<CHN>Chapter Three
<CHT>The Epistemology of Albinism in African Traditions

<CA>Abstract

<TX1>This chapter explores the epistemic injustice that has been done to persons with albinism in African societies through deeply entrenched theories of knowledge and processes of knowing in African thought. It begins with an attempt to construct an African theory of knowledge by theorizing three interrelated levels on which an African can claim to know anything: (i.) knowledge understood as first-hand information; (ii.) knowing consistency with established beliefs ; and (iii.) knowledge as implying 'we know that'. It then proceeds to an examination of the African processes of knowing or modes of knowledge acquisition. The chapter also examines factors responsible for the persistence of false and harmful beliefs about albinism in Africa today and the role epistemic ignorance play in this process.

<TX1>The ideas about the coming-to-be and the nature of the being of persons with albinism clearly indicates that African indigenous communities possess a body of knowledge and truth claims about such persons as queer beings that have been institutionalized into society and preserved by social structures that influence the way communities deal with persons with albinism, as well as how such persons view themselves within such particular worlds. This immediately raises some epistemological questions about such knowledge claims, how they are acquired, justified and preserved in human society. What is the basis of human knowledge in African traditional communities, or what does it mean for an African to claim to know in an African context and, in this case, to know certain things about albinism and be sure that her knowledge of such a being is true? How does an African explain the reliability of her knowledge claims about albinism? How does she explain the nexus, for instance, between the amputated limb of a person with albinism and protection from bad luck or creation of wealth?

How does an African person acquire what he knows about albinism, or what are the processes of knowing in African communities? What role does utility and inculcation play in the preservation of beliefs and knowledge claims about albinism in modern times even in the face of biological facts about the human condition? What role does ignorance and the active production of falsehood play in the knowledge process in African communities? What is the connection between constituted authority and the reliability of knowledge? These are important epistemological questions that arise from the ideas about albinism in African communities, epistemology being the theory, study or discourse of knowledge.

<TX2>In what follows, I begin with an attempt to construct an African theory of knowledge by theorizing three interrelated levels on which an African can claim to know anything: (i.) knowledge understood as first-hand information; (ii.) knowing consistency with established beliefs ; and (iii.) knowledge as implying 'we know that'. I show in each case that the ideas about albinism as a queer human condition are ideas that community members can claim to have reliable knowledge about as different from having a mere personal opinion or 'voice' in the matter. This is followed, I believe necessarily, with an examination of the African processes of knowing or modes of knowledge acquisition. It is obvious that what the African knows about albinism and any other matter is gradually inculcated and assimilated from birth to death through social epistemic structures of learning and training that can, in many ways, authoritatively impose the community's ways on the individual and his will.

<TX2>I then proceed to examine certain factors responsible for the strong persistence of the belief in the supernatural agency of persons with albinism in whole or in part, leading to the commodification of such persons even in the age of science and modernity, which, far from being a perfect mode of thought and having its own many flaws and limitations, provides us with factual, verifiable information about albinism as a human condition. Here I pay close attention to two key factors: the power of inculcation and the power of utility. I further dwell

on utility in terms of how African community members provide explanations for the knowledge claims they hold, not in some conventional sense of outlining the belief, truth and justification of the claim, but by simply showing the utility or function of the claim. And this is very evident in how people defend their claims about albinism. Lastly, in this chapter, I pay close attention to what I consider a crucial aspect to decipher any attempt to understand the epistemic framework from which ideas about such unusual human conditions such as albinism stem from. It is the role of ignorance and actively produced falsehood in the knowledge production process. I conclude by highlighting the essential ingredients of a robust polycentric, global epistemological programme as essential for overcoming the shortcomings of an African approach to knowledge.

<H1>African Theory of Knowledge I: Knowledge as First-hand Information

<TX1>In the first level of the theorisation of knowledge in African traditions, to know is to have first-hand information or a personal experience of an object or an event. In other words, an African knows what she has personally sensed or experienced and there is no question or doubts about it. The person who claims to know in this level of epistemic competence has witnessed or experienced what she knows first-hand through the senses. Consider this scenario A: In a Yoruba community, Dayo tells her friends that Alabi's wife has given birth to a strange baby with white pale skin, an *afin*, at the midwife's house. The friends ask her: 'How do you know this?' She responds: 'I saw it myself. I was there, and I am just returning from the midwife's house.' Consider the second scenario B: Dayo tells her friends that Alabi's wife has given birth to a strange baby with white pale skin, an *afin*, at the midwife's house. The friends ask her: 'How do you know this?' She responds: 'Well, Jomoke told me just now, near the market on my way here.' In scenario A, the knowledge claim is not in question because Dayo had a first-hand experience of the information she was providing. The matter ends there and

does not raise any scepticism or disputes. This is essentially because the hearers, Dayo's friends, are convinced that since Dayo saw what she claims to know, they can also verify the claim themselves by going to the midwife's house to see the strange baby. However, in scenario B, Dayo's friends would be sceptical because Dayo's knowledge claim is not first-hand information. Their respond to Dayo's statement that she heard it from Jomoke will likely be to ask Dayo if she saw the baby herself. If Dayo replies in the negative, her friends would likely advise her to witness her claim first-hand before she shares her knowledge with others.

