

# **Albino Killings in Sukumaland: Study on a Shifting Cultural Paradigm**

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## **General Introduction**

2009 UNESCO 'Picture of the Year' has been selected to further sensitise the world about an unusual horrible trade: human body parts of albino people, supposedly in view of fabrication of some magic medicines. Perhaps UNESCO has singled out this particular affliction because it remains one of the most puzzling enigma, and again associating Africa with nefarious irrationality. The region of the 'Great Lakes' in East Africa has been most affected. The Tanzania Albinos Society reported that at least 35 albino people were murdered in 2008 alone, in order to 'supply witch doctors with limbs, organs and hair for their potions' (The Economist, Jan. 17<sup>th</sup> 2009).

Most of these killings took place in the North-Western part of Tanzania (Mwanza and Shinyanga regions), an area largely covered by the Sukuma people and, to a lesser degree, the Nyamwezi people. But this phenomenon is not exclusive to Sukumaland as it has also been reported in the three following regions: Musoma, which is further north bordering Kenya; Kagera, which offers access to Congo, Rwanda and Burundi; and finally Mbeya on the southern way towards Malawi and Zambia (Daily News, Oct. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008). In addition, it is noted that the killings of albino people has now 'spread outside Tanzania's borders to Kenya, Uganda, Burundi' (The Economist, Jan. 17<sup>th</sup> 2009), while some at least of the Tanzanian exported products were intended to Congo (Daily News, Nov. 12<sup>th</sup> 2008). It appears that after an initial outbreak in Sukumaland, the phenomenon is spreading fast and wide. It is more acutely felt in some areas than others: in Kasamwa, a village centre of about 15,000 people in Geita district (Mwanza Region) where I presently reside and work as a pastor, albino subjects can still live a normal life. This no longer seems to be possible in Kagera and Kigoma areas as safety precautions compel them to camp together under the care of strict security units, seriously controlling their movements.

By December 2008, the Commission for Human Rights and Good Governance (Tanzania) set 'an in-depth study on the causes behind the spate of killings of albinos' (Daily News, Dec 8<sup>th</sup> 2008). To date, no official document has been released, yet the killings are going on. This following reflection seeks to be a contribution to the effort of making somehow intelligible this most bizarre and curious phenomenon. I believe it is significant that this eruption occurred in the very area which witnessed, in the most recent past, another variety of largely unexplained assassinations, this time related to elders, especially women. Between 1970 and 1988, over 3,000 (80% women) were brutally killed, of which 2/3 in Sukumaland (Mesaki, 1994).

This study concentrates on Sukuma society and on what the author thinks to be some of its social and cultural characteristics. It first exploits a most popular Sukuma myth of origin interpreted through a theory of violence and sacrifice introduced by the

French scholar René Girard (1972). Then, supported by some media coverage<sup>1</sup> and personal observation, I pursue with an analysis of the symbolic meaning such abhorrent trade may convey. I assume that the manipulation of deceased human body parts for making medicine to be ‘magic’ that is related to a ‘technique used to manipulate supernatural forces and beings’ (Lenkeit, 2003: 245). I do not conceal the fact that I consider this activity foreign to my own principles of reasoning, and insofar as criminal aspects are concerned, it is an unjustifiable activity which does not make any sense for me. However, the extent of the calamity proves that it does certainly make sense for a particular community or perhaps more precisely, a clandestine section of it. It is this meaning it may bear for this specific population that I intend to retrieve. Accordingly, I attempt to answer the following questions: where does the need to kill particular individuals originate? What may it mean for the concerned population to rely on medicines originating from sections of deceased human bodies? Concluding remarks point at directions towards which further research could be drawn for effective social responses to this most disturbing set of happenings within Tanzanian society.

### **Introducing Sukuma Sacrifice: ‘Masala Kulangwa’ Myth of Origin**

Perhaps, it may come as a surprise to the reader to start this reflection on the killings of albinos with what may sound as a tale, a story, a fiction, namely the Sukuma myth of origin known as ‘Masala Kulangwa’. However, I feel justified in doing so remembering the understanding that Malinowski placed into myths for the people he studied. Myths are not for him intellectual games to explain causes nor dreams for escaping daily worries and anxieties, but rather, tools and means to enter into a particular cultural milieu: ‘myth is a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom’ (Malinowski, 1956 [1926] in Lambek, 2002: 177). Malinowski’s detailed examples concerning the Trobrianders of Melanesia portray the numerous ways myths have to be related to other aspects of social life and of which they are mirror-reflections, mapping the script consequently acted out: ‘[Myths] never explain in any sense of the word; they always state a precedent which constitutes an ideal and a warrant for its continuance, and sometimes practical directions for the procedures’ (*idem*, 179). We may think of myth as an effective tool for enculturation, that is an instrument introducing children and youth to whom it is most especially addressed to the main social and cultural features they are called to enact and indeed presumably accept.

I propose to discuss the popular Sukuma creation narrative of Masala Kulangwa (literally ‘the clever young man’ or ‘the one who is quick to learn’), which is the traditional narrative which most Sukuma would identify with. There is hardly any Sukuma person who would not know about Masala Kulangwa, and we still find young people able to sing the full story relatively easily. Already in this sense, Masala Kulangwa is a myth which is still very much active and alive.

The text of the narrative, from Healey & Sybertz (1996: 64-65) is as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Newspapers referred to in this document are *The Economist*, an international weekly; *Daily News* and *The Guardian* which are Tanzanian papers in English language. *Mwananchi* is also a Tanzanian paper in Swahili language.

