

**Color Specifications and the Othering of Persons with Albinism in  
Sub-Saharan Africa Traditions**

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**Abstract**

This essay examines the intersection between color aesthetics and the othering of persons with albinism in sub-Saharan African traditions with particular reference to the understanding of colors in Akan and Esan cultures. It also explores the roles that the arts may play in re-representing albinotic bodies in an inclusive manner in contemporary Africa.

*Keywords:* color specifications, sub-Saharan African traditions, persons with albinism

Recently, there has been increasing attention to discrimination against persons with albinism. This includes disturbing trends seeing persons with albinism kidnapped, maimed, and killed, and their body parts commodified. “In black markets in East Africa, a limb of a person with albinism sells for a minimum of 600USD and the full body sells for as much as 75,000 USD” (Imafidon, 2019).

In sub-Saharan African traditions, prevalent beliefs about persons with albinism abound: persons with albinism are seen as punishment for bad deeds; a consequence of witchcraft; the result of mother of a child with albinism having sexual intercourse with a European; or the popular Yoruba mythological phrase *afin ki n je iyo* which translates as “a person with albinism does not eat salt.” There is ample evidence that in sub-Saharan African traditions that people validate their stereotypes and discriminatory practices against persons with albinism on the basis of what their communities allow in form of belief systems. Imafidon highlights this when he states that persons with albinism often find themselves thrown into existence in a community already saturated with certain ideas about their personalities, how they originated, of what use they are, etc., notions that have acquired the status of objectively given truths (2019). Of note, one belief system that has continued to perpetrate and legitimize the discrimination against persons with albinism is how colors have come to be understood in sub-Saharan African traditions.

Examining how these color specifications serve to legitimize discriminatory practices against/othering of persons with albinism is the focus of this essay. Colors are seen as significant in African traditions to the extent that people often ascribe things, events and occurrences to specific colors. For instance, colors can be used to differentiate the categories of beings involved in a particular ritual ceremony. Also, the social significance of colors is reflected in their use in various functions such as marriages, rituals, funerals and other social

and or individual functions. I therefore begin this paper by exploring color specifications in sub-Saharan African traditions, paying close attention to specific colors found in the Akan and Esan thought systems. In the second section, I examine some indigenous belief systems that are being used in validating the discrimination against persons with albinism in sub-Saharan African traditions. Consequently, I examine the nexus between color specifications and the othering of persons with albinism in sub-Saharan African traditions. All this is followed by an examination of the roles the arts may play in re-representing albinotic bodies in an inclusive manner.

### **Color Specifications in sub-Saharan African Traditions**

In this section, I explore the specific colors peculiar to some cultures in sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, I examine color specifications as it relates to the Akan and Esan conceptual schemes. In sub-Saharan African traditions, the importance of colors cannot be overemphasized. In the Akan and Esan conceptual schemes, the understanding of colors does not go beyond three basic colors: black, white and red. In Esan conceptual scheme, there are *ufuamhin* (white), *ubimhin* (black), and *ugianmhin* (red); in Akan thought system, we have *fufu* (white), *tunturn* (black, or dark), and *memene* (red). However, this is not to say that there are no other colors aside the aforementioned ones, but for us to understand other colors, they must be an approximation of these three basic colors listed above.

In “A Note on Akan Color Symbolism.” G.P. Hagan argues that each color has its significance in the Akan conceptual scheme. To him, *fufu* which means white, light, plain, untainted, incorrupt, clean, pure, is a color of rituals which symbolizes victory and purity. The reason why the *fufu* is significant in relation to victory and purity is that it is often considered as the color of the gods, and it is the color that is reserved solely for sacred places.

Thus, *fufu* also expresses joy, hope and well-being. That aspect of the human person which bears a man's destiny and directs his fortunes (*KRA*) is associated with *fufu*. And the expression *Kra-biri* (the dark Kra) refers to the state of a person who has lost hope and lost his ritual bearings (Hagan, 2009). This suggests that the white color in Akan conceptual scheme is synonymous to good tidings and positive things.