<TX2>This level of theorizing in African traditions is aptly developed by Barry Hallen in his essay 'Yoruba Moral Epistemology'. According to him, within the Yoruba thought system:

<EXT1>Persons are said to *mo* (to ''know'') or to have *imo* (''knowledge'') only of something they have witnessed in a first-hand or personal manner. The example most frequently cited by discussants, virtually as a paradigm, is visual perception of a scene or an event as it is taking place. *Imo* is said to apply to sensory perception generally, even if what may be experienced directly by touch is more limited than is the case with perception. *Imo* implies a good deal more than mere sensation, of course. Perception implies cognition as well, meaning that the persons concerned must comprehend that and what they are experiencing. The terms ''*ooto*''/''*otito*'' are associated with ''*imo*'' in certain respects that parallel the manner in which ''true'' and ''truth'' are paired with ''know''/''knowledge'' in the English language. In the English language ''truth'' is principally a property of propositional knowledge, of statements human beings make

about things, while in Yoruba *ooto* may be a property of both propositions and certain forms of experience.[103]

<TX1>Hallen therefore draws a distinction between first-hand and second-hand information. Second-hand information, as distinct from the direct experience of first-hand information, is the propositional knowledge highly valued in Western epistemology. And this is information that 'cannot be tested or proven in a decisive manner by most people and therefore has to be accepted as true because it ''agrees'' with common sense or because it ''corresponds'' to or ''coheres'' with the very limited amount of information that people are able to test and confirm in a first-hand or direct manner.'[104]

<TX2>The distinction that Hallen makes between first-hand and second-hand information is akin to the distinction John Hospers makes between facts as actual states-of-affairs and facts as true propositions.[105] Facts as actual states-of-affairs is not propositional per say but refers to the configuration of things around us, how the objects and events in the world happen to be and our experiences of them. Facts as true proposition, on the other hand, are statements that are true by virtue of the fact that they can be verified directly or indirectly, and it is in this sense that we talk about scientific facts and knowledge. Knowledge in African traditions, according to Hallen in this first level of theorisation, would consist of the first reports or information about actual state-of-affairs as experienced by the reporter or informant.

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[103] Barry Hallen (2004). 'Yoruba Moral Epistemology'. In Kwasi Wiredu Ed., *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing). 298.

[104] Barry Hallen, 'Yoruba Moral Epistemology', 298.

[105] John Hospers (1973) *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.).

<TX2>A number of issues arise from living the theory of knowledge in African traditions to this level alone. For one thing, this manner of claiming to know is not peculiar to Africans alone. It is, in fact, a common sense way of claiming to know by humans in general — I can lay claim to knowing what I saw or directly witnessed without needing to subject it to any rigorous form of verification. I know that I saw a cat outside my house just now, and I know I am watching CNN while sitting on the couch. I also know that the community head is going to his farm, because I saw him on the farm road walking toward his farm with his farming tools. These are not knowledge claims that are often subjected to some rigorous form of verification. Nonetheless, there are latent issues arising from knowledge as first-hand information

<TX2>There is the issue of the moral standing of the informant. This is precisely the point Hallen brings out in his essay. If I experience an event first-hand, and I relate it to two or three other persons, for what I relate to them to be taken as knowledge for them the same way I do, they must have complete trust in my honesty, credibility and reliability as an informant at that moment. If there has been several cases in the past where I related a first-hand experience and it later turned out to be false or largely incorrect in description, then my honesty and reliability would be called into question whenever I give first-hand information about an event or an object. This will only result in episteme solipsism, where I know but others do not know what I know. Similarly, if my first-hand information has always proved to be apt and correct, then it is likely that even when I make a mistake or provide inappropriate description of my knowledge claims, others will still take my information as accurate knowledge. Consider, for example, this scenario: If Dayo's information about the birth of an infant with albinism at the midwife's house turns out to be true in the same way virtually all her previous first-hand information to her friends were true, her friends become morally obliged to accept any other first-hand claims she brings forward. If after some days, Dayo reports to her friends that she

heard the baby crying in a strange way, like an owl, in the parents' house, her friends would accept her information as knowledge because she has earned the epistemic virtue to make such a claim, and her claim is in many ways in line with already existing beliefs about such babies. But Dayo is certain within her that the cry of the baby did not really sound like that of an owl.

<TX2>Dayo's new first-hand information brings us to another issue with this level of conceptualising knowledge in African traditions. This is the problem with accurate and objective descriptions of events. The competency of objectively describing events and objects is never foolproof. There are always flaws, biases and idiosyncrasies inherent in the description of objects and events. If the mother of an infant with albinism and the witch doctor of the community are told to give first-hand information of the baby they see right in front of them, they are most likely to vary in their descriptions due to personal feelings and biases. Knowledge as first-hand information does not therefore give us a comprehensive account of an African view of human knowledge. Besides, it mainly accounts for the visible and tangible objects and events, and it is difficult to on the basis of it accounts for the many invisible agencies and experiences that Africans claim to be knowledgeable about and on which basis a majority of their objects, beliefs and events are explained.

<H1>African Theory of Knowledge II: Knowledge as Consistency with Established Beliefs

<TX1>In this level of epistemic competence, persons in an African community can claim to know if the knowledge claim is consistent or coherent with an established body of beliefs. Such established beliefs in African traditions include the belief in the agency of invisible entities such as ancestors, divinities and manipular forces; the belief in the interaction of beings that could result in either the strengthening or weakening of one's vital force; the belief in specific

kinds of rituals and taboos; the belief in the high epistemic competence of a community elder as a custodian of the traditions of the people; the belief in queer beings and their nature; in manipular forces; in the Supreme Being and so on. Knowledge claims made by specific persons within specific spheres of existence must fit within such consistent sets of beliefs in order for others not to become sceptical of such claims. Consider this scenario: Among the Esan people of Southern Nigeria, it is an established belief that when a married woman has extramarital affair, she incurs the punishments of ancestors of her husband's kin. The punishment is such that a child she had with the husband becomes ill without any medical remedy for the ailment. At the point when the medical attention has been sought for a child consistently without any diagnosis and, by implication, any known remedy, the husband and his kin can make specific knowledge claims about the situation. They would claim to know that the woman in question has committed adultery even when there may be no factual evidence to back up the claim. This is because the claim is consistent with established beliefs regarding the signs of a cheating wife. On the basis of knowing this, the woman is summoned to a meeting where she is asked to speak the truth, which is expected to corroborate what the husband and his kin already *know*. In virtually every case I am aware of, the woman does confess to having cheated on the husband, because she is warned that delaying the confession may result in the death of her child. When she confesses, and the necessary appeasement rituals are done — rituals that include the slaughtering of a goat provided by the woman and the sharing of the meat among the husband's kin, and the parading of the woman around the community as some form of deterring measures — the child recovers from the strange illness.[106]

