

Albino Killings in Tanzania: Implications for Security

Author: Chinenye P. Dave-Odigie

Senior Research Fellow

Institute for Peace & Conflict Resolution

Abogo Largema Street, Off Constitution Avenue

Central Business District, Abuja. F.C.T. Nigeria

irukadave@yahoo.com

Tel : Mobile +234 (0)805 983 1100

Home: +234 (0)9 6708865

SKYPE: irukadave

ALBINO KILLINGS IN TANZANIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SECURITY

Introduction

‘Like a hunted animal run to ground, the little girl was cornered. Branded a ‘ghost’ on account of her striking white skin, Mariam Emmanuel had been chased through her village, in a remote corner of Tanzania, by a bloodthirsty mob. Exhausted and terrified, the five year old slumped in the dust at the end of an alley. She whimpered and cowered while the adults surrounded her and sharpened their knives and machetes.

Then they set to work, butchering her and dividing her remains between themselves. She was killed like an animal, by grown men who showed no compassion for another human being. Mariam’s crime? She was an albino (see Malone, 2009).

The above paints a gory and vivid picture of a worrisome and sullyng trend which is the killing of albinos in Tanzania, an East African country located on the Indian Ocean, bordered on the north by Uganda and Kenya, on the west by Burundi, Rwanda and Congo, and on the south by Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi. According to 2009 estimates, Tanzania has a population of about 41 million. It is relatively a peaceful country having been spared from the spate of violent conflicts witnessed by its neighbors like Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Congo.

Beyond infringing on their fundamental human rights as enshrined in Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the scale of the ongoing

atrocities being leveled against albinos in Tanzania today, if left unchecked, may soon qualify as the first campaign of genocide in the 21st Century.

By definition, an albino is a person with a pale skin, eyes and hair as a result of genetic condition that impairs normal skin pigmentation. Albinos are often shunned as outcasts and some of them die of skin cancer before the age of 30 (Garcia, 2008). Albinism is a genetic deficiency of melanin pigment production. Melanin production is rarely totally absent but perhaps 1 to 10% of normal. It is usually inherited as a recessive condition (Draper, 2009). Albinos are easily identified with their pale white skin and since it is a hereditary condition, it means that it is a condition that one cannot control. At least, there is no vaccine yet for the prevention of albinism in human beings.

Albinos in Tanzania are a vulnerable group of people who are under the threat of extinction as they are being killed with impunity, based on the belief that the potion made from their body parts can bring good luck, wealth and success. This has sparked angry protests, condemnations and outcries by the citizens who perceive that the government's response to the threat against the lives of the albinos are inadequate as the number of trials and convictions have not been commensurate with the number of killings. The phenomenon is also attracting international attention as there is a public and international outcry against it. This means that efforts need to be intensified both locally and internationally to check the scourge.

In early 2009 during a visit to the country's capital, the United Nations Secretary General: Ban Ki Moon decried the killings and conveyed the United Nations condemnation of same.⁶ However, much more than condemnations and outcries are needed to address the issue of these killings which constitute serious crimes. It will go a long way if proper attempts are made at tackling the root causes of the problem.

The importance of the paper topic stems from the fact that security is central to the study of international relations and has been defined in different ways. Mostly, security is equated with the safety of the state from attack, with the possibility of war and with questions relating to the threat, actual use and management of military force (Terriff, *et all*, 1999, 179-181). These were the traditional angles to security studies; and considerations for the study of security in the Cold War era where most armed conflicts were inter-state in nature.

With the end of the cold war, security has been viewed as being much more complex than this traditional angle to it. There is no agreed definition yet on the concept of security in the post-Cold War era.

According to Buzan who outlined 12 definitions of security, the concept defies the pursuit of an agreed upon definition and has been viewed as one of the most ambiguous and value-laden terms in social science. He developed the concept by arguing for a broader understanding of it based on the contention that human

collectivities are affected in 5 sectors viz: military, political, economic, social and environmental. For instance, the military sector to which the traditional angle of the study of security is based on is concerned with the 2 levels of interplay of the armed offensive and defensive capabilities of states and perceptions of each other's intentions. He suggested that security is integrative and a comprehensive understanding must include all levels and sectors (Buzan, 1991, 19-20). Some other scholars view the concept of security from an individual point of view. This signaled a change from the traditional state-based formulations of security focusing on the individuals need to be made safe; it broadened the question of what is to be secured.

