



Judith Schühle

Medicine, murder of people with albinism in Tanzania – how casino capitalism creates rumorscapes and occult economies

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## Medicine murder of people with albinism in Tanzania – how casino capitalism creates rumorscapes and occult economies

Judith Schühle

### Abstract

In 2007, a spate of killings of people with albinism in Northwest Tanzania placed the country in the international limelight. Rumors that the bones of people with albinism were a necessary ingredient in wealth generating magic potions provoked the killings which had no precedents in Tanzania or the local Sukuma culture. This working paper places the rumors in a wider context of living with albinism in Tanzania as well as a general retreat to magic in the face of economic distress. It is argued that the specific nature of the mining and fishing industries in Northwest Tanzania as examples of casino capitalism brings about 'rumorscapes', in which stories from near and far are exchanged, fused, adapted and, by some 'witchdoctors', turned into viable business options. The rumors and the killings must be understood as a new phenomenon, not as a retreat to traditional *modi operandi* from local Sukuma magic. Only by addressing the uncertainties faced by people working in the fishing and mining industries will it be possible to prevent such murders in the future.

### Zusammenfassung

Im Jahr 2007 zog Tansania durch eine Serie an Mordfällen an Menschen mit Albinismus in Nordwesttansania international Aufmerksamkeit auf sich. Gerüchte, dass die Knochen der Menschen mit Albinismus ein zwingender Bestandteil von magischen Mitteln, die Reichtum versprachen, seien, provozierten diese Morde, die keine Vorläufer in Tansania oder der lokalen Ethnie der Sukuma hatten. Dieses Working Paper erläutert die Entstehung der Gerüchte vor dem Hintergrund, was es bedeutet, in Tansania mit Albinismus zu leben und untersucht sie im Hinblick auf eine häufiger auftretende Tendenz, sich angesichts ökonomischer Unsicherheit auf Magie zu besinnen. Es wird argumentiert, dass die Besonderheiten des Bergbaus und des Fischfangs als ‚casino capitalism‘ ein internationales Fluidum an Gerüchten („rumorscape“) entstehen lassen, innerhalb dessen Geschichten von nah und fern ausgetauscht, fusioniert, adaptiert und von einigen ‚witchdoctors‘ zu erträglichen Geschäftsmodellen gemacht werden. Die Gerüchte und Morde müssen als neues Phänomen begriffen werden, nicht als eine Rückbesinnung auf traditionelle *modi operandi* der Magie der lokalen Sukuma. Erst, wenn die Unsicherheiten der Leute, die im Bergbau und Fischfang arbeiten, beseitigt werden, wird es möglich sein, solche Morde in Zukunft zu verhindern.

### About the Author

Judith Schühle, M.A., studied Social and Cultural Anthropology as well as Art History at the Freie Universität Berlin, Uppsala Universitet and Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg. After graduating in 2010, she worked as research assistant at the National Museums in Berlin. Since 2013, she is a research fellow at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin within in the DFG funded project 'African Medical Migration: Nigerian Doctors in the USA between Conflicting Priorities of Moral, Economic and Professional Commitment'.

## Medicine murder of people with albinism in Tanzania – how casino capitalism creates rumorscapes and occult economies

### Introduction

Tanzania being an East-African state with little conflict and seemingly steady – if slow – economic progress hardly ever made it into the big news magazines of the so called Western world in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2008 however, it all of a sudden found itself in the limelight. News about the murder of people with albinism in Tanzania began to spread internationally (cf. Ntetema 2008, Scheen 2009). The murders were soon connected to rumors according to which the bones of people with albinism were a necessary ingredient in money-making magic. The Tanzanian people, the international press and public argued, was taking a step ‘backwards’ to ‘tradition’, they had once again retreated to black magic.

The news coverage rarely dug deeper to investigate the underlying problems behind this retreat to violence. Likewise, medical or sociological literature on albinism in Africa and especially in Tanzania is scarce. In 2009, I set out to conduct fieldwork in Northwest Tanzania in order to thoroughly analyze the murders in the most affected area.<sup>1</sup> The material gathered during my time in Tanzania later became the basis for my master thesis.<sup>2</sup> As the murders were said to be connected to a situation of economic deprivation, I was particularly interested in how people interpreted their economic condition and what this revealed about the structural problems they were facing. Why did some members of society resort to such drastic measures as using human bones in order to enhance their economic situation? And more specifically, how and why did the rumors about the wealth-bringing potency of these particular bones develop right then and right there?

Whereas the focus of this paper will be the analysis of the situation in Northwest Tanzania in which these rumors arose, I argue that the findings also reveal more general implications about the recourse to magic in other countries with great economic disparity and dangerous workspaces. As the killings of people with albinism are mainly connected to people working

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<sup>1</sup> At that time, the only publication on the killings of people with albinism in Tanzania was an Advocacy Report by the International Red Cross (International Red Cross 2009). The first scientific analysis was published in 2010 (cf. Bryceson et al. 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The data was collected for a Magister thesis at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin (Schühle 2010). I am deeply indebted to all the people who during my fieldwork shared their views, knowledge and most importantly their everyday life with me.

within the industries of fishing and mining, I will broaden the regional focus of this paper by briefly looking at magical and moral interpretations in other parts of Africa and the world where these industries play an important role. As will be shown, this paper will thus shed some light upon the question of the transmission and migration of moral imaginaries, of the 'local' versus the 'regional', of the creation of what I would like to call 'rumorscapes' following Appadurai's notion of '-scapes' (Appadurai 2003 [1996]).

Rumors are dynamic stories "[...] and spin off each other like many-headed hydras to simultaneously inform and confound listeners and to become more entangled as they spread and multiply." (Masquelier 2000: 90) They are constantly reinterpreted and reinvented, catering to local needs to explain the seemingly inexplicable, thereby giving people the impression to (re)gain control over situations perceived as obscure (cf. Dilger 2005: 329). I therefore argue that it is especially in economic situations of "casino capitalism" (Strange 1986), dangerous workspaces, international markets and labor migration that rumors about the potency of the bones of people with albinism can spread and turn into a spate of killings. I aim to explain that the imaginaries which thus come into being do not necessarily feed on local or traditional systems of belief but emerge out of particular economic contexts and therefore are not embedded in cultural affiliation but rather bound to for instance certain professions and markets. I thus hope to contribute to a wider discussion in anthropology on "magical interpretations" of "material realities" and modernities (Moore and Sanders 2001).

## Materials and method

The following material is mainly based on a two-month-long period of fieldwork in the rural northwest of Tanzania during May and June 2009.<sup>3</sup> Gathering information on sensitive topics such as people's private economies, let alone topics such as magic, witchcraft or 'the occult' is demanding and doing research on 'ritual killings' even more so. Tanzanian journalists who had reported on the murders were facing death threats<sup>4</sup> and journalists criticized that the government had tried to manipulate their investigations.<sup>5</sup> The presence of myself, a white, young European woman, certainly also raised suspicion. Consequently, instead of formal interviews, it was only

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<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork was partly supported by an undergraduate scholarship of the DAAD.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ntetema (2008), see also: N.n. (2009): Norwegian Journalist Told Off by Former Mwanza RC.

