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The Right to Be White: Fighting the Persecution of Albinos in Tanzania

MADDIE WINCHESTER

Introduction

As the thirty-first largest country in the world, Tanzania supports a population of over forty-six million people (CIA). Demographically, Tanzanians represent a wide variety of cultures and languages. In addition to the over 130 Bantu tribes that make up most of the mainland population, thirty-five percent of the nation holds indigenous religious beliefs, and the country is home to over half a million refugees, mostly from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (CIA). Add to this the fact that Tanzania shares borders with eight different countries, and it becomes apparent that a vast number of interests, cultures, and languages exist throughout the nation, sometimes in harmony and other times in conflict. The country faces natural hazards ranging from flooding to drought, as well as a host of social and environmental problems (CIA). Tanzania is threatened not only by deforestation and the ivory trade (CIA) but also by a deep-rooted racial discrimination against the country's albino people.

The Problem

Throughout the world, one in 20,000 people suffers from Albinism, a recessive genetic disorder that affects skin pigmentation and leads to pale coloring, poor eyesight, and hypersensitivity to sunlight (Brookes, Burnett). In contrast to the worldwide average, one in every 1,400 Tanzanians is albino (Burnett). The high concentration of albinism in Tanzania has several possible explanations. The country may be the place of

origin for the genetic mutation; also, most albinos who live long enough to marry ultimately marry one another due to the constant discrimination that albinos face (Burnett).

Longstanding superstitions in the area fuel the belief that albino body parts have magical properties that, when made into a potion by a witch doctor, help to ensure a catch of fish or a good place to dig for minerals in the ground (Burnett). Some also believe that the magic is stronger if the albino victim is alive and screaming when he or she is dismembered, a notion that has led to incredibly gruesome attacks and discrimination in more than a dozen African countries (Salinas, Burnett). Some other myths associated with albinism in the country are that albinos disappear instead of dying; that albinos are ghosts or aren't human; and that having sex with an albino woman can cure AIDS (Salinas, Brookes). Because of these superstitions, more than one hundred albinos in Tanzania were attacked between 2006 and 2012, and many more face continuous discrimination and feel unsafe because of the superstitions associated with their skin color (Burnett). Estimates for the values of albino organs and other body parts range from several hundred dollars (von Planta) to a hundred thousand dollars (Salinas), but the actual prices are hard to determine because of the underground nature of the market.

In addition to taking limbs from living albino people, some wealth-seekers have resorted to grave robbing to find bones and body parts. Others rape albino women in an attempt to cure diseases (Pisik, Brookes). There are families that send their albino children to boarding schools for their protection, hide them inside, or are even forced to give them away "before they can bring bad luck to the village" (Pisik). Unfortunately, some parents also contribute to the violence by selling their own children's bodies and by helping to attack them (*Spell of the Albino*). Since the large majority of Tanzanians live in rural communities, their isolation fuels the perpetuation of stereotypes and belief in witchcraft,

which is directly related to the indigenous religious beliefs held by much of the population (CIA, Gettleman). This isolation also means that many victims of attacks against albinos die before receiving medical care, and a lack of law enforcement allows the majority of attackers to get away with their offenses (United Nations, CNN). Many Tanzanians, however, condemn this focus on witchcraft. Native journalist Richard Mgamba is among the disbelievers:

If you look at my country, the Sunday Citizen published an article on the front page saying “Juju Nation.” Every five people out of ten have visited the witchdoctor for the purpose of getting remedy or seeking the fortune. Now, when you have half of the population believing that kind of thing, the challenge is how do we move out of this. Because, if witchcraft was working, Africa would have been fine in terms of development, Africa would not be begging for aid from Europeans, or from America. But people have to understand that it doesn’t work. We have to move forward, it doesn’t work at all. We have to stop it, we have to abandon it. (*Spell of the Albino*)

Whether the exact number of believers is the thirty-five percent reported by the CIA or the fifty percent estimated by Mgamba, it’s clear that superstition is deeply ingrained in Tanzanian society. Combating the mistreatment of albinos will require a change at the most basic level. People with albinism must begin to be seen as human beings instead of dollar signs.