Peace studies in its contemporary variants focuses on the security of the individual, pointing to class and economic disparities within the global system as core issues which need to be addressed if positive peace is to be achieved. Some perspectives under individual security argue that it is violence that individuals need to be protected against. Be it organized violence such as that used by the state, structural or criminal violence, (albino killings fall under criminal violence) the emphasis on violence provides a link to those state centered perspectives that focus their concern on the need to protect the state against violence (Terriff, *et all*, 1999, 179-181).

Other perspectives, however, argue that the individual may be harmed by more than just violence and that they need to be secured in their health as well as from being economically, politically and socially marginalized and be free from oppression (Ibid). The killing of albinos places a restraint on the social aspects of their existence because the people now live in dread. This is a form of oppression against a group of people for the mere fact of skin color, and it needs international collaboration and cooperation to curb it. This human angle focuses on the protection of the vital core of individuals' lives from critical and pervasive threats as opposed to the traditional concept of security that focused mainly on external threats and more specifically on external military threats. This protection of the vital core of individuals' lives hinges on the fact that people are threatened by events well beyond their control as is the case with the albinos who are born with such condition.

The traditional and individual arguments on security are not the only arguments or schools of thought on security. Environmentalists amongst so many others have also come up with the notion of environmental security.

However, for the purposes of the paper, albino killing is a topic that falls under the individual (human) aspect of security. In this regard therefore, the paper agrees that the notion of security focused on military balances and capabilities need to be broadened to include safety from chronic threats like hunger, disease, repression and protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of daily life.

Causative Factors and Trends in Albino Killings in Tanzania

Since 2007, over 50 albinos have lost their lives in Tanzania. The victims were caught, mutilated and their organs and body part harvested and sold to witchdoctors. Relatedly, dead albinos have been exhumed from their graves in order to make use of their body parts (Kiishweko, 2008). Disgustingly, some parents have been accused of complicity in the crimes even against their own children. Some families see albinos as the result of a curse placed on such families and these acts reduce them to animals that can be butchered at will (O'Toole, 2009).

The belief in curses accounts largely for the killing of albinos in Tanzania. Like many other African states, Tanzania is still largely steeped in traditional and superstitious beliefs though many of the citizenry adhere to the Christian and Islamic religious faiths. In the Mwanza, (Magabe, 2009; The Task.net, 2010) Shinyanga, (Tamric Agency, 2000) and Mara regions notorious for albino killings, the people are largely religious and adhere to traditional, Islamic and various sects of the Christian religion but are still very rooted in superstitious beliefs. This paper intends to inspire further research into the nexus between religion and human security in Africa.

Apart from superstitious rationalizations, the trade in albino body parts also represents a very lucrative enterprise. Body parts from an albino are said to fetch thousands of dollars (Magram, 2009). Given that Tanzania is a poor country, the trade in Albino body parts presents itself as an alternative way of making quick money. This “get rich quick” syndrome shows that people do not want to do regular jobs through which they will save but want quick fixes where money is concerned.

There are also indications that foreigners collaborate in and profit from these crimes in Tanzania. Some Kenyans, for example, were arrested in Tanzania in connection with the murder of albinos (Yusuf, 2008), suggesting that the slaughters may assume a regional dimension.

Nevertheless, the traditional witch doctors are fingered as being largely responsible for the killing of albinos in Tanzania. The witch doctors also direct the perpetrators on how to go about the killings, operating as the heads of gangs with middle men that help them carry out the killings in a loosely organized form of criminal activity.

The Mwanza region of Tanzania has not only witnessed the largest number of albinos murdered, it also contains 3,000 registered witch doctors, making it the region with the highest proliferation of witch doctors in the country (Mushi, 2009). Most of the people there earn their livelihoods in either the fishing or mining industries. As a largely rural region, with little or no contact with the more modernized urban centers of the country, Mwanza suffers extremely high rates of both poverty and illiteracy, with the people being rooted in traditional beliefs and more inclined to defer to the authority of witch doctors in explaining the sources of their hardships or misfortunes in their businesses (Magessa, 2008). A recent boom

in the fishing and mining industries has only bolstered their authority and the popularity of their albino potions (IDEAS, 2009, 20). Many fishermen and mineworkers viewed the boom as evidence of the potency of the witch doctors' potions. In turn, the demand for potion drives the demand for the albino body parts from which it is made.

The above buttresses the fact that superstitious beliefs in the rural areas largely account for the killing of albinos as the high number of killings portrays. These cultural undertones steeped in superstitious beliefs make it a difficult case for the police to effectively check as the police constitute part and parcel of the seemingly traditional and cultural belief systems; a system that is still relevant in spite of the presence of Islamic and Christian religions.

