

*Out of the Shadows* narrates the realities of persons with albinism in Malawi, who are being killed for ritual purposes. It gives us insight into the mind of the perpetrators. Children and adults endure gruesome killings. Attacks are conducted by criminal gangs and in some cases family members. Survivors have been left with deep physical and psychological scars and remain fearful that those who hunt them might return. More than 163 cases of attacks on persons with albinism have been recorded between November 2015 and May 2019 in Malawi.

Why are these attacks happening?

The search for a perceived market, reveals a toxic mix of superstition, desperate socio-economic conditions and ritual practices driving people into believing that body parts of a person with albinism contain mythical powers that can make one rich, cure disease and drive away bad luck. Rumours of the existence of people who are prepared to pay large sums of money for body parts also fuel the killings. Few seem to know where this trade takes place or are able to point to an instance of money changing hands.

These are the stories of the victims, the survivors and the perpetrators.



Out of the Shadows

Azad Essa and Sorin Furcoi

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Exposing the killings and attacks of persons with albinism in Malawi

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Latida Macho



Latida Macho with her friends and neighbours in the village of Nambilikira, Dedza district, eastern Malawi

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Photography: Sorin Furcoi

Words: Azad Essa





Latida Macho (centre) and her family in front of their house in Nambilikira village



Latida's brother, who has the same condition

*The condition that makes me black without black,  
white but not white. That is how it was, and I will  
tell you all about it.*

– Petina Gappah, *The Book of Memory*



Latida Macho

# Acknowledgements

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We followed the persecution of persons with albinism for more than a year before deciding that a large-scale project on the reasons behind the murders had to be investigated. But in an environment of shrinking budgets, a noxious obsession for hits and sensational storytelling, it took some effort, and many minds and hands, to get this project off the ground. We would like to acknowledge the efforts made by our colleagues at AlJazeera.com in helping us elevate this story beyond the tropes that have come to characterise the murder of persons with albinism on the African continent.

To this end we must thank Imad Musa, our manager at AlJazeera.com, for giving us the necessary support for the online version of this project. Then, there is Mohammed Haddad and Shakib Asrir from AJLabs for designing the project and making it accessible across digital platforms for readers and viewers from all types of bandwidth; Andrew Philips for making sense of our video footage and turning it into short videos for the web. More than anyone else, we want to acknowledge our commissioning editor, Carla Bower, who dared to break convention with her support for the story. Carla was ultimately the backbone of this project.

On the ground, there was Suzgo Chitete, our field producer, who toiled with us – logistics, translations, additional reporting. Suzgo also ensured that the story travelled far and wide, translating it into a radio show in Chichewa as well as having it published as a series in multiple Malawian newspapers.

Then there was the guidance from Bonface Massah, Emily Chumia from APAM,\* and Ikponwosa Ero, the UN

Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism. We are especially grateful to the team at the Amnesty International Southern Africa Regional Office for their support and for taking this project forward to its logical end. We also acknowledge the support of the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa for this project.

Finally, and most importantly, we want to thank and acknowledge the people across Malawi – from David Fletcher to Clement Gweza, Stercia Kanyowa to Edna Cedric – who allowed us to enter their homes and document their stories. We hope we have done so in a caring and sensitive manner.

Azad Essa and Sorin Furcoi  
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\*Association of Persons with Albinism in Malawi

## Foreword by Ikponwosa Ero

Growing up in Nigeria as a person with albinism, I heard rumours that I could be a victim of ritual attack. To me, this information was more speculative than real. I never imagined that we would reach the point where the hunting and killing of persons with albinism for their body parts would be so frequent, that it would almost become a no-news story.

Nowhere has this crisis been more prominent than in eastern and southern Africa where, altogether, no less than 300 cases of violence against persons with albinism have been reported. More than half of these cases are from the last four years alone. It is also highly worrisome that these cases are likely an underestimation of the real figures. This is because organisations monitoring these issues tend to lack full monitoring capacity because most are volunteer-driven, operating on passion and adhoc donations from the public. Moreover, given how often family members and friends are involved in this violence, and given the frequent role of witchcraft practices, which are often carried out in secret, it is safe to conclude that there are cases that have gone unreported. While records of attacks seem to decline in some countries, this peace is often fragile and very quickly ends when new reports emerge in neighbouring countries or in countries that purported to have achieved peace for persons with albinism. Cross-border trafficking of persons with albinism and their body parts has been reported in both eastern and southern Africa.

Many say that targeting people because they have albinism is completely new and is an utter shock to their country. However, this makes me wonder why the response to this issue has been generally weak. It is unacceptable that state-led response is often sluggish. I have said it before that all excuses not to act are in fact reasons to act: whether the

purported excuse is that the group is too small in number to mobilise adequate response or whether the complaint is that we do not have enough data to act. Small numbers of citizens affected often means that the cost of many measures to protect are often not prohibitive. Lack of data in light of the crisis means there could be many more to protect.

Inaction on this issue and an attitude of “it-will-soon-end” leads nowhere but to more violations. It has been well over a decade since the first cases were reported in the media. In the silence of our friends and protectors, we as persons with albinism hear the footsteps of potential perpetrators. Living in real fear of attack is agonising. No one should have to face this as a daily reality.

That said, hope is on the horizon. That hope is encapsulated in the regional action plan on albinism (2017–2021) which was endorsed recently by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. The plan consists of concrete measures that we ought to carry out by 2021 to respond to the issue in both proactive and reactive ways. The measures were drawn up by persons with albinism themselves, with the collaboration of various governments and other stakeholders in the region. Most of the measures cost minimal amounts of money relatively speaking and yet can result in maximum returns, including preserving life. The measures range from training for health workers and parents upon the birth of a child with albinism to engaging community structures in the protection of their members with albinism. The plan also includes other foundational measures such as data-gathering. The measures have targets that are linked to the UN sustainable development goals as well as to the overall principles of the African Union’s Agenda 2063. Therefore, in carrying out these global and regional agendas respectively, states should see ample opportunity for including the situation of persons with albinism in various measures.

It is in this regard that I welcome this photobook, *Out of the Shadows: Exposing the killings and attacks of persons with albinism in Malawi*. The photobook provides useful background information for taking action. Specifically, it provides a very good overview of the people affected by this tragedy of attacks: persons with albinism and their relatives, perpetrators and their relatives, as well as the community at large. It also provides a good introduction to the complexity of harmful practices when embedded in the promise of profit and supernatural results, whether at the level of widespread belief and practice of “witchcraft” or at the individual level.

Further, the photobook illustrates the power of investigative journalism and reporting. It is a good example of the utility in informing and mobilising the masses, particularly in urgent situations using real stories including visual tools. The promotion of investigative research is one of the targets of the regional action plan. Therefore, I congratulate the authors and publishers of the photobook for playing their part in the implementation of the regional action plan.

Finally, I use this opportunity to call everyone to action through the regional action plan by following its components and progress online, engaging in their community through local partners of the plan and, at the very least, spreading the word on the issues, highlighting that persons with albinism are human like everyone else and that they CANNOT enrich anyone financially, by mere virtue of having albinism, no matter what rituals are applied.

To that end, I hope that this photobook would be part of advocacy to the public at large, and particularly for duty bearers: States and their mechanisms, non-state implementers as well as advocates. I look forward to its wide distribution and use.

Ikponwosa Ero  
UN Independent Expert  
On the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism  
@unalbinism

## Foreword by Bonface Ophiyah Massah

I am a person with albinism. I was the last-born boy in a family of six children. Two of my older sisters were also born with albinism.

Like so many other families, my condition has caused distress to my parents. With so many threats, it was also seen as a death trap.