The discrimination against albinos and the trade of their body parts throughout much of Africa has many implications for international communication. Tanzania alone shares borders with eight other countries, which makes the black market trade of albino charms difficult to stop (CIA). Peter Ash, founder of the

Canada-based albino advocacy group Under the Same Sun, also describes an Internet trade in albino body parts (Salinas). Because only eleven percent of Tanzanians have access to the Internet (“Report on Internet” 24), the online trade could point to involvement with more developed African countries. Ideally, something good could also come out of this cross-country market. In July of 2009, nine people were sentenced to either prison or jail time in neighboring Burundi for murdering albinos and selling their body parts in Tanzania (BBC). Hopefully, as Tanzania’s neighbors continue to prosecute the perpetrators of these killings, the country will feel pressure to respond with equal force, as it has already begun to do.

In this year alone, four albinos were attacked in a sixteen-day period during January and February (Salinas). Three of these attacks were against children, including one that led to the death of a seven-year-old boy and his ninety-five-year-old grandfather, who tried to protect him (Salinas). Even while the attacks that the United Nations has deemed “abhorrent” (Salinas) continue, the treatment of albinos in the country is slowly beginning to change due to increased awareness and legislative action (Burnett). Advocacy groups work to educate people about albinism and skin cancer, which kills ninety-eight percent of albinos in Tanzania before the age of forty, and albino celebrities and members of parliament are attempting to give a voice to their people (Burnett, McConnell). As the issue moves further into the open, the goal is to transform this visibility into action to make Tanzania and its neighboring countries safer places for all people, regardless of the color of their skin.

The Solution

There is no one perfect way to stop the discrimination and attacks against African albinos, but a combination of efforts can

help to eliminate the problem over time. A multi-pronged approach, beginning with awareness and leading to action, is needed to fight the deeply ingrained beliefs at the grassroots level through empowerment. Melkote and Steeves define empowerment as “the mechanism by which individuals, organizations, and communities gain control and mastery over social and economic conditions (Rappaport 1981; Rappaport *et al.* 1984); over democratic participation in their community (Rappaport 1987; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1998); and over their stories” (355). This approach is ideal because empowerment is a sustainable solution that allows the persecuted to identify their own problems and the best way to solve them, which serves to create leaders who truly understand the needs of the community. The idea of a sustainable approach is directly related to Melkote and Steeves support of participation as an ends through Participatory Action Research, which focuses on allowing local people to take control of their own problems and to find solutions in their own way and as equals (342-4). Only when the community joins together can it begin to repair the damage that has been done by the many years of treating the albino people as though they are not human. The best chance for a solution will come with the ability to integrate existing and new efforts to protect Tanzanian albinos and begin changing stereotypes through awareness and action.

Awareness

The first step in addressing the problems of Tanzania’s albinos is to create awareness within the country and around the world. This consciousness should focus not only on making known the plight of the albino people but also on bringing to light all of the existing efforts to combat injustices. An increased level of awareness creates worldwide attention and puts pressure on the

Tanzanian government to address the problem and begin protecting its people. Several creative consciousness-raising campaigns, ranging from the musical to the technological, are already underway within the region.

Music has always been a way to bring people together and expose social issues; consider the songs of the Beatles to the philanthropic involvement of U2 front-man Bono. Malian singer Salif Keita was shunned by his own father from birth because of his pale skin and light hair (Brookes). Keita played music in the streets for two years before being discovered and beginning a successful multi-decade career in the music industry (Odidi). A lifelong activist for a variety of causes, Keita has formed two nonprofit organizations, founded a hospital for skin cancer patients in Mali, and helped to deliver textbooks, glasses, and thousands of tubes of sunscreen to African albinos (Brookes, The Salif Keita Global Foundation). Despite years of fighting for those with albinism, Keita only recently began using his music as a means to this end, saying, "I wanted to live my life without complaining about my albinism as if it was a handicap. But now, so many things are happening to albinos, massacres, and human sacrifices. It is too much. I had to say something" (qtd. in Odidi). Keita recently released a song, entitled "Folon," that he has dedicated to albinism awareness (The Salif Keita Global Foundation). Translated to English, "Folon" demonstrates the struggle of Tanzania's albinos to find a voice amidst changing times:

Today, you are supposed to take part
Today, I'm supposed to take part
Today, we are all supposed to take part
Today, whatever's happening
we're all asked to take part
Today, people want to know

In the past, people did not want to know(translated in Gamzeu)

“Folon” shows us a changing time in which people are beginning to address the issues of albinism, though the wounds have yet to heal from a past in which “people did not want to know” about albinos’ struggle. Through his words, Salif Keita gives a voice to a number of voiceless people. He demonstrates Melkote’s and Steeves’s ideal of empowerment by serving as a model of everything that people with albinism can accomplish and giving back to those who share his stigma through his activism and philanthropic commitment.

In 2012, French author Michel Picquermal published a children’s book, *La Voix d’Or de l’Afrique*, about Salif Keita’s life (The Salif Keita Global Foundation). In many ways, a children’s book makes a lot of sense as a way to reach out to a nation and start changing dangerous beliefs. While only one in ten Tanzanians have access to the Internet, almost seventy percent know how to read (“Report on Internet” 24, CIA). In a country where technology is still lacking an infrastructure, books remain an important means of communication. The use of books like *La Voix d’Or de l’Afrique* can help, starting in childhood, to raise awareness of the persecution of albinos and to dispel the myths attached to the lack of skin pigmentation. Stories written by African albinos would further follow this model of empowerment and create a way to show people that albinos are just like everyone else. In this way, more leaders would follow in Salif Keita’s footsteps and bring awareness to the fight of the albinos by serving as spokespeople and beacons of hope for others who share their struggle.

In a gesture unlike Keita’s musical campaign, Deputy Minister for Communication, Science, and Technology January Makamba is using communications to help combat corruption in

Tanzania through a new mobile phone service (Kellaway). Makamba has created an anti-corruption campaign based on text messaging that works to expose bribery throughout the country: “Only 6.9% of corruption cases are currently reported. We want to solve the problem...At a hospital you are asked for a bribe. You have a USP code, you enter the location and details of the bribe and send it to a web platform: it will appear as a dot on a map so everyone can see that at a certain hospital a bribe was asked for” (qtd. in Kellaway). Because more than half of Tanzanians had a mobile phone in 2012, solutions based on telecommunications make sense for the nation (“Quarterly Telecom Statistics”). By making some changes to Makamba’s cellular operation, a similar idea could be used to catch witch doctors using albino body parts or albino attackers, even in rural areas. Unique solutions like Makamba’s text message-based campaign are examples of the way communications can be put into action to help fight problems in Tanzania and all over the world.

Another way in which Tanzanians are working to fight discrimination based on skin color is through participation in documentary filmmaking. Award-winning Swiss filmmaker Claudio von Planta recently released *Spell of the Albino*, a twenty-four-minute documentary, in collaboration with Africa Investigates and Al Jazeera (von Planta). While von Planta admits that he was originally skeptical of the reports of the albino attacks, he began to change his mind after witnessing the aftermath of two assaults firsthand. In his film, von Planta used native Africans, both black and albino, as investigators. Anas Aremeyaw Anas, a famous Ghanaian investigative journalist, partnered with Tanzanians Richard Mgamba and Isaak Timothy, an albino, to investigate the issue and confront witchdoctors (von Planta). After visiting several victims of albino attacks, the men ordered a fake albino arm from a special effects company, and Anas took the fake arm to a witch doctor, pretending to be a client hoping to get rich.

Through a combination of fear tactics and verbal assaults, Anas convinced the witchdoctor to stop making potions from albino body parts, something he then hoped to do in other villages. By allowing the Tanzanian people, and in particular a Tanzanian albino, to tell their own stories and to fight their own fight, von Planta exemplifies the use of empowerment to enact change.