In contrast, in the Akan conceptual scheme, the dark color is known as *tunturn*. According to Patrique deGraft-Yankson, *tunturn* in the Akan conceptual scheme does not only stand for black, but also connotes absence of lightness, happiness, piety and sparkle. However, *tunturn* is not used synonymously with doom or solely negative connotations. To the Akans, the general use of these specific colors cannot be done in isolation of the particular context in which such individual is using it. For instance, the weight and compactness of *tunturn* also represents unmatched strength and solidity. This is why we see expressions such as black beauty, black power, black star, black magic, which connote the highest levels or degree attainable in the referent condition (2020). While this is the case, there is a general understanding among the Akans that *tunturn* as the dark color might represent a particular phase of an individual's life, that is, a stage of misfortune. As a consequence, *tunturn* does not signify victory, neither does it signify celebration, but often expresses sorrow associated with ill-luck. This explains clothing associated with mourning in sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, when an individual dies at old age, people often put on white clothes to symbolize the celebration of life. If an individual dies untimely, people often wear black to show that the individual's death is painful, or perhaps considered an unnatural death.

The last specific color in the Akan conceptual scheme *kobena*, red, also has its own complexities. Some Akans often use it interchangeably with blood which represents vitality and life force. Again as we see contradictory meanings as the word can also connote

something negative, especially when blood is spilled for no reason. According to Hagan, this act of blood spilling which cannot be justified can desacralize sacred objects. The implication of this is that no one should ever take the life of another or engage in unwholesome activities.

Mirroring the Akan thought system, in the Esan conceptual scheme, there are also three specific colors. All other colors are considered approximations of these. In “Western Specifications, African Approximations: Time, Color and Existential Attitudes,” Imafidon states:

Among the Esan people of southern Nigeria, where I come from, the three colors that exist are *ufuamhin* (white), *ubimhin* (black) and *ugianmhin* (red). Every other color tends to be an approximation of these three colors or is not acknowledged within the conceptual scheme of the culture. There are constructions within the Esan language that suggest that the color of a thing approximates the three basic colors, such as *odia bhe begian* (“it looks like it is red”) and *ofua se se se* (“it is so white”). (2019)

Similarly, Hagan argues in the same vein in Akan thought system, except in a few cases involving the use of green (*bun*), all colors used in ritual ceremonies appear to fall under these three broad terms; so that the terms *Fufu*, *Tunturn*, *memene* (and their cognate terms) tend to apprehend wider ranges or spectra of color than would normally fall under them in a naturalistic classification of colors (Hagan, 2009).

### **Indigenous Beliefs about Albinism in Sub-Saharan African Traditions**

This section examines indigenous beliefs about persons with albinism in sub-Saharan African traditions and the ways in which such belief systems are used to justify discrimination against persons with albinism. In sub-Saharan African traditions, there has been a prevalent indigenous understanding that persons with albinism are “ghosts,” or, as previously stated, the product of sexual intercourse with a European man. For instance,

Olagunju argued that in Yoruba tradition, persons with albinism are seen as ‘punishment’ from the ancestors and consequently, people continue to discriminate against them (2012).

For example, a 41-year-old male with with albinism from South Africa retells the following:

[S]ome shops, especially those owned by West African migrants or black South Africans often do not like to attend to albinos in the morning. One of them was bold enough to tell me that whenever an albino or someone with a disability comes around to the market, it affects sales negatively. There are so many ‘superstitious’ beliefs. It hurts to recount them. (Ikuomola, 2015)

Similarly, among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, illness and disability, including albinism, may often be explained by witchcraft and other supernatural forces. According to Baker *et al* (2010), fear of contagion often shapes attitudes and treatment, with the belief that contact with a person with albinism suggests that at one point in an individual’s life, either he or any of his family member will have a baby born with albinism; or will somehow be impacted in the domains of marriage and children, employment, education, and so on. This discrimination may contribute to their being considered outcasts by others. For instance, a Rixi taxi driver bluntly made the following observation to Owen Sheers during Sheer’s extensive research on albinism in Zimbabwe: ‘Unlucky, [...] I would not like to be one’ [...] ‘You are black, but you are white, so you belong nowhere. Nobody likes you (Sheers 2004).

Concepts around the birth of a baby with albinism are also informed by indigenous understanding. Many believe albinism to be cause by a mother’s encounter (physical or sexual) while pregnant, with another individual with albinism. Other beliefs exist that it may be a curse, e.g., for marital misdemeanor within the family (Lund, 1998).

More recent, “modern” beliefs about albinism in sub-Saharan Africa suggest sleeping with an individual with albinism cures HIV/AIDS. According to Baker *et al.* (2010), a woman in Bulawayo remarked, “and now people think that to sleep with albino woman [sic]

is a cure for AIDS. They use you, all the time. They sleep with you and then they run away; and now all albinos are dying because of this thing, they are dying of HIV.”

