# THEATRE AND ALBINISM IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA: CENTRALIZING THE MARGINS IN A CHANGING SOCIAL SYSTEM

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## Abstract

The traditional stereotypical image of People Living With Disabilities (PLWD) particularly in southeastern Nigeria is that of pity due to their handicap. The condition is therefore associated with begging and often attracts patronizing attitudes from the elites in society. In 2019, Nigeria passed the Disability Law. Earlier in 2018, Anambra State, located in the southeast, passed her own Disability Law. But all these laws have remained mere documents on the shelves as implementation is still far-fetched. The laws also did not actually address the problems of People With Albinism (PWA). The objective of this research is to investigate the connection and impact of theatre on albinism matters in Nigeria. The research took its sample from southeastern Nigeria which has a sizeable population of PWA. It used the qualitative methodology involving the Participant Observation and Content Analysis approaches. The research instruments used to collect primary data include a Theatre for Development (TfD) sample workshop and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The study also applied Michael Oliver's "Social Model of Disability" and Graham Room's "Social Exclusion Theory" to analyze, discuss and interpret the research results. The study observed that the concerns of the PWA are quite different from what most people assume. The study also found that the PWA in Nigeria consider the theatre and creative arts as part of their challenges due to lack of diversity in the industry as well as the stereotypical representation of PWA in popular arts and cultural productions in the country. Based on these findings, the study concludes that a proactive approach is required in dealing with the challenges. It suggests that theatre practice in Nigeria should embrace diversity, be more inclusive, and engage more with the PWA in order to mitigate their marginalization in society.

## Introduction

Over time, the theatre and creative industries in sub-Saharan Africa have engaged with Persons With Disabilities (PWD) in various ways. The representation of PWDs in theatre occurs basically in two forms: as characters in the dramatic narrative and as artists or practitioners working in the industry. Both aspects of representation are incidentally influenced by societal perceptions and constructions of Disability, as well as the construction of Disability by the PWD themselves.

The concept of Disability appears to differ among people in various communities and societies. Such difference pervades the physical, mental and emotional domains thereby leading to semantic differentials in the construction of Disability. In Southeastern Nigeria, the typical and popular perception about PWDs is that they are people who deserve compassion and need help. Hence, giving alms and handouts to the PWDs is regarded as culturally normative and a moral responsibility.

However, the PWDs themselves appear to make distinctions between one form of disability and another. Each subgroup such as the visually impaired, the physically challenged and those with speech and hearing challenges tend to emphasize their areas of strength, ability and comparative advantages over others. Similarly, People With Albinism (PWA) do not consider themselves as having a Disability, hence they do not participate in programmes and schemes meant for PWDs. Nevertheless, they suffer similar discriminations and social exclusion as PWDs since the society and policy makers often lump all of them into one social group.

In the theatre industry, perceptions of Disability affect the inclusion or exclusion of PWDs and PWA. Indeed, Hadley observed that “local policy, industry and production frameworks” are the common factors that affect the inclusiveness and constructions of disability in theatre (305). But while the conditions of PWDs are gradually being represented in African theatre, the plight of PWA is rarely interrogated by theatre and film practitioners in Nigeria.

This non representation of People With Albinism appears to be the trend in East Africa despite the brutal attacks on the albino community fueled by harmful cultural myths and stereotypes. According to Chisiza, one of the first attempts at “using educational theatre for albinism in school settings in Malawi” was in 2018 when “an educational peer-led learning albinism awareness campaign” was carried out in some public schools using the Theatre-in-Education (TIE) methodology (83). The project created theatre that tried to activate “critical dialogue among children and youth on misunderstandings about albinism” (84). This study therefore investigates the deployment of theatre agency in addressing the conditions of the albino community in southeastern Nigeria.

## The Problem in Context

Studies on the representation of albinism in theatre is quite few in Nigeria. Yet, in its reflection of culture and societal trends, the theatre has often been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes and contentious profiling of certain groups and communities. But theatre scholars rarely focused on this. Hence, there is scant literature on theatre and albinism in Africa. The theatre is a mirror of popular views prevalent in society but some of these dominant views have been rejected by the people concerned. Theatrical representations of People With Albinism and Disabilities both on stage and the screen have not strongly emphasized their capabilities. Indeed, Oliver affirms that “dominant views of disability as an individual and medical problem have been vigorously challenged by disabled people in recent years” (20).

