

Africa: Diversity and Development

Colourism as an intra-racial phenomenon: the case of Tanzania

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Abstract

Diverse shades of skin tone in Africa are associated with various social meanings and connotations. Colourism incorporates stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination based on skin colour, between and within races, as part of a hierarchical system of privilege and disadvantage structured on the lightness and darkness of someone's skin. Skin colour often designates racial identity. Colourism is an aspect of racism which usually values lighter skin over darker shades, and reactions to this, such as using skin-lightening products. Most literature on colourism has focused on the experiences of African-Americans and similar majority populations.

In order to understand how colourism functions, this paper focuses on intra-racial experiences of colourism in Tanzania as depicted in local media. People with albinism and very light skin due to lack of pigment experience pervasive discrimination and attacks in which their body parts are removed and sold. The difference in treatment indicates complexities related to mystification of albino bodies. Colourism in this extreme form functions along a path of stereotyping, devaluation and questioning of people's humanity, ascription of supernatural powers and commodification of these powers. The paper argues that although colourism is primarily understood as a social process, it can function as capital and hence underpin economic benefits and disadvantages. Colourism is explored as a phenomenon separate to racism in the case of albinism. The paper discusses applied and potential strategies useful to deal with colourism in society and in changing the social meanings associated with diverse skin tones.

Keywords: colourism, albinism, Tanzania, media

COLOURISM AS AN INTRA-RACIAL PHENOMENON: THE CASE OF TANZANIA

Colourism is a global phenomenon incorporating stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination based on skin colour, between and within races. The highest level of diversity in skin colour, due to differing levels of melanin, is within populations in sub-Saharan Africa (Relethford 2000). Diverse shades of skin tone are associated with various social meanings and connotations. Colourism is a concept with relevance for understanding societal perceptions of Africans with albinism (albinos) who tend to differ in colour from their communities. In order to understand how colourism functions, this paper focuses on intra-racial experiences of colourism towards Africans with albinism (albinos).

Although I have occasionally been mistaken as a Tanzanian with albinism (when wearing distinctly African cloth, *khanga* or *kitenge* and acting in African ways), my own experience of

colourism is vastly different. I have predominantly experienced undeserved positive colourism, within my race due to my auburn hair colour and inter- racially when living in East Africa, due to my white skin-colour. My analysis of media portrayal of albinism led me to become interested in the phenomenon of colourism as an aspect contributing to mistreatment of people with albinism. Mutilation and murder of Africans with albinism, involving the removal and sale of various body organs, are an extreme form of colourism. Such violence operates through occult economies in postcolonial East Africa within races, along the division of skin colour.

Colourism is “ubiquitous yet understudied” (Marira & Mitra 2013). Colourism studies investigate “intra-racial hierarchies of skin colour” and how persons’ skin tone affects life opportunities, such as the employment of African Americans and Latinos (Hunter 2007, p.240). This paper addresses the call for more studies to examine how the phenomenon of colourism is manifested and experienced globally (Marira & Mitra 2013 p.105). It explores the case of albinism in Tanzania to examine how colourism is a separate social process to racism and how it can operate to commodify colour as capital. The paper also describes some anti-colourism approaches.

Colourism

Colourism is a type of discrimination based on skin tone, operating within or outside racial groups (Marira & Mitra 2013). Skin tone carries symbolic meanings: it is “not value-neutral body difference” (Rockquemore and Brunsma cited in Walther 2014 p531). The social meaning or value attributed to skin colour leads to differential treatment (Jones 2000 p.1497). Hence colourism is part of a hierarchical system of privilege and disadvantage structured on the lightness and darkness of someone’s skin. Skin colour is a visible sign of social difference, often indicating an individual’s race, or racial identity, or a device to assign them to a racial category (Jones 2000 p.1497). Colours are used to describe racial categories: black for Africans, African-Americans and many Indigenous peoples, whites for Caucasians, yellow for Asians, reds for American Indians.

Colourism is recognised in international law as a kind of racial discrimination. The International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination defines racial discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, *colour*, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life” (United Nations General Assembly 1965). Hence, the phenomenon of colourism encompasses a spectrum of actions, ranging from covert hints of disfavour to obvious acts of serious discrimination (Hunter 2007 p.241). This paper focuses on the most extreme forms of skin-tone based discrimination.

