

HADITHI ZA MABADILIKO

Uanaharakati wa Wapenzi wa Jinsia Moja na
Uvuka Jinsia Barani Afrika

Toleo la Kiswahili



Stories of Change: Queer Activism in Africa
Kiswahili Edition

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STORIES OF CHANGE

Queer Activism in Africa

Kiswahili Edition

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Taboom Media & GALA Queer Archive
2024

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UTANGULIZI

Mnamo Januari 2021, katika kilele cha janga la COVID-19, Taboom Media ilikusanya wanaharakati 30 kutoka nchi 18 za Kiafrika mtandaoni kwa warsha ya wiki moja ya Utetezi wa Vyombo vya Habari kwa LGBTQI+ Usawa.

Wakati wetu pamoja ulipofika mwisho, tuligundua kuwa hatujamaliza kushiriki hadithi zetu. Sote tulitaka kuelewa zaidi ni nini kiliwachochea wanaharakati wenzetu kujiunga na vita hivi vya pamoja vya kuleta usawa.

Kumbukumbu nzuri ya kishoga ilianza kutengenezwa, kwa hivyo tuliwasiliana na GALA ili kuona jinsi tunavyoweza kushirikiana na kushiriki hadithi hizi. Tuliafiki wazo la kuwaagiza wasanii mashoga na washirika watoe vielelezo asilia kwa kila hadithi na kufungasha kila kitu pamoja kwenye kitabu.

Antholojia yetu ya kwanza, *Hopes and Dreams That Sound Like Yours: Stories of Queer Activism in Sub-Saharan Africa* zilichapishwa kwa Kiingereza baadaye mwaka huo. Mnamo 2022, tukiwa na kikundi kipya cha wanaharakati, tulichapisha *Courage to Share: Queer Activism in Africa* kwa Kiingereza na Kifaransa. *Whispers and Shouts* ikaja mwaka wa 2023, na kufuatiwa na juzuu letu la nne na (kwa sasa) la mwisho *Love, Trouble* mnamo 2024. Zaidi ya watu 200 wamechangia mfululizo huu kwa hadithi, vielelezo, video, uhuishaji, ushauri, uhariri, tafsiri na muundo.

Toleo hili maalum la Kiswahili linaangazia hadithi 12 zenye nguvu na vielelezo kutoka Juzuu 1-4. Katika kurasa hizi, watetezi wa haki za binadamu kutoka barani kote wanashiriki hadithi zao za asili na safari za wanaharakati. Matokeo yake ni antholojia yenye nguvu ya upinzani, uthabiti, na utambuzi. Ili kusoma mkusanyiko kamili wa takriban hadithi 100 katika Kiingereza na Kifaransa, au dazeni tofauti katika Kiarabu au Kireno, tembelea TaboomMedia.com/resources au GALA.co.za.

Hadithi na vielelezo vyote vya *Uanaharakati wa Wapenzi wa Jinsia Moja na Uvuka Jinsia Barani Afrika (Queer Activism in Africa)* vinachapishwa chini ya leseni ya Creative Commons, kwa hivyo tunakuhimiza uendelee kutafsiri

na kuzishiriki katika Kihausa, Oromo, Amharic, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, Somali, Malagasy, Amazigh, Akan, Zulu, Kinyarwanda, Chewa...kila lugha chini ya jua.

Hata ikiwa wewe ni nani, popote ulipo, bila kujali historia yako, tunakualika ujipate katika hadithi hizi.

Mara tu unapomaliza kuzisoma, ni wakati wa kuandika yako mwenyewe.



Brian Pellot

Mhariri wa Msururu wa Hadithi na Meneja wa Mradi
Mkurugenzi Mwanzilishi katika Taboom Media
Julai 2024, Cape Town

INTRODUCTION

In January 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Taboom Media gathered 30 activists from 18 African countries online for a week-long Media Advocacy for LGBTQI+ Equality workshop.

As our time together came to a close, we realised we weren't done sharing our stories. We all wanted to better understand what inspired our fellow activists to join this collective fight for equality.

A beautiful queer archive started taking shape, so we reached out to GALA to see how we might collaborate and share these stories. We landed on the idea of commissioning queer and ally artists to produce original illustrations for each story and packaging everything together in a book.

Our first anthology, *Hopes and Dreams That Sound Like Yours: Stories of Queer Activism in Sub-Saharan Africa* was published in English later that year. In 2022, with a new group of activists, we published *Courage to Share: Queer Activism in Africa* in English and French. *Whispers and Shouts* came in 2023, followed by our fourth and (for now) final volume *Love, Trouble* in 2024. More than 200 people have contributed to the series with stories, illustrations, videos, animations, mentoring, editing, translation, and design.

This special Kiswahili Edition spotlights 12 powerful stories and illustrations from Volumes 1-4. In these pages, human rights defenders from across the continent share their origin stories and activist journeys. The result is a powerful anthology of resistance, resilience, and recognition. To read the full collection of nearly 100 stories in English and French, or a different dozen in Arabic or Portuguese, visit TaboomMedia.com/resources or GALA.co.za.

All *Queer Activism in Africa* stories and illustrations are published under a Creative Commons licence, so we encourage you to keep translating and sharing them in Hausa, Oromo, Amharic, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, Somali, Malagasy, Amazigh, Akan, Zulu, Kinyarwanda, Chewa...every language under the sun.

Whoever you are, wherever you're from, whatever your background, we invite you to find yourself in these stories.

Once you're done reading them, it's time to write your own.

Brian Pellot

Series Editor and Project Manager
Founding Director at Taboom Media
July 2024, Cape Town

MAELEZO KUTOKA KWA TIMU

Baadhi ya hadithi katika antholojia hii ni pamoja na masimulizi ya kiwewe na lugha ya wazi. Tafadhali soma kwa utaratibu.



Maneno na vifupisho vinavyotumiwa kuelezea tofauti za kijinsia hutofautiana katika muktadha na utamaduni. Baadhi ya wanaharakati hufanyia kazi “haki za LGBT,” wengine kwa usawa wa “LGBTQI+.” Katika antholojia hii yote, masharti na vifupisho vya kila mwandishi vimehifadhiwa.



Baadhi ya majina yamebadilishwa (*) au kubadilishwa na herufi za kwanza ili kuhifadhi majina yasijulikane.



NOTES FROM THE TEAM

Some of the stories in this anthology include accounts of trauma and explicit language. Please read with care.



The words and abbreviations used to describe sexual and gender diversity vary across context and culture. Some activists work on “LGBT rights,” others for “LGBTQI+ equality.” Throughout this anthology, each individual author’s preferred terms and abbreviations have been preserved.



Some names have been changed (*) or replaced with initials to preserve anonymity.





KUTANA NAMI

KIM

Tanzania

Nilinunua jozi yangu ya kwanza ya mabondia nikiwa na miaka 21. Zillikuwa nyeusi na kijivu na zilinifanya nijisikie vizuri sana, wa kiume, lakini nilikuwa na wasiwasi wazazi wangu wangepikiria nini ikiwa wangepata chupi za wanaume kwenye droo yangu. Ilikuwa 2014, na bado waliniona kuwa msichana wao mdogo.

Baada ya kuziosha jioni hiyo, nilikua na wasiwasi. Ningeweza kuzikausha wapi? Ilibidi iwe mahali ambapo mama yangu hatatazama. Nilizitandaza karibu na nguo zangu chafu.

Baada ya mwezi mmoja kuvaa mabondia haya yenye unyevunyevu, nilipata maambukizi na kuacha. Kuwaacha kulihuzunisha sana, lakini afya yangu ilikuwa muhimu zaidi. Nilijiahidi kuwa nitavaa tena siku moja. Nisingekata tamaa.

Miezi michache baadaye nilihamia upande wa pili wa Dar es Salaam na kujiunga na Chuo Kikuu cha Kimataifa cha Kampala nchini Tanzania. Ingawa ilikuwa vigumu kuishi chumba kimoja na wasichana wengine saba katika hosteli, ilikuwa bora kuliko kuishi chini ya macho ya wazazi wangu. Nilijitahidi kuingiana nao huku pia nikiwaaminisha wasichana hawa kuwa nilikuwa tofauti.

“Ni sawa kuwa tofauti, lakini unahitaji kuendelea kujaribu kufanya ngono na wavulana”, waliniambia. “Labda mpenzi wako wa kwanza hakufanya vizuri. Jaribu na mtu mwingine.”

“Lakini kwa nini niendeleo kujaribu jambo ambalo linaniumiza?” nilijiuliza.

Alasiri moja yenye joto kali kwenye chuo kikuu, mtu fulani aliyevalia shati jekundu alinivutia macho. Sikuweza kuacha kutazama. Ilikuwa Smith, mwanaume mbadili jinsia ambaye kila mtu alizungumza juu yake. Watu wengi walimwita “tomboy”. Neno “trans” lilikuwa geni kwangu. Nilijawa na hamu ya kuungana na Smith, hivyo nikamuomba rafiki yangu Safina, aliyemfahamu, atuunganishe.

“Kwanini? Unampenda?” Aliuliza.

“Apanaaa!” Nilicheka. “Nahitaji tu kuzungumza naye.”

Mara baada ya kupata namba yake sikusita kumtumia ujumbe mfupi: “Hujambo Smith! Huyu ndiye Kim.”

“Namba yangu amekupa nani?” “Safina”, nilijibu, kisha nikatoka nje ya mtandao. Sikujua angemjibuje mtu asiyemfahamu. Niliporudi mtandaoni jioni hiyo, majibu yake yalipamba uso wangu. Nilimuuliza ikiwa tunaweza kukutana.

Sikujua tungezungumza nini, lakini niliamua kwenda na mtiririko. Tulikubaliana tukutane Jumamosi hiyo mchana kwenye kantini ya shule tule chips mayai.

“Kwa hiyo unataka nini?” Aliuliza.

“Je, wewe ni msagaji?”

“Hapana, mimi ni mtu aliyebadili jinsia”, alisema kwa kukunja uso, kisha akatabasamu.

“Mwanaume aliye badili jinsia? Hiyo ina maana gani?”

“Ninabadilika kutoka kuwa mwanamke na kuwa mwanaume.”

“Subiri! Nini? Kwa hiyo una uume? Umeipata wapi? Wewe ni wa jinsia mbili?”

Akatabasamu tena. “Hapana, hapana, lakini siku moja nitakuelezea zaidi.”

“Sawa”, nilisema, lakini akili yangu bado ilikuwa imechanganyikiwa. “Kwa hivyo una uhusiano wa kimapenzi na mvulana au msichana?” “Wacha tuhifadhi hayo kwa siku nyingine.”

Wiki zilipita na hatukuwasiliana. Nilidhani labda nimemuudhi, lakini nikapata maandishi yake: “Habari Kim, vipi hali?”

“Mungu wangu!” Nilishangaa. Moyo wangu ulipiga kwa kasi sana. Baada ya ukimya wake wa muda mrefu, sikutarajia ujumbe mwingine.

Smith alisema alitaka kunipeleka mahali fulani na akanihakikishia nisiwe na wasiwasi. Ikiwa sikupenda mahali hapo, sitahitaji kwenda naye tena. Nilikubali. Niliamka mapema siku iliyofuata na kumngoja Smith kwenye kituo cha basi. Tulichukua dala dala hadi hotelini ambapo alimwambia mpokezi tuko pale kwa ajili ya mafunzo. Alituelekeza kwenye ghorofa ya pili ambapo watu wachache walikuwa tayari wamekusanyika karibu na ubao mweupe. Nilikaa pembeni, uzito wa udadisi ukiniponda.

Waandalizi walinikaribisha kwa Looking In, Looking Out (LILO), mbinu ya mafunzo ambayo hutoa ujuzi kuhusu mwelekeo wa kijinsia, utambulisho wa kijinsia na kujieleza, pamoja na jinsi ya kukabiliana na jamii kama shoga.

Siku hiyo, katika chumba hicho cha hoteli, safari yangu katika harakati ya ushoga ilianza.

Mafunzo hayo yalinifungua macho. Nilijifunza mengi juu yangu na jinsi ya kusimama na kuishi ukweli wangu bila woga. Mara moja nilijihisi mwepesi. Niliporudi nyumbani kwa likizo, nilianza kutundika mabondia yangu nje.

Mnamo 2022 nilianza kubadilika kimatibabu. Nimekumbana na upinzani mwingi, hata kutoka kwa marafiki mashoga, lakini napata faraja kwa kujua ninafanya hivi kwa ajili yangu, sio wao. Kadiri ninavyokua kuwa mimi wa kikweli, ndivyo ninavyokuwa na furaha.

Kim ni mwanaharakati aliyebadili jinsia ambaye anatumika kama mwelimishaji rika na mratibu wa kufikia jamii katika Mpango wa Tanzania Trans Initiative (TTI). Yeye pia ni mwanzilishi wa Bandari Salama Youth Group, ambayo inafanya kazi kusaidia watu wa jinsia tofauti, watu waliobadili jinsia na watu wasiothibitisha jinsia/wasio wa-jinsia mbili za kawaida kuboresha maisha yao.

MEET ME

KIM

Tanzania

I bought my first pair of boxers at 21. They were black and grey and made me feel so comfortable, so masculine, but I worried what my parents would think if they found men's underwear in my drawer. It was 2014, and they still considered me their little girl.

After washing them in the shower that evening, I grew anxious. Where could I dry them? It had to be somewhere my mother wouldn't look. I spread them out next to my dirty clothes.

After a month wearing these damp boxers, I got an infection and stopped. Abandoning them was heartbreaking, but my health was more important. I promised myself I'd wear them again one day. I wouldn't give up.

A few months later I moved to the other side of Dar es Salaam and enrolled at Kampala International University in Tanzania. Though it was challenging to share a room with seven other girls in the hostel, it was better than living under my parents' prying eyes. I struggled to fit in while also convincing these girls I was different.

"It's ok to be different, but you need to keep trying to have sex with guys", they would tell me. "Maybe your first boyfriend didn't do it right. Try it with someone else."

"But why should I keep trying something that hurts me?" I wondered.

One hot afternoon on campus, someone in a red shirt caught my eye. I couldn't stop staring. It was Smith, the trans man everybody talked about. Most people called him a tomboy. The word "trans" was new to me. I was filled with a desire to connect with Smith, so I asked my friend Safina, who knew him, to connect us.

"Why? You like him?" she asked.

"Nooo!" I giggled. "I just need to talk to him."

Once I got his number I didn't hesitate to text: "Hi Smith! This is Kim."

"Who gave you my number?"

"Safina", I responded, then went offline. I didn't know how he would respond to a stranger reaching out. When I went back online that evening, his response lit up my face. I asked him if we could meet.

I didn't know what we would talk about, but I decided to go with the flow. We agreed to meet that Saturday afternoon at the school canteen over chips maya.

"So, what do you want?" he asked.

"Are you a lesbian?"

"No, I'm a trans man", he said with a frown, then smiled.

"A trans man? What does that mean?"

"I am transitioning from female to male."

"Wait! What? So you have a penis? Where did you get it? Are you intersex?"

He smiled again. "No, no, but one day I'll share more with you."

"Okay", I said, but my mind was still confused. "So are you in a relationship with a boy or a girl?"

"Let's save all that for another day."

Weeks passed and we didn't communicate. I thought maybe I had offended him, but then I got his text: "Hello Kim, how are you?"

"Oh my God!" I exclaimed. My heart beat so fast. After his long silence, I didn't expect another message.

Smith said he wanted to take me somewhere and assured me not to worry. If I didn't like the place, I didn't have to go with him again. I agreed.

I woke up early the next day and waited for Smith at the bus stop. We took a dala dala (minibus taxi) to a hotel where he told the receptionist we were there for a training. She directed us to the second floor where quite a few people were already gathered around a whiteboard. I sat on the edge, the weight of curiosity crushing me.

The organisers welcomed me to Looking In, Looking Out (LILO), a training methodology that provides knowledge about sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, as well as how to cope in society as a queer person. On that day, in that hotel room, my journey in queer activism began.

That training opened my eyes. I learned so much about myself and how to stand up and live my truth without fear. I immediately felt lighter. When I went back home for the holidays, I started hanging my boxers outside.

In 2022 I started transitioning medically. I've faced a lot of backlash, even from queer friends, but take comfort in knowing I'm doing this for me, not them. The more I become myself, the happier I become.

Kim is a transgender activist who serves as a peer educator and community outreach coordinator with Tanzania Trans Initiative (TTI). He is also the founder of Bandari Salama Youth Group, which works to help Intersex, Transgender and Gender Non-Confirming/Non-Binary people improve their livelihoods.



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HATA MBAO ZILIZOVUNJIKA HUIMBA

*AMBER

Ethiopia

Utoto wangu katika miaka ya mapema ya 2000 ulikuwa sehemu sawa za matamania na wasiwasi. Nilijitahidi kufikia ukamilifu ili kukidhi matazamio makubwa ya wazazi wangu, huku nikitafuta pia uhusiano wa karibu na hali ya kuwa mtu nje ya nyumbani.

