

Discrimination and violence against Tanzanians with albinism in the Great Lakes region: crime and national shame

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Abstract

Africans with albinism experience stigma and discrimination as people with white skin in black societies, and as people with disabilities of low vision or blindness and susceptibility to contracting skin cancers. A more recent form of discrimination is attacks against people with albinism, only reported by news media in Tanzania since 2006. Violence in the Great Lakes district appears to be driven by traditional 'witchdoctors' and carried out by contract killers to meet a market for albino body parts along an axis of wealth and poverty. This paper discusses how discrimination and violence against people with albinism, especially children, is portrayed in Swahili and English Tanzanian news articles of 2008-2012. A content analysis reveals that coverage is most commonly framed in terms of law enforcement and national shame, reflecting sourcing from court and police reports and politicians' statements, with some human rights framing. This analysis also shows how people with albinism are portrayed as 'skin-disabled', humans with rights and as economic commodities, and their attackers as sub-human and betrayers of the nation. Although such violence is seen as shameful, Tanzanian media provides public space for African people to debate and shape knowledge about the impact of cultural and economic development on disadvantaged persons with albinism.

Key words: Tanzania, albinism, violence, media, disability,

Introduction:

Background:

Africans with albinism experience stigma as people with white skin in black societies, and as people with disabilities of low vision or blindness and susceptibility to contracting skin cancers. Albinism is a group of rare inherited conditions which affects the pigment in eyes, hair and skin of people throughout the world, including Africa. Estimates of prevalence of albinism in Africa generally range from 1 in 5,000 to 1 in 15,000 (Hong et al. 2006), with 1 in 1,500 in Tanzania (Lookingbill et al. 1995). Major health and social issues for Africans with albinism are identified as skin cancer (Lookingbill et al. 1995), impaired eyesight and the stigma from skin-colour difference. These affect the education and social inclusion of children and adults with albinism (Lund & Gaigher 2002). Interventions and services include special schools, sun protection measures and outreach clinics (Lund & Gaigher 2002, McBride & Leppard 2002).

A more recent form of discrimination is attacks against people with albinism in the Great Lakes district of East Africa. This has only been reported by news media in Tanzania since 2006, when police started documenting the attacks, later coming to international attention through the writing of Tanzanian BBC journalist Vicky Ntetema in 2008 (Alum et al. 2009). The non-governmental organization, (NGO), she now leads in Tanzania, called Under the Same Sun has

documented 71 murders and 31 survivors of machete attacks in Tanzania (UTSS 2012). In neighboring countries, there have been 16 documented murders in Burundi, 7 in Kenya with 2 survivors, and there are reports of survivors and murders in Swaziland, Guinea, Nigeria, South Africa, Congo, Zambia, Namibia, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. Attacks are mainly being reported in Tanzania, which has a reputation for free press, but it is believed many attacks and killings in all these countries are not reported or documented. For example, it is likely that infanticide of albinos has silently been practiced in the past (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2009).

Violence in the Great Lakes district appears to be driven by traditional ‘witchdoctors’ and carried out by contract killers to meet a market for albino body parts believed to bring wealth and fortune. The recent apparent escalation of such violence towards people with albinism is puzzling, with suggestions made that it results from traditional superstitions, or emerges from transitioning to new economies and rapid modernization in developing countries. Bryceson, Jonsson and Sherrington (2010) write about albino fetish and gold mining from an anthropological and sociological perspective, arguing that new upheavals in Tanzania’s moral economy have fostered a commodification of life itself. Most writing about this violence has been by newspaper journalists, some of whom have called on academics to apply themselves to the issue of albino killings (Navuri 2009, Mosha 2009) to understand how to prevent it and to contribute to its reduction.

Methods:

This paper discusses how discrimination and violence against people with albinism is portrayed in Swahili and English Tanzanian news articles. It aims to add to increased understanding about this phenomena, how such incidents are covered in the media and to analyse the influence and impact of this coverage by focusing on how it is framed and reported in Tanzanian media. This paper reports on a media study which analysed online versions of print newspaper articles from 2008 accessed from publically available websites of 3 media companies: IPPMEDIA Group (ippmedia.com), Majira (majira.co.tz), Mwananchi Communications Ltd. (mwananchi.co.tz). This consisted of 9 newspapers, including the Swahili newspapers, Nipashe, Nipashe Jumapili, Alasiri, Majira and Mwananchi and the English papers, The Guardian, Sunday Observer and This Day. Hence the sampling frame was all Tanzanian online media, with the sample being accessible articles dated 2008-mid 2012 from the 3 selected media companies. The data is necessarily limited by what is available by the internet search engine and that articles collected were not intended for the analytical purpose of this study. And while the accuracy of all media reports is not guaranteed, using media sources which are publically available and relatively cost-free is a way to access a field of study which is otherwise hard to reach. The media is noted for tending to focus on violent and sensational stories, and also its ability to shape public perception and policy, which makes these data sources particularly relevant.