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[106] For details on the intricacies of adultery among the Esan people of southern Nigeria, see Justina O. Ehiakhamen, 'Beyond Culpability: Approaching Male Impotency through

<TX2>Therefore, to make specific knowledge claims about albinism or persons with albinism is to make a claim that is consistent with the established beliefs about albinism within the African framework of thought. If *x* claims to know that the infant with albinism given birth to by the wife would bring bad luck to him and his family and, thus, decides to hand the baby over to the chief priest to be thrown away in the evil forest or to serve at the chief priest shrine, or he decides to let the child grow in his home but refuses to care for the child's needs such as schooling, his claim to know would be a justified claim because it is consistent with the established beliefs in his community about persons with albinism as queer beings. If *y* claims to know that *z* must have given birth to a baby with albinism because she or the husband has done something evil that they are being punished for, *y*'s knowledge claim would be accepted as consistent with established beliefs about albinism. Similarly, if *a* claims to know that she performed badly in her interview because she had gazed at a person with albinism while on her way for the interview, she would also be making a claim consistent with established beliefs about albinism, which makes her claims not merely an opinion but a knowledge claim.

<TX2>However, if *x* makes a claim within a typical sub-Saharan African community to know that his new-born baby, although having albinism, is just another human being with a biological defect and deserving of care and attention, he would be making a claim that is not consistent with established beliefs, and his claim could, at any point, be called into question. As funny as this may sound, it is still very true of the experience of albinism in modern African societies. Many persons still feel it is a waste of hard-earned funds to spend money in sending a child with albinism to school. As a person with albinism, I have experienced first-hand strong challenges to my parents' claim to know facts about albinism that are inconsistent with

Legitimated Adultery in Esan Metaphysics'. In Elvis Imafidon and John A. I. Bewaji (Eds.), *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-ethics* (Lanham: Lexington Books). 121-131.

established beliefs in the community. When I did something wrong in junior college —
specifically, not being able to take down notes written on the board due to poor vision — my
class teacher was always quick to tell me that it would have been better if I was thrown into
the evil forest when I was born rather than allowing my parents to waste money on me. Hence,
persons are expected to fit within the framework of knowledge in making knowledge claims to
avoid making claims that become sceptical and questionable.

<TX2>Knowledge as consistency with established beliefs does not require knowing
why an object or event is taken the way it is. It simply requires knowing that it is taken the way
it is within a larger framework of thought. To know is, therefore, to be knowledgeable in the
ways of the people, not necessarily having some explanation for why the ways of the people
are such and such. A member of the Esan community, for instance, knows that if the woman
confesses, the goat is slaughtered and the woman is paraded around the community, the ill child
will become well. The three events, she knows, are essential components of the process of
appeasing the husband's ancestors to avert the punishment that befalls a woman who commits
adultery. There are not accidental components of the process. The Esan may not be able to
explain why the goat needs to be slaughtered or why the woman in question needs to be paraded
around the community.[107] However, he knows that if the essential components of the
confession and atonement process are carried out, the woman will receive pardon for her
wrongdoing and the child will get well. He may not be able to explain the causal connections
between visible and invisible agencies, but he is certain of the connections, and we shall return

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[107] The distinction between essential components and accidental components of a ritual in
African traditions is clearly drawn by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005). 'African Studies and
the Concept of knowledge'. In Bert Hamminga Ed., *Knowledge Cultures: Comparative
Western and African Epistemology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi). 26-27

to why such connections are deeply established and sustained in his belief system, even without some cogent explanation for them. In the same vein, *x* does not know why there is a connection between his new born baby with albinism and bad luck, but he knows that there is a connection, because the connection is an established belief. *A* does not know why there is a connection between her interview that went bad and her gazing at a person with albinism, but she is certain of her knowledge that there is a connection, because it is an established belief.

In light of emerging facts about albinism in modern times as a human condition caused by the lack of melanin, these established and consistent beliefs in African traditions about the nature of albinism are called into question. And herein lies the major challenge to knowledge as consistent with the established body of beliefs: the question of the gap between rationality and consistency, where the former must include elements of truth and the later may completely lack them. This has been aptly discussed by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his essay 'African Studies and the Concept of Knowledge.' Ideally speaking, as Appiah explains, rationality ought to be linked with the quest for truth:

<EXT1>Rationality is best conceived of as an ideal, both in the sense that it is something worth aiming for and in the sense that it is something we are incapable of realizing. It is an ideal that bears an important internal relation to that other great cognitive ideal, Truth. And, I suggest, we might say that rationality in belief consists in being disposed so to react to evidence and reflection that you change your beliefs in ways that make it more likely that they are true. If this is right, then we can see at once why inconsistency in belief is a sign of irrationality: for having a pair of inconsistent beliefs *guarantees* that you have at least one false belief, as inconsistent beliefs are precisely beliefs that cannot all be true.[108]

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[108] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'African Studies and the Concept of Knowledge'. 34.

<TX1>Hence, ideally speaking, it would be expected that a rational person would let go of some set of beliefs about albinism, no matter how established and consistent they are, in the light of a new sets of beliefs that are completely inconsistent with the former but are not only internally consistent but are factually true and can be verified. It would be a sign of irrationality to want to hold two inconsistent sets of beliefs side by side; it is, in fact, impossible to do so because one is not consistent with the other. Thus, the rational move would be to let go of the less truthful set of consistent beliefs for the more truthful representations of reality.

<TX2>Therefore, having a consistent set of beliefs as the basis for knowing is not enough. The set of beliefs must also be largely true. In Appiah's words:

<EXT1>… consistency, as an ideal, is not enough. For someone could have a perfectly consistent set of beliefs about the world, almost every one of which was not only false but obviously false. It is *consistent* to hold, with Descartes in one of his sceptical moments, that all my experiences are caused by a wicked demon, and, to dress the fantasy in modern garb, there is no inconsistency in supporting the paranoid fantasy that the world is "really" a cube containing only my brain in a bath, a lot of wires, and a wicked scientist. But, though consistent, this belief is not rational: we are all, I hope, agreed that reacting to sensory evidence in *this* way does not increase the likelihood that your beliefs will be true.[109]

<TX1>Thus, to claim to know specific things about persons with albinism on the basis of a consistent set of ideas that are obviously false is not a rational move to make and calls such knowledge into question because 'a person who starts with a consistent set of beliefs can arrive, by way of reasonable principles of evidence, at the most fantastic untruths.'[110]

[109] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'African Studies and the Concept of Knowledge'. 34-35.