As a child I experienced bullying and abusive name-calling in school and even within the community. It left me feeling shy and strange when at school or at market or church. But thankfully, the love from my family helped me recognise that I am accepted, loved and destined to do better in life.

I grew up with no attitude of self pity and realised that I can participate fully in any school and in the larger community.

I chose not to remain silent; I became a human rights defender on disability issues, specifically on rights of persons with albinism, to speak for my brothers and sisters who have suffered for no reason other than the colour of their skin. So many of us – in Malawi and other parts of the African continent – have died because of the continued disrespect and misunderstanding of this condition.

Personally, I choose not to feel different and refuse to feel rejected. I cherish my beautiful creation with respect and celebrate myself in a bid to challenge the myths and superstitions surrounding albinism. This is one way to educate and shift the intolerance in society.

Albinism is a condition I will live with forever. No one can remove the way I look by their prejudice or through eliminating us. It's my lifestyle: a hat, long sleeves and sunglasses.

This book highlights the deep-rooted stigma, discrimination and exclusion faced by persons with albinism in Malawi.

It looks at the nature of the criminal syndicate hunting for bones and body parts belonging to our community. So many of us battle skin lesions and cancer due to the severe sun in sub-Saharan Africa. Now we are facing elimination and extermination by those hunting us for rituals.

This book looks at uncomfortable truths. It explores some of the challenges in our homes and urges parents and extended family to try and understand albinism, to celebrate the diversity of creation and value life from birth to death.

It brings human rights back into the home. Surely, community and family members should not be on the frontline of selling children with albinism or directing criminals to tamper with graveyards?

As it stands, so many young persons with albinism and their households remain in social and economic trauma; we are on the same barren path of poverty, hunger, war and unemployment that excludes us from mainstream society. This has to change.

And yet, every day, I wake up with energy to fight on and win the good fight of faith; raising awareness and education on albinism.

Building a strong movement of persons with albinism is critical towards challenging negative stereotypes about our community. Also developing programmes in which persons with albinism are able to participate in society would help shift perceptions that we are "useless".

As persons with albinism we also have to stop shedding tears and stand up for change. We must demand a shift in mindset, for equality and fair opportunity. In doing so, we would force society to recognise our capabilities.

I have experienced the change and I am the change; we no longer need to live in fear and in hiding.

We stand in solidarity with fellow brothers and sisters across the world. We are filled with joy and power to fight with no fear.

Bonface Ophiyah Massah  
Association of Persons with Albinism in Malawi  
April 2018



Latida Macho's family



163 persons with albinism have been attacked in Malawi since 2013, at least 22 fatally.

In Malawi, persons with albinism are being killed; children and adults hacked to death with machetes and kitchen knives. By 2019 163 attacks on persons with albinism had been recorded in Malawi since 2013, at least 22 fatally.

Those who have survived have been left with deep physical and psychological scars, and remain fearful that those who hunt them will return.

But why is this happening? Most people will talk about an elusive market for the body parts of persons with albinism, people who are prepared to pay large sums of money for them and witch doctors who use them in potions to cure everything from disease to bad luck. But few seem to know where this trade actually takes place, or are able to point to an instance of money changing hands.

So, does this market of human body parts really exist, or is it a myth that is driving murder? We went in search of the market and found a toxic mix of witchcraft, poverty and desperation.

These are the stories of the victims, the survivors and the perpetrators.



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# 1: The Victims



David's parents in front of their house in Nambilikira village

# David's story

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Village of Nambilikira, Dedza district, eastern Malawi

It was a Sunday in April 2016. A warm, dry day. Seventeen-year-old David Fletcher was feeling moody and withdrawn. He wanted to watch a football match at the local school instead of helping his family gather maize in the fields. His parents eventually relented and let him go. When he didn't return, they searched the village, but couldn't find him. The next day, they walked to the nearest police station to report David missing. Then they waited.

A week later, the local police chief came to their home to deliver the news: David's dismembered body had been found, 80km away, in neighbouring Mozambique. It was badly decomposed, he told them. It couldn't be brought to the village for burial, but he could bring the arms and legs, if they wished. And, if the family could afford the journey, they could visit the place where it was found.

"He was dead. What benefit was there to see his dead body?" Fletcher Machinjiri, David's 65-year-old father, asks, dismissively. "It was too expensive for us."

Fletcher is sitting outside his house. His 53-year-old wife, Namvaleni Lokechi, sits beside him. Her face is expressionless. Their 32-year-old daughter Mudelanji and 21-year-old son Manchinjiri sit on the hard earth a few metres away. They listen as though it is the first time they have heard the story.

"He was killed like a goat at a market," Lokechi says, staring into the distance. "His arms and legs had been chopped off. They broke off some of his bones. His skin was hanging. And they buried him in a shallow grave."





The football field at the local school where David was last seen alive



Clement Gweza

She makes chopping motions with her hands as she speaks. “We cry every day,” Fletcher says. “To us, he was a ray of hope. We believed in his future. We thought he would lift our hand because he was good at school.”

“We still battle to eat without him.”

## “A war against persons with albinism”

Born in 1999, David was the fourth of five siblings – and the only one to have been born with albinism.

“I wasn’t surprised when he was born,” David’s mother says softly. “I was more than happy with his complexion.”

Her tiny frame stiffens when she talks about her son.

She had an aunt in Blantyre with the same congenital condition that results in a partial absence of pigmentation in the skin, hair and eyes, she explains.

“I’ve always felt that this group of people were lucky in life,” she says slowly. David was a star pupil at the local school in the neighbouring village of Kachule. His teacher, Clement Gweza, recalls feeling mildly concerned when he didn’t turn up for school that Monday.

“I thought maybe there were no groceries at home, or maybe he was unwell,” Clement says, sitting inside his empty classroom. “But the second day [he didn’t turn up] ... then I got worried.”

When he learned what had happened to David, he says, he was shocked. “It meant I was next,” he says, placing his hands on his chest.

Clement also has albinism. So does 14-year-old Latida Macho, another pupil at the school. She is one of five siblings with the condition. After David’s murder, her family kept her home for three weeks.

“If this is war against persons with albinism, then it means I’m second in line.”

He says he knew that persons with albinism were being murdered, but “for it to happen in the district, but also in my class, it was unreal”.

Within days, two men were arrested for the murder.

Both Malawians, they were tried in a district court in May 2016 and sentenced to 25 years in prison for conspiracy to commit a crime and abduction.

David’s family say they heard about the arrests and subsequent trial only from the media. And that they are bitterly disappointed with the outcome.

“The accused persons should be killed as well,” Fletcher says, pointing to the floor. “The child was brutally killed, hence they must equally be killed brutally.”





14-year-old Latida Macho



Alfred with his aunt and cousin in front of their house

## Alfred's story

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Village of Nasi, district of Phalombe, south eastern Malawi

Seventeen-year-old Alfred Chigalu lives with his aunt in a mud home surrounded by dead sunflowers. Their courtyard of red earth is home to five goats and a dozen raucous chickens. The nearest neighbour is a five-minute walk away, along a path cut through overgrown grass. It takes 20 minutes – across dried-up tobacco fields – to reach the main road. Drought has hit this region hard, and while tall mango trees provide shade for the farmers, they bear no fruit.

The climate here is harsh. Crops are often destroyed by drought or violent hailstorms. Like others in the village, Alfred and his aunt, Lydia Petulo, are surviving on pieces of dried maize from last year's harvest. The goats in the yard are not their own. Lydia looks after them for a local merchant, and receives one at the end of each year in return.

