

## Challenging Traditional Understandings: Embedding Accurate Knowledge of Albinism in African Cultures

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### Introduction

The epistemology of albinism as the discourse – *logos* – of the knowledge of albinism consists of justified and evidential knowledge claims about albinism, the processes of justification and validation of such claims, the system of production of knowledge claims about albinism, the reliability of such epistemic systems of production, and the access and barriers to such knowledge claims. It also consists very importantly, as recent studies in epistemology in general, and the epistemology of ignorance in particular show,<sup>1</sup> of an analysis of manifest and latent contents of deliberate or non-deliberate forms of ignorance, pseudo claims, false representations and misinterpretations of albinism, and how these influence and distort accurate knowledge. The discourse that unfolds in this chapter is essentially one with an epistemological concern with regards to albinism in Africa.

African epistemology is an epistemic system that emphasizes collective epistemic agency and shared or social knowledge. Take, for instance, the knowledge about ancestors and their relationship with the physically living in African communities. These knowledge claims are collectively held by, at the very least, a majority of the members of the community of selves and are accepted as typical, normal and accurate representations or descriptions of the state-of-affairs of the living-dead and their relations with the physically-living in the community. These knowledge claims and representations in turn lead to social norms or collectively held norms or behaviours which are also taken as normal, typical and appropriate action by members of the community.<sup>2</sup> But in several cases, collectively held representations often lack evidence or factual justification and are only continually held on the basis of the following: that many held them to be true and reliable before those who currently hold them (so they are deeply entrenched knowledge claims); and that the collective will of all who hold them shows that it is not a false claim (collective agency). But is collective epistemic agency or collective will-to-know sufficient to override empirical and verifiable facts about objects and events? If a community of selves claim to know collectively that eating the newly harvested yams without the rituals and prayers during the annual new yam festival would lead to ill-health, is it really the case that it leads to ill-health?

In African societies, there are several knowledge claims about albinism. How are such knowledge claims acquired and justified? What is the hindrance or barrier to accurate knowledge about albinism in African places? How can epistemic barriers be overcome with regards to albinism? What role do deliberate and non-deliberate forms of ignorance and false representation play in the distortion of accurate knowledge about albinism? The discussion that follows pays attention to these questions. In section one, I attempt to summarize and highlight the core ideas in the African understanding of albinism and the person with albinism as built around a violent and negative encounter of the other or radically different. In section two, I explore the nature and contents of an African social elitist virtue epistemology as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Sharron Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, (eds.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); and Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (eds.), *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gerry Mackie, et. al., 'What Are Social Norms? How are they Measured?' A Report prepared by UNICEF and the Centre for Global Justice, University of California, San Diego, 2015.

basis for understanding knowledge systems in Africa in general and the knowledge of albinism in particular. I then proceed in the third section to examine empirical and verifiable facts about albinism and the epistemic barriers in African cultures that hinder the rooting of such accurate knowledge in African societies. In the final section, I explore how African social elitist virtue epistemology can be employed not only in challenging false claims about albinism, but in entrenching accurate knowledge of albinism in African societies.

### **Traditional Understandings of Albinism in African Cultures**

The use of 'traditional' here unavoidably drags one into the protracted and controversial debate on the alleged polarity and dichotomy between the traditional and the modern. The alleged binary opposition between the traditional and the modern has led to heated and perennial debates in various contexts and circles as to what constitutes such a dichotomy and if such a dichotomy even exists. Within the African contexts of use, many African scholars frown at it because of the tendency of the alleged polarity to further perpetuate the colonialist description of African cultures as traditional in the negative and debasing senses of being backward, unscientific, primitive, native, old, authoritative, closed, rural and agrarian, and, by implication, legitimating the colonialist agenda to 'modernize' the traditional by making it progressive, scientific, civilized, modern, new, liberal, open, urban and industrial.<sup>3</sup> If understood solely in this sense, there would be obvious legitimate reasons to jettison the tradition-modernity dichotomy. Helen Lauer therefore argues vehemently that it is a false dichotomy in her monograph, *Tradition versus Modernity: Reappraising a False Dichotomy*.<sup>4</sup> Jacob A. Aigbodioh summarizes the key points for Lauer's rejection of the tradition-modernity dichotomy:

