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The “Albino paradox” –
faith, culture and despair in contemporary Tanzania

New situations demand new magic.... (E.E. Evans Pritchard)¹

Since its independence in 1961, Tanzania has enjoyed a reputation as a safe country to live in, with kind and friendly people who live together in harmony and peace. However, this reputation is slowly fading away in the light of the deaths of more than 40 Albinos who have been butchered in the last two years by those - in some cases friends, relatives or neighbors - who see in their skin, hair or limbs a source of luck, wealth and a “shortcut” to fortune. Many such pictures of injured or dead Albino adults and children, with missing feet, arms, breasts or ears have “invaded” the mainstream media since the BBC first exposed the killings of Albinos in early July 2008. In this essay, I analyze the following: what might lie behind the Albino killings; what the “Albino medicine” is; what it is meant to do; who has been using this “medicine”; and how the ideology of this “medicine” is designed to solve a series of contemporary problems that Tanzanians have been struggling with in the last ten years. I argue that the killings of Albinos in Tanzania are the consequence of contradictions inherent in the economic, political and social transition Tanzania is undergoing and not simple acts of barbarity. In new postcolonial contexts, the Albino medicine is simply another example of an “occult economy” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999) which is on the rise and is likely to affect more and more communities (as we shall see not only in Tanzania or even just in Africa). Its vigor lies in its power to adapt, change, shape, redefine and explain contemporary misfortunes in new and compelling terms, a flexibility which is particularly characteristic of witchcraft systems all over the continent (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 1999, 2000; Geschiere 1997; Shaw 2002, and others). However, I will also question the extent to which the Albino Medicine can be

¹ Quoted in Jean and John Comaroff, *Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony*, *American Ethnologist* 26(2), 1999;

understood on the model of traditional systems of witchcraft. In doing so, I will explore some of the structural differences between witchcraft and the Albino Killings and argue that despite the fact that the Albino Medicine can be seen as a result of a historical continuity, it also displays a series of characteristics that make it new and appealing to those interested in purchasing the medicine despite the high costs associated with it. Lastly, I argue that the Albino Killings are a result of the different ways in which the current socio-economic crises in contemporary Tanzania are experienced individually by various actors.

The Albino Medicine – what is it and how is it supposed to work?

According to the New York Times, “In the last two years, rumors have spread in East Africa that potions made with Albino blood, shoes made of Albino skin, tendrils of Albino hair woven into fishing nets and amulets with Albino body parts will make people rich.”² There is also a widespread belief that “the body parts of Albinos can help a politician win an election; a businessman multiply his fortune 100 times over; and the tycoon’s mistress to become pregnant with triplets.”³ In addition, Albino genitals, breasts, fingers and the tongue, along with hair used for bracelets or earring decorations, are reportedly^{4,5} in high demand in the northern part of the country, and even near Dar es Salaam, the economic capital of the country. Given this situation, Tanzania is currently a real nightmare to the approximately 170,000 Albinos^{6,7} that currently reside in the country. Most Albinos interviewed by BBC, CNN, New York Times and by the author of this essay have confessed that they live under constant fear everywhere in Tanzania as incidents of albino killing have not been contained to only one location, but are sporadically occurring all over the country. I can offer no official data to confirm my hypothesis, simply because no such data

² Donald G, McNeil, New York Times, 02.16.2009, permanent link http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/17/health/17albi.html?_r=1, retrieved on August 25th 2009.

³ Daily Nation, Kenya, 10.26.2008, CHARLES ONYANGO-OBBO, <http://www.nation.co.ke/oped/Opinion/-/440808/495364/-/3n42vs/-/index.html>, retrieved July 15th 2009

⁴ <http://www.citizenjournalismafrica.org/node/1293>, retrieved July 15th 2009

⁵ Donald G, McNeil, New York Times, 01.26.2009, permanent link http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/27/health/27glob.html?_r=1, retrieved July 15th 2009

⁶ <http://allafrica.com/stories/200901260592.html>, retrieved July 15th 2009

⁷ <http://a.abcnews.com/International/story?id=5331015&page=1>, retrieved July 15th 2009

on this subject exists, but based on the conversations with more than 50 Albinos living in Dar es Salaam, it seems clear that at least some of the Albinos have taken refuge in the capital as they hope that the authorities in the city will be more effective than the ones in their native regions at protecting their lives. Perhaps future studies will focus on the social effects of the Albino Killings among the Albinos who now live in the urban centers in Tanzania, but this is not the intention of the present essay.

Witchdoctors have come up with terrifying explanations for the use of Albino limbs and organs. A BBC reporter went undercover to several witchdoctors and inquired about the actual process of how the “Albino medicine” is used. This is a conversation between the reporter and a witchdoctor:

‘You bring leg bone here and Albino’s hand. We will mix with other magical potions then we will give you instructions how to use it.’ ‘What about Albinos’ hands?’ ‘We use the potion from that for your fishing nets.’ ‘What about the legs?’ ‘The legs will help you in the mining business.’ ‘If I can’t bring these body parts, can you help? I can’t do these things alone because, you know, I’m a woman.’ ‘There are people who can get these body parts for you. We do have Albinos in this area and it is possible to get a hold of them and kill them.’⁸

This conversation reveals two interesting aspects of the Albino killings. First, and most importantly, everything is justified and explained in a “scientific” way. There is a practical explanation and a clear assignment for different parts of the Albino body. One could argue that the effort of the witchdoctor to be so “scientifically accurate” is directly related to the fact that the costs for such a potion are extremely high. Some estimates (generally made by the reporters working on the cases of the Albino Killings) show that Albino organs are sold for as much as 2000 US dollars.⁹ My research among the people who claim using or hope to use this medicine turned up similar figures regarding the Albino body parts. Moreover, the Albino medicine is seen by many of the people interested in buying it as no different than any other Western medicine that they want to acquire (something explored later in the essay). Consequently, the local healers’ attempt to present the medicine scientifically is meant to bridge the gap between what the Albino Medicine is supposed to be and what it really is.

