

IN MY GENES

“...A salutary rebuke to prejudice, in all its forms... **IN MY GENES** therefore becomes an important, challenging and, above all, necessary film.”

— *John Sibi-Okumu, Writer, Actor and Television Presenter*

IN MY GENES Tells Intimate Story of What it is like to be an Albino in Kenya

7th Sense Communications announces the release of **IN MY GENES** by Lupita Nyong'o on **Thursday May 28th, 2009**. This eye-opening story of vision, violence and the value of difference set in Kenya's vibrant capital city, Nairobi and her environs, takes viewers into the experience of being an albino in Kenya. Two years before the news of the rampant murders of albinos in Tanzania, writer, producer and director, Lupita Nyong'o – herself a native of Kenya, began documenting the life stories of 8 extraordinary people with albinism, a people so visible and yet little mentioned in everyday Kenyan life. She discovered stories of people who had overcome great superstitious beliefs and practices, discrimination, and physical harm. Then the killings were heard of in Tanzania, and they soon spread to Burundi and even Kenya. The film became a matter of urgency, a dramatic appeal to proclaim the humanity of people with albinism and an entreaty for the restoration of their human right to life in our region.

Through sponsorship received from Safaricom Ltd., CFC Stanbic Bank and a few individuals, sufficient funds were raised to complete the film in December 2008. The completed work, both touching and triumphant, takes viewers principally into Agnes' past, a woman with albinism who overcomes the torment of being born albino in a family, community and society that discriminated against the condition. The film has received high acclaim at various festivals in the USA, including the New York African Film Festival.

Albinism was Lupita Nyong'o's chosen topic for her undergraduate thesis project in 2006 at Hampshire College, in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA. She became aware of her own ignorance on the subject of albinism when she heard of the work her neighbour, CK (featured in the film), a person with albinism and a contemporary of Nyong'o's, was doing. CK had helped in the founding the Albinism Society of Kenya. Nyong'o was embarrassed that she knew nothing about her friend's condition despite having lived next to her for 10 years. She embarked on the documentary as a way to educate herself and others like her who may not know that they don't know or need to know.

“I wanted to address my ignorance, expose and oppose the unfair treatment of people with albinism as a matter of principle toward the tolerance of human difference and at the same time tell a powerful and inspirational African story,” says Nyong'o, who adds that she is committed to telling Africa's stories in a dignifying manner, “Though there is tragedy in the lives of some of the characters in the film, the main emotion I hope you leave with is celebratory: celebrate humanity, difference.”

In the wake of the murders in our neighbouring country, Tanzania, and threats on the lives of people with albinism locally and as far as Benin, today many people with albinism live in fear for their lives, making the world append on us the title barbarians that we as Africans have fought for so long to undo. **IN MY GENES** celebrates the resiliency of the individuals and how they managed to carve out unique and expressive personalities and attitudes that would enrich the lives of those with the pleasure of meeting them.

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IN MY GENES

The FILM

Running Time: 78 minutes

A production by Lupita Nyong'o and 7th Sense Communications

The TEAM

Producer/Director/Editor/Writer: Lupita Nyong'o
Cinematographer: Willie Owusu
Composers: Coire Williams, Iconic Music
Characters: Agnes Muthakye, Alex Munyere, Benedict Kinyua, CK Nyambura, Delphine Karumba, Grace Karihe, Isaac Mwaura, James Mutai, Pamela Mukami, Wycliffe Ogutu, Dr. Fatma Abdallah

Brief SYNOPSIS

Agnes may not seem like someone with much to laugh about. For one thing, she has albinism - a lack of pigment in the skin, hair and eyes-- and her appearance has provoked prejudice from family, friends and strangers since she was born. But despite all odds, Agnes refuses to lead a life of sorrow.

This fascinating and inspiring documentary also shares the stories of seven other people's individual experiences of living their lives with albinism in Kenya, a predominantly black society. While each person's story is unique, they all have one thing in common: they know what it is like to stand out uncomfortably from the crowd!

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Synopsis

IN MY GENES is the eye-opening story of vision, violence and the value of human difference set in Kenya's vibrant capital city, Nairobi and her environs. Shot in 2006, before the news of the rampant murders of albinos in Tanzania, the film is both heartrending and invigorating in tone.

Albinism, the inherited genetic condition that causes little or no pigmentation in the eyes, skin or hair, has been wrought with misunderstanding among many African communities, and Kenya is no exception. Being a person with albinism comes with constant stares, stigma, stereotypes, and discrimination. Some common misconceptions are that children with albinism are products of affairs with white men, that the condition is contagious, affects the brain development of the individual and, most traditionally, that they are a curse or a bad omen. While **IN MY GENES** addresses these misconceptions, this is not another "Oh-Poor-Africa" documentary. The stories are an affirmation of what individuals under great persecution can make of themselves and what they can then inspire and challenge in us. It is a film of such effortless intimacy, subtle glimpses and honest examination.