Mnamo mwaka wa 2015, nikiwa bado naishi kwa furaha na familia yangu huko Addis Ababa, nilianza chuo kikuu, nilisoma kama maisha yangu yaliyategemea masomo hayo na nilizama katika shughuli za ziada za shule. Katikati ya shughuli hizi zote, niligundua kikundi cha watu ambao walikuja kuwa familia yangu niliyoichagua. Ilikuwa nafasi salama kwangu katika jamii ya Addis Ababa inayochukia sana ushoga. Ingawa tulikuwa tofauti kwa njia nyingi, sote tulishiriki utambulisho wa ushoga na utambulisho usiobainika.

Mmoja wa “jamaa” wangu mpya mahiri alimiliki nyumba iliyojificha ndani ya mitaa ya usanifu wa zamani wa Addis Ababa. Huko, mbali na macho ya ulimwengu ya kuhukumu, tulitengeneza kimbilio la faragha, la kimwili kwa ajili ya msongamano wetu wa watu wasiotoshea kwa jamii ya kawaida.

Ni watu watatu tu walioishi katika nyumba hiyo, lakini wengine kumi na watano kati yetu tulikaa huko, tukiwa sisi wenyewe. Tulikuwa wabunifu tukiwa na ndoto tukicheza dansi kwenye ncha za vidole vyetu, waandishi tukifuma kanda za mashairi, na wanafunzi wa matibabu wakilemewa chini ya milima ya vitabu. Tulikuwa kikundi cha asili, ndoto, na haiba na dokezo moja la kawaida – utambulisho wetu wa kishoga ulikubaliwa katika nyumba hii, tofauti na karibu kila mahali katika moyo huu wa kihafidhina wa Ethiopia.

Nyumba yenyewe ilijumuisha kukubalika. Kuta zake zilizozeeka zilivuta vicheko, siri, na ahadi zetu. Rangi iliyopasuliwa kwenye miimo ya milango haikuwa ishara ya kupuuzwa bali dhahirisho la mtiririko wa wageni wanaotafuta faraja na usalama ndani. Mbao za sakafu zilizozeeka zimepasuka kutoka kwa karamu zetu nyingi za kutokea kighafla na vikao vya densi ya kutingiza makalio. Kila mbao iliimba Kwa ushikamano. Tulikuwa na furaha ya kuhisi kushikamana, kupendwa, na kueleweka. Kwa zaidi ya mwaka mmoja, kuta hizo zilitulinda.

Bila shaka, bandari yetu haikuwa bila vivuli vyake. Nje ya kuta zake, tulinyanyaswa mara kwa mara na kubaguliwa kwa sababu ya kuwa mashoga. “Haki ya wananchi” ilikuwa ya kawaida, kwani watu tusiowafahamu na majirani walituchoma kwa maneno ya chuki na kutuumiza miili yetu. Sheria za chuki dhidi ya mashoga ziliongeza wasiwasi wetu. Ingawa Ethiopia ilikumbatia kicheko chetu, matendo yetu ya upendo yalikuwa kinyume na sheria na kuadhibiwa kwa kifungo cha jela. Wengi wetu hatukuthubutu kuwaambia familia zetu au marafiki wengine kuwa sisi ni mashoga.

Zaidi ya unyanyasaji, tulikabiliwa na kufutwa. Waethiopia wengi wa kidini huwachukulia watu wa LGBTQ+ kuwa waovu na walisema kwamba hatungeweza kuwepo katika “nchi yao iliyobarikiwa”. Lakini kuwepo tulikuwepo, hata kustawi. Kila mtazamo ulioibiwa na neno la kunong’ona lilihihi kama uasi. Tulihoia siku zote kwamba nyumba yetu, ambayo ni sehemu yetu pekee iliyo salama, ingegunduliwa.

Usiku mmoja mwaka wa 2016, tuliporudi nyumbani kutoka kwenye starehe ya karibu, wanaume kadhaa walitushambulia. Hawakupenda jinsi tulivyozungumza Kiingereza chetu kilikuwa cha juu sana; viganja vyetu vimelegea kidogo. Kipigo hicho cha kwanza tukiwa kikundi kilituacha tukiwa na kiwewe. Bado tumebeba makovu ya usiku huo. Kwa kusikitisha, hii haikuwa hali ya mara moja. Zaidi na zaidi, mmoja wetu alikuja nyumbani akiwa amepigwa na kufadhaika kutokana na matukio kama hayo. Katikati ya mashambulizi hayo, nyumba yetu ilibaki kimbilio ambapo tungeweza kuzika hisia zetu za kutokuwa na uwezo kwa kukumbatia huruma na upendo.

Mashambulizi yalipozidi na kuwa ya mara kwa mara, lengo letu likawa kusalia hai. Hisia ya mara kwa mara ya kuathirika ilichemka chini ya ngozi zetu. Baadhi ya marafiki walihama ili kutafuta faraja na kuepuka unyanyasaji huo. Mimi, pia, nilitamani ulimwengu usio na mashambulizi haya, ambayo tunaweza kutembea mitaani tukiwa tumeinua vichwa vyetu, bila hofu. Lakini nyumbani ilikuwa nyumbani. Niliendelea kutembelea.

Minong’ono ya tuhuma iligeuka kuwa matamshi ya hadharani kwamba wakaaji katika nyumba yetu walikuwa mashoga. Hatimaye, serikali ililenga nyumba hiyo kunyang’anywa, ikitaja hitaji la “maendeleo ya umma”. Mbao za sakafu zilizochakaa ambapo vicheko vilijirudia sasa vilisikika kwa vishindo vya arifa za kufukuzwa. Serikali ilitunyang’anya nyumba yetu Septemba 2017.

Ingawa hatuna tena kimbilio letu la jengo, mahali salama tulipojenga mioyoni mwetu kama nguvu iliyunganishwa dhidi ya chuki imesalia mpaka mwaka wa 2024. Mapenzi kati yetu na nguvu zetu za ndani sasa

zinatumika kama mwanga unaotuongoza kuelekea wakati ujao ambapo kukubaliwa kwetu si tu wa kuibiwa, wa kimya, lakini wimbo wa kudumu unaoimbwa kote Ethiopia.

Urafiki wetu umekuwa patakatifu petu, haukuchongwa kwa matope, chuma, na rangi, lakini kwa kumbukumbu za pamoja za nyumba yetu na upendo usioyumba uliokua ndani. Tumeonja uhuru wa kuwa sisi wenyewe chini ya paa moja na familia iliyochaguliwa ambayo ilitufunika kwa upendo na kukubalika. Matumaini yetu yanaishi machoni mwetu, yakiukaidi, tunapopigania kukubalika. Bado tunabeba cheche hii ya uhuru, ukumbusho kwamba hata katika pembe za giza zaidi, upendo unaweza kuchanua.

Ingawa nyumba yetu ilichukuliwa kimwili, nguvu na roho iliyozaliwa nayo haiwezi kamwe kufukuzwa.



**Amber anafanya kazi na Sem Alba, shirika la habari na sanaa ya kishoga na vyombo vya habari la Ethiopia ambalo husherebekea, kushiriki na kuhifadhi kumbukumbu za utamaduni wa kichinichini wa ushoga Ethiopia.*

EVEN BROKEN FLOORBOARDS SING

*AMBER

Ethiopia

My childhood in the early 2000s was equal parts ambition and anxiety. I strived for perfection to meet my parents' high expectations, while also searching for close connections and a sense of belonging beyond home.

In 2015, still happily living with my family in Addis Ababa, I started university, studied like my life depended on it, and drowned myself in extracurriculars. Amidst all these activities, I discovered a group of people who became my chosen family. They embodied a safe space for me in Addis Ababa's highly homophobic society. Although we were different in many ways, we all shared queer fluidity and identities.

One of my vibrant new "kin" owned a house that hid within the labyrinth of Addis Ababa's old architecture. There, away from the world's judgmental eyes, we created a private, physical haven for our bustling enclave of misfits.

Only three people lived in the home, but another 15 of us spent time there, simply being ourselves. We were designers with dreams dancing in our fingertips, writers weaving tapestries of poetry, and medical students cowering under mountains of books. We were a symphony of backgrounds, dreams, and personalities with one common note – our queer identity was accepted in this home, unlike nearly everywhere else in this conservative heart of Ethiopia.

The house itself embodied acceptance. Its aged walls absorbed our laughter, secrets, and promises. Chipped paint on the doorframes wasn't a sign of neglect but a testament to the stream of visitors seeking solace and safety within. Worn wooden floorboards creaked from our countless impromptu parties and twerk sessions. Every creak sang of solidarity. We were high on feeling connected, loved, and understood. For more than a year, those walls protected us.

Of course, our haven wasn't without its shadows. Beyond its walls, we were repeatedly harassed and discriminated against for being queer. "Vigilante justice" was common, as strangers and neighbours stung us with hateful words and bruised our bodies. Homophobic laws added to our worries. Although Ethiopia cradled our laughter, our acts of love were criminalised and punishable with jail time. Most of us didn't dare tell our families or other friends we were gay.

Beyond harassment, we faced erasure. Many religious Ethiopians consider LGBTQ+ people evil and said we couldn't possibly exist in their "blessed country". But exist we did, even thrived. Every stolen glance and whispered word felt like a rebellion. We constantly feared that our home, our only safe space, would be discovered.

One night in 2016, as we returned to the house from a nearby hangout, several men attacked us. They didn't like how we spoke – our English a little too polished; our wrists a little too limp. That first targeted beating as a group left us traumatised. We still carry the scars from that night. Sadly, this wasn't a one-off situation. More and more, one of us would come home battered and distraught from similar incidents. Amid these attacks, our house remained a refuge where we could bury our feelings of helplessness with embraces of empathy and love.

As the attacks worsened and became more frequent, our focus became survival. A constant sense of vulnerability simmered just beneath our skins. Some friends moved out to find solace and avoid the abuse. I, too, craved a world without these attacks, one in which we could walk the streets with our heads held high, unafraid. But home was home. I kept visiting.

Whispers of suspicion turned into public pronouncements that residents in our home were queer. Eventually, the government targeted the house for confiscation, citing a need for "public development". The worn floorboards where laughter reverberated now resonated with thuds from eviction notices. The government took our home in September 2017.

Although we no longer have our physical haven, the safe place we built in our hearts as a united force against hate remains in 2024. Our affection for one another and our internal strength now serve as a beacon guiding us toward a future where acceptance isn't just stolen, silent moments, but a permanent melody sung throughout Ethiopia.

Our friendships have become our sanctuary, sculpted not with mud, metal, and paint, but with shared memories of our home and the unwavering love that grew inside. We've tasted the freedom of being ourselves under the same roof with a chosen family that enveloped us with love and acceptance. Our hopes live in our eyes, defiant, as we fight for acceptance. We still carry this spark of freedom with us, a reminder that even in the darkest corners, love can bloom.

Although our house was physically taken, the strength and spirit it birthed can never be evicted.

**Amber works with Sem Alba, an Ethiopian queer art and media organisation that celebrates, shares, and archives Ethiopia's underground queer culture.*



UPENDO, UGONJWA NA FASIHI

EFEMIA CHELA

Ghana / Afrika Kusini / Zambia

Mashoga mara nyingi huambiwa kuwa kujifichua kunamaanisha kuvunja maisha yako dhidi ya ukuta wa matofali. Maonyo na hadithi za tahadhari ni nyingi. Hatimaye chaguo la wewe ni mtu wa LGBTQIA+ wa aina gani ni lako pekee. Nivumilieni ninapovuka mipaka na kukengeuka na niwaambieni jinsi ilivyokuwa kwangu.

Hebu wazia msichana mdogo katika chumba peke yake, amelala kifudifudi tumbo lake kwenye jamvi akipitia kurasa za kitabu. Unaweza kuona mabega yake yanatetemeka anaposikia wazazi wake wakipigana. Mwazie hapo tena, akiwa bado peke yake, lakini akichanua karibu na chuchu. Wazia akiwa peke yake, tena na tena, siku baada ya siku.

Upweke ulikuwa wimbo wa ujana wangu, na vitabu vilinipa kampuni. Vilikuwa mali yangu ya thamani, washirikishi wangu wa mazungumzo ya kimyakimya, lakini hawakuwahi kusimulia hadithi za msichana kama mimi – mwenye kupenda jinsia mbili, wakati mwingine msagaji, Mghana na Mzambia. Mtu ambaye alishikilia vivumishi vingi lakini mara nyingi alihisi kana kwamba hakuwa chochote.

Nilipokuwa na umri wa miaka 21, nilimleta msichana huyo katika ulimwengu wa hadithi kupitia hadithi yangu fupi ya kwanza. “Chicken” iliangazia mwanamke asiye na jina, anayehangaika, mwenye umri wa miaka 20 katika jiji la Afrika ambalo lilikuwa likijaribu kumla akiwa hai. Hadithi hiyo ilizunguka hisia zake za kutokuwa na nguvu na duni lakini ilitegemea chaguo: kuishi na kupata riziki kwa kuuza mayai yake.

“Chicken” ilishinda tuzo ya uandishi, ilinipeleka kote ulimwenguni, na kunifanya nisifike kwa kuzungumza kuhusu wanawake mashoga wa Kiafrika, ngono, na biashara ya kimwili. Katika uzoefu huu, nilipata nguvu fulani. Nilipata jumuiya ya wanawake ambao nchi zao zinawakana wanapojidai wenyewe. Tulikutana kwenye hafla za vitabu na tukazungumza juu ya mambo yasiyosemeka ambayo tulikuwa tunaandika. Tulililia mikononi mwa kila mmoja wetu huku tukiyumba kati ya kuficha asili yetu halisi na kuishi kwa uhalisi. Tulicheka kwa simu huku tukipanga na kuota pamoja ulimwengu mpya iliyoundwa kwa ajili yetu.

Hebu fikiria chumba hicho tena na ushangilie kwamba ni tupu. Msichana amekwenda.

Unamtafuta msichana kwenye minyororo ya magari ameketi kwenye trafiki, chini ya udongo wa kahawia, ndani ya moyo wako mwenyewe, na unapochoka kutafuta, unamkuta amefurahi kitandani na inchi tatu za dildo ndani yake.

Kila mara anapofanya mapenzi na mwanamume aliyebadili jinsia ambaye anampenda kwa tamaa kubwa, wanaponya miili ya kila mmoja na kutikisa roho zao. Atauvunja moyo wake, lakini nataka uendelee kusoma. Endelea kama yeye, ukijua maafu yanaweza kupiga kama umeme. Ogelea pamoja nami kupitia dhoruba ya radi.

Anahisi mwanga wa jua kwenye koo lake na anabainisha tu kwamba wakati wao pamoja unapita anapoweka tarehe za barua za mapenzi anazoandika. Wanaadhibiana kwa ngozi na upendo, usiku baada ya usiku. Anamjaza na testosterone. Wanajifundisha siasa. Wanajiuliza njia sahihi ya ukombozi wa kishoga. Hajawahi kupendwa hapo awali, na kitu kisichojulikana wanacho ni ushahidi kwamba anaweza kuwa. Anaweka moyo wake mkononi mwake na kumruhusu kuuponda. Anaondoka. Lakini ndoto ya ukombozi wa kishoga haimwachi kamwe, inawaka akilini mwake kama kisu kilichotiwa motoni.

Kumbuka tumbo la msichana? Lilikuwa limezungukwa na wavamizi. Unakumbuka dildo zake? Havikuwa vitu pekee ndani. Mimi si msichana huyo tena. Niliweka kando umbali niliohitaji kuanza insha hii. Sihitaji tena.

Mimi ni mwanamke. Nina nguvu za kutosha kuzungumza sasa, lakini sikuwa nazo hapo awali.

Mnamo 2021 nilianguka nikiwa pekee yangu nyumbani kwangu usiku mtulivu. Kimya cha jioni kilikatwa na mlipuko wa ghafla wa vurugu za ndani, damu, na matapishi. Mwili wangu ulikuwa ukiniua, na kwa uchovu wa kifo cha wagonjwa wa magonjwa makali, nilifikiri wakati huu ungefaulu.

Lulu ndogo ya unafuu ilinijia. Msiba huu ulinipeleka kwa daktari wa kwanza ambaye alizingatia afya yangu kwa uzito. Kabla ya hapo, kulikuwa na uchungu wa kuvuja damu ya mwezi ambako kulinipa hofu, miaka mingi ya utambuzi mbaya, na vipindi vya muda wa wiki ambamo damu ilinitoka mpaka nabaki mkavu, na viliniacha dhaifu na mvi.

Daktari huyu alinipa picha ya “scan” niliyokuwa natamani sana. Katika maandishi meusi na meupe kulikuwa na viumbe kumi na wawili, kilo nne za nyuzinyuzi zikiponda kibofu changu, zikikua na kukua hadi usumbufu waliousababisha ukafunika utu wangu wote, ukaharibu maisha yangu, na kunitenga na mfuko wa uzazi wangu wa ajabu na usiyoeleweka.