Specifically, Lauer argues (i) that the contrastive uses of the dichotomy involve the tacit acceptance, contrary to world historical antecedents, that scientific culture is the creation solely by Western societies and is their prepossession. This she says is the consequence of an 'outmoded ideological agenda which arbitrarily dislocates, disassociates and disowns from Africans those traditions labelled 'modern' which historically, are part and parcel of the human cultural legacy developed worldwide'; (ii) that the dichotomy is a result of an exclusionary propaganda which arrogates supremacy to scientific knowledge and urges total compliance to scientific claims and methods of truth validation...; (iii) that the dichotomy harbours the false impression that it is only tradition which has the feature of authoritarianism, ignoring the fact that scientific inventions and products have their peculiar authoritarian control and manipulation of social life and thought through the ubiquitous mass media' and finally (iv) that the dichotomy carries with it the mistaken assumption that indeed Western and African cultures, along with their respective systems of rationality are incommensurable and mutually exclusive forms of life.<sup>5</sup>

Lauer thus rejects the dichotomy for these reasons. However, while accepting the legitimacy and reasonableness of Lauer's position, it may not necessitate the outright rejection of the dichotomy. Several other scholars have used these terms 'traditional' and 'modern'

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob A. Aigbodioh, 'A Response to Helen Lauer's Critique of the Tradition versus Modernity Dichotomy', *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, 9.2 (2011), 80.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Lauer, *Tradition versus Modernity, Reappraising a false Dichotomy* (Hope Publications, Ibadan, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Aigbodioh, 'A Response to Helen Lauer's Critique of the Tradition versus Modernity Dichotomy', 80.

differently and they remain useful in conceptualising human lived experiences particularly as it was in the past and as it is now in the present. For example, Kwame Gyekye argues in his seminal work *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* that while tradition refers to the predominant or normalized cultural elements of a people, modernity consists of a mental revolution involving radical changes to the mental habits of the people.<sup>6</sup> This understanding is not so geographically defined as the sort of understanding that Lauer is critical of. Rather it shows that the traditional are deep-seated ideologies, representations and worldviews indigenous to a place and deeply entrenched in the people's mind. They include deeply entrenched norms, habits, attitudes, explanations for events and occurrences, and ways of life in general. The modern on the other hand is the consequence of the critique of tradition in the light of new evidences, new findings and new understandings, leading to revisions in ways of life and inaugurating the modern in a manner that often seem revolutionary. To be sure, modern science has played a key role in the critique of traditions but such a critique of tradition is not only the critique of African traditions but of all traditions including Western; also, the critique of tradition is not only necessitated or made possible by science but other forms of life. Hence, we can successfully use the terms 'traditional' and 'modern' without falling prey to the colonialist supremacist agenda.

Flowing from this background, when we talk about traditional understandings of albinism in African cultures, we are referring to the predominant mental attitude, the deeply entrenched explanations and representations, the habits and norms indigenous to the African peoples with regards to albinism. It is how African people normally and habitually perceive and understand albinism. It is no news that this African traditional understanding of albinism is hinged on a negative and violent perception and reception of the different, the other. A person with albinism is conceived in African cultures as different and such difference is not merely explained away based on the physical appearance of the person with albinism which clearly shows visible difference when compared with the many persons with melanin all around them. Rather, such difference is also ontologically and normatively explained and interpreted. In other words, persons with albinism in Africa are not only different because they do not conform to the African norm of the body, but also because they do not conform to the African norm of being human and the African norms of being a person. Although the exclusion of persons with albinism from the category of persons is not so explicit in African thought, it seems to be the only logical conclusion to be drawn from the predominant indigenous perception of personhood and albinism in African thought. Consider the following examples of predominant beliefs about albinism in African traditions and the logical conclusions that can be deduced therefrom:

*In African culture A, a person with albinism is a ghost.*

*Human beings or persons are not ghosts.*

*Therefore, persons with albinism are not human beings or persons.*

*In African culture B, a person with albinism is the physical manifestation of the curse or supernatural punishment placed on a parent.*