In December 2015, four men broke down the door of Alfred's bedroom while he was sleeping. They slashed at him with machetes, hitting the back of his head, his shoulders and his back. They tried to drag him out of the house. When his aunt arrived, the attackers ran away, leaving Alfred in a pool of his own blood. Alfred survived but was left badly scarred. Since then, the slightest sound wakes him, and when he walks to the village he must be accompanied.

"Before the attack I used to depend on him; I could send him to the market, he could go to the farm and do the farming," Lydia says, biting her lips as she completes her sentences.

"But I cannot do the same these days. I fear for his life. The responsibility has shifted to me."





Alfred Chigalu





Portrait of Alfred's aunt,  
Lydia Petulo





The scars on Alfred's left shoulder after he was hit with a machete during the attack

But this isn't the first time she has been afraid for her nephew. She took him out of school six years ago, when the taunting began, she explains.

Lydia slouches as she narrates their story. Her tired eyes wander. But they brighten when she talks about Alfred. She adopted him after his mother – her sister – died.

Alfred had a sibling who also had albinism, but that child died, she recalls. She doesn't remember the dates or the details, but both Alfred's parents died around the time he took his first steps.

## “I am lonely”

Alfred is sitting outside on the floor, his back against the house, wearing oversized jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. They are the only clothes he owns. There was so much blood when he was attacked that the clothes he was wearing – his only other clothes – had to be burned. On his head he wears a large cowboy hat. He is tall with broad shoulders that droop when he walks. For the first few hours that we are there to interview him, he doesn't talk. But when we put the camera away and move out of sight of the curious neighbours who have gathered to watch, he begins to speak. His parched lips barely move.

“I wake up at six in the morning, every day. I sweep the yard, but I feel pain in my arms,” he says slowly. He removes his shirt to reveal long, deep scars on his chest and back.

“The way they cut me, they cut my veins. I can barely hold a hoe,” he explains.

“The neighbours came when I screamed for help, but it was too late. The attackers had left,” Lydia says. “I knew he was lucky to have survived. He would have been killed if he hadn't screamed for me.”

She knows why he was attacked.

“Before the attack, some people used to mock him if he went outside the house. They [would say] he is worth millions of kwacha [thousands of dollars], so that gave us an indication that his life could be in danger,” Lydia explains.

The physical wounds have mostly healed, but life is not the same for Alfred. He misses “chatting,” he says, shyly, before adding: “Most of all I miss my friends. I am lonely.” His aunt says he “lacks peace”.

In April 2016, Ikponwosa Ero, the UN's independent expert on the human rights of persons with albinism, visited Alfred and his aunt. She says that Alfred's family were concerned that he had suffered “memory loss” after the attack. But when we visit him two months later, he rolls off the names of towns in Malawi, capital cities of African countries and national political leaders. He seems to be recovering.

Fiddling with a piece of dry hay, he tells us: “I want to finish school, to become a teacher, and move out of here. I would love if someone could take me away from this village. I have to get out of this place.”



Alfred's aunt, Lydia Petulo, sitting on the mud porch of her house





"I want to finish school, to become a teacher, and move out of here." – Alfred Chigalu



Edna Cedric with her husband, Marizane Kapiri, and their son Harrison, Hari's twin brother

## Hari's story

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Village of Mpakati, Machinga district, southern Malawi

Edna Cedric remembers that night in February 2016. Her husband, Marizane Kapiri, had gone fishing. Her identical nine-year-old twins, Hari and Harrison, were sleeping beside her. She heard a knock at the door. When she answered it, a machete-wielding man barged inside, slashing at her. He pulled Hari from the bed and dragged him to the door. Edna tried to hold on to him while also gripping Harrison with her other hand. The intruder struck her face with the machete and she fell to the floor. And, just like that, her son was gone.

“I couldn't hold on to him any longer,” she says, quietly. “I ran out screaming.”

“Four days later, the police found his head in Mozambique.”

Marizane is not the father of Edna's children. He says he spent the best part of the five days after Hari was abducted explaining to the police why he wasn't at home when the attack took place. They suspected that he was involved and it wasn't until the village chief explained to them that he spent much of his time at the lake, catching fish to feed the family, that the police let him go.

“After the police discovered the head, they sent a message to us that we should be ready to see it,” Marizane explains. “They brought the head wrapped in a cloth and in a sack. His mother identified it.”

According to Amnesty International, two men were arrested in connection with Hari's murder. One was said to be an uncle, and the other a stranger who had an existing conviction for possessing the bones of a person with albinism. For that crime, he had been fined US\$30.



"Four days later, the police found his head in Mozambique." – Edna Cedric



Edna with her son, Harrison



Edna Cedric with her husband, Marizane Kapiri, and thier son Harrison in front of their house

## The twin brother

Harrison is wearing pyjamas and a cowboy hat. He sits between his parents as they take turns to talk. He fiddles with the cords of his hat, licks his cracked lips and scratches at the dry skin on his arms. He only returned to school in September 2016, eight months after his brother was taken.

Their mud brick home is in a remote rural area, far from the main road between Blantyre and Mangochi. Houses here sit on small plots in expansive fields. It is a few minutes' walk to the nearest neighbours through fields of browning plants that haven't been harvested in a year. Here, police officers are few and far between.

But this is not where Hari was taken from. That home was even more isolated, Marizane explains.

"We demolished the house and moved here so we are closer to other people," he says.

But the move hasn't changed much for the remaining brother, Harrison.

"He wakes up in the middle of night, screaming, because he can't find his brother. We just tell him he will come back one day," Marizane explains.

Edna says that she can't get over the pain she felt when she saw Hari's head.

"I immediately thought about his brother, Harrison, and I knew his life would never be the same," she says, looking at her surviving son.





The house of Edna Cedric



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## 2: A History of Violence



People in Malawi's capital city of Lilongwe protesting against the killing of persons with albinism

**B**orrowed from the word “albus”, meaning white in Latin, albinism is a congenital condition where the body is unable to create enough melanin to protect the skin, hair and eyes.

The condition affects about one in 20,000 people worldwide. But it is more common in sub-Saharan Africa, where one in 5,000 have albinism. Most cases occur in Mozambique, Tanzania, Burundi, Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Whereas previous population estimates in Malawi put the number of persons with albinism at between 7,000 and 10,000 people. The 2018 census revealed that the country has 134 000 persons with albinism.

And it is not just a matter of appearance: the lack of melanin associated with albinism often results in poor vision and sensitivity to light. In fact, many persons with albinism are legally blind. Because their skin is particularly vulnerable to the sun’s ultraviolet rays, they can also be predisposed to skin cancer and lesions. According to a 2014 study, persons with albinism in Africa are 1,000 times more likely to get skin cancer than others.

Discrimination against persons with albinism is driven by myths and superstition. For many, this discrimination amounts to violence – murder, infanticide and live burials. Until recently, this has not been well documented. The past decade has seen an increase in the number of documented killings and maimings of persons with the condition.

There is a belief that the bones of persons with albinism are made of gold dust, and myths abound that they are a necessary component of magic potions. There are reports that the bones of persons with albinism can fetch up to US\$75,000 on the black market, but there have been no documented cases of money changing hands. Whether there

is indeed organised trade in the body parts of persons with albinism has yet to be established definitively. The UN's Ikponwosa Ero says they have been unable to confirm the existence of such a market.

“There is allegedly a lot of money in this business. And I say allegedly, because people keep on repeating the idea that there is a lot of money in this, and it would seem that the media is part of the reason some people have gotten involved,” she says. “But then some countries have witnessed a reduction in the number of attacks, maybe because people are realising there is no value [in the bones and body parts].”

The Canadian charity Under the Same Sun (UTSS) has documented some 561 attacks on people with albinism since 1970, with 201 killings in 29 countries worldwide, including Egypt, DR Congo, Cameroon and Senegal. “Most of the attacks have occurred between 2007 and present,” Don Sawatzky, director of UTSS, says.