<sup>5</sup> Kabendera (2009).

possible to gather information through chats and informal inquiries in Kiswahili and English in which I carefully worked towards ‘stumbling across’ my actual topic of interest. Obviously, the quantity and quality of the material gained this way is determined more by the informants than by the researcher and this limitation of information makes it difficult to validate the information gathered. I therefore decided to include national and international newspaper articles as sources after carefully crosschecking the information provided there and in some cases contacting the journalists. Additionally, I relied on documentaries about the murders, particularly “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts” by Greek filmmaker Yorgos Avgeropoulos.<sup>6</sup> To complement these voices, I was with the help of MWANZA e.V., a friendship organization in Würzburg, Germany, also able to conduct an e-mail interview with the secretary of the umbrella organization of the people with disabilities in Mwanza. Besides the challenges outlined, the more open approach to gathering information also yielded the advantage that I became aware of other popular (moral) interpretations of economic situations. These gave me a better understanding of the daily struggles, expectations and dreams of the people in rural Tanzania. Finally, in the anthropological tradition of participant observation, I tried to involve myself as much as possible in village life and profited immensely from the opportunity to help out at the village’s small store as the interaction with the customers provided useful insights into the people’s economic situation.

My group of informants was composed of both men and women, most of them under the age of 40. Some of them were undergoing vocational training, others were subsistence farmers or had small scale businesses, a few had university degrees; some of my informants spent most of their time in the village of my research while others lived in a shanty town on the road to Mwanza from which they commuted to the village on a daily basis.<sup>7</sup>

### **People with Albinism in African societies**

The murders of people with albinism appeared all of a sudden in Tanzania,

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<sup>6</sup> I am aware of the fact that “[f]ilms are cultural and symbolic forms [...]” (Denzin 2004: 242) and that “[...] a documentary film [...] is not merely a neutral document or record of things that took place before the camera [...]” (Banks 2007: 12f.). Using the secondary data provided by film as the only source of material would be problematic. I however can put the scenes from the documentary into context and verify them in comparison to my own fieldwork data.

<sup>7</sup> Due to the sensitivity of my topic of research, I refrain from going into greater detail when it comes to my informants and unless they are persons of public life such as politicians, they will remain anonymous in this working paper.



and, as will be shown, had no precursors. In order to embed the killings into the wider context of living with albinism in Tanzania it is important to review the literature on albinism in Sub-Saharan Africa especially from a sociological point of view. Medically speaking, albinism is the inability of the skin to produce the pigment melanin (cf. Hong et al. 2006). People with albinism have white skin, light blond hair and light colored, sometimes reddish, eyes. The recessively passed on genetic defect also causes eye impediments such as nystagmus or even blindness. In Sub-Saharan Africa, skin cancer poses an additional problem as sunscreen for the oversensitive skin is rarely available (Luande et al. 1985). Their poor health condition makes people with albinism especially vulnerable to poverty, as they tend to be less educated than the rest of the population (McBride and Leppard 2002: 632, see also “A Skin-deep African affliction”, N.n. 2000: 38).

Whereas there is only one person with albinism per 17,000 people in the U.S.A.<sup>8</sup>, the condition is more common in East Africa. The Tanzanian government<sup>9</sup> estimates that 1 out of 5,000 Tanzanians is born with albinism, Hong et al. (2006) even report a ratio of 1 case of albinism per 1,400 births. It is obvious that the condition is more noticeable in Africa and thus also spurs more moral imaginaries in society (Hong et al. 2006).<sup>10</sup> However, qualitative studies about albinism in African societies of today, especially in Tanzania are scarce. With their visible, supposed otherness, people with albinism are often perceived as resisting definition and refusing to fit predefined categories.<sup>11</sup> The fact that albinism is passed on recessively and there-

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<sup>8</sup> National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation (n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> The press Release by Professor David Homeli Mwakyusa (MP), Minister of Health and Social Welfare Regarding 2008 Tanzania Disability Survey, on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 2009 in Dodoma speaks of 8,193 people with albinism.

<sup>10</sup> Demeaning beliefs about people with Albinism also exist in Western culture. Hollywood often portrays them in blockbusters such as “End of Days” (Peter Hyams, 1999) or “The Da Vinci Code” (Ron Howard, 2006) as the prototypical mysterious bad guys. Cf. also Wan (2003) who regarding North America concludes: “the general public holds many misconceptions about the condition. Thus, remarks such as that people with albinism are ‘demons’ or posses ‘special powers’ are often made” (Wan 2003: 287).

<sup>11</sup> In his analysis of historical sources on people with albinism Lagercrantz distinguishes three regional variations of imaginaries: “[...] there is the western African region, from Senegal to roughly the borderlands between Nigeria and Cameroun (the albino was created by ‘God’), the central African region, covering mainly the Lower Congo and the adjacent regions of Loango and Angola (the albino is a *nkisi* person [*an incarnation of a water spirit in human form*]) and the eastern African region, corresponding primarily to the Central Lakes region and the adjacent parts of Katanga, Rhodesia and Nyasaland (the albino is the child of a

fore two dark skinned parents can have a child with albinism makes it difficult to understand the condition as hereditary. People therefore turn toward moral imaginaries to find explanations for the seemingly arbitrary recurrence of the condition. In Tanzania, the white skin of an infant born with albinism can for instance be taken as evidence that the baby's mother had had an affair with a white person (Görge 2003: 59). In Malawi, the condition of albinism is thought to be contagious: "A very common myth in Malawi is that if a pregnant woman looks at a person with albinism, she will have a child with albinism herself. It is said that one way to prevent this from happening is for the pregnant woman to spit on the ground if she has looked at a person with albinism." (Braathen and Ingstad 2006: 605).<sup>12</sup> In Mali, among the Bamana and Maninka, people with albinism are considered to be twins. Whereas the latter are, however, thought to possess positive, extraordinary powers, people with albinism here are "[...] sometimes feared because they are the result of behavioral departures from social norms" (Imperato and Imperato 2006: 204). Moreover, as people with albinism here are supposed to stem directly from *Faro*, one of the deities responsible for creation, "[...] albinos are considered excellent sacrificial victims to *Faro* because of their powerful *nyama* [vital life force, energy or power]." (Imperato and Imperato 2006: 217, original emphasis). A survey conducted by an outreach-program to support the needs of people with albinism in the Kilimanjaro region in Tanzania showed that such beliefs were even widespread among the people with albinism themselves: "Although 59 (63%) respondents had an albino relative, only 13 (14%) believed albinism to be an inherited condition. More common were beliefs in numerous local superstitions explaining the cause of albinism. Most of these concerned a curse being put on the family or the mother eating with an albino or shaking hands with an albino." (McBride, Leppard 2002: 630).<sup>13</sup>

It is also known that, among the Maasai of Tanzania, babies born with albinism were regarded as bad omen and either killed or left to die. According to the secretary of the umbrella organization of the people with disabilities in Mwanza, the same was done in Sukumaland – the area of my research – in the past: "Albino children have been killed or abandoned in Sukuma tribe for a long time because they were bad omens."<sup>14</sup> He also noted that "[m]any people think that albinos are witches because [the] sun makes their eyes

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'spiritual agency', the dignity of which may vary from that of the Supreme Being down to the Satan; usually, this being is to be found among the malevolent agencies)." (Lagercrantz 1979: 75).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Livingston (2008: 299) for similar beliefs in Botswana.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Okoro 1975: 491 for similar beliefs in Nigeria.