[110] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'African Studies and the Concept of Knowledge'. 35.

<TX2>Acceptably, persons in traditional pre-colonial African societies with no alternative set of beliefs to their ideas about albinism cannot be blamed for the knowledge claims they hold about albinism. It is normal and reasonable for persons in every mode of thought to hold tenaciously to beliefs within that form of life in the absence of countervailing evidence. In fact, even in situations where there is countervailing evidence, it is difficult to let go of the less factual beliefs that have been held for a long period of time. We see this many times in the history of science as a form of thought, and Thomas Kuhn has helped us see how jealously scientists hold on to a model even when there are good evidences to let go. It is so difficult that it would need a scientific revolution in the Copernican sense to overcome the old less truthful set of beliefs.[111] The question then is: Why are the sets of established beliefs about albinism still very prevalent in modern African societies in the face of factual counteracting evidences? What sustains false beliefs? I shall return to these questions in a moment — in the section on the persistence of established false beliefs — because if we must succeed in overcoming harmful knowledge claims about albinism, we must, first of all, find a way to deal with the prevalent sets of beliefs about albinism that shore them up and find a way of bridging the gap between a consistent set of established beliefs and the cognitive ideal of truth. But first, let us pay attention to a third level of the theorization of knowledge, one that is very vital for understanding the African mode of knowing.

African Theory of Knowledge III: Knowledge as Shared Knowledge

<TX1>The third level of the theorisation of knowledge in African traditions stems from the ontological essence of being in African traditions that has become popular in existing literature, the communalistic principle. Basically, the communalistic principle emphasises that the

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[111] See Thomas Kuhn.

community has ontological priority over individual entities in every area of thought, which makes its survival fundamental. With particular reference to the relationship between the community and individuals, the ontological priority of the community over the person is clearly seen in the following facts: that an individual person is born into an existing human society and therefore into a human culture; that is, the human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into a human community; also, the human person is at once a cultural being, and the human person cannot live in isolation from other persons, hence she must form relationships with others; these social relationships are necessary, not contingent, and the person is constituted thusly, but only partly, by social relationships in which she necessarily finds herself.[112]

<TX2>Based on these ontological facts about the being of the person as subsumed under the being of the community, it is implied that the community has the crucial moral responsibility of providing normative guidance and setting the standards for individual persons on every matter arising from social interactions such as standards of morality and epistemic competence. The moral right of the community to do this is not simply because it has ontological priority over individual entities in the community, but also because it is seen as the only way the community can survive and individual interests protected. Hence there is an emphasis on shared standards and shared norms as crucial for the survival of both the community and the person.

<TX2>Flowing from this background, claiming to know something is claiming to know what others know. Knowledge is thus shared knowledge — What I know is what we know. As

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[112] Kwame Gyekye (1992). 'Person and Community in African Thought'. In Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye Eds., *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies* (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy). 104.

Bert Hamminga puts it, 'the African "knowing subject" is not an individual person.'[113] It is the community. When I claim to know *x*, I am not making a claim to have come to the knowledge of something through some solitary mental exercise; rather I claim to know *x* because we as a group know *x*, and others share in my knowledge of *x*. In Hamminga's words:

<EXT1>Since togetherness is the highest value, we want to share our views. All of them. Hence we always agree with everybody. Standing up and saying: "I have a radically different opinion" would not, as it often does in the West, draw attention to what I have to say. Instead, I am likely to be led before my clan leaders before I even had the chance to continue my speech. Among us, you simply never have radically different opinions. That is because, and that is why we are *together.* Togetherness is our ultimate criterion of any action, the pursuit of knowledge being just one of them.[114]

<TX1>Hence, knowledge claims about ancestors, the maleficent nature of witchcraft, the way to harvest and store crops, the types and functions of different divinities, the right ways to live and the nature of queer beings are all shared knowledge perpetuated by communal structures, and individual members are expected to fit into these structures. Fitting into these structures of shared ontic and shared epistemic ideas, no matter how difficult it may be, is fundamental for the survival of the community and individual members. This is why a radically different view from shared knowledge, for instance, is often not welcomed even when the radically different view is evidently factual. As Hamminga says:

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[113] Bert Hamminga (2005). 'Epistemology from the African Point of View'. In Bert Hamminga Ed., *Knowledge Cultures: Comparative Western and African Epistemology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi). 57.

[114] Bert Hamminga, 'Epistemology from the African Point of View'. 58.

<EXT1>The clan or tribe is the knowing subject. All knowledge is power. All power comes from the forces preceding us: our ancestors. These are three maxims that have a status comparable to the law of conservation of energy in western science: if some of your thoughts do not tally with it, that means you have made some error. So even if the tribe changes its mind, as for instance tribes, facing AIDS, nowadays do on sexual relations, this is an accommodation to new circumstances, according to the traditional view agreed upon, yes *decreed* by the ancestors.[115]

<TX1>In this level of knowing in African traditions, knowledge claims about albinism are, thus, shared. To claim to know something about the being of a person with albinism is to make a claim that is shared such that when *x* says, 'I know that a person with albinism is so and so', she is saying in effect that 'We know that a person with albinism is so and so. To make a radically different knowledge claim about albinism is to make a claim that is controversial and may be denied as knowledge even when such claims are evidently factual. One is not expected to think outside the knowledge box in African traditional communities, and this has in many ways eaten deep into modern African societies. If a young lady in an African society, for instance, sees albinism differently, perhaps in biological terms, and on the basis of her different understanding becomes comfortable in dating and getting married to a young man with albinism, her action would become a shocker to family members, friends, and persons in her community. Their shock stems from their thinking that the girl *does not know* what albinism is to the extent that she is willing to be married to a person with albinism, or that she *knows* and she is yet willing to ignore all what she knows and go ahead with her relationship with such a person. To be sure, *knowing* here has to do with the shared knowledge of albinism. Her own