Once upon a time, the monster Shing'weng'we swallowed the domestic animals together with all the people in the world except for one pregnant woman who hid in a pile of chaff. Later this woman gave birth to a boy named Masala Kulangwa. When he grew up he asked: 'Mother, why are there only the two of us? Where are the other people?' She answered: 'my dear one, everyone else was swallowed by the monster Shing'weng'we. We are the only ones left.'

From that day on, the clever young man started looking for the monster. One day he killed a grasshopper and arrived home singing: 'Mother, Mother, I have killed Shing'weng'we up in the hills. Rejoice and shout for joy.' But his Mother answered: 'My dear one, this is only a grasshopper, not the monster. Let's roast and eat it.'

Another day he killed a bird and arrived home singing: 'Mother, Mother, I have killed Shing'weng'we up in the hills. Rejoice and shout for joy.' But his mother answered: 'My dear one, this is only a bird, not the monster. Let's roast it and eat it.'

Another day, he killed a small gazelle and arrived home singing: 'Mother, Mother, I have killed Shing'weng'we up in the hills. Rejoice and shout for joy.' But his Mother answered: 'My dear one, this is only an antelope, not the monster, let's roast and eat it.'

When Masala Kulangwa grew to manhood, he told his mother that he wanted to go and look for the monster. At first she did not want him to go, but finally she agreed. Then he went out into the forest to look for the monster. Masala Kulangwa shouted, 'Hey, you, Shing'weng'we.' The monster answered, 'It's me', in a voice so loud that the earth shook. The clever young man was terrified, but he gritted his teeth and did not turn back.

Finally Masala Kulangwa found Shing'weng'we, overcame him, killed him and cut open the monster's back. Out came his father along with his relatives and all the other people. By bad luck, when he cut open the monster's back, Masala Kulangwa severed the ear of an old woman with his knife. This woman became very angry and insulted the young man. She tried to bewitch him and kill him. But Masala Kulangwa was guarded by his many friends, and she failed to harm him. Afterwards he found medicine and healed the old woman. Then all the people declared the clever young man chief and raised him up in the Chief's chair. Masala Kulangwa became the chief of the whole world, and his mother became the Queen mother.

How might this specific myth relate to other cultural and social features? The chronology of events is important. The initial state of affairs is very bleak: the quasi-totality of the human and animal population has been swallowed up a monster. They are all in the same pot. A detour to some aspects of Girard's theory on violence could help us interpret this situation. Indeed, he would suggest that social unrest, tensions, quarrels, strife, jealousies and so on would arise from a single cause: the lack of institutionalized differentiation among the different actors of a particular society. Violence erupts because there is a context of general same-ness in which differences play only a secondary and minor role.

This is perhaps the most difficult element in Girard's theory to recognize and accept, used as we are to identify conflicts as caused by class or other related *differences*. We could remember how much the Western mind has been shaped by different sets of ideologies including Christianity (stating *equal* dignity for each human being), the Enlightenment (dictating that every human being is born with *equal* rights) and Marxism (which forcefully proposes its own dialectic of class conflict). All these ideas do attain much of their strength and relevance within a context whereby *difference* is indeed the most immediate problem to be solved, and *sameness*, in terms of dignity, equality of rights and economic prosperity is the goal yet to be attained. Contemporary thought has completely forgotten why and how unquestioned social distinctions have so much flourished within human populations in the first place.

Sukuma people have not been exposed to these above mentioned ideologies, or if so to a much lesser degree. Consequently, social sensitivity to what may imply social distinctions among constituent members of a particular population may be less acute and appear less threatening. Instead, similarity and sameness may seem strange, confusing, inauspicious and dangerous.

There is a clear indication of this fact when parents of twins come to the priest to ask for a special blessing. I routinely perform these blessings on request, and they are frequent among families away from the Church. There is an instinctive fear related to those who look so much alike, that is, twins. Girard would explain that the lack of *differentiation* opens up endless possibilities for violent actions. Any action performed by an individual indeed initiates and stimulates the desire of his or her neighbour or kin by way of imitation, precisely because he or she knows to be of the same kind. In other words, wherever variations are not sufficiently framed within clearly institutionalized social categories, they can hardly be tolerated: there is no reason as to why a particular person should start to be different. Violence is reciprocal, vengeful, and subject to an endless cycle of strife and quarrels. One of the roles of cultural institutions is to establish accepted differentiations which would enable individuals to embrace particular positions, which when occupied and contrasted to positions of respective neighbours and kin, terminate the profuse perils of same-ness.

Girard's theory elucidates some peculiar characteristics of societies and could be confirmed to some extent by some of our common experiences. The theme of rivalry between brothers, so much present in the first pages of the Bible, does gain understanding from this theory. Most strikingly, Sukuma ways of performing songs and dances by way of competing groups seem to replicate this mimetic and violent reciprocal process within a given context of sameness, this time within the control of a safe and secure frame:

Song and dance play a large part in the life of the Sukuma. (...) They are divided into two great groups of dance societies (*bagumba* [otherwise known as *Bagalu*] and *bagika*) to one of which all the other smaller dance societies belong, and competitive dances between the various societies are extremely popular. On a day chosen for a competition two singers and their respective followers meet; they form two groups which take their stand at some distance from each other. Each group sings a song prepared by the leader especially for the occasion. Sometimes both groups sing and dance at the same time. The victor is the leader who is able to draw the majority of the spectators over to his side. Many means besides songs are used to arouse the interest of the spectators, such as miming, acrobatics and skilful deceptions or the mock killing and resuscitation of a member of the group. (...) The words of the songs are intended to hold the opponent up to ridicule; a singer may insult his adversary as much as he likes with impunity' (Cory, 1953: 6).

