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# The terror of being a black child with a white skin

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**South African journalist Sam Rogers won an international award for her documentary *The Curse of the Nobody People*. But this accolade has done nothing to end the hunting of albinos in Africa, she told Sue de Groot**



**MUTILATED:** Sisters Tindi and Bibianna (right), whose leg was cut off

*Photograph by:*



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*"Most of the victims are children, dragged from their beds or kidnapped ... Those who survive are missing a limb"*  
*Jacob Zuma*

Some say it's hard being black in Africa, and some say it's hard being white. Try being a black person with a white skin. In Tanzania, one out of every 3000 people is born with a congenital absence of pigment. The average life

expectancy of an albino is 32. Short-sightedness causes many to drop out of school, many die of skin cancer and few are employed because they are outcasts. But albinos face an even greater threat. Superstition thrives in times of economic deprivation and, as a result, albinos are hunted for their body parts, believed by some to possess magical qualities.

Tanzania is the site of some of the most gruesome killings to occur in Africa in recent years. Most of the victims are children, dragged from their beds or kidnapped in daylight. Those who survive are missing a limb or disfigured in other ways.

The government and the police have condemned these attacks, and some arrests have been made, but convictions are rare. Most of the atrocities occur in rural villages and, according to witnesses, are well planned. The attackers leave little evidence, while those dealing in the sale of human parts are protected by a code of fearful silence.

Journalist Sam Rogers travelled to Tanzania in 2008 after reading an article on the murder of albinos, written by Tanzanian journalist Osoro Nywangah.

"It was a tiny piece buried on page eight of a Tanzanian newspaper," says Rogers. "At the time, the official government statistic was that 28 people with albinism had been killed, but Osoro spoke to independent NGOs, who put the number of murdered people closer to 60."

With Nywangah's help she set up meetings with victims and the authorities, and in Dar es Salaam met Tanzania's only albino MP, Al Shaymar Kwegyir, who is dedicated to changing people's perceptions of albinism. Kwegyir had just adopted two albino girls, Bibianna and Tindi Mbushi. Bibianna had not spoken since losing a leg to albino hunters, but her younger sister, Tindi, told their story to Rogers.

After the siblings' parents died they went to live with their uncle.

"It was on the second day there that this happened," Tindi tells the camera. "We didn't see anybody, we don't know the names of the people ... We saw a torch. The person came, not just one. They started to cut her leg. When we shouted for help they left, other people came, but they had cut her leg."

The next day their uncle was arrested on suspicion of being complicit in the attack, and Kwegyir took the girls in.

Rogers went on to the north-western city of Mwanza, centre of Tanzania's mining and fishing industries. Most of the albino murders have taken place in this area, on the shores of the placid Lake Victoria. But the lake is no idle spectator to these crimes. Dwindling fish stocks have made desperate fishermen turn to magic in an attempt to increase their catch, while miners are resorting to similar measures to make the earth bear more gold.

"They (witch doctors) take some albino hair," says Nywangah. "They instruct him to tie it in his nets so that it can attract small fish. But for those who are in the mining business, they give him a sort of flour. The (albino) bone is ground and mixed with herb potions."

A police spokesman in Mwanza told Rogers that a leg bone could fetch around \$3000. Even the dead are hunted. Albino teenager Mariam, who died in 2008 after both her legs were hacked off, is buried beneath the floor of her grandfather's house. He has placed his bed over her grave so that no one can dig up her body.

These moving stories, and those of the people trying to help and protect Tanzania's 270000 albinos, are shown in *The Curse of the Nobody People*, which Rogers researched, wrote, produced, directed and narrated on a tiny budget. She went to Tanzania with camera operator Meggan Raubenheimer (named cameraman of the year at the 2010 National Press Awards for her work on the documentary) and sound engineer Mandla Mlambo, who doubled as an undercover operative. He and Nywangah posed as buyers and used a spycam to film a man offering them what he claimed was the bone of an albino child.

On May 29 this year, Rogers won best news feature and was named overall journalist of the year in the CNN Africa journalism awards for this searing investigation. Recognition, however, does not translate into help for Tanzania's victims. Since the documentary was aired on Third Degree in April 2009, the official death toll of albinos murdered in Tanzania has risen to 57, while dozens more have been maimed and disappearances remain uncounted. There have also been albino killings reported in Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, Zambia, Kenya and Malawi.

This is a horror that few are prepared to acknowledge. Though there has been international press attention for Rogers since the award, to date her film has only been shown on e.tv. When it was offered to M-Net's *Carte Blanche*, Rogers was told it was "beautifully filmed", but "not for our audience". Foreign TV stations seem to feel the same way.

"Sometimes I think nobody is interested in African stories," says Rogers. "Not even Africa. It's not just Africa though. Cruelty and apathy happens everywhere. But there are good people too, extraordinary people like Osoro, the embodiment of what a journalist should be. I met teachers who look after albino kids and don't take holidays because the children can't return home - they're not safe at home, so the teachers stay at school to take care of them. There are people trying to bring about change and raise awareness."

This is the second time she has won the top CNN prize. In 2001 she was recognised for *Double Injustice*, the story of gang-rape victim Makhosi Mkhize. Rogers and her team found forensic evidence that had been ignored and brought pressure on the police to investigate further, but the perpetrators were never brought to trial and Mkhize has since died. How do you fight such losing battles?

Speaking about her quest for justice, despite the lack of results, Rogers says: "You do it because you care."

"I was so tired when I got back from Tanzania, so sad about what people do. You have to stop, regroup, remember who you are and why you're doing it. I couldn't look at what we'd filmed immediately, but when I did, I saw Tindi and Bibianna, and that's why I did it. They need a voice."