In Nigeria, a popular actor that belongs to the albino community, Damilola Ogunlesi, has led a vigorous media campaign to denounce the stereotypical tag of “albino actor” foisted on him by the media and practitioners in the creative industry. Damilola contends that he would like to be seen as “the actor with albinism” and not “the albino actor”. Such semantic differentials in the construction of albinism have significant impact on the public perception of People with Albinism (PWA). It equally contributes to their social exclusion while posing conceptual challenges to researchers.

One of the challenges facing the PWA community in southeastern Nigeria is the lack of policy and legal frameworks to challenge or criminalize their discrimination at home, school, workplace and societal affairs. Nigeria enacted the National Policy on Albinism (2012) to mainstream albinism into every sector of development. The cardinal objective of the policy was to guarantee improved living conditions for the PWA. But this policy is not yet domesticated in many States of the country. The awareness of the policy is low among the Nigerian public and its implementation remains poor.

The activists on albinism rights contend that their discussions on albinism centre on opportunities denied, relationships failed, abuses, rejection, violence and even death meted to the albino community. Nevertheless, these realities have not found suitable commensurate spaces on theatre stages, film and television screens. The theatrical representation of the challenges of PWA in southeastern Nigeria remain quite low and virtually non-existent. The theatre has also not exploited the annual International Albinism Awareness Day, commemorated every June 13, to advance the cause of PWA.

The average albino is photophobic and therefore avoids exposure to bright lights and harsh sunlight. These factors affect their eyesight, visual performance and skin health. Incidentally, the theatre and film practitioners are commonly exposed to bright stage and studio lights during performances. In Africa, they often work under harsh tropical sunlight particularly in the television and film industries that frequently demand outdoor shooting. In Nigeria, there is unstable electric power supply hence movie producers shoot more scenes outdoors in the afternoon using sunlight as lighting source.

These challenges have reduced the inclusion of the albino in the theatre and creative industries. The practitioners in that sector have not consciously devised ways to mitigate these challenges on the albino to increase the participation of PWA in theatre and film productions.

At present, there is virtually no literature on albinism in the Nigerian theatre. While many African novelists have written on the theme of albinism, playwrights rarely do so. Many research studies focus generally on disability while the problem of albinism has received low attention from scholars. Related research studies on albinism often approach the subject from a medical or sociological perspective. African theatre scholars have not adequately focused on the twin representation of PWA in theatre; that is as performers onstage and backstage or in front and behind the camera as actors or crew members; as characters being represented on stage and screen or as practitioners that drive the theatrical and filmic representation.

The PWA frequently challenge and reject the representation of albinism in theatre and cinematic narratives as well as the near exclusion of PWA in the Nigerian creative industry. The PWA contend that albinism is not a disability. But as Baker, Lund, Taylor and Nyathi observed, “the visible physical difference of people with albinism has inspired beliefs and myths that result in their marginalization and social exclusion” (4). In Nigeria, the National Disability Law (2019) and Anambra State Disability Law (2018) did not specifically include people with albinism. Yet, the PWA still complain of “challenges” in the areas of health, physical performance at work and social stigma as other members of the Disability community. This contradiction poses a challenge to theatre researchers and practitioners in the engagement of People With Albinism (PWA).

## Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative approach to collect and analyze data. It applied the Participant Observation and Content Analysis approaches in collecting data from a performance held at the study site. The research sample was selected through a purposive technique. The southeastern Nigeria is culturally homogeneous in terms of language and ethnicity. The zone has a high number of people with albinism. Out of the zone, Anambra State being the most populous and having over 3% of Nigeria’s albino population was selected for the study. The State is also the first to pass and domesticate the Disability Law in 2018 even before Nigeria’s Federal Government passed her own in 2019.

Furthermore, the study adopted informal interview schedules and post-performance Focus Group Discussions (FGD) as additional primary data collection instruments. The interview as a data collection instrument in applied theatre research was also relevant to the study due to its nature. These instruments helped to provide and validate some data which were subsequently incorporated into the playmaking process.

The secondary data were obtained from relevant books, journals, articles in news magazines and related information on the Internet. All the collected data were systematically collated and analyzed using a descriptive and interpretative approach. The pieces of information were incorporated into a drama skit created for the invited audience. The skit was performed as part of the events to mark the International Albinism Awareness Day, held at Awka, Anambra State, in southeastern Nigeria on June 14, 2021.

The Focus Group Discussion took place after the performance as part of the post-performance analysis. The issues raised in the play were discussed, debated and critically evaluated. This yielded additional data on theatre and albinism matters in the study area. In addition, a documentary film on albinism in Nigeria titled *Sun, Not Salt* was also screened to the audience. All these provided materials for the discussants which comprised a mix of people with albinism and those without albinism, theatre practitioners, media executives, civil society groups, government agencies, policy makers and politicians.