In addition to being subject to these abuses, persons with albinism are often believed to possess immortality. A man from Venda in South Africa noted he had to invite the people of his village to the burial of a relative with albinism so they would believe that those with albinism also die. Also, a woman in Zimbabwe comments on the supposed immortality of persons with albinism stating:

They think we do not die, ha. I went to Harare for 8 months once, and when I came back people were screaming spook, ghost, they thought I had died and come back.

They think albinos [sic] do not die; they wander off into the bush. I even thought that myself before, I had never seen a dead albino. But now with the skin cancers I have seen many dead albinos. But an albino funeral, that is a thing that is always very well attended. Not just because he has many friends. People come to see for sure that the albino is dead; they even touch him in the coffin to make sure he is really dead.

(Baker, 2010)

### **Color Specifications and the Othering of Persons with Albinism**

The idea of color specifications in sub-Saharan African traditions, as discussed earlier, suggests that the understanding of colors does not go beyond three basic colors: black, white and red, such that the conception of any other color is often seen as an approximation of these colors. My intention in this section is to examine how the understanding of these specific colors is one of the bases of the discrimination against persons with albinism in the sub-Saharan African traditions.

In her conference keynote address, “Different Shades of White: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Albinotic Body,” Ikponmwosa Ero argues that the discrimination faced

by persons with albinism is based on two grounds: their disability and their skin color (2018). Regarding skin color, there is what I call “aesthetic exclusion.” While the word albinism is derived from the Latin word *albus* which means white, those with albinism are considered as racial minorities because their skin color does not match nor approximate any specific color in sub-Saharan African aesthetic tradition. Regarding the prejudicial marginalization of persons with albinism on the basis of their skin, for instance, the director of the Albinism Society of Southern Africa writes: “when we get into taxis, people still move to the other side, or even refuse to use that taxi. We are still called *isishawa* (a Zulu word for a person who is cursed) and *inkawu* (an Nguni word for ‘white baboon’) (Fazel 2012). In a similar vein, the *Vanguard Newspaper* of August 17, 2015, reported an incident in which an individual with albinism took his own life due to the stigma, discrimination and social ill-treatment he received overtime. *Vanguard Newspaper* reports the case as follows:

A 23-year-old man, Ugochukwu Ekwe, yesterday committed suicide at Festac Town, Lagos, over the color of his skin being an albino [sic]. His dangling body was discovered in an apartment [...] where he lived with his parents and siblings.

*Vanguard* gathered that the deceased refused to eat since Saturday in protest of what he said was people’s rejection and stigmatization because of his skin condition. He was also said to have refused to go to church with other members of the family yesterday. When the family returned from church, Ugo, as he was fondly called, was dangling at the end of a rope tied to the ceiling fan [...] *Vanguard* gathered that the deceased had attempted to take his life before now (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 2017).

Such events reflect the daily discrimination and lived experiences of persons with albinism. Because of prejudices regarding skin color, many are seen as a “troubling anomaly” in the eyes of those without albinism.

The non-government organization, Under the Same Sun (UTSS 2014) concluded,



among many factors, that “nearly all misunderstanding, mystification and stigma [with respect to albinism] are traceable to the most visible aspect, which is their appearance.” In the same vein, a UN Independent Expert on minority issues stated that these problems such as stigma, lifelong social exclusion and discrimination, are similar to the experiences faced by vulnerable racial minorities *because of their skin color* (See Joint Press Release by UN Rapporteurs, 4 May 2013). In other words, persons with albinism experience colorism. Colorism is a global phenomenon incorporating stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination based on skin color, between and within races. The highest level of diversity in skin color, due to differing levels of melanin, is within populations in sub-Saharan Africa (Relethford, 2000). Colorism differs from racism here as it is seen as an intra-racial discrimination on the basis of skin color, while racism is seen as an inter-racial discrimination on the basis of skin color. Thus, the discrimination faced by persons with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa is colorism since they are marginalized by people of the same race.