Perhaps, the intensity of the rivalry of these two groups has now faded, but it has not disappeared. Sometimes it is just transformed. Particularly telling for instance is the spontaneous creation of competitive Church choirs in some villages. For instance, the Catholic Church of Kasamwa incorporates *Mtakatifu Sesilia* and *Mtakatifu Teresia* (Choirs dedicated respectively to Saint Cecilia and Saint Theresa) and they operate in ways not unknown to the traditional *bagalu* and *bagika*.

Tolerance to a different life-style may increase proportionally to the strange-ness of the population in question. For instance, I have observed that the wealth of a white, foreign expatriate person is easily bearable and forgiven as this particular individual has a radically different history (and all the more if this person has a leadership role). But the

wealth of a kin, in one's own village is outrageous and unbearable. It commonly leads to robberies and murders wherever security forces are found wanting.

This could also further explain why Sukuma people would not easily question differences related to status. Chiefs are right as long as they are chiefs. To be a chief is a blessing, also because it provides access to a number of benefits. Institutionalized leaders are not easily questioned. This may incidentally lead to some misunderstandings with other partners in dialogue. For instance, what expatriate foreigners may identify as a questionable corrupt behaviour in a specific leadership activity might simply be perceived as natural or normal for an insider who is acutely aware of his or her differential positional status. Endangering the leader may equate to questioning the institution itself and be sensed as a menace to fall back into the perils of same-ness. In brief, institutional distinctions such as rank or status provide particular positions or niches to be satisfied with, regulating competitive, jealous and violent strife.

Now, back to our narrative in which the people are '*swallowed up by the monster*'. They have not been distinguished from one another. Mixed together we find men and women, young and old, chiefs and commoners and most interestingly, people and animals! This mention is all the more surprising as the presence of animals outside the monster is necessary for the following parts of the story. They are all in the same pool, prisoners of their same-ness. In the belly of the monster, there is no outside group to refer to in order to establish a sense of related identity. The lack of differentiation inside the belly of the monster could be paralleled by the lack of differentiation outside it. The pregnant woman is the only one left. Mother and child, man and woman are contained within the same individual. The whole world is concentrated in this person.

The lack of differentiation holds the people really captive of their own jealousies and disordered, mimetic desires. Its violent effects are in a most graphic and realistic way fairly to be compared with the swallowing up of the people by a monster. The monster is real therefore, not by its nature (we would have found some bones or other remnants), but by its force, power, effect. I sometimes asked the naïve question: 'does the monster exist?' And I got the surprise of a spontaneous 'yes'. Yet, nobody could claim to having seen the monster, nor is it expected. But it certainly exists in its work and effect, through that which is holding people in fear and doubt. And indeed, the presence of the 'felt' monster by the captive people calls for a saviour.

Masala Kulangwa proposes himself to be this saviour. He certainly has a good will and a burning desire to set his people free like Moses. That is what we may fairly praise in the tale. He is even ready to take risks, and that is another element which may appeal to children and youth. But the art and trade he learns is the one of killing. That is the means he has at his disposal. Remarkably, he kills three innocent, petty animals before approaching the monster. We know nothing about the way he kills. The killings of the innocent creatures fail because there is no agreement with his mother. The mother affirms the innocence of the unhappy animals. In order to become effective, he has to kill in agreement with his mother. The *unanimity* of the community for the effectiveness of the deed is an important point made by Girard himself. The text offers us a beautiful hint on the difficulty of reaching this agreement: when finally ready to hunt the monster, the mother did not want him to go, but finally she *agreed*. Unlike the case of the three unfortunate creatures, the agreement is obtained before the act of killing. It occurs within

the understanding and acceptance of a community. This is perhaps the secret for success of the whole project.

Then, our story narrates the voice of the monster which is followed with a brief moment of 'hide and seek', and finally, the killing of the monster. Masala-Kulangwa is now a trained killer and kills successfully, but again we know nothing about the way he performs his art. It is after all very surprisingly easy. The only difficulty is to overcome his fear *he gritted his teeth, he did not turn back*. True enough, other versions of the story narrate the battle, but in ways we may find so similar to the fight between David and Goliath (Sybertz) that we spontaneously think of a latter borrowing.

The difficulty comes: who or what is the monster in real life? The monster exists in its effects and I only have to find its nature. Here we are guided by Girard's theories again. The monster may become anybody, but most especially a marginal person, a weak one, somebody confusedly already guilty. In the eyes of the people, anybody, at any moment may take the nature of the monster and consequently share all of its guilt. The condition is the agreement of the people to decide that this particular individual is a monster. The victim, scapegoat as we may call him or her, attracts upon oneself the enormous violence contained in the undifferentiated society. Perhaps the killing was so easy, or is simply not narrated because the monster was not so dangerous after all.

In the story itself, we have hints that the victim-monster might well be the old woman. First she is really cut on the ear, in that sense she is a real victim. Second she is accused to be a witch, and witches really deserve to die as they literally 'hold people in fear'. A third and final hint is found in the alternative version mentioned above (Sybertz) in which there is a direct link between the old woman and the monster: the monster is born out of a pumpkin which itself grew in the very place where the old witch has been burnt. The old woman's anger might well be understood as an attempt to reveal her own innocence and accordingly the guilt of Masala Kulangwa, but the community quickly comes to the help to its saviour. It confirms the fact that what he did was right anyway. The cutting of the ear could be thought as being associated with the making of magic medicine and consequently be reminiscent to what is the subject matter of this reflection: the use of body parts for the making of magic medicines.