News articles were searched by keywords and then downloaded from the websites and saved into data files. Content analysis was conducted on 153 Swahili and 121 English articles, totaling 274 articles, using the Nvivo9 computer programme. Content analysis builds a systematic overview of the content of the data. The concept of media framing was used to analyse and

interpret the results, by examining features of news stories to identify a set of “frames” used to present a topic (Giles 2010). How stories are framed affects how problems are defined and what is understood to be the causes, consequences and effective solutions (Entman 1993 cited in Gulati 2011). Entman (2007) explains how frames make sense of information by “activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel and decide in a particular way” (cited in Giles 2010). Hence coding categories included how news stories were triggered, what the sources were, what causes and solutions were suggested, use of language and who the audience is invited to identify with.

Seven main types of articles were identified, categorized according to their sources, trigger and primary content. The most frequent were court reports of trials of arrested suspects, and reporting of attacks on people with albinism from police reports and interviews. Many articles reported on announcements and speeches made by the president, prime minister, Members of Parliament (MPs) and other government officials, and others reported on visiting celebrities, activists and diplomats as well as fund-raising events or the launch of a group or movie, possibly sourced from press releases. Fewer articles were journalist-initiated, either as editorial opinion or took an investigative approach, including interviews with survivors and families.

The voices heard most in the media were politicians and government officials, followed by leaders of albino associations and police. The voices least heard are attackers themselves, and then usually only in a limited way through court proceedings, and nothing is heard from those driving the attacks, that is, the witchdoctors, the wealthy elite, the ones who are seeking a quick way to wealth.

Media coverage framings

Content analysis of the media articles identified four main interpretative ‘frames’ that are used to present the news and invite audiences to make sense of the stories. These frames presented the violence against Tanzanians with albinism as a crime, as related to poverty or inequity, as a national shame and as an issue of human rights.

The attacks on people with albinism were most commonly framed in terms of criminal activity and law enforcement, reflecting the predominant sourcing from court and police reports. The main causes of the albino killings are reported by most articles as criminal actions to secure wealth, driven by greed and superstitions rooted in traditional cultural beliefs. It seems the gold rush in the Lake Zone has created a demand for the body parts. In 2009 the Sunday Observer stated that “Fortune seekers believe that the blood or portions of the albino body guarantee prospects in gold or fish, which are very important sources of income in the Lake Victoria regions of Shinyanga, Mara, Mwanza and Kagera, where the problem is most acute” (Sunday Observer 9 March 2009). There is a lot of money at stake in “this murderous trade” (The Guardian 26 September 2009) involving a range of players: from rich clients to poorer hired assassins, acting as a “business network”¹ (Majira 1 October 2009) Some articles highlight the role of traditional healers (or witchdoctors) in deliberately spreading such beliefs, and deceiving

¹ Translation from ‘mtandao wa biashara hiyo’

people, who “tell clients that albino parts will bring them luck in love, life and business.” (The Guardian 16 March 2009).

The activities most frequently reported and recommended as solutions were the identification, arrest and punishment of the perpetrators. Major actors in this are the police force, with cooperation from the community and support from the Government. Arrest, conviction and sentencing of offenders is seen as important law enforcement measures to deter future attacks and to send messages to potential perpetrators to stop their actions and to the world that Tanzania is reclaiming its good record for human rights.

Another major explanation is that the attacks occur for economic reasons, that is, that they are “income-generation ventures” which are “fueled by lust to get rich quickly” (The Guardian 15 February 2009). Such a poverty frame, in the context of economic inequity, explains the involvement of “greedy heartless gold miners and fishermen... in the Lake Zone...” (Guardian 15 February 2009) and witch doctors who “use poor and desperate people to carry out their dirty work of looking for albino body parts” (Guardian 7 September 2010).

