

## Ideology and the Killing of Albinos in Tanzania: A Study in Cultural Relativities

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**ABSTRACT** Public opinion dictates public ideas of causation. The logic of quasi-traditional reactions to distress and anxiety are little affected by the narrow limits of Western scientific pragmatism. This Sukuma violence should be understood in the context of inexplicable distress and within the accepted paradigm of widespread creatable spiritual power to do and prevent interpersonal evil.

By June 2009, some 48 Albinos had been killed by groups of Sukuma in north-west Tanzania so that parts of their bodies could be used in the preparation of supposedly protective 'magic' medicines which could be used to relieve a range of suspected and real misfortunes, ranging from witchcraft to the prevention of rain and the spread of AIDS as well as to increase the possibilities of success. This was a matter of immediate concern to the central government, local authorities and those concerned with the welfare of the underprivileged and the international image of Tanzania.

It was an additional political and social worry because it seemed connected with the killing of over three thousand suspected witches and wizards between 1970 and 1988, of which 80% were women. Two-thirds of this appalling total occurred in the Sukuma regions of Shinyanga and Mwanza (Mesaki 1994), where these recent killings of albinos have also occurred. This was a matter of particular concern that this tribal area without any other reputation for social or political violence, was prone to this social malignancy.

The use of body parts in the preparation of magic medicines has long been reported in Usukuma (Cory 1951) and its prevention has been given as a reason for burial in Christian cemeteries. There was a similar outbreak of killings in Singida in the 1940s (Wyatt 1950) and some suspected similar activity in Utete about the same time.

The Sukuma, now numbering some five millions, live in what was once the savana grassland of central Tanzania, with a low and intermittent rainfall and predominantly lateritic soils of no great fertility. A treeless flatness with outcrops of rocks. Other than Lake Victoria to the north, the whole enormous area contains only one permanent water source.

Except for the pre-colonial period in which some lived in defensible high density localities against Masai raids from the east and for the recent period of compulsory villagisation, which lowered harvests and disrupted self-help neighbourhood groupings, they have sensibly lived in widely dispersed exogamous hamlets near to their fields. They speak a distinctive tonal Bantu language shared with the Nyamwezi to the south and they remain by far the largest tribal group in Tanzania.

### THE UNSETTLED BACKGROUND OF THE CONTEMPORARY SUKUMA

The political and social history of these people has involved quiet overt change with a muted colonial interference in what they wanted balanced and marked by the growth of the cooperative movement for cotton from the late 50s taking over the previous Indian monopoly, the creation of elected local governments and acceptable rates of compulsory 10% annual destocking which may have been lower than their natural wastage.

National independence produced no great improvement in their standards of living and the provision of additional local water availability was hindered by corruption and poor maintenance in comparison to the large number of hand-dug small dams which they had dug themselves (Malcolm 1953: 149-153). The largely urbanised and urban thinking of the dominant elite in the one party government which ruled for some twenty years, produced the disruption of villagisation and constantly exhorted them to pay for their own community development projects. They also abolished their chiefs with their important symbolic roles leaving a combined social and

religious vacuum from the simple colonial hierarchy to complicated and disparate channels of authority (Tanner 1970). As far as they were concerned, the somewhat distant colonial government had been replaced by a government which had not lived up to the promises of their political rhetoric as well as combining these failures with persistent small scale corruption. At the back of their minds, there was the erosive anxiety of AIDS for which neither government or non-governmental agencies had any solution unlike the earlier and still remembered elimination of smallpox by vaccination.

The nature of blame for personal and community overt and covertly experienced misfortunes is a complex mixture of psychological, political, social and scientific factors which are specific to particular cultural environments for which there can certainly be only limited cross-national understandings. These killings of albinos has to be assessed in a specifically Sukuma context.