We experience what it is like to be "white" in a "black" society through the uplifting story of Agnes Muthakye, a woman, who at first glance may not seem like someone with much to laugh about. For one thing, she has albinism-- a lack of pigment in the skin and eyes-- and her appearance has provoked prejudice from family, friends and strangers since she was born. Agnes is also blind and as a woman of few means, she heads a household of 7 children, her 17-year-old daughter expecting another, by weaving traditional kyondoo baskets and knitting sweaters for sale. But despite all odds, Agnes refuses to lead a life of sorrow. She invites us into her life as she constructs a kyondoo over the course of a week. During this time, Agnes discovers the real reason why she is the way she is, and why she lost her eyesight. Yet Agnes keeps going, trusting in the work of her hands and the strength of her God. The threads of the woolen basket she weaves become a poignant metaphor of the need to reconstruct our human ties and the importance of solidarity.

Interviews with seven other individuals inter-cut Agnes' narrative to share their unique experiences of living with albinism. CK, an energetic, eloquent and witty person with albinism grew up alongside a dark-skinned twin sister (a reported very rare occurrence for only one twin to be a person with albinism). She shares the surprising perks of being a person with albinism, including receiving preferential treatment from her parents, and yet, also the destruction of her dreams from traumatizing childhood experiences. James is expecting a baby with his dark-skinned wife, Pamela, any day soon. He tells us of what courting a dark-skinned girl was like and they share their hopes and fears should they have a child with albinism. Mwaura, a politician, Alex and Grace, educators, Benedict, a leather artisan, and Wycliffe, a medical student, all help bring alive a compelling and complex experience that charmingly tackles questions about the effects of their condition on aspects of their childhood, adolescence, sexuality, race, and dreams.

In Kenya, statistics of the occurring frequency of albinism are not available, as little national attention has been paid specifically to this condition. However in some parts of Africa, where studies have been done, albinism is estimated to affect as many as one in every 1,000 people. This is indication that people with albinism do make up a considerable number of our population. The film is filled with facts about the condition and acts as a powerful introduction to understanding the condition.

This film is inspiring, informative, and disturbing. The images are unforgettable, and the stories resonate reminding us of what it means to be human, what it means to love. **IN MY GENES** celebrates the resilience and vibrancy of people who sorely stand out from the crowd and manage to teach the world a thing or two about transforming perceived weakness into strength in the process.

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Director's Statement

I am a Kenyan Filmmaker, born in Mexico to Kenyan parents, raised in Kenya and educated partly in the United States of America. The idea of making a documentary about the experiences of being a person with albinism in Kenya came about when I was made aware of my own ignorance on the subject. I returned home to Kenya in 2006, the final year of my undergraduate programme in the USA, to work on a documentary film as my final thesis project. Two years before the news of the rampant murders of albinos in Tanzania, I found that CK, a neighbour with albinism and an acquaintance was in the process of forming the Albinism Society of Kenya. I was embarrassed that I knew nothing about CK's condition despite having lived next to her and interacted with her for over 10 years. I was not privy, for example, to the fact that she had suffered from the anxiety of being stared at, ignored, ridiculed, and feared by people who thought that her condition was contagious, dangerous or evil. I did not know that people like her had been killed at birth because of superstitious beliefs that their condition was a curse or a bad omen. I also did not know that mothers of people like CK were often banished from their communities for being thought to have had an affair with a white man. I certainly did not know what caused CK to look as pale as she did! The need to form the Society was proof to me that this was a significant minority group whose issues had been sidelined and ignored by the major Kenyan society and they were in need of being heard.

I embarked on this documentary as a way to educate myself and others like me on the condition of albinism and to shed light on the stigma, discrimination and persecution that they face because of their difference. It is alarming that this special condition that exists in every race and civilization of human beings – and indeed in most animal species – should be so hyper-visible and yet so socially invisible (In my research I could not find any traditional stories with people with albinism as characters, for example).

My goal in making this film was therefore to tell the story behind the silence. I chose to focus on the personal and intimate experiences of people with albinism who had overcome the great social odds, in order to add to the plethora of positive cultural stories that they have been excluded from for so long. The 8 people I chose represent people with albinism from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, who, though they all have very distinct experiences and opinions, are all united in their embracing of themselves. I wanted to capture the spirit of individuals who have persevered in the face of great hostility and harm. Agnes is the natural main character of the documentary, the epitome of endurance and enthusiasm despite all the drawbacks and persecution in her life. I knew the moment I met her that her story would carry more than the message of albinism awareness: Agnes' story stands for the embracing of one's self and therefore human diversity.