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[115] Bert Hamminga, 'Epistemology from the African Point of View'. 59.

differing knowledge claims are completely ignored in the assessment process of her decision, even if she has clearly explained herself to family members and friends. The same scenario can be observed when the manager of a firm recommends the employment of a person with albinism. Fellow workers would find this odd and contrary to what is known about albinism. Hence, a knowledge claim about albinism ensuing from an individual subject that is radically different from what is inter-subjectively known is mainly treated as an opinion, a voice standing out in the matter, but one that needs to be as subtle as possible and not become louder than the voice of the group, because that would threaten the much needed communal harmony. As Hamminga puts it, 'if in an African group there are inconsistent proposals, the *group as a togetherness* is in quite a[n]… uncomfortable state of mind. The state has to be resolved quickly. It decreases vitality, it inhibits action.'[116]

<TX2>To be sure, an immediate matter that raises concerns when we talk about the collective approach to being, knowledge and the like in African traditions is the manner in which it overrides a person's will and discourages individual creativity, even of ideas. This has been responsible in African scholarship for the protracted and heated individual-community debate that has resulted in essentially two theories, radical communitarian theory and moderate communitarian theory.[117] To avoid deviating too far from the issues at hand in this chapter, I do not intend to get involved just right now with this debate. But one thing is clear, the community of selves superimposes its will and ideas on persons whose individual wills and ideas must fit within communal expectations. One obvious consequence of this is that in African

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[116] Bert Hamminga, 'Epistemology from the African Point of View'. 60.

[117] See, for instance. Olatunji O. Oyeshile (2006). 'The Individual-Community Relationship as an Issue in Social and Political Philosophy'. In Olusegun Oladipo Ed., *Core Issue in African Philosophy* (Ibadan: Hope Publications). 102-119.

scholarship today, we primarily have at our disposal African theories or worldviews and ideas evolving from an African space. We rarely have ideas about the nature of things proposed and developed by individual members of an African community as we may have in the West. When personal voices are subdued, and the community's voice reigns supreme, the community easily becomes authoritarian and anachronistic, and its ideas outlast their use. It is now obvious in the face of alternative and factual theories about albinism that ideas about the human condition in African communities are clearly untrue, authoritarian and anachronistic, even though they persevere, as we shall soon see, for certain reasons. But they cannot be sustained for too long if the right things are done.

<TX2>Again, that an idea is shared by many does not guarantee that the idea is true or can pass as knowledge. Many times in human history, an idea can be held by many as a true and objective knowledge claim without any evidence in support of the claim. It is so much upheld as knowledge that it influences how people act and react to related matters. That the invisible agency of the Bermuda triangle is widely held to the extent that it has become known by many as the Devil's Triangle does not make the ideas about it true, factual knowledge claims. The widely held view among European tribes that African tribes and, indeed, non-European tribes are less human and pre-logical may have influenced European action and reaction for centuries until now, but it was far from being what we can today call a true knowledge claim. In the same vein, although the ideas about persons with albinism in African communities were shared ideas, they were not necessarily true, as it has become obvious today. Hence, if a group of persons are content with attributing the status of knowledge to a claim simply because many or all in the group have come to accept it, then they are most likely going to have a bulk of claims that would turn out to be false claims in the face of counterfactual evidence.

<TX2>But it remains a major component of knowledge that what is known must, among other things, be an inter-subjectively shared knowledge rather than something known

only to the subjective self. This is not a peculiar requirement to knowing in African traditions. It is essential for any form of knowledge claim. Hence, one way to raise the status of the scientific and biological facts about albinism to that of knowledge in modern African societies is to find ways of making the knowledge claims more popular, acceptable and shared among many members of African communities. This depends largely on identifying the right channels through which this can be done. We shall return to this issue in the last chapter. At the moment, I would like to pay closer attention to a very important issue. Why do the ideas about albinism in African traditions still flourish and survive today even though they have been found lacking in facts? To answer this question, we need to say a few things first about the processes of acquiring knowledge about albinism in African traditions.

Processes of Knowing

Mario Martinez rightly says that 'any theory that attempts to define the process of knowing requires an explanation of how information is accessed, stored and retrieved in order to understand how learning takes place.'[118] This is because understanding the process of knowing in any given space invariably sheds light on how what is known is stored and sustained through time. Here, I would like to present a communo-cognitive theory of the process of knowing about persons with albinism and, indeed, anything in African traditions. By a communo-cognitive theory, I simply mean that the process of knowing in African traditions and the related cognitive features such as learning and remembering is essentially a community-centred process, controlled by the community and its structures. This is precisely

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[118] Mario E. Martinez (2001). 'The Process of Knowing: A Biocognitive Epistemology'. *The Journal of Mind and Behaviour*, 22 (4): 407.

why knowledge is seen as shared knowledge since the process of accessing and acquiring such knowledge is determined by institutions established and controlled by the community.

<TX2>Once a person is born into a community in African traditions, she immediately begins to develop her cognitive abilities by gaining access to the institutions available in the community through which she can learn, understand and remember the ways and standards of the people. There are two key institutions in any African community having the epistemic competence to impact knowledge into individual persons. They are the family and the elite class. Let us begin with the place of the family in the cognitive development of the person.

<TX2>Many traditional African communities operate the extended-family system, in the sense that the community is organized in terms of kinship. But this can easily be misinterpreted in a way that it would seem the nuclear family is not important. The nuclear family still plays a very important role in the upbringing of a child. Of course, a child is born into a community and she is raised by the community. But important phases of training and learning about life that a child receives come from her parents. The parents have the primary responsibility of bringing up the child in a way acceptable to the community buy helping her acquire shared community knowledge.[119] This is obvious for two reasons: first, when a person deviates from the way that is known to the community, the immediate family takes the blame. If, for example, a child fails to greet an elderly person, the elder is apt to ask the child, 'Did your mother and father not train you well?' This implies that the immediate family of the child is expected to ensure that the child is accustomed to the standards of the people. Second, the parents have the status of an elder to their children, which gives them the competence and obligation to inculcate in them the right ideas and values.