## Theatre and Albinism

The World Health Organization (WHO) Report in 2021 estimated that Nigeria has one of the highest populations of albinos in the world with over 2 million living with albinism in the country. This figure was also affirmed by Ayuba Ahmed in an article published online in 2021 which reported a high prevalence of albinism in Nigeria. Out of this rising population, a significant percentage of albinos are estimated to be facing discrimination from families, peers and schoolmates. In 2012, Nigeria enacted a National Policy on Albinism under the auspices of the Federal Ministry of Education. But this policy applies more to the education sector. Other sectors still neglect the plight of the PWA with attendant cultural, social, political, psychological and economic implications. Furthermore, most State governments in Nigeria are yet to domesticate and implement the National Policy on Albinism.

The theatre, television and film industries in Nigeria still record a poor representation of People With Albinism. They are rarely featured as actors, directors, presenters, producers or crew members. The challenges of the PWA are expected to be depicted in theatre and film productions to help create awareness among the citizenry. But currently, the problems and challenges of the albino are rarely featured as themes in Nigerian plays, popular music, television soap operas and Nollywood feature films. At present, only a few documentary films sponsored by the Albino Foundation exist as filmic and communication materials for creating awareness on the needs and plight of the albino community in Nigeria.

The International Albinism Awareness Day is marked yearly on June 13 by the United Nations to raise public awareness about the challenges of PWA in each country. The theme for the 2021 event was “Strength Beyond All Odds”. It focused on highlighting the achievements of PWA and showing that they can defy all odds to meet and exceed expectations in all areas of life. In Anambra State, Southeastern Nigeria, the Albino community organized an awareness programme to mark the 2021 event using theatre, film and discussion forums. This decision was based on their recognition of the power of theatre and film to create awareness and catalyze social change.

This study was therefore carried out as part of the critical evaluation of the project. In executing the project, the researchers being part of the facilitators applied the Theatre for Development and Forum Theatre Workshop techniques which as Sappa and Barabasch explained "activate a dialogue between multiple perspectives, thus enlarging the perceived spectrum of possible actions during relational conflicts". This creates a "positive impact in terms of proactive participation, critical awareness and activated reflectivity" (43). A preliminary research was earlier conducted on the major challenges facing the PWA in the locality. It was found that the PWA face skin problems due to the hot tropical sun and harsh weather conditions. They also face vision challenges, low self-esteem and dangerous myths and beliefs about the albino personality and their body parts. All these lead to their exclusion, stigmatization and discrimination in society. The consequences of these include lack of access to opportunities, low achievement and non-actualization of the albino's potentials.

In using the agency of theatre to explore and discuss these challenges, a drama sketch was devised and performed to depict the realities faced by the PWA. In addition, a documentary film titled *Sun, Not Salt*, which focuses on Albinism and the plight of PWA in Nigeria, was also screened to the audience to provide additional data and materials for the post-performance discussion.

After the performance and film screening, a discussion session was held where participants analyzed and commented on the issues presented in the play and film. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also held to lead the dialogue on the issues depicted on stage and screen and make suggestions for improved the living conditions of the PWA. The play performance was deliberately designed to use audience participation and other popular theatre techniques to encourage optimum actor-audience interactions.

The workshop highlighted the potential powers of the theatre and film to graphically portray the conditions of the PWA with realistic imagery unlike other communication media. The drama sketch captured the common problems of the PWA such as discrimination as romantic and marital partners, prevalent stereotypes which affect their academic achievement in schools, lack of employment opportunities, and lack of integration in family, community as well as societal affairs. The play was loosely devised in an improvisational format following a scenario earlier created. The language was a mixture of English, Pidgin and Igbo which is the local vernacular. This enhanced a wider reach and infusion of comic effects in the performance. The drama sketch which lasted for about 20 minutes centred on the rejection of PWA as marital partners, bullying and exclusion of albinos in the school environment and the reluctance of employers to hire an albino into their workforce. The duration of the documentary was reduced to 25 minutes to allow adequate time for post-performance analysis and discussion.

## Discussion

The theatre workshop highlighted a number of issues as key points in the society's relationships with the PWA. Through the dramatic depiction of the experience and perceptions of the PWA in the local community, the audience was offered a deeper and more balanced perspective of the key issues that define the living conditions of the albino. The post-performance dialogue underscored three factors that constitute a hub around which the plight of the PWA revolves. These are:

(a) The PWA suffer considerable social exclusion everywhere which needs to change urgently.