*Human beings or persons are not the manifestation of a curse or supernatural punishment placed on a parent. Rather, since children are blessings from the ancestors, they are a manifestation of blessing rather than a curse.*

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<sup>6</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

*Therefore, persons with albinism are not human beings or persons.*

*In African culture C, a person with albinism cannot become an ancestor.*

*African persons who live a community-accepted life can become an ancestor.*

*Therefore, persons with albinism are not African persons.*

*In African culture D, African persons are normally dark-skinned, strong and appealing.*

*Persons with albinism are pale looking, fragile and repulsive.*

*Therefore, persons with albinism are not African persons.*

Thus, the same conclusion is deducible from these and other such beliefs and interpretations of albinism that permeate African cultures: persons with albinism are not persons and should not be treated as such and albinism is a repulsive condition with paranormal causes. Maromi reiterates the prevalence of this understanding of albinism in African places thus:

persons with albinism are considered to simply vanish. In Tanzania, they are referred to as apes and a source of money. They are seen as sorcerers, devils or persons suffering from a curse and, in some communities, it is believed that contact with them will bring bad luck, sickness or death. Other frequent myths ... include: that sexual intercourse with a woman or a girl with albinism can cure HIV/AIDS; that the sacrifice of persons with albinism can appease 'the god of the mountain' when a volcano starts to erupt; or that pulling out the hair of a person with albinism brings good luck. It has been reported that miners use the bones of persons with albinism as amulets or bury them where they are drilling for gold, and that fishermen weave the hair of persons with albinism into their nets to improve their catches. This range of beliefs and superstitions leads to various forms of attacks against persons with albinism in many communities.<sup>7</sup>

Two disturbing points can be deduced from this conclusion about the traditional African understanding of albinism. First, it explains why persons with albinism are often (mal)treated badly, discriminated against, prejudiced and stigmatized as if they were not persons and this understanding in some way justifies all forms of inhuman treatment against persons with albinism including killings, social ostracism, commodification of body parts and other forms of bodily and mental harm.

The ideas in African cultures of the nature of persons with albinism clearly shows that they are seen as a threat to the established structure of being and are thus excluded from that structure. Due mainly to their 'unusual' physical nature, they are seen as not fitting into the community of beings. This justifies all sorts of maltreatment and harm against persons with albinism. For if a human being appears to another person as nothing more than an animal and a threat from that person's ontological and ethical point of view, then the killing of such a human being by that person will be regarded

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<sup>7</sup> Sabbath M. Uromi, 'Violence against persons with albinism and older women: Tackling witchcraft accusation in Tanzania', *International Journal of Education and Research* 2.6 (2014), 233.

as morally permissible, especially given that the killing or ill-treatment of a threatening animal is not frowned at.<sup>8</sup>

Second, it shows that the human encounter with the other or radically different is more often than not violent rather than hospitable. The reasons for this may range from fear of the other, attempts to normalize the other into the self, to an inherent yearning to maintain the status quo. The encounter of the black African with the white, pale-looking person with albinism is one where the former – the self – does not only view the latter – the other – as radically different but has an uneasiness about the other and formulate theories and construct ideologies and interpretations to explain her uneasiness about the albinotic other. In summary, broadly construed, albinism is socially and culturally represented as an unwelcomed abnormality or difference, much the same way other forms of disability are negatively designated in African traditions. Within and between cultures in African societies, there are varying descriptions of albinism in persons. However, such varying ideas about albinism all point to the same social and cultural representations of albinism as not only abnormal but repugnant... Specific negative descriptions and representations of persons with albinism are thus formulated to institutionalize the abnormal and repugnant nature of albinism.<sup>9</sup>

But why do such false representations and alleged knowledge claims about albinism in African traditions persist even in the face of modern factual evidences contrary to them? Why do people tenaciously hold on to pseudo knowledge claims and how can this become an epistemic barrier to accurate knowledge? To find answers to these questions, it is imperative that we proceed first in the following section to understand the knowledge system operational in African traditions and how effective they can be in successfully rooting, inculcating and entrenching knowledge claims deep into members of the community, even when such claims are not factual.