<sup>14</sup> Personal correspondence via e-mail, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009.



red.”<sup>15</sup> According to Bieker, people with albinism in Tanzania are commonly considered to be lazy, as they hardly ever work their fields during midday like others but prefer the hours around sunset and sunrise to protect their skin (Bieker 2006: 59). Bieker also states that people with albinism were thought to disappear instead of dying (Bieker 2006: 68).<sup>16</sup>

The negative connotations are summed up in the Swahili word for a person with albinism: *zeruzeru* (also spelled *zeru zeru* or *zeluzelu*) which is generally translated as ghost.<sup>17</sup> According to Görgen, the term *zeruzeru* comes from the English ‘zero’, thus implying uselessness: “Man nennt sie *Zeruzeru*, vom englischen Zero, auf Deutsch Doppelnullen, nutzlose Wesen.“ (Görgen 2003: 59). This derivation does, however, seem farfetched. The term *mtoto wa mazeru*, child with albinism, was already in use in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lagercrantz 1979: 62), speaking against the term’s root in the English language. The 1939 edition of the ‘Dictionnaire Swahili-Français’ of the Paris Institut d’Ethnologie sheds some light on the word’s origin: *Zeru-zeru* here is supposed to stem from *zeu-zeu*, which translates into French ‘albinos’ and its roots are specified to lie in the Bantu languages Kizaramo and Kizigua. In these two languages, *zeru* means cendré (Engl. ‘ashen’) or blanc (Engl. ‘white’) (Institut d’Ethnologie 1939: 1039). Originally the term *mtoto wa mazeru*, and later the term *zeruzeru*, therefore descriptively referred to the whiteness of the skin of people with albinism. Today, however, the word’s origins seem forgotten and the opinion that it means ‘ghost’ dominates. People with albinism suffer from the use of this derogative term which places them into a sphere between the living and the dead, into a category of ‘in-betweens’ which are often thought to harass the living. Al-Shymaa John Kwegyir, a Tanzanian woman with albinism who was appointed Member of Parliament by President Kikwete in 2008, recalls her own experiences:

“I remember I have been discriminated in school. [...] I have been chased with a crowd of children behind me. Throwing names to me of discrimina-

<sup>15</sup> Personal correspondence via e-mail, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009. Among the Sukuma, a person’s eyes are thought of as a means to transmit evil powers, casting spells or causing physical pain.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Diakité (1992: 119) for similar reasoning among the Bamana: “[...] l’albinos ‘yefege’ [...] n’est pas enterré à sa mort mais enfoui dans une ruche.”

<sup>17</sup> Derogatory name-calling for people with albinism also exists in other societies. In Nigeria, “[t]he Efik name [for albinos] is rather derogatory and means literally ‘a white man from the bush’. Albinos are taunted from the cradle to the grave with such names as ‘D.O.’ (District Officer), a reference to the days when District Officers were Europeans” (Okoro 1975: 485). In North America, “‘Whitey’, ‘Powder’, ‘Ghost’ and ‘Casper’ are just a few of the derogatory names [...]” (Wan 2003: 284).

tion. [...] *Zeruzeru* is the most they like, the children here in Tanzania. They like that word. You know *zeruzeru* is like a nobody. Also a ghost, they normally use a ghost. [...] They are running with different types of words. But the most word they use is *zeruzeru*, running after you, a crowd of children, calling names behind you which makes you feel like you are not needed in that area. [...]”<sup>18</sup>

Keeping these past and present imaginaries about people with albinism and their living situation in mind, we can now turn towards the most recent rumors connected to this condition – the claim that the body parts of people with albinism possess extraordinary powers.

### The murder of people with albinism for wealth

According to the secretary of the umbrella organization of the people with disabilities in Mwanza “the killings started in October 2006 in Bunda.”<sup>19</sup> What in the beginning might have still seemed coincidental soon turned into a spate of killings which could no longer be downplayed by the government. These killings predominantly took place in Sukumaland in Tanzania’s northwest around the bustling city of Mwanza on the shore of Lake Victoria. Up until September 2009, there had been 54 killings of people with albinism, though reported numbers vary. Children, women and men all seemed equally vulnerable to these attacks.<sup>20</sup> The news of these killings spread quickly beyond the borders of Tanzania and international coverage was spurred on by Vicky Ntetema, a Tanzanian BBC reporter, who had conducted undercover investigations that showed how local ‘witchdoctors’<sup>21</sup> were behind the killings as they claimed that magic potions could be made from bones of people with albinism and that these would bring riches and wealth

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<sup>18</sup> Interview in “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts”.

<sup>19</sup> Personal correspondence via e-mail, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009. Bunda lies in Mara region in Northeast Tanzania. Through it passes the tarmac road connecting Nairobi, Kenya with Tanzanian and Zambian economic centers such as Mwanza.

<sup>20</sup> An incomplete list given to me by the secretary of the umbrella organization of the people with disabilities in Mwanza states the death of six middle aged men, four women, one boy and three girls.

<sup>21</sup> I adopt the term ‘witchdoctor’ from my informants who used it when discussing the issue with me. By using quotation marks, I would like to highlight that the use of the term is problematic. Whenever arguments are centered around healers, diviners and traditional doctors in general, who are not necessarily involved in money-making magic with the help of human bones, I will use the term ‘traditional doctors’.

to businessmen.<sup>22</sup> Following her report all of the major media in the Western world ran stories about the killings (c.f. Scheen 2009, Gettleman 2008).

Journalists and politicians soon referred to the killings as ‘ritual killings’ and ‘human sacrifice’<sup>23</sup>, underscoring a retreat to the occult. The terms ‘sacrifice’ and ‘ritual’ imply an “enactment of meaning” (Rappaport 2002 [1999]). Rituals are performances in which both audience and “[...] participants must be trained, indoctrinated or otherwise prepared to receive the messages [they] transmit” (Rappaport 2002 [1999]: 448). I therefore argue that it is misleading to label the attacks on Tanzanians with albinism ‘ritual killings’ for the attacks do not have a specific meaning, are neither performed by initiated people nor directed at a specific audience. Most attacks occur in the family compound. The killers enter the victim’s houses and see no need in abducting the people with albinism. Mariam, a young Tanzanian woman with albinism recounts that at around one o’clock in the night people entered her family’s home and immediately started to cut off her arms with a machete.<sup>24</sup> The mother of Vomilia, a young woman with albinism who lived in a small fishing village on the shores of Lake Victoria, reportedly recounts how she tried to keep the door shut when the attackers violently tried to enter her home during the night of the fatal attack on her daughter. They cut off Vomilia’s right leg with a machete and disappeared into the dark.<sup>25</sup> The assaults are sudden intrusions, leaving families and neighbors with no chance to chase the attackers. The general pattern of the attacks shows that the act itself is a means to an end – to obtain body parts which are deemed necessary in money-making magic – and not an end in itself as a ritual would be. In other words: the attack itself contains no deeper meaning, how it is executed does not have any influence on the potency of the body parts thus obtained.<sup>26</sup> This view is shared by G. I. Jones who examined murders in Basutoland in Swaziland in the late 1940s:

“This term ‘ritual’, which implies religious or magic rite, is not a particularly happy one [...]. The [murders] are not committed from any religious motives but for the purely material objective of cutting from the body of the victim strips of flesh or portions of particular organs, [...] used in the making of certain magical compounds usually called ‘protective medicine’” (Jones 1951: 12).

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<sup>22</sup> Ntetema (2008).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Mocek (2010); also Oloya (2009); as well as: N.n. (2009): *Albino African Seeks Spain Asylum*.

<sup>24</sup> Interview in “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts”.

<sup>25</sup> Interview in “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts”.

<sup>26</sup> The death of the victim is for instance not a necessary prerequisite for the medicine’s effect.

Rituals that involved human sacrifice did exist, and as mentioned earlier there were cases among the Bamana and Maninka in Mali in which people with albinism were deemed perfect human sacrifices. The recent killings in Tanzania however in my opinion can only be called *hit and run medicine murders*.