Colour and race may be viewed as overlapping but distinct phenomenon. Banton (2012) notes how the “idiom of colour recognizes a continuity of difference” ranging from very light to very dark shades, while the idiom of race recognises or creates discontinuities (or categories) (p.1112) such as the binary distinction between black and white races. Banton (2012) further explains how the mechanisms of colourism as related to the meaning or significance given to the characteristic of skin colour are a basis for evaluating an individual’s entitlement or a basis for creating of a social category. Hence what is created is a colour scale (with ranking for socio-economic status according to complexion of individuals) or a colour line (with individuals divided into social categories with different entitlements) (p.1110). A colour line marks a breach in a colour scale (p.1111), distinguishing between black and white races. Jones (2000) argues that “although colourism is an important element

of racism, it is equally its own distinct phenomenon” (p.1492). Colourism may overlap or operate separately from racism (Jones 2000 p.1543). There are calls for colourism to be recognised as a distinct form of discrimination (Mswela & Nothling-Slabbert 2013) not affiliated to race, and this is relevant in the case of Africans with albinism.

Colourism in Africa

Colourism studies in Africa predominantly focus on critiquing the skin-lightening industry (Mire 2001, Hugo 2012) which is expanding throughout the world, especially in developing postcolonial countries like Tanzania (Lewis et al. 2011), Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Ghana and parts of Asia, Arabia and the Americas (Mire 2001). Some women in these countries use skin-bleaching creams to give themselves a lighter skin complexion, with ideas that this enhances their beauty, and hence their life opportunities. Skin-lightening is a strategy to raise social status, mobility and material wealth (Hugo 2012) by using certain cosmetics on the skin in order to reduce its melanin content. Notably the Tanzanian Food and Drug Authority has banned skin bleaching products (Lewis et al. 2011) due to harmful side-effects, yet they are still widely available.

The colourism which drives the skin-lightening industry is skin-tone discrimination which discriminates against dark skin, due to social perceptions of fair skin as beautiful. Social meanings applied to albino skin are completely different. Albinism can be understood as a genetic condition involving lack of pigmentation (melanin) and hence colour (Scott 1999). In English the concept of colour is fundamental to albinism: the word ‘albino’ is derived from the Latin word ‘*albus*’, meaning white. There are various forms of albinism, affecting only the eyes (ocular) or the eyes, hair and skin (oculocutaneous OCA). The most common type in sub-Saharan Africa is OCA2 which is the most severe type, where little or no pigment at all is produced. People with OCA2 have white hair, pink skin and blue or gray eyes (Pierce cited in Scott 1999 p.497).

The pale skin colour of those with albinism primarily has negative social meanings and connotations. In Tanzania and other black communities albinism is highly visible and often linked with witchcraft and beliefs that they are evil and cursed (Baker et al. 2010, UTSS 2014). The symbolic meaning of colours varies globally. In European traditions white is associated with purity, innocence and goodness and black with “dirt, evil and death” (Jones 2000 p.1528). Yet in Africa, white is associated with ghosts, spiritual world and death. Baker et al. (2010 p.170) argue that the myths and stereotypes attached to albinism are one of the greatest obstacles to the full participation of people with albinism in society. The non-government organisation, Under the Same Sun (UTSS 2014) has concluded that “nearly all misunderstanding, mystification and stigma are traceable to the most visible aspect, which is their appearance”. Skin colour difference is an element in the mystification of albino bodies but is not the only factor contributing to the violation of their human rights.

In a study examining the reporting of albino murders in UK newspapers during 2006-2011, Baker (2011 p.6) noted their uncritical “focus on the whiteness of albino skin”. She analysed how sometimes this is racialized, that is, whiteness is understood as setting Africans with albinism apart from the norm of black Africa. More often the whiteness is linked to beliefs about albinism as strange and different, such as people with albinism being labelled as “ghosts”. Baker observes that these views are not critically explained and hence contribute to perpetuating misconceptions about albinism.

