

The background of the cover is a photograph of a group of approximately 12 people of various ethnicities and ages sitting in a circle on the floor of a large, domed structure. The interior of the dome is made of woven reeds or similar natural materials, with a single circular opening at the top through which bright light is streaming, creating a dramatic spotlight effect on the group. A small, thin tree sapling is planted in the center of the circle. On the back wall, a large, light-colored tapestry or map is hanging. The overall atmosphere is warm and communal.

TWAWEZA

A collection of 24 African Non-Fiction Stories

Edited & Compiled by:
Nabilah Usman
Kolabomi Adeko

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TWaweza: A Collection of 24 African Non-Fiction Stories

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Introduction

One of the problems confronting the African continent is the gradual but steady cultural erosion that can be noted from one region to the next. African traditions and values are gradually becoming a thing of the past as there are several influences from other cultures to adopt what is referred to as a more ‘open-minded’ culture of freedom without restrictions.

One of the ingredients that perhaps acts as a catalyst is the prevailing cultural stereotype where some cultures are viewed through the lenses of negativity and inferiority. This leads to the abandonment of those cultures by the newer generation who are supposed to ensure its longevity.

Confronted by these two challenges above, one must note that cultural erosion is dependent on cultural stereotype, among a few others, and one way to mitigate it is to ensure that there is some form of cultural integration whereby aspects of another’s culture, including beliefs, rituals, practices, etc, can be learned without sacrificing one’s culture thereby reducing the cultural stereotypes and eventually slow down cultural erosion.

We set out to do just the above with the PenPen Africa project co-funded by Culture at Work Africa and the European Union. We implemented the project in partnership with Writers Guild

Kenya. The idea of the project is simple: promoting cultural integration among Africans, using literature. We held a writers residency for 21 days in Nigeria with 6 writers from West and Central Africa. We then held the same residency in Kenya with writers from East and southern Africa. During their time together, they learned about each other's cultures, their practices, rituals, etc, and provided room for intercultural dialogue in the culturally diverse mix of creatives. In the end, they each sent in 2 culturally themed non-fiction stories.

When we were done compiling the stories for this anthology, we were left with the choice of a fitting title. We settled for *Twaweza*. This is a Swahili word which can loosely be interpreted to mean 'together, we can'. We chose this as a symbolic title to express our belief that together, we can do anything we want to including dispelling cultural stereotypes and ensuring that our cultural traditions and beliefs are not eroded. This is the moment to act because our culture is our identity and the moment we lose that identity, we become invalid.

Finally, it is our hope that as you read this book, you begin to appreciate the cultural diversity of the African continent. While our attempt may be modest, we can all do more in many more ways to ensure that we remain afloat and never sink into an identity crisis. This book is not for sale so please feel free to

distribute to your networks so that our approach may be even much more impactful than planned.

Anthony Onugba,
Executive Director,
African Writers Development Trust

*The opportunities for cross-cultural learning presented to us by
the cultural diversity of Africa remains our most valuable
advantage for forging a united and prosperous Africa.*

- Henry Ijomah

1

REMINISCENCE: WE ARE OUR BELIEF

Ngang God'swill N. - Cameroon

On a quiet rainy evening, my brothers and I sit enjoying the wonders of 21st century magic. The heavy rainfall drums on our zinc roof like a creditor knocking on an overdue debtor's door - violently and destructively. The cold that floods the room meets with a powerful adversary; blankets and mugs of hot tea. Three cups for the three of us.

We don't do much talking. We are all immersed in our online lives and punching away at our phones.

The peace of our tech space is distorted by a loud thunderous voice calling my older brother. We sit in silence, as our father bellows again, a slight irritation in his humongous voice.

“Ade!”

My brother is quick to his feet and halfway to the parlour.

“Yes Dad!” His voice filling the house.

Growing up, I had expected my voice to eventually turn out like theirs, with that sweet musical bass intonation to it - even my younger brother had the same type of voice. Instead, I developed a higher pitch voice, adept in soft speech and excellent for tenor.

My mind drifts from my phone and I begin to think about my family and how strange it is.

We are a Christian family, professed Presbyterians. Dad was a mathematical associate professor and a very committed church member, and also a member of the CMF (Christian Men Fellowship). Mom is also a committed christian and a member of the CWF (Christian Women Fellowship) movement. Like me, my younger brother and sister had all been in the YP (Young Presbyterian) movement back in the day. Our older brother joined the UB Pres. Singers (University of Buea Presbyterian Singers). We all aspire to join this choir.

For a science inclined family, we are church regulars who aspire to grow in our connection with God, to lead proper lives and enjoy the afterlife. Considering our present times, I often wonder how a mathematician raised a family of religious people. I wonder if religion is our way of fitting in, because almost every other person in our community is a believer of sorts. The entire nation of Cameroon is filled with churches and so is the African

continent. We, Africans, seem to be the most religious and spiritual people on earth.

Heavy footsteps approaching the room yank me back to our bedroom. . When my brother walks, one can hear him throughout the entire house.

Ade strolls in, grabbs his phone and turns to leave when Ndeh, our younger brother asks,

“Guy, what did he say?”

“He wants me to go with him to Bamenda, the day after tomorrow, that is Friday morning. He’s going to be made Tata’s *chop-chair*. Now I have to go pack, and start cancelling my programs and stuff. Anyways...”

He trails off while in the hallway. He is like that, always walking off mid-answer. I don’t know whether it is his was of escaping further questions or just multitasking. He is not a fan of simple questions.