### **The Nature of Cause**

Most people, irrespective of education and level of intellect, have always been logical in their behaviour and patterns of survival as part of their inherited knowledge. There has always been a logic in Sukuma behaviour so that as subsistence farmers and herders their methods may well be better suited to their environment than the scientific and administrative understandings developed in different social and ecological circumstances; their preference for down the slope fields and the planting of crops in patches over time was well suited to their intermittent and sporadic rainfall. This logic provides the primary reasons for some events but produces no explanations as to why they have occurred or not occurred.

Whatever the reasoning behind Sukuma behaviour, we can surely presuppose some extensive underlying logic; perhaps we can assume that they are just as sensible as people in other cultures. Few individuals or groups behave for long in self-destructive ways destroying themselves for non-pragmatic reasons such as the self-castrations of the Russian Skopsi and the extreme self-denial and religious anorexia of ultra-orthodox Jains. The vast majority of people are entirely logical as far as their understandings go which accounts for their successful survival.

In all societies at all levels of intellectual

capacity there is a small range of events for which there are clear understandings of cause and effect. The primary fact that the walker was hit by a car and the cultivator was bitten by a snake. However beyond this small minority of narrowly lineal events, causation is much more complex in the number of lateral rather than lineal factors involved. There are both philosophical and scientific doubts as to whether any event can be adequately explained by the simple fact that two identifiable and isolatable events have come together to cause a third.

Beyond such events what constitutes a cause is as much cultural as scientific. Whatever may be the current scientific understandings whether a person is ill because of a virus or because of the malevolence of an ancestor or a neighbour is no more than a matter of trust in the information provided by two different types of professionals; the 'weirdly' costumed diviner and diagnostician are visibly deviant. The recipients of such information assume that it has been provided by men and women who have been professionally trained according to acceptable local standards, and the accuracy of their work has been supported by local gossip which come together to make their pronouncements acceptable. One group may believe that there is such a thing as a virus for the transmission of AIDS and another that there is a transmittable malevolence called witchcraft which is responsible. Neither have seen these responsible evils and both interpretations of what has caused their distress is taken on trust which is itself correlated to personal and institutionalised charisma.

### **The Nature of Correlations**

There is always the hope that some secondary factors can prove to be related to the primary event in a scientifically acceptable way or that the connection will appear often enough in scientific reports to be similarly acceptable. People who have experienced misfortunes cannot be expected to wait for such valid results to appear and to be accepted by public opinion. Even the previous President of South Africa was not prepared to accept that AIDS was caused by a virus.

It seems more likely that what are considered to be correlations to an event are what that society has been socialised to expect and indeed hope for which social science researchers find as profe-

asionally reasonable in the circumstances of particular societies. Certainly there are very large numbers of correlations which individuals and communities find quite acceptable which have no potential scientific validity but are nevertheless the background to much covert and overt hostility.

Much social science research produces tentative correlations between behavioural factors but this does not imply causation only that there may be relationships. 'Ordinary' people produce their own correlations for what may have happened to them. Whatever these are thought to be may well prove comforting to those who seek and indeed find tenuous connections in areas of social behaviour which are frightening and for which there are the need for social and psychological explanations. The widespread taking of magic medicines for AIDS may have a placebo effect and coincide with a period of remission, just as magical procedures may retrospectively account for success in finding gold in the Geita area.

Correlations exist that are statistically watertight but which are quite illusory and mean nothing. Most if not all violent criminals in the United Kingdom and Tanzania are tea drinkers and probably can ride bicycles but there is no connection between these behaviours.

It seems likely that any investigation of AIDS in the Sukuma regions of Tanzania would be likely to find a geographical relationship between the distributions of albinos, women living alone and AIDS sufferers and indeed any other widely known misfortune or hope and the suspected use of body parts and one of the ingredients of the magic medicine which may have been used. No doubt they would find similar correlations with other undesirable social activities or experiences. There is not even the vaguest of possibilities of finding any pragmatically based correlations between people who have no biologically identifiable connections.

Many studies have shown that people's general ideas which they get from their cultural backgrounds and socialisation leads them to make illusory correlations. In the opinion of cultural outsiders these behaviours in isolation can have no possible connections and yet those people are convinced that there are strong even overwhelming connections (Alloy and Tarachnik 1984; Troler and Hamilton 1986).