Direct identification of the monster with the old woman is concealed, yet it is to be found just below the surface. The text contains many elements introducing attitudes that may be nowadays questionable as it may lead to criminal activity: glorification of killing, suspicion of old women as presumably witches (without any other evidence than some ill-temper), the making of magic medicines (who knows out of what?). Some versions include further details about the way the monster should be cut (Sybertz 2006). Could it be an allusion to what Malinowski (quoted above) refers to what may be included in myths: 'practical directions for the procedures'? (Malinowski, *op. cit.*: 179). This particular myth may well encapsulate and reflect prevailing beliefs and behaviours we are trying to explain. The tale may not be as innocent as it first looks.

Finally, and still following Girard's theory, the actual killing is an enormous release for everybody, a liberation which is source of tremendous joy and celebration. Reciprocal violence (everybody against everybody) has successfully been replaced by unanimous violence (everybody against one). Perhaps, there is now a view point as to refer oneself. 'I might live in awkward conditions, but at least I am not this unfortunate who has been sacrificed'. And this may keep people in peace, at least for a while. But

there is the related other side of the medal, tied up with the killing itself, which could be a hint as the cause for the fear so prevailing within traditional societies: there is an obscure understanding that the next victim could well be me! The very act of killing a witch is powerfully enforcing the belief itself, and like the old metaphor of the snake swallowing its tail, the remedy is bound to be self-defeating.

But most importantly, the killing is a source of distinction and differentiation, tied up with unquestioned and unquestionable legitimacy (Girard refers to it in terms of the 'sacred', the necessary complement on his theory about violence). It is most evident with the establishment of kingship. Masala Kulangwa becomes a great chief, but also a great medicine man. Cultural institutions, advocates Girard, have all their origin in a prime sacrifice. They regulate and canalize social violence. Sukuma culture like any other develops its own institutional directions attempting to surrogate the prime sacrifice, taking its necessity away. The institution of the Medicine-Man is perhaps the one most deserving of our attention now.

### **Manipulative Use of Albino Body Parts: Clues about Changing Aspirations?**

An anthropologist initiated within a number of Sukuma and Nyamwezi secret societies could write that 'any research into African institutions must begin with the study of the indigenous medical practices (...)' (Cory, 1960: 14). It has also been stated that 'the sorcerer's principal method of aggression is the use of magic medicines (...)' (Tanner, 1956: 438). Even rain making activity is expected to be regulated by the manipulative use of magic medicines (Masuha, 1963: 50-54).

Our myth presents the institution of the Medicine-Man as related to the killing of the monster-witch, and this tempts us to posit that at least in its origin, the power of the medicine may well originate in a sacrificial killing. We may think of the killing-sacrifice as the origin of the institution and also of the power of the medicines themselves. The role of ritual and religious sacrifices in Sukumaland will be reviewed below; for now, suffice it to say that it plays a minor role. But a clear way to link up human killing or sacrifice with the use of magic medicine is the use of human body parts for the very making of these medicines.

The use of magic medicine is in no way exclusive to Sukuma society. Belief in magical power of medicines affects the whole of Tanzanian society. 'Some [soccer] clubs taking part in the top flight Vodacom premier league engage in voodoo as part of their winning strategies', and the journalists explain that, by night, some stadiums were powered with magical stuff: 'they were like peasants spraying paddy seeds' (Sunday News, Oct. 29<sup>th</sup> 2006). Likewise, Dodoma MP's very Chamber receives its share of magical powders (The Guardian, Jun. 16<sup>th</sup> 2008). But the use of human body parts for the making of medicine is more documented within the area of 'the Lake Zone region of Mwanza, Kagera, Shinyanga, Musoma (...) Mbeya remains a lone exception' (Daily News, Oct. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008), that is within or in proximity of Sukuma area. Media coverage makes plain the fact that body parts are stolen with these intentions (The Economist, Jan. 17<sup>th</sup> 2009).

Accounts of the ways beliefs associate human body parts with effectiveness in particular matters is risky, as we are dealing with criminal issues for which actors would obviously conceal much. Yet, besides the general statement for which actual killing has

capacity to render effective a particular medicine, we may attempt directions for interpretations. It has, for instance, been reported to me that genital organs of elder women are commonly stolen after being killed - most likely in order to fabricate medicines related to life, health and fertility issues. The killing of elder women continues, though it is poorly reported as officials may face heavy sanctions in case of happenings in their respective areas. But why is it that, nowadays, albino subjects are killed alongside with elder women? This seems to be a very recent phenomenon.

Journalists have published the following: albino hair 'attracts fish in large quantities' and their 'bones are also believed to strike gold in mines' (Daily News, Oct. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008). Most Albinos killings in the region, however, account for the fact, sometimes graphically of the theft of 'arms and legs', and in extreme cases leaving the maimed victim alive! (The Economist, Jan. 17<sup>th</sup> 2009, Daily News Oct. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008, Mwananchi Feb. 19<sup>th</sup> 2009 and several other events that were privately reported). The Economist further states that 'skin and flesh are dried out and set into amulets and the bones ground down into a powder. Artisanal miners in the gold and diamond fields directly south of Lake Victoria are the main buyers' (Jan. 17<sup>th</sup> 2009).