I am of very dark complexion, and therefore one would imagine that my background could not possibly relate with the subjects of this film. And yet, I found that my experience as a dark Kenyan in a country affected by complexion-politics and European standards of beauty was that I too was ridiculed and discriminated against due to my dark skin when I was growing up. In this respect, I am familiar with the insecurity and fear that develops from not being physically acceptable. Everyone, I believe, can relate to the feeling of being rejected and unaccepted in one way or another.

In the course of making this film, one of the things I heard over and over from all my subjects was "Love and respect yourself the way you are." Back then, this phrase seemed like a simplistic cliché. Since then and with the advent of the massacres in Tanzania and its environs, this phrase has become my anthem: that we will love and respect ourselves – humanity – the way we are. In **IN MY GENES**, I desire that people applaud the humanity of people with albinism and that they may be inspired to accept difference of any kind. Not only do I want to shed light on the problem of stigma, but I also want to celebrate human difference. **IN MY GENES** is as tragically uplifting and positive as Agnes, who is its cornerstone.

Lupita Nyong'o

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IN MY GENES

BIOS

Creator/Director/Editor/Producer

Lupita Nyong'o has worked on the production teams of critically acclaimed films including *THE CONSTANT GARDENER* (2005) directed by Fernando Mereilles and *THE NAMESAKE* (2006) directed by Mira Nair. During her four-year undergraduate programme where she concentrated on the study of film and theatre she made a number of short experimental films, the last of which, entitled *DECOLONIZING THE MIND* (2005), won the 'Best of Hampshire College' award at the Pioneer Valley Five College Film Festival, 2007. The film is a personified visual exploration of conflicted African identity.

Lupita's latest filmic endeavour has been writing, producing, directing and editing an award-winning feature-length documentary entitled, ***IN MY GENES*** (Winner of 'Best Documentary' and 'Best Film of 2008' at the Pioneer Valley Five College Film Festival, 2008; and 'Souvenir Selection,' Africala Film Festival, Mexico, 2008). ***IN MY GENES*** addresses the personal and societal challenges that people with albinism face as members of one of the most hyper-visible and misunderstood minority groups of Kenya's predominantly black society through the experiences of eight individuals from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds.

Lupita moved back to Nairobi in August 2008 and has since broadened her portfolio to include producing the award-winning MTV Music Video, *LITTLE THINGS WE DO*, song created and performed by celebrated Wahu and Bobby Wine. Apart from her passion for film and video, Lupita also has over ten years experience in stage acting. She enjoys and practises capoeira and attempts to play the harmonica. Lupita joins the Yale University in September 2009 for a Master of Fine Arts.

Cinematographer

Willie Owusu is a Kenya-based cinematographer who brings to the project over twelve years of documentary and narrative experience. Owusu has worked on celebrated projects for CNN, Associated Press, Ford Foundation and Medeva TV. He has also written and directed award-winning short narrative films, which have been screened at festivals in Europe including winning the Ecumenical Prize at the Oberhausen International Short Film Festival in Germany. His portfolio also includes music videos and television commercials. He is currently the Director of Photography on M-NET's new television series, *CHANGES*. Owusu is one of the founding partners of production company, BIG IDEAS ENTERTAINMENT LTD.

Composers*

Coire Williams is an avid music lover and seasonal band player. He plays the guitar, drums and kora. He is currently a stop-motion animator based in New York.

Iconic Music is a record label that is owned by RANDOM GROUP LIMITED with the mission to provide media production, entertainment, and cultural solutions to a market that is yearning for a new way of doing things. Producers Edwin Seno, Alex Mugenda and Victor Mbugua Kimani aim to inject new life into the Kenyan music industry by turning music into a serious profit-making venture.

**IN MY GENES also features music by Nyota Ndogo, Iddi Achieng', Harry Kimani and Jabali Afrika*

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REVIEWS

*“...A salutary rebuke to prejudice, in all its forms... **IN MY GENES** therefore becomes an important, challenging and, above all, necessary film. Ms. Nyong’o deserves praise for the conversation her debut film invites us to have with ourselves after we have seen it and taken it all in. The dedication is to “different people.” Lest we forget: we are all different but the same, as human beings.”*

— John Sibi-Okumu, Writer, Actor and Television Presenter

“...Powerful”

— Patricia Amira, The Patricia Show

“...Fantastic!”