I am excited that Dad is going to be made “chop-chair” (successor) to our grandfather. Grandpa has been dead for many years now, and it has taken too long for them to carry out the rites of succession.

In no time, it is Friday morning and it seems I am more excited than the people taking the journey. The journey had been postponed to later that evening because dad had some work to clear up in the office. While he is away, we help mom prepare his traveling bag for the journey and have a good laugh doing it. Moments like these with Mom are priceless, she is often too stressed from work to relax with us.

By evening we have packed all the bags into mom's car and the travelers are all dressed up for the journey. We have supper together, then Mom calls us to form a circle and hold each other's hands. She leads us in prayers for a safe journey and a successful event in Bamenda. The prayer lasts a while - as we are accustomed to - before she says, "Amen",

Mum is set to drive her son and husband to the bus station to board a bus for Bamenda. Theirs is a six-hour car ride to Bamenda and she is not a fan of night journeys given the rate of highway hijackings. However, it cannot be helped and all she can do is hope for the best. We used to tease her about how much she worried, and whenever she said we were causing her worry, we'd remind her that it was part of the job description.

I open the gate for her to drive off with her precious cargo, I don't want to be in her shoes. She is scared for her men.

I lock the gate behind her and walk back towards the house. As I do, I picture my father's face and the excitement spread across it.

Dad is a cultural man. His years in Britain had not taken that from him. He cherishes cultural practices and will go out of his way every now and then to promote culture. He is a ranking member in our cultural association and has been in the audience of the *Fon* of our land many times. True, that he is currently a Christian, but the spiritual nature of our people has not departed from him. Our kinsmen are reputed for being spiritual, seeing everything as a physical manifestation of a spiritual activity. They see the world as a tech-guy sees a computer, from the inside out.

We believe in the blessings of our parents, and their parents before them; that a blessing, like a curse, will manifest till it is broken.

We believe our parents that have moved on to the life-after still watch over us and guide our steps. We also believe that one can destroy in the spiritual what is in the physical, like marriages and a peaceful community. We believe diseases can be a manifestation of evil spirits and curses inflicted on one by another.

I am no exception. I believe I will never be in any motor accident because Dad once told us that some relative of ours in the past had blessed our lineage; that accidents will occur before we arrive or after we've left.

We are not alone in this; that is why most of my country and continent could easily accept Christianity and Islam once they saw miracles, or so I think.

On Sundays, in the Christian areas of the country, churches are always full with people looking for miracles, healing, breakthroughs and prophecies. They believe so much in the spiritual that they sometimes ignore the physical, and will spend hours praying or carrying out rituals; fortifying the spirit man or just cleansing their souls and preparing for the afterlife. They prepare so much for climbing that heavenly stairway.

I do not realize that I have already gotten to the flight of stairs just in front of our house, so I trip and fell. My younger sister and brother come out laughing like hyenas choking on laughing gas. They can literally mock one to suicide, but I am no regular person, I am accustomed to their crazy. They are rolling on the floor now, I try to laugh too, but the pain in my head won't let me, so I get to my feet and quickly walk into the house, speaking to them over my shoulder;

“When Mommy comes back, you people will open the gate for her”.

They don't respond or mind at all, or maybe they are still overcome with laughter. I had kicked my left toe, a sign of good fortune, or so my cousin tells me. It is believed that when one kicks the big toe of their left foot, it is a sign of good fortune coming their way.

Mom returns roughly thirty minutes later. She heads straight into her room, no word at all; just worry and fear written on her face. We know better than to get in her way. I assume she sat with them till the bus left the park, said a short prayer perhaps, before heading for home.

Mom had taken a great chance on her man many years ago, before they got married. Back then, Mom was a Christian, of the Roman Catholic Church faith, and was not allowed to marry out of the church, unless the man became a Catholic too. Dad was not about to become a Catholic and Mom was not about to let her man go, so she did the switch. She left the Catholic Church and professed the Presbyterian doctrine with my father. She left a lot with that decision, and till date, she does not regret the choice.

I have thought about the issue before: why one has to marry from their own denomination despite the fact that we all identify as

Christians. It appears that marrying from your own denomination is a way of keeping the church united, instead of scattered. This is all an attempt to maintain the purity and sanctity of Christians and the church. Marrying into another denomination is taking a member away from the church, and that is a sin. A dreadful sin at that, the taking of God's own.

*Religion is like air,
a fundamental part of life
a life cord in fact, perhaps
to those who answer Religious;
that belief in spiritual realities.*

Africans. We have always been the religious type, like our fathers before us. The difference is that, while they practiced African Traditional Religions, we, are faithfuls of the new generation religions, inclusive of Christianity and Islam. While they offered sacrifices of crops and animals to their deity as a physical representation of their devotion towards them, we offer our money, intellect and good deeds in response to the same need. Somehow, we found the nerve to call them pagans, unbelievers. Is it not us who are unbelievers, turning from the ways of our fathers?

It is about 10pm, I am moving about the house, locking doors and ensuring all is securely locked down. At each door, I look up at

the crucifix hanging above the door and I remember mom. Presbyterians don't have or use crucifixes, but here they are in our home. These are reminders of her Catholic days, and they are supposed to protect the house from evil spirits and keep us safe.

My tour is over in a little while, and once I am sure the house was as safe as it can be, I turn out the lights and head to my room. My younger brother is already fast asleep, he is not the type to snore but he sleeps like a log. I have to move him to find space to sleep. The task is more than I bargained for; it is like he gained extra weight when he slept.