Gold mining in this part of Tanzania is not new as German and British colonialists were aware of the presence of the minerals and started some exploitation of the resources. But political leadership of the country during the first three decades straight after independence strongly disregarded the industry, so much was it identified with values of capitalism, themselves at odds with the brand of socialism (*Ujamaa*) that the father of the Tanzanian nation, Julius Nyerere, struggled to enforce. For these reasons, gold mining really took a new start and intensified by the late nineties only, with the changes of economic policies brought about by the second president Ali Hassan Mwinyi. Alongside ventures controlled by powerful international companies, there are a number of areas still open to local and small size diggers who simply come to try their luck for various reasons, and it is safe to say that it includes despair.

According to the media, the fabrication of medicine out of albino body parts relates to this recent outburst of activity. The use of albino amulets would enhance good luck and enable success and prosperity (see references above). I believe it is to be contrasted with health and life issues that manipulation of the old women body parts were previously dealing with. Why and how could albino people be associated with good luck in gold mining?

There is an acceptance of the fact that, traditionally, albino subjects were at least very embarrassing for their kin in Sukuma society. Perhaps they were not slaughtered for commerce and the fabrication of medicine, but there is a convergence of testimonies attesting that albino people used to simply 'disappear'. In fact they were supposedly killed and buried secretly, sometimes in the very home of their relatives. I was once questioned: 'have you ever seen the tomb of an albino person?' It seems that it was an allusion to this believed practice.

Albinism is not a disease as such, (as it is sometimes wrongly presented in Swahili terms), but a genetic disorder causing the lack of black melanin pigmentation within the epidermis. Melanin is effectively protecting against sun rays and therefore the lack of it unfurls numerous risks of skin diseases including cancer. By definition, albino people are white. The other common group of white people present in the area are

western expatriates, who are frequently referred to as '*Wazungu*'. The majority of those are indeed working in the mining industry. Albino people are occasionally and jokingly, that is in friendly situations, called '*Wazungu*', obviously because of the nature of their skin.

White western expatriates, by their lifestyle and activities are unavoidably associated with wealth and money. I painfully learned about it, to my own expenses, through endless requests for help and gifts my very presence would raise. A German friend once told me that a shopkeeper casually asked him for the 'small gift of a motorbike'. This kind of incident is not infrequent.

Furthermore, Swahili people commonly refer to a white man as '*Mtasha*' (I still heard it recently travelling in a bus). Grammatically speaking, '*Mtasha*' is the causative form, of '*kutaka*' (to want or to desire), applied to a person. It is fair to say that this etymology of the term '*Mtasha*' would not be easily accepted by Swahili speaking people themselves. Some think it is simply a deformation of the term 'British'! But following strict grammatical rules, '*Mtasha*' could be interpreted as 'the one who causes me to want'. A white person in my midst is the one exciting jealousy, so much is he associated with wealth, and consequently (my interpretation) a potential causing agent for violence.

Aware of these associations, I once mentioned to a villager that when all the albino people will be killed, the murderers will obviously switch to the white people in general ('*Wazungu*'). Kindly, my friend told me that this could not be, as to, be effective, the medicine has to be taken from a 'local' person ('*Mtu wa Asili*'). Once again, we meet the idea that what is foreign to one's cultural identity would not be effective anyway. It cannot hurt nor benefit. Rather, what is most meaningful and what is subject to raise temper or interest only abides in those who are close to me, those of the same blood, with whom I may easily be identified. A white western expatriate is defined by a clear categorical distinction sanctioned by local culture. There is a border, a threshold preventing any expectation of access. He or she is consequently accepted or tolerated without any further difficulty.

By contrast, an albino person is somebody highly confusing: white yet within the frame of one's own family and environment and which may include indigence; different and distinguished, yet within the same-ness of one's own identity. It is noteworthy that close blood or kin relationships do not protect albino subjects from danger: some fathers have been suspected to give away their albino children, and husbands their albino wives (Mwananchi, Feb. 19<sup>th</sup> 2009; Daily News, Nov. 12<sup>th</sup> 2008). The presence of an albino person may well provide a 'window of opportunity' onto the world of wealth and prosperity which is otherwise barred. It is not so much hatred than envy that leads to the killings of albinos. The same line of thought could be followed about elder women, envied upon because of their old age as much as hated because of their supposedly witch related activities<sup>2</sup>. The albino person may well become the 'monster' awaking carvings towards what is associated with white skins, and so much so as it is now in one's midst, from one's very blood. A traditional pejorative term for an albino person in Swahili is '*zeruzeru*' meaning a 'freak' or a 'ghost'!

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<sup>2</sup> Girard claims this kind of ambivalent relationship to be extremely common, and supports his argument with some psychological evidence as with the 'double bind' portrayed by G. Bateson et. al. (Girard, 1972: 219).

Now, something ought to be said about the processes through which medicines originating from albino body parts are expected to be effective. This is the area commonly known as magic. Our claims need to be extremely modest in this matter as factual data is scant and not sufficient for approaching a comprehensive view of magic in these particular situations. Conclusions may not amount to much more than speculations. Malinowski for instance claims that magical acts comprise various elements such as ‘the spell or actual words used (...) the rite, a stereotyped sequence of symbolic acts; and the moral or ritual condition of the performer’ (Willis, in Barnard & Spencer eds.: 2002: 341). Owing to the fact that the subject matter of the discussion is clandestine and criminal in nature, I know less than little about these elements that are words and processes used for the making and the application of medicines. I will therefore concentrate on the nature of the stolen albino body parts and their likely symbolic meanings, as magic, according to some ‘always rests on the idea of symbolism and of language’ (Wittgenstein, 1979 [1931] in Lambek, 2002, 87). Whether a particular deed germinates in traditional healer’s heads or in the traditional store of a particular people, needs to recognize that it has some reception in the minds of the specific community of perpetrators and consumers. According to media coverage (see references above), the body parts most commonly robbed are hair, skin, bones, and most importantly legs, feet and hands.

