Chapter 18

ALBINOS DO NOT DIE: BELIEF, PHILOSOPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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In Mozambique one is often told things about albinos that can hardly be interpreted at face value.[1] These are not, properly speaking, fictionalized narratives of a connected series of events, but rather they are evidence of 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?

For a long time the concept of 'belief' and its relation to that of 'knowledge' has been a source of theoretical concern for anthropologists (see Needham 1972). Malcolm Ruel has argued convincingly that the Christian heritage hidden in our anthropological toolkit has made us susceptible to a number of 'shadow fallacies' concerning belief, of which he identifies four: 1) the notion that belief is a central part of all religions; 2) the notion that a person's beliefs form the ground of his or her behaviour; 3) the notion that belief is essentially a psychological condition; and, finally, 4) that 'the determination of belief is more important than the determination of the status of what it is that is the object of the belief' ([1982] 2002, 111–12).

More recent attempts to differentiate between 'to believe in' and 'to believe that' do go a long way in helping us examine this problem (see Pouillon 1982; Talal Asad 2001). To my mind, however, this polarity is insufficient to clarify what is at stake. As a matter of fact, all intellectualist approaches to the concept of belief (see Robbins 2007) are bound to hide how it is deeply intermeshed with the central tenets of our modernist anthropological heritage, which

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overstressed both continuity *and* schism. To my mind, Donald Davidson's theory of *radical interpretation* (1984, 2001) provides us with a novel way of looking at the role of 'belief'. In ethnographic accounts, thus overstepping many of the scepticist doubts that have haunted anthropological theory over the past decades. In this chapter, I focus in particular on the problem of the *retention of belief*: that is, the way in which all beliefs are dependent on other beliefs that constitute an environment surrounding them.

My example is belief concerning albinos, an interstitial condition within the great 'black/white' ethnic divide so pervasive in colonial and postcolonial Africa. The tone of disgust that often accompanies reports on albinos is characteristic both of colonial racialism and of pervading Bantu attitudes.[2] This symmetry in response (and the disturbing similarity to 'whites') must not go unnoticed in the light of Michael Tausig's well-known analysis of the search for 'white Indians' by American explorers and anthropologists in the Panama region in the 1920s (1993, 274n2).

Albinos Don't Die

In 2001, towards the end of a long car trip in southern Mozambique, 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 generalized (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.

Much like me, the people that were telling me this seemed to be fascinated with it without caring too much as to whether they believed it to be true. 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 sociocultural 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 rumour (*boato*) suddenly went around that 'the Chinese' were killing albinos and selling their meat as if it were pork, due to the similarity of the skin colouring. Relations with Chinese people have always

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been slightly tense in this part of the world. Already during the late colonial period (1961–75), 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.

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 Euro-African woman (*mulata*) whose parents were *mulatos*, but whose mother was an albino. Apparently the girl 'did not even have bad hair (*cabelo mau*) 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 the region of Chokwé are supposed to 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. His report sketched out a map of ambivalent ethnic relations, in which 'whites', 'blacks', 'mulatos',[3] '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 to properly contextualize these beliefs, he provided me with examples 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 his father abandoned him on a rubbish heap after his birth, only to be saved by his mother's brother, who raised him. Other persons confirmed to me that albinos are said not to die and that 'one is never invited to go to funerals of albinos'.

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One lady claimed that it was supposed to be a magic type of disappearance, but that it did not imply a later rebirth or a reappearance 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. 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 characterized 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

Belief has puzzled modernist anthropologists. From Needham (1972) to Gellner (1974) to Veyne ([1983] 1988) to Tambiah (1990), the more the issue is discussed, the less we seem to be nearing resolution. 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'. The important question is of the representationalist approach 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 'nonmoderns'. Indulge in, and knowledge as the realm of modern 'Western' science and culture. There are many variants to this polarity and many different forms of theorizing it, but they all make us ultimately incapable of understanding belief. We know it is there, but we do not know what it is.

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. He can help us to see some light at the end of the tunnel concerning a central issue for anthropology: 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'

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(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' (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' (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' (1970, 5).

According to Davidson, therefore, 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' (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 much of what we think in the course of everyday life are beliefs (such as the sky is blue, the ground is 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,

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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 1) cannot be granted the status of belief or 2) 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 the 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, I do not see that these statements can have any other meaning than the literal meaning they have (see Davidson 1984, 245–64). 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. Now, 'metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use' (247), which means that 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 *uncertain* about their relative truth. 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,

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I do not know of any instance when it was not true… But whether it is true or not, I cannot really say.'). 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: 1) these things were not told to me as 'stories' (i.e., as fictionalized narratives), but as reports about shared belief, 'things *people* believe' – *as pessoas acreditam que…*, *as pessoas dizem que…*, *essa gente pensa que…*; 2) 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 than about something they have heard or deduced from other sources. Such a potential for gradation in belief is a fact of everyday experience. People are open to greater or lesser certainty even about matters of sensory experience. 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; in the second place, because the relevance of such statements does not seem to be exhausted by their literal 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: in such cases, 'truth and falsity are not immediately to the point; what counts is *circumstantial cogency*, […] the force of prevalent custom' (Needham 1985, 39; my emphasis).

But there is a third consideration: the relative veridicality of 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 increases. 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 the Chinese. Under the more cool-headed conditions of the present situation (the wealthier post–civil war period) people were less likely to stand by the literal truth of such beliefs. Experience tells me that this sort of reduced

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veridicality is a common feature of all cultural situations. 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 give up on truth (see Pina-Cabral 2009). 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 make nonsense of a series of things that strike me as important, such as: 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). 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' (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' (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

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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 (see 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 recognize 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 recognize 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 postcolonial 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

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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' (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 assumed), 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 so).