The UN estimates there have been at least 600 attacks on persons with albinism since 2006. Since her appointment as the UN's independent expert on albinism in June 2015, Ikponwosa Ero, who herself has albinism, has documented over 200 attacks in at least eight countries.

The majority of the documented attacks have taken place in the Great Lakes region, particularly Tanzania and Burundi. According to media reports, Tanzania has seen some 180 attacks, including 76 murders, since 2000. Thirty-five of those murders took place in 2015. Ero said in mid-2018 that her office had received between 70 and 100 reports of attacks in Mozambique alone since her visit in 2016.

Though attacks in South Africa have not reached the levels of Tanzania or Malawi, South African legal expert Maureen Mswela says that the “vulnerability of these persons requires immediate attention before it spirals out of control”. In January 2018, 14-year-old Gabisile Shabane and 15-month-old Nkosikhona Ngwenya were kidnapped and murdered in Mpumalanga province. It took nine months for authorities to allow the bodies to be buried as they waited for DNA tests to confirm if all the mutilated parts belonged to the victims. A traditional healer was arrested in connection with the murders but the case is yet to be resolved.

“It is clear that a case is to be made for compelling, in particular, the state to intervene,” Mswela says.

## Responses to a crisis

A public outcry on this issue in Tanzania saw the government create special schools for children with albinism. In 2015 Tanzania took the step to ban witch doctors, seen as the driving force behind the attacks and the killings. At the time, there were specific reports that politicians were seeking favours from witch doctors ahead of elections in later 2015, which had catalysed the attacks on those with albinism. At least 200 witch doctors and traditional healers were rounded up by the government in a public show of action against the attacks.

While it has been suggested that Tanzania's actions have yielded positive results, it is unclear if these purported changes are here to stay, or if they will result in shifting attitudes in neighbouring countries. The election of Isaac Mwaura, who has albinism, into the Kenya's parliament is surely a step forward. Ikponwosa Ero says his success makes Kenya “leaps and bounds ahead” of any other African country. Six persons with albinism from Malawi have subsequently announced their candidature for the country's 2019 elections.

In May 2018, the AU's Pan-African Parliament endorsed the Regional Action Plan on Albinism in Africa (2017–2021). The regional action plan specifically tackles ending attacks and prejudice against the community and seeks to guide states on short- and long-term actions towards protecting and improving their lives.

But given the poor levels of reporting and vulnerabilities faced by the community, an endemic scarcity of resources and underwhelming political will, it is unclear if policies will ever be translated into real action.



A teenage boy who has albinism at Malingunde School for the Visually Impaired, Masumpankhunda, in Lilongwe, central Malawi





Malawi's Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture, Hon. Grace Chiumia (right) at a rally against the killing of persons with albinism in Lilongwe



Steven Burgess, who is in his 40s, says he has been called a "white animal" since he was a child.

## 'Millions, millions'

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Zomba, southern Malawi

Emily Chiumia works at a government department in Zomba, southern Malawi. But she moonlights as an activist for persons with albinism.

She's happy to talk, even if the topic is the verbal abuse she is subject to on a daily basis.

"You walk on the street, and they call you 'millions, millions,'" she laughs, "as if we are gold."

Emily is the former vice-president of Association for Persons with Albinism in Malawi (APAM). Since the attacks began, Emily and the association have been documenting the offences committed against people like her.

Most of them, she says, are carried out by relatives, neighbours or people the victims considered to be friends.

"Before, it was a case of people saying 'if you sleep with a person with albinism, your skin will turn white,'" she says. "But now it's different. I cannot enjoy my life as I used to ... I can't walk in the evenings, can't sleep, even at home, I fear who might come." Her laugh has disappeared now.

Radio DJ Ian Sambota describes how, in 2012, he was befriended by an "older, educated" woman who first offered him K100,000 (US\$138) and then K500,000 (US\$700) to sleep with her. "She was HIV-positive and she thought if she slept with a person with albinism, it would be solved," he says.

Ian refused, but admits that the offer was tempting because he needed the money to pay for medical care for his mother. Steven Burgess, who is in his 40s, says he has been called a "white animal" since he was a child. But this is "a time of crisis", he explains, referring to the increase in attacks. Bazirio Kaudzu, 46, says he feels so threatened that he





Steve Burgess says his family is taunted because of his condition.





Bazirio Kaudzu, 46



Patricia Maguwa, 37

only travels to the clinic in the capital Lilongwe – to collect the zinc oxide ointment needed to treat the lesions and blisters on his skin – if his nephew accompanies him. It's an expensive journey for the tomato farmer, so each month he must take out a loan to cover the cost of the taxi ride for two.

But it hasn't always been this way.

Patricia Maguwa, 37, remembers a time when her husband who had albinism, gospel singer Geoffrey Zigoma, was considered one of the golden voices of Malawian music. Before he died of cancer in 2013, he always tried to offer a counter-narrative to the usual discrimination.

“He was called names like ‘yellow man,’ but he never felt insecure about his life,” she says from her modest home 7km outside Lilongwe. “[But] the situation is different now.”

## A shifting trade

Malawi's government recognises that there is a problem.

Neverson Chisiza, a senior state advocate at the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, says that the government has reported cases including murder, assault, attempted abductions, trafficking, maiming, and grave robberies since 2014.

The United Nations Independent Expert, Ikponwosa Ero, says that if serious action isn't taken to stop the attacks, persons with albinism could become “extinct” in Malawi.

Malawi's government says a crackdown in neighbouring Tanzania has shifted the “trade” in body parts to their country.

Senior Chief Kawinga, a traditional authority from Malawi's Machinga district, where most of the attacks have taken place, told us during a visit to his office that he'd heard the market for body parts was in neighbouring Mozambique.

“But some say Mozambicans were caught looking for the market in Malawi,” he said during a visit to his office in Machinga. “We are puzzled. We asked the police: did you find the market?”

Likewise, Mary Shawa, principal secretary of the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare in Malawi, whose mandate includes protection of persons with albinism, also described the dangerous myths and beliefs as coming from across the border. “The majority of people demanding body parts are witch doctors who are not Malawians,” she was quoted as having said.

Each country in the region tends to posit their neighbour as the source of the problem.

For instance, Tanzania's home affairs minister has previously inferred that the demand for bones came from Zambia.

Pachora Kayira, Malawi's chief state advocate, says the issue was most problematic in the “Machinga, Mangochi and the eastern regions”, in other words, close to the border with Mozambique.

Cortex Nzima, a Malawian journalist, says that there also seems to be very little dialogue between Malawi and Mozambique, or at least, there is very little public acknowledgement that the two governments were working together on the matter.

In June 2016, 150 government officials, academics and activists from 26 countries met in Dar es Salaam for the first forum on albinism in Africa. It aimed to create an action plan to end the attacks, and concluded that governments must dedicate a budget and a multisectoral task force to doing so. It recommended a range of measures and best practices. “Now that we have a catalogue of effective specific measures that are not very expensive to execute, governments should no longer act ignorant of what to do on the issue ... It is time to act,” said Ikponwosa Ero.





Senior Chief Kawinga, a traditional authority from Malawi's Machinga district



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## 3: The Perpetrators



Zomba Central Prison

Zomba, southern Malawi

Zomba Central Prison stands like a citadel in the former capital. It might resemble a factory were it not for its watch towers and the metal fence that encircles it. Flanked by mango trees and shrubs, a dirt track leads to the main entrance.

Inside, some 2,365 prisoners are either awaiting trial or serving time for some of the most serious crimes: murder, abduction, trafficking and armed robbery.

