Socio-Cultural Conception of Albinism and Sexuality Challenges among Persons with Albinism (PWA) in South-West, Nigeria

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Abstract

The conception of albinism and the plight facing persons with albinism (PWA) in south-western Nigeria have long been viewed and overemphasised from a biomedical perspective. However, there is a lack of information on the socio-historical conception of albinism and the corollary effect on albinos' sexuality challenges. This study examines the socio-cultural barriers affecting PWA in the formation of identity and sexual negotiations and relationships. The study was purely qualitative in nature, revealing the Yoruba myths, folktales and legends about albinos as both disabled and divine beings. This was highlighted as having a significant impact on their sexuality, associations, and relationships with persons with/out pigmentation defects. Men with albinism (MWA) were discovered to be more likely to get involved in relationships and possibly getting married especially if they are from a wealthy home. Similarly a better chance and strong familial support exist for a first-born son and for an only male child, than the females with albinism (FWA). This buttresses the patriarchal nature of the African society which emphasises much preference for the male born. From birth therefore, gender was narrated as a discriminatory factor. However, identity formation, association and getting involved in sexual relationships were major challenges affecting all PWA. For the female PWA the risk of being used for

money making rituals; not knowing a sincere partner; their more fragile nature and perceived fear of societal objection and hatred in seeing a non-albino with an albino getting involved were highly traumatising. The study concluded that the socio-cultural conception of albinism and albinos as disabled and spirit beings should be deconstructed to pave the way for effective expression of sexual relationships.

Key words: Spirit beings, myth, relationships, gender, patriarchy

Introduction

In this article, the inherent cultural beliefs, stereotypes formation and discrimination against persons with albinism (PWA) in South-West Nigeria are examined, with particular emphasis on their sexual relationships. Albinism is a genetic condition in which a person lacks the gene for producing melanin – the pigment that protects the skin from ultraviolet light from the sun (Brilliant 2009; Thuku 2011). Persons with albinism (PWA) may lack pigmentation in the skin, eyes and hair. The exact prevalence of albinism in the human race is not clear but estimates say that the ratio is about 1 in 17,000 (Thuku 2011; Wiete 2011). It is, however, more prevalent in some parts of the world than in others. In Nigeria, there are about 6 million PWA; the prevalence is put at 1: 1100 (Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2008). Statistically, Africa seems to have a high prevalence of PWA, of which Tanzania, Nigeria, and South Africa are worst affected (Baker et al. 2010; Burke, 2012; NDHS 2008; Thuku 2011; Wiete 2011). That said, it is important to understand that albinism is found in all races and not just among the people of the black race. There are several classes, types and sub-types of albinism defined by the measure to which there is a lack of melanin and what body parts affected (National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation NOAH; 2008). In most communities across the world, albinism is hardly (or not) understood. Myths and misconceptions surround the condition. However this is amplified in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa largely because the light skin tone of PWA stands out sharply in communities whose members are predominantly dark skinned. In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Nigeria and Tanzania, the condition is traditionally thought of as evil, a curse, or as some form of punishment from the gods or the ancestors for something wrong done by the parents. In some communities, it was thought that there was something wrong with the mother. For centuries, children born with albinism have been routinely killed immediately after birth by parents and mid-wives (Abogunrin 1989; Ayantayo 1999; Delaney, 2008). Myths about albinism continue to persist in many parts of Africa

In Nigeria, like in Tanzania and South Africa research has shown that widespread violations of Albino's rights are taking place on a daily basis due to the belief in witchcraft (Offiong 2010; Baker et al. 2010). Suspected Albino 'witches' have been abandoned by their parents and guardians, taken to the forest and

slaughtered, bathed in acid, burned alive, poisoned to death with local poison berry, buried alive, drowned or imprisoned and tortured in churches in order to extract a confession (Baker et al. 2010; Burke, 2012; Offiong 2010; Stepping Stones Nigeria 2007; Thuku 2011; UNHCR 2008; Wiete 2011) Abuses of PWA rights linked to witchcraft are not isolated to Africa. In 2004 Pakistani police found the body of an albino with his throat cut in a town where two men were earlier arrested for murdering four albinos, with the belief that blood is useful for local medication (Sun 2004).