National Response to Albino Killings

In its attempts at curbing the incident of albino killings, the Tanzanian government banned and withdrew the licenses of traditional witch doctors from practicing. Further to the ban, many of the witch doctors have been arrested and some have been remanded in custody (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2009). Subsequent to banning the witchdoctors, the Tanzania government has made the killing of albinos a capital crime and this has led to an exodus of some of the witch doctors to neighbouring countries like Burundi where they hope to reestablish their practices (Lugungulo, 2009).

Furthermore, in its bid to check the current wave of albino killings in Tanzania, President Jakaya Kikwete called on Tanzanians to make available any information they might have about the perpetrators of such acts. In a secret referendum, the government invited the citizens to write down the names of suspected albino killers. Such names were gathered and handed over to the police (European Union @ United Nations, 2008)

There are concerns that the process may be flawed and exploited. Innocent people could be framed up by their perceived enemies just to settle old scores. This calls for proper investigation with regards to the information given to the police.

The government also mobilized officers to draw up a list of people affected with albinism as a form of census (Auken, 2009). They also introduced police escorts for albino children and set up emergency hotlines and a program to distribute free cell phones to all albinos (Lapidos, 2009). However, the issue with the introduction of police escorts lies in its sustainability whereas that of the census is in its accuracy.

Al-Shaymaa J. Kwegyir, an albino woman, was sponsored by government and incorporated into the parliament in 2008 to show that albinos can live a normal life

like everyone else and she has been active in trying to find lasting solutions to the problem (Gettleman, 2009).

In September 2009, 3 men were sentenced to death for the killing of a 14 year old albino boy in December 2008 (Omolo, 2009). This is the first conviction and while some may see the death sentence as too harsh, it may help in deterring the murder of albinos.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Hundreds of Tanzanian albinos are being uprooted from their homes, creating disruptions in familial relations. In some cases, where women have been forced to choose between their albino child and their husband, it has divided and broken families. Whether for their own personal security or that of their child, many have chosen to flee from the remote parts of Tanzania to the country's urban centers. Others have sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Kenya and Burundi (Mango, 2008). Such refuge, however, has proven to offer little security. Not only have the murders of albinos been reported in both countries, but the murderers claim to have had ties to witch doctors back in Tanzania (Obulutsa, 2009). This clearly points to the fact that the killing of albinos for rituals, as well as profits, is spreading beyond the borders of Tanzania throughout East Africa and the Great Lakes region. As albinos and their families flee Tanzania to other countries, the organized criminal gangs follow them, like predators following the vast herds of zebra and wildebeest across the African plains. This defeats the point of seeking refuge (Natukunda and Ngatya, 2008).

While strict prosecution and stiff sentencing of the murderers of albinos might help deter some of the killings, the government of Tanzania must do much more. Greater accessibility to education in the nation's rural areas could play a pivotal role moving people away from the various forms of irrational belief that help drive the ritual practice of killing albinos for their body parts. Public enlightenment strategies to deal with the issue and sensitize the populace should be strengthened. But there is no denying the fact that it will take more than awareness and education to stop superstitious discrimination and stigma. It is a challenging task to completely filter out the more destructive and dehumanizing elements of peoples' cultural backgrounds and belief systems. Good governance that will cater for the basic needs of its people should also be encouraged. Tanzania is a poor country where 36% percent of its citizens live below the poverty line. Thus, the government needs to do much more to deal with poverty, unemployment and illiteracy as it will go a long way in deterring people from resorting to a life of crime such as the killing of albinos.