When he is securely in his corner of the bed, I get in and like Mom had taught us many years ago as boys, I close my eyes and say a prayer. I say a prayer of thanksgiving for the day and the next, I pray for journey mercies for my family members on the way, and I pray for protection for those left behind. I call on the Lord to send His angels to come and protect us as we sleep. I had securely locked the house down, protecting us in and from the physical, I had said a prayer too, to cover the spiritual; I am safe now.

So I rest my head on my pillow and I go to sleep secure in the things I believe and the person that I am.

2

HOW TO PLOT A RENAISSANCE

Hassan Kassim – Kenya

I remember in part. A flight of stairs. Salsabila, her freckled little sister beaming at the entrance as she put her phone away and asked me to sign the name sheet. I remember the room where it happened flooded with light and I remember there being five of us, all sane and with clear understanding as to how daunting the task we were to undertake was. Most of all, I remember her smile, most genuine. A five-foot-something to my 6'2".

It is only after I have taken my seat that I catch a glimpse of the fire in her eyes; this was a woman on a mission. “Welcome,” she says. I am late.

“Would you mind introducing yourself?” She pauses briefly, looking at me. “Then tell us a bit about the writing you do. And don’t worry, you haven’t missed a thing. Abdulqadir here just finished introducing himself.”

It's often in moments where I'm supposed to talk about myself that I forget myself. Perhaps it's the ambiguity of the question or my unwillingness to fit years of becoming into several short sentences. *Who am I when I'm constantly trying different versions of myself?* Do I simplify it to my education? Family history? Or whatever I do to get by? My greatest contribution to the collective human experience? In moments like these, I don't recount a thing.

"So, my name is Hassan," I finally say, scanning the faces in the room, smiling to feign confidence "and I'm passionate about writing. But I haven't written a thing yet and I'm hoping this workshop will ease me into that. And... yeah"

Shrugging my shoulders, I adjust my posture to face her as the room nods agreeably. I am obviously lying. One, to say you're passionate about a thing you hadn't started doing was a contradiction in itself. Other than love, passion entails obsession. Two, I have been writing. But my writing prowess pales in comparison to hers. I revere her. She goes by the name of her blog - infamous in our circles - 'Strokes of my Pen.' There isn't a sentence she has written that I haven't read.

"Good, I see we're all beginners here to help each other." You can hear the eyes rolling in the room. "So, let's get comfortable and feel free. I'm more nervous than any one of you but this is

something I felt our community needed and I hope I'll meet all your expectations." She adjusts her glasses.

She had announced the workshop in the writers network Whatsapp group about two weeks before. The news of a creative writing workshop happening in my hometown, Mombasa, was a revelation. I did not think twice before signing up, even though I was 15 hours away, in Eldoret. Plus, I had exams, the last of which was scheduled a day before the workshop. To be in attendance meant bending over backwards. And here I am.

The class begins with an introduction to creative writing and proceeds to a session on writing about the Coast. We watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's famous Ted Talk, The Dangers of a Single Story. I have watched that talk before, but putting it in our context now is the first time I feel I actually understand it.

"So, I'm of the assumption you're all university students," Lubnah says, to which we all nod.

"And how many of you schooled outside of Mombasa?" she proceeds, and half the hands in the room go up.

"So, to those of you who schooled outside, what's the word out there about the people of the Coast. Like, are there any stereotypes that you're always associated with?"

We exchange glances, wondering who will go first.

“Well,” Sultan begins. “Out there, the thing that comes up again and again is laziness. Like, everyone seems shocked when I’m always taking initiative or making it to places on time cause like you know, the assumption is that everyone from the Coast has a problem with keeping time.”

“Yes,” Amina, the only female student jumps in. “I haven’t been outside much but that seems like a common generalization. Everyone expects that I must be slow in everything I do. There’s even this saying my classmates use around me ‘Be chill like the Swahili.’ Then the guys from my class keep bugging me with when I will invite them to my place for a meal, like being a girl from the Coast automatically makes me a great chef. I mean I am but...” Her arms flail in hope of recollecting something. “You know... The one nice thing is when they call my Kiswahili accent impeccable. Someone can come to me sometimes and tell me they heard I’m from Mombasa, and ask if they can hear me speak. Then I speak and they implore me to speak again. It’s like a sort of performance I’m usually doing.”

We all laugh at that. The remaining three of us give different variations of the same point.

“And...” Lubnah takes charge again. “Do you find all these things to be true? Like you realize we’re always pigeonholed into the same themes, in writing even. The reason behind that is all the stories about us are not told by us. And it’s not until we step up and tell our own stories that our story will collectively change.”

We stare at her owlshly.

“Now, I see you’ve carried notebooks. I’d like all of you to note down all the themes you can write about when talking about the Coast.”

We get busy and end up with: delicacies, the welcoming people, the diversity, the rich documented history, ceremonies and the sense of community, radicalization, religious extremism, extra-judicial killings, the conservative and frigid mindsets, witchcraft and racism.

“Like seriously? That’s it?” Lubnah says matter-of-factly, staring at us in a jaw-dropping manner. “What about the architecture walking through Old town? The *heena* art? What about the evening *barazas*? Guys, let’s look beyond what we think will work airbrushed on our social media. We’re not trying to prove anything to anyone. Focus on the nitty gritties we don’t talk about. Like our mothers. These same people who, like Amina

puts it, are Chill like the Swahili, have mothers who spend 6 hours in the kitchen tenderly preparing meals after they've spent the whole day fending for their families. This is not because I'm a woman by the way, but yeah, women are the ones carrying our society. Some of you were single-handedly raised by your moms. Talk about us lazy kids too who from age three are already going through two different forms of education simultaneously. You go to school then you go to madrassa bouncing between English and Arabic inscriptions when your mother tongue is Swahili. And there's a lot. We just have to think and tell these stories. Stop assuming they're small."