Stepping Stones (2007) research on ritual murder and human sacrifice identified the Nigerian film industry (popularly referred to as Nollywood) as promoting violence against PWA via some of its movies. Singled out was the film titled "End of the Wicked" which portrays the main character (acted by an albino) as a witch (The First Post, 2009). Similarly, such films regularly promote superstitious beliefs such as that of witchcraft and highlight the spread of the idea that albino body parts may have mystical powers. Many children, youth and adults with albinism in Nigeria have been found dead, missing and sacrificed due to the belief that certain body parts can be used in rituals, to gain power, money, and success; and for the cure of impotency and causing harm to others (Katy 2006; Mesaki 1993; Stepping Stones Nigeria 2007). Looking at all these problems, faced by PWA, first as children and later in their adult lives, sociologically there is no doubt that surviving albinos will be faced with a myriad of challenges in their relationships with others in the larger society. One of such societal challenges is the limited space for building sexual relationships.

There are studies on issues bordering on PWA's sexuality and sexual relationships. Most available literature about sex and sexuality are usually limited to men and women who are not albinos. Apart from being stigmatised, killed for ritual purposes (Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, 2005; Hoskins, 2006), there is much to study and to understand about their identity formation, sexual urges and sexuality in general as complete social and biological beings. Against this background, the existence of ineffective socially approved outlets for PWA effectively to associate and express themselves in sexual relationships in Nigeria points to tensions often not expressed overtly. Other social vacuums such as extreme poverty, lack of access to basic resources and services and violent abuses of basic human rights provide a fertile breeding ground for distress in exploiting their sexuality. These realities go a long way in explaining life's misfortunes and the social order to the disadvantage of many in the minority group (Heslop and Gorman 2002). The fact still remains that Albinism is not inimical in itself. This no doubt can only be well understood through new research, as many studies in the past continuously tend to concentrate on the various discriminatory practices, neglecting the implications these practices may have for PWA's sexuality. Hence, the need to examine critically

the relationships between socio-cultural conception of albinism and sexuality challenges among PWA in Southwest-Nigeria for necessary awareness and possible actions and planning purposes. With regard to the outlined objectives, this study seeks answers to the following research questions: What are the socio-demographic factors affecting sexual relationships of PWA? How do Persons with Albinism (PWA) express their sexual urges with one another, and with non-PWA without albinism? What are the gender dimensions towards sexual advances? What are the cultural barriers facing PWA in their sexual negotiation and decision making? How do familial influences affect sexual relationships of PWA? What are the cultural barriers hindering sexual relationships between PWA and People without Albinism?

Methodology

The study employed the grounded theory approach where research questions emerged from interviews. Identified PWA were simply asked to narrate the cultural beliefs surrounding albinism and albinos and how it has affected their social and sexual relationships. This was done using Wengraf's Life-history qualitative research interviewing, which involves a narrative and semi-structured method questionnaire "tell me the story/history of your life" (Wengraf 2001). The interest in life narratives addressed much about the psychology of the individual—his or her personality, identity, or self— as it does about the events and structural conditions experienced. Data collection involved personal interactions, direct participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion with 38 PWA, across cities in Ondo, Osun, Oyo, Ekiti and Lagos States in South-west, Nigeria, between December 2012 and October 2013 . The Interviews were conducted in Yoruba with the interjection of pidgin and standard English languages. They lasted between 50 minutes and one hour 30 minutes, per individual. The data generated were analysed qualitatively, using ethonography summaries. The study comprised 21 females and 17 males. The research took into consideration the sensitive nature of the subject (sexuality) and the age of respondents engaged in the interview and group discussion sessions. All the respondents were over 18 years, which was one of the inclusion criteria specified in the consent form. Over 26.3 percent each were between two age groups of 23-27 and 38-42 years. Another 21.1 percent and 18.4 percent were between the ages of 28-32, and 33-37. The youngest group and least in number (18-22 years) totalled 7.9 percent. The statistics of PWA with secondary education were quite impressive, with 55.4 percent. Followed in the rating were those with primary education (23.7 percent). Those with tertiary education were 13.2 percent. Non-formal education was the least with 7.9 percent. The marital status shows that over two-thirds of the respondents indicated by 68.4 percent were single and never married, as against 13.2 percent married and 18.4 separated. Going by gender alongside marital status, 39.5 percent of the women were not married. Seven respondents (18.4 percent) were separated.