### **An African Social Elitist Virtue Epistemology**

Social epistemology in Western philosophy is a recent and broad approach in epistemology and it departs from traditional Western epistemology in several ways. Most importantly, social epistemology shifts the Western enterprise of epistemology from the traditional focus on the subject or individual in the knowledge agenda to the social or collective whole, emphasising the importance of collective epistemic agency over individual epistemic agency. However, social epistemology has always been the predominant approach to the knowledge agenda in African places. African epistemologists have seen the social epistemological approach to the discourse of knowledge as the ideal theoretical framework for the discourse of African theory of knowledge due to the emphasis on collective epistemic agency in African epistemic framework Hence African epistemology has been variously but similarly described as social epistemology, collective epistemology, shared epistemology, and communitarian epistemology. A consensus among African epistemologists is that in African epistemology, claiming to know something is claiming to know what others know. Knowledge is thus shared knowledge, that is, what I know is what we know. Bert Hamminga thus explains that, the African knowing subject is not an individual person; it is the community or clan. When I claim

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<sup>8</sup> Elvis Imafidon, 'Dealing with the Other between the Ethical and the Moral: Albinism on the African Continent', *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics: Philosophy of Medical Research and Practice*, 38.2 (2017): 169.

<sup>9</sup> Elvis Imafidon, *African Philosophy and the Otherness of Albinism: White Skin, Black Race* (London: Routledge, 2019), p.19.

to know  $p$ , I am not making a claim to have come to the knowledge of something through some solitary, subjective mental exercise; rather I claim to know  $p$  because we as a group know  $p$  as fulfilling the epistemic criteria of knowledge, and, thus, others share in my knowledge of  $p$ . Knowing  $p$  becomes a collective rather than an individual responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

But that an idea is shared by many does not guarantee that the idea is true or can pass as knowledge. Many times in human history, an idea can be held by many as true and objective knowledge claim with or without sufficient evidence in support of the claim and may in time be abandoned when more evidences that are counterproductive emerge. So, on what basis does African epistemological thought guarantee or provide assurance for its knowledge claims? What gives the knowledge of  $p$  its epistemic status or what epistemic criteria must  $p$  fulfil for it to be true. It is the African elite class. Although knowledge is a collective responsibility and is shared in African traditions, the epistemic authority to produce, justify, validate and revise knowledge claims is hinged on the elite class and the highly held virtue of members of that class. Hence, African epistemology is not only social, elitist but virtuous in nature. An elitist virtue epistemology,

consists mainly of the claim that to know is to partake of the epistemic competence of an elite class in a particular social system, for the elite class is seen as the source of epistemic value and members of the class are thought to possess intellectual and moral competency to sustain accurate knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, an African social elitist-virtue epistemology is the African theory of knowledge that holds that to know as a group or collectively by members of a community is to partake of the epistemic competence of a smaller lead group, the African elite class, who are seen as the repository of knowledge, possessing the intellectual and moral competence to produce and sustain accurate knowledge. The elite class consists of community leaders, chiefs, elders, priests, heroes and other key players in the society.<sup>12</sup> The elite is seen as the custodian of the epistemic traditions of the people and as persons possessing the needed epistemic virtues to provide community members with accurate and reliable knowledge and information about objects and events. Such epistemic virtues include trustworthiness, veracity, consistency, honesty and reliability.

To this end, knowledge claims about albinism in African cultures are collectively held and are sustained by the elite class. In other words,

To claim to know something about the being of a person with albinism is to make a claim that is shared such that when  $x$  says, 'I know that a person with albinism is so and so', she is saying in effect that 'We know that a person with albinism is so and so. To make a radically different knowledge claim about albinism is to make a claim that is controversial and may be denied as knowledge even when such claims are evidently

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<sup>10</sup> See Bert Hamminga, *Knowledge Cultures: Comparative Western and African Epistemology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005). See also Imafidon, *African Philosophy and the Otherness of Albinism*, p.60.