She goes on and on ranting with a passion that stirs us as she talks about finding our voices as the Coastal people.

"While everyone else has moved on pushing for the African identity, we haven't barely scratched our own identity as the Coastal people and it's high time. Our voices need to be heard because we matter. Our stories matter. Not just English, Kiswahili."

I remember Lubnah's skin going red, before she recollects herself. I remember that being the first time I had a sense of purpose; the first time I believed my writing could stand for something. I remember telling myself that I would one day write about that incident and title it 'All the feels all the time'; like that

line from her Instagram bio. But memory is a fickle thing. I don't even remember properly what I think I remember. I mostly remember being moved and that workshop being a kind of rebirth.

I remember walking back home that day and actually seeing my town; for the first time. The streets of Old Town radiate an aura that feels plucked from the scriptures of old. Narrow streets sinuously snake through the town with houses starting immediately where the sidewalks end. Houses that haven't seen a fresh coat of paint in decades, their walls a rusty orange, their arrangement, rather chaotic. The people, all diverse and different shades and everywhere is colour. Old town is a beautiful work of art and a testament to this great human experiment. A living, breathing, museum.

And I was beginning to notice.

3

A ROOM FOR FREE FLOATING STORIES

Tega Oghenehovwen - Nigeria

African writers in the twenty-first century should forget the complexities of the past and be more imaginatively aggressive and expansive, invading other continents and even skies as a new setting, striving to have a global outlook in their creative output, mounting a new international phase and not limiting their canvas to the African soil. — Charles Nnolim.

On the moribund danfo this sunny afternoon in 2018, you flick out your phone from your jacket and read the New Yorker article Ekpeki emailed you. It is about a Zambian ‘afronaut’ who wanted to join the space race; not only join the race, but beat the US and the Soviet Union to it. He intended to plant the flag of his country on getting there . It’s incredible because this was the same year his country was born — 1964.

This was the same period when the African continent was recovering from the almost sixty years of colonial rule. The name of the space-minded man sticks to your brain because it sounds

like the strumming of a base guitar: Ed—ward. Mukuka. Nkoloso.

Edward was a grade school teacher. You find it fascinating that he wanted to go to the moon— the fucking moon, and not to a classroom where he belonged. Guts! You are blown away by the means he adopted trying to reach his aim. You love his daring. You love that he could attract the attention of foreign reporters, some of whom called him silly. You loved that Mr. Nkoloso kept on working hard, hoping he could take his country there, and in doing so take the continent.

In 1967, his ambition died a horrible death. The space program never took off. You close the magazine, put the phone back into your jacket and think deeply of the moon for the first time.

The bus screeches to a halt in front of a cobbled street. You jump off. You are on time to meet Ekpeki at your proposed rendezvous — a coffee shop with a cotton-wax print interior at Abule Oja, Yaba. Inside the shop, you find Ekpeki behind one of the ornate glass tables, hunched over his laptop —a technology-inclined beast gulping down their free internet service.

“You read it, the Nkoloso article?” You nod, taking a seat across him.

“Nkoloso must have been high on some cheap crack. What was he thinking?”

Ekpeki sighs dolefully. He collapses his laptop screen, and leans over to you.

“He was a dreamer, a visionary. And never for once think he failed.”

It is your turn to sigh now, and you do it with some histrionics.

Ekpeki doesn't mind you.

“Young Africans like me have been towing Nkoloso's line with our stories,” he sucks in air through his teeth,

“His ideas were ahead of the continent. He blazed a trail. And we, black sci-fi writers, follow.”

He calls on a serving girl, “Cappuccino. Two.”

Ekpeki, as you may know, has a story to his name titled *Ife-Iyoku*. Ife-Iyoku is set in the far-flung future where there is a nuclear war between the US and the Middle East. Africa is caught in the war and has 80 percent of its population wiped out. The few survivors on the continent gather around Ile-Ife, the spiritual capital of the ancient Oyo Empire and the birthplace of

all life. They evolve and develop powers, which enable them to survive the chemically polluted environment.

When Ekpeki fashioned his piece, he didn't think that roughly two years later, an American President would bomb a Middle-Eastern military commander and there would be a threat of nuclear war hanging about — the Third World War.

You wonder how events unfurl as per the dictates of sci-fi. You wonder how sci-fi writers imagine issues that eventually become reality. How they create new frontiers of thinking, and show the world possibilities that might not be present.

The cappuccinos come. Ekpeki makes an argument that Africa is where it is today because she has not yet built a room for sci-fi stories — which you like to imagine are free floating stories. You chuckle.

“Breakthroughs have occurred in military and medicine,” he sips his coffee, “and there have been developments in technology because of sci-fi stories. Many departments in advanced countries borrow ideas from sci-fi. They set out to invent things that have been imagined by us.”

Ekpeki goes on to say that most people develop the ideas of being astronauts and inventors from reading sci-fi. And that sci-fi by black writers matter because before now, when Africans

envisioned the technological shape of the future, it was mostly through the white gaze and if black people did feature in top-grossing Hollywood box office movies, they were stereotyped as the poor ones, the poor ones with broken families, the operators of crime and violence. But now, black sci-fi writers question those stereotypes, call for a rejuvenated Black identity, tell black people to dream above the hardship they face, to fight for what they believe they deserve, to listen to their intuition which led their forebears to raise the pyramids. To see themselves in the future despite the distressing past and present.