The prison's director, Major Manwell, greets us at the front door – an almost three-metre-tall gateway made of green steel. He is wearing a khaki safari suit and leather sandals.

“How can I help you?” he asks with a knowing smile.

Manwell hands us over to two prison guards, who lead us into an open corridor between the front desk and the staff kitchen. A makeshift clothes line hangs nearby. We sit on a bench, shaded by the prison's towering walls.

Over the next three hours, we will meet eight prisoners who are either awaiting trial or have been convicted of playing some part in an attack on somebody with albinism.

One at a time, they sit opposite us on another wooden bench, a translator beside them.

A guard sits at a distance – far enough that his presence doesn't feel intrusive, but close enough to eavesdrop. His body language tells us when he finds an inmate's story of interest. When he doesn't, he slumps back into his leather chair.





Inside the main yard at Zomba  
Central Prison



Stenala Shaibu Lizahapa

Just two of the inmates acknowledge that their case is related to someone with albinism. Most insist that they were framed or have been wrongly accused. Only one admits to having committed a crime.

“They are not able to come to terms with their crimes,” says the guard, removing his cap so that he can scratch his head. “They are in denial.”

## The tomb raider

Stenala Shaibu Lizahapa is wearing a clean white shirt and tattered jeans. He takes his seat slowly and crosses his legs. A thin row of rosary beads pass through his fingers. Stenala is not in a hurry. Unlike the others, he doesn't fidget. He simply sits and waits.

He is in his mid-30s and has been convicted of trespassing on a gravesite to remove three bones from the body of a man named Awali Mandevu.

Along with five others, he was caught trying to sell the bones to an undercover police officer in April 2015.

All six were charged with criminal trespassing, removal of human tissue and selling human bones.

Three of them, including Stenala, pleaded guilty. Two others denied the charges and were acquitted, while the case against the sixth was dropped.

Stenala was sentenced to six years in prison.

He says he has made peace with his crime.

“What I did was wrong, but I felt desperate,” he says softly, only briefly making eye contact. “I feel ashamed.”

As a fisherman, he says he was earning K500 (70 cents) a day. So when friends asked if he'd help them deliver a set of bones to a client – promising it would make him “rich enough to drive” – he says he was tempted.

“With my income, I can't afford a motorcycle, but a car – that was a dream ... The devil took over me,” he says.

In early April 2015, Stenala travelled with friends from Machinga to his home district of Jali, where he went to Chinangwa, a village neighbouring his own, in search of a grave he'd been told housed the corpse of a person with albinism.

“Who doesn't want more money?” he asks. “I knew it was wrong, but I did it for my family.”

Because his was not a case of murder or attempted murder, Stenala wasn't eligible for legal aid and so had no representation in court.

He was tried, sentenced and given 30 days to appeal.



Emily Emisi in front of her home

## The victim's family

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Chinangwa village, Zomba district, southern Malawi

In the village of Chinangwa, Emily Emisi is sitting on a straw mat outside her mud brick and thatch-roofed home. She offers us a mat on which to sit.

“Why didn’t you call before you came?” the 36-year-old asks with a smile. “I would have cooked.”

Her generosity betrays her means. Her open yard – like the barren plateau that surrounds it – is hard brown earth. A few mango and small kachere trees surround the settlement.

Three children sit on the floor. For a while, they watch curiously. But when the novelty of strangers wears off, they return to kicking a punctured miniature football.

“It was my grandfather’s grave that Stenala dug up,” Emily says. “It was terrible. He was buried a long time [ago], in the 1990s. And this felt like a second funeral for him.”

Emily says it didn’t come as a surprise to many of the villagers when they learned that Stenala was responsible.

“He was known to steal goats,” she says. “Then he tried to romance a girl with albinism, but the girl refused and told villagers that she was being pursued by him.”

Someone close to Stenala must have betrayed him, Emily speculates, because nobody knew that the village graveyard had been tampered with. But, while she has no doubt that Stenala had been searching for the bones of somebody with albinism, Emily says he dug up the wrong grave.

“My grandfather, Awali Madenvu, was not a person with albinism. But his grave was close to a person with albinism and so they got the wrong bones.”





Outside Chinangwa village,  
Zomba district, southern Malawi

When we tell Emily that Stenala admits his guilt and is remorseful, she clicks her tongue and looks away. “Of course, after the hardship in jail, he is going to be remorseful,” she says.

“He is not someone who will change. We all think that his sentence is too short, and we expect him to come back and teach us a lesson.”

### “I will wait for him”

As the sun is about to set, the silhouette of a woman appears through a haze of dust. She has a girl at her side and a baby in her arms.

“That is Annie Fuleya,” a young girl says. “Stenala’s wife.”

She is on her way to gather wood. Stenala’s home village of Jali is just a few hundred metres away. Emily’s family crosses paths with Stenala’s every day.

Annie is tall with a brush-cut. She wears a long green skirt and a pale blue T-shirt.

In the weeks leading up to the incident, the 26-year-old says her husband was acting strangely. She recalls asking him to stay away from a friend she thought was trouble.

“I didn’t believe it at first but then after the conviction I felt let down by him,” she reflects, looking away as she completes her sentence. Then, without looking back at us, she adds: “I believe that he did it.”

Annie was pregnant when her husband was arrested and must now raise their four-year-old daughter Saamyato and their now 14-month-old baby Latifa alone.

She left Machinga for Stenala’s village after his arrest, believing it was safer to be close to her mother-in-law. Now, she works in other people’s fields and depends on financial support from the extended family to help raise her children.

“All I know is that he was found with body parts of a person with albinism. I don’t know what parts. I don’t know what he did. I just feel disappointed,” Annie says, holding on to Latifa as the baby wriggles in her arms.

“But I understand that he may have done it because of our situation. He doesn’t earn enough as a fisherman. He looks after me, his mother, my mother and two orphaned children from an aunt,” she explains softly. “Perhaps this is what drove him to do this.”

“I will wait for him. Because I have forgiven him.”

Stenala’s mother, who has been watching pensively as her daughter-in-law talks, agrees to speak to us under the shadow of a large kachere tree. Elizabeth Magawa is 49, and the resemblance to her son is immediately apparent. She smiles when we tell her this and the children who have gathered around burst into laughter.

Elizabeth seems tired. She says she has aged over the past year.

“I didn’t look like this,” she sighs. “I spend sleepless nights wondering why Stenala would have done such a thing. He always helped the family. It is something I will never understand.”

Her son’s arrest brought the family unwanted attention in the village, but Elizabeth says they haven’t suffered any serious repercussions.

“There was a lot of talk. They spoke about bones. But they’ve moved on,” she says.

“Maybe Stenala did it because of our poverty, or because of peer pressure. I don’t know.”



Annie Fuleya, the wife of Stenala Shaibu Lizahapa





Stenala's mother, Elizabeth  
Magawa





A guard inside Zomba  
Central Prison



Charles Nyasa

# Charles Nyasa

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Convicted of trying to sell human tissue

Charles Nyasa cries as he tells his story.

The 24-year-old from Zomba district was sentenced to six years for being in possession of human flesh in March 2015.

He says he heard an advert for a witch doctor on radio or television – he can't recall which – that promised “quick riches”. But when he visited the witch doctor, he was told to bring the placenta of a newborn. So, he says, he spent K8,000 (US\$11) buying one from nurses at a hospital.

When he took it to the witch doctor, he was accused of carrying a placenta from a newborn child with albinism.

He was convicted but insists his case had nothing to do with albinism.



John Alfred

# John Alfred

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Convicted of trying to sell a child

**T**hirty-one-year-old John Alfred looks older than his years. He is feverish and sweating profusely, but wants to talk.

