

THE QUANDARY OF BEING BORN AN ALBINO IN TANZANIA

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Not so long ago a young fellow asked me, “how does it feel to be an albino celebrity in Tanzania?” and I replied, “I feel human.” I do not often get the opportunity to write or share my thoughts on what I have experienced and view the world. I wish there was something I could say to the world; I am nothing but a human. I was born with the albinism, a condition that makes the skin vulnerable to objects and sun exposure. My earliest memory of dealing with others was a few years after I was born when I was old enough to play outside. I would constantly get sunburns or easily injure myself as I played with other kids.

Many non-albino people are unaware the only difference they have with people with albinism is that an albino has congenital absence of melanin pigment that protects a person from the sun's ultraviolet rays, which explains the difference in their skin, eye, and hair color. When I was younger, I experienced people who thought albinism could be passed from person to person by visual or physical contact with a person with albinism. During my grade school days, other students used to spit inside their shirts believing that by doing so, they would prevent themselves from turning into albinos or protect them against consequential bad luck. Sadly, albinism is still not well understood today and discrimination, mistreatment, and intra-cultural ignorance impact the albino population of Tanzania. Obulutsa (2009) states, “Tanzania has about 170,000 albinos among its 40 million people, according to government and lobby groups” (p. 9).

My bad dream of childhood became a nightmare a few years ago, when I learned albinos in Tanzania were being murdered. At the time, I was living in the United States pursuing my undergraduate degree. People in my home country were killing fellow citizens for their body parts. Odula (2009), wrote “Africa's albinos into hiding, fearful of losing their lives and limbs to unscrupulous dealers who can make up to \$75,000 selling a complete dismembered set” (p.14). I remember crying as I read that people with albinism from my home country, my fellow citizens, were being brutally killed to ‘*generate wealth*’ for a sick few. When I first learned of this genocide, I could not eat for days and felt as if I was going insane. For the first-time in my life, I really felt as if I had no home. Tanzania had always

been to me a place which respected human dignity, promoted peace and love to its citizens, and ensure freedom. Now, I could not go to my own country in fear of being killed.

Engelhart (2009) reports, “Murdered albinos are usually sold at high prices to witch doctors, who grind up the body parts and brew them into potions that they believe carry magic powers” (p. 38). Tanzania has registered an astonishing number of albinos who have been brutally butchered by merciless people on baseless superstition. One BBC coverage in 2009 highlighted the belief in this superstition when they talked to Hassan Mwita, a fisherman in Tanzania, ‘*testifying*’ that albino parts brought wealth to his friend who got rich by planting albino hairs in his fishing net, which made him catch a larger number of fish as compared to what he used to catch.

Public education needs to occur in Tanzania regarding albinism on a national level. All citizens should be aware that albinism is not contagious, and people living with albinism are important human resources to the country, but have a few special health care needs. This public health messaging campaign could mirror the national communication strategies used by health professionals in the early 1980’s with AIDS. The communication methods, avenues to reach large populations exist, and now is the time for Tanzania to educate its citizens on albinism to avoid further loss of life.

While the brutal killings are shocking, sickening, and demonstrates a lack of understanding by some of the citizens of Tanzania, other significant issues face albinos in Tanzania. Skin cancer from frequent sun exposure account for many reported deaths and the reduction of life span for persons born with albinism. Limited humanitarian action has taken place to provide education and preventative measures on how to minimize sun exposure, which is closely tied to high-rates of skin cancer. These efforts are targeting children with albinism in Tanzania.

A not-for-private-profit organization, named Afrobino (T) Ltd (having no capital shares), has been formed in Tanzania. Afrobino’s mission is to improve the wellbeing of the albinism community focusing on skin cancer prevention, special accommodations for albino school children (to ensure equal learning opportunities), increase public awareness of albinism and to

assist government officials educate the citizens of Tanzania in an effort to stop the killings of innocent people (caused by false beliefs).

Afrobino Ltd is preparing to launch its first MAUA Project (**M**aendeleo, **A**fya na **U**sawa kwa **A**lbino). The MAUA project is designed to ensure equal opportunity and improvement for the **D**evelopment, **H**ealth and **A**ccommodation of the Albino community. The implementation strategy for the MAUA Project proposal focuses on a Five Year Action Plan. The action plan focuses on children with albinism from 5 to 10 years old. The intended result of the MAUA project is to help children with albinism grow up peacefully and become well educated. The achievement of these results will gradually transform their welfare and standard of living into a better and more prosperous albino community for Tanzania. This visionary plan will require additional humanitarian aid to ensure the project is successful.

References

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