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.

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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 jeopardize 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. 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.[4]

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.[5]

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 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 to it here briefly only to point out that there is a localization effect through which one is less willing to confront observations across domains.[6] 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. My travelling companion is a literate person who, when he is helping his daughter do her housework for school, for example, will know not to include examples about 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,

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we are prone to treat as true many beliefs that are not supported by observation but by the role they play in shoring up a whole area of belief. The case of the beliefs about albinos is a particularly good exemplification of this process: 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 postcolonial Africa. Beliefs such as these reported by my companion about intermediary and interstitial categories 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.

World Views, 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' (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, 138–9).

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. To 'make sense' is not a characteristic of each belief on its own. Rather, it is a function of the use of beliefs – that is, the way in which each belief coheres with others within intersubjectively shared worlds of meaning. 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 'world views' – broad patterns of beliefs that are widely shared by their daily social interlocutors.[7]

Thus, the fixation and the transmission of a belief depends on the way in which it 'makes sense' by relation to a process of sharing of associational paths rooted in a particular sociocultural context. Each belief is simultaneously integrated in the general web of belief of the person in question and in the localized web of belief associated to the domain

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where it occurs. Moreover, since belief is an intrinsic part of interpersonal communication, its fixation and transmission cannot be dissociated from the communicational context of its occurrence. Each belief, therefore, is deeply dependent on its environment, both in terms of retentivity and ostensivity, since, as Quine would have it, 'what counts as an observation sentence will be relative to the community chosen' (1970, 99). We must, nevertheless, keep in mind Davidson's advice that 'perfect consistency is not to be expected. What needs emphasis is only the methodological necessity for finding consistency enough' (2000, 150).

World views, therefore, are constellations of belief, they do not exist outside their context of enactment. They are geared to social practice both because they are indispensable for a measure of predictability to occur in social interaction and because they do not exist as formed theories, but as tendencies. They are favoured paths through the web of belief, so to speak. The category, therefore, is fully 'etic'. I do not presume that people hold world views in their heads, so to speak, as actual images or as preformed 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. These concatenations only exist because they are useful to people in the way they deal with the world and with other people. Thus, these *paths through the web of belief* are constantly being reinforced by their use. They are like jungle paths: they do not pre-exist the process of passage of people that constitute them and without which they would vanish.

One of the central areas of world view construction is the major fault line of ethnic classification. In postcolonial 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. 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

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world view 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[8] divide functions as an integrating principle within which or across which lie the other modes of differentiation (be they based on subethnic, 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 problematize 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. 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 (see 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'; in the case of Chinese, because they are so few and so clearly associated to whites from a sociocultural 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 condition of our 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.

There is an almost structuralist neatness to the way in which, after having problematized the concept of albino, my travelling companion went on to explore the boundaries of the requirements of retentivity 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, while being that of 'blacks', is lighter and thus more 'white' (the people of Chokwé).

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Conclusion

What, then, is the relevance for these people of saying that 'albinos don't die'? 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. The legitimation of citizenship is mediated by a notion of autochthony. That the earth should not consume 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, however, it is also a denial of rights of belonging to 'whites'.

Careless and disconnected as the comments of my travelling companion 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, he 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 my interpretation is correct, he was reflecting symbolically on the tragic condition of those who fall outside the 'black/white' divide. When talking to me about albinos, my driving companion was attempting to open a window to his world view[9] and, at the same time, he was allowing me to understand the painful condition in which interstitial people such as himself find themselves today in Mozambique.

Notes

1 An earlier and less developed Portuguese version of this article was published in Gil, Livet and Pina-Cabral 2004. I am grateful to J. Giannotti and Omar Ribeiro Thomaz (at CEBRAP, Brazil), as well as to the colleagues in Rio de Janeiro (IFICS and Museu Nacional) for their insightful comments, and to the colleagues at University Eduardo Mondlane for providing me with a welcome environment in Mozambique.
2 Cf. Bryant 1949, 117. I am grateful to Adam Kuper for calling my attention to this passage.
3 In Mozambique the word *misto* (literally 'mixed') is often encountered in daily use with a similar meaning.
4 As Quine puts it: 'Chances are that I will waive the one wayward observation, attributing it to unexplained interference, even to hallucination' (1970, 17).
5 See Peter Fry's interesting essay on the issue (2000) and Pina-Cabral (2001).
6 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' (87). Needless to say, I do not follow Veyne's approach to truth, but I am bound to retain this comment as a valid empirical observation, since a 'pluralist' approach is a condition for the possibility of anthropology (for a similar concern to make realism and pluralism compatible, cf. Lynch 1998).

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7 Cf. Pina-Cabral 1986, 4–5. For a similar suggestion, see Michael Lynch's use of 'worldview' (1998). Without entering into his debate with Davidson (1984, 31–54), I think that the latter's insistence that there is a limit to the number of beliefs we may attribute to another person that are contrary to our own beliefs is not incompatible with the notion that people's beliefs differ: 'We cannot intelligibly say that [conceptual] schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one' (1984). I fully realize that I am bypassing the thorny issue of differentiating 'concepts' from 'beliefs'.
8 Ethnic relations being here understood as discursive traditions concerning belonging, mediated by narratives of common origin.
9 That is, to the paths of belief that constitute the intersubjective terrain in which his life and that of his family is processed.

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