



## **Towards a Biblical Response to Myth and Discrimination against the Human Right of Albinos in Yorubaland**

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**Abstract.** It has been widely reported by some international and local media (electronic and print) that Albinos in some parts of Africa are kidnapped and killed for ritual purposes. The worst hit countries are Tanzania, South Africa and Burundi. This dastardly act against the Albinos is an outright disrespect for the sanctity of human life as assured by the Almighty and their right to live as entrenched by the International Human Right Law. God has given human beings life and the United Nations Declaration for Human Right has guaranteed freedom for all people no matter their race, color and creed. It is unfortunate that the human right of the Albinos is being abused especially among the Yorubas where they are isolated and discriminated against because of the myth that surrounds them. They are called *Afin* or *eni-orisa* that is “one who belongs to the deity.” As a result of this myth, they are discriminated against and their human right is infringed upon. They are denied of essential amenities (such as education, employment and other basic life provisions) which are privileges of the free born.

This paper is a Biblical response to the myth and discrimination against the Albinos among the Yoruba people. The paper involves interview of some Albinos to ascertain the kind of abuses they suffer. It also makes use of on-line materials such as e-book, newspapers and articles that focus on human right of the Albinos in Africa, and more especially among the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. This paper recommends that the Albinos have right to life and they should be treated equally like any non-pigmented persons wherever they found themselves.

## INTRODUCTION

God has created all human beings in the way he pleases. He created some, black, yellow or white, he created the physically challenged people and at the same time he created the Albinos that is, those suffering from Albinism. The scripture says “all things were created by God.”<sup>1</sup> So, if God created all things, then why are the Albinos discriminated against? There is no justification for people or organization to prejudice or discriminate against the Albinos simply because their color is different from the other people. Scientifically, “Albinism is a genetic condition in which a person lacks the gene for producing melanin, the pigment that protects the skin from ultraviolet light from the sun. Persons with albinism (PWAs) may lack pigmentation in the skin, eyes and hair.”<sup>2</sup>

From the statistic available, Africa is seemed to have a high prevalence of Albinos.<sup>3</sup> That is not to say that other continents do not have them, it is important to note that Albinos are found in all races and not just among the people of the black race.<sup>4</sup> The plight of the Albinos in Africa calls for concern.

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<sup>1</sup>Rev 4:11 says “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”( KJV) See also Gen 1:1-2; John 1:1-3.

<sup>2</sup> MutheeThuku, “Myths, Discrimination and the Call for Special Rights for Persons with Albinism in Sub-Saharan Africa “Ed. By Bert Verstappen*E-Book* February 2011; 2

<sup>3</sup>Thuku, E-Book 2, Jake Epele, the President of the Albino Foundation of Nigeria, says more than 600,000 persons living with skin pigmentation problem in the country suffer discrimination. He further stated that “Some families abandon newly born children with albinism,” due to this, an albino has a slim chance to make it in life with most parents reluctant to invest in the education of albino children.” He said statistics indicated that more than 1.5 million Nigerian albinos were among the poorest, least educated and marginalized persons, adding that these persons were also the most susceptible to skin cancer due to frequent exposure of their skin to the sun Reported by Yusuf Zango of the Daily News in Article ‘Albinos in Nigeria suffer discrimination’ February 27, 2011 - 6:46am.

<sup>4</sup>Zango, Daily Times, February 27, 2011.

Recently, it was reported in the local newspaper in Tanzania that ten Albinos male and female were murdered and their body parts was shared among the ritual killers for medicine.<sup>5</sup> The same occurrence took place in Burundi where some Albinos were taken out of their parents' home and killed for rituals.<sup>6</sup> In Kenya, a woman killed her baby because she found out that she was an Albino. A BBC reporter notes:

Worse than social ostracization is the idea that albinos are worth more dead than alive. The recent murders of albinos in Burundi and Tanzania are the result of a belief that their bones possess magical properties, capable of bestowing good fortune on those who consume concoctions made from them. The murders — including at least one of a young girl who was taken from her home in the middle of the night, murdered and dismembered for her legs and hair — support a black market trade in magic human potions made from body parts and blood of albinos, potions which can fetch up to \$2,000.<sup>7</sup>

