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THE ROLE PLAYED BY MUSEUMS IN PROTECTING PERSONS WITH ALBINISM IN TANZANIA:

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INTRODUCTION



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In 1996, while working at the Village Museum Dar es Salaam Tanzania I noticed one thing. I used to conduct Children's programmes that enabled them to visit the museum and conduct different activities. There were different role plays that I conducted. The Village Museum has different traditional house architectural styles from all over the country. I used to conduct a three day programme of such once annually. Children would play positions of different gender roles in the families of different communities.

Tanzania has more than 123 communities (tribes) with different cultures. One of the things that united us is the Kiswahili language which every one can speak and so makes it easy for us to communicate. But, we still need to combat some of the traditional values and norms because they were good practices. At the end of each programme we used to evaluate 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. That particular year, the children told us that, they were not happy with their teachers who always left the disabled children in school and would not allow them to come to the museum. They went further that, some of their neighbors were depriving their own children from going to school and were locking them inside.

That is the time I rose up and said "No, I am going to shout, using the museum as a platform"

Since then, I established a special programme for children in special needs.

I first started with the albino children. The reason was that, albinism in Tanzania was seen as the most misfortune. The albino people are called "Zeruzeru" meaning off and on. It was believed that, any mother with an albino



child got it because of sleeping with a devil spirit. It was also believed that, because of the albino being the offspring of the devil, they never died but just disappeared.

Therefore who ever had an albino child would do every effort to hide. Others were killed at the initial stages of their lives. Those who survived were hidden so that their families should not be cursed in the society.

THE FIRST PROGRAMME 1997

My first programme for these children was in 1997 which was called FESTIVAL FOR CHILDREN LIVING IN THE DISADVANTAGE. The programme was divided into three phases. Phase one was for the public. I used radios and televisions. I explained what albinism was and how parents should treat them. Giving them rights as other children. Then I explained to the teachers that, they should give allocate them in 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 in the television and sympathized with them. He donated pairs of reading and sunglasses to all the two hundred

children through their association

The second phase was an exhibition which 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 were given media coverage. From then, we had more programmes for awareness about albinism.

Albinism is a genetically inherited disorder which results in 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.

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 traveling 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 many more reported cases of brutal albino illings.

- 2. Lack of low vision aids

Lack of glasses, magnifiers and specialized computer equipment. This results in extreme difficulty in completing educational programs, resulting in chronic unemployment.

- 3. Epidemic Rates of fatal skin cancer:

Lack of protective sunscreens, wide brimmed hats and proper clothing resulting in epidemic rates of death due to preventable skin cancer. The lack of melanin in the skin creates high risk for skin cancer. 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 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 - 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.

MORE EFFORT DONE BY THE MUSEUM

Though we started about a decade ago, this issue is becoming worse. Since the museum is dealing with tangible and intangible heritage, the issue of albino killings in our country is contrary to the United Nations human rights as everybody has the right to live.

- The issue is being addressed in the research to explore more reasons of these fateful actions.
- Working together with the Tanzania albino association
- Still organizing the special programmes
- Using the museum as a human rights platform
- Organising more public awareness programmes during and after the festivals

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