The people with albinism are also rarely attacked by their closest family members. On the contrary, it is their household unit that provides them with a sense of security (cf. also Bieker 2006: 38f.). Whereas the attackers usually come from further away and do not personally know their victims, distant relatives or people living in the vicinity collaborate with the killers as they are being paid to pass on any information about a person with albinism. During the attack Mariam for instance was able to identify the person who assisted the attackers. There seems to be a distinct division of labor: there are those who pass on information, those who execute the attacks, and finally those who charge the killers, as one of my informants explained: “The people, they go to the witchdoctor and then he says ‘bring me a finger of such a person [*a person with albinism*]’ or I don’t know, ‘a leg of such a person and I will make so that you are rich.’”<sup>27</sup> The ‘witchdoctors’ then are the ones elaborating rumors on the potency of the bones of people with albinism and encourage their customers to buy some from the killers, but they are not the ones who execute the deeds.

These claims made by ‘witchdoctors’ about the wealth-bringing potency of the bones of people with albinism are new to Tanzania. As Tanzanians with albinism interviewed by Bieker (2006: 68ff) in the beginning of the millennium did not mention such rumors when asked about prejudices towards them, one can assume that the hunting for bones of people with albinism had, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not yet set in. A report by the International Red Cross on the situation of people with albinism in the Great Lake region similarly concludes that

“[...] on one point all [...] agree: the use of the *body parts* of murdered albinos as good-luck charms suddenly came from nowhere and seems to have been the result of a kind of marketing exercise by witch doctors, who are feeling the same economic pinch as everyone else around the world” (International Red Cross 2009: 11, original emphasis).

The killings thus must be seen in direct connection with new claims spread by some ‘witchdoctors’ that the bones of people with albinism were a necessary ingredient in a wealth-bringing magic potion. But why *their* bones and

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<sup>27</sup> Interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009 with a young male professional. This was also confirmed by the secretary of the umbrella organization of people with disabilities in Mwanza via e-mail, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

not just any?

## Commodifying the bones of people with albinism

Commenting on a ‘ritual killing’ (to use Smith’s term) that happened in 1996 in Nigeria, where a little boy was kidnapped and later found dead with several body parts missing, one of Smith’s informants said: “We Africans have a long tradition of sacrificing human life to seek power and wealth. But in the past, one always had to kill a kinsman. [...] This imposed limits and costs to taking a human life. It is not so easy to kill your relation. But now these people kill anybody to satisfy their greed. We are in trouble” (Smith 2001: 820). Smith’s informant implies that there no longer seems to be a typical victim, thus making the threat of falling prey omnipresent. Reliable moral boundaries to protect the people have seemingly vanished just as the ways leading towards or away from economic success have become less obvious.<sup>28</sup> By choosing people with albinism, however only people already demarcated as outcasts of society are affected in Tanzania. Choosing this minority group means cradling the population at large in safety and keeping criticism at bay.<sup>29</sup>

The limitation to people with albinism also means that the number of the commodity in question – the bones – can artificially be kept low and thus the prices for this more ‘exclusive product’ can be set at a high level. Spreading rumors about the potency of the bones of people with albinism then resembles a clever business-plan.<sup>30</sup>

Journalist Rico Czerwienski, who was able to talk to a man in Kahangara allegedly involved in the trade of body parts, recounts how the commodities were treated:

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<sup>28</sup> On moral boundaries in the cases of medicine murder in Basutoland during the 20<sup>th</sup> century see Mabiiri 1986: 45f.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. „[...] die traditionelle Haltung der Gesellschaft Albinos gegenüber ist günstigstenfalls von Teilnahmslosigkeit geprägt“ (Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung 2009: 3).

<sup>30</sup> It is not my intention to claim that there was a person mapping out the killings of people with albinism onto a business plan; yet I intend to show that these killings follow an internal logic that – be it intended or accidental – strongly resembles capitalist marketing strategies where ‘limited editions’ of commodities artificially impose a limit on the number of potential buyers, thus raising the price. The fact that non-cadaverous material is primarily sought after and not organs or skin which would easily decompose in Tanzania’s tropical climate also speaks for the fact that careful thought was put into what kind of material could be said to possess magical powers and later commodified.

“The demand is said to be huge, the prices went up, there is a large variety of price categories. First, there are the ‘fresh bones’ which were hunted only recently. There are the ‘old bones’, they would be exhumed from the graves of albinos. A leg bone would be worth more than a finger bone, bones of children more than those of adults. ‘The most expensive bones are from [*the town*] Bariadi’. The origin, too, has a bearing on the price. He [*the seller*] at-tests their authenticity with a test. You take an albino bone and a radio. You pass the bone in front of the radio. [...] The stronger the interference of the loudspeaker, the better the bone.”<sup>31</sup>

The same test is performed by a merchant in the documentary, ‘Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts’. Filmed with a hidden camera, the transaction proceeds. A piece of bone is passed in front of a radio, causing barely noticeable interference. The customers take that as evidence that the bones are quite old and thus try to lower the price. They settle at 1,300,000 TZS and the customers leave with their purchase.<sup>32</sup>

The bones represent an expensive commodity which seemingly only already rich people could afford. According to the International Red Cross, “Senior police officers in Dar es Salaam said a complete set of albino body parts – including all four limbs, genitals, ears, tongue and nose – was fetching the equivalent of 75,000 US dollars” (International Red Cross 2009: 5). Although this particular sum seems somewhat exaggerated when compared to other sources, it symbolizes that the trade certainly ‘pays off’. Yet the ‘witchdoctors’ also make sure that less well-off people can afford their magic potions. In the documentary “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts” a miner who talks about going to the ‘witchdoctor’ to obtain magic which will help him find gold, explains: “[...] when you hit a gold lode, you are obliged to take all the money to [the ‘witchdoctor’] first. He keeps a sum, as much as he wants, and gives you back the rest and gives you even stronger charms to dig out even more gold.”<sup>33</sup> The ‘witchdoctor’ thus invests in the miner and ties the client to his business: he is given medicine as symbolic or magical loan, and as soon as he finds gold, pays back his debt in money.

While Todd Sanders sees the reflections about the use of human skin in medicine thought to procure wealth in Southern Tanzania in 1999 as “[...] musings over the (il)logical conclusion of unbridled liberalization – a world

<sup>31</sup> Czerwinski 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Undercover footage in “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts”. 1,300,000 TZS equal approximately \$ 960, which, considering an average per capita income of \$ 366 (cf. UNdata Tanzania n.d.), is a sum that the majority of Tanzanians cannot afford.

<sup>33</sup> Interview in “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts”.



where *everything* is commodified through and through” (Sanders 2001a: 178, original emphasis), this I argue, is not the case in Tanzania today. The body parts of people with albinism are indeed turned into commodities, yet this seems to be neither a result of deeper musings over nor a critical review of prevalent commodification. It is no longer *everything* that is being commodified and not everything is commodified randomly. On the contrary, it is now only very specific items that are being sold with specific aims. This does not only apply to the case of bones of people with albinism. While tracing the life lines in the palm of his right hand one of my informants explained:

“Do you see these lines here? There are also people in Tanzania who kill people whose lines form an ‘M’. [...] Maybe it is ‘M’ for money, I don’t know. These people, they think that with the bones of those people you can become rich.”<sup>34</sup>

Whereas I have not heard of an actual murder in this case, it is interesting to note that here, too, a certain group of people has been selected – that again not everybody’s bones can be commodified.

