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African music star uses fame to help fellow albinos

Friday, January 06, 2006

By Yaroslav Trofimov, The Wall Street Journal

BAMAKO, Mali -- Salif Keita says that when he was born in a village south of here, his father recoiled in horror and expelled both Salif and his mother. "What is this thing?" the father wondered aloud.

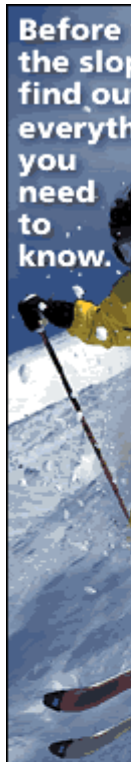
The reason: Mr. Keita -- now one of the most popular African singers, with several hit albums and a big international audience -- is a black man with white skin.

Like millions of people around the world, Mr. Keita has a genetic condition known as albinism, which deprives skin, hair and sometimes eyes of pigmentation. In North America and Europe, albinos lead relatively normal lives, though many must contend with poor eyesight. But for albinos here in Africa, so starkly diverse in appearance from their neighbors, life is complicated by prejudice and illness. Albinism in parts of Africa is estimated to affect as many as one in a thousand people.

In many traditional African cultures, including Mali's, albinos are seen as bearers of bad luck. Many are abandoned at birth or even slaughtered in ritual sacrifice. "We are different. When people see us on the street, they usually spit on the ground in disgust," Mr. Keita says. "What can be worse than this?"

Then, there is the relentless African sun, from which the albinos' pigment-less skin offers little protection. "Skin cancers among the albinos here usually start in adolescence," Somita Keita, head of the dermatology department at the Mali University clinic, explained as a 9-year-old albino girl, splattered with black sunburn blotches, waited outside. "An albino who survives to the age of 40 or 50 isn't something we often get to see here," he said.

The 56-year-old musician -- who is not related to Dr. Keita -- is one of the rare survivors. He is a world-music star who packs concert halls in



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Paris and Rome, and who plans to tour the U.S. this year. Mr. Keita is also the best-known albino in Africa. Having suffered so much in his youth, he's using his fame and wealth to improve the fortunes of other albinos.

"My goal is to make sure that albinos are treated like normal people," Mr. Keita says, sipping a tiny glass of sweet Malian tea in Moffou, a culture center that he built on the outskirts of Bamako, the capital of Mali. Returning from a European concert tour before Christmas, he brought 1,500 tubes of sunscreen, a simple treatment helpful in preventing skin cancer but that, because it is expensive, remains well beyond the reach of most Malian albinos.

With his youngest daughter, Natenin, born an albino in late 2005, Mr. Keita -- whose albino sister died of cancer at the age of 24 -- says he feels duty bound to focus his energies on fellow albinos' plight. He already lent his prestige to an association known as SOS Albinos, which has united thousands of albinos in Mali and prompted the creation of similar bodies across Africa. Now, he says he will channel 10 percent of all his royalty income into a new foundation to help albino children.

While the new foundation still awaits approval by Mali's cumbersome bureaucracy, the sheer force of Mr. Keita's example -- and his passionate defense of albino rights -- has already brought change. Ibrahim Djire, one of whose nine children, 13-year-old Djouma, is an albino, says he was struck by how attitudes have improved in recent years in his neighborhood of Lafiabougou, a sprawl of walled cinder-block houses on the edge of Bamako.

"Before, people would be afraid, they would say that albinos' presence makes them vomit. But now my daughter goes to school, she even has friends here in the neighborhood," says Mr. Djire, whose skin is black. "The fact that Salif is an albino influenced people a lot. He's very well-known, and the fact that he's fighting discrimination so hard has transformed mentalities."

Djouma, whose translucent white hair is braided in traditional African style, nodded in agreement. "In school, there is no more difference," she smiled. Among several people interviewed in the area, most said they were fans of Mr. Keita's music and accepted albinos. Only one, 48-year-old Kader Coulibaly, expressed the opinion that albinos are dangerous carriers of disease, and said that he would never let his children come near an albino.

Born into a noble family tracing its lineage to Mali's medieval emperor, Mr. Keita as a young man yearned to be a schoolteacher. But, in 1969, just a day before he was to graduate from teachers' college here, he was taken aside and told that he wouldn't be receiving a diploma. "They said that the children would be too afraid of me because of my skin color," Mr. Keita recalls. "But, at the same time, they were very happy to hire real whites as teachers."

As a result of that setback, music became Mr. Keita's career choice, and he has spent much of his adult life establishing his fame in Europe. For American audiences, his best-known performance is the song "Tomorrow" from the 2001 movie "Ali" about the boxer Muhammad Ali.

"Salif is our ambassador. When people listen to him, they forget that he's an albino -- and then they accept the difference, realizing that we albinos, too, can achieve something," says Thierno Diallo, a university professor here and chairman of the SOS Albinos association.

Bringing albinos out of a ghetto of superstition and shame saves lives. It's not just about access to education, jobs and sunscreen lotions. Albinos in many parts of Africa are in special danger because of animist customs that ascribe magical powers to potions made from sacrificed albinos. Around Africa, parents hide their albino children ahead of elections and important sports competitions, fearing that they will be abducted and killed.

In 2000, during an election campaign, an albino teenager, Mamatou Koita, disappeared from a boarding school in the town of Sanankoroba, just outside Bamako. The main suspects were never arrested. Then, last November, a 4-year-old child, Soumaila Doumbia, was found dead in the same municipality, in the well of the village of Sinsina, a cluster of mud houses. The body appeared to have been mutilated, authorities say.

"What we were told is that his tongue was cut off to sprinkle a fetish with blood that would bring good luck in the land dispute that some of the villagers of Sinsina have with the village nearby," says Cheick Amadou Koita, the district magistrate who is leading the investigation.

"There are atrocious things going on with albinos here, crimes against humanity," says Mr. Keita, the singer. "But it's all hidden from sight, and the government couldn't care less."

While praised by the international community as one of Africa's most democratic, the Malian government is reluctant to acknowledge that its albino citizens face special threats. "The exclusion or discrimination of albinos just doesn't exist in Mali. Maybe the albinos have complexes and they feel that they are excluded, but we are the society, not them, and it's up to us to judge this, not up to them. This is a false problem," says Baba Toumany Kane, spokesman for the Ministry of Social Development, Solidarity and the Elderly, the government agency whose functions include combating discrimination against the disabled and other minorities.

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