Familia yangu ya kujichagulia ya marafiki mashoga ilinizunguka kwa uangalifu na usaidizi nilipokuwa mgonjwa. Rafiki yangu mkubwa, Ben, alinisafirisha kwa ndege hadi Zanzibar ya tropiki ili kutuliza akili kabla ya upasuaji mgumu. Rafiki yangu, Deshnee, alinilisha kwa upishi wake nilipokuwa nikipata nafuu kitandani. Msimamizi wangu wa masomo, Srila, alinihakikishia kwamba ningeweza kuanzisha upya masomo yangu wakati wowote nilipojisikia vizuri bila kupoteza ufadhili wangu. Watu katika jamii ya ushoga daima wamejitokeza kwa ajili yangu katika masaa yangu ya giza; wao na wengine walikuwa na ni washirika wangu wakali zaidi.

Nilikuwa na kazi nyingine ambayo haikuwa ya kuridhisha, lakini sasa uanaharakati wa LGBTQIA+ ni kazi yangu. Kuwa na hisia kwa jinsia mbili imetengeneza maisha yangu na kuleta maana katika uandishi wangu, katika mapenzi, na katika urafiki. Niliyoyapitia yamenitia moyo kuwekeza kwa undani zaidi katika nguvu kali ya ushoga, kuishi maisha kwa masharti yetu wenyewe, kupenda watu wanaostawi nje ya njia mbili. Ninarudi katika jamii yangu kwa kuishi bila aibu, kurudisha utunzi, na kufanya harakati.

Ninapoandika kuhusu wanawake mashoga, kama nifanyavyo katika riwaya yangu ambayo haijakamilika, ninaandika Afrika ambayo ipo kwa siri chini ya kivuli cha ujinga na ukandamizaji wa kisiasa, Afrika ambayo inadumisha nguvu na uzuri wa sheria, mafundisho ya kidini, na mila tofauti ambayo mila za ubabedume na kihafidhina haziwezi kuharibu. Ninatumia fasihi kunasa asili ya Afrika na kuidhihirisha.

Ninafanya kazi ya kiharakati na HOLAAfrica, kituo cha watetezi wa haki za wanawake wa Kiafrika, ili kusaidia kutambua bara ambalo mashoga wanaweza kupata upendo waziwazi na kuthibitishana katika utukufu wetu wote. Ninataka kila mtu mwingine ahisi raha na mapendeleo ambayo nimepata katika maisha yangu ya kishoga. Njia zisizo za kawaida ambazo mashoga hukuzana na kusherehekeana hunisukuma kuendelea kupigania Waafrika wengine wa LGBTQIA+ na haki yetu ya kustawi.

Efemia Chela ni mwandishi wa Zambia-Ghana, mhariri, na mtaalamu wa mawasiliano. Anafanya kazi na mashirika kama vile HOLAAfrica, kituo cha wanawake wa Afrika nzima.

LOVE, SICKNESS, AND LITERATURE

EFEMIA CHELA

Ghana / South Africa / Zambia

Queer people are often told that coming out means smashing your life against a brick wall. Warnings and cautionary tales abound. Ultimately the choice of what kind of LGBTQIA+ person you are is yours alone. Bear with me as I transgress and digress and tell you what it was like for me.

Imagine a young girl in a room alone, lying on her stomach on the carpet, flipping through a book. You can see her shoulders twitch when she hears her parents fighting. Imagine her there again, still alone, but blooming around the nipples. Imagine her alone, again and again, day after day.

Solitude was the soundtrack of my youth, and books kept me company. They were my prized possessions, my silent conversation partners, yet they never told stories of a girl like me – bisexual, sometimes lesbian, Ghanaian and Zambian. Someone who held many adjectives but often felt like she was made of nothing at all.

When I was 21, I brought that girl into the world of fiction through my first short story. “Chicken” spotlighted a nameless, struggling, 20-something queer woman in an African city that was trying to eat her alive. The plot looped around her feelings of being powerless and insignificant but hinged on a choice: to survive and make ends meet by selling her eggs.

“Chicken” won a writing award, took me across the world, and made me notorious for talking about queer African women, sex, and bodily commerce. In these experiences, I found a certain power. I gained a community of women whose countries deny them when they radically reclaim themselves. We ran into each other at book events and talked about the unspeakable things we were writing. We cried in each other’s arms as we vacillated between hiding our true natures and living authentically. We laughed over the phone as we plotted and dreamt together of a new world made for us.

Imagine that room again and rejoice that it is empty. The girl has gone.

You look for the girl in the chains of cars sitting in traffic, beneath the brown soil, in your own heart, and when you tire of searching, you find her blissed out in bed with three inches of dildo inside her.

Every time she has sex with the trans man who loves her hungrily, they are healing each other's bodies and shaking their souls free. He is going to break her heart, but I want you to keep on reading. Keep on like she did, knowing disaster can strike like lightning. Swim with me through the thunderstorm.

She feels sunshine in her throat and only notes their time together passing when she dates the love letters she writes. They discipline each other with leather and love, night after night. She shoots him up with testosterone. They teach themselves politics. They question the right path to queer liberation. She has never been loved before, and the undefined thing they have is evidence she can be. She puts her heart in his hand and allows him to crush it. He leaves. But the dream of queer liberation never leaves her, it burns in her mind like a hot blade.

Remember the girl's stomach? It was surrounded by intruders. Remember his dildos? They weren't the only things inside. I'm no longer that girl. I cast aside the distance I needed to start this essay. I no longer need it.

I'm a woman. I'm strong enough to speak now, but I wasn't always.

In 2021 I collapsed alone in my home on a quiet night. The evening's silence was cut by a surprise outbreak of internal violence, blood, and vomit. My body was killing me, and with the weary fatalism of the chronically ill, I thought this time it would finally succeed.

A small pearl of relief formed. This disaster led me to the first doctor who took my health seriously. Before that, there were cramps that gave me panic attacks, years of misdiagnoses, and weeks-long periods that bled me dry, left me weak and grey.

This doctor gave me the scan I had longed for. In the black and white printouts were 12 monsters, four kilograms of fibroids crushing my bladder, growing and growing until the discomfort they caused eclipsed my entire personality, jaded my life, and alienated me from my own strange and misunderstood uterus.

My chosen family of queer friends surrounded me with care and support when I was sick. My best friend, Ben, flew me to tropical Zanzibar to centre myself before a complicated surgery. My friend, Deshnee, nourished me with her cooking while I was recovering in bed. My academic supervisor, Srila, reassured me that I could restart my studies whenever I felt better without losing my funding. Queer people have always shown up for me in my darkest hours; they and others were and are my fiercest allies.

I had another career which was less fulfilling, but now LGBTQIA+ activism is my work. Being bisexual shapes my life and draws meaning in my writing,

in love, and in friendship. My experiences have encouraged me to invest more deeply in the radical power of queerness, living life on our own terms, loving people who flourish outside of binaries. I pour back into my community by living unashamedly, reciprocating care, and doing activism.

When I write about queer women, as I do in my unfinished novel, I'm writing an Africa that exists surreptitiously in the shadow of ignorance and political repression, an Africa that maintains a power and beauty that law, religious dogma, and heteronormative traditions cannot destroy. I use fiction to capture this Africa's essence and bring it to light.

I do activist work with HOLAAfrica, a pan-African feminist hub, to help realise a continent where queer people can openly find love and affirm each other in all our glory. I want everyone else to feel the pleasures and privileges I've experienced in my queer life. The unconventional ways queer people nurture and celebrate each other drives me to continue the fight for other LGBTQIA+ Africans and our right to thrive.



Efemia Chela is a Zambian-Ghanaian writer, editor, and communications specialist. She works with organisations such as HOLAAfrica, a pan-African feminist hub.



KUSHINDA UNYANYASAJI KUPITIA USANII

STEPHEN OKWANY

Kenya

Chama cha Drama kilikuwa maficho yangu. Kupotea kwa mhusika kulinisaidia kuepuka hofu ya kuwa mtu aliyependa wanawake pamoja na wanaume aliyejificha katika shule ya upili ya wavulana. Ilinifundisha kutenda jinsi jamii ilivyotarajia nitende, kuwa bila kuonekana, kuishi.

Katika mwaka wangu wa pili katika shule ya upili ya wavulana ya Kisumu, magharibi mwa Kenya, mvulana ambaye si msomi wa jinsia mbili anayeitwa George alijiunga na mrenge wa bweni baada ya kufichuliwa kuwa shoga na kufukuzwa kutoka shule yake ya awali. Tulicheza mpira wa mikono wakati wa michezo na kuigiza pamoja jukwaani. Upendo kati yeti uliongezeka. Tulianza kuchumbiana. Tulifanya hivyo kwa siri.

Wanafunzi wenzetu walikuwa na mazoea ya kuwasema kwa wote, wanafunzi walio wachache wa jinsia na ngono. Baada ya mihula miwili ya masomo, George alilengwa na “Black Omena”, genge la kuogopwa la shule ambalo liliwahadaa wanafunzi mashoga. Kikundi hicho kilijumuisha wafanyikazi wa shule, na mkuu wetu wa shule alikuwa kasisi mwenye uhafidhina wa kijamii, kwa hivyo kulikuwa na manufaa kidogo au hakuna kabisa ya kuripoti unyanyasaji wao kwa wasimamizi.

Tulihisi tumeishiwa na nguvu. Hatukuweza kuzungumza.

Kwa muda mrefu, nilificha mwelekeo wangu wa kingono nyuma ya umbo langu kubwa ili kuepuka fedheha na unyanyasaji wa genge hilo. Nilifanya kazi, nikakunja misuli, na hakuna mtu aliyegundua siri yangu. Nilikuwa na nguvu kimwili lakini niliumia sana ndani.

George alikuwa na wakati mgumu zaidi kuficha ukweli wake, kwa hiyo nikawa mwenye nguvu katika uhusiano wetu. Mapambano yaliendelea, lakini niliendelea kumlinda George dhidi ya madhara. Nyakati nyingine tungelipa pesa kwa washiriki wa magenge ili kununua kinga ya muda dhidi ya kunyanyaswa. Wakati wote wanafunzi wa mbwembwe karibu nasi walikuwa wakifichuliwa, mara nyingi hadharani kwenye mikusanyiko ya kijamii. Nilikabwa na hofu.

Pumziko letu pekee lilikuja kwa safari ya mara kwa mara kwenye sherehe za drama. George na mimi tungsafiri hadi majiji mengine na Chama cha

Drama, nyakati fulani tukikaa pamoja kwa muda wa majuma mawili. Kwa sababu George aliishi shuleni na mimi nilikuwa mwanafunzi wa kutwa, huo ulikuwa wakati wetu wa pekee pamoja. Sikuwahi kuwa na furaha zaidi.

Katika mwaka wetu wa mwisho, nilirudi nyuma katika malipo yangu ya shule hivyo sikuweza kuhudhuria masomo kwa wiki kadhaa. Hiyo ilimaanisha kuwa sikuwa karibu kumlinda George.

Siku moja nikiwa sipo, genge la Black Omena lilimvamia George kwenye hafla ya michezo shuleni. Walimuaibisha na kumfedhehesha George na kubandika hadithi kumhusu kwenye ubao wa matangazo wa shule. George alipatwa na kiwewe, kujistahi kwake kulishuka kabisa.

Niliporudi shuleni, nilimkuta George aliyevunjika moyo.

Nilikasirika. Nilitaka kulipiza kisasi vibaya sana, lakini kuongea kungemaanisha kujifichua. Sikuweza kufanya hivyo, na sikutaka kufanya mambo kuwa mabaya zaidi. Nilijua jinsi George alivyokuwa na shida kwenye mabweni usiku.

George hakuweza kustahimili mashambulizi tena. Alidanganya ugonjwa na kwenda nyumbani Kericho. Hiyo ilikuwa mara yangu ya mwisho kuona au kusikia kutoka kwa George.

Ilinivunja vipande vipande.

Ufaulu wangu wa masomo ulidorora, lakini bado nilifaulu mitihani yangu. Nilifarijika sana kumaliza shule hiyo lakini bado nilihitaji kurudi kwa mara nyingine kuchukua cheti changu. Ndipo nilipokutana na Kenny, ambaye alikuwa ameajiriwa kufundisha mchezo wa kuigiza.

Nilimwona Kenny akiongoza mazoezi na mara moja nilipenda mbinu zake za mafunzo. Alichanganyika vyema na wanafunzi, ambao hawakuwahi kuhukumu usemi wake wa kijinsia usio na uwili. Tukawa marafiki na akaniomba nijiunge na timu yake ya mazoezi. Alikuwa na shughuli nyingi akifanya kazi na Kisumu Initiative for Positive Empowerment (Mpango wa Uwezeshaji Chanya Kisumu), kikundi cha kutetea haki za LGBTQI+ mahalia, na alikuwa na muda mchache wa kusimamia mazoezi, kwa hivyo nikaanza kuwashauri wanafunzi wa chama cha drama.

Kenny alinitambulisha kwa “usanii-uharakati” dhana ya kutumia sanaa kufikia mabadiliko ya kijamii, na kunifundisha jinsi ya kuandika maandishi yanayozingatia jamii. Ujuzi niliopata kufanya kazi na Kenny ulinipa ujasiri wa kuanzisha Talanta Africa, shirika la wasanii la LGBTQI+ ambalo linatumia sanaa, vyombo vya habari, utamaduni na teknolojia ili kukuza sauti za mashoga nchini Kenya na kwingineko.

Ninatumia usanii-uharakati kuunda ulimwengu ambapo vijana wa LGBTQI+ wanaweza kujichunguza na kujitambulisha wanavyotaka, ambapo hakuna anayelazimika kuvumilia mateso ya kiakili, kihisia na kimwili tuliyoteseka na George shuleni.

Ikiwa George bado yu hai, natumai na kuomba asome hadithi yangu na anikumbuke kwa furaha.

Stephen Okwany ni “msanii-mwanaharakati” ambaye shauku yake iko katika kukuza sauti za vijana dhidi ya vurugu na vitisho. Yeye ni mkurugenzi wa programu katika Talanta Africa.

OVERCOMING ABUSE THROUGH ARTIVISM

STEPHEN OKWANY

Kenya

Drama Club was my hideout. Getting lost in a character helped me escape the terror of being a closeted bisexual at an all-boys high school. It taught me to act the way society expected me to act, to fly under the radar, to survive.

In my second year at Kisumu Boys High School in western Kenya, a gender non-binary boy named George joined the boarding wing after being outed as gay and expelled from their previous school. We played handball during games time and acted together on stage. Our affection for one another grew. We started dating. We did so secretly.

Our classmates were obsessed with outing sexual and gender minority students. After two academic terms, George was targeted by “Black Omena,” a dreaded school gang that blackmailed queer students. The group included school staff, and our principal was a socially conservative priest, so there was little use in reporting their abuse to the administration.

We felt defenceless. We couldn’t speak out.

For a long time, I hid my sexual orientation behind my large physique in order to escape the gang’s humiliation and abuse. I worked out, flexed my muscles, and nobody discovered my secret. I was strong physically but hurt miserably inside.

George had a harder time hiding their truth, so I became the strong one in our relationship. The struggle continued, but I kept protecting George from harm. Sometimes we would pay money to gang members in order to buy temporary immunity from harassment. All the while queer students around us were being outed, often publicly at social gatherings. I choked with fear.

Our only respite came on the occasional field trip to drama festivals. George and I would travel to other cities with the Drama Club, sometimes staying away together for up to two weeks. Because George boarded at the school and I was a day student, it was our only time alone together. I’d never been happier.

In our final year, I fell behind on my school payments so was unable to attend classes for several weeks. That meant I wasn’t around to protect George.

One day during my absence, the Black Omena gang attacked George at a school sporting event. They body-shamed and humiliated George and pasted stories about them on a school notice board. George was traumatised, their self-esteem completely deflated.

When I came back to school, I found a broken George.

I was furious. I wanted revenge so badly, but speaking up would mean outing myself. I couldn't do it, and I didn't want to make things worse. I knew how awful George had it in the dormitories at night.

George couldn't take the attacks any longer. They faked an illness and went home to Kericho. That was the last time I ever saw or heard from George.

It broke me to pieces.

My academic performance deteriorated, but I still passed my exams. I was so relieved to be done with that school but still needed to return one more time to collect my certificate. That's when I met Kenny, who'd been hired to teach drama.

I saw Kenny leading a rehearsal and immediately loved her training techniques. She blended in well with the students, who never judged her non-binary gender expression. We became friends and she asked me to join her training team. She was busy working with the Kisumu Initiative for Positive Empowerment, a local LGBTQI+ rights group, and had less and less time to oversee rehearsals, so I started mentoring the drama students.