The selling of bones as well as hair of people with albinism therefore cannot be interpreted as a criticism of the universal commodification which takes place under capitalism. What the commodification of the bodies of people with albinism shows is that entrepreneurial ideas can take on dirty faces as new and highly profitable occult markets are being established in a time when demand seems to be high for such items. Thus concludes the secretary of the umbrella organization of people with disabilities in Mwanza: “This is a new belief, made up by the witchdoctors, *it’s a business*.”<sup>35</sup>

I do not, however, think that this “use of the *body parts* of murdered albinos as good-luck charms suddenly came from nowhere” (International Red Cross 2009: 11, original emphasis). One possible origin of the rumors might be found with the Bamana and Maninka of Mali who hold that

“[e]ven the various body parts of an albino are viewed as endowed with special powers, thus adding to their risk of being used for sacrifices. The head assures a large family and prosperity; the hair brings riches; the bone marrow brings gold and copper; the excrement produces a good harvest; and sitting on the interred bones of an albino assures that wishes are granted. The Bamana consider albinos so powerful that even after death they will attempt to disinter them” (Imperato and Imperato 2006: 218).

<sup>34</sup> Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2009 with a young male professional.

<sup>35</sup> Personal correspondence via e-mail, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009, my emphasis.

Whereas it is not necessarily here that the roots for the rumors which appeared in Tanzania lie, this example shows that the claims about the wealth-bringing potency of bones of people with albinism is not foreign to some regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. It is therefore necessary to scrutinize the idea of how such claims might have been transported from other Sub-Saharan regions to Tanzania through the means of rumors and gossip and why they so gruesomely materialized especially in Northwest Tanzania around 2006.

### **The casino capitalism of mining and fishing as breeding ground for rumors**

One striking similarity in all accounts on killings of people with albinism in Tanzania is that the people looking for the magic potion work primarily in two specific industries: mining and fishing. This was confirmed by one of my informants who, upon my question as to why the beliefs in the wealth-bringing potency were present particularly in northwest Tanzania, said that “it is especially in this region because we have the lake [*Lake Victoria*] here and the mines.”<sup>36</sup> Another one of my informants explained to me that the magic potion administered “[...] depends on *who* goes to see the witchdoctor”<sup>37</sup>, meaning that there are different potions for different professions. Both the mining and fishing industries hold a huge share in the economy of Sukumaland. In the following, I argue that the specific characteristics of these industries are the breeding ground for such rumors. Parallel to and equally transgressing as the market of international consumer goods, there exists a market of rumors within an occult economy. It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at the two industries and their economic context which enable what I would like to call a trans-local ‘rumorscape’.

Ever since the abolishment of the mining monopoly of Tanzania’s State Mining Company (STAMICO) in the late 1980s, the mining business has seen a boom (Phillips et al. 2001: 5).<sup>38</sup> Tanzania has industrialized, large-scale mining sites run by international companies who mainly employ unskilled laborers. Small-scale mining by artisanal miners who are not associated with big companies is also very widespread. Gold, diamonds and other colored gems such as Tanzanite are the mineral resources that make up the

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<sup>36</sup> Interview, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2009 with a young male professional. Note that he immediately and without my mentioning of economic reasons pointed towards these industries and not, for instance, to the fact that Sukuma magic is known as very powerful (see below).

<sup>37</sup> Interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009 with a young male professional.

<sup>38</sup> For a general overview over the history of mining in Tanzania, see Chachage 1995: 48ff.

largest part of Tanzania's mining. According to Phillips et al.

“Mwanza is the major secondary market for minerals from the central and lake zone mining areas. Gold is the main commodity traded there. [...] Participants estimated that 95% of the gold is traded on the parallel market in Mwanza and later smuggled to neighbouring countries” (Phillips et al. 2001: 21).

Whereas in 1998, gold and minerals hardly had an impact in total exports, by 2005, they made up 56 percent (World Bank 2007: 3). Mining was also claimed to have a poverty-alleviating effect in rural areas: “the mining sector had added another 46% of middle income jobs to the total employment, mostly in the early 1990s. *No other sector has reduced rural poverty on such a scale.*” (Phillips et al. 2001: 5, my emphasis). In its more recent report the World Bank however is critical of the development:

“[...] the mining sector seems to have had limited influence on reducing poverty in the local economy. [...] Returns are very low, especially when one considers the hardship associated with this kind of employment/labor. It seems, furthermore, that an increasing income disparity is emerging between those employed in small-scale mining and those employed in the large-scale sector.” (World Bank 2007: 246f., see also Wijzen and Tanner 2002: 146f.).

In short, mining is “casino capitalism” (Strange 1986) par excellence. To start with, the sheer invisibility of the product makes finding a lode of gold bound to serendipity. Additionally, returns may be huge and mining may appear as a way to become rich instantly. The stakes one puts into the game are on the other hand very high. Especially small-scale mining was considered to be extremely dangerous. One of my informants, a young man, told me:

“I don't know [if I would work in a mine]. I would not feel well there. Many people go there and look for work [...]. But in the mines, it is very dangerous work. In January [2009] for example, there was a big accident. More than 20 people were killed.”

And another informant added:

“Yes, it is so at local mines. The people, they just dig a very deep hole and they dig themselves. When it rains, then the hole fills with rain and the tunnel collapses. The people who are still in, they die.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Interview, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2009 with a young male professional. Cf. N.n. (2009): Oxfam Says 70 Killed in Tanzania Mine Floods.

It is therefore not surprising that the people in this particular industry try everything to ensure that luck is on their side and it is in this climate that some of them pick up rumors and turn towards magic in the pursuit of wealth (cf. Bryceson et al. 2010: 361, Phillips et al. 2001: 69). The rumor about the potency of bones of people with albinism began to spread when the mining industry in Northwest Tanzania was especially troubled:

“During 2007, Geita faced a number of production challenges. Exceptionally high staff turnover in a fiercely competitive labour market, an untimely wall failure in one of the main producing open pits, as well as specific orebody dilution challenges within an area of the Geita Hill open pit which had previously been extracted by underground methods, all contributed to a performance that fell short of expectations” (AngloGold Ashanti 2007: 1).

A miner, working at the gold mine in Mgusu and interviewed in the movie *Zeru Zeru* explains: “I don’t get paid weekly. It is a matter of luck, you see. You can find gold today and become rich but you can also work for years and come up with nothing.”<sup>40</sup> Another miner in the same documentary tells:

“If you want to dig out gold, you have to go to the witchdoctor first. He cleanses you and you make a fortune because you know that bad people are obscuring your star. So when you come to the mine you have to follow the instructions he gave you and prepare the charm accordingly. He might give you a concoction that you mix with water and burn some herbs and you wash with it. Then when you get down in the mine you can see clearly the gold deposit. And you get so much gold out that if you sell it you can make 10 to 20 million Shillingi. Therefore, we think that if you don’t go to the witchdoctor, you will make little, only to survive, not to go forward. [...] I wash with it [*the medicine from the ‘witchdoctor’*].”<sup>41</sup>

When being asked about the ingredients of the potion he uses to wash with, he says: “[...] that is the witchdoctor’s secret, he does not say how he makes the concoction, it is hard to know.”<sup>42</sup> The miner states that the magic potion enables one to see exactly where the gold is hidden. Whereas two of my informants also said that the magic potion would “help people find the minerals when they go into the mines”<sup>43</sup> and “that it would make you find a lot of diamonds”<sup>44</sup>, another one of my informants claimed that the potion

<sup>40</sup> Interview in “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts”.

<sup>41</sup> Interview in “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts”.

<sup>42</sup> Interview in “Zeru Zeru – the Ghosts”.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009 with a young male professional.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009 with a young male professional.

made from bones of people with albinism will make the miner invisible: “When they [*the miners*] work in the mines, they will become invisible and so they can take out many minerals without being seen.”<sup>45</sup> The first interpretation of how the magic potion works could be said to mirror the physical difficulties of finding minerals which are hidden in the ground. The second description of the magic, though, rather reflects a social conflict that is overcome with the help of the magic potion: by making the miner and the product invisible, he is able to smuggle his wealth out of the mine without being seen by others who might want a share in it.