⁸ BBC Podcast, http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/meta/dps/2008/07/nb/080722_allen_sl_au_nb.asx, retrieved July 15th 2009

⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7523796.stm>, retrieved July 15th 2009

Second, what strikes one in the above conversation is the ease with which the “doctor” talks about killing the Albinos. One could argue that this relaxed attitude comes from the fact that in the discourse promoted by some of the local healers, Albinos don’t die but simply fade away, as they are simply ghost-like creatures who are and not human – or not human *enough to die* as others do (the name generally given by other Tanzanians to Albinos is actually *Zeru Zeru* which means ghost in Swahili.)¹⁰ One should bear in mind the fact that, as we shall see in the present essay, the Albino Killings have in fact ambivalent meanings for various actors involved. The Albino medicine has different values, powers, and implications depending on who’s the beneficiary and on the views exposed by the people involved in the process of commercializing the Albino body parts. Therefore, while the Albinos do not seem human enough for those killing and butchering them to consider this murder, they intrinsically have a different value for those who use the Albino Medicine; Albinos might be symptomatic of an ideology in which they are seen as *super human*. Let me be more specific. The Albino killings have different meanings for different actors based on where they are located in the chain of production, distribution and exchange of the Albino medicine. These killings occur under the assumption that Albinos lack full humanity whilst alive, which seems to justify witch doctors and their suppliers in killing them, but once in contact with other potions, substances and other natural elements (including the fur of dead animals, other animal bones or plants), their body parts gain a magical significance and power.

In death, Albinos gain new importance and purpose, and this is primarily in the commercial realm: the potions derived from their bodies are then used to help others become economically successful. I will focus on three examples of such commercialized use of Albino medicine shortly, a couple of them mentioned above, its use by fishermen, miners and small-business entrepreneurs. For the moment, it is important to note that, as we see from the BBC account, the Albino legs are believed to bring wealth to

¹⁰ David Lowe, *Welcome to Albino Island*, The Sun, 12.09.2008, permanent link http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/woman/real_life/article2017493.ece, retrieved July 15th 2009

miners, while hands and in some other documented cases the Albino hair¹¹, is meant to induce a good fishing season for the people using this “medicine.”

Albino medicine variations

It would be a mistake to see the Albino Medicine simply in the light of the body parts traffic and the crimes that have made the news in the Western Hemisphere. Such an isolationist understanding would not necessarily serve the purpose of a rigorous analysis of the Albino Medicine, its impact and its consequences. During my last two brief stays in Tanzania (July-September, 2008, 2009) I came across various people who used *milder forms* of the Albino medicines (specifically bracelets, talismans or earrings made of Albino hair.) They were in fact the only ones that admitted using this “version” of the medicine in my presence since this weaker version of the practice is still not sanctioned by law, as technically no direct harm to the victim is done. While at least formally denouncing the killings of Albinos, they provided me with more background information about these killings.

Some brief remarks about my interactions with such beneficiaries of the Albino medicine and my findings resulting from those interactions are in order. First, all of their stories about this practice were strikingly similar. Personally, I expected to see more variations since rumors, whispers and urban stories tend to be constructed, repeated and re-interpreted by those carrying them on from one speaker to another. Instead, I was surprised to note that the people I spoke with about this “magical allure of making money from nothing” (Andrews, 1997) shared more or less the same storyline about the benefits of the Albino body parts. This could be a sign that some of the witchdoctors promoting this medicine provided at least the people I interviewed, a constant, worked-out “sales pitch” for the Albino medicine. Nonetheless, it seems that across much of Tanzania, the types of rumors spread about the Albino Killings are reasonably uniform.

¹¹ <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/general/2008/08/20088171455171120.html>

Second, the people I interviewed, reassured me that various Albino body parts can be used to achieve different goals that seemed tied in with their personal needs. Two types of discourses emerged out of this research. On one hand, people would talk about the benefits of the medicine they were using – which in most cases was in the form of talismans made of the Albino hair. On the other hand, many of them claimed to be merely aiming at, or trying to reproduce for a limited time, the benefits of other, stronger forms of the medicine which they thought they needed but could not afford to buy – people who wanted medicine made from a hand, but could only pay for a hair-talisman. Thus, while most users of the medicine I talked to were adamant that their financial situation had improved significantly following their use of the Albino hair bracelets, they were also clear about the greater potential advantage they could secure if they could afford more expensive versions of the medicine. This discourse is in fact strikingly similar to the one about Western medicine in Tanzania. Especially in Dar es Salaam, it would not be uncommon to hear people talk about the benefits of using Western medicine but express their frustration at the shortage and financial inaccessibility of such medicines. To be more specific, in regards to both Western and Albino Medicines cases, people put their faith in the *price* of the medicine, and believe that the more they pay, the better results they get.

I acknowledge that such a hypothesis might be deemed highly questionable by various scholars. It is true that applying Western standards to quantify the relation between users of the Albino Medicine and the perceived benefits associated with this phenomenon is problematic. Since Evans Pritchard (1937) we have learned that various practices might have a totally different meaning and rationale within the local systems of thoughts than Westerners might initially assume. Things, events, rituals are clearly embedded within the local context in which they are produced. Furthermore, judging them based on an external system of values or explaining them in the light of the terms and conditions under which they are understood in the Western world seems shortsighted. However, connecting the selling and buying of Albino human parts with a cost-benefit rationale does not dismiss the local systems where such practices have originated. In fact, it reinforces them. In interviewing those who access the Albino Medicine, I have

observed the presence of two significantly different evaluative standards that are applied alternatively or simultaneously to the phenomenon. The monetary value associated with the medicine – be that Western or traditional – has surfaced as a recurring theme among those interested in purchasing and using the Albino body parts. A tendency to correlate efficiency with the high costs of the Albino Medicine might be a practice some would feel more comfortable associating with Western, capitalist approaches. But dismissing this way of thinking as purely Western and not applicable to African contexts is also problematic because contemporary African realities are a product of the shared experiences various communities have registered over time. An isolationist perspective in which phenomena are explained solely based on either Western standards or local systems of thoughts is therefore detrimental to understanding the complexity of the surge in Albino Killings. Many of the people interviewed think that Western medicine in Tanzania is more expensive and more effective than traditional medicines. The shortage of such medicine and the lack of its accessibility are often associated by many of the people I interviewed with a failure of the state and the international donors to improve the standard of living in Tanzania. However, it is crucial to point out that while for many outsiders the Albino Medicine might be seen as terrifying proof of the destructive force of witchcraft, for many in Tanzania it is seen as just another medicine that they cannot acquire. The Albino Medicine is therefore a hybrid product of both Western and local beliefs. *The Albino medicine is regarded as an amalgam of Western medicine - expensive, inaccessible, effective, scientific and thus desirable – and witchcraft – medicine with the power to explain and/ or amend a series of misfortunes that have affected ones' life.* There is therefore a strong symbolism of curing techniques, be those traditional or Western, which has to be understood historically and in the context of the colonial interventions (Vaughan, 1992) for an accurate understanding of its impact and consequences. Conceptualizing it accurately is only possible if one acknowledges the fusion of local and Western beliefs and how they *both* play into the medicine-related discourse that has been adopted at least by some of the Tanzanians living in the urban centers.