John was sentenced to six years in prison for trying to sell his own child.

“I did it because of my [financial] condition. No other reason,” he says, shaking.

The father of five from Naweta village, in Machinga district, was earning K4,000 (US\$5.50) for two weeks’ work in the gardens and on the farms of a businessman.

“My boss saw me living in poverty and said to me one day: ‘Why don’t you be brave, and sell that child of yours?’ pointing to my daughter Vanessa. He said there were buyers in Mozambique for children like her.”

John says that his daughter does not have albinism but because she had a pale complexion, people might assume she did.

“I had five children, and I thought that maybe it wasn’t a problem to get rid of one,” John says.

In April 2015, without consulting his wife, he took their four-year-old daughter and left for Mozambique.

“I didn’t know where I was going. I was just going to Mozambique to find this market,” he says.

But the police intercepted him in Machinga and arrested him.

“I admitted it in court and was sentenced,” he tells us.



Melinda Mbendera

# Melinda Mbendera

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Convicted of attempted kidnapping

**T**wenty-year-old Melinda Mbendera is agitated. She twitches and bites her lips as she talks. She was found guilty of trying to kidnap a child with albinism and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. But she insists that she is innocent. The court didn't have enough evidence, she declares, and based their verdict solely on the claims of the child and her parents.

She says the judge told her that it would be safer for her to be in jail than on the streets, where she might face mob justice.

In 2016, 11 people suspected of being involved in digging graves or carrying human flesh were lynched in Malawi. In one case in the Nsanje district in March 2016, seven witch doctors accused of using bones in their potions were burned alive. A month earlier, a courthouse in the South Lunzu township in Blantyre was razed to the ground after three people accused of murdering somebody with albinism had been bailed.

Melinda says she previously spent eight months in prison for stealing K200,000 (US\$275) from a family friend. She suspects her criminal record influenced the verdict in this case.

But, she maintains: "I didn't spend eight months in this wretched place only to go out and commit another crime."

"The police said that because I stole before, the probability was high that I did this ... but why would I sell a human being?" she asks.



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## 4: A Question of Justice



“On the surface, there is the question of superstition and witchcraft, but I think underlying all of that is desperation.”

– Edge Kanyongolo

Zomba, southern Malawi

**E**dge Kanyongolo is a tall man with thick eyebrows and an even thicker moustache. This associate professor of law at the University of Malawi in Zomba is sitting behind his desk. Behind him, a window showcases a courtyard garden. In front of the window, textbooks and legal reports are carefully stacked on a wooden bookshelf.

“The attacks on persons with albinism are a manifestation of a larger problem,” he says. “On the surface, there is the question of superstition and witchcraft, but I think underlying all of that is desperation.”

Malawi has been in an economic crisis since 2012. It began when tobacco, the country’s premier export, dropped in price by more than 50 per cent in 2010. In 2012, under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund, President Joyce Banda imposed a range of hard-hitting economic reforms that were most harshly felt by the poor. The currency was devalued by almost 50 per cent and inflation reached more than 20 per cent.

In 2015, the World Bank rated Malawi as the poorest country in the world, per capita.

Two out of every five Malawians of employable age are without work. According to the International Labour Organisation, three in four young workers have only irregular employment, while nine out of 10 work in the informal sector, where their employment is precarious and may change daily. At least 61 per cent of Malawians live on less than US\$1.25 a day and 2.3 million are said to be food-insecure.

“People don’t have options to earn money. And this then drives them to be so desperate and, as some would





Masiyambuyo Njolomole and  
Usmani Ibrahima Banda

say – so irrational – as to think that getting the body parts of a type of person and so on, may make you rich,” the professor explains.

But Elijah Kachikuwo, the senior deputy commissioner of police in Mangochi, disagrees. In fact, he grows agitated when questioned about the connection. He is standing in the dusty courtyard of the main police station in Mangochi.

“It is not poverty that is causing this,” he declares, the lines on his forehead deepening. “We aren't faced with poverty for the first time in the country. We shouldn't hide behind this ... so that question is out of order.”

## The traditional healers

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Mphalare in Dedza, central region of Malawi

**M**asiyambuyo Njolomole and Usmani Ibrahima Banda live in the remote village of Mphalare in Dedza. It is 80km – about an hour’s drive along a dirt track – from Lilongwe.

They are both traditional healers.

Seven wooden stools lined up against a wall and a small coffee table are the only furniture inside the house where we meet them. There is no electricity, so the door has been left ajar. The sunlight illuminates the two men’s faces. A woman sweeps the yard outside, scraping at the dry earth.

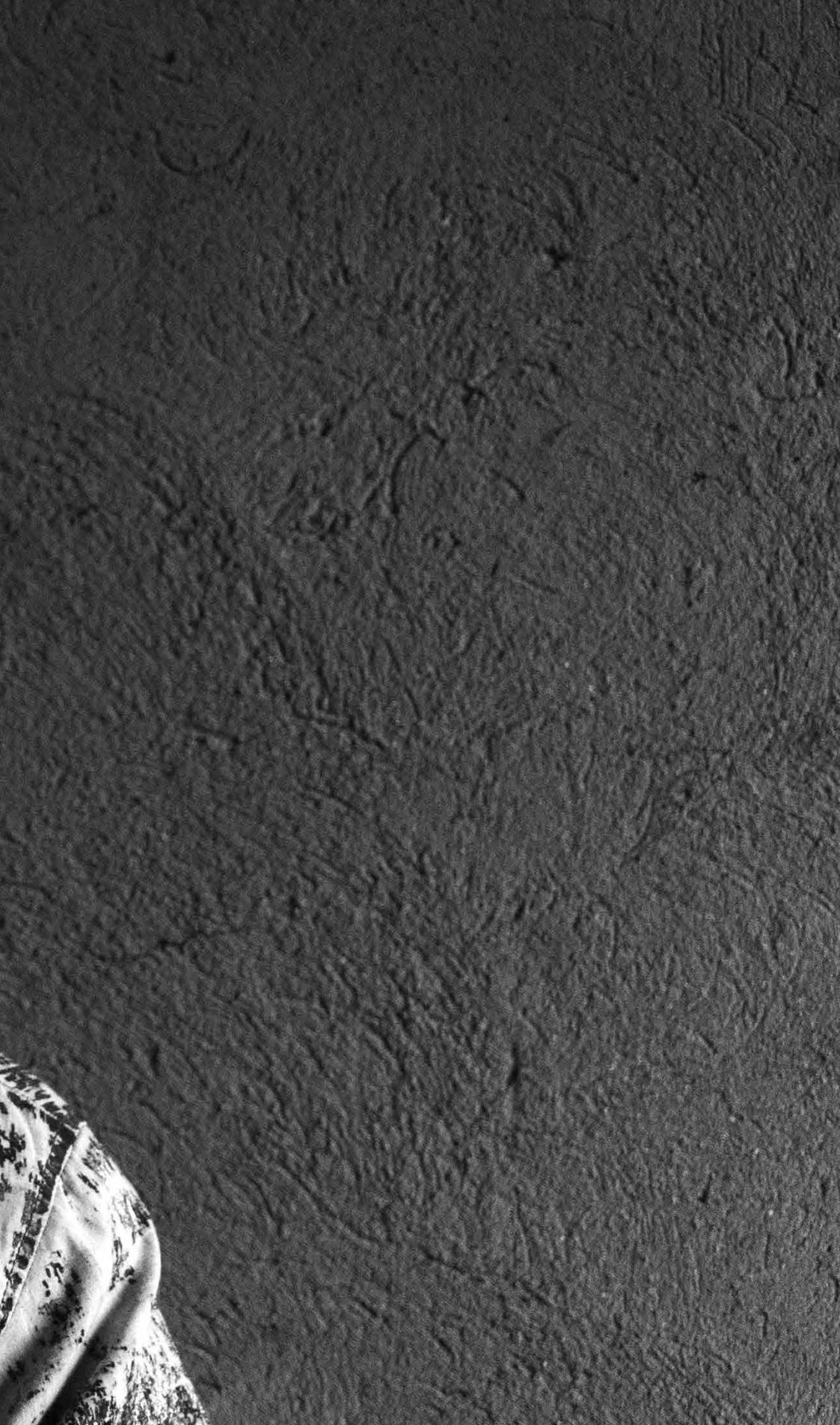
Usmani wears a skull cap; Masiyambuyo a headdress made from monkey skin. The latter smiles as he presents his registration card. Usmani’s expired in 2011.