You note the passion on Ekpeki's face as he finishes by saying that sci-fi helps to inspire a new generation of Africans in the areas of science and tech because it encourages them to create things that had otherwise not been dreamt of. You lift your coffee to your lips and swallow it with Ekpeki's views. Before now, you had a bias for stories about the exploration of everyday issues including violence, corruption, homophobia, struggles with mental health issues, and poverty, because these stories deal with life through a direct and relatable prism. You never favoured the fantastic, the boundless and the escapist approach sci-fi and speculative fiction bring to the storytelling table. You have never understood the mechanics of these stories. You thought about sci-fi as weird stories without people, or with people with ass-kicking powers; stories about alien stuff, recycled life; stories

about experimental military programs and adventures...stories beyond Africa, beyond Earth, beyond life.

You nod to everything he has said and commandeer the conversation to other things.

At home, you muse about how black sci-fi writers take African images and project them in the future to create a different narrative. How they believe in the idea that Africa can one day be sophisticated. How they promote black culture in popular consciousness. You also think that it is not only about the future but also about the past as well. It is about selective memory; a deliberate way of remembering what the continent was like before the West put a knife to its well-knit cultural system.

That night, you follow the links to some stories Ekpeki emails you. One of them is *Nnedi Okorafor's 'Mother of Invention'*. A story about a pregnant character who learns that the father of her unborn child is married to someone else. She is forced to give birth alone in the confines of her autonomous smart house which can be many things, including a midwife. She overcomes her plight through the help of this 'smart' house.

Another story you pore over is *Blaize Kaye's Brand New Ways (To Lose You Over and Over Again)*. It is the story of an African

couple who, rather than die, chose to give up their bodies and have their consciousness uploaded to the virtual space.

Then, there is *Chinelo Onwualu's 'Read Before Use'*. A story set in the post apocalyptic future of a well-realized sci-fi world. There, an immigrant professor living in a classist and xenophobic satellite city is trying to revive the city's failing power source for good by searching for its long lost instruction manual.

All these stories simply give privilege to black narratives with the African identity in the sci-fi world. They also project every day African life into a technologically advanced future, and they exhaust African cultural aesthetics and heritage in their design. They do these without giving Whiteness a God role.

It dawns on you that using technology, these writers draw on the past in order to critique the present and imagine an alternate future, all from an afro-centric perspective. That is why many of their stories import folkloric, mythical, and legendary ideas from different African tribes. They also use the future to retell the past. For example, Tochi Onyebuchi's novel *War Girl* —which you also read at Ekpeki's behest— re-imagines the Biafran War being fought again in the future with robots and futuristic technology.

You will eventually read other sci-fi narratives and observe how African writers explore the boundaries of where the African race could get to in the future.

You witness the closing ceremony of the 2018 edition of the prestigious Purple Hibiscus Trust Workshop run by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. During the certificate presentation, amidst the explosive applause you watch Chimamanda thank Simbiat Haroun, one of the participants, for making her read and enjoy a sci-fi story, because of its spectacular Africanness.

“I read widely,” Adichie informs the audience, “but science fiction and fantasy I just cannot really get into, and then I read her story, and I was like what happened next? Now Simbiat has this massive responsibility to go write sci-fi and speculative fiction that people like me would enjoy, which is to say people who are not very keen on speculative fiction.”

You agree with Chimamanda. Not only Simbiat whom she heaped praises upon, but a lot of other black writers need to start writing Africa into the fantastical future, and in doing so must use the ink of the African identity.

4

HAIJIYA DIJE

Maryam Ibrahim Boyi - Nigeria

As I remember it, my paternal grandfather's house in Dutsin-ma always teemed with the laughter of women and children. It was a spacious compound, with an open *fada*, connected to low and dark winding corridors. Once inside the main space, you would see in a neat line the equally sized rooms of his four wives. If my grandmother had been alive, we would have gone straight to her room to be fed and cajoled into more and more portions of food. But instead, we allowed ourselves one by one, to be ushered into each room, accepting small portions of food and snacks from each wife, so as not to offend anyone.

Half a plate of rice here, a bowl of fura there, mugs of hot kunu and cold sachets of water. The refreshments were served with a heaping plate of the latest gossip which my young mind tuned out, not being able to understand why it mattered what the neighbours had done this time.

Hajiya Jari had the first room in the line and her room bubbled with the loud conversations of her five children and their

boisterous laughter. The second room was the same, Hajiya Dada's room with her children. They were neighbours, so the children often went to the other room to talk, to mingle and to gossip. Hajiya Inde's room was the last of the line, her room also overflowed with life, and the shrieking of her grandchildren.

Hajiya Habiba's room was the third in the line, but there was no laughter or conversation, for she had never had children of her own. The other wives' children hardly went into her room, for there was no gossip to be found, no sons or daughters to be teased and taunted. When they did go in, it was for propriety's sake, the morning greetings, the farewell greetings and so on.

Whenever we arrived during the holidays, all the wives, children and grandchildren would run out of the rooms to the entrance in a flurry of colours, patterns and greetings, welcoming us.

I was usually restless on these visits; I wanted to spend as little time as possible in each room, until we got to the last room, Hajiya Inde's room, the grandmother of one of my favourite cousins.

Hajiya Habiba in the second to the last room was a small brown woman, with a smile that reached her eyes and a mouth with far too many teeth. She had dark tribal marks on her face, intertwined with her wrinkles like an impressionist painting. Her

high-pitched nasal voice greeted us as she welcomed us into her room.