Another general theme that emerged from my discussions with some users of this medicine is related to the preparation of the medication. The Albinos' body parts cannot be used simply on their own but only become effective if they are mixed with other ingredients, all part of a secret or at least private ritual. The limbs, body parts or hair need to be used regularly during the "treatment," at precise moments throughout the day (a systematicity and rigor which again suggests the *scientific* nature of the medicine), and should be combined with prayers, other personal restrictions in the form of some sort of personal and/or social sacrifices, and special efforts to overcome the difficulties one faces. It goes without saying that the medicine has a *pseudo*-scientific justification – it's not actual science since no experiments were conducted, no data collected and analyzed rigorously, no hypotheses tested. The power of this explanation therefore lies in something else, namely its systematic value: the capacity to explain and theorize the benefits of the medicine in terms acceptable to those interested in purchasing it.

The daily rituals beyond the headlines

According to one of the people I spoke with, the healer that gave her the necklace told her to wear it every day but also to put extra hours in her work, check her employees balance frequently, diversify her business and try to find cheaper suppliers. The person owns a clothing shop in Kariakoo neighborhood in Dar es Salaam, and she admitted that her business is not doing well because of the very cheap imports the Chinese shop owners on her street are selling. When I tried to suggest that perhaps the valuable advice she was given might improve her business more than the necklace she was wearing, she did not have a problem with agreeing and disagreeing with that suggestion at the same time. "I'm putting more effort into this business; I'll do what I can to improve my work, but who will bring the customers? The necklace will!" She concluded that her business did improve a lot in the last two months *because* she was wearing the Albino necklace, while finally dismissing my suggestion that her business might have simply improved because of her personal efforts and the summer high season: "More tourists in the city does not

necessarily mean that more people will buy from my shop. And yet I have scored higher profits than in the past. I tell you, it must be the necklace.”

Other interviews provided similar narratives. A good example comes from a young fisherman who left Mwanza for Dar es Salaam after his parents both died of a fatal disease. He also experienced severe hardships in the first months of 2009. His story deserves being told in its entirety:

There was no fish anywhere. We changed the fishing nets, asked a local priest to bless our boat and moved from one fishing site to another. No luck of any kind. An old man told me about this healer in Msonga [about 50 kilometers away from Dar es Salaam]. My friend and I went to him and he told us we have a bad spirit haunting our nets so we need a very strong medicine for it. He said we need an Albino bone attached to our boat. I said ‘Ok, where do we get it.’ He said he will get it for us but it will cost a lot of money. When he said how much – one and a half million shillings (or about \$1,200 US) – I almost fainted. When both my friend and I told him that there is no way we can make that much money in a whole year he said: ‘Oh right then, you will settle for something else: Albino hair bracelets.’ ‘But it might not chase away the spirit,’ he added. ‘It will just keep it away for the time being.’ We each got a bracelet for a total of 120,000 Shillings (\$100 US) and then things changed. We got to one of the fishing sites we knew about and we got fish. It took us a whole month to pay the 120,000 shillings back to the people that lent us the money, but it was worth it. At least for now we have fish and money. The healer warned us that the power of the bracelet will run out and that we will need to get another one next year. We’re already saving money for that.

We can see in both accounts that people who use Albino medicine *themselves* think about it in a mixed way. It seems to them to be like Western medicine because of its price, unavailability, the way it works (it has a positive effect on their wellbeing alone, not like a curse which is directed towards others); and the pseudo-scientific application and justification, which makes it more desirable. It is perceived as a very strong kind of medicine, and this caters for the dire sense of urgency experienced by people who have been affected financially by recent food shortages or economic fluctuations.

There is also an underlying correlation between Western religious practices and traditional medicine. Most of the 30 users of the Albino Medicine who were willing to talk to me about it are in fact devout Christians. Accepting Christianity, while using the Albino Medicine was not viewed by them as a contradiction. The Christian cross, the Sunday mass, the icons in their shops, their houses and their wallets were indicative of their religious beliefs. The shop owner quoted above was wearing both the necklace made of Albino hair and the Christian cross. The fisherman asked for the blessing of a priest

before resorting to the Albino medicine. The combination of local and Western rituals, practices, and beliefs is not exceptional. Just as with the medicine to treat clinical diseases, the local practices and the Western religion can concomitantly address a problem without canceling each other. The symbolism is clear. As people see the Albino Medicine as a real medicine for real conditions, not having the possibility to obtain it is seen as a historical perpetuation of social and personal injustices their fathers and forefathers also experienced. For some, this might sound like an irony as many Africans during the colonial period would simply run away from hospitals and medicine (Vaughan, 1993, White, 2000.) But on the ground, the deprivation from the Albino Medicine is sometimes associated with the same shortage and inaccessibility of the Western medicine. Whereas it may be true that the Western medicine has a direct chemical effect on the body, the Albino Medicine affects people at a social and personal level, thus having profound effect on how they experience the world they inhabit.

Lastly, even acknowledging these reports are honest and truthful, they might very well be *false positives*: real improvements in situation that can be associated with various economic and social variations and not the medicine itself. This led to *false* confirmations of the hypothesis that the medicine works. The fact that at the local level few people seem to take seriously the idea that personal success in the case of those using the medicine could be the result of something other than the medicine shows that amongst users this is at best a pseudo-science in which the actors are interested more in confirming what they suspect or *want* to be true than the actual underlying causes of personal enrichment.

Albino Medicine users. More on who they are

In this section I will investigate some of the practical dimensions of the context in which the Albino Medicine becomes desirable. In other words, I am now interested in seeing how the medicine is supposed to “treat” some concrete problems Tanzanians face, and how the Albino killings can be seen as a direct reaction to these problems. This should lead us towards an explanation for a pressing current question: “Why have the Albino killings been so common and in such worrying numbers in Tanzania?”

Recall that most Albino killings happened near Dar es Salaam and in or around the city of Mwanza, the largest two urban centers in Tanzania¹². The two cities have several things in common that could be related to the prevalence of Albino killings in these locations. Mwanza is located on the Southern shore of Lake Victoria; Dar Es Salaam is located on the Indian Ocean. A significant number of people in both cities are heavily reliant on the fish that is trawled out of the two waters. Since late 2007, the United Nations Environmental Programme warned that the dire poverty in the region has led to massive overfishing in Lake Victoria which has significantly affected the local ecosystem,¹³ driving the Nile perch, one of the most important species of fish in the lake, almost to extinction. Similar problems have occurred in Dar es Salaam as well, where local authorities have drastically restricted fishing in the local harbor without a special authorization. The Tanzanian state is hardly helping the poorest of the poor to overcome their condition and no measures have been taken to compensate for the cancellation of many of the fishing permits that were previously available to those dependent on the fish market for their livelihood. Many people in both places, including a large majority of youth, have decided to become fishermen – a profession that can both put food on the table and bring some influx of capital into one’s homestead. The fishing restrictions have forced some fishermen to resort to illegal fishing especially during the night, others to engage in occult practices, change their profession, or look for fishing sites far away from the sites normally patrolled by the coast guard.