The meanings ascribed to the difference in color in sub-Saharan African traditions, and to the condition of albinism, contribute to societal discrimination of people with albinism. Ultimately, they may become the “object of discrimination [...] and into a cash transaction much more cruel than the slave trade” (Guardian 15 December 2012). Their color difference is portrayed as an important aspect of the objectification and commodification of their bodies and ascription of supernatural powers. As stated previously, albinotic bodies are perceived as highly valuable due to beliefs they have special powers. “Just because of the difference in the color of the skin, eyes and hair the society believes after being convinced by witchdoctors that they possess magical powers worth millions of shillings” (Guardian 4 December 2011). Hence the different color is linked to myths and false beliefs that “the legs, genitals, eyes and hair of people with albinism can help [...] achieve instant wealth” (Guardian 27 November 2011). These beliefs fuel the violent attacks on Tanzanians with

albinism. All these, no doubt, are tied to how specific colors are understood in sub-Saharan African traditions. Again, as skin color of persons with albinism cannot be approximated with the specific colors in sub-Saharan Africa, this has continued to fuel discrimination against them.

According to Imafidon, this discrimination has both ontological and moral imports. Regarding the ontological implication, Imafidon argues that persons with albinism are often ontologically excluded in the community in which they belong, that is, persons with albinism are not considered as part of beings that make up the African ontological worldview:

[A]though persons with albinism are visibly different and alleged to be queer and unusual in a densely black-populated Africa, they ought not to be ontologically unusual since they share the same common essence, vital force, with other beings. The principle of being ought to enclose rather than isolate as queer the being of persons with albinism as human beings. (2019, 45)

Aside the ontological implication of colorism for persons with albinism, there has always been an exclusion of persons with albinism from the standpoint of African moral humanism. In this stance, the humanism embedded in African morality has its limit when it comes to persons with albinism. Put differently, African moral humanism dehumanizes persons with albinism when compared to persons without albinism. To Imafidon:

African moral humanism justifies the cruel treatment of persons with albinism. When persons within an African community cause harm, maltreat, stigmatise and discriminate against persons with albinism, they do not often feel they are doing something wrong in the same way they would feel when they are hurting a fellow human [...] their interaction with a person with albinism, cruel as it may be, is not considered the same as an interaction they would have with a fellow human being [...] the ill-treatment of persons with albinism protects the community from harm.

(2019: 82)

These negative views become inscribed in language. For instance, in the Yoruba thought system, an albino is called *afin* which means horrible. In Benin and Esan thought systems, a person with albinism is called *eyaen* and *anyaei* respectively. We see similar dynamics elsewhere:

Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria in West Africa, there are various explanations for albinism in humans. A popular notion of albinism is that persons with it are agents of divinities (*eniorisa* as they are often called) sent to families who have erred against some divinity or ancestral spirit as some forms of punishment or curse. They are therefore often called *afin*, meaning horrible beings. For this reason, persons with albinism are often sent to serve in shrines, and some individuals draw the conclusion that since they are agents of the divinities, their body parts and blood must have superhuman powers that can be used for ritual purposes such as money-making rituals and charms for long life and different forms of protection. (Imafidon, 2019: 19)

Evidently, this conception of persons with albinism as mysterious beings is not only limited to Yoruba tradition alone, as there are culturally embedded understandings that cut across other sub-Saharan African traditions. This has made it even more difficult for persons with albinism to obtain access to education, job opportunities, health, marriages, and relationships, etc. The implication of this is that being different, especially in skin color of a particular aesthetic tradition, often carries the risk of discrimination. Our idea of the color of a human person in Africa is fair or dark, and not white, which is why persons with albinism living in areas dominated by dark skin Africans, are often seen as the “other.” This is tied to the understanding that whiteness in sub-Saharan African aesthetic tradition is exclusive of albinotic bodies. Due to this, Scott (1999) argued that albinism should be considered a new category of color in order to distinguish it from the normal white as we have in African

aesthetics.

### **The Role of Arts in the Inclusion of Albinotic Bodies**

In considering this mistreatment and discrimination and abuse, what role, if any, can the arts, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, play in re-representing albinotic bodies in a way that is inclusive? Attempting to answer this question forms the bulk of this section. From the arguments thus far, it is evident much needs to be done for the rights of those with albinism. It is obvious that, among other factors, the understanding of colors in sub-Saharan Africa has over the years contributed to the violation of their personhood. We turn now to consider what role the Arts may play in countering prejudice and perhaps helping with efforts towards greater equity and inclusion. (By the Arts, we are considering movies, music, dance, drawings, literary works, painting, modeling, etc.)