Unlike the other wives, Hajiya Habiba had few pictures on her wall; a large one of her younger self and one of my grandfather Alhaji, placed side by side, against the fading blue of her wall. On her television set, stood a smaller picture of her sister Khadija, smiling with her eyes, and looking far off into the distance. I was an inquisitive child and always asked her where her sister was. She would laugh out loud in her nasal voice and say, “Khadija visits me often.” Like the sweet but slightly sour fura she served us in her room, the laugh always had a hint of sadness to it.

Her room was usually quiet, but muffled voices bounced off the walls, from the rooms around her. My mother seemed to enjoy spending more time in her room, and although I enjoyed it as well, and asked her a great many questions, I longed for the stream of conversation to dry out so that we would leave for the last room and I could play with my cousin. She would always follow us out, as though we were travelling a long distance and not next door.

In Hajiya Inde’s room, I would see my cousin Zarah, wide-eyed and excited. We would huddle together and make plans to cross the street and visit the shops opposite my grandfather’s fada.

They weren't really shops as they were more of old rickety shacks that sheltered old women with trays of all kinds of sweets. We would go there after the midday prayers had been completed, taking along our other cousins from the other rooms.

Zarah and I weren't the same age, she was three years younger than I, but we lived in the same city and saw each other often, which made her the most relatable. We would sit in Hajiya Inde's room like restless birds, legs folded as we listened to our mothers' voices float around us, waiting for the beautiful sound of the call to prayer from grandfather's mosque to interrupt them. When it finally came, we would wash in haste and speed through *Sujood*, waiting for the Imam to complete the prayers. Then we would run out of the house so fast like we were pursued by Djinnns. We would cross the double lane street all holding hands like a chain of beads bobbing along. There would be much squabbling when we got to the trays of sweets; everyone wanted something different, and they argued over how much to buy. As the oldest of the group, I would shush them, and ask for 15 pieces of everything on the tray. 15 rolls of *yashinmadina*, 15 beads of *charbinmalam*, and 15 packets of chewing gum. Each 15 would cost 5 naira and I would pay for all with a 20 naira note.

After the sweets, we would usually roam the neighbouring houses where our relatives lived, emptying rolls of sugared powder down

our throats and chewing gum afterwards. The relatives would praise us for maintaining our family ties and pray for our prosperity. Our reasons for going were usually boredom, or the hopes that a generous host would give us a few coins or notes for visiting so we could get more sweets, but we smiled happily and accepted their prayers.

We would always be careful not to stray too far. To return before the sunset prayer was called, was to escape the wrath of my mother. My aunts on the other hand didn't seem to care much about the whereabouts of their children in the village as there weren't many places to go. Our close-knit community protected and treated every child like one of their own, but I knew my mother. She would give me a side-way glance that held promises of a thrashing later at night, away from grandfather's house. It was the sting of slippers on my behind that always prompted me to hustle the other children home the moment the sky started to turn the colour of weak tea.

That, and the fear of Dije. For as the night came, so did she. Roaming the dark corridors of grandfather's house, raving to herself and looking for her next victim. I usually refused plates of adult gossip, but I reached into plates of warning greedily, and I listened whenever Hajiya Inde or Hajiya Jari told us of how Dije had pounced on my Aunty Safinah as she returned from a

wedding after sunset. Dije had knocked Auntie Safinah's *gogoro* off her pretty head, and slapped the beads from her dainty ears. She ripped her clothes, and beat her within an inch of life, until the men of the house heard her screams and came to her rescue. There was a dark mark I always stared at behind her neck; her battle scars I thought, and I would shudder.

Dije followed me and my childishness to Lagos and haunted me in my nightmares; she was the only thing I feared more than my mother's wrath. So many nights I had woken up in sweats, breathless, begging her to release me from her hold.

A part of me always dreaded visiting Dutsin-ma in fear that I would be her next victim. I would rush all the children along the dark winding corridors, and breathe a sigh of relief when we sighted the light of the open kitchen. We were all afraid of Dije. Anisa, the mischievous, said she had seen her before and she had slapped her and pulled her hair; but Anisa was one of those children who lied to get attention.

"If you've seen her, what does she look like?" I had asked.

"She is tall and black with red eyes!" She had screamed back defensively.

I didn't believe her, but her description helped shape the ethereal Dije in my head. I pictured her to be so tall that she stooped to

pass through doors, her crazed hair grazing the dust and cobwebs of the mud ceiling. Her lips would be as black as the *kwalli* mama lined her eyes with and her red eyes could see in the dark, ready to pounce on anyone who dared come through those corridors at night. At some point it occurred to me that perhaps Dije was a spiritual being, and that was why she had red eyes and never appeared during daylight. I'm sure I must have asked mama about Dije, but I cannot remember what she said.

In my Dutsin-ma holiday memories, my siblings hardly exist – we all went our separate ways, wandering. We would only meet again in the evenings to share a tray of *tuwo* with our cousins. My younger brother Salim would sulk over his dislike for *tuwo*, while Hajiya Inde fawned over him, asking if he would prefer to eat the afternoon meal again. My older sister Hadiza would glare at me from the other side of the tray, as my hands fished in the thick *kuka* soup for lumps of meat before the other cousins got to them. Don't be greedy, her gaze would say, but I would avoid her face completely.

