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Black, Yet White: A Hated Color in Zimbabwe

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.

HARARE, Zimbabwe— John M. Makumbe is a professor of political science. Richard Nyathi is chief librarian for a Government ministry. Stanley S. Gunda is a senior financial officer in another ministry. Not so long ago, they might have been killed at birth.

Even today, pregnant women refuse to shake their hands. On crowded buses they sit apart. On the street they see mothers point and warn their children, "If you don't behave, I'll let that monkey get you."

Messrs. Makumbe, Nyathi and Gunda are albinos. In Africa, far more than on any other continent, that is a lifelong curse. They lack the gene that codes the skin pigment melanin, and they are very nearsighted. As white-skinned men in a black society, they are shunned and feared as the products of witchcraft, taunted by children and drunks as "peeled potatoes," "monkeys" and "ghosts."

There is a stereotype that all albinos are intelligent and accomplished, as these three men are. But Professor Makumbe said successful albinos were "a teeny-weeny minute number." Most, he added, languish at home without education because they cannot see the blackboard at school or because their parents, told such children die young, will not pay for their schooling.

In parts of Africa, albinos rarely live beyond 40. Mr. Nyathi has already lost a 30-year-old brother to skin cancer. And Professor Makumbe said he thought "many just die of frustration -- of broken hearts."

With a handful of other albinos, Professor Makumbe has founded the Zimbabwe Albino Trust. He dreams of a powerful human rights organization that battles prejudice on albinos' behalf. But his first goals are almost pathetically humble: to raise enough money to buy sunscreen lotion and spectacles for albinos who cannot afford them, and to raise \$20,000 for a survey to count albinos in Zimbabwe and see what they need most.

In the United States, about 1 person in 20,000 is an albino, according to doctors at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, which has a clinic that studies the genetics of albinism. The condition is more common among blacks than among whites, and almost unknown among Asians.

In parts of Nigeria, as many as 1 in 1,100 are albino; in parts of South Africa the incidence is 1 in 1,800. It varies sharply from country to country and tribe to tribe, said Jennifer Kromberg, an expert on albinism at the South African Institute for Medical Research. For instance, in South Africa it is twice as high among Tswana as among Zulu, she said, because Tswana encourage marriage between cousins while Zulu forbid it.

Estimates for Zimbabwe vary. One done early last year found that 1 schoolchild in 4,700 was albino. An

earlier one found nearly twice that rate in Harare.

Albinism comes from a recessive gene and must be inherited from both parents. Not all children in affected families are albino. Mr. Nyathi, for example, has two albino siblings, while his parents and eight other siblings are black.

The condition may skip generations, reappearing to cause confusion and ruin marriages.

Lloyd Thuchila, a pipe fitter, said his father had left his mother shortly after he was born. "He said, 'Why do I have to be the one with an albino child?'" Mr. Thuchila said. "No one in my family has an albino."

Professor Makumbe, who is married to a black woman and has three black children, said that when his first child was born, one of his colleagues at the University of Zimbabwe asked if the baby was "black, white or colored."

"He's a physicist," Mr. Makumbe said. "He should know better."

Many men accuse their wives of infidelity when albinos are born. Some even accuse them of having had sex with a tokolosh, a devil's imp who is said to be produced by witchcraft from a tree root and to live under beds.

Superstitions are strong in rural Zimbabwe. The practice of killing suspected witches survives, and albino children were once smothered at birth. The belief that adult albinos do not die, but simply vanish, is still widely held.

There is also a lingering belief that albinism is somehow contagious. Many Africans admit to spitting when they see an albino, to ward off the "spell." At parties, Mr. Gunda said, people hesitate to shake his hand. Some albinos say they bring their own food on group outings to avoid embarrassing incidents.

"When my nephew got a rash when he was 18," Professor Makumbe recalled, "my own sister said, 'You must have got this from your Uncle John.'"

Professor Kromberg said surveys she had done among young albino adults in Soweto, South Africa, found that they were rarely shunned on buses or in the classroom but did have much lower marriage rates and believed that they would have difficulty finding work. She said she had come across anecdotal evidence that black children were reluctant to share food with albino classmates.

More disturbingly, she said studies she had done in the 1980's found that mothers of albino children took about nine months to accept them fully. "They keep a distance that's not normal between mother and child, and talk to them less," she said.

