

XXII.—*Some Observations on the Albino.* By JOHN DAVY, M.D., F.R.S. Lond.  
and Edin., &c.

(Read 18th February 1861.)

Amongst the natives of Ceylon, the occurrence of the Albino, the offspring of dark-skinned parents, is not very uncommon. In looking over my note-books, kept whilst I was in that island, between the years 1816 and 1820, I find mention made of five several examples. Now that the subject of species and varieties is attracting so much attention, perhaps the particulars I then collected of these abnormal instances of the human race may not be altogether without interest, even if given a little in detail.

In a work “On the Interior of Ceylon,” published in 1821, in describing the native races, I have stated that “The colour of their skin varies from light-brown to black;” that “the colour too of their hair varies, but not so much as that of the skin;” that “black hair and eyes are most common; that hazel eyes are less uncommon than brown hair; that grey eyes and red hair are still more uncommon; and that light-blue or the red eye of the Albino is the most uncommon of all.”

The Albinos whom I had an opportunity of examining were all children of natives of ordinary colour. As already mentioned, they were five in number, and besides these, I heard of no others then alive, with the exception of one, whom I did not see.

Two of these Albinos were brother and sister. The latter was twenty-three years old, of average height, well made, and in the enjoyment of uninterrupted good health. Her skin was very white and soft, especially where it had not been exposed to the sun. Her eyes were of a very light colour, not very weak; she could bear moderate light well, but disliked strong light. The pupil showed the absence of the *pigmentum nigrum*; it was of a light flesh colour. The iris was nearly of the same colour, but lighter; its converging fibres were of a light grey hue, and very distinct, having interstices between them of a flesh colour. Her hair was nearly white, or rather of a light-cream colour, shining and fine, long, with a tendency to curl. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were of the same hue, but rather lighter. Her brother, who was three years older, had the same colour of skin, hair and eyes; and was well made, and in good health. He had a thin beard. His voice was feeble and somewhat effeminate. The disposition of both seemed to be mild and cheerful; the expression of their countenance not disagreeable. In conversation they expressed themselves readily, and seemed, if not acute, not deficient in intelligence. Neither of them was married. When

questioned on the subject, the brother said he should like to have a wife, did not his poverty prevent him. They were orphans and beggars. I was informed that their parents had other two children, who were also Albinos; they died young.

The Albino of whom I have next to make mention was a young woman, well grown, and rather tall, the only child of black parents. Her hair and eyes differed in colour from those of the preceding. Her hair, long, and fine, was much darker, of a yellowish-brown. Her eyes were stronger, very like the eyes of a European of the same light complexion—a pure blonde—the pupil being black, the iris blue. In England, this young woman would be considered very fair, but not an anomaly. She too was unmarried.

The next I have to describe were sisters, two of a family of seven children, three of whom were Albinos, four of the colour of their parents. The eldest of the Albinos I did not see; she was married and living at a distance. She was described as being very like her sister next in age, a girl twelve years old. This girl was fully formed, her breasts well developed. Her skin was fair, but not remarkably so; where it had been exposed to the air it was a little sunburnt. Her hair was of a yellowish-brown colour, long and fine. The eyes were large, well formed, and not weak; the pupils were black, the iris bluish-grey, its outer margin hazel coloured. Her countenance was agreeable and intelligent; and she was described as lively and well disposed. Her sister, five years old, was fairer; the pupils of her eyes flesh-coloured, and much dilated; the iris bluish-grey. In features she resembled her sister.

All these Albinos were natives of the south-west coast of Ceylon, where the average heat is about 80° of Fahr., the yearly range remarkably small, little exceeding 10°, with a climate distinguished for salubrity, and the absence of malaria. The temperature of those I tried—the Albinos—was not peculiar; like that of the other natives and of European residents, it was about 1° higher than that of man in a cool climate.

I have heard it said that the Albino is held in contempt by the Singalese; this, on inquiry, I was assured was a mistake; on the contrary, as regards colour, that they are rather respected. Nor is such a feeling towards them surprising, considering that in the East a light hue is held to be distinctive of high caste, and *vice versa*; the lowest castes, those in least easy circumstances and most exposed to the sun, being dark. Moreover, the ethnologists of Ceylon, the Singalese savants, are of opinion, that the white races of mankind are sprung from the Albino, and *ab origine* were merely an accidental variety.

It would be interesting to know what would be the offspring of Albinos. The inquiry I made on this point was unsatisfactory; I could not learn of any descendant from Albino parents, either pure or mixed. Judging from analogy, whether we regard the blondes of the human race, or the white varieties of any domesticated animals, is it not probable that the complexion would be hereditary?

The distinctive quality of the Albino, at least in the highest degree, appears to depend on the absence of the *pigmentum nigrum*, and of its analogue in the skin, the *rete mucosum* (using the term conventionally), and of a like secreting structure, it may be inferred, in the bulbs of the hair. Now these, we know, exist greatly varied in different peoples, and even in different individuals of the same family. In those in whom the *rete mucosum* is least developed, the less we find their skin to be darkened by exposure to the sun's rays, and the fairer they remain, even within the tropics, and from generation to generation, as is witnessed in the whites of Barbadoes and of the other West Indian Islands longest settled. On the contrary, where there is a well developed *rete mucosum*, the action of the sun's rays is found to have a well-marked darkening effect. A gradation, feeble indeed, was noticeable in the skin of the Albinos I have described, and in one of them, the least colourless, a tendency to sunburn was mentioned. Taking into account this gradation, and this effect of the sun's rays, the speculation of the Singalese respecting the origin of the white races of men is not without the semblance of probability; and the more so, if we admit what seems to be proved by all experience, that the coloured races are best adapted for warm climates, and that in the most unwholesome of these climates, they have a better chance of escaping disease and a premature death, and thereby extinction of race, than the whites.

LESKETH HOW, AMBLESIDE,  
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