Masiyambuyo, a tall, thin man, makes it clear that neither of them use bones of any kind in their potions. He says “people like him” are being made scapegoats for criminals and a political conspiracy because the government has lost control of the situation. “This is a syndicate by some influential people in this country who are interested in body parts of persons with albinism. They simply want to take the attention away from them; that is why they are accusing us,” he declares.

“Persons with albinism have existed for a long time and we have also existed for a long time,” he adds.

In June 2016, Malawi’s High Court banned “witch doctors, traditional healers, charm sellers, fortune tellers and





Masiyambuyo Njolomole

magicians,” in an effort to quell the trade in the bones of persons with albinism.

But Usmani and Masiyambuyo argue that this only hurts the people they help. “People think we deal with witchcraft, but we are here to help people,” Masiyambuyo says, earnestly, opening his arms.

According to the Traditional Healers Association of Malawi, up to 97 per cent of the population visit traditional healers and herbalists. It is difficult to verify this but it is clear that many people do use them, particularly in rural areas, where the state is often conspicuous by its absence.

There are only two physicians and 59 nurses for every 100,000 people in Malawi. The ratio is the lowest in all of sub-Saharan Africa.

Usmani says that, in such circumstances, the services he and Masiyambuyo provide are critical.

He was trained by his father, the softly spoken traditional healer explains, and used to specialise in sexually transmitted diseases. But, “nowadays, [it’s] cancer, blood pressure, asthma, using herbs and a mixture from seven trees” he adds, showing us plastic packets of concoctions made primarily from plants.

“People come to me when the hospitals have failed them.”

Dr Chilani is the spokesperson for Malawi’s Traditional Healers Association and tells us over the phone that “everyone [in the country], [from] farmers to politicians” uses traditional healers.

Chilani’s Facebook page offers “revenge spells, fertility spells, magic rings and witchcraft spells,” but also asks that anyone with information about the bones of somebody with albinism contact him so that it can be reported to the police. He says no one has been in touch.

“If we have been around for generations, and the killings of persons with albinism began roughly two years ago, what were we doing all this time?” he asks.



Usmani Ibrahima Banda



In Malawi, more than 90 per cent of the population cannot afford legal representation.

## One lawyer for every 38,500 Malawians

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Lilongwe, central region of Malawi

Piles of paper cover Masauko Chamkakala's desk. The director of Legal Aid, the body tasked with representing those who cannot afford legal representation, is in his office in Area 4 of Lilongwe.

The country's legal system, he says, is a mess.

"More than 90 per cent of the population cannot afford legal representation. We have seven lawyers for the entire country," he says, his hands clasped and eyebrows raised.

The Legal Aid Act stipulates that anyone charged with a crime that could result in a custodial sentence is entitled to legal aid, but limited resources have resulted in the courts restricting this to homicide cases.

A 2013 report found that Malawi had fewer than 400 lawyers. That was one lawyer for every 38,500 people.

The jails are overcrowded and suspects can wait months or even years before their cases go to trial.

"If you go to the prisons [and] start going through the cases, you realise that so many of these people are not supposed to be there," Masauko says, pointing out that: "For an ordinary person to get an appointment with a lawyer will cost him K20,000 (US\$27), while the [monthly] minimum wage is K18,000 (US\$25)."

Then there is the question of entrapment – a method that police officers have admitted to using but one which has so far led only to the arrest of sellers.

In a side office near Malawi's High Court, Neverson Chisiza, a senior state advocate at Malawi's Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, acknowledges that there have been discussions within the ministry about "why it

is always sellers, those who are desperate [and] looking for quick money, [who] are caught, not the buyers”.

And without the buyers, the police are little closer to understanding the source of this trade.

Masauko says that the hysteria over the killings of persons with albinism has reached such a height that “it is possible a person could be convicted for carrying antelope bones because they resemble human bones”.

## A question of government preparedness

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Lilongwe, central region of Malawi

It is late on a Friday afternoon when Mary Shawa meets us in her office and her team are about to leave for the day. As the principal Secretary of the Ministry for Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare in Malawi, she is responsible for the security, health and wellbeing of Malawians with albinism.

“Until the atrocities started, we didn’t look at persons with albinism as people with a disability. We saw them as ordinary people,” she says, adjusting her glasses.

She slumps back into her chair. “If you look at the demographics, they are young and old, some working as lawyers and teachers, some still in school,” she adds.

She speaks authoritatively and frankly, rejecting any suggestion that the government hasn’t done enough to address the crimes committed against persons with albinism. She rattles off the details of cases that have been solved and cites “ministerial research” to suggest that there is no market for the bones.

“[The] culprits get the bones and walk around looking for a market to sell them,” she says.

Mary says her ministry has been leading a communications plan to tackle the crisis. “The radio messages, the billboards, this is all us,” she explains.

But it’s hard to tell if anyone is listening.

“We are also compiling a census, to register all persons with albinism in the country,” she says, leaning forward, her hands resting on the desk.

But beyond the issue of security, persons with albinism have other needs – sunscreen, hats and sunglasses to protect them from the sun. The Ministry of Health does provide zinc oxide at clinics but that only helps with the blisters and lesions and doesn't offer any protection. Moreover, patients have to travel to the main cities to access the ointment.

Mary hints at a lack of funding. Malawi is heavily reliant on donors, and sunscreen and hats are not at the top of the government's financial priorities or a foreign government's agenda.



"The culprits get the bones and walk around looking for a market to sell them." – Mary Shawa





A teenage girl at Malingunde  
School for the Visually Impaired



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## 5: The Future



Clement Gweza

Village of Nambilikira, Dedza district, eastern Malawi

Confident, assertive and friendly, Clement Gweza seems as though he was born to teach. He transforms the 60 rowdy teenagers into an orderly classroom and begins his social and environmental science lesson by scribbling “How to prevent air pollution” on the blackboard.

The 24-year-old is smartly dressed in an off-white shirt, pinstriped tie and black trousers.

“It was difficult at first,” he says. “The children found it hard to understand my albinism, because people, not just the learners, don’t think that a person with albinism can do something that can be recognised by society.”

He became a teacher, he says, because the tuition was free and he couldn’t afford to pay to study anything else.

At first, he worried that his students wouldn’t respect him. But, he says, “after a few weeks, the learners came round. They will tell you: ‘Ah! He is a good teacher and he understands our problems.’”

But he knows that, despite the respect he enjoys in the classroom, he is not safe outside of it.

He was the teacher of David Fletcher, the boy with albinism from Malawi who was killed, with his body being found in Mozambique, and the murder of David made him afraid.

He has stopped walking outside at night and, if he must, he asks a close friend or relative to accompany him.

“If I can’t find someone to take me home, I will stay where I am and sleep there. I have no choice,” he says.

“Everything has changed. I look at the people, the friends around me, and I think ‘maybe he wants to kill me and make some money.’”