The United States Meese Commission con-

cluded that pornography leads to sexual crimes which was more or less what public opinion expected (Mould 1990), but as a cause they could find only very limited and questionable evidence. It seems likely that many Sukuma believe that magic medicines containing body parts are correlated to the relief of serious personal misfortunes but the fact that this is scientifically impossible is socially irrelevant in these distressing circumstances.

These widespread correlations come from the general feeling that there must be explanations for misfortune and success rather than statistically explicable accidents which go beyond the impersonality of chance and the inevitabilities of death, disease and disaster. In Africa, south of the Sahara and amongst the more geographically static, Sukuma there is an almost universal correlation of misfortune to the malevolence of ancestors for whom small spirit houses are erected in some compounds, to whom prized livestock are dedicated and identified by iron bells and after whom some children are named. Where this form of attribution becomes less comprehensible with dispersed families and migration, then the witchcraft of jealous neighbours, wives or fellow employees develops. Both these forms of correlation are so indefinable in both their form and to the situations to which they can be attributed, that they may well be psychologically valuable as providing some stability in situations of personal or institutional change. They become a focus for social reactions in palliative rituals and this reactionary violence to which the Sukuma appear to be prone.

In south-east Asia and Japan misfortune is correlated to hungry ghosts of those who have not been properly buried with appropriate ceremonies or the revenge of aborted fetuses (Snodgrass 2001; Kwon 2008; Nam Le 2008) as well as the 'nat' spirits in Myanmar (Spiro 1967), all of whom provide ready made explanations for misfortune. In Thailand, the ever present spirit shrines in the gardens, fields on the verandas or in the office compounds of families, hotels, police stations, factories or near isolated forest trees testify to the universality of such beliefs. Similarly, in India and Myanmar the transmigration of souls and the doctrine of rebirth in which the shortcomings of behaviour in previous lives is a correlated explanation for present misfortunes. This may account for the absence of widespread

witchcraft beliefs in Eastern societies which are so prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa.

The correlations which are part of the Sukuma cultural explanatory paradigm for their misfortunes of which the newly arrived AIDS socially transmitted epidemic, could almost be described as commonplace when viewed with comparisons in other cultures. The only difference would appear to be that their beliefs have not yet been incorporated in some sophisticated religious and philosophical ideology. It would seem that non-literate patterns of belief will rarely get the attention and understanding they merit because they have not been enshrined in sacred literature.

Illusory generally accepted correlations are most likely to occur when the events or people are distinctive or conspicuous and when they are different or considered to be different from the typical social environments in which they live (Hamilton and Gifford 1976). In the context of very real fear albinos and elderly women living alone without protection are made all the more distinctive because they fit so easily into the existing ill-defined beliefs in the potency of witchcraft.

These current correlations are no different to earlier ones amongst the Sukuma that the surgeons in Mwanza hospital were using the body parts that they removed during operations and the medical researchers who had to collect blood for filariasis research at night when the carriers were present, were using this blood for witchcraft purposes and the preparation of magic medicines. In the latter case an administrative officer had to accompany these doctors for their night-time blood collecting meetings to prevent violence. These scientific and bureaucratic explanations were probably received with muted polite incredulity.

### **The Nature of Cupidity**

We cannot start from a base-line assumption that there is no connection between the appearance of AIDS in an individual or the success or failure of personal efforts and what magic medicines containing human body parts may or may not be able to do. To assume this is more an illustration of combined intellectual, cultural and scientific biases. It was stated long ago that if something is believed to be true it is real in its consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1925). To what extent do the Sukuma believe that there are such connections and are prepared to act

violently in support of such understandings cannot be established but it is obviously widespread amongst them.

Cupidity has to be assessed in relation to the individuals concerned and whether they are going against what is considered to be culturally acceptable in their social environment. Those with whom they live have to see their overt behaviour rather than their invisible covert thinking as outside acceptable paradigms; the public opinion understandings of the majority which may have little to do with the detached rationality of cultural outsiders.