The skin is white, most obviously distinguishing albino people from common folk and associating them with the white westerner’s group (*Wazungu*) and with their respective wealth. Consequently, a white skin powder would have the capacity to call for wealth and prosperity according to the principle of contagious magic. Lenkeit’s definition of ‘contagious magic’ runs as follows: ‘a type of magic based on the idea that something that has contact with a person or animal contains some essence of that being and that magic performed on the item will have the same effect as if performed on the being’ (2002: 246). Accordingly, the wealth of the white expatriate is called upon, through the means of the products of a white albino skin.

Bones are the hidden, but also a most vital part of a human body, the hard and white matter which may recall the precious hidden golden stones concealed in the gravels and mud of the earth. Once again, the fact that they are albino bones would imply capacity to attract the wealth so much characterizing white westerners.

Feet and legs are the organs through which things may keep ‘going’. It is common all over the world to hang a shoe or a ‘rabbit’s foot’<sup>3</sup> (Kirwen, 2005: 220) so as to ‘ward off occult/evil activity’ (idem) or to attract prosperity for a particular business. In common language it is very frequent to use expressions such as ‘the business does not go’, or on the contrary having a sense of being ‘stuck’, in varied aspects of life. Most telling is the Swahili term for ‘development’ included in expressions such as ‘the developed world’. This term is ‘*maendeleo*’ and its root base is ‘*kwenda*’ which means ‘to go’. The whole ideology of the Western type of development and modernity is consequently associated with the idea of ‘going’ which comes very close to ‘walking’. To appropriate for oneself an albino’s foot, and its consequent concoction may well be an attempt to integrate into my life, and *move towards* qualities which enable the white expatriate to be so successful and materially prosperous.

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<sup>3</sup> Is it just ironic fate that most of these ‘feet’ are derived from ‘albino’ species of rabbits?

Hands may refer to the resourcefulness of a person. There are Swahili proverbs and sayings associating the traditional hoe with wealth '*Jembe ni mali*' (literally: the hoe is wealth), and this wealth necessary implies the work of the hands. More significantly, there is a Sukuma proverb stating that the 'two hands are mother of a man' (*Makono: nina wa munhu*). The hands are the means through which somebody may attain the full dignity of a human being and to be counted and respected as such. It may refer to an attempt to recover full human-hood, to get a more complete sense of self. Perhaps, when people feel less than human beings, demeaned by standards of prosperity set around them and for which they have no access, and also unrewarded by the fruits of their 'hands' or of their work, a little help from hands which have relations to qualities so much desired upon is welcome.

These may be indications to think the struggles to integrate into a world-village, a world economy based on money and greater proximity to affluence without necessarily greater access to corresponding goods and services. There are clear indications as to say that present social distinctions and differentiations are gradually transformed. What was previously defined in terms of long life, health, status and rank (a great aspiration was to belong to particular categories such as the elders and their respective associations) is now becoming monetary and financial (how much do I perform on the international scale of material prosperity?).

Ten years ago, I conversed with a young man who was convinced that a female neighbour of his was a witch, on the sole basis that she was old. Age was what was affecting him, leading him towards ambiguous mixed feelings of envy and hatred. Perhaps, albino people were not meaningful in a society without a sufficient number of wealthy white westerners to render them significant, and without the recent gold mining industry. But this is rapidly changing thanks to the mass media and intensified international communications. Through TV, movies and internet, material western type of prosperity is now frequently given to contemplate. It is only to be expected that this rather new situation generates new sets of aspirations, languages and associated symbols. Again, what we are faced with here might be new demands whereby what is becoming increasingly important is not so much to be alive with many years, together with being healthy, but also to be prosperous, powerful, moving and integrated with the international community.

As we have seen, magic medicines are experienced as efficient means to achieve this. The power of the 'contagious magic' should not be thought to be exclusive of the need for sacrifices previously commented upon, rather it complements it. The sacrifice of a victim, when rooted in the agreement of a particular community, produces unquestionable truths which may well include beliefs in sacred medicinal powers. Wherever manipulations of human body parts are happening, suffice it to say that beliefs in the power of medicines are not successfully surrogating needs for human sacrifices.

### **Ineffectiveness of Sukuma Religious Traditional Rituals**

According to Girard, the normal route through which social needs for human sacrifices is eliminated is through the institution of sacred religious rituals, and primarily animal sacrifices. The Old Testament teaches us the long and painful way the Israelites themselves had to learn how to replace the human sacrifices by animal ones (see the

sacrifice of Abraham in Genesis 22). Ritual animal sacrifices performed by religious institutions progressively replace the random killings of the society's members. That is, it has a protective, preventive role. Girard reports that in the book of Genesis (4:1-16), Cain who is not performing any animal sacrifice, but instead presents offerings from his crops, is the one who is led to kill his brother Abel. Whether the substitution of a human being by an animal is successful or not might depend of other criteria, but at least this is the idea. In many places, religious institutions have been subsequently replaced by alternative types of sacrifices or by the combined operations of the legislative and judiciary systems.