She conceded that discrimination might be worse in other African countries. For 25 years she and a social worker have been visiting clinics and reminding nurses to explain to people that the condition is genetic "and not caused by witchcraft or by the mother drinking orange Fanta during pregnancy or by laughing at an albino or other things people believe," she said.

Many albinos have developed a bitter humor about their lot. Twice in the 1970's during the war against the old white regime, Mr. Nyathi was almost shot by guerrillas who took him for a white man. He was very funny as he described walking home from a rural bus stop and seeing three soldiers leap up from

behind a bush, pulling back their rifle bolts, then halting in astonishment when he started shouting at them in Ndebele, the language of southern Zimbabwe. "Oh, look, he's an African," they said. "Sorry, brother, sorry!"

Sibongile Chitiyo, a 27-year-old albino studying social work at the University of Zimbabwe, said she could judge a man's feelings for her by his behavior in public. "If people ask who I am, and he says 'Oh, she's my sister,' then I know he's ashamed," she said.

Mr. Nyathi, 36, Mr. Gunda, 33, and Mr. Thuchila, 24, met in the library of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce recently and talked about the difficulties of doing ordinary things like dating and looking for jobs. The day-to-day discrimination that albinos face sounded hauntingly like that suffered by black Americans.

Mr. Gunda recalled how the mother of "the first girl I wanted to marry" declared, "I will commit suicide if I have an albino son-in-law."

All three men mentioned having co-workers who were friendly at work but avoided them socially.

Mr. Nyathi described job interviews he had set up by phone, and the shock and confusion of the interviewers when he walked in. "You know you have failed before you start talking," he said.

Several times as the men spoke, ministry employees came around the bookshelves that hid Mr. Nyathi's desk. Each one started at the sight of several white-skinned men, and retreated, apologizing.

Mr. Nyathi smiled ruefully and reflected on the peculiar shame that discrimination creates in those who must face it. "Albinos tend to unconsciously avoid each other," he said. "If I see another albino on a bus, I won't go stand next to him. Other people will assume he's my brother or something. But you look at each other, and you both have this sense of, 'They're on to us.' "

All three men did well in school, despite vision problems. The genetic differences that cause albinism also change the connections between the optic nerves and the brain. Many albinos have nystagmus -- "dancing eyeballs" -- and myopia that, even with thick glasses, can only be corrected to about 20-200.

"Albinos seem more intelligent because they try harder," Mr. Nyathi said. "You have to get out of your seat, go up to the board, squint, write two sentences, go back, and still finish the test in the same time as the others."

Dr. Kromberg said her intelligence studies had confirmed that. "Albinos have normal I.Q.'s but a higher capability," she said. "I think it's because they don't play in the sun all day. They stay inside and do their homework."

But poverty and discrimination often hold them back.

Mr. Thuchila was a good student but could not afford glasses. He became a pipe fitter in a Government motor depot but had to give up the job because the oils on the lathes he used damaged his fragile skin. His bosses, he said, would not give him a different job, or one he could do with gloves on.

For those who do poorly in school, there is even less hope. "It's pretty common to see an albino with a little bowl, begging on the street," Professor Makumbe said.

His trust is seeking outside money, but without much success. "Foreign embassies usually say, 'Give us a development project, not charity,' " Mr. Thuchila said.

At Christmas the Mayor's office gave \$500, an anonymous donor, \$300. Johnson & Johnson's local subsidiary donated 50 small bottles of sunscreen lotion and some toothbrushes.

John Chinyandura, a 48-year-old unemployed albino who asked Professor Makumbe to pull together the rights group, knows what he would do if there was more money.

He said he would go on speaking trips throughout Zimbabwe, "to tell people that we are the same blood -- that we are people."

Photos: At a gathering of the Zimbabwe Albino Trust in Harare, Tecla Nyaguze treated her brother-in-law John Makumbe to a warm greeting -- an all-too-rare event for albinos, as John Chinyandura, center, would attest. (Fiona MacDougall for The New York Times) (pg. 1); Albinism, a recessive trait, must be inherited from both parents, and not all family members are affected. At the Chitiyo family house outside Harare, Sibongile Chitiyo, right, and relatives discussed ways of coping. (Fiona MacDougall for The New York Times) (pg. 14) Map of Zimbabwe: In Zimbabwe, albinos are shunned as the products of witchcraft. (pg. 14)