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Albinos don't die:

The symbolic ecology of belief in post-colonial Mozambique¹

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*If I see before me
the nervature of past life
in one image, I always think
that this has something to do
with truth. Our brains, after all,
are always at work on some quivers
of self-organization, however faint,
and it is from this that an order
arises, in places beautiful
and comforting though more cruel, too,
than the previous state of ignorance.
How far, in any case, must one go back
to find the beginning? Perhaps (...)*

W.G. Sebald (1944-2001)²

² Extract from “Dark Night Sallies Forth”, translated from German in *The New Yorker*, June 17 and 24, 2002, p. 126.

In Mozambique³ one is often told things about albinos that can hardly be interpreted at face value. These are not properly speaking “stories” (in the sense of organised or fictionalised narratives of a connected series of events) but propositional attitudes pertaining to refer to statements of fact, that is, they are “beliefs”. Although they are not told to you as “lies”, the fact is that the people who narrate them are often uncertain as to whether they are true. Upon hearing them, I was immediately challenged by the following question: if these beliefs do not meet up with the test of disbelief, what then is the significance of both conveying and holding them? This paper aims to interpret the meaning of these statements about albinos and, at the same time, to propose a novel way of looking at beliefs of this nature.

We start from Quine’s definition of belief as “a disposition to respond in certain ways when the appropriate issue arises” (Quine and Ullian 1970: 4). We proceed to consider Donald Davidson’s suggestion that belief is essentially veridical (2001). We argue, however, that beliefs such as the ones above are not judged primarily by reference to ostensivity. Rather, they have a *retentive* function: that is, they shore up whole areas of belief by providing symbolically organised environments of belief. These areas of belief are integrated and structured in a loose fashion so as to constitute what can be called a *worldview*. We, therefore, propose an approach that focuses on the *ecology of belief*: that is, the way in which all beliefs are dependent on the other beliefs that constitute an environment surrounding them.

In the case of the beliefs about albinos, they turn out to be props for the fixation and transmission of a worldview that is deeply marked by ethnic frontiers. They refer to the interstitial condition within the great “black”/“white” ethnic divide of post-colonial Africa.

³ I am grateful to the Department of Anthropology of University Eduardo Mondlane, Maputo, and to my colleagues at the UFICS and the Centro de Estudos Africanos for providing me with a welcome environment in Mozambique and for helping me to recognise a territory that was so familiar to me in my youth but which, a quarter of a century later, was deeply changed.

Intersubjectivity and the Automobile

Long trips in private automobiles are always exceptional circumstances for the exercise of intersubjectivity. People are held together for long periods of time, in reduced numbers and in close, sometimes even almost promiscuous, physical proximity. At the same time, one is challenged from the exterior – there are directions to find out, dangers from the road and other drivers, sights to be interpreted, plans of timings to be made.

In fact, the very objective of the trip is often in negotiation throughout its occurrence, as in many of these trips the goal to be reached is not predetermined, being open to change, which may well alter the general impact of the trip. Finally, there is the matter of authority: who owns the car; who drives the car; who pays for the trip; whose purpose ultimately determines the trip; who is senior (here age, gender, ethnicity, class, education, prestige, etc., all count). Often these are all conjoined into one person, but at other times they diverge, giving rise to distinct frames for the negotiation of meanings and corporate actions (those that are bounded by the car).

After the initial period of adaptation, long car trips often become a sort of loose seminar, in which people exchange points of view, debate interpretations of what they see and renegotiate with the other partners their own identities (depending on whatever angle of identification comes up to be relevant in the context). What is said is seldom dependent on any particular expositional logic and often is imparted “with no particular purpose in mind”. Briefly, people tell other people things that they want to tell without feeling that they need to question themselves about the reasons why they are telling them or why others should want to hear them. In principle, it is presumed that others want to hear only because “they having nothing else to do”.

Albinos don't die

It was towards the end of one such trip, in 2001, in southern Mozambique, that we passed by yet another albino on the side of the road. I commented that there seemed to be a lot of albinos around, having previously become aware that this was a favoured topic of conversation. My Mozambican companions readily confirmed that, in Mozambique, there are more albinos than in other African countries. This seems to be a generalised (though necessarily ungrounded) belief. The conversation proceeded naturally. I was told that it is generally believed that albinos do not die: they merely vanish. I asked my companions whether they had ever gone to an albino's funeral; they responded that, as a matter of fact, they had not.

I was interested in the exchange because, much like me, the people that were telling me this were fascinated with it without caring to say whether they believed in it. So I asked whether they did. The answer was negative but ambivalent, in the sense that they did not want to deny it either. I asked whether albinos were reborn later or whether they were supposed to go to another level. I was trying out to see if I could fit this tale with other types of patterns with which I was familiar from other socio-cultural regions. But both questions were negatively answered.

Already on a more jocular tone, and because they knew of my interest in the matter of cannibalism, they told me that, when there were food shortages during the Socialist period, a *boato* (rumour) suddenly went around that "the Chinese" were killing the albinos and selling their meat as if it were pork. At that time, the Socialist regime of Frelimo was closely allied with the People's Republic of China and such rumours had a vaguely seditious nature.

But relations with Chinese people were always slightly tense in this part of the world. Already during the late colonial period (1961-1975), the financial success of many Chinese people and their ready association with white Europeans (namely via the process of scholarly success) caused friction with the local black population. In a recent newspaper interview, an old Chinese man who had been a locally renowned boxer in the days of his youth, explained to the journalist how he began his career. It

all started from the fact that he lived in a poor quarter of town and he soon learned at school that the only way to survive as a Chinese was to be a good fighter. Being slightly built, he decided to learn boxing.