The fear of not getting married was identified as a major concern among respondents. Thus the challenges experienced are discussed below:

Social Exclusion and Marginalities

The discourse of social exclusion is predominantly applied to marginalities such as the underclass, the homeless and other minorities (Young 1999). For PWA, cultural exclusion is as a result of the perception and dictates defining who they are. The effect on their life-styles is also captured in their experiences regarding sexual relationships. Experiences of female PWA showed that relationships with non-PWA (males) are characterised by secrecy, pretence, short-lived with heartbreaks. A female PWA captured her experience as '*we are loved at night dispersed by the day:*

> There are very few non-albinos friends who come around asking for a relationship. After secondary school education, I became pregnant after being deceived by one of them, thinking we were going to get married. After this incidence I recalled why he did not want me to meet his parents during the relationship. He would tell me to stay at home that he would be visiting me at home and in school. He would say 'it is because of the sun'. Later I suspected, he was not comfortable with me especially during the day, but prefers taking me out at night. The day I told him I was pregnant he became furious and told me he couldn't have been responsible. His parents were also in denial saying 'our son couldn't have been the one, we know his girlfriend'. Literally the parents meant he could not have been dating an albino, neither would he have impregnated one (Female/Lagos State).

She was clearly hurt. She vowed never to get involved in any relationship; which simply means she may not be interested in getting married. This was an example of once bitten twice shy. With regard to the cultural norms, where women are not expected to make the first move towards sexual relationships or friendships another respondent emphasised that this also contributes to the delay in getting involved in relationships and marital affairs:

> Culturally if a woman is found making the first move by telling a guy he is handsome, and that you are in need of friendship. It is seen as a taboo and can be interpreted as an obvious sign of waywardness and ill-mannered. Therefore when a man fails to approach me, I would never descend so low to give myself away cheaply. It is something not to be discussed ordinarily. I wonder what a non-albino man or boy would feel. In such a case, especially among an albino who is a girl, she may be accused of being a witch if the boy is not an albino.

> Or it may be seen as bad omen or a topic for the town or community to discuss (Female/Ondo).

Avoidance and othering in society have been associated with the definition of PWA's otherness, which in turn marginalises, disempowers and excludes them in the broader scheme of things (Weis 1995). Though some have argued that othering serves a psychological purpose, where an 'exclusionary urge' (Hubbard 1998:281) satisfies a need to keep psycho- and socio-spatial proximity 'clean' from deviant, dirty or threatening others, and maintain moral normality. It is however revealing that a number of PWA narrated their dependence on electronic media for sexual pleasures. This was only highlighted by three of the respondents:

> The internet can now be accessed through phones, so it is much easier for me to watch sexual activities and get satisfied. Though it is not something I do often (Male/Ondo State).

For the two others, it was the reliance on soft sell magazines, electronics and the use of the internet:

> I make myself happy with books, magazines and my phones when I am alone. So I get connected to the internet and I am free to visit any website of my choice to satisfy my urges (Male/Lagos State).

> Just like any other person, I have some compact discs of erotic and romantic movies, when I get bored or experience some urges I watch for some minutes and am done. It is not all the time and one has to be careful not to be seen (Female/Ogun State).