Kenny introduced me to "artivism", the concept of using the arts to achieve social change, and taught me how to write socially conscious scripts. The skills I gained working with Kenny gave me the confidence to establish Talanta Africa, an LGBTQI+ activist organisation that uses art, media, culture, and technology to amplify queer voices in Kenya and beyond.

I'm using artivism to create a world where LGBTQI+ youth can self-explore and self-identify as they wish, where no one has to endure the mental, emotional, and physical abuse George and I suffered at school.

If George is still alive, I hope and pray they read my story and remember me fondly.

Stephen Okwany is an "artist" whose passion lies in amplifying youth voices against violence and intimidation. He is the director of programmes at Talanta Africa.



T.A.R.

MUNGU ALITUUMBA JINSI ALIVYOKUSUDIA

UCHENNA SAMUEL NGENE

Naijeria

Shoga. Mkristo. Mnigeria. Mwanaume. Watu wanasema vitambulisho vyangu vinagongana, lakini vyote ambavyo nimewahi kujulikana. Lebo hizi ni vipande vya ukweli wangu.

Nilizaliwa na kukulia kusini-mashariki mwa Nigeria, nikiwa mtoto pekee katika familia ya Kikatoliki iliyoshikamana sana. Wazazi wangu walinifundisha kumcha Mungu na kumpenda Yesu. Nilihudumia makasisi kwenye ibada na nikaanza kueneza injili kwa ajili ya Harakati ya Upyaji upya ya Karismatiki ya Kikatoliki kabla hata sijabalehe.

Nikiwa shule ya sekondari nilianza kutilia shaka ujinsia wangu. Siku zote nimekuwa mwanamke na nilihisi kivutio cha asili kwa wanaume wengine kutoka kwa umri mdogo. Busu langu la kwanza lilikuwa na mvulana nilipokuwa na umri wa miaka tisa. Nilijua nilichohisi, lakini sikuwa na maneno ya kuelezea. Mashoga bado hakuwepo katika msamiati wangu.

Hatimaye nilijifunza maana ya “mashoga” kanisani. Mapadre walitushtumu, wakihubiri dhidi ya ushoga na dhambi nyinginezo. Niliamini nilichosikia – kwamba asili yangu ilikuwa ya dhambi na yenye kuchukiza.

Nilichunguza maandiko kutafuta majibu mbadala kwa chuki hii ya kidini. Nilikuwa nimechoka kukandamiza hisia zangu, vivutio, tamaa. Nilichoka kukandamiza ukweli wangu. Maswali hayo yalinifanya niende shule ya Biblia na hatimaye kupata digrii ya chuo kikuu ya falsafa na dini. Pia ilinisaidia kugundua jumuiya inayostawi ya Wakristo wa LGBTIQ.

Mnamo 2015 nilianza kujitolea na House of Rainbow (Nyumba ya Upinde). House of Rainbow inakuza uhusiano kati ya watu wa imani wa LGBTIQ na waungamkono wao ili kuunda jumuiya salama na zinazojumuisha zaidi. Kupitia kazi hii nilipata usaidizi na hatimaye kujikubali.

Kupatanisha imani yangu na ushoga wangu ilikuwa safari ngumu. Ilinipelekea kuanzisha shirika liitwalo Levites Initiative for Freedom and Enlightenment (Mpango wa Walawi kwa Uhuru na Kuelimika) mwaka wa 2016 ili kusaidia vijana wengine wa LGBTIQ wa Nigeria wa imani katika kuelewa na kupatanisha vipande vya utambulisho wao ambavyo mara nyingi jamii husambaratisha. Kama vile Walawi katika Biblia walivyosaidia kulinda

na kudumisha taratibu takatifu na maisha ya kidini katika Hekalu la kale la Jerusalem, tunaunga mkono watu wa LGBTIQ katika kutekeleza imani yao, ili wajihisi kuwa wamejumuishwa na kupendwa.

Wakati huo safari yangu ya kuelekea kwenye upatanisho ilikuwa mbali sana. Mnamo mwaka wa 2017 nilifukuzwa kutoka kuimba katika kikundi cha muziki cha kikristo nilichopenda kwa sababu ya kuonekana sana kwa kazi yangu ya kupinga masimulizi ya kidini ya chuki ya watu wa kupenda jinsia moja na kuendeleza tamaduni za wanaopenda jinsia tofauti. Mlango mmoja ulipofungwa, mlango uliofaa ulifunguliwa. Mwaka huo huo nilichaguliwa kuwa “bingwa wa Nigeria” katika IDNOWA (Interfaith Diversity Network of West Africa / Mtandao wa Dini Mbalimbali katika Afrika Magharibi). IDNOWA hufanya mazungumzo na jumuiya za kidini na kutekeleza programu za elimu na utetezi ili kukuza kujikubali.

Punde nilianza kushirikiana na kikundi kingine kiitwacho Soulfice kuunda nyenzo za kielimu ambazo huondoa chuki ya Wakristo. Soulfice ni shirika lenye makao yake nchini Marekani ambalo linafanya kazi kukomesha ukandamizaji wa kidini na kisiasa wa watu wa LGBTIQ na kuponya roho zao. Hii ilinifanya niijiunge na mpango wa kukuza uongozi wa The Reformation Projects (Miradi ya Marekebisho), ambao unalenga kuendeleza ushirikishwaji wa LGBTIQ katika kanisa la Kikristo.

Mnamo 2020 nilijiunga na bodi ya Global Interfaith Network for People of all Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions (Mtandao wa Dini Mbalimbali ya Watu wa Jinsia Zote, Mielekeo ya Jinsia Wanayoipenda, Vitambulisho vya Jinsia na Kujieleza). GIN-SSOGIE inatetea nafasi salama, ushirikishwaji wa sera, na usaidizi na kukubalika kwa walio wachache wa jinsia na kimapenzi ndani ya jumuiya za kidini. Kupitia GIN-SSOGIE, nimeangazia masaibu ya watu wa imani wa LGBTIQ kwenye mikutano ya ngazi ya juu na kupendekeza mageuzi ya ushirikiano wa utetezi ili kuboresha haki zetu za binadamu.

Ninapotafakari nilikotoka na yale niliyopitia, naona safari yangu imekuwa na ustahimilivu. Nimekumbatia utambulisho wangu na kupinga hali ilivyo sasa ili kudumisha ukweli wangu wa kibinafsi. Ninajali sana uhusiano wangu na Mungu na sasa najua kuwa kuwa mimi nilivyo na kuwa na yule ninayempenda hakubatilishi imani yangu.

Natumai safari yangu ya upatanisho inatoa mfano mzuri kwa watu wa imani wa LGBTIQ kujua kwamba upendo wa Mungu hauna masharti. Kama watu wa LGBTIQ, upendo wetu sio dhambi. Mungu alituumba jinsi alivyokusudia.

Uchenna Samuel Ngene ni mkurugenzi mkuu wa programu katika Shirika la Levites Initiative for Freedom and Enlightenment huko Asaba, Nigeria.

GOD MADE US WHO WE'RE MEANT TO BE

UCHENNA SAMUEL NGENE

Nigeria

Gay. Christian. Nigerian. Man. People say my identities clash, but they're all I've ever known. These labels are pieces of my truth.

I was born and raised in southeastern Nigeria, the only child in a devout Catholic family. My parents taught me to fear God and love Jesus. I served the clergy at worship services and started evangelising for the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement before I was even a teenager.

In secondary school I started questioning my sexuality. I had always been effeminate and felt an innate attraction to other males from an early age. My first kiss was with a boy when I was nine years old. I knew what I felt, but I didn't have the words to describe it. "Gay" wasn't in my vocabulary yet.

I eventually learned what "gay" meant at church. Priests clobbered us with condemnation, preaching against homosexuality and other "sins". I believed what I heard – that my nature was sinful and repulsive.

I pored over scripture seeking alternative answers to this religious hatred. I was tired of suppressing my emotions, feelings, attractions, desires. I was tired of suppressing my truth. This questioning led me to Bible school and eventually to earn a university degree in philosophy and religion. It also helped me discover a thriving community of LGBTIQ Christians.

In 2015 I started volunteering with House of Rainbow. House of Rainbow fosters relationships among LGBTIQ people of faith and their allies to create safer and more inclusive communities. Through this work I found support and eventually self-acceptance.

Reconciling my faith with my sexuality was an arduous journey. It led me to establish an organisation called Levites Initiative for Freedom and Enlightenment in 2016 to support other young Nigerian LGBTIQ people of faith in understanding and reconciling the pieces of their identities that society so often tears apart. Just like the Levites in the Bible helped protect and maintain sacred rituals and religious life at Jerusalem's ancient Temple, we support LGBTIQ people in practising their faith, so they feel included and loved.

At that point my own journey towards reconciliation was far from over. In 2017 I was expelled from singing in a Christian music group I loved because of the high visibility of my work challenging homophobic and heterosexist religious narratives. As one door closed, the right one opened. That same year I was elected as “Nigeria champion” at the Interfaith Diversity Network of West Africa (IDNOWA). IDNOWA dialogues with faith-based communities and implements education and advocacy programmes to foster self-acceptance.

I soon started collaborating with another group called Soulforce to create educational resources that debunk Christian queerphobia. Soulforce is a U.S.-based organisation that works to end the religious and political oppression of LGBTIQ people and heal their spirits. This led me to join The Reformation Project’s leadership development programme, which aims to advance LGBTIQ inclusion in the Christian church.

In 2020 I joined the board of the Global Interfaith Network for People of all Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions. GIN-SSOGIE advocates for safe spaces, policy inclusion, and the support and acceptance of all sexual and gender minorities within faith communities. Through GIN-SSOGIE, I’ve highlighted the plight of LGBTIQ people of faith at high-level meetings and proposed collaborative advocacy reforms to improve our human rights.

As I reflect on where I’ve come from and what I’ve been through, I see that my journey has been marked by resilience. I’ve embraced my identities and challenged the status quo to uphold my personal truth. I care deeply about my relationship with God and now know that being who I am and being with who I love doesn’t invalidate my faith.

I hope my journey of self-reconciliation offers a positive example for LGBTIQ people of faith to know that God’s love is unconditional. As LGBTIQ people, our love is not a sin. God made us who we’re meant to be.

Uchenna Samuel Ngene is the executive programmes director at Levites Initiative for Freedom and Enlightenment in Asaba, Nigeria.



KILA KITU KITAKUWA SAWA

LING SHEPERD

Afrika Kusini

Harufu nzuri ya nyama ya braai, moshi wa sigara na bia ya Black Label ilining'inia hewani. Ilikuwa Ijumaa usiku katika majira ya joto ya 1989, na watoto kwenye mtaa wetu wote walikuwa nje.

Wazazi wetu walipofanya karamu, mtaa mzima ulihudhuria. Sherehe yoyote katika eneo linalojulikana kama “Rangi” (“Coloured”) la Cape Town, kama yetu, kilikuja na hali ya kutatanisha. Popote palipokuwa na pombe unaweza kuhisi. Labda ilikuwa mabaki ya mfumo wa “dop” – ambapo mababu zetu waliokuwa watumwa walichuma zabibu na kulipwa kwa kiasi kikubwa cha pombe – bado ikitiririka kutoka kwa mizabibu hiyo huko mkoa wa ndani ambako mvinyo ulitengenezwa na hadi usiku huu. Nilikuwa na umri wa miaka saba tu na sikujua kikamilifu “die dop trek” (Kiafrikana kwa “wakati pombe inapoingia”) ilimaanisha nini wakati huo, lakini nilijua niliposikia kuvunjwa kwa chupa ilikuwa ikitokea.

Sherehe ilikuwa imeanza alasiri hiyo, na ilikuwa ya utukufu. Sisi watoto tulikuwa tukicheza “hula hoop” na baba yangu alianzisha braai (nyama ya kuchoma) wageni walipoingia. Dada yake, shangazi yangu Glynnis, alifika kwanza akiwa na mpenzi wake Janey, ambaye watoto wake walikuwa karibu nami kwa umri. Dada ya mama yangu, Flossie aliishi nasi na mpenzi wake Nessa. Nessa alikuwa na watoto watatu na alikuwa karibu kuachana na mumewe. Bado aligawanya wakati wake kati ya nyumba yetu na ile ya ndoa yake. Sisi sote katika Mitchell’s Plain tuliishi kwenye jumba zenye msongamano wa watu. Haijalishi majirani zako walikuwa wakipika au kusema nini, ulisikia harufu na kusikia mazungumzo yao. Nadhani ndiyo sababu sherehe zetu zilikuwa nje kila wakati: nafasi zaidi na uhuru wa kuwa.

Wapenzi wa shangazi zangu wote walikuwa wameolewa na wanaume wanyanyasaji, na sasa walikuwa na furaha katika ushoga wao. Haikuzungumziwa kamwe kuihusu kwa sauti kubwa, lakini kulikuwa na hali ya jumla ya kukubalika isiyokoma karibu nao, hadi usiku huu.

Jirani yetu mmoja ambaye alikuwa amesimama karibu jioni nzima na lita za bia alivunja chupa yake chini. Mtu alipiga mayowe yaliyomwagika kwenye usiku kama glasi iliyojaa hadi ukingo na ikitoka povu. Chupa ilipopasuka, nilimwona Flossie na marafiki zake Terence na Quintin, wapenzi wa ndoa

mashoga, wakitoka nje kwa kasi. Jirani mwingine alikuwa na rafiki wa Flossie, Marco katika mshituko. Bado sijui vita hiyo ilihusu nini, lakini nitakumbuka kila wakati maneno yaliyotoka kinywani mwa jirani yangu. Yaliuma na kuumiza. Sikujua maneno yote yalimaanisha nini, lakini niliweza kuyaonja. Nilikuwa nimeuma mdomo kwa woga na kuvuja damu.

“Tombwa wewe, shoga. Nitafunga kinywa chako milele”.

Muziki kwenye spika ya hi-fi ulikata. Nyama ya braai iliacha kuchomeka. “Hula hoop” yangu ilidondoka chini. Mtu alimtoa Marco kutoka kwa mshiko. Sherehe ilikuwa imekwisha. Watu walizidi kurushiana maneno ya ulevi. Pombe ilikuwa imeanza kunywa watu. Chuki ilitiririka badala ya shayiri na humle.

Sikuwa na maneno yake wakati huo, na kuna sehemu zangu bado hazina. Nilichojua ni kwamba nilikuwa kama shangazi zangu mashoga na marafiki zao. Hata katika shule ya chekechea, nilijua nilikuwa kama wao. Sikujiona na mvulana au mwanaume nilipokua. Walinichorea upinde wa mvua kabla sijajua ni ishara ya kiburi ya ushoga. Walikuwa na yote – wapenzi waliowapenda, maisha yenye shughuli nyingi, marafiki wenye kelele ya furaha na urafiki uliipendeza.

Maneno ya chuki ya mlevi yule yalibaki kwangu huku nikiendelea kukua katika ushoga wangu. Nilisikia chuki zaidi kadiri muda ulivyosonga, lakini shangazi zangu na wapenzi wao na marafiki hawakurudi nyuma. Walijitetea wenyewe, hata katika nafasi ambazo walihukumiwa na kutajwa kuwa “wasio wa kawaida”. Kuwatazama wakisimama kwa nguvu zao kulinipa imani isiyotikisika kwamba hakuna kitu chochote kibaya na mimi.

Shangazi Flossie alifanya kazi ya teknolojia muda mrefu kabla haijatawala maisha yetu na alikuwa mchezaji wa soka wa kustajabisha wa ligi ya wanawake ya Cape Flats “Coloured”. Alikuwa mmiliki wa kwanza wa nyumba katika familia yetu, shangazi yangu msagaji mwenye fahari ambaye alinunua nyumba katika kilele cha Ubaguzi wa Rangi. Glynnis alitumia mikono take kufanya kazi mara kwa mara. Nilimtazama akibadilisha matairi na kugeuza gari kwa mkono mmoja. Aliunda biashara ya ujenzi na akafanya ujenzi na ukarabati wa nyumba katika eneo letu. Alifanya mambo kuwa mazuri; alifanya mambo yasonge. Alilea watoto wa mwenzi wake pia. Alinionesha kwamba wanandoa wa ushoga wanaweza kuwa wazazi.

Najua sikushuhudia mapambano yote waliyokumbana nayo, lakini nilichokiona ni watu wenye maisha, upendo, uchungu, na furaha iliyopo katika ushoga wao. Nikikumbuka nyakati, hilo lazima lilichukua ujasiri mkubwa. Kulikuwa na woga mkubwa lakini walifanya hivyo. Waliniokoa kwa njia zaidi ya moja. Uwepo wao ulinifundisha kuwa niko sawa. Ninatosha.