<sup>11</sup> Elvis Imafidon, 'Some Epistemological Issues in the Othering of Persons with Albinism in Africa'. In Elvis Imafidon (ed.), *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference* (Cham: Springer, 2020), p. 368.

<sup>12</sup> See Albert Onobhayedo, 'Western education and social change in Esan land', *IRORO: A Journal of Arts* 7./1&2 (2007): 270-271.

factual. One is not expected to think outside the knowledge box in African traditional communities, and this has in many ways eaten deep into modern African societies.<sup>13</sup>

To claim therefore that a person with albinism is a ghost or that she does not die but simply vanishes or disappear is not to make a subjective claim that the individual has come to through some subjective epistemic process of validation and justification. It is to make a claim that is consistent with what is held by the collective group and what has become a long-standing claim entrenched into the fabric of beliefs by the elite class. Within the community of selves, it therefore seems strange that a community member would make a claim about albinism contrary to, or inconsistent with, the body of knowledge about albinism already entrenched into society by virtue of the elite class.

### **Epistemic Barriers to Accurate Knowledge of Albinism**

Beyond the traditional understandings of albinism in African thought, there is accurate, factual knowledge about albinism that obviously contradicts these traditional understandings. By accurate factual knowledge, I simply mean to say something exact and truthful about an object or an event corroborated with basic verifiable information about such an object an event. To say something as simple as there are twenty-four hours in a day or that glass is made from liquid sand, or to make more complex claims that food high in saturated fat are bad for the heart or that Oxford University is the best university in the world according to the World University Ranking, is to make an accurate factual claim that is in conformity with truth and can be corroborated by evidence, although the level of evidence or proof would vary depending on how simple or complex the knowledge claim is. Accurate factual knowledge claims are often universal in nature and rarely relative to contexts and places.

Understood in this sense, factual and accurate knowledge about albinism are knowledge claims about albinism that are corroborated with biological and scientifically verifiable evidence and proof. They provide true and reliable information about the condition, providing a basis for adequate management and health management. Consider the following accurate facts or knowledge claims about albinism:

- i. Albinism is a congenital (existing at or before birth) disorder caused by reduced or the complete absence of melanin: the pigment responsible for giving colour to our skin, eyes, and hair. Albinism is sometimes known as hypopigmentation.
- ii. Persons with albinism can live long, healthy lives just as anyone else. The biggest danger comes from skin cancer, which develops more easily from unprotected sun exposure.
- iii. Persons with albinism often have one or a few eye conditions, including poor eyesight, involuntary eye movements (nystagmus), and sensitivity to light (photophobia).
- iv. The cause of albinism is cellular. Malfunctioning genes do not produce melanin and cannot be made to.
- v. Though the disorder is found in about 1 in 20,000 people in the United States, its prevalence is higher for other parts of the world where it can be as high as 1 in every 1, 400 people in some parts of Africa.

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<sup>13</sup> Imafidon, *African Philosophy and the Otherness of Albinism*, p. 61.

- vi. People with albinism synthesize vitamin D five times faster than dark-skinned people. Since vitamin D is produced when ultraviolet-B light enters the skin, the lack of pigmentation means the light can enter more easily.
- vii. Though albinism does not require treatment, the skin and eye conditions which accompany it often do need specialized treatment.
- viii. Many different types of albinism exist. Oculocutaneous albinism is the most common and most severe, with a person's hair, skin and eyes remaining a pale white color throughout their lives.
- ix. Some children born with less severe forms of albinism are born with white hair and skin which slightly darkens as they grow older.
- x. One in 17,000 people have some form of albinism gene. Though it affects the sexes equally, males are more likely to have ocular albinism: a lack of pigment in the eyes.
- xi. People with albinism face persecution and bullying all over the world. Some of this comes from beliefs that they are cursed or that their body parts have magical powers when used by witch doctors.
- xii. Around 1 in 70 people carry one albinism gene. If both parents carry the albinism gene, there is a 25% chance the child will be born with the disorder.
- xiii. To be born with albinism, a baby must have defective genes from both its parents. If the baby inherits one normal and one albinism gene, enough melanin will be produced by the normal gene.
- xiv. One of the most severe types of albinism is known as Hermansky-Pudlak syndrome. People with this variation are prone to bleeding, bruising, and lung disease.
- xv. Albinism is most common in various groups of sub-Saharan Africa.
- xvi. Scientists can test if a parent has an albino gene by testing if a hair follicle produces melanin.
- xvii. Some lesser-informed men in East Africa - especially Tanzania which has the largest population of people with albinism in Africa - believe that the mother of an albino child was unfaithful with a white man or that the baby is the ghost of a former European colonist
- xviii. Currently, there is no treatment which can cause the body to produce melanin and lessen the symptoms of albinism.
- xix. Albinism is genetic and thus is not contagious. And it doesn't make anyone less of a person. It's as genetic as having brown hair or blond hair, and we don't think less of people with brown or blond hair, so we shouldn't think differently about a person with albinism.<sup>14</sup>