Comments about the place of pornography in their lives can also be read as an indication of their desires and pleasures in the construction of their sexual identities. There has been much focus on the vulnerabilities that the marginalised face especially young women, as Reddy (2004) and others have noted (Bhana, 2011; Jewkes and Morrell, 2011). Whilst this remains a justifiable concern, less emphasis on the pleasurable means through which the marginalised seek sexual gratification has been overlooked with references to PWA's sexual desires). These narratives thus reflect that some PWA relate positively to pornography and the erotic elements of sex and sexuality as a result of the social distance created by society. Similarly the responses go a long way in creating as well as building up what psychologists refer to as withdrawal syndrome among people with albinism (Ferguson et al. 1992, Kayode 1986; Jewkes & Morrell 2011; Hearn J 2008). It also defines late life in adult personality and personhood. The withdrawal syndrome among PWA, just like any other people, is linked most times to the socialisation processes experienced from childhood. For PWA, in Nigeria, different attention is given, and often they are excluded from many strenuous activities especially those that require moving outside

the compound, during hot afternoons. For some of these reasons, PWA are differentially socialised.

Differential Socialisation Processes: Implications and Difficulties on PWA's Relationship with Opposite Sex

The linkage between societal discrimination and the socialisation processes arises from the fact that culture through socialisation defines who we are, being male or female, masculine or feminine and sexual orientation, in different social and cultural contexts. Similarly discrimination and what to discriminate against are cultivated first through socialisation as described by Parker et.al (2000) in the analysis of identity and sexuality as cited in Parker (2009):

> …All biological males and females must undergo a process of sexual socialisation in which culturally specific notions of masculinity and femininity are shaped across the life course. It is through this process of sexual socialisation that individuals learn the sexual desires, feelings, roles and practices typical of their cohorts or statuses within society—as well as the sexual alternatives that their culture opens up to them (P. 257).

The lack of knowledge, misinformation and negative attitudes about albinism often builds up to the exclusionary tendencies manifested by 'others' in the same society towards PWA. Starting from early childhood to adulthood at one or other point in time PWA seem to have been discriminated against. This was evident in their experiences in both the private and public spheres, most especially in school and at home. The differential treatment at home and associations outside the home have many roles to play in the way PWA's self-esteem is built. This explains some of the reasons why many PWA are more likely than others to develop low self-esteem and negative attitudes about themselves and their abilities. An excerpt from three life history interviews showed clearly that there are exclusionary tendencies which limit the avenues for PWA to express and share their emotions; and in getting engaged. The few available ones like going to parties and even religious and social gatherings were marked with terrible experiences and expectations which bring about observed withdrawal syndrome and low self-esteem:

> …The home is the most important avenue for socialisation but surprisingly the sexuality challenges even start at home. Family members keep examining you as if your organs will be quite different in colours as well as in sizes, sometime they peep at one to see if the genitals are normal. It is embarrassing! Though family members accept one as he is, just because you are from the same womb, but they also sometimes make jest of one. Sometimes parents and

siblings even distance themselves from PWA. So we know these things. It is natural, once someone discriminates against you; one will definitely know. One does not need to be told when you are in a place where you are not accepted; instantly you will know. So we suffer all of these. These take a psychological toll on us (PWA) especially as one grows up into an adult (Male/Ondo State).

…I still remember some of the agonising experiences I went through. I still remember when I went to a library to read and the young man beside me was uncomfortable and stylishly sneaked away to another section of the library. I had to look at myself again to see if I was properly dressed or had a smell or odour. I was from a comfortable home I had good clothes and body spray to discountenance the false belief that PWA have body odour or smells in general (Female/Oyo State).