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[119] S. Baskerville (2009). 'Freedom of the Family: The Family Crisis and the Future of Western Civilization'. *Humanitas* XXII.1&2: 170.

<TX2>The role of the family in the cognitive development of the child in line with community values is clearly seen in the notion of a family name. The notion of a family name in African traditions describes whether a particular family has a good family name, that is, the said family is competent and in-tune with a community-accepted lifestyle, or a bad family name, that is, a family that has competence in the traditional ways of life but fails to live by it. A good family name is developed, tested and earned with time to the extent that it can be handed down from one generation to another. The only way this is possible, however, is if the parents, especially the family head (the father) instil in the children the shared knowledge and standards practiced by the family, both through deliberate training and through personal actions. A bad family name is also developed with time. It is natural that no person is perfect and would therefore not always do what is right or what is expected of him. This is not enough to earn a person or a family a bad name. But when a family member radically or persistently deviates from the accepted standards, it brings a bad name to her family.

Hence, it becomes normal for a family member to discriminate or stigmatise a person with albinism because she has been trained by both words and action in the family to do so. She learns from the way the father, mother and older family members and relatives relate with such persons from a distance. She has inculcated and continues to remember the normalcy of the social exclusion and isolation of such persons from normal human society. She is cognitively aware of the stigma and the shame that families with persons with albinism go through. She has also come to know that normal people are not supposed to form an intimate relationship, such as marriage, with persons with albinism. So, if a family member grows up and brings home a person with albinism for marriage, she threatens the family name and opens the way for outsiders to question the epistemic competence and effectiveness of the upbringing of the child. The parents and other family members would naturally refuse to support the union in order to avoid tarnishing the family name, because the said action of the individual member

would bring shame to the family since it is not part of the shared knowledge for a person to associate with such a queer being in such an intimate manner. The refusal to support the union between a family member and a person with albinism in modern times can be intense, violent and traumatic for the family member and, in most cases, it often succeeds in ending the courtship. But if the family member insists on going ahead with the union without the support of the family, she brings shame to the family and would likely be cut off by angry family members. With regards to the elite class, Albert Onobhayedo says that:

> <EXT1>Prior to the advent of Western education, elitism did not derive from literacy. Yet, it is possible to point to the traditional rulers… and their chiefs, the elders…, priests, heroes as well as professional craftsmen as the elite of traditional [African] communities. They were the opinion leaders and custodian of the customs and values of the people. They ensured that the younger ones were groomed to be conformists within the traditional settings. They also provided leadership in politics, industry, religion as well as individual and community health management. The ordinary subjects generally obeyed and emulated these supposedly knowledgeable and well-adjusted members of their community.[120]

The group of persons which Onobhayedo refers to as the traditional African elite — kings, chiefs, priests, elderly ones, professional craftsmen, etc. — can simply be referred to as the custodians of the community to whom the young ones and 'ordinary people' look up to. They are accorded tremendous authority, respect and power in traditional African communities, and they occupy a status where their epistemic competence, will and dictations are not questioned. Instead, they are taken as representing the epistemic competence and will of the community of

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[120] Albert Onobhayedo (2007). 'Western Education and Social Change in Esan Land'. *IRORO: A Journal of Arts* 7.1 & 2: 270-271.

beings, both visible and invisible. The respect and reverence accorded these ones in these communities is made particularly obvious in a general name or title given to any elder in traditional Esan community of Southern Nigeria, *Owanlen*. *Owanlẹn* translates as 'wise one'. It is meant to indicate that the bearer of such a title is a repository of the customs and traditions of the people and, by implication, he is the custodian of the traditions of the people. He is therefore primarily responsible in protecting that tradition and preventing it from oblivion. The elite class thus have the crucial responsibility of maintaining and sustaining communal equilibrium by internalizing into members of the community the values and norms that will bind them together.

<TX2>Anelite is seen as a fully developed moral and knowledgeable person who has important roles in forms of communal and social responsibilities, which include training the young ones both through words — through storytelling, adages and folklore — and action, prodding others, or praising others as the case may be, in order to help them achieve moral and epistemic competence, which is crucial for attaining personhood and possibly elitism. This duty requires the elder to display his wealth of knowledge in his judgement by exhibiting rich and comprehensive sensitivity. An elder, by his very action, is teaching and morally educating the young ones by modelling his actions for them. This is why he is a mentor and a role model for the people to emulate. Thus, an important part of the process of training is the ability of the younger ones to imitate the actions of the elders.[121] This is why before an African traditional community confers a clearly stated elitist position on anyone, he must have fulfilled the roles expected of him by the community and be very conversant with the cultural practices, beliefs and values of the community for the obvious reason that others will look up to him. For if he

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[121] Polycarp Ikuenobe (2006). *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*. (Lanham: Lexington Books). 136.

is not well informed about these things, he will become someone who misleads the younger ones. This is thoroughly avoided. Learning of values by the younger ones from the elders reveals that:

> <TX2>... the community as an informal educational structure represents a hierarchy of moral authority and teaching responsibilities, where those in the top hierarchy teach and reinforce for those in the lower hierarchy how they ought to behave in order to achieve harmony. In this hierarchy children are at the lowest level and the elders, who are not only the custodian of the tradition, but are people of wisdom (epistemically and morally), are at the top. The highest moral status in the community is being an elder or chief, or, in some cases, king or queen.[122]

<TX2>It is therefore not strange that the younger generation assimilate the ideas about albinism held by the elite class and approach albinism in the same way the elders or members of the elite class approach it. If they see albinism differently, it would imply that the elite class failed in their responsibility to train them to become epistemically competent in the ways of the people. Hence, the status quo is maintained to a process of learning where the views of those at the top of the hierarchy are infused into those in the lower ranks of the lower hierarchy. This is an effective means of cognitive development, because the elite class, or indeed the family, would never claim that these are their own ideas or knowledge claims. But it is always made clear in the learning process that the knowledge being transferred is a community-based knowledge that goes beyond any particular member of the elite class and that all beings in the

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[122] Polycarp Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions.* 137.

community, both visible and invisible, have been involved in the knowledge production process.