The harsh working conditions, the high profits at equally high risks, etc. are not limited to mining in Tanzania. Just as these conditions are also prevalent in other regions of the world such as South America or Melanesia, so are the magical restrictions and rumors connected to mining.<sup>46</sup> Among the people of Qamarwara in Peru when mining, “[c]ertain prohibitions had to be scrupulously observed. [...] The ore had to be removed from the ground with a silver spoon. But this was the moment of greatest danger, for the gold was guarded by demons (Quechua *supay*, Spanish *diablo*), who might attack a prospector and sap him of his life-force.” (Sallnow 1991: 212, original emphasis). In Bolivia, tin-miners worshiped little figurines representing the devil with whom the miners make contracts: “Without the goodwill of this spirit, effected through ritual, both mineral production and the miners’ lives are imperiled” (Taussig 1980: 144). To appease those guardians of the mines and their thirst for blood, the miners collectively sacrificed a llama at certain times in the year as well as after accidents (Taussig 1980: 147ff). In Papua New Guinea the miners among the Hamtai carefully build up and maintain relations with the spirits who are said to inhabit the mined land and who are held responsible for the creation of minerals through food and valuable offerings (Moretti 2007).

Among migrants from Mozambique working in South African goldmines at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was believed that witchcraft practitioners employed the life essence of deceased miners which had been buried without requisite rituals on the mines and thus seemingly gained fortunes ef-

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<sup>45</sup> Interview, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2009 with a middle aged male professional.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. also „Die risikoreiche bergmännische Arbeit und ihr abgeschiedener Schauplatz unter Tage, [...] die geheimnisumwitterte Montansphäre überhaupt lassen ein Fluidum des Ungewöhnlichen und Erregenden entstehen, aus dem Vorahnungen, Tabus, abergläubische Vorstellungen erwachsen. [...] Der Glaube an geisterhafte Mächte in den Gruben war allen Bergleuten über die Welt hin gemeinsam, aber die Verkörperungen variieren vielfach in den einzelnen Revieren“ (Heilfurth 1981: 208f.).

fortlessly (Harries 1994: 221).<sup>47</sup> Moreover,

“[w]orkers were constantly threatened by the spirits of deceased miners [...]. They were captured by these spirits and, transmogrified into the zombies called *dlukula*, were forced to labour several days without pay on a diet of mud” (Harries 1994: 221).

Similar to the situation in Tanzania, Harries (1994: 221) describes this as a “new and virulent form of witchcraft” which developed in the face of a strongly perceived unequal distribution of wealth. Lastly, after a devastating accident in Burkina Faso, in which about sixty mineworkers were killed in 2001, rumor had it that the gold had ‘eaten’ the victims and that their corpses would later turn into gold. According to these rumors, corpses were allegedly decapitated. The victim’s skull was then supposedly buried in areas with gold deposits only to be reburied after a while when it had turned into pure gold (Werthmann 2001: 363f.).

Besides the mining industry, the magic potion made from bodies of people with albinism is also said to be used by fishermen, for instance by weaving the hair of people with albinism into the nets. Fishing, like mining is an industry which has been on the rise during the last couple of years in North-west Tanzania, drawing a large crowd of migrant workers but facing similar challenges: “There is concern that both the gold and fishing industries are reaching the limits of expansion of natural resource extraction, with only limited prospects of future growth” (World Bank 2007: 22). In Mwanza, the fishing port ironically is right opposite of Capri Point, a hill where all those who have been able to profit disproportionately over the last few years have built their Western-style villas which must seem like the donkey’s carrot on a stick in front of the fishermen’s eyes. Fleets of small wooden fishing boats belonging to businessmen are operated by local fishermen. The fishing of Nile Perch, which is almost entirely exported to Europe and the U.S. is big business. Due to overfishing the export has however dropped considerably.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, more and more men try to find their luck in the business, thus causing a fiercely competitive situation among the boats. In their study on small-scale fishermen around Mwanza, Eggert and Lokina sum up the (financial) risks for people working within the industry:

“[...] uncertainty about product prices, imperfect information about resource abundance and location, dynamic changes in both prices and abundance, and the evolution of fishing regulations” (Eggert and Lokina 2007: 49, cf. also World Bank 2007: 251).

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Gordon 1977 for Namibian miners.

<sup>48</sup> Wambura 2009; also Abdul-Aziz 2009.



In addition to these factors, fishing in itself is an industry that shares many characteristics with mining. In both cases the product is hidden below a surface and the seemingly arbitrariness in good and bad catches leaves room for magical interpretations. Both businesses are dangerous, the lake takes many lives every year. And just as the specifics of mining spurred magical beliefs worldwide, the same can be said about fishing. A striking example recorded by Luise White in Zimbabwe during the early 1990s should suffice to emphasize this point. White's informants explained that

“[n]owadays, children and teenagers are found far away from home. They take the heads and some innards...There are some *n'angas* who buy the hearts to mix with medicine. The heads are used as bait to catch those big fish in the oceans. It is said that those big fish are very fond of human flesh. Once caught, they are cut up to get the precious stones that are inside” (White 1997: 331, original emphasis).

Linking both industries concerned in Tanzania makes this account from Zimbabwe particularly interesting. A young man with albinism from Burundi actually voiced the same concerns in an interview with a journalist: “Some fishermen also use the parts to bait large fish they think have gold in their bellies.”<sup>49</sup> An explanation of these practices, which, I believe, is equally applicable to Tanzania, is provided by another one of White's informants from Zimbabwe:

“The mines are owned by rich people, and they keep all the money raised from mining gold. The poor man needs money so he tries by all means to get gold to sell and get money. This can be done *either by selling heads* or actually catching the fish” (White 1997: 332, my emphasis).

It is worthy to note that White's informant first brings up the option that money could be obtained by *selling* the heads. Getting rich by *using* the magic comes second. This I hold equally true for the cases in Tanzania, where the only people definitely profiting in this “occult economy” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) are those selling the bones and the magic potion. The secretary of the umbrella organization of people with disabilities in

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<sup>49</sup> N.n. (2009): Burundi's Albinos Flee Sorcerers Organ Traders. Cf. also Scheen (2009) as well as Heilfurth: „Es wird von Bergen erzählt, die auf einem ‚silbernen Fuß‘ stehen sollen [...] da findet man im Magen von Tieren, die aus einer bestimmten Quelle getrunken haben, Klumpen von Gold“ (Heilfurth 1981: 225). Lastly, Lagercrantz – quoting Godie and Hutchinson – recounts the practice of sacrificing a girl with albinism in the Niger-Delta during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as “[i]t was essential to keep on good terms with the River Deity (the river), who gave an abundance of fish and kept the harbours open to merchant ships” (Lagercrantz 1979: 84).

Mwanza draws the same conclusion: “[t]he witchdoctors don’t really believe in this magic, selling the bones is just a business for them. In a way they do get rich...”<sup>50</sup>

### Local or regional rumors?

Both mining and fishing are industries attracting large numbers of migrant workers and the products are traded internationally. I therefore argue that the rumors about the wealth bringing potency of the bones of people with albinism are not local, but regional. I adopt this demarcation from Luise White who, analyzing rumors about the traffic in heads in Zimbabwe during the early 1990s, writes:

“What follows is a *regional* rather than a local history: this is not the study of idioms, metaphors or genres in their local context and performance, but rather a regional history [...]” (White 1997: 328, original emphasis).