References

- Auken, Margrete (2008) 'Albino killings in Tanzania: Greens/EFA motion for a resolution' accessed on March 29, 2010 at http://www.greens-efa.org/cms/default/dok/285/285685.albino_killings_in_tanzania@en.htm.
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2009) 'UN's Ban decries Tanzania albino killings,' March 1, 2009, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/03/01/2504141.htm?site=news>.
- British Broadcasting Corporation (2009) 'Tanzania 'healers' flout ban' Jan 23, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/7851287.stm>.
- Buzan, Barry (1991) *People, States and Fear : An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post Cold War Era* (2nd ed.) Boulder Co. Lynne Rienner PP 19-20
- Draper, Richard (2009) 'Albinism,' *Patient UK*, June 9, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.patient.co.uk/doctor/Albinism.htm>.
- European Union @ United Nations (2008) 'EU Parliament resolutions on Human Rights issues in Mauritania, Iran, and Tanzania' September 9, accessed on March 29, 2010 at http://www.europa-eu-un.org/articles/fr/article_8123_fr.htm.
- Garcia, Pat (2008) 'Albino Killings in Tanzania,' *Now Public*, June 9, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.nowpublic.com/world/albino-killings-tanzania>
- Gettleman, Jeffrey (2008) 'Albinos, long shunned, face threat in Tanzania' *New York Times*, June 8, accessed March 29, 2010 at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/world/africa/08albino.html?_r=2.
- IDEAS (2009) 'Providing Safe and Clean Water to The Vulnerable Albino Families in Kagera Region, N.W Tanzania.: A Project Proposal Submitted to The GlobalGiving Open Challenge On-Line Fund raising Opportunity' August, accessed March 29, 2010 at www.globalgiving.com/pfil/3567/projdoc.doc.
- Kiishweko, Orton (2008) 'JK Orders Crackdown to Stem Murder of Albinos', accessed on March 28, 2010 at <http://allafrica.com/stories/200810200901.html>.
- Lapidos, Juliet (2009) 'How Many Albinos Are in Tanzania?' More than you might think' *Slate*, January 6, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.slate.com/id/2208026/>
- Lugungulo, Amri (2009) 'Who is defending albino killers?' *Daily News* November 21, accessed March 29, 2010 at <http://www.dailynews.co.tz/feature/?n=5829>.
- Magobe, Telesphor Remigius (2008) 'Superstitious Albino Killings in Tanzania Must Stop' accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.groundreport.com/Opinion/Superstitious-Albino-Killings-in-Tanzania-Must-Sto/2860945>.

- Magessa, Boniface (2008) 'The Killing of Albino in Tanzania,' December 19, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://magessabm.blogspot.com/2008/12/killings-of-albino-in-tanzania.html>.
- Magram, Khalid (2009) 'Albinism murder trial begins in Tanzania,' *Digital Journal*, June 8, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/273834?tp=1>.
- Malone, Andrew (2009) 'The albino tribe butchered to feed a gruesome trade in 'magical' body parts,' *Daily Mail*, September 25th, accessed on March 28, 2010 at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1215949/The-albino-tribe-butchered-feed-gruesome-trade-magical-body-parts.html#ixzz0jVXsbtNB>.
- Mango, Caroline (2009) 'Albinos From Tanzania Will Get Kenya Asylum' *The Nairobi Star*, October 8, accessed March 29, 2010 at <http://multimedia.marsgroupkenya.org/?StoryID=269331>.
- Mushi, Deogratias (2009) 'Media can end albino killing,' *Daily News*, February 23, accessed March 29, 2010 at <http://www.dailynews.co.tz/feature/?n=395&cat=feature>.
- Natukunda, Carol and Ngatya, Kikonyogo (2008) 'Ritual killings: Albinos hunted' *The New Vision*, December 5, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/12/663061>.
- Obulutsa, George (2009) 'Tanzania bans healers to curb albino murders' Reuters, January 24, accessed March 29, 2010 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLO458015>.
- Omolo, Leo Odera (2009) 'Killers of albinos in Tanzania are to pay for their heinous crimes with their own lives as court pronounce (sic) death sentence against them' Jalu.com, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://blog.jaluo.com/?p=2614>.
- O'Toole, Megan (2009) 'Halting the Slaughter of Albino innocents,' *National Post*, February 28, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.underthesamesun.com/related/national-post-02-27-09.pdf>.
- Tamric Agency (2000) 'Gender and Witchcraft Killings in Tanzania,' March 27, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://www.thelizlibrary.org/site-index/site-index-frame.html#soulhttp://www.thelizlibrary.org/brett/brett009.htm>.
- Terriff, Terry, Croft, Stuart, James, Lucy, and Morgan, Patrick M. (1999) *Security Studies Today* Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers Ltd. U.K.
- The Task.net (2010) 'Mara Cluster,' accessed March 29, 2010 at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?v=wall&ref=mf&gid=106190409414405>.
- United Nations (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, accessed on March 28, 2010 at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.
- Yusuf, Khadija (2008) 'Harvesting body parts in Tanzania: Sexual organs of male and female albinos are particularly sought,' *African Press International*, May 6, accessed on March 29, 2010 at <http://africanpress.wordpress.com/2008/05/06/harvesting-body-parts-in-tanzania-sexual-organs-of-male-and-female-albinos-are-particularly-sought/>.