<H1>Why Do (False) Beliefs Persist?

<TX1>Why do people hold on tenaciously to beliefs and knowledge claims even when there are obvious counterfactual evidences to such claims? More specifically, why do many persons in African communities still cling doggedly to certain notions about albinism even when they are evidently false? It is quite obvious from our discourse so far that the survival value of these sets of beliefs about albinism in modern African communities is not determined by their being true or reasonable.[123] As Appiah says, for instance, 'anyone who has read Evans-Pritchard's elegant discussion of Zande witchcraft beliefs will remember how easy it is to make sense of the idea that a whole set of false beliefs could nevertheless be part of what holds a community together. But the point does not need labouring; since Freud we can all understand why, for example, it might be more useful to believe that you love someone than to recognize that you do not.'[124]. So, if truth and reason doesn't essentially count in helping a belief survive even when there are reasons to let it go, what then does? There are two essential reasons, I believe, why this happens. First, a person growing up in an African community becomes habitually dependent on ready-made patterns of beliefs. Second, utility or functional explanation play a crucial role in the sustenance of beliefs.

In traditional African societies, a person is born into ready-made or already provided patterns of beliefs that she gradually becomes addicted to or depends on habitually as she grows up. Her addiction to such patterns of belief is really no fault of hers because she hardly has any

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[123] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'African Studies and the Concept of Knowledge'. 35.

[124] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'African Studies and the Concept of Knowledge'. 35.

evidence within such a closed society to counter the set of beliefs, and even when there are isolated and recalcitrant cases that seem not to fit quite well within the established pattern of belief, it is not enough to let the belief go, not after realising the heavy weight of tradition behind such beliefs.[125] This attitude displayed by the person in African traditional communities is, to be sure, not peculiar to her. The same attitude is obvious in the history of science. It takes more than the availability of alternative ideas and counterfactual evidence for a theory to be let go in the sciences. Appiah puts it succinctly:

<EXT1>… it may seem strange to suggest that accepting beliefs from one's culture and holding onto them in the absence of countervailing evidence can be reasonable, if it can lead to having beliefs that are… so wildly false. But to think otherwise is to mistake the relatively deplorable nature of our epistemic position in the universe. It is just fundamentally correct that there is no requirement other than consistency that we can place on our beliefs in advance, in order to increase their likelihood of being true; and that a person who starts with a consistent set of beliefs can arrive, by way of reasonable principles of evidence, at the most fantastic untruths. The wisdom of epistemological modesty is, surely, one of the lessons of the history of natural science…[126]

<TX1>Hence, persons in African communities — including those communities in modern Africa that are still very indigenous and traditional and still rely heavily on traditional ideas about life — would cling to the ideas about albinism they have grown up with and become habitually used to, even though such beliefs are not true. They are unlikely to let go of these

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[125] See Evans-Pritchard (1976). *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

[126] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'African Studies and the Concept of Knowledge'. 35.

established patterns of beliefs simply because a differing viewpoint emerges from another form of life.

<TX2>But the more worrisome situation has to do with how we can account for why many persons in African *modern* communities who we could say have a fair enough grasp of modern ways of life — trained in Western formal education, having some basic medical knowledge, having information about the cause of albinism, and so on — still would not let go of the traditional beliefs about albinism. The way they relate with persons with albinism, their utterances and comments about the condition and persons with albinism in informal settings show that they are still very much addicted to the established patterns of beliefs in their communities. The truth is many Africans do not see Western education and science as a mode of knowing and learning new ways or ideas that may be useful in evaluating shared beliefs in African traditions. Many simply see the formal education process as a necessary requirement for survival in modern societies, such as becoming aware of certain useful information and getting hold of a degree certificate in order to get a white collar job. It is therefore not surprising that there are still medical doctors, healthcare workers, lawyers, academic professors, political leaders and the like who still relate to persons with albinism on the basis of shared-knowledge within the community, which persistently determines their actions and behaviour. One reason why it is difficult for even such ones to let go of false beliefs is because they see these sets of false beliefs as stemming from the agency of invisible forces, an agency that is all too evident in their everyday experiences for them to let go simply because, Western science cannot access them and they are also sure that such agency is very useful in explaining events. In Appiah's words:

<EXT1>The evidence that spirits exist is *obvious*: priests go into trance, people get better after the application of spiritual remedies, people die regularly from the action of inimical spirits. The reinterpretation of this evidence, in terms of medical-scientific

theories or of psychology, requires that there be such alternative theories and that people have some reason to believe in them; but again and again, and especially in the area of mental and social life, the traditional view is likely to be confirmed.[127]

<TX2>And this brings us to the second point on why false beliefs persist: The utility value of such beliefs in terms of explaining events, that is established patterns of beliefs, provide functional or teleological explanation of events. African traditional and modern societies exist in a big web of causal relations. Things do not happen by chance or coincidence. Every event has a purpose and meaning. No event is contingent but necessary. It is no coincidence that the owl cries in the night and the child dies in the morning, that the woman commits adultery and her child becomes incurably ill else she confesses, that a man does some evil and the wife gives birth to a child with albinism, that a person suffers some bad luck after coming in contact with a person with albinism. These series of causally related events help individual persons to make sense of the world they live in. So, it is not likely for them to let go of the set of beliefs that gives meaning and purpose to their existence.