The shortage of fish and fishing permits are not the only restrictions that created panic among fishermen in both cities. The boost in the number of fishermen has also produced an increase in competition between those practicing this profession, which combines dangerously with decreases in the number of fish that can be caught. Recall that witchdoctors have been advertising that the Albino Medicine, - be that hair that will induce a good fishing season or the hands for the fishing nets – will bring

¹² http://www.utalii.com/Lake_Victoria/Mwanza.htm

¹³ [http://www.unep.org/bpsp/Fisheries/Fisheries%20Case%20Study%20Summaries/Ogutu\(Summary\).pdf](http://www.unep.org/bpsp/Fisheries/Fisheries%20Case%20Study%20Summaries/Ogutu(Summary).pdf)

back the fish and bring fortune to those who use it¹⁴. Given the fact that competition and the lack of fish are the two most important hardships in a fisherman's life, I believe there is a direct connection between overfishing, illegal fishing and the sudden increase in Albino deaths. This phenomenon is, to return to Evans Prichard's point, people's way of reacting to unfortunate events that seem beyond their control – the lack of fish due to overfishing – in an attempt to restore the previous balance. Here it is interesting to observe a subtle dimension of the theory of the “Albino medicine.” In no account is it mentioned that the medicine would bring fortune and success to the community as a whole, but to the individuals that use that medicine. For that matter, the fishermen are simply trying to get ahead of the game by choosing the Albino medicine because it is believed that those using the medicine become more successful than other people in the same social and economic groups, who they are competing with.

There is another sector of workers in Mwanza that have been affected by unfortunate events and that have reportedly been using the Albino Medicine: the gold miners. If one drives 90 kilometers west of Mwanza one gets to the gold mines in Mgusu, outside Geita. After years of mining during the colonial and postcolonial times, the local gold resources have become a scarce and increasingly unsustainable commodity. For that reason, it shouldn't come by surprise that most of the local miners “believe that using Albino body parts in witchcraft will increase their chances of financial success.”¹⁵ Christopher Steiner has noted that the relation between producing, distributing and exchanging crafts in West Africa is the most talked about factor in traders' lives (Steiner, 1994, p.51.) In miners and fishermen's lives alike, luck has the same significance, because it has such a strong and direct impact on their fortunes. Miners, in particular, are greatly affected by the “lack of luck” which they perceive to be the reason why gold can hardly be found in the mines anymore. Consequently, they are also desperately looking for a way to ensure their recovered success. Fishermen can more easily adapt to the current situation. They can look for new fishing sites, work during the night when it is less likely to be caught by the maritime patrol, or

¹⁴ Some fishermen think that the Albino hair will bring the fish back due to its shiny color which is supposed to attract the fish to the fishing nets.

¹⁵ <http://www.marcusbleasdale.co.uk/tanzania/>

simply explore the fishing sites they are most familiar with. Miners are much more limited in their options and in a more dire need for reassurances that they will be able to put food on the table. Given their economic desperation, it should then now come as no surprise that both fishermen and especially miners end up being charmed by the prospect of success brought about by the Albino medicine.

Albino killings: A theoretical perspective

If one types in Google the key words “Albino killings in Tanzania” one will find thousands of articles regarding the topic of this essay. Almost all of these articles will make some sort of allusion to or direct mention of witchcraft. But is what is happening in Tanzania inherently witchcraft? The killings themselves are certainly a result of local healers’ propaganda with respect to what the medicine is expected to achieve. To that end, the Albino medicine is related to witchcraft. But some clear structural differences between witchcraft and the Albino killings can also be noted.

First, in much of Africa, and specifically in many parts of Tanzania, sorcerers and witch doctors are employed to fight inequalities, or even more specifically, to completely destroy or neutralize others who have accumulated wealth.¹⁶ However, users of the Albino medicine are most often not directly trying to destroy others, but simply to achieve a better economic status which may or may not be comparable to people they know or interact with. Witchcraft practices and the Albino Killings cater for peoples’ needs in different ways even if those performing the rituals might be the same actors. Witchcraft accusations fight to restore a balance between various social actors who are somehow interrelated, while the Albino

¹⁶ For Tanzania, the best example is the case of the Haya people in the Western part of the country, studied by Brad Weiss in *The Making and Unmaking of the Haya Lived World*, Duke University Press, 1996; Jean and John Comaroff’s study of *Occult Economies*, among others, points to the desire to destroy other people who are supposed to be responsible for wealth accumulation *and* the cause of lack of economic prosperity for other members of the community, thus supporting my point about the destructive power of witchcraft. Peter Geschiere’s book on the *Modernity of Witchcraft* also shows the tensions between the people who have accumulated wealth and those related to them by kin or other forms of personal relations who employ witchcraft to invert or destroy their wealth.

Medicine is set to change the success individual, generally unrelated actors who desire prosperity, but lack the means or the knowledge to obtain it.

That is why, perhaps paradoxically, witch doctors and beneficiaries of the Albino Medicine can be both friends and enemies; they can work together on some occasions, but are also at risk of becoming direct enemies, in other contexts. How is that possible? Those who want to become rich by using the Albino medicine will start by obtaining the Albino medicine with the help of a witch doctor. This healer will make the potions, facilitate the transactions and instruct the beneficiaries with respect to how the medicine is used. But if the medicine is successful and these people attain their new economic status, they can become the target of the same or other witch doctors who could subsequently be employed to act *against them* by people close to the newly enriched beneficiaries who wish to redistribute the wealth in their community. Thus we see that the form of sociality created by contemporary forms of witchcraft in Tanzania and elsewhere can both facilitate and destroy the accumulation of wealth. These two forms of magical medicine can be used alternatively, to various ends, or even concomitantly. The fisherman quoted earlier in the essay appealed first to a priest to chase away the evil spirits that might have “landed” on his boat, then consulted a local healer to find out whether he was bewitched by someone else and raised the money necessary to buy Albino hair for his fish nets. As another fisherman using the Albino medicine lamented: “I am at the mercy of the healer. She helped me out but could easily bring me down if she wishes!”