These basic pieces of information, truths and accurate claims about albinism can be verified by anyone by following some rigorous process in a science laboratory or through a simpler process of everyday sensory observation of persons with albinism. But there are obviously mostly in conflict with cultural representations or interpretations that have proved harmful to persons with albinism. Why do many persons in African communities – persons with melanin and persons with albinism alike – still hold on to the traditional, cultural and counterfactual understandings or interpretations of albinism in the face of factual observable

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<sup>14</sup> Adopted from Alex Salamanca, *25 Facts about People with Albinism that we Need to be Aware of*. In [www.list25.com](http://www.list25.com). par. 1-25.



truths? What epistemic barriers prevent and hinder the assimilation into the epistemic system of the African society accurate knowledge about albinism? Here, I identify and elaborate on three key epistemic barriers to accurate knowledge of albinism in African cultures: (i) absence of epistemic access, (ii) the human tendency to hold tenaciously to beliefs, and (iii) the quest to sustain and defend tradition and its interwoven web of beliefs.

Concerning the first – lack of epistemic access, one must gain access to this basic information about albinism as it is not often self-intuitive. To gain epistemic access to accurate knowledge about albinism, a person must have been taught in a formal education system and this is where the challenge lies. To be taught about albinism in the current African formal education system is to be an advanced student in a senior secondary or tertiary institution and offering a science-based course related to human biology. Such basic information is barely available in primary schools and to many students in secondary and tertiary schools studying non-science-based courses or subjects. Quite a number of persons in African communities where false representations of albinism thrives may not have had more than the basic primary school education. By implication, many persons in such communities would not in a lifetime come across such basic information about albinism. So they simply make do with what they have to explain their experiencing of the albinotic body and person through cultural interpretations of albinism. Another way to gain epistemic access to accurate knowledge about albinism is to take moral responsibility to know. To take moral responsibility to know is to avoid contentment with being fed knowledge claims by alleged epistemic authorities such as culture and traditions. It involves what Immanuel Kant conceptualized as *sapere aude* – daring to know for oneself what is true, the motto of Enlightenment. To take the moral responsibility to know about albinism seriously is to therefore carry out personal research about it such as surfing the internet and libraries in order to satisfy one's curiosity about the actual nature of the condition. But again, how many persons in the African communities where these false beliefs thrive have access to internet and libraries, even if they are willing to know?

Concerning the second – the human tendency to hold tenaciously to beliefs, African peoples cherish and guard their beliefs jealously. Of course, this is not peculiar to Africans. As Imre Lakatos explains, for instance, about science in his critique of Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift theory of science, even scientists guide their theories and conjectures jealously, holding on to them tenaciously and not wanting to let go even in the face of better theories. It takes a revolution similar to the Copernican revolution to overthrow one theory with another and even when such a revolution takes place, some still hold jealously to previous, less reliable theories. Some in African communities who have had epistemic access to accurate knowledge about albinism still hold tenaciously to cultural interpretations. These may include health workers such as medical doctors and nurses, some of whom, although having basic information about albinism, still see and treat persons with albinism from the lenses of cultural interpretation. Another reason why persons who ought to have had epistemic access to accurate knowledge about albinism still hold tenaciously to cultural beliefs and discriminate against persons with albinism is the third epistemic barrier factor – the quest to sustain and defend tradition and its interwoven web of beliefs. People feel it is their responsibility to protect their culture and belief system against what they might consider alien. They argue that these beliefs worked perfectly in ensuring social order and equilibrium in their societies in the past and do not see why they should be jettisoned now due to alternative explanations of events, more important is the claim that these cultural beliefs are interlocked and interwoven such that abandoning a part may severely affect the whole. For