…One of the reasons you won't find me in a party or social gathering is because of the systematic discrimination netted on PWA. In 2005 I went to a party and was walked out of the party hall—the bouncer told me categorically that 'we don't welcome Albinos here'. There are other incidences too numerous to mention. I can still remember, I stretched my hands to shake somebody, and I was told 'don't touch me' because I was an albino. Sometimes in churches, people come in to have their seats close to you, they just suddenly leave you and leave a whole row of sit for you; ladies walk up to you and say 'I cannot sit, touch or talk to an albino'. Once I was invited by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), to give a talk as a guest; the Newscaster, a lady was of the opinion that she does not see the discriminations I speak about in society. So I looked her deep in her eyes and asked her if she would marry an Albino? She lost her breath. After a while she eventually answered in the affirmative. I said to her 'I do not need to be a psychologist' to know that, that is a secondary opinion' (Male/Executive, Albino Foundation, Lagos state).

In all the interviews made, there was a unanimous response and objection to the option of having a relationship with females or males with albinism or even someone having the gene or traces of albinism in their lineage. For the males they tend to regard association with female albinism as disgusting. This was earlier noted and can be traced down to some belief systems or culturally held stereotypes against the female albinos, as 'possessed and evil'. In one of the discussion sessions, this was a

major cause of concern, which was narrated as hindering female albinos from having male partners:

> I have no male friends to engage with in any form of relationship, because of the strong belief that female albinos are more deadly than male albinos. I hope such beliefs will change in no distant future, because, many of us are not getting married. I am still hoping and praying to be able to get a partner if God wills it (Female/Ogun State).

Another, a married man, was full of confidence, with the opinion that whoever is destined to have a partner will have one someday. Similarly he highlighted how his pastor assisted him in getting a partner:

> It got to a stage in my life, with a good education and job I knew it was time despite being in my late 40s. I was getting old and I have no female friends outside my siblings, due to several rejections in the past. One day I approached my pastor, informing him, that I am thinking of getting married. And he applauded me as if I have brought him a gift! He encouraged me to pray over it and that he will talk to some of the single ladies in the church. That was how I got a partner and we are now married (Male/Ondo State).

He concluded with emphasis on his educational and economic status as two major factors that enabled his chances of getting a partner:

> I felt it was a bit easy for me and the pastor, because I was educated and have a relatively good job to cater for a family and also to assist the church….it could have been a friend or other family members doing the expression for a relationship and others will follow.

Late marriage was common among PWA, while the worse affected were the women. A female respondent revealed some of the challenges in her marriage and how she is coping with a non–albino partner and extended family pressures:

> We got to know each other from a spinsters' programme organized by the church way back 1999 and it took us about 11 years to get married. Till date some of my in-laws are not really comfortable. Often I hear gossips, people backbiting at your back, saying 'why did he marry an albino? Maybe I have charmed him! He is just too nice to have gotten married to me! What a wicked world!. The most painful of all these tantrums was the one my sister in-law threw at me when I was pregnant she said 'I pray you won't give birth to another albino, one is already too much for my brother to handle'.

> Anytime I remember these words, I feel dehumanised (Female/ Oyo State).

The facial expression changed as the respondent made her last remark. The mood of other participants was also affected. This was clearly observed from the faces of the single (not married). One of them wept profusely. At this point the discussion was brought to a halt and had to be rescheduled. The persistence of social discriminations in marriages shows some of the forms of inequalities and social experiences concerning skin pigmentation (Hearn 2008). PWA being in the minority and a socially marginalized group in society, intensify the various forms of discriminations experienced. Discrimination seems to vary with Ocular Albinism (OA) and Oculocutaneous Albinism (OCA) which are the two major shades of albinism. PWA noted the different perceptions and discriminations surrounding these two forms of albinism. The Pale Albinos scientifically referred to as Ocular Albinos (OA) narrated their experiences differently as 'more advantageous and acceptable' in the society than the very light albinos (Oculocutaneous Albinos (OCA). Thus persons with OA described their leverage in relationship choices and control over their personality:

> I do not see myself as a typical albino. I can do most things others cannot. I go out in the sun, I have boyfriends and I have been in couple of relationships. This is not my first or second relationship. Once get fed up, or notice any disrespect or negative change in attitude, I quickly say goodbye and end the relationship for good. I have never struggled for boyfriends so why should I be tied to who will not love me. At my age young boys and men still make advances at me (Female/Ondo State).