A clear difference between witchcraft and the causes of the Albino Killings is the fact that there is no substance or creature in the body of the Albinos that makes them witches in the eyes of the other members of the community. To recall Geschiere’s studies on Cameroon, the Albinos do not have a *djambe*, or an evil eye within themselves. They do not travel by night, suck other people’s energy, or have any inherent potentially negative elements in their beings. In a way, Albinos are the opposite of traditionally conceived witches: they are inherently good, can bring along prosperity and richness and do

not have a negative affect on those surrounding them. That is why, in the Tanzanian Albino Killings, we witness something like the reversal of the beliefs about traditional witchcraft. Far from harming people, the Albinos are thought to be able to help them. Their body is therefore a talisman in itself, as we have seen, and not something to be afraid of. Furthermore, the Albinos are not thought to attack those with whom they quarrel and no correlation is made between Albinos' envy against other successful members of the community and any direct or metaphysical attacks (the way it would normally be the case with most already documented cases of witchcraft). Because they do not have a *djambe*, Geschiere might argue, Albinos are metaphysically neutral, not a harm to the community or a threat to others.

The differences between witchcraft and the benefits of using the Albino medicine lie in the basic nature of the two practices. The Albino Medicine is not internal to a community but is directly related to an individuals' quest for good fortune, independent of any effects on others. Witchcraft is based on social relations and it provides a social explanation of the various misfortunes that occur in people's lives. Witchcraft can therefore be conceptualized as a means by which people interact with each other, in accordance with their personal history, familiarity with each other and also their differences. A person will almost never accuse someone who is a complete stranger to him and with whom he is not at all (socially or otherwise) related. As we understand it from Evans Pritchard to contemporary studies, witchcraft is predominantly a community affair.

The ideology of the Albino medicine is based on rather different principles. A number of the users are already to some extent financially successful but have encountered unforeseen difficulties in their businesses. Others are simply trying to get what the Comaroffs call "value sans visible effort." But what all these people have in common is a desire to succeed, to become or to remain financially independent. They are not trying to destroy others around them or even affect their lives in negative ways. Consequently, it seems that the Albino Medicine caters for intrinsically individual and personal ambitions, more than the desire to harm and affect others. In addition, both witchcraft and the Albino

medicine are meant to provide ways of acting on the world. But the mechanisms by which this is supposed to happen, the relations, ambitions and purported effects involved, are significantly different.

Lastly, there is also a difference of attitude. *Maendeleo*, development in Swahili, is something people talk about on a daily basis in Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, and in other parts of East Africa. (Smith, 2008) Whereas some witch doctors have claimed that they work in the name of development (Geschiere, 1997, and others) at least in urban Tanzania, witchcraft accusations per se are generally considered inherently traditional and outdated (something also seen in the way the state has responded to the Albino killings). Surprisingly to me, some of the people that admitted using the Albino hair in their practices in Mwanza and in Dar es Salaam rejected witchcraft practices by themselves. For example, some were profoundly aware of the fact that their misfortunes had to do with the economic climate in the country, the lack of investments, and the presence of new and aggressive competitors (the increasing Chinese community living in the major Tanzanian cities, along with the more established competitors of Indian origins, were often mentioned). At the same time, they directly or indirectly preached the potential benefits of the Albino Medicine *and* denounced the more traditional witchcraft practices (hence my use of Evan Pritchard's quote at the beginning of this essay: "*New situations demand new magic...*")

The Albino Medicine is not only a new magic for a new context, but also a profoundly chameleonic form of magic. I suggested above that some people might use the Albino medicine, believe in witchcraft and perceive some of the members of their community as potential enemies once they accumulated wealth (as a matter of fact, some of the people I talked to believed exactly that). But as we have just seen, people can also publicly denounce and reject witchcraft and see no contradiction between their denial of witchcraft and the practice of using the Albino Medicine. This suggests that Albino Medicine and witchcraft are two fully independent belief-sets with more differences than similarities. And in fact, the fragmented and isolated accounts of the practice in media reports and my own interactions with people using the Albino medicine, all point to this dual nature of the medicine. The Albino body

parts have the alluring prospect of answering otherwise apparently unanswerable questions that educated and uneducated, “traditional” and “modern”, relatively successful or poor people face. At the beginning of this essay I noted the similar storylines surrounding the Albino Medicine. People shared the same stories about how the medicine is made, who makes it, and its potential effects. But the real power of this medicine lies in the fact that it caters for various interests. People from different backgrounds all use this medicine simply because the ideology of this medicine molds to fit their very particular needs and interests.

The practice of killing Albinos and using them as means to bring back good luck and material wealth is therefore “a stereotyped means of reacting to such events,”(E.E. Pritchard, 1937) as bad luck and the lack of material wealth. When someone chooses the Albino medicine he/she may or may not reject the idea that their misfortune is the consequence of witchcraft, or that their friends or family might use witchcraft against them at another point in the future. For those who believe in other witchcraft practices, the discourse of the Albino medicine molds on their understanding of the world they live in. As the Albino medicine is believed to bring luck and fortune to an individual per se, whether the hardships one person experiences are the consequence of witchcraft or not becomes irrelevant. Thus the “Albino medicine” is not only a way to bypass practical problems and limitations and become successful, but a way to bypass witchcraft itself. For those who do not believe in traditional forms of witchcraft also, the Albino medicine caters to their interests and goals.

In short, the “Albino medicine” is either meant to restore or generate the wellbeing of one person, no matter what the cause for his/her misfortunes might be. The Albino medicine’s greatest strength is therefore to be found in what it stands for: it is temptation taken to a new level of understanding. People who are desperately trying to change or maintain their economic and personal status are allured into believing that the Albino body parts can help them to achieve that goal. The Albino Medicine is suddenly offering a concrete step-by-step plan for securing otherwise unattainable but highly desirable ends. Those

who can afford it and are convinced by the discourse of this medicine, buy it. Some settle for the second best solution whilst wishing that one day they could afford the Albino body parts. In the absence of any concrete explanations that can shed some light on why some people succeed and others do not, the Albino Medicine promises to provide what the post colonial state has failed to bring: personal and economic stability.