example, abandoning the belief that the body parts such as the hair or bones of a person with albinism when tied to a fishing net would result in more catches during fishing and by implication, prosperity and wealth for the person fishing, may friction the more encompassing understanding or sacrifice, rituals and the role of the supernatural in influencing the life and wellbeing of the physically living. So, members of the elite class and persons who have received formal education including health workers may be more inclined to defend and sustain cultural interpretations of albinism than accept accurate information about it.

### **Embedding Accurate Knowledge through African Epistemic Systems**

An effective way to embed accurate knowledge of albinism in African communities is by ensuring easy and reliable epistemic access to acceptable and customary repositories of knowledge about albinism. As we have identified above, the primary reason for the absence of epistemic access to accurate knowledge of albinism is that the repositories for such accurate knowledge are still very much the formal academic settings which many in the community or society either do not have access to, or are not accustomed to in cases where there is access. So, an important way to go is to explore the African epistemic system by infusing accurate knowledge of albinism into communally and commonly accepted repositories of knowledge and by implication, customary and acceptable avenues of knowing in these communities because members of the community already have access to these repositories and avenues. Their everyday lives are permeated by them and they are in constant dialogue and contact with them. These would include stories, adages, proverbs, village square meetings, the palaver conversation model, the council of elders, age grades associations, and parental upbringing. But, although the epistemic access to these repositories guaranteed, the infusion of accurate knowledge of albinism into such repositories would not be successful if the elite class, the custodians of these repositories of knowledge and avenues of knowing, were not deliberately targeted and influenced through effective means of dialogue to accept as reasonable accurate knowledge about albinism as a more plausible explanation of albinism than the African explanation already present in the African repositories of knowledge. Once this difficult task is achieved and since the elite class pride themselves as the custodians of knowledge, having the epistemic and moral authority and responsibility to educate community members, they become duty-bound to replace the false information with the accurate ones. But getting the elite class to jettison old information and replace it with new information by proving that the latter is more accurate than the former is no easy task. This would require all stakeholders in the advocacy for the rights of persons with albinism, which is essentially hinged on the access to accurate knowledge of albinism, to make as the primary target of their advocacy the traditional elite class. Other members of the community including allegedly learned persons and state officials would be secondary due to the essential place that the elite class take in African communities. A deliberate and sustained effort to reach, dialogue and reason with members of the elite class can thus not be overemphasized.

To illustrate the effectiveness of targeting the elite class in the quest to infuse accurate knowledge in indigenous repositories of knowledge, let us consider, for example, the palaver model. Benezet Bujo provides an elaborate explanation of the palaver model as a model of uncoerced and effective discourse and dialogue in *Foundations of an African Ethic*.<sup>15</sup> He distinguishes three levels in which the palaver could take place, the healing palaver, the

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<sup>15</sup> Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic* (Nairobi Paulines Publication Africa, 2003), pp.175-194.