<TX2>Furthermore, the appeal to agency essentially includes invisible agents and forces. The role of invisible forces in the unfolding of events in the universe is taken very seriously in an African space. Hence, when an incurable illness or albinism is seen as the result of some invisible being, it is not questioned. In fact, it is welcomed because it explains the events and ensures that no event is left unexplained. It doesn't just explain events; the expected consequences are often felt in every area of life. And if such causal explanation of events is reliable in making sense of the world the African lives in, why would she let it go even in modern times? Take, for instance, the glaring evidences that the body parts of persons with

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[127] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'African Studies and the Concept of Knowledge'. 36.

albinism sell for a whooping sum of $75,000, USD, or more in East Africa.[128] In the face of such realities, how do you explain to a seemingly modern African that the person who has spent such a huge amount of money to acquire the body of a person with albinism did it without a clear purpose in mind? How do you explain that both the seller and the buyer are not fully convinced of the efficacy of their beliefs that they are able to invest such time and money into it? Hence, families arrange to sell their member with albinism, relatives connive to kidnap and kill a person with albinism to make money or to gain some favours from invisible agents.[129]

The point to draw from all this is that it will take much more than the mere availability of counterfactual evidence to certain false beliefs in African traditional form of life to make people let go of such false beliefs. To achieve a model-shift in the perception of albinism in African societies, an ideological revolution must obviously take place, and it must be a deliberate one championed and sustained by all stakeholders for a long period of time. The new model must provide better functional explanation, not in some classroom in a university, but to the market woman in a village in East Africa as to why, for instance, a child is born with albinism and how the condition can be avoided in the first place. To be sure, these explanations are available and certainly reliable; they are not just being said in the right place and in the

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[128] See Flora Drury (2015). 'Hunted Down like Animals and Sold by their own Families for $75,000: Tanzania's Albinos hacked Apart by Witchdoctors who believe their body parts "bring luck" in Sick Trade Fueled by the Country's Elite'. In *The Daily Mail Online*. Accessed from: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2922243/Hunted-like-animals-sold-families-75-000-Tanzania-s-albinos-hacked-apart-witchdoctors-believe-body-parts-bring-luck-sick-trade-fuelled-country-s-elite.html.

[129] See Flora Drury, 'Hunted Down like Animals and Sold by their own Families for $75,000 …'

right way. The cognitive process is inadequate in getting the message home. In the last chapter of this work, we shall examine some ways to achieve this arduous task.

Ignorance and Systemically Produced Falsehood

A recent trend in epistemology is the attempt to examine 'the complex phenomena of ignorance, which has as its aim as identifying different forms of ignorance, examining how they are produced and sustained, and what role they play in knowledge practices.' [130] It aims to 'promote the study of ignorance, by developing tools for understanding how and why various forms of knowing have "not come to be", or disappeared, or have been delayed or long neglected, for better or for worse, at various points in history.'[131] This is the branch of epistemology known as the epistemology of ignorance. According to Linda Martin Alcoff:

> The idea of an epistemology of ignorance attempts to explain and account for the fact that such substantive practices of ignorance — wilful ignorance, for example, and socially acceptable but faulty justificatory practices — are structural. This is to say that there are identities and social locations and modes of belief formation, all produced by structural social conditions of a variety of sorts, that are in some cases epistemically disadvantaged or defective.[132]

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[130] S. Sullivan and T. Nancy (Eds.), Introduction to *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance.* 1.

[131] R. N. Proctor and S. Londa (Eds.) (2008), Introduction to *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press). vii.

[132] L. M. Alcoff (2007). 'Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types'. In S. Sullivan and T. Nancy (Eds.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance.* (Albany: State University of New York Press). 40-41.

<TX1>My goal in this section falls in these lines of thought. I am concerned here about how ignorance played a crucial role in the production of knowledge about albinism in African traditions and how the ideas about albinism were institutionalised into such society through a systemically produced falsehood that stemmed from ignorance, deliberate or otherwise.

<TX2>In the early stages of the development of African communities, building community was paramount and seen as the primary means of communal and individual survival. African elite classes, as the custodians of the customs and traditions of the people, were saddled with the crucial responsibility of establishing and sustaining the much needed harmony among beings in African communities. Hence, when they noticed anything abnormal or extraordinary, something different due to ignorance about the other and other from the status quo, out of fear of being a threat to the accepted nature of things, theories were formulated and falsehoods were deliberately and systematically produced about the abnormal, ideas that dichotomised the normal from the abnormal, ensuring the superiority of the former over the latter. Such theories were institutionalised, presented and re-presented in various forms from generation to generation until they attained the status of 'objective ontologies of truth' spiced with religiously garnished ideologies.

<TX2>These constructed ideas and representations were mostly far from factual. They were falsehoods deduced from ignorance but nonetheless institutionalised and entrenched into the socio-cultural system because they were goal-directed: to protect the status quo and overcome the fear of the other. Hence, for instance, such social representations are not different from the racial contract drawn by European tribes against non-European races in the past. It is a contract drawn by the normal against the abnormal, the self against the other. It stems from wilful ignorance produced and sustained to attain certain goals. These actively and deliberately produced falsehoods are not factual, true, or justifiable, but they are systemic and structural, deeply entrenched into society and having real consequences for real people.

<TX2>As we have seen, the consequences of such deeply entrenched social representations about albinism in African traditions coated with ignorance and false but yet taken as real are not funny. It is not news that persons with albinism continue to face unfair and unjust treatment. Due to the harmful ideas about them in the consciousness of Africans, they continually face stigmatisation, social exclusion, maltreatment, dismembering and even murder. They are hunted for their body parts; they lack access to basic things in life such as education, marriage, employment, good health care and cordial familial relationships. Until such social representations are overturned and the ignorance and falsehood inherent in them made obvious to the market woman and the school student, persons with albinism are likely to continue to experience such injustice, partiality and unfairness.

<TX1>The epistemological issues that we have been engaged in thus far clearly show that the knowledge about albinism in African traditional and modern societies is riddled with systemic ignorance and falsehoods that continue to serve as a veil that hinders the actual facts about albinism to take roots in African societies. And as we have seen, such untruths about albinism are part of a consistent and reliable set of beliefs that are not only deeply entrenched in African thought systems, cherished and shared by Africans but are seen as providing functional explanations for objects and events. Any attempt to overthrow these deeply rooted ideologies about albinism must be as penetrative, popular and useful in managing and dealing with albinism both by persons with albinism and other community members. I shall return to these concerns in due course.