The Role Played by Museums in the Protection of People with Albinism in Tanzania

Lucina D. Shayo
Education Officer
Museum and House of Culture
Dar es Salaam
Tanzania

Underprivileged children (albino and crippled, with their parents) in one of the programmes at the Museum in Dar es Salaam
INTRODUCTION

In 1996, while working at the Village Museum Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, I became aware of the widespread discrimination that disabled children experience in our country, and this had lead to recent work with disabled and albino children. At that time, I organised children’s programmes that enabled them to visit the museum and do different activities. There were different role-playing activities that I conducted. The Village Museum has different traditional house architectural styles from all over the country. I would conduct an annual, three-day programme based on these various house styles. Children would play various gender roles in the families of different communities.

Tanzania has more than 123 communities (tribes) with different cultures. One of the things that unite us is the Kiswahili language, which every one can speak and thus makes it easy for us to communicate. But, we need to combat some of the traditional values and norms because they are not good practices, for example, polygamous marriages, inheritance of widows, girls of 14 years old married with the willingness of their fathers, senior men allowed to marry girls (who often run away and cannot go back to their parents because it is a curse to run away), female genital mutilation (FGM), and keeping the physically and mentally under-privileged children indoors.

After each of the children’s programmes we did at the museum, we would do an evaluation together with the children. In this venue, the children would tell us what more we should do for them and what roles they could play in the next year. During the 1996 programme the children told us that they were not happy with their teachers who always left the disabled children in the schools and would not allow them to come to the museum. They went further to say that some of their neighbors were depriving their own children from going to school and were locking them inside. I then rose up and said, “No, I am going to speak out, using the museum as a platform” Since then, I have established a special programme for the under-privileged children.

I first started with the albino children. Many people in Tanzania, and across Africa for that matter, believe albinos have magical powers. The reason is that albinism in Tanzania is seen as a curse. The albino people are called “Zeruzeru,” meaning off and on. It is believed that any mother with an albino child got it because of sleeping with a devil spirit. It is also believed that because of albinos are the offspring of the devil, they never die but just disappear. Therefore, whoever had an albino child would make every effort to hide the child so the family would not be cursed by society. Others are killed at the initial stages of their lives.

Albinism is a result of a genetic condition that impairs normal skin pigmentation and strikes about 1 in 3,000 people in Tanzania. There is a lack of pigmentation in the hair, skin and eyes of those affected. In almost all cases a significant visual impairment is also involved, with most persons with albinism being legally blind.

According to the Tanzania Albino Society (2009), one in 4,000-5,000 people in Tanzania is an albino and although they have not been counted thoroughly, there may be around ten thousand albinos in the population. Albinism also occurs in animals such as lions. Therefore, we need to educate the public so that albinism is no longer looked at as a curse.
THE FIRST PROGRAMME, 1997

My first programme for these children was in 1997, which was called Festival For Children Living with Disadvantage. Phase one was for the public. I used radio and television. I explained what albinism is and how parents should treat them—giving them the same rights as other children. Then I explained to the teachers that they should give them the front desks so that they see the teachers and boards clearly, because most of them are visually impaired. This phase was a great success because there was one donor who saw the programme on television and sympathized with the children. He donated pairs of reading glasses and sunglasses to two hundred children through the Albino Association of Tanzania.

The second phase was an exhibition that showed their talents. They had a lot of hand crafts that they did while at school and inside the museum. The exhibition was officially inaugurated by government officials and was given media coverage. We then developed more programmes for awareness about albinism.

THE STATE OF ALBINOS IN TANZANIA TODAY

Persons with albinism in Tanzania face several major challenges:

1. The horror of a rapidly growing industry in the sale of albino body parts

This unimaginable evil is driven by the belief (in some areas of the country) that the body parts of people with albinism possess magical powers capable of bringing riches if used in potions produced by local witchdoctors. During the last year, official reports indicate that 43 people with albinism have been brutally murdered and their body parts hacked off and sold to witchdoctors. However, leaders in the albinism community believe the number of deaths to be between 60 and 70.