Examination of media items can reveal what information is disseminated about a topic and how it is portrayed (Baker 2011). This paper focuses on intra-racial experiences of colourism affecting Africans with albinism as depicted in the local Tanzanian media by analysing English and Swahili newspapers from three media companies during 2008-2013. This data

set has previously been used to analysis the media framing of the violent attacks on Africans with albinism (Burke 2013) and strategies used to address issues affecting them from a social work and human right perspectives (Burke, Kaijage & Jon-Langba 2014). This paper seeks to increase understanding of the global phenomenon of colourism as manifested in a local situation and affecting a specific minority group.

Portrayal of albinism in Tanzanian media

The newspaper items focused on the colour of Tanzanians with albinism. The light skin colour of people with albinism was highlighted in the media as different, unique and visible. As one leader explained, “The disability with persons with albinism is clearly seen through the colour of their skin” (Guardian 4 December 2011). A Tanzanian man with albinism was reported as exhorting the community to “understand that albinism is just a disability of skin colour.” (Guardian 17 February 2009). It is the social meaning given to the light colour of their skin which is considered to be the main disabling mechanism. Highlighting colour difference as the defining disabling feature of albinism can obscure other aspects such as any associated impaired vision or susceptibility to skin cancers. Similarly a teenager with albinism shared how he knew “early on that he was different, with the very light colour of his skin, hair and eyes making him stand out” (Guardian 15 December 2012). While he refers to the colour of several parts of his body, most references in the media are made to the colour of skin. Light coloured skin is understood as an identifying sign of albinism in society and of deceased albino body parts.

The meanings ascribed to the difference in colour, 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 colour difference is portrayed as an important aspect of the objectification and commodification of their bodies and ascription of supernatural powers. Albino bodies are perceived as highly valuable due to beliefs they have special powers. “Just because of the difference in the colour 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 colour 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.

Sometimes the colour of albino skin was racialised in comparison to the majority black Africans. For example one article described their skin colour which “society in general calls it ‘white’” (Guardian 4 December 2011) implying a questioning of this societal ascription. The Swahili term *mzungu*, was listed as a derogatory term applied to people with albinism. It is the same term used for white westerners of similar skin colour, but in the case of people with albinism is a term of derision meaning difference.

Some newspaper articles report on how people with albinism are perceived as part of the spirit world, and are not human beings (Guardian on Sunday 4 December 2011). A murdered albino girl was described as “branded a ‘ghost’ on account of her striking white skin” (Guardian 26 September 2009), and the same article used the language of ‘white ghosts’. Another article narrated how a child mistook an albino boy for an ‘*mzungu*’ (Caucasian), who was then told by their mother that he was the “devil’s child” (Guardian 24 May 2009). Lack of education is blamed for how “various superstitious beliefs” confer “supernatural interpretation on the phenomenon” of albinism (Guardian 2 June 2009). These are evident in beliefs that an albino birth signals “a curse to the concerned family” (Guardian 27 November 2011) and accusations towards mothers that they have been unfaithful with a white man or “slept with the devil” (Guardian 27 November 2011).

Colour discrimination is represented in a number of media items as contrary to African and Tanzanian principles of peaceful coexistence amongst diverse groups. Colour, or in the case of albinism, lack of colour is listed amongst other categories to exemplify Tanzanian values of living peacefully together despite differences in “tribe, religion or colour” (Nipashe 19 November 2009) and “colour, religion or sex” (Guardian 29 January 2009). Exhortations are made to “return to our culture of equality and rights amongst us without discrimination of colour or religion.” (Majira 7 August 2012), a sentiment reflected by both government and opposition, by Christian and Muslim leaders. Hence colour is understood as a division within society, amongst other divisions along tribal, religious and gender lines which are of concern in African societies and manifest as tribalism, religious prejudice and sexism.