Ingawa uvundo wa usiku huo upo bado, shangazi zangu na familia zao za ushoga ziliendelea kuishi hewani sote tulipumua. Waliupa ushoga uso, mwili, roho. Nilikuwa upande wao wakati maneno yale yakitoka kinywani mwa mtu huyo mwenye chuki. Ilikuwa maumivu ambayo nina maneno kwa sasa. Lakini katika hali ya kushangaza, usiku huo pia ndio wakati nilijua nitakuwa sawa.

Usiku ulipoisha kimya na watu kuanza kuondoka kwa gari, nilimsikia mama yangu akisema, “Njoo ndani, mtoto. Kila kitu kitakuwa sawa”.

Ling Sheperd ni mwanaharakati na afisa mawasiliano wa Triangle Project, NGO ya haki za binadamu yenye makao yake makuu mjini Cape Town, Afrika Kusini. Yeye ni mwandishi wa mambo yote na anapenda haki ya kijamii na utamaduni wa pop.

EVERYTHING WILL BE OK

LING SHEPERD

South Africa

The sweet aroma of braai meat, cigarette smoke, and Black Label beer hung in the air. It was Friday night in the summer of 1989, and the kids on our cul-de-sac were all outside.

When our parents threw a party, the whole street attended. Any party in a so-called “Coloured” area of Cape Town, like ours, came with a sense of foreboding. Wherever there was alcohol you could feel it. Perhaps it was a remnant of the dop system – in which our enslaved ancestors picked grapes and were paid in tots of alcohol – still trickling down from those vines in the Cape Winelands and into this very night. I was only seven and didn’t fully know what “die dop trek” (Afrikaans for “when the alcohol kicks in”) meant at the time, but I knew when I heard a bottle break it was happening.

The party had started that afternoon, and it was glorious. Us kids were hula hooping and my dad started the braai (barbeque) as guests trickled in. His sister, my Aunt Glynnis, arrived first with her partner Janey, whose kids were close to me in age. My maternal aunt Flossie lived with us and her girlfriend Nessa. Nessa had three kids and was about to divorce her husband. She still divided her time between our home and her marital one. All of us in Mitchell’s Plain lived in crowded maisonettes. No matter what your neighbours were cooking or saying, you smelled and heard it. I think that’s why our celebrations were always outside: more space and freedom to be.

My aunts’ partners had both been married to abusive men, and now they were happy in their queerness. It was never spoken about out loud, but there was a general air of unwavering acceptance around them, until this night.

One of our neighbours who had been standing around all evening with quarts of beer smashed his bottle on the ground. Someone shrieked, and it poured into the night like a glass being filled to the brim and foaming over. As the bottle broke, I saw Flossie and her friends Terence and Quintin, a gay couple, rush out. Another neighbour had Flossie’s friend Marco in a chokehold. I still don’t know what the fight was about, but I’ll always remember the words that came out of my neighbour’s mouth. They stung and hurt. I didn’t know what all the words meant, but I could taste them. I had bitten my lip in fear and tasted blood.

“Fuck you, faggot. I will shut your mouth forever.”

The music on the hi-fi speaker cut out. The braai meat stopped sizzling. My hula hoop flopped to the ground. Someone freed Marco from the chokehold. The party was over. More drunken words were exchanged. The alcohol had begun drinking the people. Hate flowed instead of barley and hops.

I didn't have the words for it then, and parts of me still don't. All I knew was that I was like my queer aunts and their friends. Even in pre-school, I knew I was like them. I didn't see myself with a boy or a man growing up. They painted rainbows for me before I knew they were a symbol of queer pride. They had it all – partners they loved, busy lives, boisterous and beautiful friends.

That drunken man's hateful words stayed with me as I grew into my queerness. I heard more prejudice as time went on, but my aunts and their partners and friends never retreated. They stood up for themselves, even in spaces where they were judged and singled out as "abnormal". Watching them stand in their power gave me the unshakeable belief that there was nothing wrong with me.

Aunt Flossie worked in tech long before it ruled our lives and was an amazing soccer player for the Cape Flats "Coloured" women's league. She was the first homeowner in our family, my proud lesbian aunt who bought a house at the height of Apartheid. Glynnis was always handy. I watched her change tyres and reverse a car with one hand. She built up a construction business and did renovations and home repairs in our area. She made things beautiful; she made things work. She mothered her partner's children too. She showed me that a queer couple could be parents.

I know I didn't witness all the struggles they faced, but what I saw were people with lives, love, pain, and joy existing in their queerness. Thinking back on the times, that must have taken tremendous audacity. There was fearlessness and fear, but they did it. They saved me in more ways than one. Their existence taught me that I am ok. I am enough.

Though the stench of that night lingered, my aunts and their queer families kept living in the air we all breathed. They gave being queer a face, a body, a soul. I was on their side when those words left that hateful man's mouth. It was a pain that I have words for now. But in a strange way, that night was also the moment I knew I would be ok.

As the night ended in silence and people started driving away, I heard my mom say, "Come inside, child. Everything will be ok".

Ling Sheperd is an activist and communications officer for Triangle Project, a human rights NGO based in Cape Town, South Africa. She is a writer of all things and is passionate about social justice and pop culture.



AHADI YA MATUMAINI

KASHINDI SHABANI GADY

Jamhuri ya Kidemokrasia ya Kongo

Mapema mwaka wa 2019, umati wa watu elfu moja walichoma matairi nje ya ukumbi wa jiji la Bukavu ili kupinga jamii yetu ya LGBTI. “Ingieni katika nyumba zao, zichome moto”, mwanamume mmoja alipaza sauti kupitia kipaza sauti.

Umati huo ulikusanyika baada ya mabango kuanza kuonekana karibu na mji wakitaka ushoga na tofauti za kijinsia kuharamishwa. Mtu aliyekuwa nyuma ya mabango hayo alikuwa mchungaji wa eneo hilo ambaye mara kwa mara huwaambia waumini na hadhira yake ya kipindi cha redio kwamba watu wa LGBTI wanapaswa kufukuzwa nchini.

Hakuna sheria maalum dhidi ya kuwa LGBTI katika Jamhuri ya Kidemokrasia ya Kongo, lakini kuna chuki nyingi.

Haki zetu za binadamu zinakiukwa kila siku. Tunakabiliwa na kukamatwa kiholela kwa makosa yasiyo halali, kukataliwa na familia na jamii zetu, kubaguliwa katika ajira na elimu, huduma duni za afya, kinachojulikana kama ubakaji wa “kusahihisha”, na aina nyinginezo za vurugu.

Mateso hayakomi.

Hatari tunayokabiliana nayo ni kubwa sana hivi kwamba watu wengi wa LGBTI wanaogopa kuondoka popote wanapoita nyumbani. Kwa wengine, nyumba ni watu watano wanaoishi katika chumba kidogo, wakilazimishwa kuishi pamoja baada ya kutengwa na familia zao au kufukuzwa na wamiliki wa nyumba walio na mawazo ya kizamani.

Kwa watu wengi mashoga nchini DRC, maisha ni ya taabu. Hakuna pesa kwa sababu hakuna kazi, ambayo inamaanisha hakuna chakula. Wengi wetu tunaishi kwa kuombaomba barabarani au kufanya biashara ya ngono.

Mwaka 1998 nilitoroka DRC na kutafuta hifadhi nchini Ireland. Huko nilifanya kazi na mashirika kadhaa yasiyo ya serikali na kujifunza jinsi ya kusaidia watu walio hatarini katika kutekeleza haki zao za kibinadamu za utunzaji wa afya, usalama, makazi, na msaada wa kihemko.

Miongo miwili niliyoishi Ireland ilikuwa tajiri sana, lakini nilijua jamii yangu ilinihitaji kurudi nyumbani, haswa baada ya serikali ya DRC kujaribu

kuharamisha ushoga mwaka wa 2016. Kauli za chuki ya mashoga na mashambulizi yalikuwa yakiongezeka na kuwa mabaya zaidi.

Nilirejea Bukavu mwaka wa 2017 na kuanzisha ushirikiano wa Savie Asbl, NGO ambayo inapigana na chuki dhidi ya watu na inajitahidi kuongeza idadi ya maeneo ya kazi nchini DRC ambayo yanajumuisha LGBTI. Pia tunasaidia walio wachache wa jinsia na jinsia kupata huduma ya afya na elimu.

Tangu janga la COVID-19 lilipowasili hapa 2020, maisha nchini DRC yamekuwa magumu zaidi kwa kila mtu. Mashoga, kwa hali ya kipekee, wameathirika sana.

Hatua za kufungwa kwa hali ya kawaida ziliwalazimu watu wengi wa LGBTI kujitenga katika mazingira ya uhasama na chuki na wanafamilia wasio na usaidizi au wakaaji wenza. Ingawa wengi wetu hatujitengi tena, ninazungumza na watu kila siku ambao bado wamenaswa katika hali hizi mbaya.

Janga hili na vizuizi vinavyofuata vinaendelea kuwa na athari mbaya kwa maisha na mahitaji ya afya ya watu wa LGBTI. Savie Asbl tunafanya kazi kushughulikia mahitaji mbalimbali ya jamii, ikiwa ni pamoja na utoaji wa chakula na makazi ya dharura, ufikiaji wa huduma ya afya iliyo salama na yenye uwezo, na utulivu wa kifedha.

Imekuwa miaka michache migumu kwa jamii yetu. Savie Asbl inajitahidi kadiri iwezavyo kuleta tumaini katika nyakati hizi za taabu na kuunda mustakabali angavu, uliojumuisha zaidi, na wenye usawa zaidi kwa watu wa LGBTI kufurahia janga hilo litakapokwisha.

Kashindi Shabani Gady ni katibu mtendaji wa shirika lisilo la kiserikali la Savie Asbl PGEL LGBTI DRC huko Bukavu, Jamhuri ya Kidemokrasia ya Kongo.

THE PROMISE OF HOPE

KASHINDI SHABANI GADY

Democratic Republic of the Congo

In early 2019, a crowd of 1,000 people burned tyres outside Bukavu's city hall to protest against our LGBTI community. "Go into their homes, burn them down", one man shouted through a megaphone.

The mob gathered after posters started appearing around town calling for homosexuality and gender diversity to be criminalised. The man behind the posters was a local pastor who regularly tells congregants and his radio show audience that LGBTI people should be kicked out of the country.

There are no specific laws against being LGBTI in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but there's plenty of hatred.

Our human rights are violated every day. We face arbitrary arrest for illegitimate offences, rejection from our families and society, discrimination in employment and education, inadequate healthcare, so-called "corrective" rape, and other forms of violence.

The persecution is relentless.

The dangers we face are so extreme that many LGBTI people are scared to leave wherever they call home. For some, home is five people living in a tiny room, forced together to survive after being shunned by their families or evicted by bigoted landlords.

For many queer people in the DRC, life is misery. There's no money because there's no work, which means there's no food. Many of us survive by begging in the street or taking up sex work.

In 1998 I fled the DRC and sought asylum in Ireland. There I worked with several NGOs and learned how to support vulnerable populations in exercising their human rights to healthcare, security, shelter, and emotional support.

My two decades in Ireland were incredibly rich, but I knew my community needed me back home, especially after the DRC government tried to criminalise homosexuality in 2016. Homophobic and transphobic rhetoric and attacks were on the rise and getting worse.

I returned to Bukavu in 2017 and co-founded Savie Asbl, an NGO that fights anti-queer hatred and works to increase the number of workplaces

in the DRC that are LGBTI-inclusive. We also help sexual and gender minorities access healthcare and education.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic arrived here in 2020, life in the DRC has become more difficult for everyone. Queer people have been especially hard hit.

Lockdown measures forced many LGBTI people to self-isolate in hostile and queerphobic environments with unsupportive family members or co-habitants. Although most of us are no longer self-isolating, I speak with people every day who are still trapped in these terrible conditions.

The pandemic and ensuing lockdowns continue to have devastating impacts on the livelihoods and healthcare needs of LGBTI people. At Savie Asbl we are working to address a range of community needs, including the provision of emergency food and shelter, access to safe and competent healthcare, and financial stability.

It's been a tough few years for our community. Savie Asbl is doing its best to bring hope during these grim times and to create a brighter, more inclusive, more equitable future for LGBTI people to enjoy when the pandemic finally lifts.

Kashindi Shabani Gady is the executive secretary of Savie Asbl NGO PGEL LGBTI DRC in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo.



RAHA SUMU

MÈMÈ MINAJ

Togo

Nilimtaama Bastou akishuka ngazi za darasani kwa macho yake yasiyo na hatia na tabasamu la kupendeza. Ilikuwa mwaka wa 2012, na nilikuwa na umri wa miaka 13, nikiwa bado katika shule ya sekondari huko Lomé. Nimekuwa nikimtaama kwa mbali kwa miezi kadhaa.

Jioni moja, tulipokuwa tukizungumza na marafiki katika mtaa wetu, Bastou alijiunga nasi. Nilimpenda usiku ule. Uso wake mzuri uliendelea kupenya kichwani mwangu. Mwili wake wa riadha na ngozi nyeusi ilinisumbua. Sikuwahi kukiri hisia zangu kwa sababu niliogopa kukataliwa ikiwa aligeuka kuwa na chuki kwa mashoga. Badala yake, nilizika matamania yangu ndani ya fikira zangu kali zaidi.

Majira ya joto yalipofika, nilikuwa na hamu ya kutumia likizo nzuri na Prince Charming wangu, lakini aliondoka kwenda kijijini ili kuendelea na masomo yake huko. Ilihisi kama ulimwengu wangu katika dunia ya kujitungia ulikuwa umeanguka. Likizo nzima niliitumia kumuwaza hadi hisia zangu zilipoanza kupungua.

Miaka minane baadaye, nilikuwa bado katika mtaa wetu. Nilikuwa nimesahau kabisa kuhusu Bastou hadi Jumamosi moja usiku nilipokuwa nikipiga gumzo kwenye simu na rafiki mwingine shoga kutoka shuleni kwetu. “Bastou anasema halo, yuko hapa nami”, rafiki yangu alisema ghafla.

Nini!? Alitoka wapi jamani? Bastou na mimi tulizungumza baadaye usiku huo. Aliniambia anavutiwa na wasichana lakini ana hamu ya kujaribu na mvulana. Huo ulikuwa mwanzo wa mazungumzo yetu ya usiku.

Tulizungumza juu ya chochote na kila kitu, kutoka kwa maisha yetu ya kitaaluma hadi furaha na huzuni zetu, hata maisha yetu ya ngono, tukipeana majina ya utani ya kimapenzi kama vile mpenzi, asali, upendo. Wakati wa mchana, tulikuwa tunaonana katika mtaa wetu lakini tulikuwa tukitengana ili kuepuka shauku.

Baada ya miaka miwili ya urafiki wa WhatsApp, hatimaye alikuja kwangu. Alikaa pembeni yangu akiwa amevalia shati la maua na kaptula iliyokazia mwili wake wa riadha. Nilisisimka, nikifikiria kuhusu ngono, lakini tena sikumwambia jinsi nilivyohisi.

Baada ya kuondoka, alinitumia ujumbe mfupi wa simu kuniuliza kama nilimpenda. Lazima aliona kutoka kwa usoni mwangu, ambao haukuweza kuficha chochote tena. “Kwa kuwa sina mchumba kwa sasa, naweza kutoa mafunzo na wewe ili kuboresha utendaji wangu wa ngono hadi nipate mpya”, alipendekeza. Hatimaye! Nafasi ya kugusa na kuufurahia mwili wake mzuri.

Nilikubali pendekezo lake, na tukawa marafiki wa ngono. Tulishiriki ngoni karibu kila siku katika kila kona ya chumba changu cha kulala. Nilimuacha ateleze mawazo yake juu yangu, ambayo mengine sikuyapenda, lakini sikutaka nyakati hizi naye ziishe, hivyo nilivumilia.

Alisumbua akili na roho yangu. Alinimiliki. Alitumia mwili wangu jinsi alivyotaka. Sikuweza tena kukataa tamaa zake, na bila kujua, uhusiano wetu ukawa gereza la ngono. Nilitegemea angenipenda ili tuwe na uhusiano wa ukweli. Nilimtunza, nilimvalisha, nilimlisha, nilimfanyia kila nilichoweza, ingawa sikuwa na pesa za kutosha.

Baada ya miezi saba ya ngono, bado sikuwa na haki ya chochote kutoka kwake. Aliwatongoza wasichana mbele yangu na kuniuliza kama angeweza kuwaleta kwenye chumba changu, lakini nilikataa.

Siku moja, baada ya kushiriki ngono kama kwenye filamu ya Kama Sutra, tulikuwa tumepumzika kwenye kitanda changu na niliuliza kama alikuwa na hisia kwangu. “Sina hisia zozote kwako”, alijibu. “Mimi si shoga wala sipendi jinsia mbili; mimi ni mvulana mnyoofu ambaye anapenda kutomba mkundu wakati mwingine”. Nilivunjika moyo. Nilihisi chukizo na aibu. Lakini kama kawaida, nilitoa kisingizio kingine cha kutomchukia.