Reports also indicate that albino body parts are being exported outside of Tanzania. In one instance, a Tanzanian trader was caught travelling to the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the head of an albino baby in his possession. He told police that a businessman there was going to pay him for the head by its weight. There are many more reported cases of brutal albino killings.

2. Lack of low vision aids

There is a lack of glasses, magnifiers, specialized computer equipment and other protective gear for albino people. This results in extreme difficulty in completing educational programmes, leading to chronic unemployment.

3. Epidemic rates of fatal skin cancer

A lack of protective sunscreens, wide-brimmed hats and proper clothing results in epidemic rates of death due to preventable skin cancer. The lack of melanin in the skin creates high risk for skin cancer. The average life expectancy for persons with albinism in Tanzania is 30 years, with only 2% living beyond 40 years. In western countries persons with albinism have the same life expectancy as the general population.
4. Widespread social discrimination fueled by powerful myths

There is a long-standing and widespread lack of public awareness of albinism. Powerful myths surround albinism in Africa. Some of these are:

- People with albinism are evil or are a curse from God and will bring bad luck on the household.
- People with albinism never die—they simply vanish.
- People with albinism are born to black women who have slept with white men.
- Albinism is believed to be a contagious disease, and as a result many employers avoid hiring persons with albinism due to fears that their customers and staff will "catch" the condition, or that food would be contaminated if touched by a person with albinism.
- Body parts of people with albino are powerful charms that can help the bearers rich or fortunate.
- Albino hunters kill their victims and use their blood and body parts for potions. Witchdoctors tell their clients that the body parts will bring them luck in love, life and business.

TESTIMONIES: INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION

- Following are excerpts from a New York Times article, “Albinos, Long Shunned, Face Threat in Tanzania,” by Jeffrey Gettleman, published on June 8, 2008:

The Tanzanian government has mobilized to protect its albino population, an already beleaguered group whose members are often shunned as outcasts and die of skin cancer before they reach 30. Police officers are drawing up lists of albinos in every corner of the country to better look after them. Officers are escorting albino children to school. Tanzania’s President even appointed an albino lady for a seat in Parliament…. But the killings go on…. Advocates for albinos have also said that witch doctors are selling albino skin in Congo.

The young are often the targets. Vumilia Makoye, 17, was eating dinner with her family in their hut in western Tanzania when two men showed up with long knives. Vumilia was like many other Africans with albinism. She had dropped out of school because of severe near-sightedness. She could not find a job because no one would hire her. She sold peanuts in the market, making $2 a week while her delicate skin was seared by the sun. When Vumilia’s mother, Jeme, saw the men with knives, she tried to barricade the door of their hut. But the men overpowered her and burst in. “They cut my daughter quickly,” she said, making hacking motions with her hands. The men sawed off Vumilia’s legs above the knee and ran away with the stumps. Vumilia died.

Yusuph Malogo, who lives nearby, fears he may be next. He is also an albino and works by himself on a rice farm. He now carries a loud, silver whistle to blow for help…. Al-Shaymaa J. Kwegyir, Tanzania’s new albino member of Parliament, said, “People think we’re lucky. That’s why they’re killing us. But we’re not lucky.”…Police officials say the albino killings were worst in rural areas, where people tend to be less educated and more superstitious. They state that some fishermen even weave albino hairs in their nets because they believe they will catch more fish.

On the shores of Lake Victoria, in North-West Tanzania, albinos are a touchy subject. When asked if they used albino hairs in their nets, a group of fishermen just stared at the sand. One
traditional healer, a young man in a striped shirt who looked more like a college student than a witch doctor, said: “Yeah, I’ve heard of it. But that’s not real witchcraft. It’s the work of con men.”…

Police officials are at a loss to explain precisely why there is a wave of albino killings now. Commissioner Paul Chagonja said an influx of Nigerian movies, which play up witchcraft, might have something to do with it, along with rising food prices that are making people more desperate. “These witch doctors have many strange beliefs,” he said. “There was a rumor not so long ago that if you use a bald head when fishing, you’ll get rich. There was another one that said if you spread blood on the ground in a mine, you’ll find gold. These rumors come and go. The problem is, the people who follow witch doctors don’t question them.”

