**Albino Muti Murders**

<http://www.forteantimes.com/strangedays/misc/3043/albino_muti_murders.html>

Notice, in particular these quotes:

Strictly, *muti* is not preceded by killing the victim, who should be conscious during mutilation; it is part of this horrible belief that the agonised screams of the victim, before s/he succumbs to shock and blood-loss, makes the *muti* more potent. The ghastly ingredients are then cooked into a paste or powder which can be put into charms or clothing, smeared on skin (usually into cuts to make scars), ingested or placed at a significant location.

 “Confirmation of this can be seen in an interview with well-known Zulu *sangoma* Credo Mutwa (he has his own Wiki page), made in September 1999 by Rick Martin of the US newspaper *Spectrum*. Asked about rumours of human sacrifices to demons, Mutwa replied: “***Not all Africans have got black hair. There are Africans who are regarded as very holy, as very sacred. These are Africans who are born with natural red hair. These Africans are believed to be very spiritually powerful. Now, in Africa, such people, albeamers or red-headed Africans, were the most victims of sacrifice, especially when they were just entering maturity – whether they were males or females.” From the context, it seems most likely that the word italicised (albeamers) is a transcription error by Martin of ‘albinos’, and that it is the folk-attribution of an innate “spiritual power” to the albinos that makes their body parts a profitable target for the muti hunters.”***

**Albino Muti Murders**

**The albinos killed for their 'magical' body parts**

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| **By Bob Rickard** | **March 2010** |



**Taking a break at the Mitindo Primary School for the blind, which has become a rare sanctuary for albino children.**  
*Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images*

*FT260*

When Mary Owido, 36, a senior school teacher at Isebania, on the Kenya-Tanzania border, learned that a girl she knew had been murd­ered and parts of her body removed, she became afraid for her own life because, like the murdered girl, Mary was an albino. In 2009, Mary moved to Ahero, in western Kenya, where she now works for less pay and brings up her six children. However, she still doesn’t feel safe. “Wherever I go people start talking about me, saying that my legs and hands can fetch a fortune in Tanzania. That kind of talk scares me.”   
  
Albinos suffer this rare hereditary condition when both parents donate a recessive gene, and in Africa they already have a hard time, enduring insults, discrimination and ostracism all their lives, as well as an increased risk of contracting skin cancer. The chairman of the Albino Associat­ion of Kenya, Isaac Mwaura, said 90 per cent of albinos in the region were raised by single mothers because fathers accused their wives of having an affair with a white man. “When I was born, my father said his family tree doesn’t have such children and he left us,” he said. He was lucky; a generation ago such pale-skinned children – also called ‘ghosts’ or ‘zeros’ (*zeru*) – were killed at birth.   
  
Nevertheless, there is a very old and widely held belief that albinos are ‘otherworldly’ and have an innate magical power that can be transferred to others. For example, fishermen on Lake Victoria will weave albino hair into their nets to improve their catches; and miners in the Mbeya coal-fields have been known to splash albino blood on the ground, wear albino *muti* charms or bury albino bones to ‘attract’ gems and gold where they dig. Again, according to Andrew Malone of the *Daily Mail*, many Africans believe that having sex with an albino will cure diseases – a belief that has led to “countless rapes and leaving them HIV posit­ive”. Mary had good reason for her anxiety to intensify. The pressure of modern living has created a huge demand for magic charms to procure luck, money and success, leading inevitably to a surge in the numbers of ‘*muti*-hunters’ seeking their chief ingredient, albino body parts.   
  
Confirmation of this can be seen in an interview with well-known Zulu *sangoma* Credo Mutwa (he has his own Wiki page), made in September 1999 by Rick Martin of the US newspaper *Spectrum*. Asked about rumours of human sacrifices to demons, Mutwa replied: “Not all Africans have got black hair. There are Africans who are regarded as very holy, as very sacred. These are Africans who are born with natural red hair. These Africans are believed to be very spiritually powerful. Now, in Africa, such people, *albeamers* or red-headed Africans, were the most victims of sacrifice, especially when they were just entering maturity – whether they were males or females.” From the context, it seems most likely that the word italicised (*albeamers*) is a transcription error by Martin of ‘albinos’, and that it is the folk-attribution of an innate “spiritual power” to the albinos that makes their body parts a profitable target for the muti hunters.   
  