— Rick Guidotti, Photographer & Albinism Activist, Positive Exposure

“A candid exposé of what it means to live with albinism in Africa, the direct essence of our being.”

— Isaac Mwaura, Albinism Society of Kenya

“Lupita’s film is both poignant, given the recent killings of Albinos in Tanzania and Burundi, beautifully shot and surprisingly really funny... If this installment is anything to go by then Lupita is definitely a rising star in Kenyan and international film-making circles.”

— Grace Kerongo, Nairobi Star

*“With her documentary, “**IN MY GENES**”, Lupita Nyong’o tells us about ourselves. About our ability to stigmatize and exclude. Our inability to accept difference. Through CK, Mwaura, Alex and the others- all of whom have faced the challenge of being born with albinism- but mostly through Agnes, Lupita helps us to see life from the perspective of a segment of our society that is highly visible, yet totally invisible in all areas of life. It leaves us with a sense of shame that we can so sorely lack understanding, but it also leaves us with a sense of pride that despite all odds, one can, like Agnes, triumph. It is a must see for all who want to learn, to understand.”*

— Mumbi Ngugi, Albinism Foundation of East Africa

“...This is an eye opener for all who will view it and will change a lot of perceptions borne out of ignorance.”

— Iddi Achieng’, Performing Artist

“It is GREAT... beautifully shot... very engaging... a HUGE accomplishment.”

— Byron Hurt, Award-Winning Filmmaker, HIP HOP: BEYOND BEATS AND RHYMES

“Eye-opening”

— The Daily Collegian

IN MY GENES

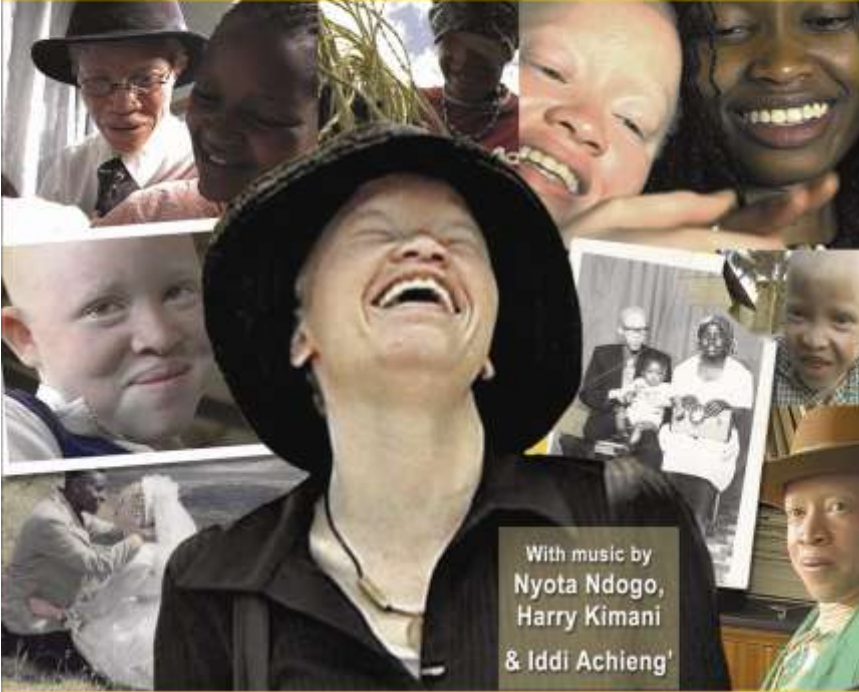
SCREENINGS & AWARDS

- **Rwanda International Film Festival, RWANDA** – June 2009
- **Real Life Pan-African Film Festival, Accra, GHANA** – May 2009
(Official Selection)
- **New York African Film Festival, New York, NY, USA** – April 2009
(Official Selection)
- **Salt Lake City Film Centre “New Face of Africa” Screening Series, Salt Lake City, UT, USA** – October 2008
- **Zanzibar International Film Festival, Stone Town, ZANZIBAR** – July, 2008
- **Pacific Kino Garden Film Series, Portland, OR, USA** – June 2008
- **Africala Film Festival, Mexico City, MEXICO** – April 2008
(Winner: Souvenir Selection)
- **Five-College Film Festival, Northampton, MA, USA** – February, 2008
(Winner: “Best Film 2008” & “Best Documentary”)
- **Kenya International Film Festival, Nairobi, KENYA** – October, 2007

IN MY GENES


POSTER

What is it like to be 'white' in a 'black' society?



With music by
Nyota Ndogo,
Harry Kimani
& Iddi Achieng'

Lupita Nyong'o presents
IN MY GENES
Stories on living with albinism in Kenya



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PHOTOS



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