The trip continued and the conversation took off again. Apparently, men do not like their wives to give birth to albinos. The “more traditional husbands”, I was told, are prone to divorce their wives “for suspecting them”. I was not told what this suspicion consisted of – whether it had to do with having had adulterous relations with whites or even more sinister practices associated to witchcraft.

What followed, precisely because it was unelicited, was even more puzzling. I was told that the teller had recently met a Euroafrican woman (*mulata*) whose parents had already been *mulatos* but whose mother was an albino. Apparently the girl “did not even have bad (*mau*) hair like ours”, “she looked just like a white person”, as she was both albino and *mulata*.

This again was immediately followed by a discourse on how not all black skins are alike, since people from Chokwé (a region in southern Mozambique) have a lighter skin colour. Their skin, however, is clearly that of a black person as it has a yellow tone that cannot be confused with the skin of white Europeans.

What struck me about this series of unelicited comments was how each piece of information provided an interpretative context for the previous piece, in such a way as the teller, without wishing to grant his full support to most of them as empirically verified observations, drew out an interpretative plot that clarified their significance to the hearer and that placed them all at the same level. His report sketched out a map of ambivalent ethnic relations, in which “whites”, “blacks”, “*mulatos*”, “albinos”, “Chinese” and others distinguished among themselves by means of the diacritical signs of skin colour and hair type.

He was not willing to provide or even capable of formulating, a theory concerning the way in which the supposed mystic properties of albinos, and the corresponding discrimination which they suffer, were associated with this background of racial classification. But, sensing my lack of means properly to

contextualise these beliefs, he provided me with examples of such links that might help me to reconstruct the “web of belief” within which what he told me came to make sense to him and to the people that he heard it from. It seems important to clarify that at no moment was he attempting to make me “believe” in what he told me, in the sense that I should expect it to correspond to empirical reality.

Later on, wishing to understand to what extent what I had been told corresponded to generally held ideas, I queried various other acquaintances about it. I was told, for example, of an albino musician who claims that he was abandoned on a rubbish heap by his father after his birth, only to be saved by his mother’s brother, who raised him (this is supposed to have taken place in northern Mozambique among Makua people, where the mother’s brother is a figure of greater responsibility than the father).

At another time, I was given a far more complicated version of the story of the albino-eating Chinese. Apparently, “during the hunger period” (*no período da fome*), many people became sick in Matola (a suburb of the capital, Maputo) after eating some meat sold to them by Chinese. It then came out that they were selling albinos as pork, due to the similarity of the skin colouring.⁴

But, for themselves, these Chinese were not eating the actual albinos, this person told me. Rather, they hired albino servants, fattened them, and sealed them alive in a closed drum, which they placed in the sun. When the servant died and rotted, a gigantic necrophagous worm came out. This was the relish that the Chinese ate during their feasts. Again, I was not given confirmation of whether the teller thought that this event actually occurred or was merely rumour. This was certainly not the reason why it was being told to me. My impression was that the person was fascinated with the notion of the Chinese eating these worms.

This same lady confirmed that albinos are said not to die and that “one is never invited to go to funerals of albinos”. She claimed that it was supposed to be a

⁴ I urge the reader not to take this account as an empirically grounded statement of fact. Even if such a thing had actually happened, the people that narrate it would have no means of checking its veracity.

magic type of disappearance, but that it did not imply a later rebirth or a re-appearance in spirit form.

Parents, she corroborated, are profoundly unhappy about giving birth to albinos. An acquaintance of hers had given birth to two albino children in a row, whom she killed at birth, before she gave up and decided to raise her third albino child. Apparently there is a kind of “medicine” which one can give to these babies, such that they grow up to look like *mulatos*. Albinos must not eat molluscs and have to be bathed with seawater when they are babies, in order to prevent their skin from deteriorating. This informant also expressed the same strong disgust for the skin of albinos that I had heard being expressed more than once.

Finally, an association is made with vitiligo – a skin disorder characterised by smooth white spots on various parts of the body. I was told that this is a form of acquired albinism that results from theft. If someone has stolen something, the former owner goes to a sorcerer who will “treat” (*tratar*) the thief in this way. An example was given to me of a person who had stolen a duck. Not only did he get vitiligo but it also affected his children, who had eaten it without knowing its provenance.

Belief and Interpretation

For a long time the issue of “belief” has been a source of theoretical concern for anthropologists. On the one hand, very few ethnographies fail to speak about belief and a good number of them pertain to be exclusively about that. On the other hand, no one quite seems to know what “belief” is. From Needham (1972) to Gellner (1974), to Veyne (1988 [1983]), to Tambiah (1990) the more the issue is discussed, the less we seem to be nearing a solution. In fact, Needham’s radical pessimism in this matter continues to be largely justified.

Essentially, the topic of the definition of what is belief tends to merge with the more general topic of there being a modernist propensity to treat “belief” as contrary to “knowledge”. But, in fact, if we accept that “traditionalism” is a form of

modernism, as Latour suggests (1991), then half of the modernists were traditionalists (the other half were the progressive modernists). This being the case, it is no longer possible to claim that modernity saw belief as essentially untrue.

The important question is rather the role attributed to “knowledge” – and, in particular, scientific and technological knowledge. By dissociating “belief” from “knowledge”, the modernists placed us before a quandary that ultimately can only provide ethnocentric results. Belief came to be associated to what non-moderns indulge in and knowledge as the realm of modern science and culture. There are many variants to this polarity and many different forms of theorising it, but they all make us ultimately incapable of defining belief. We know it is there but we do not know what it is.