There are also views expressed which point to more external conditions, such as by a leader of an opposition political party (NCCR – Mageuzi) who stated the main reasons for albino murders were “poverty, unemployment and witchcraft beliefs” (Nipashe 9 March 2009). Residents in the Lake Zone area, specifically from Mwanza, say the problem results from increasing poverty (Majira 12 July 2009) in their area despite its natural resources, because these are owned and are generating profit for foreigners. A guard when interviewed anonymously suggested that lives of albinos should not be entrusted to poorly paid guards who may be tempted into “trading albinos in his charge if approached with millions of shillings” (Sunday Observer 15 February 2009). This alternative voice acknowledges poverty as an environmental vulnerability. Another common way of framing the stories around albino killings is as a disgrace that brings shame to the nation, and is reflective of sourcing from politicians’ statements and editorials. Many media items spoke of the good name of Tanzania in terms of human rights, stability and “as an island of peace in the Great Lakes Region” (Guardian 22 September 2009). The murderous acts are seen as bringing shame (*aibu*) to the country before the world, and damaging its reputation. This shame portrays Tanzanians “as a society of 21st century savages” (Guardian 20 April 2010) and “as superstitious and without *utu*” (Majira 7 May 2009). The concept of *utu* is best translated as humanity, so the idea here is that such actions imply Tanzanians are somehow lacking basic humanity, although it is only the actions of a few criminals. The president of Tanzania is quoted as condemning the foolishness of beliefs that albino body parts and blood have special powers and can be used to bring wealth and success in this age of science and technology. The way to restore respect (*heshima*) (Majira 7 May 2009) to the country, is to ensure that court proceedings of accused killers are not delayed, and there are appropriate punishments, with exhortations for those involved to stop their actions. One article commends the free discussion in the press of this shame, rather than the more common African response of hiding the shame. “It is a real shame to our nation but I admire the way we bravely face that shame. That problem is not unique to Tanzania. Tanzania may be the country which has adequate freedom press to put to the public over its own shameful areas. Viva

Tanzania.” (Guardian 3 January 2009). Other countries share the same problem but their shame may be hidden due to less press freedom.

Many articles used the words rights and justice, often in general terms but also specifically to the right to life, to education, to freedom of movement and in reference to rights of children, disabled persons and as citizens. For example, it is reported that “Albino pupils do not attend school and adult ones are in constant hideouts, which violates the right to work and the right of movement” (Sunday Observer 8 March 2009). The murders are condemned as violations of human rights, with responsibility for these acts more often credited to the attackers than the Tanzanian government, although the government is also criticized for inaction. The right to life, amongst others, is framed legally in relation to the constitution and international conventions as well as framed as a ‘human’ right, which requires recognition and responsible protection by the community. This human rights frame is expressed most strongly in editorials and investigative writing as well as stories reporting politicians’ speeches and from press releases and interviews with leaders of NGOs, human rights, disability and albino groups. The recommended strategies from a human rights framework include moving albino children to safer boarding schools and camps, the appointment of an albino MP and educational campaigns to raise public awareness.

Portrayal of persons with albinisms and their attackers

This analysis also shows how people with albinism are portrayed as ‘skin-disabled’, humans with rights and as economic commodities. In the media articles, the word ‘albino’ is more often used in both Swahili and English versions than albinism. Words used for people with albinism in Swahili were *mlemavu wa ngozi* (literally meaning skin-disabled person) or *watu wenye ulemavu wa ngozi* (literally meaning people with skin-disability). Clearly they are being recognized, in the media at least, as disabled persons with the main aspect being a disability of skin colour.

A common theme is to state that people with albinism are humans, intimately included in social relations as fellow countrymen, or as “our” children or brothers and sisters. As such they deserve the same rights, respect and love as anyone else, because they are humans and created by God. Prime Minister Pinda said “They are our fellow human beings. I want all of us, as Tanzanians to ensure they get the same rights as everyone else, especially the right to life” (Guardian 21 September 2011).

At the heart of the attacks against them, is the disturbing portrayal of people with albinism, as commodities, perceived by their attackers as non-human or sub-human. While this attitude is condemned by the media, articles also report the monetary values of their body parts and the language used to refer to people with albinism as *dili* (deal).

In the majority of articles perpetrators are described as cruel, savage and wicked. Occasionally they are described as “traitors” either to the family, or to their country. The most emotionally

charged descriptions are used for family members who act as “merchants of death” ²(Nipashe Jumapili 8 January 2012) when they collaborate in selling their relatives. The rights of offenders are a topic covered in some media articles, particularly their right to life, in a situation when death by hanging is a possible penalty. Arguments that “people who kill their own people deliberately have no right to live” (Nipashe 26 September 2009) suggest that such inhumane acts are seen as evidence that the killers are in some way not human, or undeserving of human rights.