In November 2009, figures released by the International Federation for the Red Cross and Crescent Societies (IFRCCS) showed that at least 44 albinos were known to have been killed in Tanzania and 14 in Burundi in the preceding year; actual figures may be much higher, as pretty much everyone seems to fear the witchdoctors and their legendary powers of retribution. In the month before their report, a 10-year-old albino boy, Gasper Elikana, was beheaded and his leg chopped off in an attack that also left his father severely injured. The IFRCCS report added that a complete set of albino body parts (limbs, genitals, eyelids, ears, tongue, nose and even skin) can fetch around 75,000 dollars. It is not surprising therefore that the growing anxiety among albinos throughout Africa has led to at least 10,000 being displaced or having gone into hiding.   
  
The Zulu word *muti* is used widely in numerous languages across Africa to mean, generally, ‘medicine’, but it can also mean a supernatural medicine. It is likely that the practice of *muti*-killings (what African police and sociologists call ‘medicine murders’) have plagued the people for centuries. Given the prices involved, it is thought that most clients must be rich or work at high levels in industry and government, or else a man will bankrupt himself for a charm that will guarantee him promotion, riches or virility – or so he has been promised. In Southern Africa, they go to a traditional shaman (Zulu, *sangoma* or *inyanga*) who tells them what ingredients they have to provide, from which the specific muti will be made. This ‘shopping list’ is then given to middle­men who commission the killers. Strictly, *muti* is not preceded by killing the victim, who should be conscious during mutilation; it is part of this horrible belief that the agonised screams of the victim, before s/he succumbs to shock and blood-loss, makes the *muti* more potent. The ghastly ingredients are then cooked into a paste or powder which can be put into charms or clothing, smeared on skin (usually into cuts to make scars), ingested or placed at a significant location.   
  
While the specific attacks on albinos are a relatively recent escalation, the *muti* trade has seen sinister specialisations before. For example, one of the last inter­nationally reported outrages occurred back in Tanzania in 2000. At that time, a gang clubbed 20-year-old Enicko Simkoko as he worked on a remote field near Mbeya and skinned him alive. They were caught when the middleman, in the town of Tunduma, was spotted drying the skin in his hotel room. Apparently their ‘client’ had paid 5,000 dollars. Around the same time another gang were caught after butchering 14-year-old Leo Kimwegile-Swile as he herded his father’s cattle… and another when an undercover policeman bought from them the skin of 11-year-old schoolboy Job Kajange. These and other ‘skin’ killings prompted senior police officers from Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia to expel “foreign witchdoctors” blamed for the ‘skin’ trade which had raged especially since January 1999. Despite a dire threat from Mbeya MP Edison Halinga – “All human skinners will be skinned. There will be no mercy.” – it did nothing to stop other dark aspects of *muti*; indeed, it left the field open to local witchdoctors as the fad for skin turned to albinos.   
  
The albino murders came to international notice mid-2007 – see FT240:8. However, it is quite possible that a public rally in support of albinos, held in Dar-es-Salaam in October 2008, and a spate of frightening witchcraft films made in Nigeria, inspired evil minds to go further. There were three murders immediately after that rally. Migration of miners from the Mbeya area was also suggested as a vector for spreading the albino-*muti* belief. By November 2008, there were 30 known albino mutilations; by January 2009, 53. Condemnation from the European Union and the United Nations followed, spurr­ing Prime Minister Mizengo Pinda to order the revoc­ation of “the licenses of all trad­itional healers with immediate effect”. It had little effect; almost immediately one BBC reporter encountered around 10 *sangomas* operating openly just outside Dar-es-Salaam. One told her angrily that theirs was a legal trade, much in demand, and the government should be making the police and other official departments do more to stop the killings. Only now are the police forces involved sugg­esting that the albino *muti*-trade is greater and more organised than first suspected; that it has escal­ated from murders for individual clients to supplying a pan-African network of criminal gangs.   
  