When the night came and it was time for us to ply those corridors with the grandmothers in tow on our way home, I would cling to my mother and beg her to allow me go see Alhaji Babba, my grandfather. As much as I loved to sit on Alhaji's lap and eat the lumps of sugar he always kept in his pockets, my cunning child

mind was looking for a way to avoid the corridor and the possibility of an encounter with Dije. If I went to see Alhaji through his fada, I would have an exit point that was in no way near the haunted corridors. Mama would give her approval and I would leap towards his fada until my little heart beat against my chest and I collapsed at his feet.

“Little one, why are you in such a hurry?”

“I am excited to see you, Alhaji” I would respond, looking outside cautiously for any glimpse of Dije.

Alhaji was always surrounded by men; they lounged, lazed and leaned all around his richly decorated fada. The musky animal scent hung desperately in the air, clinging to the ottomans and round mats they had been made into. I had heard about how the leather tanners soaked the skins in steaming pits of chemicals to make the smell fade away but the animal was relentless, refusing to give up the scent even in death. My mother once told me a story of how she had a stubborn cough in the village, and one of her aunties had given her a remedy of the tanned leather water to drink. I always retched when I recalled it.

“I am excited to see you too.” Alhaji would say, grinning through his thick white beard.

After we got to our house and into bed, I would breathe a deep sigh of relief, knowing I had escaped Dije's wrath tonight, but tomorrow was a new day with endless possibilities.

As with each time we visited Dutsin-ma, our days following the first were always less exciting, the welcomes were less colourful, the excitement would simmer and the animal skins in Alhaji's fada were less pungent. My nerves on the other hand would still be on edge, standing on their tips like cat ears, and waiting for the faintest sound. I had been in Hajiya Jari's room one afternoon drinking a bowl of fura when Zarah came running in.

"Yaya Maryam", *big sister* Maryam "Khairat just came back from Hayin Gada with iced zobo. We should go and get some too." She said, her eyes widening as she emphasized the iced zobo.

It was hot, and I was bored, so I jumped up and went out of the room. I informed my mother first, and then stepped out with Zarah. One of my aunts lived at Hayin Gada and every Friday she would make local drinks and put them in her giant freezer to sell after the Friday prayers. If we went at the right time, she would give us one block each.

We walked all the way to Hayin Gada with Zarah and 3 of our other cousins. We had all been laughing and playing until Anisa

ripped half of her iced *zobo* nylon, even after I had warned her not to, and it toppled onto the sand. She burst into tears, and the memories of that day are stuck in my mind, like the sand grains stuck to the red syrupy sweetness of her fallen *zobo* block.

The red stained our mouths and teeth, and we laughed at Anisa for her foolishness, refreshing our parched little bodies from the heat of the sun. Dutsin-ma, the city surrounded by rocks, seemed like the hottest place in the world to me, the sun baked the giant rocks that surrounded the city and the heated breath of those rocks baked us too.

We roamed back to Unguwar Kanti and found ourselves behind Alhaji's house. There was a small clearing of shrubs that created a path to climb up the rocks. I had never actually seen anyone climb up the rocks, there were people on the rocks, but not climbing them. The path was mostly used by small red goats looking for mischief and the plants faded where their stubborn hooves had beaten them down from days of climbing back and forth.

"Mu hau." *Let's climb*, Anisa said excitedly, her stream of tears had dried up with the heat. I looked at her like she was insane. Hajiya Dada had always said Anisa was a naughty girl. Last year when we came for Eid, she had spent hours poking the tied ewes with sticks until they protested in loud bleats. I reported her to

Hajiya to talk some sense into her, but she had brushed me away, saying that Anisa was a ram herself and should be allowed to play with her relatives, and now I realized she must have been right. My mother had warned us never to even go near the rock path. She told me that evil Djinns lived on the mountains and I did not want to press that story.

“No. Ku zo mu je gida.” *Let’s go home*, I said and Zarah followed me. Anisa was on the brink of a tantrum, but I ignored her and walked towards Alhaji’s house. She had no choice but to follow us, because mischief after all, was more fun in numbers. We had found our way beside Alhaji’s house now, the high fence kept the view of the house within the walls, but you could hear voices as you walked past. We had walked past a smaller house with shucks of wheat growing towards the front, and saw a woman, bent over in an old tattered *zani* and mismatched blouse weeding the grass. Her feet were dusty and she wore no footwear, and her lips moved as she worked, her facial features twisting in a grimace, then a smile as she pulled the weeds free from the soil and tossed them aside. As though she had become immediately possessed, Anisa suddenly darted towards the house and picked up a small rock.

“Laaa ga Dije, Mahaukaciya!” *It’s Dije, the Mad woman!* She shrieked, just as she threw the rock towards her and bolted ahead

of us singing “Dije Dijeje, Dije Dijeje”. My head had told me to run, but I stood there, and watched as the rock bounced off her back and she jumped in surprise, turning to look where the rock had come from. Confusion had first registered on her face as she bent to pick up the rock, this gave way to a fleeting sadness before she settled on anger. My curiosity suddenly disappeared and I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. I always came last in races at school, but in the light of danger, I found that I was unbeatable. I sped past Zarah and Anisa, and slushed through a gutter, leaving one of my slippers in the muck; I sped through Alhaji’s corridors and collapsed on the cement floors of the courtyard, breathing and panting heavily. My heartbeat was strong in my ears and I felt as though my blood stream would overflow. Filthy pure water bags and garbage clung to my ankles and the hem of my dress was caked with muck. My cousins came in shortly after and all collapsed next to me, laughing and giggling. I turned around and sunk my fingernails into Anisa’s arm until she screamed and started to cry. I could not describe my feelings in that particular moment; I was angry at Anisa, but I was relieved.