The reporter lamented that despite the promises by the African government to protect the rights of the albinos, it is disconcerting that nothing is being done to protect the right of these people. For example, none of the more than 200 people arrested in connection with the murders of innocent albinos have been

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<sup>5</sup> It is widely reported by the Daily Newspaper Magazine in Tanzania and Burundi that nearly 200 Albinos male and female were murdered in cold blood in these East African Countries in 2009. In a similar report in the Nigerian Tribune of Wednesday March 23, 2011 under a caption "The Albinos as Engendered Species" the reporter notes that, "some ten years ago students of the University of Ibadan went wild destroying properties and life because of the rumor that a final year law student of the university, who happens to be an Albino was kidnapped for ritual purposes. Although that news later turned to be a hoax but the damage has been done. This confirms the lingering fear of the safety of the Albinos in Yoruba land."

<sup>6</sup> A Newspaper report in Kenya accessed on the web [www.Albinos](http://www.Albinos) right in Kenya.

<sup>7</sup> Josh Clark "21 Albinos in Africa — Murder for Magic, A Human Rights Nightmare" BBC World March 17, 2009.

convicted.<sup>8</sup> This neglect by the government should be condemned by all well meaning people in Africa.

### **MYTH ABOUT THE ALBINOS AMONG THE YORUBA PEOPLE**

The Yoruba people have a misconception about the Albinos whom they tagged as *eni-orisa* or ridiculously referred to as *Afin*. Some tribes in Yoruba land believed that the Albinos are descendant of *Obatala* while some believed that Albinos came to being as a result of the intermarriage between *Lamurudu* and some Yoruba female when he got to *Ile-Ife*.<sup>9</sup> How the Albinos come about this condition still remain a mystery among most communities across the world. However, in Yoruba land it is usually believed that the Albinos are agent of the gods and they are usually sent to the family that has offended the gods or the ancestors. Some believed it is a curse or some form of ‘punishment’ from the gods or the ancestors for something wrong done by the parents. Myths about albinos continue to persist not only in Yoruba land but in other communities in Africa; as a result people with this condition are isolated and discriminated against. These are some of the myths and misconceptions the Yoruba people have about the Albinos.<sup>10</sup>

1. Myth: That Albinos are agent of the gods therefore their blood is rich in money making rituals and charm for long life.
2. Myth: When a woman had intercourse during her menstruation she will give birth to Albinos

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<sup>8</sup> BBC World March 17, 2009.

<sup>9</sup>*Lamurudu* also inter-married with the typical black Yoruba. And the union produced what is today known as *Afin* (Albino). Formerly, there was nothing like the Albino phenomenon in Yoruba land before the advent of *Lamurudu*. That was how this *Odu Ifa* (oracle) came to be. This *OduIfa* is now being used by the Yoruba *Ifa* practitioners. It is a living language that can be used to cure, to attract good things to people. It can also be used to reinforce the living force of man and to uphold human nature. We have many *Odu* like that, which can be transmitted from Hebrew to Yoruba language. See <http://allafrica.com/stories/201004160900.html>

<sup>10</sup>Alade Adeniyi Interview on Phone on the 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2011 by 8pm Local Time

3. Myth: That albino (*Afin*) is a punishment or a curse from the gods or ancestral spirits due to wrongs done in the family

Fact: Albinism is a genetic condition that is passed on from parents to children. Many people are carriers of this recessive gene. Albinism is not a curse.

4. Myth: The body parts of persons living with albinism make potent charms that can make people rich and successful

Fact: This is absolutely not true. It is a myth spread by witchdoctors in order to enrich themselves at the expense of others.

5. Myth: That drinking the blood of a person with albinism gives extra magical powers, wherever one goes he will be honored so they recite the incantation as follows:

*Owo koko la fi n wogi*, we honor the tree because of the spot it possess

*Owo orisa la fin wo afin* we honor the Albinos with the honor of the deity

*E fi owo temi wo mi loni*. People should honor me today

Adeniyi notes that “the blood and the hair of the Albino are potent for money making rituals. He also notes ‘the ritualist uses the breast and private parts of the female Albinos for charm that enables people to live long and wealthy.’<sup>11</sup>

Other myths in other communities in Africa are as follows:

1. That having sex with a person with albinism can cure HIV/AIDS
2. That albinism is a contagious condition.<sup>12</sup>

Myths such as the ones listed above have led people to discriminate against the right of the Albinos, the event that resulted in violations of the human right of the persons with albinism.