Based on everything that has already been done with music, books, and cell phones, it's apparent that communications hold a key part of the solution to Tanzania's problem. Though the country is lacking a communication infrastructure in many ways, the influence of Keita's words and Makamba's fight against corruption are making a difference even with the small amount of people they reach. Improving the quality of roads and telecommunications throughout the country would allow more people to benefit from this increased awareness and to pick up their own fight against injustice. In this way, a more advanced communication infrastructure in Tanzania would help to dispel the myths associated with albinism, and greater access to books and the Internet throughout the country would force people to rely on facts instead of superstitions, making Tanzania a safer place for its albino citizens.

The only way in which awareness can make a difference is if it inspires people to take action against injustice. Awareness begins with empowerment, and more specifically with people controlling their own stories (Melkote and Steeves 355). The key to change in many instances can be as simple as allowing people to tell their own stories, and we have seen the impact of this through Salif Keita's music and Isaak Timothy's powerful words in *Spell of the Albino*. These stories embody the idea of empowerment with the purpose of change, and both the government and several non-governmental organizations are attempting to use the awareness created by the narratives of the albino people to enact change within and outside of Tanzanian borders.

Action

Once awareness has been promoted, the next step is to take action to protect African albinos. This action should work to combine the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations, and to help albino people of all ages. Through empowerment and awareness, action begins to form at the grassroots level, and people with and without albinism in Tanzania can learn to coexist peacefully.

Several non-governmental organizations are working to combat albinism stereotypes in Tanzania. Groups like Under the Same Sun and the Tanzanian Albino Society fight to dispel myths, create awareness, and educate both albinos and non-albinos about life with albinism in an African society (Burnett, "Learn"). At the same time, organizations based outside of Tanzania, such as The Salif Keita Global Foundation, work to provide Tanzanian albinos with life-saving sun protection (The Salif Keita Global Foundation). Dr. David McLean, secretary-general of the International League of Dermatological Societies, has been visiting Tanzania for the past twenty years to help grow the Regional Dermatology Training Centre, which trains dermatologists and controls a mobile skin care clinic that visits albinos living nearby (Miller). Dr. McLean has also been integral in the formation of the project "Hats On for Skin Health," which works to provide wide-brimmed hats to Tanzania's sun-sensitive albinos (Miller). The hats, which cost around \$2.50 apiece to produce, are expected to last for ten years and will be distributed by the Regional Dermatology Training Centre (Miller). Something unique about this project is its focus on education and empowerment. The Regional Dermatology Training Centre works to train local

doctors, and the mobile skin care unit brings awareness and educates albinos and their families in remote villages (Miller). In addition to this, the factory where the hats are produced is located in Moshi, Tanzania, and staffed primarily with albino workers, which serves to empower the albino population to take control of protecting themselves from the sun (Miller).

Melkote and Steeves encourage the formation of alliances, which can bring different groups together based on a common interest and contribute to their success (292). There are many different organizations and individuals fighting for those with albinism in Tanzania, and an alliance between the established nonprofit groups could make a huge difference. The Tanzanian Albino Society survives on just \$15,000 a year, while the Salif Keita Global Foundation received almost \$100,000 in donations in 2009 alone (Gettleman, The Salif Keita Global Foundation). Economic disparity is an unfortunate reality that keeps human rights organizations from living up to their full potential, but a combination of efforts can increase success. Additionally, these organizations experience technological gaps in conveying their ideas to the world. All of them have websites, but given the region's low Internet penetration, they are probably most effective in communicating their messages to more developed countries than to the Tanzanian people and their elected officials. Melkote and Steeves utilize Allinsky's definition of power as "organized money or organized people" (353), and with a combination of the Tanzania Albino Society's local network, Under the Same Sun's international ties, and the Salif Keita Global Foundation's image and funding, the groups would have the power to accomplish great things for albinos throughout Africa.

In addition to progress made by NGOs, the Tanzanian government has been taking steps to protect the rights of its albino citizens. One way that the government has increased awareness about the plight of the albino people is through the inclusion of

albino Tanzanians in the country's parliament. In 2008, Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete appointed Al-Shaymaa Kwegyir to parliament ("It is easy"). Kwegyir runs the Office of Albino Affairs and fights for the rights of fellow Tanzanian albinos ("It is easy"). Serving as a member of parliament puts Kwegyir in a good position to help pass laws to stop the persecution of albinos, something fellow parliament member Salum Khalfani Bar'wani has already committed to doing (McConnell). The first albino parliament member to be elected by a popular vote in 2010, Bar'wani wants to change the situation of the albino people in his country (McConnell). Bar'wani says that he "joined politics to represent people who have disabilities" and that he hopes his election can help to start changing the reality of the albino people (McConnell).