Likewise another stated:

> Just like other girls I have had a boyfriend before now. Though I started a bit late after my secondary education, but I had to give in as the peer pressure was becoming too much. My first boyfriend was a great pretender; it took me time to know that he was dating other girls. When I got to know, I had to call it quite because I know I am alright by all standards, so what is the big deal. I felt he was probably not comfortable with me, because all other girls were not of the same colour. For my second boyfriend he was just too harsh I thought it wise that he should also leave. I was force to remind him that with my skin, I do not think I should be hurt. I am currently alone. Having a boyfriend for now is not in my priority list (Female/Ekiti State).

Scholars have noted that Ocular Albinism (OA) affects only the eyes, not the skin or hair. For this singular reason, slightly pigmented respondents classified themselves as advantageous compare to Oculocutaneous Albinism (OCA) which affects the eyes, hair and skin. Persons with OCA are more predisposed to having black spot all over their bodies, if exposed to the sun, and their inability to walk and work in intense heat puts them indoors more often than not. It is said to be more expensive than OA to manage (Brilliant 2009). Thus persons with OA have more agencies to express their sexual desires more openly and freely. Culturally, they are less constrained and well received. However this does not mean that very light albinos (OCA) are powerless. For OCA in the informal sector and involved in energetic activities such as carpentry, their skin was often spotted and disfigured. A respondent noted the suffering of coping with the weather, strenuous jobs, and the implication on opposite sex:

> With the stress and everyday sunshine, my skin has completely changed since I started working as an adult. I think most ladies do not like coming close, except when they come to collect their wood works. Apart from that I have no relationship whatsoever with women (Male/Ogun State).

With these perceived beliefs among albinos, there are quite a number of sexuality challenges in the available options any matured person with albinism (PWA) would want to take. So therefore a number of well-calculated measures must be taken regarding first and foremost who would their future partner be, as well as the option of constantly living in fear with intending partners. The fears and challenges contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of PWA from most societal functions, where marital status elevates one among his or her peers. Thus many PWA are not only lonely but often remain single because of the limited opportunities available in mingling with others for possible marital relationships.

The Impact of Education on PWA Association and Relationships

Emanating from the interviews and discussions was the notion that improved education was an enhancer towards marriage and association. This was captured from the voice of a male advocate in Oyo State, describing from his personal experience how higher education brought him more female admirers. At first his association with females and other male colleagues in his early years in school was very minimal until he was given admission to the university:

> Education plays a lot in reducing the barriers. I got into a relationship, precisely having a girlfriend who she saw the potentials in me. That was in my sophomore, though she later left and abandoned me with no good reason. I was able to know later that she

could not cope with family pressure on her. A year later a fellowship mate from the scripture union (SU), and from a very religious home got closer and we became lovers and got married after about five years. It was difficult for her too for similar reasons at first. In all I believe my education status played a key role in having a wife today (Male, Oyo State).

Education has often been emphasised in many of the campaigns and rallies by the president of the Albino Foundation of Nigeria (AFN). He noted that he is what he is today because of the encouragement and investment in education by his parents, nothing that:

Children and Albino children must be well educated and if possible getting the highest form of education to gain respect in Africa society. This will empower them in living better as humans and as citizens in contributing meaningfully as family members and in expressing themselves, their rights and knowing their privileges (Male, Lagos State).

A male student complemented his view by stating some of the challenges in getting involved in:

…being younger and being an albino are serious issues; our concern is usually not in opposite sex for relationships, because we have quite a number of challenges to contend with; ranging from harsh environment, both at home and in school. For these reasons alone we (albinos) tend to start, or enter into a relationship much later than people without albinism (Ekiti, State).