Towards a more general understanding of the Albino Killings

The obsession with financial success is the main catalyst for the Albino Medicine. However, people in this region have always looked for ways to improve their conditions or change their financial status. What has changed? The answer is both subtle and obvious at the same time. The emerging world economic crisis has affected East Africa (especially Kenya and Tanzania, two countries that have relied extensively on American and European Foreign Direct Assistance and Investment) in unexpected ways. Because such disparate economic sectors in Tanzania have been seriously affected by the economic crisis¹⁷, the need for “shortcuts” to success has become widespread enough to support this novel and desperate form of response. To put it differently, because most Tanzanians are being affected by the economic crisis and the social inequalities reinforced by the financial situation, there is now a large enough group of desperate people to support the development of this new Albino ideology. Mary Douglas’ observations about taboo beliefs seem to govern the narrative of the Albino killings: “The people can believe because they collectively want to believe.” (Douglas 2002, xiii.) Albinos are therefore conceptualized within the local communities where they live, but also in the urban centers in Tanzania and elsewhere, as having something inherently beneficial in their bodies from which some members of the community could benefit. They seem like walking fountains of fortune, and are thought to be the path to happiness, or put differently, they are the shortcut to happiness, prosperity and personal wealth for a third party.

¹⁷ <http://www.ippmedia.com/ipp/guardian/2008/11/25/127053.html>

The faith in the power of the Albino Medicine is not only validated by the desire to believe in these practices. They are also corroborated by the blurry distinction between true and false accounts about the benefits of this medicine. Luise White elaborates on the relation between the value of a narrative and the context in which one account is being told: “Stories and rumors are produced in cultural conflicts of local life. They mark ways to talk about the conflicts and contradictions that gave them meaning and power. These conflicts and their meaning can only be reconstructed if the stories are grounded in relation to other evidence, other interpretation and other stories.”¹⁸ In the case of the Albino Medicine, the narrative is not only constructed around very fluid and extremely relative processes (after all, the main users of the medicine: fishermen, miners and traders rely to a significant extent on luck in order to succeed (Steiner, 1994, p.51), but it is also given new interpretations and descriptions. I have yet to meet people who directly admitted that the Albino medicine has not successfully worked in their lives. Whether that is because people are too ashamed to have invested both mentally and financially in this medicine which failed, or because, as Douglas was arguing, they want to collectively believe in it, is irrelevant here. Bearing Luise White’s arguments in mind once again, rumors, a category in which the Albino medicine narrative partly fits, exist simply because people believe they exist. As the stories of the two Tanzanians quoted above suggest, their reflections on what exactly is the cause of their financial and personal improvements can hardly be questioned in their opinion.

Even the educated guesses one could make about the actual causes of the changes in the personal success of Albino medicine users cannot alter their interpretation of such change simply because the assumptions cannot fully explain these phenomena. Generations and generations of economists have gone to great lengths to explain every mechanism of any markets and yet have fallen short of predicting every possible outcome or cause. The Albino medicine feeds into just such “intellectual loopholes.” It provides comfort and explanations for situations in which scientific explanations fail, as E.E. Evans Pritchard has argued in his famous ethnography about the Azande ethnic group of Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1937). As

¹⁸ White Luise, *Speaking with vampires, Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*, University of California Press, 2000, p. 312

we have seen, healers come with complex stories about the causes of misfortunes, which are followed by even more complicated means by which these misfortunes are addressed. Furthermore, the popularity of the Albino medicine is also reinforced by the fact that various people who have accumulated apparently inexplicable amounts of wealth in a short period of time, have been arrested and accused of having used the Albino medicine, or even bluntly admitted that they used it and attributed their own success to it.

The Perpetrators' World

While the Albino Killings might speak of the effects of the economic crisis, the sudden shortage of natural resources and the social, economic and personal anxieties that result, connecting the killings only to these factors would be to ignore certain relevant local complexities and specificities. The use of the Albino Medicine is also related to a series of “crises” that occur at a level which has yet to be firmly linked, at least in this essay, to the nature of the Albino killings: the forms of sociality witchcrafts brings along; how witchcraft interacts in new and surprising ways with postcolonial realities; how various local actors operate on the ground; and the terms in which people relate to each other. Again, this has already been discussed by various authors (Bastian 1993, Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Weiss 1996, Geschiere 1997; Parish 2000; White, 2000; Shaw 1997, 2001; Smith 2008, etc).

Brad Weiss, studying the Haya group in Western Tanzania reaches similar conclusions to mine about the sociality of witchcraft in his research. Weiss notes that the increasing economic inequalities, which among the Haya are often deemed incomprehensible, have had profound effects on how people experience, control, and shape the world they live in (Weiss, 177). One of the most dramatic consequences of these inequalities is the way the Haya relate to blood sucking accusations. Much like in the case of Albinos, the blood suckers are people who, by selling blood, have acquired significant wealth within the local communities, in relatively short periods of time, with no apparent causality between their “daily work” and the source of enrichment. The sudden change in their economic status is therefore directly connected by other members of the community with blood selling, as this practice is widely

known among the Haya as a source of income. However, the author argues convincingly that the Haya do not simply react to the sight of various commodities and services that one puts on display (i.e. the real business moves that lead certain people to relative political success), their accusation of blood selling also comes from the perception that this wealth had in effect inexplicable causes. The relationship between cause and effect, the direct implication in occult economies connected to the sudden economic success one experiences is of great importance for both the Haya and, in my study, the beneficiaries of the Albino Medicine.

An even more important link between blood sellers and the Albino Medicine lies in the fact that the bodies of the victims (those whose blood is sucked out and sold, and the Albinos killed for their bones) become what Weiss calls “transactable units.” According to Weiss, through the blood sucking mechanism, “Blood thereby becomes a resource, a utility that is thoroughly separable from the context in which it’s produced.”¹⁹ This brings about another historical irony which mingles, among others, with theories about the legacy of colonialism and its extractive power (Mandami 1996, Rodney 1997, Comaroff 1998.) The Albino killings, from the perspective of the perpetrators this time, are based on a too familiar principle that ruled the days of colonialism: the emancipation of some at the expense of others. The colonial state, as an extractive enterprise, seems now to have been replicated in a mutated form, with dire repercussions for the actors involved.

The brutality of this extractive occult economy in Tanzania, and its cost on human life, may simply be more obvious (because the link is so direct) in the case of the Albino Killings, but it is not different in kind or consequences to other economic structures that dominate in much of Africa. From the coltan in our mobile phones that is extracted with the help of forced labor in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the diamonds in Sierra Leone and Angola which before 2003 were taken out of the country by bandits who killed those who refused to slave for them, to the Western medicine that is tested on African human subjects who lose their lives in the process (the most recent cases of which were registered in

¹⁹ Weiss, 216

Nigeria), to the gold bracelets, necklaces and earrings Westerners wear without the knowledge of the people who die suffocated in gold mines in West Africa and elsewhere, the developing world is full of examples of brutal inhumane extractive mechanisms for African resources. What most of these examples have in common is the fact that they are out of control of the local people who suffer under them, be they Albinos, Congolese, Nigerians or others. The Albino Killings is therefore not unique as an extractive economy and it should be analyzed in a much broader context.