The Ministry of Education has also taken action by starting to educate teachers and professors about albinism and how to help the albino students in their classrooms, since those students frequently have vision problems (Burnett). Institutions such as schools and law enforcement agencies are integral in both preventing albino abuse through education and in finding and prosecuting attackers. Police officers in Tanzania have begun creating lists of albinos in their regions and escorting children to and from school to protect them from potential attackers (Gettleman). The help of schools and police in confronting the problem is an important step for the elimination of the persecution of albinos in Tanzania, but more must be done to ensure everyone's safety and stop the attacks.

The United Nations reports that out of the seventy-two documented cases of the murder of albinos since 2000, only five have been prosecuted successfully (Salinas). It's also important to take into account the number of attacks that go unreported, perhaps due to rural isolation or fears for the lives of family members (Ng'wanakilala). In 2008, the Tanzanian Government

made some progress by informing the people that “the torture and killing of an albino would be prosecuted in the same way as any other murder” and also by recently banning witchdoctors from running their businesses (Pisik, BBC). Just a year later, a court sentenced several men to death by hanging for killing an albino boy and taking his legs for use in witchdoctor potions (BBC). The victories for the albino people continued in 2010 when a man received the death sentence for cutting off the legs of a five-year old girl, drinking her blood, and leaving her alone to die (Ng’wanakilala). Parliament member Al-Shaymaa Kwegyir welcomed this sentence, stating that “the court ruling should serve as a lesson for others” (qtd. in Ng’wanakilala). While the convictions of albino killers demonstrate progress for the country, the sentences remain more severe on paper than in practice; as of 2009, no one had been executed in over fifteen years, despite there being over one hundred criminals waiting on death row (BBC).

Awareness sets the stage for future action, which is what will help to change the fate of Tanzania’s albino people. Non-profit groups working together can raise more money and reach a greater number of people, and the government can create and enforce laws to enact change. In a similar way that awareness is created, through legislative changes and the involvement and coordination of non-profit groups, the region can become a safer place for those lacking skin pigmentation.

Conclusion

In the year 2013, it’s hard to imagine a place in which people are still killed for the color of their skin. In a manner reminiscent of the discrimination against African Americans in the United States, Tanzanian albinos face threats and are even slaughtered and used in potions simply because they look different than their black relatives and neighbors. As a nation,

Tanzania seems divided between the third world and the first. The country supports a large population and maintains a level of telecommunications penetration and literacy that is impressive in the region, yet at the same time a large number of Tanzanians believe in witchcraft and don't view albinos as human. According to Melkote and Steeves:

Empowerment is a process that is well suited to deal with social change in general and with inequitable structures in particular. It provides individuals, communities, and organizations with the necessary skills, confidence, and countervailing power to deal effectively with social change in a world that distributes needs, resources, and power unequally. (365)

Tanzanian albinos experience a reality that is very unequal; they suffer violence, discrimination, and abuse almost constantly for a condition that they can't control. Only through empowerment can Tanzania's albino people take back their lives and feel safe in their own country. Some steps have already been taken to raise awareness by musician Salif Keita and filmmaker Claudio von Planta, and other programs could be adapted to further raise consciousness. This awareness provides the fuel for action that we see in the work of non-profit groups and the Tanzanian government, which is making space for albino officials and enforcing laws against albino killers. Even with all of these steps, the persecution of the albino people in the region is still a reality. As long as people continue to believe in witchcraft, the attacks will continue. We must take the steps to empower the Tanzanian people, and in particular the Tanzania albinos, to control their own stories and enact change. Through empowerment and awareness, Tanzania and its neighboring countries can take action

against stereotypes and become safer places for all people to live, no matter the color of their skin.

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