Discussion:

The multiple media frames identified in this study are interpretative packages that seek to explain the phenomenon of the violent attacks on Tanzanians with albinism and to analyse and suggest solutions. The multiplicity of these frames hints at the complexity of the issue being addressed and debated in the media, and the need for multiple levels of actions and solutions. The dominant framing of the attacks as criminal activity requiring law enforcement solutions is nevertheless linked to the framings of poverty (or inequity), human rights and national shame, so that strong messages of firm legal consequences are seen as a way to increase the nation’s standing in the global arena as a modernizing society committed to human rights. In other ways the descriptions of these framings as distinct highlight how these interpretations conflict, and epitomise the debate over whether superstitious beliefs, individual greed or structural inequalities in a rapidly modernising society are the conditions for its occurrence which then directs the responses to take: awareness campaigns, better policing and legal responses, and/or a broader community response. The various frames primarily invite media audiences to identify with being as yet inactive bystanders who can be motivated to be involved in preventing crime, to put aside superstitious beliefs, become more aware about this issue and supportive of policy responses. The human rights frame invites the closest identification with those affected, namely people with albinism and their families. Only one article, which strongly espoused a poverty explanatory frame, suggested any identification with members of the criminal network. So while the roles of victim and offender are clearly recognised polarities, the third position of “silent bystander” (Hugaas 2010) exhorted to be outspoken witness is the main role the audience is invited to assume.

Media coverage of violence against Tanzanians with albinism in this study relied mainly on official sources and was primarily framed as a criminal matter, then as a human rights issue. The most frequent kind of articles identified in this study were sourced from court and police reports and interviews, and from official announcements and speeches, with politicians and government officials, leaders of albino associations and police being the voices most heard in the media. The fewer articles which were journalist-initiated tended to use a wider range of sources, and correspondingly reported alternative views, such as concerns that politicians may also be involved in the criminal networks and of the vulnerability of family members and impoverished villagers and guards to the temptations of quickly accessed wealth. These connections are similar to the findings of Gulati (2011) who analysed US media coverage of human trafficking and noted the dominant narratives of crime and human rights frames over

² Translation from ‘wafanyabiashara ya kifo’

poverty and neo-imperialist frames and the marginalisation of alternative views, generally given voice in media-initiated stories. Similarly his study also found such stories were more likely to point to social and economic inequalities as the cause.

Although such violence is clearly seen as shameful, Tanzanian media provides public space for its people to debate and shape knowledge about the impact of cultural and economic development on disadvantaged persons with albinism. By disseminating info and increasing awareness, newspapers can be considered “part of the public education process” (Temoshok et al 1989, 536). The press articles in this study reported both commendations about its coverage and questioning about its role. While this is not proof of impartiality or lack of bias, it does indicate a freedom in the press and the presence of democratic processes of discourse and debate which is encouraging. In fact, Tanzania ranked 34th in the world in the World Press Freedom Index 2011-2012 (Reporters without Borders), in which only four other African countries ranked higher. This ranking is close to Australia which ranked 30th and higher than South Africa and the US. This suggests that the media is providing a public space in which to deal with keenly felt national shame in a courageous way. It has been suggested by UTSS (2012) that the higher reporting of attacks on people with albinism in Tanzania may be related to freer press and better systems of reporting, rather than higher occurrence per se than neighbouring countries. More research is needed to understand the different rates of reporting and highlights the need for a census of disabled persons and for improved reporting and investigation across Africa of violence against people with albinism and other similarly vulnerable groups, such as children in Uganda and people with hunchbacks in West Africa. Identification of these frames in studies such as reported in this paper expand the space in which to debate and shape knowledge about violence towards persons with disability and other differences beyond predominant or official representations. Framing that only focuses on crime prevention and eradication implies an overly simplistic response, as noted in other studies on human trafficking (Pajnik 2010) and does not account for the multiplicity of frames identified in this study of news articles. Moreover this analysis points to the paucity of understanding from the viewpoints of those who perpetuate or support the violent acts and human rights abuses, indicating the need for research that investigates such perspectives. As explained earlier, interpretative frames strive to make sense of the causes of a social problem and persuade audiences of appropriate responses. The naming of appropriate solutions, however, is rarely evident within news stories emphasizing the poverty frame, with structural responses to inequalities relatively absent. Further exploration of this issue in relation to the concepts of human trafficking of body parts and ritual murder throughout Africa may add appropriate frames towards understanding and responding to the complexities of the recent attacks against Tanzanians with albinism.

Conclusion:

While the media reporting of discrimination and violence against persons with albinism in the Lakes Zone is as a shame for Tanzania, it is also a demonstration of free press, democratic process and the struggle of a rapidly modernizing country striving to retain its value of *utu* (humanity). The four interpretative frames identified in this media content analysis indicate the complex nature of the phenomenon of violent human rights abuses towards Africans with

albinism and the multiple solutions that are required to address it. More research would be valuable in understanding how to better prevent and respond to these violent attacks, their prevalence and how they relate to other human rights abuses across Africa and globally.

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