Uchumba wetu uliendelea kwa miezi kadhaa zaidi licha ya dharau yake, matusi, na ukatili wa kingono. Nilikuwa na vidonda vya mkundu, lakini hakujali. Ikiwa ningeasi, angerudi kuwa mpole na mwenye upendo ili kunifunga. Nilikuwa wake, na mara kwa mara alinidharau ili kunifanya nikose kujiamini.

Asubuhi moja, niliamka na kulia macho yangu mbele ya kioo. Nilijiuliza maswali kuhusu maisha yangu yote. Kisha nikakumbuka jinsi mimi ni mtu hodari, mstahimilivu, na jasiri. Nchini Togo, mimi ni kiongozi wa jumuiya ambaye huwapa nguvu na nia ya kuishi kwa marafiki zangu wa LGBTQAI+ ambao wamefukuzwa na kunyimwa na familia zao. Pia ninaunga mkono wale ambao wanaishi na virusi na wamepoteza matumaini ya kuishi. Kwa nini ningezama chini sana? Nilijifuta machozi na kuamua kuua mapenzi niliyonayo kwa mtu huyu mwenye sumu kali na mkorofi.

Nilimpigia simu na kumwambia asije tena nyumbani kwangu. Alicheka na kuniambia yuko njiani. Tulifanya ngono tena. Moyo wangu na nafsi yangu

haikumtaka tena, lakini mwili wangu haukuweza kupinga majaribu yake.

Hii iliendelea kwa miezi mingine mitatu. Jumapili moja mnamo Februari 2024, alikuja kuutumia mwili wangu tena. Baada ya kitendo kile nilijawa na hasira. Nilianza kumtukana. Alinichukulia kwa uzito tu nilipotupa nguo zake nje, wakati huo alinishika. Tulipigana, tukavunja vitu chumbani kwangu, na nikamtisha kwa kisu hadi akaondoka.

Mara tu alipofika nje, alipiga kelele na kuniita majina. Nililia chumbani kwangu, nikiwa na aibu kwa jinsi majirani walivyonitazama. Nilimzuia kwenye akaunti zangu zote za mitandao ya kijamii. Kwa mwezi mmoja, sikutoka chumbani kwangu. Nilitumbukia katika mshuko-moyo na kupoteza ladha ya maisha.

Ili kupata nafuu, nilisitawisha mapenzi yangu ya muziki, kupika, na kutumia wakati pamoja na marafiki. Nilikazia fikira kazi yangu, nikiondoa chochote ambacho kingeweza kusababisha huzuni au hasira. Hili lilisaidia kujenga tena kujiamini kwangu na kujistahi, na hatimaye nilifaulu kumwondoa Bastou kutoka kwa maisha yangu kikamilifu.

Hata kama bado ninampenda mahali fulani moyoni mwangu, hatutawahi kuwa pamoja tena kwa ajili ya ustawi wangu na afya ya akili. Sasa ninajenga uhusiano mpya na Rudy, mpenzi wangu mpya. Ananipenda sana na ananionyesha, ingawa bado nina mashaka na hisia zake. Kwa bahati nzuri, ananielewa, na ninatumaini kwamba baada ya muda, nitaweza kulipiza upendo wake kikamilifu. Kwa sasa, ninafurahia maisha yangu, uhuru wangu na ujana wangu.

Mèmè Minaj anawajibika kwa shughuli za vijana katika Big Mama, shirika la haki za binadamu la LGBTQAI+ nchini Togo. Pia anatumika kama mwelimishaji rika aliyebokea katika uchunguzi wa UKIMWI na matibabu ya magonjwa ya zinaa na kama kiongozi wa jamii anayeandaa matukio ya elimu kwa jumuiya ya LGBTQAI+ ya Togo.

TOXIC PLEASURE

MÈMÈ MINAJ

Togo

I watched Bastou descend the classroom stairs with his innocent gaze and lovely smile. It was 2012, and I was 13 years old, still in secondary school in Lomé. I'd been watching him from afar for months.

One evening, while chatting with friends in the neighbourhood, Bastou joined us. I fell in love with him that night. His handsome face kept popping into my head. His athletic body and tanned skin haunted me. I never admitted my feelings because I feared backlash if he turned out to be homophobic. Instead, I buried my desires within my wildest fantasies.

When summer arrived, I was eager to spend a wonderful holiday with my Prince Charming, but he left for the village to continue his studies there. It felt like my world in Wonderland had collapsed. I spent the entire holiday thinking about him until my feelings began to fade.

Eight years later, I was still in the neighbourhood. I'd completely forgotten about Bastou until one Saturday night when I was chatting on the phone with another queer friend from our school. "Bastou says hello, he's here with me", my friend suddenly said.

What!? Where the hell did he come from? Bastou and I chatted later that night. He told me he's straight but curious to try it with a guy. That marked the beginning of our nightly chats.

We talked about anything and everything, from our professional lives to our joys and sorrows, even our sex lives, giving each other romantic nicknames like babe, honey, love. During the day, we'd see each other in the neighbourhood but keep our distance to avoid suspicion.

After two years of WhatsApp friendship, he finally came to my place. He sat across from me in a floral shirt and shorts that accentuated his athletic body. I was excited, thinking about sex, but again I didn't tell him how I felt.

After leaving, he texted to ask if I liked him. He must have guessed it from my face, which couldn't hide anything anymore. "As I don't have a girlfriend at the moment, I can train with you to improve my sexual performance until I find a new one", he suggested. Finally! The chance to touch and fondle his beautiful body.

I agreed to his proposal, and we became sex friends. We fucked almost every day in every corner of my bedroom. I let him carry out his fantasies on me, some of which I didn't like, but I didn't want these moments with him to end, so I endured it.

He haunted both my mind and soul. He possessed me. He used my body however he wanted. I could no longer refuse his desires, and without realising it, our relationship became a sexual prison. I was hoping he would fall in love with me so that we could have a serious relationship. I looked after him, dressed him, fed him, did everything I could for him, even though I didn't have enough financial resources for myself.

After seven months of sex, I still had no right to anything from him. He hit on girls in front of me and asked if he could bring them to my room, which I refused.

One day, after fucking like in a Kama Sutra film, we were resting on my bed and I asked if he had feelings for me. "I feel absolutely nothing for you", he responded. "I'm not gay or bisexual; I'm a straight guy who likes to fuck ass sometimes". I was floored. I felt disgusting and ashamed. But as always, I made another excuse not to hate him.

Our affair continued for several more months with his contempt, insults, and sexual brutality. I had anal lesions, but he didn't care. If I rebelled, he would go back to being gentle and loving to keep me caged. I belonged to him, and he constantly belittled me to erode my self-confidence.

One morning, I woke up and cried my eyes out in front of the mirror. I questioned my whole life. Then I recalled what a strong, resilient, and courageous person I am. In Togo, I'm a community leader who gives strength and the will to live to my LGBTQAI+ friends who are sent away and denied by their families. I also support those who are seropositive and have lost all hope of living. Why would I sink so low? I wiped away my tears and decided to kill the love I felt for this toxic, narcissistic guy.

I called him and told him not to come to my house anymore. He laughed and told me he was on his way. We had sex again. My heart and soul didn't want him anymore, but my body couldn't resist his temptations.

This went on for another three months. One Sunday in February 2024, he came to take advantage of my body again. After the act, I was filled with rage. I started insulting him. He only took me seriously when I threw his clothes over the balcony, at which point he grabbed me. We fought, breaking things in my room, and I threatened him with a knife until he finally left.

Once outside, he shouted and called me names. I cried in my bedroom, ashamed of how the neighbours looked at me. I blocked him from all my

social media accounts. For a month, I didn't leave my room. I was plunged into depression and lost all taste for life.

To recover, I cultivated my passions for music, cooking, and spending time with friends. I focused on my work, removing anything that might trigger sadness or anger. This helped rebuild my self-confidence and self-esteem, and I finally managed to remove Bastou from my life for good.

Even if I still hold love for him somewhere in my heart, we'll never be together again for my own well-being and mental health. I'm now building a new relationship with Rudy, my new boyfriend. He loves me deeply and shows it, though I'm still somewhat suspicious of his feelings. Fortunately, he understands me, and I hope that with time, I'll be able to fully reciprocate his love. For now, I'm simply enjoying my life, my freedom, and my youth.



Mèmè Minaj is responsible for youth activities at Big Mama, an LGBTQAI+ human rights association in Togo. They also serve as a peer educator specialising in HIV/AIDS screening and STI treatments and as a community leader organising educational events for Togo's LGBTQAI+ community.



USTAHIMILIVU WANGU, NGUVU YANGU

JANVIER BANANEZA

Rwanda

Nikiwa mvulana kutoka katika familia ya Kikatoliki, nilihudhuria Misa pamoja na baba yangu kila Jumapili. Nilipenda dansi ya kitamaduni na nilicheza na wasichana wakati wa ibada za kanisa. Mavazi ya makuhani yalikuwa mazuri sikuzote, na muziki ulikuwa wenye kustaajabisha sana.

Nilikuwa mtoto mchangamfu na mtiifu, lakini mazingira ya familia yangu yaliyo fedhuli yalinifanya niwe hatarini. Baba yangu alimnyanyasa mama yangu, na hakuna hata mmoja wa wazazi wangu aliyenipenda au kunijali. Nilikuwa na umri wa miaka mitano mama aliponiwacha pamoja na baba yangu asiye na huruma. Alimfunga mdogo wangu na kipande cha kitambaa mgongoni mwake na kuondoka. Nilibaki kubeba msalaba. Baba yangu alikuwa akinipiga karibu kila usiku bila sababu, na alinimumiza kihisia pia. Mashambulizi haya ya usiku yalitia hofu moyoni mwangu, na kunikosesha usingizi.

Kipindi changu cha kabla ya ujana kilishuhudia mvutano wa kisiasa ukiongezeka kati ya Wahutu na Watutsi, makabila mawili makuu nchini Rwanda, ambayo baadaye yaliishia kwenye mauaji ya kimbari ya 1994. Mamia ya maelfu ya watu wasio na hatia kutoka rika zote na tabaka za kijamii walipoteza maisha kwa sababu ya chuki na ubaguzi kwa misingi ya ukabila. Mchanganyiko wa mauaji ya halaiki, vita vya wenyewe kwa wenyewe, na uhamisho mkubwa wa wakimbizi uliacha Rwanda kuwa nchi iliyovunjika. Nilipoteza jamaa, majirani, marafiki wa utotoni, na baba yangu. Ndugu yangu na mama yangu waliokoka mauaji ya halaiki, lakini yaliwaacha wakiwa na kiwewe. Nilifurahi kuwa nao tena katika maisha yangu, lakini furaha yangu ilikuwa ya muda mfupi; mama yangu aligeuka kuwa mnyanyasaji kuliko baba yangu.

Kila siku nilikabiliwa na ubaguzi kwa misingi ya kabila langu mchanganyiko na mwelekeo wa kijinsia. Nilikuwa nusu Mtutsi, nusu-Mhutu, mtoto wa kiume mwenye tabia za kike asiye na mlinzi. Wanafunzi wenzangu na majirani walinitusi. Nilivumilia mateso ya rangi, kihisia, na kimwili shuleni na nyumbani. Hii ilikuwa ni baada ya mauaji ya kimbari, na hakuna aliyejali. Watu walikuwa bado wanakufa nchini Rwanda, wengine walikuwa wakitoweka, na walionusurika katika mauaji ya kimbari walikuwa na njaa ya kulipiza kisasi.

Niligundua kwamba nilivutiwa na wavulana karibu na mwisho wa shule ya msingi. Ilileta mchanganyiko wa hofu na kuchanganyikiwa. Sikuwahi kusikia neno “shoga” hapo awali na sikujua mtu yeyote ambaye alionyesha hisia kama hizo. Wanafunzi wenzangu walininyanyasa na kuniita “cyabakobwa”, neno la Kinyarwanda linalotumiwa sana kuwatusi wanaume wenye tabia za kike. Nikiwa shule ya sekondari niliona kwamba baadhi ya wanashule wenzangu walivutiwa nami, lakini nilizuia hisia zangu za ngono kwa sababu nilikuwa “mwanafunzi Mkristo mwenye kielelezo kizuri”. Msongo wa mawazo uliongezeka na kunitatiza mno.

Kwa muda wa miaka mitano nilijaribu kuzuia tamaa yangu ya ngono ya ujana, lakini wanafunzi wenzangu waliendelea kusengenya kuhusu mimi kuvutiwa na wavulana wengine. Ikiwa uvumi huo ungethibitishwa kuwa kweli, ningeweza kufukuzwa kutoka shule yangu ya upili ya Kikatoliki. Nilijaribu sana kuonekana na kuwasiliana kama kiume zaidi. Nilijifunza kudhibiti sauti yangu na tabia ili kukidhi matarajio ya jamii ya uanaume. Nilipokua, hisia zangu zilikuwa na mimi, na nilijua singeweza kukandamiza upendo wangu na mvuto kwa wanaume milele.

Nilikuwa mwanafunzi mwenye kipaji katika chuo kikuu, na wanafunzi wa kike walianza kuniomba niwasaidie katika masomo yao. Walionyesha upendo wao kwangu, na nilipowakataa, upendo wao uligeuka kuwa chuki. Walianza kutilia shaka ujinsia wangu na porojo kunihusu. Nilinyanyaswa sana, nilinyanyapaliwa na kubaguliwa. Licha ya moyo wangu kujeruhiwa, nilifanikiwa kumaliza masomo yangu na shahada ya kwanza.

Kwa bahati nzuri, siku hizi za giza zilikuwa na safu ya fedha. Hadithi yangu ilienea chuo kikuu, na watu wengine mashoga walikimbia kuniokoa kutoka kwa upweke wangu. Nilivutiwa na jinsi walivyokuwa na kiburi na bila woga. Nilikuwa nimechoka kuwa chumbani na tayari kuwa mkweli kwa hisia zangu. Uchangamfu na ukaribu niliopata na jumuiya yangu mpya ya mashoga ilinitia moyo kuishi kiukweli.

Ndipo nilipopata wazo la kukaribisha mikutano ya mara kwa mara ya marafiki mashoga mahali pangu pa kuishi ili kushiriki uzoefu wetu wa kila siku. BFO-Rwanda (Bright Future Organization Rwanda / Shirika la Siku za Usoni Zinazong’aa la Rwanda), ambapo mimi ni mkurugenzi mtendaji leo, ilizaliwa hivyo.

Mnamo Aprili 2021, mwenye nyumba wangu aliwasiliana na mamlaka ya utawala wa ndani na wapelelezi wa serikali kunikamata. Alikuwa akinitazama kwa siri na wageni wangu kwa miezi kadhaa na akaripoti kwamba alishuku kuwa nilikuwa shoga. Nilizuiliwa katika kituo cha polisi cha Kigali kwa muda wa wiki tatu hadi mahakama iliponiachilia kwa sababu

mapenzi ya jinsia moja sio kosa nchini Rwanda. Nilipofika nyumbani, nilifukuzwa kwa nguvu.

Licha ya chuki niliyovumilia, sitaacha kupigana hadi mashoga watendewe sawa. Kama mwanaharakati wa haki za mashoga na mwathirika wa ubaguzi, ninapanga kutumia maisha yangu yote nikijitahidi kuifanya nchi yangu na Afrika kuwa mahali pazuri zaidi kwa mashoga. Changamoto zote nilizovumilia zimenitayarisha kwa pambano hili. Uthabiti wangu hunipa nguvu ya kuwa hivi nilivyo na kuendelea kupigania haki yetu ya usawa.



Janvier Bananeza ni mwanaharakati wa haki za LGBTIQ+ kutoka Rwanda. Yeye ni mkurugenzi mtendaji na mwanzilishi mwenza wa Bright Future Organization Rwanda, ambayo inajitahidi kuendeleza haki za LGBTIQ+.

MY RESILIENCE, MY STRENGTH

JANVIER BANANEZA

Rwanda

As a boy from a Catholic family, I attended Mass with my father every Sunday. I loved traditional dancing and would perform with the girls during church services. The priest's vestments were always beautiful, and the music was marvellously uplifting.

I was a jovial and obedient kid, but my toxic family environment made me vulnerable. My father abused my mother, and neither of my parents gave me love or care. I was five years old when Mum dumped me with my merciless father. She tied my younger brother on her back with a piece of fabric and walked away. I was left to carry the cross. My dad would beat me almost every night for no reason, and he hurt me emotionally too. These night-time attacks struck terror in my heart, leaving me an insomniac.

My pre-adolescence saw mounting political tensions between Hutus and Tutsis, the two main ethnic groups in Rwanda, which later culminated in the 1994 genocide. Hundreds of thousands of innocent people from all ages and social classes lost their lives because of hatred and discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity. The combination of genocide, civil war, and massive refugee exodus left Rwanda a shattered and traumatised country. I lost relatives, neighbours, childhood friends, and my dad. My brother and mother survived the genocide, but it left them traumatised. I was happy to have them back in my life, but my happiness was short-lived; my mother turned out to be more abusive than my father.