The above narratives address the challenges for PWA while in school as highly disturbing and often preventing them from having a relationship early in life, if they ever have. Other issues which scare adult PWA from going into a relationship with the opposite sex or even accepting relationship proposals from non-PWA were the widespread cultural beliefs that having affairs with albinos cures the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV); that albinos' hairs are potent ingredients for making love potion and money rituals and lastly the belief that albinos' eyes are valuable items for seers, magicians and herbalists who look into the future (Delaney 2008; Mesaki 1993). With proper enlightenment and education of PWA and other members in the same community, these perceptions, attitudes and the discrimination arising from lack of awareness and information and little, or no, experience of living closely with PWA (and others often categorized as disabled) will change. However the current experiences of PWA show that the discriminatory attitudes and beliefs are still very much embedded in society's lack of knowledge and the socialisation processes.

Culture and Familial Influences on PWA Marital Aspirations

A probe into the challenges facing people with albinism in one of the focus group discussions showed that there are tendencies for male PWA to involve more easily in relationships and find a partner to marry than their female counterparts. A female respondent narrative depicts this:

> Those of us who are females and albinos find it difficult to get boyfriends, say much less of getting a husband; even though we are from a wealthy home. This is not the same for boys or male albinos, their parents can easily be of help and arrange girls and find them wives, with money (Female, Ondo State).

For another, the odds favour the male albinos because of the cultural attachment of the male child with inheritance, to preserve and reserve family names. The issue relating to males as heirs is captured below:

> It is even easier when the albino is male child and better if he is a senior son. He becomes a heir in the making. The family will make sure he gets married in order to keep the family name. No matter what the financial circumstance of the parents, they will do their best to ensure he procreates, to avoid a vacuum (Female, Ondo State).

It is even best if the male Albino is an only son' (Male/Ondo State). This was an interjection from a male respondent. Though it came in as a way of supporting the female respondents, this did not go down well with the females who took it as support for the status quo. This was met by some "melodrama" and disappointment among the female respondents '…*It isn't funny at all my friend*, replied a female participant (Female, Ondo State). A male opinion was asked; and unanimously male participants interjected to represent their interests. He thus expressed his views:

> Really it is easier for a male albino because we make more friends and associate more with people than the females. Even among us here, they tend to associate more with themselves (Male, Ondo State).

Countering the above opinion, a female respondent noted that association with male albinos is only common when people know that their parents or relatives are wealthy. She however noted that there are cultural beliefs which support dissociation and discrimination against the female albinos when it comes to relationships and having a partner:

> It may be easier for male albinos to be associated with, more than females, especially when their parents or they themselves are rich, but it is not the same for us. The society have the belief that female

> albinos are not to be associated with, as association will bring evil and bad omen, bad luck. Even some albino men have the same beliefs. A colleague of mine in the same college avoided me throughout the six years spent in secondary school. So often I think this is why most of us make friends more with girls than with the boys (Female, Ondo State).

Summing up, male and female identity, self-confidence and social value were evident through the discussions. The number of active voices addressed norms and values which do give positive connotations to male identity. Socially and sexually, men's activity through associations and relationship building (contrary to that of women), was often described as a legitimate way for men to enhance self-esteem and masculinity (Silberschmidt 2001). No doubt, culture has a normative role in Yoruba society just like any other in Africa, most especially in relation to the value placed on the male child as shown above. Culture therefore sets the ball rolling for more acceptance of males with albinism (MWA) and gives them a better leverage above females with albinism (FWA). In this situation, African culture can render female sexuality docile and they become passive recipients of male sexuality on the one hand and on the other sexuality becomes a means through which men and boys jockey for power and male sexual prowess. Culturally this is assessed through sexual conquests (Muhanguzi 2011; Reddy 2004). In this context, young women in particular are often considered victims of patriarchal sexuality. In other words, male sexuality is endowed and legitimated with power, and not demonstrating sexual prowess results in insubordination. This account for the relative edge MWA have over FMA. Generally in Africa women and girls are disadvantaged and have to demonstrate sexual docility and innocence as demonstrations of sexual desire and interest, which have been attributed to scathing attacks on female reputations (Bhana 2008; Ramlagun 2012). Among the Yoruba, the sacredness and standards for sex and sexual relationships are well defined. Kayode (1986:51) gave the following examples:

(a) It must be performed mainly by husband and wife. Hence, there is no room for premarital and extramarital sex,

(b) it must be performed at night and not in the afternoon,

(c) other places where sex must not be performed include the farmland so that the ancestors of the land would not be offended. It is no wonder then that there are specific rituals that must also be performed whenever anybody broke any of the taboos associated with sex.

(d) Sex is considered sacred in all its forms and interpretation. And as a matter of fact, it is something that must not be talked about. It is no wonder that activities often associated with sex such as kissing and petting are not so

common in Africa, especially when done in or around public places. Anything that relates to romance and sex is to be done secretly (p. 51).

Meanings that are conveyed in a culture and the tested practices are central in setting these standards. Standards for deciding what is right or wrong in a given society, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one should feel, standards for deciding how to go about daily activities are all embedded in culture (Bhana 2008; Goodenough 1963; Kayode 1986; Ramlagun 2012). One of the norms associated with the Yoruba culture is the belief that any couple that have sex in the afternoon will give birth to an albino child, and that Albinos are "*eni orisa*", that is, those who belong to the divinities (spirit beings). Thus, they are not ordinary children. Unlike other "normal" children, they have to observe "the do's and don'ts" associated with belonging to *Orisa* (the gods). Yoruba people or traditional religionists dread offending the divinities (Kayode 1986). In the case of males, cultural standards define what it means to be a 'man' sexually and otherwise; while for the female it is all about the value placed on gender, the children, and age. The analysis below could be traced to the socialisation process which brings about the sympathetic and expressive nature of the female child towards one another as opposed to the aggressive nature of boys in general. In a personal interview with one of the female executives in the Albino Foundation of Nigeria (AFN), Lagos State chapter, she narrated that the issue often starts from the home:

> At the home front, even my brothers do not have my time, talk less of other males that are not family members or albinos. And ordinarily, no female would want to associate with another male albino. I wonder what the society would say (Male, Lagos State).

This may have effect in terms of albinos expressing their concern and interest towards the opposite sex, at the age of maturity. The socialisation process at school was another important avenue where PWA became mixed with others, but the impact was described as not completely different from what is obtainable on the home front due to culture and familial influence.

Conclusion

This study examined the socio-cultural conception of albinism and sexuality challenges among persons with albinism (PWA) in South-West, Nigeria. Several narratives reveal the socialisation processes, the meaning associated with albinism and the impact that meanings and perceptions have on PWA experiences in their pursuit of social and sexual relationships. The Yoruba culture tends to explain why there are such negative perceptions about albinism and PWAs, from the concepts of disability and spirit beings. The tradition depicts PWA as the closest allies of *Obatala*, the Yoruba god of creation. This is a belief system which sees and informs

the continuous saying that PWA, cripples, hunchbacks, dwarfs and deaf are created by the god (*Obatala*). This has a strong relationship with the perceptions and cultural stereotype about PWA as persons with disabilities and as spirit beings to be avoided. They are covertly classified as disabled on the one hand; and on the other as materials for spiritual sacrifices and rituals. These two connections play a major role in the explanation of the personality of PWA. The import therefore is that it creates a stigma, which brings about the withdrawal syndrome most PWA often experienced. The long-time manifestation is the limited opportunities of having life partners and involvement in sexual relationships. All these invariably account for the low level of marital unions among adults PWA, mostly females. Lastly, the patriarchal and inheritance culture tends to put the MWA at advantage over the FWA in getting involved in relationships in order to maintain the family name and lineage. Thus gender and culture play a pivotal role in the conception of albinism and the effect albinism has on PWA's relationships and sexual affairs.

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