Media items report anti-colourism statements and actions, predominantly made by NGO leaders and politicians, which emphasise commonality, unity and solidarity. These include affirmations by the owner of one media company that “all human beings were equal despite of [sic] their different colours” (Guardian 7 April 2009). Similarly the Prime Minister stated that there would be no tolerance of mistreatment of “human beings just because they happen to be of a different colour” (Citizen 28 January 2009). The Guardian reported on how the Premier led a gathering in Arusha “to a lyric ‘Different colours, one People’ by South African Reggae maestro, the late Lucky Dube, reminding that God made man in his own image” (Guardian 24 November 2010)”. Although this popular song conflates colour and race and originates from the anti-apartheid movement, it is used as an anti-colourism action following an announcement to establish a centre for persons with albinism. An educational campaign by UTSS involved nationwide screenings of a film on albinism called ‘White and Black: Crimes of Colour’ (Guardian 4 December 2011), where the white and black refers to how mothers of children with albinism bear both white and black children. This film title also frames the murders and mutilations of Africans with albinism as a crime driven by colour difference.

Colourism is separate to racism

Much of the literature on race conflates colour with race, yet in the case of albinism, colour and race are not linked at all (Mswela & Nothling-Stabbert 2013 p.26). The local newspapers describe how colour discrimination operates to affect African albinism within ethnic tribes and the African ‘black’ race. That is, colourism occurs within racial categories, and independent of race. As stated by the Ugandan director of Vulnerable Persons Unit, “albinos are discriminated based on skin colour, but it is not racism” (cited in Allen 2011 p.19). Skin colour, and to a lesser extent colour of other body parts, are visible signs of difference with negative connotations which are important aspects of the mystification of albinism and resulting discrimination. The emphasis in colourism literature is on skin colour, but for those with albinism, other body parts may have different colouring to the majority population.

Africans with albinism may be name-called ‘*mzungu*’ (meaning white person or European), yet there is no other indication of their light colour being linked with the colonial white race, or that they access any benefits of belonging to that race. There is no suggestion that their (mis)treatment is a direct reaction to colonialism or the development of a colour scale in reaction to a global-wide colour line with major gaps in status and wealth between white and black races. People with albinism exemplify the fragility of race. Blankenberg argues that they lead “the way to fracturing the concept of race” (2000 p.8) because they “cross the boundary between Black and White, disrupting the binary code” (p.37). Possibly they are discriminated against because “they defy racial classification” (Scott 1999 p.508) and may sadly be perceived as not truly belonging to any race.

Colourism is a social process

Albinism exists in all racial and ethnic groups, yet due to its rarity, many people have had no contact with anyone with albinism, and are often ignorant about it. Stereotypes, prejudice and myths about albinism are embedded in many cultures, including frequent portrayal of people with albinism as evil and odd in popular Western culture, such as films (Mswela & Nothling-Stabbert 2013, UTSS 2014). There is worldwide stigma and discrimination and treatment of people with albinism as a marginalised group (Wan 2003).

The newspapers analysed demonstrate how Tanzanians with albinism are categorised as different to the rest of their communities because of the colour of their skin. Yet colour is only one variable within multiple dimensions of social differences (including disability) relevant to albinism in Africa. Ignorance about albinism as a genetic condition raises questions about the humanness of fair-skinned babies in African communities (Blankenberg 2000 p.8).

Blankenberg (2000) explains how the meta-narrative of the spiritual tends to inspire most African conceptions of difference (p8). Negative valuations of extreme differences in skin colour within race are incorporated into categorisation of people as non-human and at the same time, a commodity valued because they *are* human. In the case of Tanzanians with albinism, ideologies of witchcraft are used to justify separation, commodification and destruction of bodily integrity. These perceptions are both aired and challenged through media and government, which have become part of the social process of colourism, while simultaneously educating the community to work against colourism.

Colourism as capital

Colourism is primarily understood as a social process which may have beneficial or disadvantaged socio-economic impacts, yet it can also underpin economic phenomena. News articles present societal beliefs that the whiteness of albino skin and bodies is a commodity and capital. Notions of skin colour as capital have been developed by Hunter (2013) to explain how colourism is foundational to new global markets for creating lighter skin and altering bodies. Light skin can operate as a form of “racial capital” by becoming commodities available for purchase (Hunter 2013 p252). It can “be transformed into social capital (networks), symbolic capital (esteem or status) or even economic capital (high-paying job or promotion)” (Hunter, 2011 p.145). Other studies conceptualise skin tone as “epidermic capital” by giving economic privileges to people with lighter skin (in Walther 2014 p.521).