There are many in any society who are just plain stupid in the opinion of their neighbours whatever the cognitive basis for that assessment. We must start with the assumption that the proportionate range of intelligence in the Sukuma population is very unlikely to be any different to what might be found in European and Asian ones and probably independent of education and literacy.

We often attribute stupidity to people to people about whose culture we know little and from whom we are separated by marked social distance and this is as likely to happen with internal as external expatriates. In Tanzania the seminarian sons of devoted Roman Catholic parents who throughout their lives had avoided any participation in quasi-traditional ceremonies would have viewed such correlations as morally but not scientifically wrong. It would be obvious enough that these seminarians knew less about traditional behaviour and beliefs about the attributions correlated to misfortune than any visiting anthropologist who would be likely to have concentrated on abnormal rather than normal behaviours.

Social scientists educated in the Western understandings based on the European Enlightenment, would be likely to see if not to be convinced that the attributions attached to witchcraft can have no basis in pragmatic reality and possibly associate this with a lack of education. They would not apply the same standards of reasoning to the widespread beliefs in Western societies about astrology and fortune telling. It seems likely that cupidity in distressful social and personal circumstances is universal and certainly not something that can be attributed to the Sukuma alone in relation to their fear of AIDS and their hopes for success.

### **Rationality and Its Cultural Relative Realities**

All societies and individuals unless they are bent on social and individual destruction such as the mass suicides of the whole community at Jonestown, Guyana (Klineman and Butler 1980) or the Russian Skopsi men castrating themselves (Engelstein 1999), are logical as far as their cultural and cognitive understandings go. The basic problem here is whose standards of rationality are we going to use and thus presumably impose our assessments of cultural understandings of behaviour on societies other than our own.

The distinctions between societies having traditional thinking patterns and modern so-called civilisations with rational ones cannot be maintained in any such categorical boxes. According to the standards of Western thinking, those of markedly less economically developed societies rely proportionately on magic. However to state that modern societies do not have a large number of magical practices is manifestly absurd. Western religious thinking is festooned both publically and privately with religious ideas and practices that are no more or less logical than those of the Papuans, certainly made less obvious by ethnic bias factors (Mimica 1988).

So it may come down to three types of reasoning (Shweder 1992) which have to be assessed in the cultural context in which each occurs. Firstly, irrationality in which individuals have failed to apply themselves to their culture's accepted and proper standards of reasoning; following spirit guidance he tries to cultivate at the wrong season or she leaves her baby outside at night which the Tanzanian Sukuma would consider to be just plain stupid. But what about the three schizophrenics who all thought that they were Jesus Christ (Rokeach 1964) would find themselves quite acceptable to the same Sukuma as they would each acquire a small following without intellectual conflict since these people have a cognitive style which has developed into their particular rational and cultural dominances. Such ideas would parallel those held by French peasants prior to the Revolution who held that the Virgin Mary worshipped in their village was not the same as the Virgin Mary worshipped in neighbouring villages (Robb 2007:124), and this probably continues in their current understandings.

There can be little doubt that in all societies, both traditional and socially changing, there have

always been thinkers who were out of line with predominant rationalities and that the 'Galileos' may well have been quite common in the dialectics of cultural change. Galileo was right scientifically but Al-Ghazali, a prominent Iraqi Muslim 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic and mathematician, well educated even by modern standards held that there could not be any such thing as laws of nature as this would bind the power of God; a common enough thought at that time which may have accounted for the decline in Islamic scientific thinking which had been well in advance of the West up to that time (Weinberg 2008).

In any society depending on the status of the individual going against what is culturally accepted as rational can be seen on a sliding scale from stupidity to dangerously going against the rules by which the power-holders run their societies. If public opinion holds that there are magic medicines of great power as they contain human body parts in powdered form, then this is a social fact against which it is hard to go or indeed to disbelieve without becoming socially isolated; at the least there is a social need for the conformity of silence.

