

The battle for souls

One year on, the battle is still far from victory

By Richard Mgamba

When Shitindi Samuel celebrated his 37th birthday this year, unlike the previous years, this time around, his heart was clouded with a nightmare—fearing that he might not survive to see his next birthday.

As family members sung a happy birthday song to him, his mind and heart mourned the horrible death of his friend, who was just murdered three weeks ago in Mwanza by unknown people believed to be trading on albinos' organs.

Tanzanian albinos had always faced discrimination in schools or in the workplace. 'People believe a woman who has an albino child has been cursed and that the whole family will now suffer bad luck. In olden days midwives killed the babies at birth but now that there are health centres, albino babies do survive.'

For over three decades, Shitindi has lived peacefully-despite the discrimination in public places as well as his family-with the sunrays being his biggest worry.

But, today he has his biggest worry-the rampant killings of albinos' communities. "I am lucky to be alive to see this day but my heart is full of fear...I don't know my future." He says as he delivers a thanks-giving speech to relatives and friends who had gathered at his home to celebrate his birthday.

Shitindi is among hundreds of albinos, whose lives are at the crossroads as the spate of killings continues to haunt them, forcing them to become refugees in their own land.

As the world struggles with bailout plan to rescue the plummeting economy, Tanzania is fighting a battle for saving the souls of albinos, who have become the potential target for quick fortune hunters in the country.

It all started in November last year, at a place called Bunda, located on the northern shores of Lake Victoria-the world's second largest fresh water lake-and home to thousands of fishermen.

On that day, an albino woman was lynched by unknown people who also managed to depart with her organs. Just three days after her murder, the news broke out that 'there was a booming trade of albinos organs', fuelled mainly by the latent buyers who are fishermen and small scale miners.

Twelve months today, the spate of killings has continued unabated, with latest figures showing that so far, about 40 albinos have been murdered during the period.

Samuel Mluge, an albino who resides in Dar es Salaam narrates the appalling story in a tone of sadness and sorrow. "Some of us are still alive just to tell the horrible story of these killings, perhaps tomorrow they will come after me or my wife."

“No one knows what the future holds for albinos’ communities...This is more than a tragedy; it is a curse on our land.” He says.

Local buyers mainly miners and fishermen as well as their counterparts from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Kenya and Uganda believe the legs, genitals, eyes and hair of people with albinism can help them achieve instant wealth.

Albinos’ blood in our home

When John Msuku, a 37-year-old wanted to marry his wife early in January, this year, he spent three days visiting jewelers’ shops in Dar es Salaam, to find a highly expensive wedding ring made of gold.

He finally managed to buy a pair of golden wedding rings at \$800 each. In so doing, he was able to fulfill his long term dream of wearing a gold-made-wedding ring on his big day-the day to say ‘I do’ before the altar.

And so did his wife Esther John Marandu, a Dar es Salaam based banker.

But little did the newly wedded couples know about how the gems that were used to produce the posh wedding wrings he has worn during his wedding, may be the product of some disgraced small scale miners, who uses albinos’ organs to mine more bullion of gold or tanzanite.

“The unfolding stories about the rituals behind mining activities are appalling... I trembled the first day to hear these stories especially when I was looking at my beautiful wedding ring.” Msuku says adding, “But hopefully mine is not a product of the albinos’ blood.” Thousands of us have gone through Msuku’s route, trying to buy expensive golden wedding rings, chains or any other posh gems, in order to decorate our bodies.

But, knowing what we know today, it is difficult to know whether you and I, have supported the albinos’ tormentors by buying these gems unknowingly.

The high demand for expensive gems like gold and tanzanite, is pushing local small scale miners to increase their dwindling ounces of gold in the Lake Victoria gold belt, by murdering albinos. So does the high demand for fish in Lake Victoria that doesn’t match with the actual catches from the world’s second largest fresh water lake.

A confession of a potential buyer

During the 1990s, Tanzania moved from small scale dominated mining to highly-developed large scale mining which in the past decade has attracted Foreign Direct Investments amounting to \$4billion-the biggest since the country achieved its independence in 1961.

According to a three months investigation conducted by The Guardian on Sunday, while large scale miners spent billions in modern mining technology, small scale miners continued to depend on the outdated technology, banking their hopes on their main consultants- the witchdoctors.

After enjoying the mining sector for decades, selling their ounces of gold, or tanzanite to the black market’s dealers, today the once prosperous miners face a bleak future, forcing them to seek a bailout.

Clouded by the mighty powers of ignorance and the fear of poverty-the biggest enemies in poor countries like Tanzania-miners chose to go for albinos’ blood as their bailout package.

While previously, small scale miners used to dig just a few meters deep before hitting the golden rock, today they are forced to go deeper than previously-about 400meters, searching for gold or Tanzanite stones.