The reason why exploring the role of arts in the inclusion of albinotic bodies is important is that decades ago, arts contributed immensely to the dehumanization of, and discrimination against persons with albinism. In movies and drama series, especially in schools, churches and soap operas, persons with albinism were frequently used to play the roles of “ghosts” or mysterious beings. Consequently, there grew a prejudicial understanding that persons with albinism cannot play a suitable role other than that of a “ghost.” Hence, my intention here is to expose how these forms of arts can ensure the re-representation of albinotic bodies in a positive and inclusive way. Perhaps the arts in various forms may be used as a medium of correcting and addressing social anomalies such as the discrimination against persons with albinism. For instance, as music can serve as a great avenue to talk about issues that directly affect the society, influential artists may develop songs and arrange concerts advocating for the end of discrimination against persons with albinism. Music videos could also play an important role in re-representing albinotic bodies in ways that are

positive and less demystified. The musical videos by two popular Nigerian artistes: Omah Lay and Terry G featuring Skibii in their songs *Lolo* and *Adura* respectively come to mind here. In these videos, women with albinism are used as models, and they portrayed themselves without fear of discrimination. These musical videos promote diversity and the inclusion of persons with albinism. With the widespread access of digital streaming platforms like YouTube and Netflix, artists therefore need to take up the responsibility of ensuring that persons with albinism are represented and re-represented in more positive and inclusive ways. By this, people who over the years have had this negative conception about persons with albinism, will no doubt, begin to have a rethink.

As an example of this, in Tanzania, the popular artist group Tanzania Albinism Collective released a song album entitled “White African Power”; the songs in this album assert the power and dignity of persons with albinism to be themselves. Popular songs on the album include “I am a Human Being” and “Albino Brotherhood.” Additionally, song-writing workshops are being organised; Ian Brennan encouraged a group of people in Ukerewe Island in Tanzania to write songs about the experiences of persons with albinism using local dialects of *Kikerewe* and *Jeeta*. These are part of the ways in which art are making a difference in the lives of persons with albinism in Tanzania.

Regarding the similar potential role of movies, there have been several movies and comedy skits featuring persons with albinism that illustrate the potential power of the medium to invite new ways to think about persons with albinism. In the Nigerian movie *The Tribunal* (produced and directed by Kunle Afolayan), a man Ifeanyi Imoh (Damilola Ogunsi), believes that he was fired because he of his albinism, and a lawyer decides to represent him in a court case against his former employers. The film is enlightening because it is supported by skilled direction and performances sufficient to elicit discussions about the underlying problems associated with prejudice against persons with albinism. Similarly, in Tanzania,

Louis Laverdiere's *White and Black: Crimes of Color*, directed by Jean-Francois Mean, addresses the need to end the discrimination and insensitivity faced by persons with albinism and their mothers. The reception of the film suggests that such portrayals can have a dramatic positive impact. After the broadcast of the movie, the murder of persons with albinism in Tanzania, which had been on the increase, dramatically reduced by 90% (Kimaro, 2012). Additionally, Comedy has also been useful in circulating more sympathetic portraits of those with albinism. Recently, there have been persons with albinism getting involved in comedy skits. In Nigeria, among others, we have comedians such as Donald Ernest (Expatriate Comedian) who, via his comedy skits, has been portraying himself to audiences as an individual not be considered as "other."

More broadly, portrayals in art, including photography, may help interrupt and expand dominant ideas of beauty that have helped perpetuate discrimination and violence against peoples with albinism. Regarding the role of aesthetics, it is important to re-orientate people on the need to change their idea of what beauty entails. One might be tempted to ask, what should be the standard of beauty in a continent with persons with albinism? To answer this question, the famous South African photographer Justin Dingwall has produced a collection of portraits in his *Albus* series which explores the aesthetics of albinism and perceptions of beauty. In particular, Dingwall's series is geared towards exploring the aesthetics of albinism in relation to conventional ideas of beauty. He sees his work as inviting greater appreciation of diversity, describing it as:

"not about race or fashion, but about perception, and what we subjectively perceive as beautiful [...] I wanted to create a series of images that resonate with humanity and make people question what is beautiful [...] To me, diversity is what makes humanity interesting and beautiful" (2016).

### Conclusion


This essay has examined what color specifications entail in sub-Saharan African traditions and the role such concepts continue to play in the experiences of persons with albinism. We have considered the ways in which the skin color of persons with albinism does not have an approximation of the specific colors found in sub-Saharan African traditions, and how this has been used as justification for violating the personhood of people with albinism. We have further considered how indigenous belief systems may also be used to justify discrimination against persons with albinism. Finally, our discussion of representations in the arts has invited us to consider the role these forms may play in re-representing persons with albinism in a manner that is inclusive.

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