The situation worsened when a type of culturalist relativism became hegemonic in anthropology at world level during the late 1980's, often couched in the oddly improbable guise of neo-Marxist, Foucault inspired thought. Based on a singularly primitive version of sceptical epistemology, this current solved the problem by opting to see “cultures” (although everyone also agreed they no longer knew what that was) as systems of meaning essentially closed onto themselves. Scientific knowledge, then, became the cultural knowledge of the “West” (cf. Fabian, 1983, as an example of this argument). I have long ago called attention to the perverse implications of such a view (Pina-Cabral 1992) which, by claiming for the West the rights over science and technology, ultimately has two effects: (a) de-legitimising the rights of classificatory non-Westerners to the scientific and technological heritage of mankind, eventually claiming that one has to become somehow Western if one wants to contribute to science; and (b) throwing a veil of darkness over the fact that contemporary Westerners (whoever they are) are as likely to engage in analogical and symbolic thought as anyone else that we have known of in the history of humanity.

I was, thus, profoundly challenged by Donald Davidson's theory of radical interpretation (1984, 2001) and the way in which he treats the question of belief. Finally, it seemed, we were able to see some light at the end of the tunnel concerning

a central issue for anthropology, which it has forgotten for far too long: namely, that a necessary condition for the description, analysis and discussion of divergence in human practice is the presupposition of a solid ground of human commonality. As he puts it, a necessary condition for successful interpretation is that “the interpreter must so interpret as to make a speaker or agent largely correct about the world.” (2001: 152) This is something that all ethnographers know on the basis of their personal experience that cultural dislocation did not ultimately prevent communication and interpretation. “Making sense of the behaviours and utterances of others, even their most aberrant behaviour, requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them.” (1984: 153) Why, then, do we always focus on difference, leaving similarity as the unstated presupposition?

Davidson defines beliefs as “sentences held true by someone who understands them” (2001: 138). He insists that they are not “representations” or “images”. Rather, following Quine, he claims that “Beliefs (...) are states of people with intentions, desires, sense organs; they are states that are caused by, and cause, events inside and outside the bodies of their entertainers.” (2001: 138).

W.V. Quine’s initial definition was that belief, as a propositional attitude, “is a disposition to respond in certain ways when the appropriate issue arises.” (Quine and Ullian 1970: 4) For these philosophers, it is important to reject the commonly held notion that “believing [is] something that a man does *to* something: to some intangible thing which is *what* he believes.” (Ibid.: 4) To believe, then, is to “believe true”. Disbelief and nonbelief are consequently treated as cases of belief and of suspended judgement, respectively. Knowledge is belief when it is very well grounded.

What this means is that, for Quine, “where no confusion threatens, it will be convenient and natural to go on speaking even in the old way of what a man believes, instead of what he believes true. But whenever we are threatened by the philosophical question of objects of belief, we can gratefully retreat to the more

explicit idiom which speaks of believing sentences true, or, ultimately, of believing utterances true.” (Ibid.: 5)

What this means, according to Davidson, is that the possibility of communication among humans (and, consequently, the possibility of thought, since there cannot be thought without language) depends on the sharing of a common ground: “Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects.” (2001: 151) In this sense, therefore, “belief is in its nature veridical” (ibid.: 146), as otherwise communication would be impossible.

Such a theory may seem strange if, by belief, I continue to hold onto the classical definition of belief in things and, particularly, in things that are not true. But, if I adopt Quine’s definition and understand that there are many beliefs that are true (such as the sky is blue, the ground underfoot, etc.), I can easily concur with the notion that most of what a person says and implies is necessarily true.

This, of course, does not mean that error and falsity are impossible. Quite the contrary. As Davidson puts it: “there is no general presumption that someone who utters a declarative sentence wants or intends to speak the truth, nor that, if he does, he does it intentionally.” (1984: 268) It does, however, have two major implications. The first is to focus our attention once again on the high level of commonality in all human experience. The second is the overcoming of simplistic scepticism by focusing on the fact that reality is not outside human experience (as it were, hidden by culture) but is a necessary part of it. As he puts it, “the notion of a belief is the notion of a state that may or may not jibe with reality.” (2001: 153)

Truth and beliefs about albinos

Let us, then, consider the abovementioned beliefs concerning albinos in the light of this theory. If all beliefs are beliefs that x is true, then these statements about albinos either (a) cannot be granted the status of belief or (b) are statements concerning truth.

The first hypothesis seems difficult to hold in as much as people proffer these statements in much the same way as they proffer other statements and use them in precisely the same way. I could, of course, argue that they are metaphors and thus not meant to be understood literally. But they purport to describe actual events – such as that albinos are not buried or that Chinese sell albino meat as pork. They do not carry any indication of being a simile (x is like y) and, of course, they do not carry labels that say: “watch out, I am a metaphor!”

Therefore, much like Donald Davidson (1984: 245-264), I do not see that these statements can have any other meaning than the literal meaning they have. If there is a metaphorical intent in their production, it is not in the actual words pronounced but in the way they were both produced and received. We are here distinguishing between the meaning of the words and the use to which they are put. Following the same author, we argue that “metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use.” (ibid.: 247) This being the case, such statements can only be understood as being of the same nature as normal statements of belief. As it turns out, this is confirmed by the fact that many statements of belief can be received both literally and metaphorically *at the same time* – which, again, underlines the point that the metaphor is not in the statement itself but in the way it is received by whoever hears it.

If then, we confirm that these statements are beliefs, we are forced to deal with the notion that they are meant to be statements about truth or falsehood. As we have seen, this is problematic, since the very people that proffer them are prone to claim that they are uncertain as to whether they are true. Here, it might be argued that something is either true or not true. Whatever we might decide about that on a more general basis, that is not the point at this juncture. Because the notion of levels of truthfulness is an *ethnographic fact*, that is, it is what we were told. If pressed (for example, “But are you really sure that that happened?”) informants typically provide devious and uncertain answers (for example, “Well, people say it is true. And indeed, I do not know of any instance when it was not true ... but whether it is true or not, I

cannot really say.”) Note that, in the second example, I put in three dots into my exemplifying sentence. These are appropriate in the present case for, in fact, what typically happens is that informants hesitate and beat around the bush when we press them on this point.