See: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/world/africa/08albino.html

- From “Seven new albino killings in Tanzania and Burundi,” published in the Telegraph Magazine on May 6, 2010:

Under the Same Sun, a Vancouver-based NGO, put the toll of albino murders at 57 in Tanzania...and six attempted murders, where victims lost limbs. In Burundi the total is 14 murders. These are only the documented cases. The numbers are likely much higher – estimates suggesting well over a hundred in the last two years.


- An article by Fumbuka Ng'wanakilala, “Kenyan jailed for trying to sell albino in Tanzania,” posted on reuters.com on August 20, 2010, states:

A Kenyan man has been sentenced to a total of 17 years in prison for trying to sell an albino man to witchdoctors in Tanzania....At least 53 albinos have been killed since 2007 in the east African nation and their body parts sold for use in witchcraft, especially in the remote northwest regions of Mwanza and Shinyanga, both gold-mining regions where superstition is rife.

Albino hunters kill their victims and use their blood and body parts for potions. Witchdoctors tell their clients that the body parts will bring them luck in love, life and business.

See: http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE67I2SN20100819

- A video clip “Albinos in Tanzania, targets of witchcraft-linked killings,” by Agence France-Presse, can be seen via the Breitbart TV website at http://tv.breitbart.com/albinos-in-tanzania-are-targets-of-witchcraft-linked-killings/

This video clip is also available on the clip syndicate website at http://www.clipsyndicate.com/video/play/829018/albinos_in_tanzania_targets_of_witchcraft_linked_killings

MORE EFFORT DONE BY THE MUSEUM

Since we started our work on this issue about a decade ago, the situation is becoming worse. Discrimination against albinos is a serious problem throughout sub-Saharan Africa, but
recently in Tanzania it has taken a wicked twist, as seen, for example, in the above report on the jailing of a Kenyan man in August 2010 for attempting to sell an albino body to witchdoctors.

Since the museum is dealing with tangible and intangible heritage, we feel we have an important role to play in addressing this issue, through education and advocacy. Albino killings in our country are contrary to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which decrees that everybody has the right to live.


- Human beings are born free, and are equal: 12(1);
- Everybody deserves respect and recognition: 12(2);
- All people are equal before the law, and they have the right, without any discrimination, to protection and equality: 13(1);
- Every person has the right to live and get out the community protection of his life; according to law: 14;
- Everybody has the right to be free to live as a free man: 15(1).

The threats that the people with albinism are experiencing in Tanzania are contrary to those human rights organs mentioned above. This is the reason why the museums as a platform of the community must address this issue to create public awareness in order that the international and national declarations on human rights be implemented. Therefore:

- The museum intends to do more research to explore more reasons for these fateful actions. The pace is slow because we do not yet have funds. We are looking for partners with whom we can partner.
- We are working together with the Tanzania Albino Society.
- We continue to organise the special programmes.
- We use the museum as a platform for human rights advocacy.
- We are organising more public awareness programmes.
- We have a special TV (TBC 1) programme for children that runs on Saturdays called “Watoto wa Makumbusho,” meaning, “Children of the Museum,” in which children talk about heritage, what is heritage, positive and negative heritage. Here, children are taught what albinism is and how we can reduce the rate positively by non-albinos getting married to albinos. They are taught that the killing must stop.

CONCLUSION

Museums are powerful tools that can be used to expedite development in every society because they are cultural institutions. Culture is such a strong phenomenon in the society as it includes beliefs, norms, values and religion. It is impetus for museums to address any burning issues in the society. This is what drove the museum in Tanzania to speak out loudly for the albinos since 1997. The reason that triggered this matter has changed, from albino children been hidden to the killings, but it is our hope that with enough educational awareness about albinism, even the killings will stop. With this presentation, the author calls more fighters to jump in this boat so that more research and exhibitions can be done at the museum to create more awareness to the public.