Godfrey Lienhardt, who worked among the Dinka of South Sudan has effectively documented the capacity of an animal to replace a human victim: 'an important feature of sacrifice is that the people for whom it is made enact the death of a victim (...) The picture presented is of the living man within the carcass of an ox, which decays about him and leaves him still alive' (Lienhardt, 1961 in Lambek, 2002: 338). Some identification between the animal and the substituted original intended victim may precede the killing itself, in order to make it more effective. It is intriguing that traditionally in Sukumaland 'prized livestock are dedicated and identified by iron bells after which children are named' (Tanner, R. & Wijzen, F., 2009). Perhaps we have here a hint relating to direct identifications between humans and animals as to possibly render animal sacrifices effective. The same authors pursue: 'where this form of attribution becomes less comprehensible with dispersed families and migration, then the witchcraft of jealous neighbours, wives or employees develop' (idem). As far as I can observe, cows in Sukumaland no longer have iron bells and they may not operate as substitutes as they used to.

In today's situation, we may not think about Sukuma religious rituals as habitual, and therefore they are unlikely to be places for habitually capturing strength, confidence or luck. Perhaps it was not so in the past, but the 'decline of the ancestral cult' among the Sukuma started long ago, as R. Tanner noted, and by 1958 'many ceremonies had disappeared' (Westerlund, 1980: 144). Once again, it is significant to find the remark that 'the cult of the ancestors has tended to decline whereas, on the other hand, the practice of witchcraft has tended to increase or at least to remain strong' (idem). Perhaps, there is here another indication that what no longer takes place in religious rituals finds its expression elsewhere, and most notably among local healers.

Yet, animal sacrifices do occur. For instance, crisis situations may require the slaughtering of chickens, goats or cows. We may even think the killing of cows at the occasion of marriage feasts or funeral gatherings as so many disguised sacrifices. But this remains occasional and concerns infrequent crisis or transitional situations.

Present day traditional religious provisions for regulating and supplanting needs for human victims may no longer be effective. Besides the fact that identifications between animal and humans are becoming more tenuous, it is unlikely that they keep a capacity to respond to new challenges related to modern changes. It has been observed for instance, that traditional rituals in Tanzania 'are resorted to in two types of situations that individuals or community may face. These are periods of crisis and occasions marking passage to a new stage of life.' (Masanja & Lawi, 2006: 111). My observation confirms the fact that this corresponds to Sukuma rituals. Today, there are little (if any) 'routine' or 'maintenance' rituals responding to more habitual needs and wants of the

people facing various challenges of daily life. Sukuma religious rituals best operate within 'periods of crisis' which include 'sickness, bereavement, natural catastrophe and epidemics' (idem). Traditionally the chief was to perform at least some of these rituals, like those associated with rain-making activity, but the role of the traditional chief has fallen into oblivion.

While there is some traditional ritual catering to issues related to 'sickness' and 'health', no provision is offered for likely desires of a particular individual to improve his or her lifestyle. We believe this to be relevant as traditional religion has been notoriously known for attracting tangible advantages: 'African religions have tended to centre more around instrumentality than spirituality per se' (Lawi & Masanja, 2006: 78). Sukuma people in particular do tend to expect that religious traditions would offer them material and sensible benefits, encapsulated around the expression of 'good life' (Wijsen & Tanner, 2000). But what happens when the definition of what 'good life' may include changes, while little (if any) ritual provisions to attend to these new aspirations are created? What happens as we have seen is the recourse to magic medicines which is widespread and easily accessible through countless local healers. It has been said for instance, that there are about 2,000 'registered' local healers in Sengerema district alone.

### **Alternative Responses: Christianity and Enforcement of a Judicial System**

But turning to local healers is not the only remaining alternative offered to the Sukuma population. Christianity, and perhaps also Islam do offer appropriate responses as individuals have found out for themselves, responses which are themselves pregnant with sociological significations. Christianity has in the recent past rightly been associated with European colonialists. But it is a most puzzling fact that while these later have been completely removed from political power more than 40 years ago, Christianity continues to attract a significant number of individuals, though it is not very spectacular. Indeed Sukumaland has been notably resistant to mass conversion to Christianity, yet, this later is in no way in decline. Perhaps there are intrinsic qualities within Christian beliefs and practices which cater at least to some of Sukuma felt aspirations.

Girard's theory on violence might not be complete without his considerations on ways Christianity (1978) is particularly appropriate to respond to potentially violent situations as described above. Christ, in the beliefs of his followers does not negate the need for sacrifices, even human sacrifices in order to solve internal frictions of the community. But he categorically rejects the means of killing in order to achieve this goal. Instead, he puts himself in the position of the sacrificed victim.

Jesus is a saviour, but unlike Masala Kulangwa, not through killing. He does not learn nor teach how to kill. His life offers a singular trajectory towards an event he seems to have been prepared for: the event of being killed. Jesus accepts the fact that there is need of a sacrifice. The monster exists in its effects. But instead of looking for its nature somewhere, Jesus puts himself knowingly in the position of being killed and, through that process, unveils in an astonishing manner both his innocence and the guilt of the people. In a way, Jesus is more to be identified with the old woman or even the monster (insofar it can itself be associated with the innocent old woman) rather than with Masala Kulangwa. The old woman attempts to reveal the guilt of Masala Kulangwa, but unsuccessfully so. And that is precisely where Jesus succeeds. The theory of René Girard

opens a new understanding to sentences like ‘it is better for one man to die rather than the whole people to perish’ (John 18:14), or ‘the one who is without sin may throw the first stone’ (John 6:7); ‘the one who takes the sins of the world’ (John 1:29), and most importantly: ‘the stone that builders rejected has become the corner-stone’ (Psalm 118:12; Matthew 21:42). The sins of the people are really upon him, when arise desire or need to sacrifice an innocent victim.