In the case of the people who talked to me about albinos two things must be clear: (a) these things were not told to me as “stories” (i.e., as fictionalised narratives) but as reports about shared belief, “things *people* believe” – *as pessoas acreditam que ...*, *as pessoas dizem que ...*, *essa gente pensa que ...*; (b) I was specifically told by the informants that these things might well not be true.

This has to do with the issue of “first person authority”. People are typically far more certain about things they have experienced personally (and direct communication with some sort of divinity, for example, may be one of these) than about something they have heard or deduced from other sources. Such a potential for graduation in belief is a fact of everyday experience. People are open to greater or lesser certainty even about matters of sensory experience (I might have seen clearly that it was Martha that went through that door, or I might be open to suggestion that the person who went through that door looked a lot like Martha). This then is a factor that explains how the truthfulness of statements such as those concerning albinos might be more or less diluted.

Following Davidson again, we could argue that the fact that they are presented as possibly false statements is precisely what tells the receiver that these statements are metaphors: “Generally it is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as a metaphor and start to hunt out the hidden implications.” (1984: 258)

But this does not solve our problem. In the first place, because they were not told to us as being false, but as somehow less true.⁵ In the second place, because the relevance of such statements does not seem to be exhausted by their literal

⁵ Here, we must be reminded of Paul Veyne’s warning that “the feeling of truth is a capacious one (which easily comprehends myth) but also (...) “truth” means many things ... and can even encompass fictional literature.” (1988: 15).

interpretation. As it turns out, even if they had actually seen the burial of one albino, I am sure that my informants would still be willing to contemplate the more general truthfulness of the statement that “albinos do not die” and would still go on discussing the issue. As Rodney Needham puts it, following Wittgenstein, in certain matters, “truth and falsity are not immediately to the point; what counts is *circumstantial cogency*, (...) the force of prevalent custom.” (1985: 39, my emphasis)

In the third place, because the relative veridicality of such beliefs varies with context. This is a fact that has repeatedly been observed but that is not easily explained: in situations of social crisis, or in situations of heightened personal emotion, people’s willingness to interpret literally beliefs that are not grounded on experience often does increase. Thus, everyone that I talked to in Mozambique about these issues stressed that, during the period of hunger, at the time of the civil war, people were bound to take very literally for example the reports concerning the sale of albino meat by Chinese. Under the more cool-headed conditions of the present situation (the wealthier post-civil war period) people were less likely to hold by the literal truth of such beliefs.

Now, an argument that is often encountered to solve this sort of problem is that, when they expressed doubts concerning these beliefs, my informants were simply adapting themselves to me – in my globally hegemonic condition as European, white, educated, male adult. I admit that situations do arise in which this sort of explanation is a good one. And, of course, our conversations were marked by factors of this nature. Still, such an explanation is not enough to solve our present quandary. The fact that my informants were not as engaged to the literal truth of these statements as to that of others they provided cannot simply be explained by a “us/them” type, cultural relativistic argument of the sort: “They really believe it, but they are so afraid that I think they are fools, that they raise pre-emptive doubts just in case.”

Long experience tells me that this sort of reduced veridicality is a common feature of all cultural situations. This is one of the interpretations of the oxymoronic

sentence classically attributed to a native of Spanish Galicia: “I do not believe in witches, but that they exist I do not doubt” (*que las hay, las hay*). In short, we return to our original quandary: if these are beliefs, what do they tell us about truth?

The easiest solution, of course, would be to take the cultural relativist way out and give up on truth. I would content myself with claiming that all that can be said about the world is what any particular culture allows one to say about the world. I would classify my informants as belonging to “another culture” where people actually believe albinos do not die and would claim that such a culture is essentially incomprehensible to me, a Westerner.

This, however, would lead me nowhere. Worse still, it would make nonsense of a series of things that strike me as important, such as, for example: my own fascination with the notion that albinos do not die (that made me hear these reports, record them, hunt out for more details and finally spend a lot of very fulfilling days trying to make sense of them); my own incapacity to determine where “their culture” and “my (supposedly Western) culture” begins; and, not least of all, the whole of the history of anthropologically informed ethnography.

Ostensivity and the Web of Belief

Ironically, I believe the solution is to be found in the contrary direction, in what Donald Davidson calls “the essentially veridical nature of belief.” (2001: 175) This author suggests a very convincing alternative route to solving our problem. According to him, not all that I believe need be true, but if most of my beliefs were not essentially correct as a reflection of a shared world, then I would never be able to communicate with another human being, as I would never be able to acquire language. “The presumption that I am not generally mistaken about what I mean is essential to my having a language – to my being interpretable at all.” (2001: 99) What this means is that, for me to be able to understand what is on another person’s mind, we both have to share a largely correct view of the world. That being the case,

Davidson argues, “There are limits to how much individual or social systems of thought can differ.” (2001: 39)

If belief is essentially veridical, then, this means that we have to agree with Quine that observation is the boundary condition of belief (1970: 12-20). In other words, beliefs are dependent on ostensivity – the association of heard words with things simultaneously observed. I cannot learn a first language and, thus, I cannot learn to think as human, without being with another person in the presence of a shared world.

This “process of ostension”, is essential for the formation of belief, because, in Quine’s words, “learning by ostension depends on no prior acquisition.” (1970: 14). But it is also essential for its fixation and transmission to the extent that I constantly check my beliefs with reality and with other persons by means of the process of ostensivity. I will not attempt here to reduce to a few sentences, Davidson’s complex argument as presented in his essay on the “Irreducibility of the Concept of the Self” (2001: 84-91).