So we see that there are cultural rationalities in which most of the time most of the people apply rationality to primary events; planting in the correct way, wearing sensible clothes in the winter, watering cattle. Many Hindus see no irrationality in their assumption that the elephant headed God Ganesh is able to help business. Many, perhaps a majority of contemporary Hindus would accept the rationality of widows burning themselves to death on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. Some New Guinea societies have held the belief that woman do not conceive from sexual intercourse but because the ancestor spirits of their husbands have arranged for conception to occur. The Sukuma believe that a difficult birth is a sign that the child was adulterously conceived. Cultural rationalities are exactly what they are and only scientific rationality has successfully crossed these cultural boundaries and only then to a limited extent.

Finally, the non-rational in which the culturally accepted explanations for primary events using such concepts as ancestor malevolence and witchcraft may not apply to a white majority in Birmingham. Nevertheless, the evil eye is an ongoing active concept among long-standing Pakistani immigrants in the suburbs of London. The majority of Banaras, Beijing and Birmingham

people in their ideas of causation would fluctuate between divine intervention and luck.

It is not so much that we can assess probability on a dichotomy of rational and non-rational as if there was a some global single standard apart from Kuhn's hypothesis of fashionable ideas. Within a culture at a particular time there are strong ideas of rationality which apply differentially to human behaviour and these are subject to historical change whether in a Bengali village or in the university communities in Kolkata or Copenhagen. Only sulphuric acid and oxygen are partially immune to cultural change based on human variability.

So into the consideration of probabilities in human behaviour comes the rational about which it may be possible to have exact knowledge but in very limited circumstances because of innumerable lateral influences. This type of assessment is probably confined to primary events such as traffic accidents and venereal infections.

The problem is that in most matters other than perhaps in criminal motivations, Western cognitive thinking is quite prepared to let primary causation to be sufficient explanation. Most people want further explanations as to why they were hit by that motorcycle or why they were burgled. It does seem likely that even in Western societies this is an elite form of thinking and that there the vast majority wants to know more. This is shown in the enormous amount of money and effort which is put into fortune-telling. In the United States more is published on astrology than on psychology.

For the rest of the world, people are quite ready to accept the obvious that the branch broke when they sat on it and that they were hit by a car when crossing the road but they want to know more as to what was behind these primary causes. Here comes in the non-rational reasoning according to Western rational thought which is not the same as irrationality.

In our consideration of this horrific killing of Sukuma albinos, the analysis and understandings are skewed to the intellectual viewpoints initiated by the European Enlightenment, a sense of detached moral outrage from living in an environment not affected by so much AIDS, and also perhaps the positivistic thinking on the lines of Comte that such horrific acts can be eliminated by social engineering for the general betterment of mankind.

### **The Restrictions on Social Science Understandings**

Social scientists take their human as much as their theoretical understandings from the cultures into which they have been socialised from childhood as well as to what they have learnt in higher education. Unless they are studying some aspect of their own societies in which they would have some understanding, this would be an inadequate grounding for the study of other societies. There is always the semi-conscious disposition to see the behaviour of people in other cultures as deviants from the rightness of what their own cultural behaviour. Thus, when a Japanese social scientist is studying some aspect of their own culture there is the basic understanding which would be denied to a non-Japanese. This would occur even if such strangers had an intellectual understanding of what the differences are likely to be. Both would find the behaviour in Benin or Bogota intellectually explicable but still oddly deviant since there may well be very little overlap between their respective cognitive processes.

Their theoretical understandings were found in work done in different social situations so that they are experiencing these 'new' cultures through the commitment of culturally specific spectacles. This is as likely to cause difficulties over house-building, farming and working on a factory production line as it would more obviously in public religious behaviour and private spirituality.

Social science studies often partially ignore the realities of the people themselves in their explanations of their thinking and behaviour. Spirit possession is often seen as a psychological issue since spirits cannot possess anyone. Such an approach ignores the fact that not only are many thousands possessed in this way but their societies as a whole consider that it is quite normal for some to be possessed. It seems likely that this approach comes from the secular frame of mind in which most contemporary social scientists see their work. The earlier missionaries in Africa and Asia had no difficulty at all in eliding their conviction of the powers of the Devil with local ones about possession.