(b) The negative myths and cultural beliefs about the albino and their bodies help to aggravate their problems. These myths were quite popular among the local population and contribute to shape public attitudes and perceptions even though they had no scientific basis.

(c) The health challenges of the albino require public understanding and support from the government, corporate organizations and private individuals in the form of favourable policy changes, sponsorship of cancer treatments for the PWA and provision of free or subsidized sunscreen lotions (SPF) to protect their skin from the scorching African sun.

In discussing the results of the field research, this paper applied Michael Oliver's "Social Model of Disability" and Graham Room's "Social Exclusion Theory" as analytical frameworks. Oliver's model demonstrates that disabled people face problems that result from social oppression and exclusion and not their individual handicaps (20). The workshop performance and the subsequent discussions examined in this study indicate that disability can be physical, mental, psychological or socially constructed. Hence, though the PWA in southeastern Nigeria do not perceive themselves as disabled or handicapped, they nevertheless suffer from social oppressions and exclusion that retard their human development and professional achievements.

Similarly, in applying the "Social Exclusion" model, Room argues that "current notions of social exclusion risk neglecting patterns of inequality in the wider society" (166). In essence, in the engagement with "patterns of inequality" emanating from the prevalent social stratifications within their environments, the PWA find themselves rooted at the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. Based on this reality, Smith argues that social exclusion will continue to engender poverty among the excluded group because its psychology is anchored on denial, rejection, negative profiling, discrimination and lack of diversity in the distribution of wealth and opportunities (127-8).

The theatre workshop presented an opportunity for the PWA community and stakeholders to interrogate the foundations of poverty and low economic status which characterize the living conditions of a greater percentage of the PWA. The drama sketch and documentary film highlighted the ripple effects of the patterns of discrimination and exclusion meted to the albino in society. The Focus Group Discussants demonstrated how low access to education, poor healthcare, limited economic and political opportunities and life-threatening myths and cultural beliefs have combined to make the PWA feel insecure, traumatized and withdrawn due to anxiety disorders. These interconnected factors translate to unemployment, underemployment, low standard of living, poverty and high mortality rate for the PWA.

Another critical viewpoint which the theatre workshop unearthed was the expected role of the theatre industry in promoting the interests of the PWA in society. The PWA see the theatre practitioner as a societal watchdog and argued that the plight of the PWA should receive adequate attention through the content and themes of artistic productions on stage and the screen. The PWA observed that there exists a significant neglect of their challenges by the Nigerian creative industries which do not feature the plight of the PWA as themes in stage plays, television drama and the popular Nigerian video-film (Nollywood).

Similarly, the PWA criticized the theatre and creative industries in Nigeria of perpetuating stereotypes by presenting the PWA in negative light in line with popular myths and beliefs or using them as caricatures of foreigners and Colonial Officers in their narratives. They equally observed that the PWA are virtually excluded and discriminated against by practitioners in the theatre and creative industries who deny them equal access to acting roles, crew membership and other jobs in the theatre/film industry.

Indeed, this contention is in line with the views of Hadley who observed that “local policy, industry and production frameworks” are features that influence the inclusiveness and constructions of disability in theatre (305). The reality of the representation of the PWA and lack of inclusiveness by the theatre, presented a critical mirror image whereby theatre, the acclaimed societal watchdog and satirist is placed on the dock of public opinion. The power of theatre to create positive change was acknowledged but challenged. The general view was that it has not been adequately explored and exploited to address the challenges of Albinism in southeastern Nigeria.

## Implication of Findings

One of the key findings of this study is that policies on Albinism have not been enacted, domesticated and implemented by many State Governments and Local Councils in Nigeria particularly in the southeastern region of the country. Such policies need to be put in place to help create awareness and criminalize certain negative attitudes and harmful myths against the albinos.

There needs to be specific laws, similar to the Disability Law, focused specifically on protecting the rights of the PWA and mitigating their challenges in society. Such legal frameworks need to go beyond the common assumption that the human rights provisions in Nigeria’s Constitution are adequate for all citizens including the albino. Although the PWA often claim that they are not living with disability, yet they complain that their members still suffer discriminations in society. Again, apart from negative cultural beliefs and psychosocial factors that affect the albinos, there are also physical and health challenges that the PWA face especially in the tropics due to excessive sunshine. These challenges affect their skin, eyesight and job performance particularly in exterior locations. In certain work and school environments and situations, they amount to a form of productivity disability because they cannot always perform to the level of others that are without albinism. These are part of the arguments that led to the enactment of the National Policy on Albinism in Nigeria. Therefore, beyond the school environment, the PWA need policies to protect their lives, discourage their discrimination and facilitate their inclusion in all spheres of human existence.