## **HUMAN RIGHT ABUSES AGAINST ALBINOS AMONG THE YORUBA PEOPLE**

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<sup>11</sup>Adeniyi, *Interview*

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Due to misconceptions and myths that surrounds the Albinos in Africa especially among the Yoruba; the Albinos face isolation and discrimination right from birth to adulthood. In the school, in the neighborhood, among friends they are subjected to ridicules and shame. This writer knew some Albinos that had committed suicide because they were either stigmatized or ostracized by their community. They were left dejected, lonely and insecure hence, the best option for them is suicide. This is an abuse of their human right to living.

This writer examines some of the abuses faced by the Albinos in some part of Africa especially in Yorubaland.

### **1. Prejudice**

The Yoruba people called the Albinos *Afin*, a derogatory name that discriminates these people among their peers. Jake Epelle the Executive Director of the Albino Foundation of Nigeria notes that

“If you go into the names we are called you will just know that albinos have suffered untold derogatory insults. Let us take the Yoruba that call us *Afin*. *Afin* is not complimentary; it is derogatory. The Igbo call us *Ayarin*, the Edo people call us *Ebo*. Akwa Ibom people call us *Bakara* while the Hausa call us *Bature Ntuda* meaning “fake white man”<sup>13</sup>

### **2. Killings for Rituals**

Recently, murdering of the Albinos in some parts of Africa has woken up the world to the threats facing people with these conditions. BBC Reports that “200 Albinos were killed in Tanzania, Burundi, Malawi and some parts of South Africa.”<sup>14</sup> In Yoruba land the hair and the genitals of the Albinos are potent for money rituals. It is also believed that charms made with body parts of Albinos

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<sup>13</sup> Jake Interview in the Daily Newspaper reported by the [www.Punchonline/Nigeria/news/February](http://www.Punchonline/Nigeria/news/February) 2011

<sup>14</sup> BBC Reports on the Plight of the Albinos in Tanzania and Kenya

especially hair, genitals, limbs, breasts, fingers, the tongue and blood are efficacious for strong magic portions.<sup>15</sup> So Albinos are hot cake for money making rituals. These practices are evil and abuse against the human right of those living with Albinism. Concerted effort should be made by all and sundry to protect the right of these people and save them from the hand of the ritual killers.

### **3. Discrimination in Employment:**

The Albinos are routinely shunned from employment by both private employers and governments due to their condition. They are thought of as being incapable or as being a burden. Sometimes, they are employed but assigned tasks that require them to work for a long time in the sun which exposes them to the risk of developing skin cancer. Jake Epelle of The Albinos Foundation (TAF), Nigeria, is quoted as follows:

“From our last courtesy visit in Lagos, one of us was the second best student in the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA) examination nationwide and they told him to his face that “yes you passed well but you are an albino we can’t take you. The person in question is my coordinator in Calabar, his name is Bassey. I’ve several (*such*) complaints.”<sup>16</sup>

### **4. Discrimination in Education Systems:**

Some schools don’t admit Albinos because of their condition. Some are advice to go to the school for the blind while they are not blind. The federal government in a press release through the minister of women Affairs pledges to defend the right of the Albinos, especially their right to education.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Adeniyi Interview 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2011

<sup>16</sup> Yusuf Zango ‘Albinos in Nigeria Suffer Discrimination’ Persons living with the skin pigmentation problem want government to pay more attention to their welfare Article | February 27, 2011 - 6:46am.

<sup>17</sup> This day live 21 May, 2011

## BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO MYTH AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THE RIGHT OF ALBINOS

Before the writer discusses the biblical response to these myths and discriminations against the human right of Albinos, it suffices to briefly look at what the UNDHR article and other related charters say about the human right of the citizens;

**Article 1** of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and what it says. This article clearly states that ‘all human beings are born free and equal in dignity’.