Every day I faced discrimination on the grounds of my mixed ethnicity and sexual orientation. I was a half-Tutsi, half-Hutu, effeminate child with no protector. My schoolmates and neighbours hurled insults at me. I endured racial, emotional, and physical abuse both at school and at home. This was in the aftermath of genocide, and no one cared. People were still dying in Rwanda, others were disappearing, and genocide survivors were hungry for revenge.

I realised that I was attracted to other boys near the end of primary school. It brought a mix of fear and confusion. I had never heard the word "gay" before and never knew anyone who expressed similar feelings. My schoolmates bullied me and called me "cyabakobwa", a Kinyarwanda word commonly used to insult effeminate men. In secondary school I noticed that some

schoolmates were attracted to me, but I repressed my sexual feelings because I was an “exemplary Christian student.” The pressure was overwhelming.

For five years I tried to suppress my teenage sexual desires, but my fellow students kept gossiping about me being attracted to other boys. If the rumours were proven true, I could have been expelled from my Catholic high school. I tried desperately to appear and present as more masculine. I learned to control my voice and mannerisms to meet society’s expectations of manliness. As I grew up, my feelings grew up with me, and I knew I couldn’t repress my love and attraction towards men forever.

I was a brilliant student at university, and female students started asking me to help them with their coursework. They expressed their love for me, and when I turned them down, their love turned to hatred. They started suspecting my sexuality and gossiping about me. I was subjected to extreme harassment, stigma, and discrimination. Despite my wounded heart, I was able to successfully finish my studies with a first-class degree.

Fortunately, these dark days had a silver lining. My story spread across campus, and other queer folks rushed to save me from my loneliness. I was impressed by how proud and fearless they were. I was tired of being in the closet and ready to be true to my feelings. The warmth and closeness I experienced with my new queer community inspired me to live authentically.

That’s when I came up with the idea to host regular meetings of queer friends at my place to share our daily experiences. Bright Future Organization Rwanda (BFO-Rwanda), of which I am the executive director today, was thus born.

In April 2021 my landlord connived with local administrative authorities and state investigators to have me arrested. He had been secretly watching me and my guests for months and reported that he suspected I was gay. I was detained in a Kigali police station for three weeks until the court released me because homosexuality is not a crime in Rwanda. When I got home, I was forcibly evicted.

Despite the hatred and homophobia I’ve endured, I will not stop fighting until queer people are treated equally. As a queer activist and victim of discrimination, I plan to spend the rest of my life striving to make my country and Africa a better place for queer people. All the challenges I’ve endured have prepared me for this fight. My resilience gives me strength to be who I am and keep fighting for our right to equality.

Janvier Bananeza is a Rwandan LGBTIQ+ rights activist. He is the executive director and co-founder of Bright Future Organization Rwanda, which strives to advance the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons in Rwanda.



KIMYA CHANGU KINAPIGA NDURU

*HARRY

Madagaska

Nilikuwa na umri wa miaka 26 wakati gazeti la eneo liliporipoti habari za tukio baya. Mzee wa miaka 30 aliuawa. Mwili wake ulilala chini bila uhai. Jina lake lilikuwa Camille. Uhalifu wake? Alikuwa shoga. Mtandao wote ulizungumza juu yake. Hakuna aliyelaani.

Wiki kadhaa baadaye, niligundua kwamba wahalifu walikuwa bado huru. Nilishtuka. Nilikuwa karibu kufichulia familia yangu siri na kuwaambia mimi ni nani hasa. Kwa hofu, nilirudi nyuma. Nilimeza ulimi. Kuwaambia wakati huo kungeweza kuwa na madhara.

Mimi ni mkakamavu kwa utetezi wa haki za binadamu, ndiyo maana nilitaka kumtetea Camille. Nilitaka kuufahamisha ulimwengu kuwa sikubaliani na kilichompata. Lakini ningewezaje kufanya hivyo? Ikiwa watu wanaochukia watu wapendao jinsia moja wangemuua Camille, hakukuwa na sababu ya wao kuniua pia. Na nikajiuliza: Je, inawezekana kuendelea kuishi Madagaska hivi?

Nililewa katika familia ya Kikristo iliyojitolea na yenye kufuata sheria. Hakuna aliyeonekana kuwa na tatizo na mimi kuwa tofauti. Familia yangu haikuweka kwa maneno jinsi nilivyo, au ningekuwa nani. Hawakutaka kamwe. Wazazi wangu hawakuwahi kuuliza kama nina rafiki wa kike, nilipokuwa nikipanga kuolewa, au kwa nini sikuwa kwenye uhusiano. Ilikuwa kila wakati, “usiulize, usiambie”.

Huenda ukawa unafikiria, “Kwa nini hakuweza kujithibitisha na kufichua kuwa shoga katika muktadha ulio wazi namna hii?” Sababu ilikuwa usalama.

Nakumbuka niliona picha kwenye mitandao ya kijamii ya wanaume wawili wa Madagascar wakiwa wameshikana mikono. Picha hiyo ilinukuliwa: “Mtu ninayempenda ni mwanamume”. Kulikuwa na kitu kizuri na cha ujasiri katika macho yao. Maoni ya chuki yalijaa chapisho hilo. Maoni yaliyopendwa zaidi yalisomeka: “Mnastahili kifo!”

Hakuna kitu kama hatari sifuri. Nilitanguliza usalama wangu na wa familia yangu na marafiki. Kila kitu kinaweza kubadilika mara moja, haswa hapa Madagaska. Kujidhihirisha mimi ni nani, katika jamii ninamoishi, ingekuwa hatari kubwa sana. Basi nikanyamaza.

Lakini je, ukimya wangu haukuwa kibali? Je, ukimya wangu haukunifanya kuwa mshirika? Je, ningeweza kukaa kimya na chuki hii hadi lini?

Miaka minne. Ilinichukua miaka minne mirefu kujenga ujasiri wa kutosha wa kusema, kuruhusu maneno yangu yatiririke.

Wazazi wangu walipoondoka katika ulimwengu huu, wakati hatimaye hawakuwa na tishio na madhara, ndipo nilipovunja ukimya wangu. Nilivunja ukimya wangu kwa sababu bado kulikuwa na vurugu, matusi, na chuki pande zote. Kwa kweli, ilizidi kuwa mbaya. Nilianza kuogopa kwamba siku zote kungekuwa na wengine kama Camille.

Nilianza kuandaa mikutano ya hadhara ya vijana ili kushughulikia mada muhimu kama vile upendo, huruma, haki ya kuishi, heshima kwa maisha ya watu wengine, lakini kamwe si ushoga moja kwa moja. Mbinu hii ya kukwepa mzizi wa suala ili kuchunguza matawi yake ilionekana kuwa yenye ufanisi. Polepole lakini kwa hakika, ndimi zilianza kulegea.

Katika mojawapo ya mikutano hiyo, mwanamke kijana aliambia chumba hicho kwa ujasiri kwamba alikuwa akimpenda mwanamke mwingine. Kwa mshangao mkubwa na kuridhika kwangu, maneno yake hayakukutana na uadui. Ukimya wa kikundi, uliojaa minong'ono ya uthibitisho, ulikuwa wa mapinduzi.

Miaka minne zaidi ya kutafakari kiundani, nilianzisha shirika ambalo linafanya kazi kwa ajili ya kukuza na kulinda haki za binadamu, hasa zile za LGBT. Tunaendeleza haki hizi kupitia elimu, utetezi na utafiti wa kisayansi.

Shirika langu halijamaliza chuki ya ushoga mara moja. Vurugu dhidi ya watu wa LGBT inaendelea. Chuki inabaki. Lakini tunaleta mabadiliko chanya. Hili ndilo linalonisukuma kuendelea kupigana. Kwa sababu ndani kabisa, bado nina ndoto ya ulimwengu usio na wahasiriwa kama Camille.

“Hakutakuwa tena Camille wengine”, najiambia mara kwa mara, kila siku.

**Harry ni wakili wa haki za binadamu wa Madagascar ambaye kazi yake inazingatia haki za watoto, wanawake na walio wachache. Alianzisha shirika lisilo la faida ili kuendeleza haki za binadamu na amani endelevu nchini Madagaska.*

MY SILENCE SCREAMS

*HARRY

Madagascar

I was 26 years old when a local newspaper reported the details of a terrible scene. A 30 year old man had been murdered. His body lay lifeless on the ground. His name was Camille. His crime? He was gay. The whole web talked about it. No one condemned it.

Some weeks later, I learned that the perpetrators were still on the loose. I was shocked. I was about to open up to my family and tell them who I really was. Terrified, I stepped back. I swallowed my tongue. Revealing myself at that moment could have been fatal.

I am a committed human rights defender, which is why I wanted to stand up for Camille. I wanted to let the world know that I didn't agree with what had happened to him. But how could I do that? If homophobes had killed Camille, there was no reason they wouldn't kill me too. And I wondered: Is it even possible to carry on living in Madagascar like this?

I was raised in a devout and conservative Christian family. No one seemed to have a problem with me being different. My family never put into words what I am, or who I would become. They never wanted to. My parents never asked if I had a girlfriend, when I was planning to get married, or why I wasn't in a relationship. It was always, "don't ask, don't tell".

You might be thinking, "Why couldn't he affirm himself and come out in such an open context?" The reason was safety.

I remember seeing a photo on social media of two Malagasy men holding hands. The photo was captioned: "The person I love is a man". There was something so beautiful and courageous in their gazes. Hostile reactions flooded the post. The most "liked" comment read: "You deserve death!"

There is no such thing as zero risk. I put my own safety and that of my family and friends first. Everything can change in an instant, especially here in Madagascar. To have revealed who I am, in the society where I live, would have been too great a risk. So I kept silent.

But wasn't my silence consent? Didn't my silence make me an accomplice? How long could I remain quiet with all this hatred?

Four years. It took me four long years to build up enough courage to speak out, to let my words flow.

When my parents departed from this world, when they were finally free from threat and harm, that's when I broke my silence. I broke my silence because there was still violence, abuse, and hatred all around me. In fact, it had gotten worse. I began to fear there would always be others like Camille.

I started hosting youth public forums to address important topics such as love, empathy, the right to life, respect for other people's lives, but never homosexuality directly. This tactic of bypassing the root of the issue to explore its branches proved effective. Slowly but surely, tongues began to loosen.

During one of these public talks, a young woman courageously told the room that she was in love with another woman. To my great surprise and satisfaction, her words were not met with hostility. The group's silence, peppered with whispers of affirmation, was revolutionary.

Four years of introspection and reflection later I founded an organisation that works for the promotion and protection of human rights, particularly those of LGBT people. We advance these rights through education, advocacy, and scientific research.

My organisation hasn't cured homophobia overnight. Violence against LGBT people continues. Hatred remains. But we are making a positive difference. This is what drives me to keep on fighting. Because deep inside, I still dream of a world without victims like Camille.

"No more Camilles", I tell myself repeatedly, each and every day.

**Harry is a Malagasy human rights lawyer whose work focuses on the rights of children, women, and minorities. He founded a non-profit organisation to advance human rights and sustainable peace in Madagascar.*



TANGAZA UPENDO WAKO

INNOCENT GRANT

Tanzania

Katika umri wa miaka ishirini na mitatu, baada ya miaka kumi yakumwita *Twalib rafiki yangu wa dhati mno, niliamua kumwambia ukweli. Singeuwacha upendo wangu uendelee kunyamaziwa tena.

Katikati mwa mwaka wa 2020, dunia karibu nzima bado ikiwa imefungwa kwa sababu ya COVID kusitisha katikhuli za kawaida, tulikomboa nyumba pamoja Dar es Salaam. Tulilala mpaka kitanda kimoja. Alikuwa akiwazungumzia wasichana wapenziwe mara kwa mara lakini nilipomtazama niliipata tamaa isiyozuilika. Kama Muislamu, alikuwa ameishikilia dini kikweli na nilihisi ugumu mwingi kumwambia nilivyokuwa nahisi.

Nilishuku kuwa alipenda wanawake pamoja na wanaume lakini sikutaka kuuliza. Jioni moja, tukiwa tumetulia kwa nyumba, nilianza mazungumzo kuhusu ushoga. Punde tu nilipotaja jina hilo, aliketi kimakini na akasema huku akisaga meno, “ushoga ni dhambi!”. Moyo wangu ulitamani sana kuwa naye lakini aliwachukia mashoga, kwa hivo nikaficha matamanio yangu kwake.

Asubuhi moja, nikiwa pekee yangu, nilitaka kumtumia ujumbe wa simu nikimwambia nilivyohisi. Mchana ukafika, sikuutuma ujumbe ule. Jioni ikaja, sikufanya lolote. Kisha ujasiri wa kighafla ukanijia.

Nikamtumia ujumbe: “Hujambo ndugu. Nimekuwa nikificha kwa muda mrefu, nafikiri ninawapenda wanaume na wanawake, na nakupenda mno. Ningependa uwe mpenzi wangu.” Moyo wangu ulikuwa unadunda.

Twalib alikuja jioni hilo. Nilikuwa na wasiwasi mwingi. Nilimtazama kwa makini kuona kama angefichua hisia zake kuhusu ujumbe wangu, lakini hakufichua hisia yoyote. Hakuurudisha ujumbe wangu.

Kimya kilitawala kati yetu usiku hio. Asubuhi, nilimtazama akichukua virago vyake na akaondoka. Sikumuona wala kuskia kutoka kwake mwaka huo mzima. Nilijihisi mjinga kwa kukataliwa na kupuuzwa, lakini nilimkosa sana rohoni. Sikulala siku nyingi. Muda ulifanya mambo yakawa magumu zaidi.

Hata nikiwa katika hali ya huzuni yangu na mawazo ya kujiua, kumbukumbu za jinsi nilipatana na Twalib zilitawala mawazo yangu. Tulipatana mwanzo wa 2010 tukiwa katika shule ya upili iliyokuwa katika nyanda za juu kusini mwa Tanzania. Siku moja tukiwa darasani, macho yangu yaliangukia huyu mvulana mrefu, mtanashati. Tulielewana mara moja. Baada ya wiki kadhaa tukawa marafiki wa chanda na pete lakini moyoni mwangu ndani nilijua nilichotaka. Nilihuzunika alipokataa uhusiano wa kimapenzi na mimi.

Nilijua kuwa singezidi kukaa kwa uchungu na huzuni, nikatafuta usaidizi. Nilimtafuta Dkt. Michael Brady, mshauri wa matibabu zinazo wakumba LGBTQI kutoka uingereza. Nilikuwa nimepatana naye nikiwa mwenyekiti wa chama cha afya ya ngono katika chuo na nikamwaya moyo wangu kwake. Nilimwambia jinsi nilivyohisi sina dhamani na sistahili upendo wowote. Alinitumia ujumbe wa kunitia moyo: “Innocent, una thamana jinsi ulivyo. Mapenzi ya kweli na marafiki wa kweli watasalia siku zote.”

Ujumbe wa Dkt. Brady ulinipa matumaini. Matumaini hayo yalizaa matunda miezi michache baadae nilipopatana na *Melvin. Mwanzoni, nilikuwa na wasiwasi moyoni kuhusu kumwambia kwamba nilivutiwa naye, niliogopa kuwa itaathiri uhusiano wetu wa kikazi pale kwenye chama cha afya ya ngono. Kwa hivyo nilishtuka kwa furaha siku moja Melvin aliponijia huku akiwa na tabasamu kubwa.

“Mwanaume akikwambia kwamba anavutiwa nawe na ajaribu kukutongoza, utafanya vipi?” aliniuliza huku akitabasamu vikubwa.

“Ati nini?” Nilimjibu, pasi na kuamini masikio yangu. Melvin alirudia swali. Tabasamu langu likawa kubwa kuliko lake. “Nitathamini kutongozwa huko na mapenzi hayo. Na kama ninavutiwa na mtu huyo, tutachumbiana.”

“Hivyo basi, nimevutiwa sana na wewe”, alicheka. “Natumai unahisi vivyo hivyo.”

Papo hapo, nikamkumbatia na kukiri kwamba nilihisi kama yeye. Melvin alinihakikishia kuwa hakuna haja ya kunyamazia upendo.

Uhusiano wetu ulinihamasisha kufanya kitu kwa ajili ya wavulana wengine mashoga wanaohisi wamekataliwa na kwamba hawastahili, jinsi Twalib alivyofanya nihisi. Niliutumia uongozi wangu kuwa mshauri wa vijana na nikaanza kusafiri kwenda Kusini mwa Tanzania kuongoza mafunzo katika hafla za chama cha afya ya ngono.

Mwanzoni mwa 2021, nikawa mkurugenzi wa programu katika shirika la Young and Alive linaloongozwa na vijana, na linalofanya kazi kuendeleza

afya ya ngono na haki za vijana. Sasa hivi, natumia jukwaa hili kuunga mkono haki za LGBTQI.