Some have objected to me that this particular interpretation of the Sukuma myth denies the Sukuma possibility for salvation. Salvation is indeed presented in the myth with the joyful celebration of the liberation, but perhaps it is a self-defeating salvation insofar as it is achieved at the expense of an innocent victim. For Christians, what might be more significantly concealed in the myth is the figure of Christ *crucified* rather than Christ *warrior-like* personified in the figure of Masala Kulangwa (Healey and Sybertz, 1996: 67). Acceptance of the figure of a *crucified* Christ in one’s life, as the universal and ultimate victim, does bear a potential capacity to divert social violence and initiate a change of heart and consequently be more socially productive and profitable. A ‘baptized’ version of the myth may contain this cryptic understanding and achieve a more durable and effective model of salvation.

Other ways in which one may find Christianity as an appropriate response to Sukuma aspirations and which are gaining strength throughout Africa include its widely acknowledged capacity of integration into modernity and materially prosperous nations. The use of ‘prosperity Gospel’ has been well documented and is progressively gaining strength throughout the continent (Gifford, 1998, 2009). Christianity is often perceived as a means of access to places and situations otherwise excluded, and this may be appealing, especially when traditional cults were so much associated with instrumentality.

According to Girard, the judicial system is an alternative to the need for sacrifice or to the above mentioned substitutes. Yet, this is to be effective through routine implementation and fairness. This is far to be supported with evidence. Advocates have sometimes been reported to be plain thieves (Daily News, Dec. 15<sup>th</sup> 2007) and Magistrates, especially those of the lower courts, corrupted (The Guardian Aug. 12<sup>th</sup> 2008). By 2006 there was a shortage of 292 primary court magistrates out of a total of 1,105 (Daily News, Nov. 10<sup>th</sup> 2006) and the outgoing Chief Justice Barnabas Samatta declared that corruption in the Judiciary gave him sleepless nights and he would add that ‘the corruption in the judiciary has roots that run very deep’ (The Guardian, Jul. 19<sup>th</sup> 2007). The judiciary system is only very partially effective and mostly unreliable to settle routine disputes.

Even more disturbing are reports of the police said to be ‘the most corrupt institution in the country, followed by the judiciary’, according to a research done by FORDIA, a Non-Governmental Organization (Daily News, Dec. 31<sup>st</sup> 2009). However, recent ‘aggressive measures’ which brought into custody and justice 90 suspects between June 2007 and March 2009’ all of them in relation to albino killings might be effective (The Guardian, Nov. 5<sup>th</sup> 2009), as it is fair to say that by now some areas may be considered relatively safe. The displacement of the phenomenon towards the west in proximity of chaotic Congo may indicate the effectiveness of measures implemented in more easily controlled areas.

But the situation remains fragile. Defects in legislative and judiciary systems do tempt individuals to criminal activities in relation to their beliefs and unconstrained aspirations.

### **Assessing Girard's Theory: Exploring Directions for Further Research?**

The above explanations lead to the understanding that the killing of the elder women and albino people could directly be related to beliefs in witchcraft (the sole tangible argument in the narrative which comes close to justifying homicide) and sorcery (in this case manipulative use of body parts for medicinal or/and magical purposes). Girard would argue that this violence may originate in the very structure of the society. The lack of structural differentiation leads to competitive and reciprocal relationships escalating into always more acute 'mimetic desires' and related violence.

The theory itself is not easy to handle. It cannot be proved nor disproved as it **depends** on events which significance is concealed to the very actors: the mechanism of 'mimetic desire' is governed by a process of a 'double bind' (Bateson et al. in Girard, 1972: 219) according to which the reality of being in the same time attracted and repulsed by a role model does not emerge in the consciousness of the agent. Besides, it is taken for granted by the community that the victim of anonymous killing is guilty, its innocence is always concealed.

Moreover, the notion of social 'differentiation' is so fluid a notion that it may include about anything. Yet, relationships between instances of witchcraft and types of social organizations have already been established by Middleton and Winter ([1963] in Willis, 2002), using descent as a defining criteria. This could be further refined in the light of Girard's theory. For instance, in addition to combining descent typologies with particular related brands of occult activities, we may be tempted to search for more subjective terms defining the perceived state of social identity in which the concerned agents may situate themselves. It seems to me that questions related to social identity, role and felt sense of uniqueness and social integration may relate however vaguely to what we are looking for.

Finally, we tried to expose how turning to albino people for the making of magic medicines may refer to a paradigm shift on expectations in the social life of Sukuma people, a shift brought about by western intrusions and capitalistic exploitations of minerals. This reflection started with the unconditional condemnation of UNESCO for the albino killings. Perhaps this study shows that even this most obscure and remote calamity is not to be approached independently from the questionable international ethics of world economy. In the light of this thesis, eradication of this specific criminal activity may mean further adaptation and integration of religious and judicial institutions in accordance with modern changes recently brought about in the area. But it may also mean more sensitivity for economically powerful agents to the effects brought about by their presence and activities among local populations.

Kasamwa, 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2010.

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