July 2009: despite the arrest of at least 200 people in Tanzania – including a fisherman at Lake Tanganyika caught trying to sell his albino wife for around £2,000 and a man arrested at the border with an albino baby’s head – there were still few convictions. The authorities in Ruyigi, in neighbouring Burundi, responded more forcefully, convicting 13 men for the murders of at least 12 albinos. Tanzania’s president Jakaya Kikwete ordered the police to locate albinos and offer them protection. There is a growing public resentment of the police, whom some accuse of taking bribes to ignore the crimes. Under the Same Sun, a Canadian albino-rights-group, questions the will of the author­ities to stop the murders as a large number of the prosecutions are suspended “for lack of funds”. Peter Ash, for the Canadian group and an albino himself, spoke movingly about Mariam Masala, a girl of five (or eight), whose throat was cut and blood drained into a saucepan. Her attackers then drank the blood in front of the girl’s siblings before cutting off both her legs. Only one of the Tanzanian cases, the murder of a 13-year-old boy, Matatizo Dunia, was successfully prosecuted and his three murderers sentenced to hang. The Tan­zania Albino Society (TAS) calls for a public execution, but despite more than 100 people on death row, said a BBC local correspondent, “no one has been executed in 15 years”.   
  
During that terrible phase, the Tanzanian government appointed the country’s first albino MP, Ms Al-Shymaa Kwegyir. She adds some details to the awful fate of Mr Ash’s Mariam. Ms Kwegyir knew the child’s mother. She told the MP that she had been ordered by family elders to dress the girl in black and leave her alone in a hut. Confused and frightened, the mother obeyed. Later, “unknown men went straight to the hut. They used a machete to cut off the child’s legs, cut her throat and drink her blood.” The complicity of family members “inspired by ignorance and greed” was a disturbing factor; also, “this was the first cannibalistic case,” she said, hinting at the possibility of a horri­fying new detail in the attacks.   
  
The Tanzanian government’s initiatives are regarded by many albinos as too little too late; they still live in fear. After the Prime Minister’s edict, “another albino was killed that very night,” says Zihada Msembo, general secretary of TAS. “If you work you are unsure of reaching home safely,” he added, “and when you sleep, you are unsure of waking up in one piece.” Ms Kwegyir also highlighted the case of Mariam Staford Bandaba, 28, one of “the many brave people” who attended the Dar-es-Salaam rally. She was followed home and savagely attacked. Her left hand was chopped off, but the attempt on her right one was botched before her assailants ran away. Mariam survived, one of the rare ones, but her right arm had to be amputated in the hospital. Despite her terrible trauma, she identified her attackers after they were caught, so the government put her in a safe-house under police protection. But in October 2009 that year was up and the protection and accommodation was withdrawn; the reason given is that “no albinos were killed in her home village in the past year.” A local businessman has offered her and her elderly mother temporary accommodation, she told BBC reporter Erick Nampesya, crying, “as she had no idea what will happen to her”.   
  
The bad news is that these muti-murders are still going on.   
  
  
**SOURCES**   
*Independent, 29 Oct 1999; Observer (Tanzania), 2 April; D.Telegraph, 6 April; Weekly Telegraph, 12 April 2000; MX News (Brisbane), 22 July; Times, 4 Nov; Sun, 9 Dec 2008; Irish Times, 24 Jan; BBC News, 26 Jan, 23 July, 23+24 Sept, 19 Oct, 2 Nov; Times, 9 Mar; Guardian, 16 Mar; Independent, 25 July, 24 Sept; MX News (Brisbane), 25 Sept, 30 Nov; D.Mail, 25 Sept; Observer, 16 Nov; [AP] 28 Nov 2009.*   
Credo Mutwa/*Spectrum* [interview](http://www.metatech.org/credo_2.html) (30 Sept 1999).