture and its legal system during colonialism. For investigative agencies, it is important to distinguish *Muti murders* from cult-related murders, sadistic murders, serial murders and murders involving mutilation.

Four types of mutilations performed during a homicide have been identified: *defensive mutilation*, performed post-mortem to delay identification of the victim; *aggressive mutilation* focused on the victim’s genitals and face, attributed to the killer’s state of rage; *offensive mutilation*, performed solely to cause suffering to the victim; and *necromantic mutilation*, in which body parts are removed as a souvenir to relive the murder and/or for sexual activity with the victim’s remains.

¹⁵ See A. Minnaar, *Witchpurging and Muti Murder in South Africa*, “African Legal Studies”, in S. Borile, *Satanismo, sette religiose e manipolazione mentale*, Universitas Studiorum, 2015. Anthony Minnaar is professor at the Department of Criminology and Security Science at the University of South Africa.

because they are based on a widespread and dominant cultural belief that the organs of these children have properties that can be transferred and change the recipient's condition. This trade is part of a ritual that involves the transfer of money so that the process can take place and be fulfilled. These crimes are not committed by serial killers, nor are they committed for sadistic or sexual pleasure with respect to the victim. Instead, they are based on the need for a specific organ. The operator feels no pleasure in removing the organ, but is simply working on commission and with a specific intent. Each body part provides a specific benefit for the requesting party.

Table 1: Sadistic mutilation vs Muti mutilation

Sadistic mutilations	Muti mutilations
Many but not necessarily serious wounds	Few "functional" wounds
The aim is to cause suffering	The purpose is organ extraction
Sexual themes: rape	No sexual themes, no seminal fluid on the victim, etc.
Imagination plays a role	Imagination does not guide actions

Table 2: Serial killings and Muti murders

Serial killings and Muti murders	Muti serial killings
At least two murders	Often a single murder
Similar mutilations in victims	Mutilations vary depending on the practice
Imagination guides actions	The actions aim at obtaining a specific organ

The body parts most commonly removed from the victim are:

- 1) breasts, for luck in attracting women
- 2) genitals, in which luck resides for both men and women, used to cure impotence
- 3) throat, cut to obtain the blood considered a very important ingredient, the Adam's apple is also often removed
- 4) sacrum, considered important in curing circulation and nervous system disorders
- 5) hands, mutilated for good luck in business
- 6) fat, taken from the stomach or around the kidneys for luck

7) head, the skull is used to protect the tribe

8) tongue to attract a girl

9) eyes, to resolve vision problems

People with albinism are considered both gods and demons, possessing both the magical gift of healing and representing a poison to be removed and marginalised, excluded from any form of social coexistence, growth, education or access to employment. This binomial represents a mocking fate of these so-called "white ghosts" who become the desired prey of an illegal and ferocious market drawn to their supposed healing properties.

It is critical to understand how, anthropologically, society is based on values handed down from a community to which the men and women with albinism belong and which interprets their diversity as an evil omen, a sign of divine hatred ("*Oloibe Enkai*") that could strike every member of the community.

Analytical studies show there are many different cultural traditions feeding peculiar beliefs regarding the world of childhood. *Massai* tradition, for example, dictates that a father who denies paternity of a new-born child must place him or her in a cattle enclosure, and paternity will be accepted only if the cows do not trample the child. In the case of children with albinism, cultural tradition requires the mother stop breastfeeding the baby, thereby exposing her child to the risk of starving to death.

Children with albinism represent an intrusive and viral element to be eliminated as harbingers of evil omens and worries. However, in many African countries, their fate is that of many children who belong to the “factory of exclusion”. While, on the one hand, they live under a predominant conviction assigning healing properties to them, many of these children are considered useless in Africa. Culturally, the son represents the continuity of family lineage as the fulfilment of the social obligation of procreation, and so he is cherished and strongly desired (regardless of his albino nature). Girls, specifically, are victims of arranged marriages, the objects of economic transactions and trading through the exchange of a dowry. They also suffer female genital mutilations to improve the body, transform it and purify it through a process of embellishment that involves the removal of the clitoris which is considered a bisexual component. In Africa, women are not born, but made through infibulation as a required and necessary act for social integration and respect by the community.

A worse and cruel fate awaits children with albinism, like all children born with abnormal physical or mental characteristics or born under unusual circumstances. As we have already seen, not only are they abolished and banished because of the evil omens (bad luck) represented by their defect, they are also a disgrace to their families. The cultural axis of reference is socio-economic: since the child with albinism has a defect, he or she is often considered the child of others and as such is not considered a direct descendant of the family line or a member of the community. As a result, the child is thereby deprived of social and civil rights.

Many children in orphanages are sold, given away or forced into prostitution. Once they have grown up, some are forced to work on plantations, in mines or are taken to Europe for organ trafficking or prostitution.

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