There are many studies of spirit possession because of its unusualness to the secular thinking of most social scientists. It is certainly better recorded than the more repetitive behaviour of

cooking, eating and washing. Yet it is seen almost always as a form of abnormality rather than as a socially useful way of keeping individuals functioning adequately in their societies. Quasi-traditional societies are quite able to distinguish between the abnormal and normal in their mental processes (Claus.1984). It appears to be slotted into abnormality because that is how it would be assessed by social welfare agencies in the suburbs of London and Los Angeles.

### CONCLUSION

What can we make of these horrific acts which are so distinctive because they can be isolated in this particular Sukuma setting. Geertz has written (Geertz 1973:107-8) 'the strange opacity of certain empirical events, the dumb senselessness of intense or miserable or inexorable pain and the enigmatic unaccountability of gross inequity all raise the uncomfortable suspicion that... Man's life in this world has no genuine order at all.... The religious response ( and in our case that of the Sukuma) is not to deny the undeniable but ..... as the 'rational', 'natural', 'logical' outcome of the moral structure of reality'.

We must put aside any tentative explanations that these events are the direct result of anything that can be more than vaguely correlated to any Sukuma traditional subsistence thinking. This just cannot be isolated and related to events for which there are parallels enough in all types of societies including the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe and the Soviet elimination of whole categories of Russians.

The Sukuma both individually and culturally have to be accepted as having complex social understandings, thinking and behaviour (Wijsen 1993). They are probably as logical in their understandings of what goes on around them as any comparable Western population. The difference may be in the extent to which Sukuma society is not bureaucratically structured in comparison to Western developed ones and thus perhaps able to break out into such violent expressions of collective anxiety.

Legislation against witchcraft has existed from the earliest days of the colonial occupation but it has rarely reached the courts. Whoever starts such a case and gives evidence against people accused of witchcraft would lay themselves open to being bewitched. The newly reintroduced Sukuma chiefs are in no better position to control

such patterns of thought and action than they were in colonial times perhaps even less so in the face of an intrusive secular minded political system. They are overtly answerable to the government as shown in their Chairman's public statement of disapproval (Kaphipa 2008) while remaining covertly dependent on local public opinion which would probably have supported the thinking behind these killings.

Although the Sukuma may not have wide occupational differentiations, their individual range of intelligence and the varied misfortunes which they experience, allows for an infinite number of acceptable correlations. It would be unwise to attribute a single set of norms to such an enormous population with varied social and ecological environments between the lake-side north and the more wooded south apart from their new occupation of eastern Geita. The 'sungu-sungu' law and order vigilantes, the older 'banam-hala' and the varied roles forced on women by the villagisation, migration and AIDS prevent any uniformities other than an overall sense of uncertainty.

We do not know the varying reference groups from which they are drawing their contemporary ideas and which will include mobile phones, the mass media, the imposition of mechanical time and the limited opportunities for educationally enabled upward mobility. It seems certain that these will have changed radically from the social, economic and political optimism of the decades after Independence .

It seems certain that these killings are not the work of isolated malevolent individuals but are the actions of small groups of men and women who have used such medicines beneficially in the past or known of their successful use and who see in such killings opportunities for economic profit and enhanced status apart from individual betterment. Scientifically valid information about such activities is unlikely to ever become available.

The illusory correlations from which these murders have occurred are most likely to occur when the events and people are distinctive or conspicuous, and where they are different or considered to be different from the typical social environment in which they live (Hamilton and Gifford 1976). In the context of widespread fear of AIDS and pervasive social uncertainties albinos and elderly women living by themselves are both

distinctive and easy to weave into existing widespread beliefs in the existence of witchcraft.

In the present climate of uncertainty which any government is unlikely to be able to do much to modify it would be prudent for open homosexuals, transvestites and hermaphrodites to keep a low profile in rural areas or go to live in Mwanza city were such culturally unacceptable deviances would be easier to hide.

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