With these remarks in mind, I turn a critical eye to the context in which the perpetrators relate to the killings, their reasons and justifications for engaging in the business of distributing the body parts to the growing market for just products in Tanzania, and elsewhere. Among those who are feeling disempowered and abandoned by the structures of power which promised prosperity, wealth, and equal rights for all, yet provided little of the former two, there is a sense of urgency connected to these occult practices. The policemen arrested for facilitating, planning or executing the Albino Killings look at their superiors and see manifestations of power and wealth which will perhaps never be available to those of their ranks, and seem to lack alternative means of self empowerment. The young men, who believe that the benefits of the postcolonial state are denied to them, resort to killing Albinos for the local healers in exchange for large sums of hard cash, as this is one of the few ways of enrichment available to them. “They are the repressed for whom the promise of postcolonial return is most obviously blocked by the hardening materialities of life at this coordinate on the map of global capital,²⁰” as Jean and John Comaroff warn us. They are the ones who dreamed that their lives will be different from their parents’ only to discover that their situation is often as dire, or even worse, than that of their forebears. Some of the relatives of the Albinos killed also experience the hardships of everyday life and see in their kin the gateway to prosperity that was not in sight before the spread of the Albino Medicine mythology. The temptation to accumulate wealth in a short period of time, be that by killing Albinos or using the Albino medicine, speaks of the constant struggle people engage in, in their attempt to make sense of the world

²⁰ Jean and John Comaroff, *Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony*, *American Ethnologist* 26(2), 1999, p: 284

they live in, to act upon it, and find ways of getting ahead of the game. This, argue Jean and John Comaroff “is the flip side of the coin; the sense of impossibility, even despair, that comes from being left out of the promise of prosperity, from having to look on the global economy of desire from its immiserated exteriors.”²¹ With all its variations and complications, its changing discourse and ideology, the Albino Medicine appears to provide a novel way to escape the difficulties of the daily life, the uncertainties of tomorrow, and the humiliating and painful experience of seeing other people from the same community getting rich ahead of you.

Contextualizing the Albino killings

The Albino killings have surfaced in the mainstream media as something of an anomaly, and mainly restricted to Tanzania. This raises the questions that surround the practices of the Albino killings: “Why now?” and “Why here?” I have already suggested that some of these killings can be seen in the light of the current “unfortunate events” (related to mining and the lack of fish in the waters), and the unexpected effects of the economic crisis that has also affected Tanzania, as part of the continuing quest for elusive wealth by magical/supernatural means in the region. I have also argued that those who engage in the killings and the distribution of the Albino body parts often see this practice as the last resort to change their economic status. But I also want to question the extent to which the practice of getting ahead in the game with the help of different “tricks” is something particular to Tanzania or whether the implication of Albino body parts in different rituals is rather something that does not cross the borders of Tanzania.

The idea that the killing of Albinos is a phenomenon contained solely to Tanzania is false. While most cases of Albino killings happened in this country (potentially because Tanzania has the largest Albino population in East Africa, where 1 in 3000 births²² is affected by albinism, but also because of the

²¹ *Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming*. Public Culture (special issue: Millennial Capitalism and the Culture Of Neoliberalism) 12(2): p.25

²² Catholic Information center for Africa, Nairobi press release, 01.23.2009, permanent link: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200901260592.html>

local economic reasons noted above), the butchering of innocent Albinos has happened in other neighboring countries as well. Similar attacks occurred in all neighboring countries in the last five years. According to various media reports, in Malawi, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo²³, Burundi²⁴, and Kenya²⁵ there have been several attacks on Albinos who were either killed for their body parts or skinned to death, their skin being used subsequently in various witchcraft related rituals²⁶. What this shows is a regionalization (maybe “globalization”?) of the Albino killings, which can certainly be understood in the light of the free flow of migration between various East African countries.²⁷ How the killings of Albinos have crossed the borders of Tanzania can easily be traced in various incidents that occurred in the neighboring countries. Firstly, it has been discovered that the murderers of Albinos in Tanzania are currently selling Albino body parts to Congolese and Zambian businessmen as well²⁸, countries where witchcraft also plays a significant role in people’s lives. At the same time, various similar cases of Albino killings have also been registered in Kenya, Congo and Burundi, a sign that other locals are willing to supply the Tanzanian market with more Albino body parts.

Another proof of the regionalization of the Albino killings is the fact that the Interpol is stepping in to help the Tanzanian authorities to find and punish the Albino killers. *The Citizen*, Tanzania’s most important English newspaper, published an article in which it revealed that: “The International Police Organization (Interpol) is leading a joint operation involving countries in the Great Lakes Region to stop Albino killings in Tanzania²⁹” According to the same source, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo authorities have also agreed to participate in the joint mission organized by Interpol

²³ IPP Media, <http://www.ippmedia.com/ipp/guardian/2008/08/24/121180.html>

²⁴ Agence France Press, Burundi: Albino Boy killed for parts, published in New York Times on January 2nd 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/03/world/africa/03briefs-ALBINOBOYKIL_BRF.html?_r=1&ref=world

²⁵ <http://allafrica.com/stories/200807071192.html>

²⁶ <http://www.groundreport.com/Opinion/Superstitious-Albino-Killings-in-Tanzania-Must-Sto>

²⁷ Visas or passports are not necessary to cross borders between the five countries in the East African community (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi), and the Democratic Republic of Congo, with whom the East African Community has a special border crossing regime, is also a *de facto* member of the community insofar as the free migration of people is concerned.]

²⁸ Richard Mganga, *One year on, the battle is still far from victory*, 11.23.2008, IPP Media, permanent link: <http://www.ippmedia.com/ipp/observer/2008/11/23/126926.html>

²⁹ *The Citizen*, *Interpol leads regional operation to end albino killings in Tanzania*, by Mkinga Mkinga, published 02.11.2009, permanent link: <http://www.thecitizen.co.tz/newe.php?id=10515>

due to the fact that: “The murderers are selling Albino body parts to people in these neighboring countries where there are also superstitious beliefs about Albinos.³⁰” We therefore notice that the Albino killings have spilled over the borders in the neighboring countries creating a sort of a domino effect among various peoples that are increasingly believing in the power of the “Albino medicine.” Perhaps future research will investigate if the spread of the mythology across borders might signal its appropriateness as a response to the shared problems, inequalities and other hardships throughout the region.