Not only that but also most areas that used to produce billions of gold or kilos of Tanzanite are currently controlled by large scale mining investors who use the advanced technology plus highly trained workers to mine.

Puzzled by the growing jungle rule or survival of the fittest, propelled mainly by the forces of globalisation, ill-equipped and cash strapped small scale miners, chose to turn to the witchdoctors as their solution for dwindling ounces of gold, instead of investing in technology and skills.

With no proper regulation to regulate and support small scale miners, some of them have been struggling to cope with the situation-taking the costly route not only to albinos but also to the entire nation. "These are vulnerable miners with no mining education or proper formal education and witchdoctors have taken this advantage to mislead them...the result is what we see today." Samuel Mpanduji, a small scale miner from Matabe mines says.

Mpanduji, a father of five, who has been mining gold for twenty years, is not outraged by the path some of his fellow miners have chosen to go through in search for fortunes.

"I was once tempted to practice that ritual but finally changed my mind because the witchdoctor, apart from giving me tough conditions, wanted more from my side. He says.

Riddled with the future of mining, he found himself in a temptation to visit a witchdoctor, after rumours that his rivals have hit the golden rock, making about \$60,000 in just a single night, after sprinkling what is believed to be albinos' blood in one of their mining pits. But, there wasn't any credible evidence to justify the allegations, as his rivals kept their charm a top secret.

"Somebody who spent more hours inside the muddy and dusty pits than what he spends in his house can pay anything it costs to hit the jackpot...This is why you hear all these stories." He says, adding that most of the miners especially those who have been mining for so long are dangerous creatures.

Narrating the tough conditions the witchdoctor gave him, Mpanduji says after his star was thoroughly checked through magic power, he was ordered to find the hairs and blood of a one-month-old albino baby.

The hairs would have been used to make a magic charm that would have been buried at the main entry of his mining pit, while the blood was to be used to wash his key mining tools, as a sign of casting the evil spirits.

The cost for this 'consultancy' or whatever you call it, was only \$250,000 plus a white female goose, which, he was able to pay but finding a one-month-old albino baby was a daunting task.

According to his own words, he finally decided to abandon the plan early in March this year, before selling his three mining pits and equipments at Sh25million(\$20,000).

"I am not surprised to hear what's going on...it is not a new story but the dirty games some miners usually play secretly." He says.

Like their counterparts, fishermen in the Lake Victoria are also facing similar paradox as Nile perch-their main cash cow-continue to dwindle in terms of population, caused mainly by over-

fishing and environmental degradation.

The worsening situation is proved by recent expert findings from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Last year, Lake Victoria Fisheries Organisation found that the lake's Nile perch population has fallen by 36.4 per cent, reaching an estimated 820,000 metric tonnes per annum by the end of last year, down from 1,290,000 metric tonnes recorded in 2001.

During that period, the Nile perch contribution to the annual total catches in Lake Victoria also declined from 59 percent to 39 per cent.

According to investigation conducted by The Guardian on Sunday, historically majority of small scale fishermen have been associating fishing with witchcraft beliefs. For instance fishermen still believe that a piece of wood from the boat that overturned and killed people in the lake, has a magic power that enabled them to get more catches, when it is fixed to their nets.

“For majority of small scale fishermen, witchcraft and fishing are twins...and this is the reality.” Mwitwa Massabi, a fisherman from Sweya beach in Mwanza city says. It all starts within your mind, he says, adding that ‘those who believe so have made it’, a move that has inspired other fishermen to invest in witchcraft beliefs.

Today, fishing is one of the booming business in Lake Victoria region, with an annual revenues estimated to be \$1 billion, according to Lake Victoria Fisheries Organisation.

But, as the fishing market especially Nile Perch and sardine continues to grow, the lake's fish population has been plummeting dramatically, casting a bleak future to thousands of fishermen. To survive, like their counterparts from the mining sector, fishermen too have turned to witchdoctors, believing that they can have more catches at the expense of albinos' blood.

In a country where even some prominent politicians believe in voodoo to get elected or promoted, it seemed the tormentors have also chosen that path to survive.

According to investigations conducted by The Guardian on Sunday, historically small scale mining and fishing activities are highly associated with witchcraft beliefs. But, it seemed this time around, the beliefs have gone beyond the control, revealing the obscurity behind these two sectors.

Whether measured by the number of people who have so far been killed or the victims who have seriously been injured by the tormentors, albinos' killings are one of the worse scenarios, the country has ever experienced. Revered Simon Ndimi from Mwanza, sums the situation as ‘the battle that goes beyond expansion of prisons and police patrol’

“This is the battle for souls and minds fuelled mainly by poverty and ignorance...we need education and God's fear to win this fight” he says.

From exporting human skins to neighbouring countries to the deadly killings of elderly women as well as the current hunting of albinos, the nation is puzzled by what is really going on.

“I never chose to be albino, though our killers have chosen to eliminate us.” Says Shitindi as he ponders to his future.