Another finding of the study is that the theatre and creative industries in southeastern Nigeria have not made visible and deliberate efforts to mainstream Albinism into their operations. This scenario appears to persist across many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The theatre and culture industries in Africa therefore need to encourage inclusiveness and diversity and give equal opportunities to the PWA to join the practitioners and feature in onstage and backstage as well as in front and behind the camera operations.

The PWA workshop experience that formed the case study of this research has shown that policies on Albinism need to encourage a synergy between the theatre, media and civil society groups, to use the theatrical medium to advance the cause and interests of the PWA. This can be enhanced by creating narratives and dramatizing themes that deal on the various challenges faced by the PWA in Africa. The various Guilds of artistes and the Censorship Board can equally make conscious efforts and regulations to discourage the stereotypical and negative portrayal of the albino or promotion of harmful myths about their body parts through theatre, television drama, films and musical videos. The title of the documentary film *Sun, Not Salt* is an allusion to the cultural belief that the albino does not eat salt which implies that they are not normal human beings. The title debunks this myth and suggests that the albino only avoids the sun not salt.

## Conclusion

The theatre has a critical role to play as agency of awareness and change in Africa. The present study underscores the power of theatre to open public dialogue and debates about the living conditions of People With Albinism (PWA) in Nigeria and the rest of the African continent. Indeed, theatre in Africa has been deployed to address the challenges of PWA. Chinyowa and Chivandikwa, based on "a disability theatre project" that specifically "focused on the experiences of albinism", argued that "disability theatre can subvert ableist discourse through symbolic signification, ritual gesture, satiric humour and other theatrical devices. The precarious experiences of bodily differences such as albinism are invalidated by means of performative strategies that … serve to deconstruct ableist strategies of containment" and thus affirm the "power and agency of the disabled body" (50).

Although the PWA frequently argue that albinism is not disability, yet they face considerable challenges and discrimination that debar them from achieving their potentials and living a normal life like people without albinism. The social system in southeastern Nigeria is changing rapidly with urbanization, advancements in technology and increased education of the citizenry. The PWA expect these positive changes to reflect in their status through rejection of myths about their body, personality and capability which are the roots of their stigmatization and exclusion. The theatre therefore needs to be deployed due to its popularity and public attraction to address the cause of the PWA in Africa.

The present study also highlighted the suitability of the Theatre for Development (TfD) methodology in creating awareness and widening public understanding about the causes, nature and existential challenges of People With Albinism (PWA). In Tanzania, where the albino faces one of the most life-threatening conditions on the African continent, the Theatre for Development (TfD) paradigm has been used to tackle the problems and stigmatization of People With Albinism. In a TfD project carried out by the Tanzanian Union of Community Theatre Education on Albinism (TUCTEDA) in 2014, the major objective was to widen public understanding of albinism and prevent the harassment of people suffering from the genetic problem of albinism (TUCTEDA 3).

Using the theatrical medium, this study facilitated some interaction and public understanding of the actual conditions that surround albinism. Akinwale in an online report observed that many people are ignorant of the biological and genetic conditions that lead to albinism. This widespread ignorance feeds the popular myths about the albino personality and their body, hence the need for public enlightenment. Akinwale, in the same report, further explains that:

> Albinism is a genetic condition where people are born without the usual pigment (colour) in their bodies. The bodies are not able to make a normal amount of melanin, the chemical that is responsible for eye, skin, and hair colour. So, most people with albinism have very pale skin, hair and eyes. (1)

From all indications, albinism is genetic and not a curse. The albino has no metaphysical powers and their body parts do not have any ritual potency. But theatre-driven efforts to enlighten the public about albinism remain few on the African continent due to lack of funding assistance for such projects as well as public neglect and absence of supportive policies.

The albino in Nigeria may not be facing the life-threatening situation and attacks as in Tanzania and some parts of East Africa, yet they are incapacitated by systematic social exclusion and stigmatization driven by cultural beliefs, negative myths and stereotypes. The PWA are looking up to the theatre practitioners to change their marginalized position in society by bringing them to the centre of public debates. One way of centralizing the PWA who currently exist at the margins of society is by supporting their quest for inclusiveness through policy reforms and public enlightenment to enable them live a normal life. This will enable the PWA contribute their quota to human development in Africa and the global community. Since the PWA argue that albinism is not disability, theatre scholars and practitioners should consequently categorize all theatrical interventions on Albinism under Advocacy Theatre and not Disability Theatre.

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