**Article 2** states that everyone is entitled to the rights and freedoms set therein, ‘without distinction of any kind, such as, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.’ These guarantees are also found in the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*.<sup>18</sup>

Most of African State-Members of the United Nations have ratified these two Covenants.<sup>19</sup> The regional international human rights instrument, the *African Charter on Peoples and Human Rights (ACPHR)* clearly states in **Article 2** that “Every individual shall be entitled to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognized and guaranteed in the present Charter without distinction of any kind such as race, ethnic group, color, sex, language, religion, political or any

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<sup>18</sup>[www.un.org/en/documents/udhr](http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr); [www.hrcr.org/docs/Banjul/afhr.html](http://www.hrcr.org/docs/Banjul/afhr.html); Amnesty International, Special Programme on Africa, *HakiZetu: ESC rights in Practice, Main Book*, [http://www.amnesty.nl/in\\_actie\\_vervolg/spa](http://www.amnesty.nl/in_actie_vervolg/spa) also cited by MutheeThuku in “Myths, Discrimination, and the Call for Special Rights for Persons with Albinism in Sub-Saharan Africa” Ed. By Bert Verstappen *E-Book* February 2011; 14

<sup>19</sup>AtiemoAbamfo, “Religious View of Humanity and International Human Right” Unpublished Note, 2011.



other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status.”

The *UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)* defines racial discrimination as ‘any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.’<sup>20</sup> Based on this definition, persons with albinism can contest the discrimination they face on the grounds of skin color due to the reduction or absence of pigmentation.<sup>21</sup>

The bible is against all forms of injustices, inequalities and discrimination. In the Hebrew Canon part of the covenant code is love for justice and love for one’s neighbor. In Deuteronomy Yahweh commanded the people of Israel to treat the less privilege with respect and should not deny them justice. They were to care for one another.

In the New Testament, the ultimate mission of Jesus Christ is love. He teaches love and demonstrated it. He told his disciples to love God and their neighbors. In the parable of a Good Samaritan he demonstrated love per excellence. Apostle Paul also taught the same principle in Roman 13:8 where he noted that love is the fulfillment of the law. The Albinos should be loved and be cared for. They should be treated with dignity, love and respect as the sacred books enjoin one to do.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup>Thuku, 14

## CONCLUSION

Since the bible clearly states that, “God created all humankind” and human rights says in the article jointly signed by all members of the UN that “all persons are born free and equal in rights and dignity.”<sup>22</sup> Albinos are creature of God, they are human beings and they deserve all the privileges and entitlement freely enjoyed by normally pigmented persons. They also belong to the society and their rights should be protected by all. The bible is clear about human responsibility to one another. The suffering of one causes suffering for others. Thuku submits that

When they suffer discrimination, violations, and abuses, the human race suffers too. Their genetic condition requires that the society treats them as a special minority. Special sub-rights to safety, health, education, meaningful employment and nondiscrimination should be ensured. Governments, medical profession and organizations, civil society groups, the media and individuals of good will should help PWAs achieve their aspirations in consideration of their challenges in terms of health – skin and vision – as well as the general stigma that they experience.<sup>23</sup>

In Nigeria there is no legislation that protects the right of the Albinos except the general laws that apply to all citizens. This writer is calling on the Federal Government to take the issue of albinos with some level of seriousness. The genetic disadvantage of an albino especially in the area of easy susceptibility to cancer affliction due to exposure to sun rays, calls for special consideration. A reporter in Tribune notes that “This group of people are Nigerians not by choice but by providence, over which they have no control.”<sup>24</sup> Nature has made this way

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<sup>22</sup> See the article cited above

<sup>23</sup>Thuku, 14

<sup>24</sup>Nigerian Tribune of Wednesday March 23, 2011 under a caption “The Albinos as Engendered Species”

and there is nothing they can do about it so discrimination against albinos in whatever form should be discouraged through legislative instruments. Churches and all religious houses should with one voice condemn the discriminations and stigmatization of the Albinos. Community campaign against local myths and superstition about albinos should be promoted. Albinos are Nigerians as they have no other country to call their own.

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## APPENDIX 1



An albino man with a baby by his shoulder. Courtesy of Tweet

## APPENDIX 2

### **Albinos in Nigeria suffer discrimination by Yusuf Zango**

Persons living with the skin pigmentation problem want government to pay more attention to their welfare

Article | February 27, 2011 - 6:46am | By [Yusuf Zango](#)



Image credit: L'escale de la discordia

### **FG To Protect Rights of Albinos, Cautions Against Discrimination**

FEDERAL Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development has begun consultations with relevant stakeholders in a bid to set up a ministerial committee to evaluate challenges being faced by albinos.