Malingude School for the Visually Impaired

## Stercia Kanyowa's story

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Masumpankhunda, in Lilongwe, central Malawi

**T**welve-year-old Stercia Kanyowa says she doesn't want to beg. She wants an education, and to stand on her own two feet.

"I want to be a teacher first. Then maybe a journalist or a bank manager," she declares.

Stercia is one of three children with albinism at the Malingunde School for the Visually Impaired. As an only child from a single-parent household, she says completing school is her only hope for the future. She has been here since 2011.

"Of course, I miss home. It's long since I have gone home. Who doesn't miss home?" she says, outside her dormitory.

The school is government-run, and functions almost exclusively on donations. There are 17 classrooms and 40 teachers for 3,000 students.

There is no electricity. Inside Stercia's classroom, some students are huddled around braille machines, while others, such as 15-year-old Foster Kennedy, who also has albinism, use a magnifying glass to read textbooks.

"Everyone here is a friend. You would think we are born from the same mother," Foster says, smiling.

He wants to be a radio personality or a songwriter, he explains.

The school yard is a thoroughfare for people walking or cycling to the town centre, which means that there are always strangers passing through. This concerns the school authorities. Without a wall or a gate, the school is

vulnerable to theft and the students to being attacked. In early 2015, a 16-year-old student with albinism was almost abducted by a stranger who promised to buy her supplies from the local market.

“It is an open place. And anything can happen,” says Chiko Kamphandira, the school principal.

Back outside, Stercia, who is head of the school choir, begins to sing one of her favourite songs, before stopping suddenly, self-conscious and shy.

“I am going to work hard and fulfill my dreams,” she says. “I don’t see myself as any different. I am just a human being.”



Stercia Kanyowa with her friends at Malingunde School for the Visually Impaired



Ian Simbota in the radio studio during his talk show

## Ian Simbota's story

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Blantyre, southern Malawi

Ian Simbota is eating a chicken tikka burger at a Pakistani fast food diner when we spot him one evening in Blantyre.

When we ask to talk to him, he scans our journalists' credentials before agreeing. He works as a late-night radio talk show host and a DJ with the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation. And he has just returned from Kasungu, in the central region of Malawi, where he was the master of ceremonies for World International Albinism Awareness Day.

When he finishes his meal, he invites us to the radio studio.

Once on the airwaves, the slightly pensive man we met at the diner transforms. He taunts and teases his listeners. The studio is his safe place.

Later, he tells us about his double life. As a radio star, his voice and name are widely recognised. But not all of his listeners know that he has albinism. And there are times when his confident persona gives way to fear.

"Look, I am working at night. And people know I am here," he says. "What are they thinking, planning? From here I will get a car and go home. And when I go home, I feel unsafe. What if they attack me? I think about it all the time."

Ian became a full-time DJ in 2015. It was a dream come true. "I wanted to be a midwife as a child [but] thankfully my mother convinced me otherwise," he laughs.

"And then, I wanted to be a radio host. Geoffrey Zigoma [the gospel singer] made a huge impact on my life."





“I like radio because you could  
come naked to the studio and  
it doesn't matter. People are  
listening to your voice.”

– Ian Sambota

But life hasn't been easy for Ian.

When he was born, he was the second child in his family to have albinism. His father walked out on them.

"My father told my mum to kill us. When she refused, he left," he says, matter-of-factly.

"At that time, people didn't know about the genes and stuff. My dad thought it was a curse."

Ian's mother left her village in southern Malawi and came to Blantyre with her two children to look for a job. She found one as a cleaner at the College of Medicine.

His father remarried. His next child was also born with albinism.

School was tough for Ian. He says his teachers didn't realise that he was visually impaired so would just call him lazy. When he completed his certificate in journalism and applied for internships in radio, his visual impairments worked against him again – station managers were concerned that he wouldn't be able to see the computer screens, he says.

His mother died after a prolonged illness, and the new job felt like the start of a new life for him. But then the attacks on persons with albinism began.

"I can tell you, it has become difficult," he says. "I have friends. But at this point in time, I only trust one friend in my circle. I have other friends, but then sometimes, you just wonder, you know, maybe, he is being used [to get close to me]."

He also has to face harassment on the streets and says his girlfriend left him last year because "she couldn't deal with what ... [I was going through]".

But today he's the voice of a successful radio show.

"I like radio because you could come naked to the studio and it doesn't matter. People are listening to your voice," he says, pausing for a second, before laughing.

"I have done a little bit of TV, but radio is better because listeners create a different picture of what they think you are. It's only now [with the crisis] that people realise I am a person with albinism".



Ian Simbota Radio DJ says “my father told my mum to kill us.”



Persons with albinism are hunted for their body parts and bones.

# End Note

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This book is an account of the lived realities of persons with albinism in Malawi. It chronicles lives of fear and tragedy. Lives in which discrimination, violent attacks, murder, injury and abduction by strangers, family members and criminal gangs are commonplace – all driven by superstitious beliefs. Attacks happen in local communities and across country borders. They also happen in the context of impunity.

Some of the stories in this book are cases that Amnesty International has worked on since 2016.

Children with albinism are worst affected, with many dropping out of school for fear of abduction. We are happy that Harrison Mokoshoni is back in school. We all know that if access to quality education is guaranteed, it can be an equalizer, a real anchor of the rights that a person needs to meet their full potential. His mother's livelihood has been restored. The support of well-wishers from within the Amnesty International movement has been invaluable in helping Harrison and his mother get back on their feet. Amnesty International members have also supported other children who are not in this book like Annie Alfred to get back to school. Children like Stercia, Foster, Harrison and Latido need adequate protection measures to enjoy their human rights.

Edna Cedric lost her son, Hari. She, and many others whose relatives have been killed or maimed for life, continue to seek justice. But access to justice has been slow and marred by several challenges including delays in investigations, lack of forensic skills among police investigators to preserve evidence, and poor case documentation management. This has created a culture of impunity for crimes committed against persons with albinism in Malawi and in doing so sends the wrong message to would-be offenders.

## Is there hope?

Yes, there is hope. Every killing of a person with albinism in Malawi has deepened our resolve to see an end to these attacks and a Malawi that respects the rights of persons with albinism.

In 2016, the Government of Malawi amended the Penal Code and the Anatomy Act. The amended laws criminalise and give stiffer sentences for abduction and killing of persons with albinism, for conspiring, guiding, insinuating these crimes, and for exhumation and being found in possession of body parts and tissue.

The Government of Malawi has made deliberate efforts to establish the population of persons with albinism in Malawi. From a previous estimate of 7,000–10,000, the 2018 census revealed that there are 134,000 persons with albinism in Malawi.

It is encouraging that many many organisations have come onboard and are now supporting the efforts of the United Nations Independent Expert On the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism in different ways.

A lot more still needs to be done to challenge discrimination, harmful attitudes and practices, as well as stigmatisation of persons with albinism. We must challenge myths and superstitious beliefs, and now address the root causes behind the attacks on persons with albinism. All of us must desist from using derogatory names like katchiluwe (unripened tomato), mzungudalo (fake white person) and albino, when referring to and interacting with persons with albinism.

At Amnesty International we continue to work towards influencing SADC Member states to condemn in the strongest sense the attacks on persons with albinism accross, to collaborate towards ensuring enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism in the region and to adopt the Regional Action Plan on Albinism in Africa (2017–2021). The time to act is now.

Deprose Muchena  
Regional Director  
Southern Africa Regional Office  
Amnesty International



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97 Oxford Road  
Rosebank  
Johannesburg  
2193  
South Africa  
[www.amnesty.org.za](http://www.amnesty.org.za)

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