Bridging the gap: Albino Killings, regional variations, global consequences

In a country where the average annual salary rarely exceeds 600 US dollars [according to the UNDP 2008 Development Index³¹], the desire to engage in alternative practices that could supplement one’s income, be they illicit, informal or witchcraft related, should hardly be a surprise. The sudden string of Albino killings that occurred in 2008 and 2009 are certainly shocking, but not only specific to Tanzania or even just East and Central Africa.

As anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have successfully argued in *Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony* (1999), and again in *Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming* (2000), criminal acts connected to various traditional medicines which are advertised as promising alluring results and are in fact new tempting chimeras, are neither uniquely South African episodes (where the two are drawing their ethnographic examples from) nor are in fact *just* African. Comparable practices can found in various contexts, from Africa to Eastern Europe and again to South America, and even though they might not appear to be connected to each other, they speak of similar anxieties, contradictions and desires. In Tanzania, the contradictions of the modern state have affected local people in many and diverse ways. Most promises made by Julius Nyerere and the three presidents that followed him in office are yet to be fulfilled. Some of the basic public services that for many Westerners are by-default products of civilization– access to clean water, gas, or electricity,

³⁰ Idem

³¹ http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_TZA.html

public health or easily available Western medicine – are still distant goals for many Tanzanians living in both urban and rural areas. In a society where one can find labor for as little as 25 dollars a month,³² where poverty, corruption and the lack of jobs are the norm rather than the exception, people find hope, faith and comfort in what seems to a Westerner to be patently unreasonable practices. As we have seen, gone is the sheer hope for prosperity and equality, especially in the urban centers where Tanzanians from various social classes interact with each other on a daily basis, in a society where scrupulous villas and mansions are situated meters away from slum-like temporary dwellings.

There is no question that things have worked out better for a select few than for the large majority of people living in Tanzania. But as I discovered, at least in Dar es Salaam and Mwanza, more and more entrepreneurs are critical of these stark economic divisions. Some of them ask how these differences are possible and a lot of them talk about mechanisms and solutions through which this situation can be “fought.” Small scale entrepreneurs in Tanzania are still pursuing personal success, and they often do it through new and innovative ways. As the demand for Albino Medicine shows, some of them choose instead to find new forms of empowerment in occult practices that promise more immediate results than the options they currently have in sight. The Albino killings therefore speak not only of the contradictions of the modern Tanzanian state (the relationship between state and non-state actors or the local entrepreneurs and businessmen who are engaged in fluid, often discontinuous business relations), but also about the acute need for a better solution to those contradictions, than that which many Tanzanians have been reaching to.

Concluding remarks:

At the end of July, 2008, I was having a cup of coffee with a successful woman in Dar es Salaam, and one of the topics we covered was the Albino killings happening around the country. I was initially shocked to notice that she was not against these killings and that her views on the topic were incompatible

³² US AID/ Tanzania, Annual Report, FY 2005, page 3;

with my image of an educated middle class person. She said ‘[i] myself have considered getting the Albino medicine...’ As I was trying to understand as much as possible the way she was conceptualizing the matter I replied: ‘You realize that no medicine can really make you succeed in life and that it is all up to you to decide your future.’ Her answer is perhaps emblematic of what many people in a similar position think of the matter: ‘I know and acknowledge that. But you know, there is too much competition in this city. The Chinese, the Indians, the Arab firms. They are all affecting us in a way or another. There has to be an African solution to bypass them.’”³³ Her reasoning reveals clearly one kind of justification given for the Albino killings and the logic behind the “Albino Medicine.” In the face of uncertainty, economic regression, lack of food supplies etc, it seems that – at least for those that could afford it – the Albino medicine is a last, desperate attempt to change their financial status, to find their way out of the economic mess that has been heaped upon the already deplorable internal conditions and contradictions.

The “Albino Medicine”, then, is really a psychic solution for individuals struggling economically in Tanzania, a “shortcut” that is essentially practical, and meant to reconfigure a social order that is constantly changing against the interests of most Tanzanians in ways beyond their control. It shows how desperate people will take extreme actions in an attempt to try to take control of the environment they inhabit, and in order to improve their lives. In the last few years this “solution” has had dramatic consequences on the Tanzanian country as a whole. The Albino medicine, the solution various witchdoctors claim to be the antidote for bad luck, poverty or even other forms of witchcraft, has put Tanzania in the international news, and has given birth to internal contradictions, debates and accusations that are slowly affecting both internal affairs and regional tourism, an industry upon which the Tanzanian economy is heavily dependent. The Albino medicine, with its own logic and discourse, is closely related not only to the concept of modernity, but also to the concrete contradictions, day to day experiences, power and personal relations that characterize modern Tanzanian life. It is therefore enmeshed with these every day problems and anxieties and cannot simply be explained as a contained or isolated phenomenon,

³³ Conversation that I had with the referenced Tanzanian entrepreneur in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, on August 31st 2008

but must be understood as an attempt to respond to them – to “take the power back” as it were (for similar discussions in other local contexts see Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; White, 2000; Shaw 1997, 2001; Smith 2008, etc)

In this essay, I tried to shed some light on the extremely complex issue of Albino killings in Tanzania. I have tied the butchering of Albinos near Dar es Salaam and Mwanza with the economic uncertainties and failures that workers in the main local industries and entrepreneurs have experienced in the last year. The global economic meltdown has acutely affected the lives of many of the Tanzanian people. Those affected worst by the economic crisis have reached for any possible means of improving their situation.

For those often disempowered people, the Albino medicine constituted one of the few seemingly reliable means by which they can change their lives and achieve their often modest individual goals. Furthermore, the spread of the Albino killings has also been facilitated by some purported positive results of this medicine which confirmed and reinforced the belief in its power and its success rate. This cycle of positive reinforcement of the mythology has made more people being interested in purchasing the medicine and thus led to more Albinos being killed. Perhaps the most worrying aspect of the phenomenon is the degree to which it has become ingrained in people's views on how to succeed or restore a disrupted personal situation. For many users, the Albino medicine seems to give them control over their situation, and a direct way to influence it for the better. The lack of better explanations for people's misfortunes combined with the social inequalities and personal anxieties provided witchdoctors with the social space in which they could successfully advertize the Albino Medicine as just another form of medicine meant to “cure” its beneficiaries.

I began writing this essay with the goal of understanding how the killings of Albinos can be seen from the perspective of the people engaged in this practice. We saw that the meaning of the killings is remarkably different for those ordering or committing the killings and those who use it. I did not try to find a resolution for this problem and therefore did not explore potential administrative actions that could

lead to the stopping of these killings. However, I do believe that a solution has to be sought and found; and I conclude that such a solution cannot be found without taking into consideration at least some of the arguments presented in this essay.

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