For the situation in Northwest Tanzania this means that the rumors are *regional* in the sense that they are most prevailing among people working in the *region’s* biggest industries, regardless of their ethnic affiliation or origin. As has been shown, the cases have no precedents and are therefore not deeply embedded in local moral imaginaries of the Sukuma, the largest ethnic group of Northwest Tanzania. The fact that such stories also exist in other Sub-Saharan countries with different local imaginaries but similar regional situations, such as those in Zimbabwe discussed above underlines that there is nothing distinctly local – nothing distinctly Sukuma – about them. Even the ‘witchdoctors’ do not necessarily come from Sukumaland as one of my informants explained: “[t]hey go around! They come here, they built a hut on a piece of land! [...] Then, after one month or so, the doctor moves on.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, I disagree with Bryceson et al. (2010: 376) who claim that

“[t]he albino fetish has creatively emerged from exchange between agents representing two very different value systems: that of a localised patriarchal, agro-pastoralist community with its power source vested in male elders, and that of comparatively young miners in new settlements tied to global value chains.”

For the migrating ‘witchdoctors’ acting upon the rumors of the efficiency of the magic potions made from the bones from people with albinism and the

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<sup>50</sup> Personal correspondence via e-mail, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2009 with a middle aged male professional.

(migrant) miners are actually very likely to share one value system and do not as indicated by Bryceson et al. (2010: 378) compete over symbolic and financial power in a rural context, as is rather the case between traditional healers and those ‘witchdoctors’ spreading the rumors.

Yet the Sukuma have throughout Tanzania always been known for their powerful magic (cf. Cory 1949, Green 2005: 257, Sanders 2001b, Tanner 1957) and using magic to enhance one’s economic situation was not foreign to Sukumaland. According to Cory birds, beaks and shells were among some of the ingredients necessary in Sukumaland to make magic potions for “professional success” (Cory 1949: 18f.). Moreover, he claims that extremely powerful medicine, “the great shingira”, was made from either the corpses of people who during their life were said to have magical powers or from those killed through acts of witchcraft (Cory 1949: 21).<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the imaginaries about the potency of body parts of people with albinism do not originate in traditional Sukuma-magic. Rather, the reputation of the local traditional Sukuma-magic’s potency must be seen as the fertilizer for the new, regional rumors in the effectiveness of this kind of magic.

## Rumorscapes

The distinction between the local and the regional implies an elsewhere and a distance between the two realms that was overcome, for I argue that the rumors originated somewhere else, in a different ‘local’ and have been adapted in another ‘region’. Following Appadurai’s “[...] five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed (a) *ethnoscapes*, (b) *mediascapes*, (c) *technoscapes*, (d) *financescapes*, and (e) *ideoscapes*” (Appadurai 2003 [1996]: 33, original emphasis), I would like to call this dimension of the cultural flows of rumors ‘rumorscapes’.

I deem it necessary to coin a new term here, as the notions that this rumorscape implies are neither covered by Appadurai’s “ideoscapes” nor by “mediascapes”. As defined by Appadurai,

“[i]deoscapes [...] are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it. These ideoscapes are composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview [...]” (Appadurai

<sup>52</sup> Note that people were not killed with the aim to obtain ingredients for the potions. Rather, the body parts were, according to Cory, taken from corpses (Cory 1949).

2003 [1996]: 36, original emphasis).

Mediascapes on the other hand

“[...] provide (especially in their television, film, and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapas to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed” (Appadurai 2003 [1996]: 35).

Translocal ‘rumorscapes’ however neither transport ideologies, nor are they foremost shaped by modern mass media. Rather, they are created by oral histories which work similar to Chinese whispers and spread constantly re-invented and slightly altered images and rumors by the means of fantasy, gossip and talk (cf. White 2000). According to Masquelier,

“[o]ften the telling of one story inspires some listeners to share what they heard, thereby leading to a lively exchange of scenarios or details out of which yet new versions take shape. [...] auditors might interpret the message conveyed differently than what the narrator intended, prompting them to refashion the story to suit their own rhetorical purposes” (Masquelier 2000: 90).

Sharing rumors, comparing and altering them thus creates authenticity. Masquelier’s description of rumors as “many-headed hydras” (Masquelier 2000: 90) implies that they feed on several sources. Her image is especially useful to show how the transmission of stories from different ‘locales’ (e.g. through migrant workers) create points of intersection and shape new fusions within a ‘rumorscape’ spurred by certain regional contexts. In the case of rumors behind the medicine murders in Tanzania, the stories surrounding human heads used to attract fish originating in Zimbabwe and the beliefs about the magical potency of bones of people with albinism originating in Mali as mentioned earlier can be understood as two of the many heads of Tanzania’s current hydra.<sup>53</sup> This does not imply a direct cause-and-effect relation between rumors in *one* specific local and *one* specific region. Rather, a whole set of these stories whose many origins certainly cannot all be traced is lying behind each new rumor. The more a story gets retold, the more people can add other details thus creating a reinterpreted, rearranged and reassembled vivid and seemingly plausible new fusion within a trans-local ‘rumorscape’.

To a certain extent images transported within mediascapes also influence or support local (or regional) imaginaries. When talking to some of my informants about the local belief among the Sukuma that witches can harm peo-

<sup>53</sup> Or two of the hydra’s heads which I was able to identify with many more to be revealed.

ple, one explained: “Well either the people are bewitched or they are visited by a *litunga*.”<sup>54</sup> “A *litunga* is a person who has already passed away and who visits people during the night”, another one added.<sup>55</sup> Upon further inquiry, a third person said: “The *litunga*, they have long hair, like this [*he shows with his hands the length of hair*], long fingernails and a very big head!”<sup>56</sup> I asked him whether he had already been visited by one as his detailed description seemed so lively. “No,” he answered, “but I have seen them in the videos!”<sup>57</sup> Watching Nigerian videos that often contain stories about the occult and the realm of magic on the village’s only television is a popular pastime among young people. The films often deal with topics with which the viewers are familiar – betrayal, economic hardship, temptations in general. They transport foreign imaginaries into local contexts and are often not related to as fiction but as facts. As they contain little dialogue – mainly in foreign languages – the audience needs to step in with their own interpretations. These movies are thus rumor-like in that they end up being interpreted and transported with different nuances in different contexts (cf. Meyer 2003). Additionally, the movies both function as the channels for rumors and imaginaries and, at the same time, as their proof: Whereas the use of magic potions is condemned in the movies as immoral, it is, however, portrayed as a technique that truly works. When speaking about the potion made from bones of people with albinism most of my informants also did not necessarily question its efficiency. They did, however condemn its use as immoral. To understand modern mass media not as the only, but as one channel operating side by side with oral history, gossip and rumors shows that rumorscapes are not bound to modernity and that stories have circulated across large distances for as long as people migrated.<sup>58</sup> I therefore disagree with Appadurai when he argues that “[u]ntil recently, [...] fantasy and imagination were residual practices, confined to special persons or domains, restricted to special moments or places” (Appadurai 2003 [1996]: 53). It is through these ‘old’ channels of word of mouth propaganda that people all over Tanzania have heard about the potency of Sukuma magic (Green 2005:

<sup>54</sup> Interview, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009 with a young female vocational student.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009 with a young male vocational student.

<sup>56</sup> Interview, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009 with a young male vocational student. Cf. Stroeken 2004: 46. *Litunga* refers to a “[...] zombie-like figure unable to communicate or exchange.”

<sup>57</sup> Interview, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009 with a young male vocational student. Since we had often watched videos together, he was somewhat puzzled about my question. As I had already seen a *litunga* on TV, I should have known myself, he claimed.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. White’s (2000: 10) example on how in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, stories about the origins of the East African notion of *mumiani* (bloodsucking) spread to India along trade routes.