My point at this moment is simply that belief is indissociably connected with ostensivity in its possibility, in its formation and in its fixation and transmission. In this sense ostensivity is a boundary condition of belief. Nevertheless, as Quine graphically argues, “observation is the tug that tows the ship of theory; but in extreme cases the theory pulls so hard that observation yields.” (1970: 17) In short, in the matter of retention of belief, something else seems to be at work – a tendency to retain what “makes sense”.

Now, this has to do with one of the central characteristics of belief as identified by these philosophers: namely that “beliefs typically rest (...) on further beliefs.” (Quine and Ullian, 1970: 85) Belief is either a part of a chain of belief or it is nothing, for no belief is independent of the beliefs that surround it. Our minds are a web of belief. No belief would have content and identity without reference to an indeterminable but very large amount of other beliefs (cf. Davidson, 2001: 98). Furthermore, each of our thoughts is directly dependent on the other thoughts that

logically situate it, so it cannot be moved from this setting without becoming another thought. This is what Davidson has in mind when he insists that “Radical incoherence in belief is (...) impossible.” (2001: 99)

Consider the belief in the existence of albinos, which allows me to recognise someone as an albino. Starting from the ostensive moment in which we saw someone by the roadside whose physiological appearance was that which we normally recognise as that of an albino, I could only make that identification because I have a world of beliefs concerning what living beings are, which of these are humans, what is the normal skin of a human, etc. But then I have to enter into the whole complex area of human reproduction and of the relation between parents and offspring in skin colour, hair type, social status and all sorts of other features. By the time I have to bring into account what is to be considered as a “black” person or a “white” person in post-colonial Africa, I have gotten to the point where a good percentage of all my beliefs has had to be brought to the fore in order to “make sense” of what I understood when I shared with my companions in that automobile the ostensive moment of identification of an albino by the roadside.

We normally form beliefs on the basis of earlier beliefs, in such a way as to construct structures of beliefs that tend towards some sort of conservatism rather than towards some definite systematicity. “We form habits of building beliefs such as we form our other habits; only in habits of building beliefs there is less room for idiosyncrasy.” (Quine and Ullian 1970: 59) In fact the strategies for the transmission of belief that we normally adopt should be sufficient to illustrate this characteristic of belief. Quine makes this claim in yet another of his graphic formulae: “To maintain our beliefs properly even for home consumption we must attend closely to how they are supported. A healthy garden of beliefs requires well-nourished roots and tireless pruning. When we want to get a belief of ours to flourish in someone else’s garden, the question of support is doubled: we have to consider first what support sufficed for it at home and then how much of the same is ready for it in the new setting.” (ibid.: 85)

Let us take this injunction and look at the way in which my travelling companion declared his albino beliefs. Faced with my potential doubt (both expressed and supposed, for he knew I am a European foreigner and not completely familiar with his world) he went on to provide me with a set of apparently dislocated comments concerning skin types that were intermediary to the greater “black”/“white” divide.

If we look at what he told me without expecting it to be a logically integrated sequence, we can immediately see that all the comments he made played with interstitial types (*mulatos*, albinos, Chinese, people of Chokwé with lighter skin). I believe he was not consciously providing me with a cognitive map. Nevertheless, that is just what he did. He did not make a claim to the authority of *ostensivity* (in fact, quite to the contrary, as he was uncertain as to whether what he told me actually occurred), neither did he make a claim to *logical* systematicity (he never told me why he was threading one comment after the other and he would probably claim, if I asked him today, that he had no particular reason for doing that).

As Quine would have it, my travelling companion was planting a tree in my garden of belief. He wanted me to retain it as it made a lot of “sense” in his own garden. For that, he was providing me with a whole set of supports. To stretch the metaphor, he was showing me how well it merged with other plants in my garden and how it helped them grow.

He was in the realm of *retentivity* – the tendency for beliefs to interconnect with each other, tending towards systematicity without ever actually achieving it. As Davidson puts it, “truth is correspondence with the way things are”, thus “there is a presumption in favour of the truth of a belief that coheres with a significant mass of belief.” (2001: 138-9) This I call “retentivity”, placing it, together with ostensivity, as a condition of belief (but not a “border condition”, because it does not have the same significance for the original formation of thought and language).

Ostension and Retention

If, then, we treat retentivity as a characteristic of belief, there are a number of points that need to be raised. We will start by looking into the relation between ostensivity and retentivity.

Conservatism – Firstly, there is some conservatism in belief. This is a perfectly reasonable feature of belief. There are private reasons for it, to do with the architecture of belief. Beliefs being connected with all other beliefs, I cannot safely be willing to jeopardise my whole world for one particular wayward observation. There are also public reasons for this, since all thinking creatures are social creatures and have to remain as much as possible within contexts of intersubjectivity. The matter of authority is centrally important here. Our conservatism is such that, even before contradictory evidence, we are likely to be slow to alter the context of meaning of which it is a part.⁶

Another effect of conservatism is that what we take to be an observation also depends on the context of observation. Phenotypic observations are an interesting area for that. For example, the way people read other people's skin colour, body features or hair type varies depending on the relevant ethnic boundaries within the context at hand. This came out very clearly to me from being forced to compare the way the categories "black" and "white" are used differently in Mozambique and South Africa.⁷

Furthermore, we systematically "edit observation". We see a bent stick in water and we correct our visual observation, since we know that water has that effect on the way sticks look. In this case, we do it not because we learnt a theory of refraction but because we learnt from experience that the stick is straight. In most cases, however, we edit observation without such strong empirical reasons, as when I

⁶ As Quine puts it: "Chances are that I will waive the one wayward observation, attributing it to unexplained interference, even to hallucination." (1970: 17).