familial palaver and the supra-familial/administrative palaver. In the healing palaver, for instance, concerning an interactive discourse among affected participants – e.g. the medicine man, the patient, family members and the ancestors – about why a snake bit A rather than B although they were together in the bush, why tuberculosis killed A rather than B although they both had it, or what moral offences A would have committed to incur anger from the ancestors leading to illness, showcases the interplay of frustration, hope, the quest for explanation, the conviction that sicknesses could rupture relationships and communal equilibrium, and the need to have accurate explanation in order to adequately deal with the illness and reconcile relationships between the living and the living-dead. Also, in the familial palaver which occurs in the extended family system that includes the ancestors and the unborn, there is an ongoing interactive dialogue between, say, a mother and a misbehaving child and other voices quickly come in to help the child to see that there are family expectations and norms that the child ought to abide with. It may also consist of reminiscing about past dilemmas and how they were resolved, the young one having a fruitful discussion with their uncles, or grandparents on how they explain certain events and the reasons behind such understandings, how such events were understood in the past and current explanations for them, showing that understandings could evolve or change.<sup>16</sup> In these various forms of palaver, it is clear that the elite class is fully involved and are often the ones overseeing it, the voice of wisdom that is sought by other members of the community. The medicine man or woman in the healing palaver, the father or the kin head in the familial palaver, the elite remain key in a fruitful dialogue and discourse where members of the community not only interact and learn but find reasons for their beliefs. So, if the elite class bring accurate explanation of albinism into a palaver, other members of the community are most likely to find reasons to accept it and do away with false explanations.

Thus, embedding accurate knowledge of albinism into indigenous repositories of knowledge and avenues of knowing by targeting to educate and enlighten the elite class is not only essential for ensuring epistemic access to accurate knowledge for all members of the community, but also important in aiding community members to let go of false representations of albinism without necessarily feeling that their body of beliefs is threatened, particularly if the elite take the lead in accepting and dialoguing about the new and accurate ways of viewing matters.

## **Conclusion**

The search for sacrosanct, infallible and indubitable knowledge has been the hallmark of traditional epistemologies, Western and African, and epistemologists in these traditions have not only fought hard to theorise and enshrine the means of arriving at such indubitable knowledge, but have also strived very hard to preserve the repositories of knowledge they find sacrosanct, defending them from questioning. But these traditional epistemologies have come under scrutiny in modern/contemporary discourses in epistemology for good reasons, particularly the conviction that there is always the need to revisit and possibly revise what we have known and held so dear in the light of new evidences, to scrutinize and validate every now and then our bodies and repositories of knowledge, and to become more morally responsible epistemic agents. Holding tenaciously to knowledge claims even when there are more accurate alternatives does more harm than good to the human society and this is clearly seen from our discourse thus far of the case of albinism in African cultures. It is clear that the

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<sup>16</sup> See Anna Floerke Scheid, 'Under the Palaver Tree: Community Ethics for Truth-telling and Reconciliation', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 31/1 (2011):17-36.

sustenance of false cultural interpretations and understandings of albinism in African cultures is a source of harm and the continuous perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination against persons with albinism in African communities. It is also clear from our discourse thus far that the African social elitist epistemology system and its repositories of knowledge and avenues of knowing play key roles in sustaining false understandings and beliefs and make epistemic access to accurate knowledge difficult. Stakeholders in the albinism rights and wellbeing projects need to make as a crucial focal point the elite class in the quest to embed accurate knowledge into indigenous repositories of knowledge and avenues of knowing in order for the African society to be more just and inclusive for persons with albinism.

But there are new alternative avenues of knowing and repositories of knowledge that could be explored further in embedding accurate knowledge of albinism in members of African communities. They include social media – for those who have access to the internet, radio and television jingles and programs, and pursuing disability education in basic formal education systems such as primary schools that target children and ensure training for teachers and health workers.<sup>17</sup> These have not been elaborately explored here but are important areas to explore. However, there is a disadvantage in focusing solely on these areas while not tackling the indigenous knowledge systems. Focussing only on these alternative avenues of knowing and repositories of knowledge makes it difficult to reach the elite class who are key players in determining what members of the community accept as knowledge and accurate information. Hence, although stakeholders may explore these options, it can only be explored in addition to targeting indigenous repositories of knowledge and avenues of knowing if the efforts are to yield meaningful results. These may include holding fruitful meetings and dialogues with councils of elders, age grade associations, indigenous priests and medicine men and women, and raising matters in village square meetings and during various forms of palaver. To be sure, this would not be easy, but a sustained effort would yield results.

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<sup>17</sup> See Imafidon, *African Philosophy and the Otherness of Albinism*, chapter 6.

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