257), and it is through these channels that the rumors about the efficacy of money-making magic reached Tanzania from Zimbabwe, Mali and other 'locales'. Appadurai writes that "[t]he suffix *-scape* allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes [...]" (Appadurai 2003 [1996]: 33, original emphasis). The mining industry attracting many migrant workers as well as the subsequent trade in gems and gold offers in itself one such perfect trans-local, international, fluid and irregular microcosm – or '*-scape*' – in which rumors about magic potions can circulate. In Sukumaland, for instance, "Shinyanga town is famous in East Africa for the informal trading of gem diamonds. [...] foreign buyers obtain diamonds straight from local traders in and around Shinyanga town." (Phillips et al. 2001: 21f.). One could, therefore, talk of a trade in rumors within this 'rumorscape' created through the international gem trade.

Lastly, the fact that the killings of people with albinism have spread to Burundi shows that the rumors about the wealth-bringing potency of bones of people with albinism are regional rather than local and that 'rumorscapes' bridge the gap between different regions, regardless of the cultural affiliation of a particular group of people.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

Whereas anthropology has brought about a large body of work on magical interpretations of economic disparities and accusations made towards those who apparently profited disproportionately well during the decades following the implementation of structural adjustment programs (cf. for instance Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Moore and Sanders 2001), the material side of this phenomenon – that is the actual use of magic to gain fortunes – has hardly been dealt with. By focusing on the killings of people with albinism I have shed some light onto the material side of the connection between rumors about the efficiency of magic and the longing for material stability. As has been shown, these magical tools employed in Tanzania are rather regional than local. They neither originate in the 'traditional' imaginaries of the Sukuma nor are the Sukuma the only ones acting upon the rumors. The rumors are regional in the sense that they occur in a specific economic landscape which functions as their breeding ground.

The killings of people with albinism in Tanzania made magic undeniably re-

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<sup>59</sup> Ndege (2009). It seems doubtful that the murders in Burundi were committed to 'supply the Tanzanian market' as claimed by some officials, since the murders also continued in Tanzania.



al. Reactions to the murders and supportive acts of people with albinism took place in many fields. Some children with albinism were sent to Mitindo boarding school near Mwanza, which had initially been set up for the blind and functioned as a sanctuary (International Red Cross 2009: 12). Together with the help of foreign NGOs, the 'Tanzania Albino Society' (TAS) tries to support the latter's causes. In general, people with albinism now are much more a part of the Tanzanian public than they used to be before the killings started. The extremely popular gospel-queen Rose Muhando's features children with albinism in one of her videos<sup>60</sup>, TV commercials such as one by 'Vodacom' include people with albinism, and '*Futuhi*', an extremely popular weekly comedy show aired by Mwanza based Star TV began to feature an actor with albinism.<sup>61</sup>

Reactions from the Tanzanian government followed shortly after the news about the killings spread around the world in 2008. President Jakaya Kikwete and other politicians quickly condemned the killings. On April 5, 2008, Al-Shymaa John Kwegyir, a woman with albinism, was appointed Member of Parliament by Kikwete in order to raise awareness and give the people with albinism of Tanzania a political voice.<sup>62</sup> Additional pressure was put on the Tanzanian government for instance through a resolution of the European Union in September 2008.<sup>63</sup> On January 23, 2009 the government authorized a ban on all of Tanzania's practicing traditional healers in order to stop the killings.<sup>64</sup> When I was in the region four months into the ban its success, however, was disputable.<sup>65</sup> It was virtually impossible to enforce the ban nationwide and in the region of my fieldwork some continued their business within sight of the local police station.<sup>66</sup> Banning all traditional doctors places them under general suspicion and downgrades the important services that the large majority of them provide in regard to public

<sup>60</sup> Cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89maW4DxP7k>, accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Some of my informants believed this to be an intervention by the government. "The *zeruzeru*", one of my informants explained, "is in the program, because the government has said that he should participate. To show that these are normal people, too." Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009 with a young male professional.

<sup>62</sup> United Republic of Tanzania: Parliament of Tanzania. Member CV: Al-Shymaa John Kwegyir.

People with albinism in Uganda have also recently demanded a seat in parliament for a representative. Cf. Buwembo (2010).

<sup>63</sup> The European Parliament (2008).

<sup>64</sup> C.f. N.n. (2009): Witchcraft, Tanzania. Albino Killings are Spreading to Neighbouring States.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. N.n. (2009): Tanzania 'Healers' Flout Ban.

<sup>66</sup> This is not to say that these particular traditional doctors were actively involved in the administration of magic made from bones of people with albinism.

health. Even the secretary of the umbrella organization of the people with disabilities in Mwanza demanded a more sophisticated approach: “There are traditional doctors that have real knowledge, but the killer doctors are fake, people should learn to see the difference.”<sup>67</sup> In March 2009, after Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon had condemned the killings during a visit to Tanzania<sup>68</sup>, President Kikwete announced a referendum: “People should feel free to name those who are behind these barbaric killings and other criminal acts within their localities.”<sup>69</sup> For my informants, this referendum had failed: “The people, they do not want to say who they [*the killers*] are. It is for example relatives. They don’t want to say that one of their relatives participated.”<sup>70</sup> Trials against some of the ninety people arrested in connection with the medicine murders were opened in June 2009, but were later stopped because of an alleged lack of funds.<sup>71</sup> The secretary of the umbrella organization of the people with disabilities in Mwanza also blames corruption for the slow investigations: “Sometimes when albino bones are found from important people who have political or economic influence, they are not convicted. Corruption is involved.”<sup>72</sup> Only after international media reports about these delays did the courts again resume their work and in late September 2009 the first case was closed, finding all of the accused guilty and condemned to death.<sup>73</sup>

However, in reference to recurring medicine murders in Basutoland Mabiriizi concluded that

“[...] if the murderers kill because of economic desperation, and a belief that magic will solve their problems, no good is served by hanging them. There is no deterrence, when the socio-economic conditions from which the need and the belief arose remain unchanged” (Mabiriizi 1986: 59).

In order to fully rule out similar outbursts of violence in Tanzania in the future, the underlying problems – that is the fact that most Tanzanians do not get the chance to succeed in the free market economy, especially in prototypical casino capital industries – will have to be addressed by both the Tanzanian government and the international community, for the ongoing eco-

<sup>67</sup> Personal correspondence via e-mail, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

<sup>68</sup> N.n. (2009): Ban Calls for End to Albino Killings.

<sup>69</sup> N.n. (2009): Tanzanians to Name Albino Killers. See also: Obulutsa (2009a)

<sup>70</sup> Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009 with a middle aged male professional.

<sup>71</sup> Obulutsa (2009b).

<sup>72</sup> Personal correspondence via e-mail, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

<sup>73</sup> N.n. (2009): Albinos Call for Public Hanging of Murderers., Cf. also N.n. (2009): Tanzania convicts albino’s killers. To date, the death sentences have not been executed.

conomic misery experienced by the majority of Tanzanians is not only a Tanzanian problem. It is not a problem of tradition, but one of 'modernity' and the globalizing market at large.

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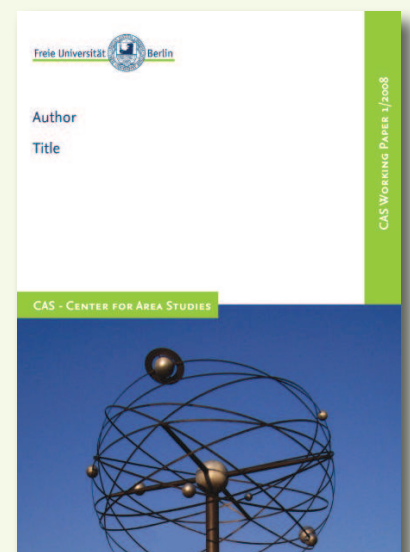
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