⁷ Cf. Peter Fry's interesting essay on the issue (2000) and Pina-Cabral (2001).

take it for granted that someone is a northerner (or whatever) because of the way he pronounces some particular sound.

Localism – Secondly, our world of experience is loosely divided into realms or domains. This is an issue about which much has been written. I refer it here briefly only to point out that there is a localisation effect through which one is less willing to confront observations across domains.⁸ This applies both to observations and to systematic implications. We are dealing here with a form of retentivity, for it means that the boundaries between these domains are thus reinforced and retained. As it turns out, for example, my travelling companion is a reasonably educated and literate person who, when he is helping his daughter do her homework for school, for example, will know not to include examples about necrophagous worms or albinos who, instead of dying, simply disappear from the face of the earth.

Systematicity – Thirdly, although we are normally rather unsystematic in the way we attend to our “garden of belief,” structural effects in belief can be observed. In particular, we are prone to treat as true many beliefs that are not supported by observation but by the role they play in structuring a whole area of belief. The case of the beliefs about albinos is a particularly good exemplification of this process. The informant is avowedly disinterested in their veracity. They turn out to be relevant in terms of the way they structure Mozambican notions of ethnicity. Race, class, origin, status, language, aesthetic standards concerning human bodies, education are all interwoven into a complex and conflictive whole that is one of the central areas for structuring the world in post-colonial Africa. Beliefs such as these reported by my companion about intermediary and interstitial categories (albinos, *mulatos*, Chinese) are central to construct the conceptual framework that supports the greater “black”/“white” divide, making it operational on a daily basis for a very complex set of purposes.

⁸ Cf. Veyne’s reference to our “capacity to simultaneously believe in incompatible truths.” (1988: 56). “The different truths are all true in our eyes, but we do not think about them with the same part of our head.” (ibid.: 87).

Worldviews, Classifications and Prototypes

This implies that beliefs are not self-sufficient units of meaning. Rather, they are necessarily integrated into networks that “make sense” of these beliefs. As Wittgenstein would have it: “Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning.” (quoted in Needham 1985: 25) This is a very similar notion to Davidson’s claim that “Radical incoherence in belief is (...) impossible.” (2001: 99)

This being the case, we cannot be surprised to find that whole areas of belief tend to cohere. As Quine would have it, we are prone to “habits of building belief” (Quine and Ullian 1970: 59). Davidson expresses a similar sort of concern in what could be taken as the perfect definition of *retentivity*. “there is a presumption in favour of the truth of a belief that coheres with a significant mass of belief.” (2001: 138-139)

Without having to go to the improbable extreme of claiming that, at any one point in time, a person’s beliefs are systematically structured, we are nevertheless plainly justified in looking for the existence of loose concatenations of beliefs that function as a shared ground for social living. Thus, I return to the concept of “worldview” proposed long ago in *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve* (1986: 4-5). Basically, it is suggested that, for the purposes of the comfortable carrying out of everyday life activities and intersubjective engagement, people find it useful to adhere to broad patterns of beliefs that are widely shared by their daily social interlocutors.

These worldviews are constellations of belief, they do not exist outside their context of enactment – the category, therefore, is fully “etic”. They are geared to practice both in the sense of allowing for social interchange and some amount of mutual predictability and in that they do not exist as formed theories, but as tendencies. They are favoured paths through the web of belief, so to speak.

In fact, they have been identified by ethnographers in all areas of socially defined interchange and are characteristically diversified by the constitution of domains of knowledge, as was discussed above. Notwithstanding, they are subject to a kind of hierarchy to the extent that each socio-cultural setting is centrally dependent

on broad forms of conceiving the human person in relation to the world. In particular, in their efforts to provide frameworks of interpretation of definitionally exotic socio-cultural contexts, ethnographers have regularly identified major areas of belief consistency both in the characterisation of personhood and in the integration between human and social reproduction (cf. Pina-Cabral 1989).

Over the years, ethnographers have learnt to describe these either as *prototypes* or as *classifications*, by using such phrases as “The Bongo-bongo think this or that” or “The Bongo-bongo classify things into this and that”, respectively. I work on the assumption that both the ethnographers and their learned anthropological supervisors and readers have found it useful to think in such ways. As ethnography has revealed itself beyond doubt a worthwhile pursuit, we must conclude that such practices are indeed useful in interpreting the way people go about their daily lives in society. I do not presume, however, that people hold such things in their heads, so to speak, as actual images or as pre-formed representations. To the contrary, I am suggesting that the classifications and prototypes that anthropologists describe exist statistically (and not mechanically) as tendencies in the way people concatenate belief and they do so because they are useful in the way people deal with the world and with other people and so are constantly being reinforced.

For example, one of the central areas of construction of worldviews is inhabitable space. All of us have habits in relation to this that are of major importance for our daily comfort. Thus, if one were to move in a New York high-rise building as if one were in a traditional Mozambican wood and straw building, one would meet with serious problems. This, in fact, was easy to witness in the years after Mozambican Independence, when the population from the peri-urban areas moved into the so-called “city of cement” left vacant by the exit of the white population. There are observers in Maputo today who claim that the period of adaptation has not yet fully terminated after nearly two decades.

Another one of these central areas is the major fault-lines of ethnic classification. In post-colonial Africa, the heritage of centuries of European

colonialism has come to shape social life in such a way as to give rise to a deeply set frame of interpreting people's social belonging and social rights and duties that tends to assume a binary character: "blacks" to one side, "whites" to the other. As I have argued elsewhere, what is "black" and what is "white", differs significantly from context to context and from country to country. Nevertheless, in Maputo today as in most other African cities, the categorical distinction between "black" and "white" is almost as important as gender in the implications it has for daily existence and as a framework for interpreting other people's actions and expectations.