Kupitia kwa utetezi wangu na niliyoyapitia, nimejifunza kuwa, licha ya mambo ya kutukatiza tamaa kutokea, matumaini hushinda. Lazima tuyalinde matumaini hayo na tufurahie matunda yake ili tuweze kuwatia matumaini watu wengine.



Innocent Grant ni mkurugenzi wa programu katika shirika la Young and Alive mjini wa Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Ni mtaalamu wa jinsia na afya ya ngono na kiongozi wa vijana aliye na utaalamu wa kijamii na mabadiliko ya kitabia, na umakini wa kuendeleza haki za LGBTQI na haki nyingine za binadamu.

SPEAK YOUR LOVE

INNOCENT GRANT

Tanzania

At age 23, after a decade of calling *Twalib my best friend, I decided to tell him the truth. I couldn't let my love go unspoken anymore.

In the middle of 2020, with much of the world still in COVID lockdown, we rented a house together in Dar es Salaam. We even shared a bed. He was always talking about his girlfriends, but I found him irresistible. As a Muslim, he was very religious, and I found it difficult to tell him how I felt.

I thought he was bisexual but didn't want to ask. One evening, while we were lounging at home, I started a conversation about homosexuality. As soon as I mentioned the word he sat up and said through clenched teeth: "homosexuality is a sin!" My heart was burning for him, but he was homophobic, so I suppressed my attraction.

One morning, while alone, I wanted to send him a text message telling him how I felt. Afternoon came, I didn't send it. Evening came, and I did nothing. Then a sudden courage came over me.

I texted him: "Hey brother. I have been hiding this for a long time, but I think I am bisexual, and I really love you. I want you to be my boyfriend." I sent it. My heart was pounding.

Twalib came back that evening. I was so anxious. I watched him closely to see if he would reveal his feelings about my message, but he didn't show any emotion. He never texted me back.

Silence sat between us that night. In the morning, I watched him grab his bags and walk away. I didn't see or hear from him for the rest of that year. I felt so stupid for being rejected and ignored, but I missed him so much. My nights were sleepless. Time only made things worse.

Even in my bouts of depression and suicidal thoughts, flashes of how I met Twalib entered my mind. I met him in early 2010 when I was at secondary school in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. In class one day, my eyes fell upon this tall, handsome guy. We connected instantly. Within a few weeks, we became best friends, but deep down I knew what I wanted. I was so sad when he turned me down.

I knew I couldn't continue wallowing in pain and sadness, so I got help. I reached out to Dr. Michael Brady, a U.K. national medical advisor for LGBTQI health who I met while president of my college's sexual health club, and poured out my heart to him. I told him I felt worthless and undeserving of love. He sent me an affirming message: "Innocent, you are valid the way you are. True love and true friends will always stay."

Dr. Brady's message gave me hope. That hope yielded fruit a few months later when I met *Melvin. At first, I was self-conscious about telling him I found him attractive, worried it might be inappropriate for our working relationship at the sexual health club. So I was pleasantly surprised when Melvin walked up to me one day with a big smile.

"If a man told you he finds you attractive and tries to seduce you, what would you do?" he asked, grinning.

"What?" I responded, not believing my ears. Melvin repeated the question. My smile grew even wider than his. "I would appreciate the seduction and love. If I found the person attractive, I would date him."

"Well, I find you very attractive", he laughed. "I hope you feel the same way."

Instantly, I wrapped my arms around him and confessed that I did. Melvin reassured me that there's no need to let love go unspoken.

Our relationship inspired me to do something for other queer boys who feel rejected and unworthy, the way Twalib made me feel. I used my leadership skills to become a youth mentor and started traveling to southern Tanzania to lead trainings at the sexual health club's events.

In early 2021, I became program director at Young and Alive Initiative, a youth-led organisation that works to advance young people's sexual health and rights. I now use this platform to support LGBTQI rights.

Through my advocacy work and personal experiences, I've learned that no matter the disappointments we face, hope will prevail. We must protect this hope and enjoy its fruits, so we can inspire hope in others.

Innocent Grant is a program director at Young and Alive Initiative in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He is a gender and sexual health specialist and youth leader with expertise in social and behavioural change, focused on advancing LGBTQI and other human rights.



HATUKO PEKEE YETU

WANJIKU “SHAKES” NJENGA

Kenya

Siku zote nilijivunia kukaa kama msichana-mvulana kwa sababu ilifanana na mtindo wa baba yangu. Kila tulipocheza mchezo wa utotoni “cha baba cha mama”, siku zote nilitaka kuwa baba. Hakuna mtu karibu nami aliyeonekana kunijali, lakini ndani kabisa nilijua kuwa nilikuwa tofauti.

Katika shule yangu ya msingi ya jinsia mchanganyiko, ilikuwa wazi wavulana na wasichana walikuwa nani na wapi pa kuelekeza mapenzi yoyote. Kuhitimu katika shule ya upili ya bweni ya wasichana wote mnamo 2010 kulileta mawimbi ya msisimko, woga, na udadisi.

Sikuwahi kuvaa sketi au magauni nikikua, kwa hivyo ilinibidi nitengenezee sare hii mpya ya shule. Nilikunja mikono ya blazi zangu, nikalivua shati langu na kuifunga tai yangu. Jumapili ilikuwa siku niliyoipenda sana kwa sababu tuliruhusiwa kuvaa suruali badala ya sketi. Kwa mtazamo wangu wa kijinsia ulikuja umakini mwingi kutoka kwa wasichana wengine. Niliipenda wao walivyonitamania.

Hatimaye nilianza uhusiano na mmoja wa wanafunzi wenzangu, *Zaha. Kati ya kutazamana kwa muda mrefu na kutaniana tulibadilishana noti na kusaidiana kusoma kwa migawo. Tulikuwa vijana na wapya kwa hili. Hatukujua hata tuuiteje uhusiano wetu. Usagaji ulisikika kuwa wa kishetani. Nilikuwa nimeona wachungaji wakijaribu kufukuza usagaji kutoka kwa washirika, kwa hivyo sikulipenda neno hilo. Tulitulia kwa kujiita marafiki bora.

Sikuwa nimewahi kupata ukaribu wa aina hii na rafiki wa kike hapo awali, lakini nilihisi kufahamika sana. Alikuwa rahisi kuzungumza naye, na kumbatio lake lilikuwa bora zaidi. Sikuelewa kwa nini ilinibidi kuficha jinsi nilivyohisi huku wanafunzi wenzangu wakionyesha barua kutoka kwa wapenzi wao wa kiume.

Lakini mwakani 2012 nilipohitimu miaka kumi na sita. Ilihisi kama mwaka uliolaaniwa. Siku moja niliitwa kwenye ofisi ya mwalimu mkuu. Baba yangu alikuwa pale na alikwepa macho yangu huku mkuu wa shule akisoma barua yangu ya kufukuzwa shule kwa sauti. Barua hiyo ilidai “nilijitembeza kama mwamaume” na “kujaribu kushawishi wanafunzi katika usagaji”.

Nilitaka kujaribu kuelezea, lakini sikuweza kupata maneno. Nilichofanya ni kulia tu. Uso wa baba yangu ulikuwa umekunjamana na jasho. Mimi na Zaha tulifukuzwa. Nilipofika nyumbani, mama yangu alinikaribisha na, “Umekuja nyumbani?” Uso wake mkali ulionekana kudumu.

Mama yangu alinifanya nijifiche kwa majirani ili wasijiulize kwa nini nilikuwa nyumbani. Nilianza kutumia saa nyingi kwenye maktaba, nikirudi nyumbani kwa kuchelewa. Usiku mmoja, sikutulia na sikuweza kulala. Nilimsikia baba akisema, “Mimi nimeosha mikono na huyo mtoto maana si binti yangu tena”. Nililia niliposikia maneno hayo, lakini sikushangaa.

Baada ya miezi mitatu, niliondoka nyumbani kwenda shule ya upili ya kijijini na kuhitimu kwenda chuo kikuu. Nilifikiri chuo kikuu kingeniweka huru, lakini nilihangaika kutafuta watu wengine waliopenda watu wa jinsia moja. Siku moja nilijiunga na programu ya uchumba nikitumaini kupata marafiki kama mimi. Nililingana na LEHA (Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer and Gender Non-conforming Education Health and Advocacy / Elimu ya Afya na Uanaharakati wa Usagaji, Upenda Jinsia Mbili, Ushoga na Jinsia Isiobainika), shirika gumu ambalo lilikuwa likitumia jukwaa kuvutia wanachama. Walinialika kwenye mkutano. Mara baada ya hapo, sikuamini macho yangu. Sikuwa nimewahi kuona mashoga wengi kiasi hicho. Nililemewa sana hivi kwamba sikuhudhuria mkutano mwingine kwa miezi sita. Hatimaye niliporudi, nilijua nilikuwa nyumbani. Nilijua lazima nibaki. Nikawa mwalimu rika wa LEHA na nikaanza kuongoza mijadala ya jumuiya.

Vipindi vya rika vilinishangaza. Sote tulikuwa tofauti, lakini sawa. Sote tulionekana kushiriki hadithi sawa, na nilitaka kushiriki hadithi zetu na ulimwengu. Baada ya miaka miwili kama mfanyakazi wa kujitolea, nilijiunga na LEHA kama mtayarishaji wa maudhui ya mtandao na afisa wa mawasiliano.

Kila wakati mwanachama wa jumuiya ya LGBTIQ anatuma LEHA ujumbe wa moja kwa moja kwenye mitandao ya kijamii akisema kitu kama “hicho chapisho uliloshiriki kilisawazishana sana na mimi. Asante kwa kuniona”, ninajazwa na furaha kwa kazi yangu. Ninataka kuunda maudhui kwa ajili ya vijana kama mimi kuona na kujua kwamba kuna jumuiya humu nje kwa ajili yao. Nataka vijana wajue hawako peke yao.

Wanjiku “Shakes” Njenga ni mwelimishaji rika, mwanasheria, na mtu wa mawasiliano wa shirika la LEHA (Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer and Gender Non-conforming Education Health and Advocacy) huko Thika, Kenya.

WE ARE NOT ALONE

WANJIKU "SHAKES" NJENGA

Kenya

I was always proud of my tomboy looks because they resembled my father's style. Whenever we played the childhood game "cha baba cha mama", I always wanted to be the "baba", the father. No one around me seemed to care, but deep down I knew I was different.

In my mixed-gender primary school, it was clear who the boys and the girls were and where to direct any romantic interest. Graduating to an all-girls boarding high school in 2010 brought waves of excitement, nervousness, and curiosity.

I never wore skirts or dresses growing up, so I had to make this new school uniform work for me. I folded up the sleeves of my blazers, untucked my shirt, and knotted my tie short. Sunday was my favourite day because we were allowed to wear trousers instead of skirts. With my "androgynous" look came a lot of attention from the other girls. I loved it. They swooned over me.

Eventually I started a relationship with one of my classmates, *Zaha. Between long gazes and flirting we exchanged notes and helped each other study for assignments. We were young and new to this. We didn't even know what to call our relationship. Lesbianism sounded demonic. I had seen pastors try to exorcise lesbianism from congregants, so I disliked the word. We settled for calling ourselves best friends.

I had never experienced this type of closeness with a female friend before, yet it felt so familiar. She was easy to talk to, and her hugs were the best. I didn't understand why I had to hide how I felt while fellow students showed off letters from their boyfriends.

But then 2012 rolled around and I turned 16. It felt like a cursed year. One day I was summoned to the principal's office. My dad was there and avoided my eyes as the principal read my expulsion letter aloud. The letter claimed I "paraded myself as a man" and "tried to recruit students into lesbianism".

I wanted to try to explain, but I couldn't find the words. All I did was cry. My dad's face was crumpled and sweaty. Both Zaha and I were expelled. When I arrived home, my mother welcomed me with, "Umekuja nyumbani?" meaning "So, you are home?" The scowl on her face seemed permanent.

My mother made me hide from neighbours so they wouldn't wonder why I was home. I started spending hours at the library, returning home late. One night, I was restless and couldn't sleep. I overheard my father say, "Mimi nimeosha mikono na huyo mtoto" meaning "She is not my daughter anymore. I have washed my hands of that child." I cried when I heard those words, but I wasn't surprised.

After three months I left home for a faraway rural high school and qualified for university. I thought university would set me free, but I struggled to find other queer people. One day I joined a queer dating app hoping to make queer friends. I matched with LEHA (Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer and Gender Non-conforming Education Health and Advocacy), a queer organisation that was using the platform to attract members. They invited me to a meeting. Once there, I was in disbelief. I had never seen so many queer people. I was so overwhelmed that I didn't attend another meeting for six months. When I eventually returned, I knew I was home. I knew I must stay. I became a LEHA peer educator and started leading community dialogues.

The peer sessions amazed me. We were all so different, yet so alike. We all seemed to share the same stories, and I wanted to share our stories with the world. After two years as a volunteer, I joined LEHA as a content creator and communication officer.

Every time a member of the LGBTIQ community sends LEHA a direct message on social media saying something like "that post you shared resonated so much. Thank you for seeing me," I am filled with joy for my work. I want to create content for young people like me to see and know that there is a community out there for them. I want young queer people to know they are not alone.

Wanjiku "Shakes" Njenga is a peer educator, paralegal, and a communication person for LEHA (Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer and Gender Non-conforming Education Health and Advocacy) organisation in Thika, Kenya.

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ABOUT TABOOM MEDIA

Taboom's media training, mentoring, publishing, monitoring, and response programs catalyse ethical journalism and public discourse around taboo topics. By shining light on taboos in the news, we aim to break their power. Our global work challenges stigmas, replacing stereotypes and discrimination with accuracy and respect. We facilitate responsible media coverage to safeguard and champion vulnerable communities and to advance human rights

To learn more about our work and to download a free copy of this anthology, visit TaboomMedia.com.

KUHUSU GALA QUEER ARCHIVE

GALA ni kichocheo cha uzalishaji, uhifadhi na usambazaji wa taarifa kuhusu historia, utamaduni na uzoefu wa kisasa wa watu wa LGBTQIA+ barani Afrika. Kama kumbukumbu iliyoanzishwa kwa misingi ya kanuni za haki za kijamii na haki za binadamu, tunaendelea kufanyia kazi ufahamu zaidi kuhusu maisha na uzoefu wa watu wa LGBTQIA+ barani Afrika. Lengo letu kuu ni kuhifadhi na kukuza masimulizi na utamaduni wa LGBTQIA+, na pia kukuza usawa wa kijamii, elimu mjumuisho na maendeleo ya vijana.

GALA huchapisha chini ya uchapaji wetu, vitabu vya MaThoko, chombo cha uchapishaji cha uandishi wa LGBTQIA+ na hufanya kazi za kitaalamu kuhusu mandhari zinazohusiana na LGBTQIA+ barani Afrika.



ABOUT GALA QUEER ARCHIVE

GALA is a catalyst for the production, preservation and dissemination of information about the history, culture and contemporary experiences of LGBTQIA+ people in Africa. As an archive founded on principles of social justice and human rights, we continue to work toward a greater awareness about the lives and experiences of LGBTQIA+ people in Africa. Our main focus is to preserve and nurture LGBTQIA+ narratives and culture, as well as promote social equality, inclusive education and youth development.

GALA publishes under our imprint, MaThoko's Books, a publishing outlet for LGBTQIA+ writing and scholarly works on LGBTQIA+-related themes in Africa.

Taboom Media na GALA Queer Archive wangependa
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Mfululizo huu maalum wa Toleo la Kiswahili la *Uanaharakati wa Wapenzi wa Jinsia Moja na Uvuka Jinsia Barani Afrika* unaangazia hadithi na vielelezo 12 vya nguvu kutoka Juzuu 1-4. Katika kurasa hizi, watetezi wa haki za binadamu kutoka barani kote wanashiriki hadithi zao za asili na safari za wanaharakati. Ushuhuda huu wa kina wa nguvu na uwezekano wa kuathiriwa na kuinua mapambano yetu ya pamoja ya usawa wa LGBTQI+. Matokeo yake ni antholojia yenye nguvu ya upinzani, uthabiti, na utambuzi. Ili kusoma mkusanyiko kamili wa takriban hadithi 100 katika Kiingereza na Kifaransa, au dazeni tofauti katika Kiarabu au Kireno, tembelea TaboomMedia.com/resources au GALA.co.za.

This special Kiswahili Edition of our *Queer Activism in Africa* series spotlights 12 powerful stories and illustrations from Volumes 1-4. In these pages, human rights defenders from across the continent share their origin stories and activist journeys. These intimate testimonies of strength and vulnerability document and elevate our collective fight for LGBTQI+ equality. The result is a powerful anthology of resistance, resilience, and recognition. To read the full collection of nearly 100 stories in English and French, or a different dozen in Arabic or Portuguese, visit TaboomMedia.com/resources or GALA.co.za.



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