These concepts which make sense of the global skin-lightening industries can also be applied to the criminal markets for albino body parts. Albino bodies (and not just skin) have symbolic capital (magical power) and economic capital (the ‘deal’) when traded as body parts. Albinism operates as a form of symbolic capital, which gains meaning and high value from existing myths and misconceptions about how albino bodies can be transformed into mystical powers. Yet simultaneously these bodies are discredited as disabled, different and low in the humanness hierarchy. The idea of albino bodies being of monetary value only makes sense in a discriminatory society where albino bodies are both valued highly when mystified and devalued for being different. This occurs in a context where certain bodies are perceived as commodities, which can be converted into power, fertility or money and where human organs are “a materialized form of cultural capital” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999 p.286) operating within occult economies, which evoke and parody the free market. Colourism directed towards albino bodies is operating within a system of disability-ism, postcolonialism and witchcraft. Colour discrimination is an aspect of the local nuances occurring within a global economy of trafficking in body parts.

Colourism has fatal dimensions

The intensity, frequency and outcomes of racial discrimination can differ dramatically for people depending on their skin tone (Hunter 2007). This paper describes how geographical location is another axis which intersects with other forms of difference (such as genetic conditions and disability) to increase the outcomes and severity of skin-tone discrimination, specifically in fatal attacks on people with albinism in Africa. Much of colourism literature focuses on the negative social and economic effects of skin-tone discrimination. Yet this paper demonstrates that colourism, at its worst, can lead to injury, disability, tragedy and death.

In Tanzania, colourism has a life-threatening dimension when persons with albinism are hunted, mutilated and killed because they are categorised as different and special due to their fair skin-colour. More directly albino murders result from the capricious instruction of some witchdoctor who decides on the type of body deemed suitable for their customers' purposes. The fatal consequences of having a lighter skin follows a path of stereotyping, devaluation as non-human, ascription of supernatural powers and commodification of these powers. Hence, economic processes as driven and underpinned by colourism can have fatal results.

Whiteness can act as a commodity, which may be dangerous to health and life. The trade in albino body parts in Africa within witchcraft economies exemplifies this, but it is not the only phenomenon to do so. Skin-lightening practices can also be fatal in countries like Tanzania, due to mercury poisoning as a result of using these so-called beauty products (Counter in Hunter 2007 p.249), even affecting children when in the womb. Skin-bleaching goods tend to be more heavily regulated in industrialised countries, yet are not immune to black market movements of the more dangerous products. Both forms of trade have more dangerous effects in Africa.

Anti-colourism strategies

The Tanzanian newspapers analysed in this study described anti-colourism approaches and strategies. Journalists acknowledged the need to widen awareness and to prevent and reduce the effects of colourism. Influential national leaders were reported giving strong public messages about the commonality between people, despite any colour difference, and the humanness of persons with albinism. Where categories and boundaries have been created, anti-colourism strategies work to change these boundaries by abolishing, moving or crossing them (Adams 2005). Changing public conversations and understandings about the social meanings of colour difference includes abolishing boundaries by affirming the notion of one human race, including people with albinism, and by confirming that skin colour is value-neutral difference.

Numerous local, regional, national and international NGOs, government bodies and international entities are acting strategically and collaboratively to educate communities, increase social acceptance of people with albinism and reduce discrimination (Burke et al. 2014). Some contribute to stopping the worst excesses of colourism by lobbying for law reform and increased government action and supporting the conviction of the criminals involved.

Conclusion

Close investigation of the media reporting of discrimination against Africans with albinism provides an example of the way in which colourism is a global phenomenon which can take extreme forms and affect minority groups who are fair in colour. We need to understand that colourism is complex and may overlap or operate separately to racism. The social meanings attributed to diverse shades of skin tone and the manifestations of colourism interact with

other belief systems and dimensions of difference. For example the evil of modern forms of witchcraft is that it is “a system that attaches meaning to variables” (Jones 2000 p.1527), like skin colour differences in order to maintain inequalities. Understanding this complexity and diversity can assist in attempting to change these social meanings and take action to restrain the worst excesses of colourism.

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