In exchanging these beliefs concerning albinos with me, my travelling companion was laying out a pathway in my garden of belief, to use Quine's metaphor. In this sense, the factor of ostensivity was largely irrelevant. The relevance of the beliefs about albinos that he was imparting to me was at the level of retentivity. By exploring the border areas of the "black"/"white" binary classification, where ambiguity might arise, he was opening a window into his worldview for me – in the sense of putting the classification to practical use, thus instilling in me the context for its relevance.

The "black"/"white" ethnic divide is a central feature of everyone's worldview in Mozambique, that functions as an integrating principle within which or across which lie the other modes of differentiation (be they based on sub-ethnic, regional, linguistic, religious or class differences). All the ethnic categories to which my travelling companion referred (*mulatos*, Chinese, albinos, people from Chokwé) can be grouped either outside or inside the major divide, in a number of ways and, thus, can be seen to problematise it.

In terms of the major line of classification, they are all marginal. In some instances, they are dealt with as external to the major binary classification by being treated as categories apart that have nothing to do with the "black"/"white" divide. This is, in fact, easier to maintain about a category my companion omitted, presumably precisely because he did not find it useful in the context – the ethnic

category of “Indian”.⁹ Their role in the society and economy of Mozambique is so marked and their numbers so significant, that it is easier to keep them right out of the “black”/“white” classification.

Alternatively, one can place interstitial groups as frontier categories within either of the two camps. In fact, people in Maputo with whom I tried out the concepts in the course of informal conversation often adopted this strategy. When simplicity requires, people are prone to group *mulatos*, Chinese, and even Indians as part of the “white” group – contrary to what is the case in South African cities where the Anglo-American “one drop rule” system is usually adopted (cf. Pina-Cabral 2001 and Fry 2000). In the case of *mulatos*, this is facilitated by the fact that they are not that many, since a good number of them actually pass either for “white” or for “black”.¹⁰ In the case of Chinese, because they are so few and so clearly associated to whites from a socio-cultural point of view.

Of all these interstitial categories, however, albinos are the hardest to classify, for they are decidedly “black” and yet their skin (the major feature of differentiation) is white. Furthermore, by adopting the style of life that normal lower class “black” people adopt, they are often more exposed to the sun than their skin permits. Consequently, they suffer a lot from exposure, which means that their classificatory oddity tends often to appear as physical anomaly: a painful assault on notions of bodily integrity. Our sense of sympathy to the human condition of fellow humans means that the lack of bodily integrity in others challenges our own sense of well being, giving rise to all sorts of sentiments of rejection and/or compulsive compassion. I take it that this explains the sentiments of disgust towards albinos and their skin that I repeatedly encountered.

⁹ A loose out-group category that integrates all sorts of people originating in the Indian sub-continent but who do not recognise any specific communality among themselves.

¹⁰ Or “almost white” or “almost black”, or “*quase brancos, quase negros de tão pobres*” as in the deeply perceptive song by Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso “Haiti” in *Fina Estampa* (Mercury, 314 258 918-2, 1995).

Seen from this perspective, the initially incomprehensible fashion in which my travelling companion linked up a series of apparently disparate comments starts to “make sense”. There is an almost structuralist neatness in the way in which, after having problematised the concept of albino, he went on to explore the boundaries of the concept itself: by discoursing, on the one hand, about albinos who are also *mulatos* and, on the other, about people who are classificatorily fully “black” but whose skins, whilst being that of “blacks”, is lighter and thus more “white” (the people of Chokwé). There could be no better exemplification than this of the operation of the structural requirements of retentivity that were identified above.

Symbolic Ecology

It would seem, then, that a major factor in the fixation and transmission of belief is the way in which it “makes sense” – that is, the way in which it is integrated both (a) into the general network of belief of whoever bears it and (b) into the localised network of belief related to the domain of belief at play. Moreover, belief being an intrinsic part of intersubjective communication, the fixation and transmission of belief cannot be dissociated from the communicational context within which it occurs. Each belief, then, is deeply dependent on its environment, in terms of retentivity but also in terms of ostensivity. For, as Quine would have it, “what counts as an observation sentence will be relative to the community chosen.” (1970: 19)

“Making sense” is not a feature of each belief itself.¹¹ Rather, it has to do with the use to which belief is put – that is, the way in which beliefs chain up, thus constituting constellations that we call worldviews. And, of course, we retain Davidson’s warning that, “perfect consistency is not to be expected. What needs emphasis is only the methodological necessity for finding consistency enough.”

¹¹ Here, I treat belief as unitary only for the sake of simplicity of argument; not through any failure of mine to perceive that belief can only exist within the web of belief and by relation to the “triangulation” (self/other/world) that Davidson proposes.

(2001: 150) I have chosen to refer to the way in which belief “makes sense” as the “ecology of belief”.

So far, I have developed my argument as if, in their concatenation of beliefs, human beings only took recourse to logical modes of thought. This, however, is far from being true. As Rodney Needham once put it, “all over the world human beings (...) elaborate their categories and render them more distinct by means of symbolic usages.” (1979: 19) Symbols and symbolic classifications (analogical thought) play two important roles: on the one hand, they focus people’s attention on certain aspects of reality, highlighting them; on the other hand, they reinforce linkages among beliefs that ultimately give shape to the classifications and concatenations that constitute worldviews. The latter, in turn, are the grounds on which intersubjective communication is negotiated. It is through them that social life comes to acquire its indispensable regularity and relative systematicity.

Human beings construct edifices of meaning by taking recourse to metaphors and metonymies or by conjoining both into analogies. The capacity to construct and interpret symbols is shared by all humans. The drive towards interpretative charity means that, when faced with a set of beliefs that are organised according to some form of symbolic coherence, most people react much like I did when faced with the beliefs about albinos – they attempt to place them in the environment of their minds. People try out new beliefs or new relations between beliefs by placing and re-placing them until they come to “make sense”. Rejection, disinterest, or doubt are as likely outcomes of this process of “making sense” as vague interest, reserved adoption or full-hearted adoption. Even though, as Davidson warns, the analogy is not in the actual words but in their use, it comes to be shared through the need that the receivers of the message have to provide contexts for belief. If their worldviews approximate, their ecologies of belief are similar. Therefore, the impact of the symbolic concatenation of belief will also be similar.

The end product is that we come to share not only pieces of information but also the architecture of belief. In this way, people share the classifications and

prototypes that make up worldviews. These, in turn, are the condition for social participation. As Needham puts it, “symbolism is doubly necessary: to mark what is socially important, and to induce men to conform in recognising the values by which they should live.” (1979: 5)

The reference to morality is centrally important here. In fact, by being built into worldviews, beliefs provide frameworks for evaluating behaviour – that is, for morals – “habits of life in regard to right and wrong conduct” (OED).¹² Even when they do not specifically present themselves as “norms”, beliefs structure emotion by the symbolic grouping of things into wholes that cohere morally.¹³ The beliefs about albinos that we have been exploring are useful examples of the process through which beliefs shape people’s moral universe.¹⁴

The disgust that is caused by the skin of albinos is an integral part of the symbolic ecology of the “black”/“white” ethnic divide. Similarly, the life story of the albino musician who was picked out of the rubbish heap by his compassionate uncle, even if it were poetic licence, would still contribute towards contextualising the liminality of albinos. Much in the same way, the association of vitiligo with albinism, on the one hand, and with theft on the other, becomes part of the symbolic ecology of albinos, even though no one ever suggested that albinos are thieves. Finally, why would “traditional husbands suspect their wives? Whether witchcraft or cross-ethnic adultery is being vaguely implied, the ultimate implication is always that of treachery. It is an implication that cannot be “logically” imputed to albinos, but which clearly comes to shape the symbolic ecology of the notions people have about albinos.

All of these emotions and valuations function as pillars for the “black”/“white” divide. As our analysis evolved, these beliefs that were originally imparted to me as an oddity of the teller, and which seemed to be totally unrelated

¹² As Pierre Bourdieu would have it, “‘logical’ integration is the condition of ‘moral’ integration.” (1989 [1977]: 10) At this point, however, we are not only dealing with logical processes, nor even mainly with these.

¹³ In terms of the role played by emotions, cf. Pina-Cabral 2002.

¹⁴ Cf. Veyne’s comment that “some modalities of belief are a form of symbolic obedience. To believe is to obey. The political role of religion is not at all a matter of ideological content.” (1988: 32)

and incoherent, have turned out to “make sense”. Both my travelling companion and the people that, previously or subsequently, discussed the theme with me, left me with the distinct impression that we were before something of greater importance to their worldview than I had originally suspected. Of course, what was in their minds, we will never be able to know. But, through a process of interpretive charity, I think we managed to get a fairly good notion of what might have been at stake.

Time has come, then, to return to the original puzzle: what is the relevance for these people of saying that “albinos don’t die”? I have not carried out sufficient research in Mozambique to be able to plot out here (either ethnographically or bibliographically) the fullness of the implications of the statement. I make, therefore, no final claims.

Nevertheless, it would seem that albinos are said not to die, not because they remain alive or active after death, but because they are not buried. Now, in this, as in most other societies, the link to the earth is a major part of the sense of social belonging. That the earth should not take these interstitial creatures is a very simple (and, for that reason, powerful) symbol of the fact that in Mozambique, today, belonging is primarily marked by the “black”/“white” divide, which albinos breach. Indirectly, it is also a denial of rights of belonging to “whites”. What happened recently in Zimbabwe is not unrelated to the way in which ethnic relations are shaping themselves in Mozambique today.

Careless and disconnected as these comments appeared to be, they turned out to constitute, after all, useful props for the intersubjective sharing of principles of social and moral differentiation. In imparting these beliefs to me, my travelling companion was counting on my being “docile when faced with another’s world”, as Veyne would have it (1988: 42). As it turns out, he was a *mulato* himself. This does not mean that he is more or less likely to believe these things. However, if our interpretation is correct, he was reflecting symbolically on the tragic condition of those who fall outside the “black”/“white” divide. He was providing me with a window into his worldview and his own, at times painful, condition.

Coda

I feel I cannot terminate this paper without presenting here an afterthought. As I situated ethnographically the beliefs that I discussed, I may have given the impression that I see them as specific and localised. In fact, the precise opposite was the aim of the paper: namely, I wished to show that even such patently localised beliefs can be interpreted in terms of a shared human condition and can thus be made meaningful. Davidson's notion of the essentially veridical nature of belief, means that, as much as there are localised, minute ecological environments for belief (such as the ones explored in this paper), so there have to be higher and higher levels of commonality in mankind.

One thing is certain, as all humans who have a language can come to understand all other humans that have a language, so there are large chunks of belief that are shared by all. This applies to obvious ostensive truths that we all share (the sky is blue, the ground underfoot, etc.) but also applies to factors of symbolic ecology, as many anthropologists¹⁵ and psychologists have noted in the past. If moral behaviour is a matter not of shared codes of law but of shared ecologies of belief and action, may we not draw the implication that the moral particularism and relativism that has become the bread and butter of anthropological teaching should be re-thought? Is it not time for anthropologists to reject the exclusiveness of the trope of human difference (Otherness) and add to it a symmetric concern to research the conditions of human sameness?¹⁶

¹⁵ Who are often treated as *maudit* – such as Rodney Needham's disquisitions in *Primordial Characters*, 1978

¹⁶ I was captivated by Philippa Foot's recent proposal of the category of "moral goodness" (2001).

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