Dije was a woman, and not a spirit. She was as real as the ground that lay beneath me. A familiar woman, with sun-scorched brown skin, dark eyes not red. It was obvious that she was sick, but not the sickness that caused you to vomit, or showed on your body.

Her sickness only showed through her mannerisms; talking to herself, grimacing at the wind, the dust that caked her bare feet and the bits of straw that stuck out of her half-done hair. There were questions burning my throat all at once but I wasn't sure where I could pour them. I dreamt of Dije that night again, but she was no longer chasing me. She was bent over in her small compound of corn husks, weeding and humming to herself. I still woke up with uneasiness in the morning.

A few days after the encounter, we drove to Alhaji's house in the evening. We would be leaving early the next morning and we had come to say our farewells. Alhaji's house was dark; mama fished her torchlight out of her handbag and lit the way through the corridor. I clung to her in the darkness like a tail, my hand grasping desperately for hers. There were two women in the corridor, and I instantly recognized Hajiya Habiba, her voice comically high, like she was speaking to a child. The other woman moved eccentrically and from the hair on her shadow, I could tell it was Dije Mahaukaciya. Mama led us past the pair, greeting them briefly before we emerged at the kitchen. I breathed a sigh of relief and only then did I let go of my mother's hands.

I walked into Hajiya Habiba's room immediately and waited for her return. My curiosity was a blazing fire in my throat now and

it needed to be quenched before we left Dutsin-ma. Her room was quiet, as usual and dimly lit by a kerosene lantern in the corner; the flickering fire bounced off harmless objects giving them sinister shapes against the walls. Hajiya Habiba walked in shortly after and I greeted her. She sat down and offered me a bowl of *tuwo*, I wasn't hungry but I accepted it to appease her and began picking small lumps and dipping it in the *kuka*.

"Hajiya, why does Dije come to Alhaji's corridors?" I asked, after a few swallows. Hajiya laughed and the sound echoed.

"She comes here every evening for food. She also comes to visit me." She answered easily.

I stopped mid-swallow. My child mind was slow, but I immediately put two and two together.

"How did she go mad?" I had wondered this for a long time, seeing the mad people roaming the streets of Lagos. Did they wake up one day and lose their sanity, or could they feel pieces of their sanity breaking into unattainable pieces?

Hajiya cocked her head to the side, surprised at my unbridled curiosity. Later when I was older, she would tell me that I was the most curious and inquisitive child she had ever met.

“Ikona Allah.” *The will of God*. A sad smile spread across her dark face, as she looked towards the picture of her sister on the television set. I heard other reasons later in life. Dije was married to a wealthy farmer in Dutsin-ma. He had passed away and she had lost her mind from grief. Dije was preyed upon by her jealous relatives, through the use of a piece of her *zani* and *tsafi*, tossed into the river – they had ruined her life for jealousy. There were more and more versions over time.

I thought much of Dije and Hajiya Habiba even after we had left Dutsin-ma. The sadness in her eyes when I think about it now, said much but also, not enough. They were like stagnant pools of water with floating algae; on the surface they promised solid land to walk upon, but if you dared to look deeper, you would certainly drown. The last time I went to Dutsin-ma, a woman grown, the house had been far more different. Dije had died peacefully of old age, and after my grandfather’s death, Hajiya Habiba had moved out of the family house and away from the other wives.

I went to her brother’s residence to greet her. She was much older now and her frail body stooped towards the ground, her brown skin had faded over the years like the blue paint in her old room. She welcomed me warmly, her voice still nasal and cheerful, but she called me by my mother’s name and asked where the children

were. When I told her who I was, her face gleamed in surprise and recognition. The conversation had gone warmly with lots of reminiscing, but when Hajiya began to grimace and speak to the space around her, over my head, calling to her co-wives to come and see how much I had grown, I knew immediately that Dije's illness had not been sent as a weapon by jealous relatives or stemmed from grieving a husband.

5

STRENGTH IS A JEWEL

Racheal Twinomugisha - Uganda

Strength, like a necklace, can be worn on the outside; but it is very easy to be brave on the outside and yet be broken, or dead on the inside.

*

While Mum waited to be taken into the theatre, save for Nancy, her daughter in-law who was eight months pregnant, she had me by her side.

She was hungry, having been tasked not to eat anything twelve hours prior to her surgery. She was weak, and in immense pain. Her back hurt a lot. Her sacrum curved a bit and her coccyx was bent and dislocated. About three bones above the sacrum on each side of the spinal cord were dislocated. I remember how the doctor had secretly taken me away to show me the results of her X-ray. She didn't need to see this. My heart fell after seeing the results.

She had had an inflammation in her right wrist since 2009. This, and her swollen feet were her biggest challenge. I'm still amazed her feet did not burst that day while she waited to be operated on.

I told her so many stories, we laughed a lot. In the middle of the conversations, she would occasionally ask to be helped to the washrooms. The steroids she took had this effect on her. She had been on steroids for decades. Anytime we were not going to the washrooms we were best friends because then, being in one position, her body didn't hurt as much, and therefore she did not shout at me.

I managed to appear brave before her. Unbeknownst to her, I wore this bravery to please her, to see her strong, to have hope in the surgery, to trust that she would be well, to trust that her bones could be fixed, and to trust that she would walk again. Somehow, God had lent me strength enough to face it all.

Before she was wheeled into the theatre, Dr. Adrian took a number of selfies with her. It pleased me to see the huge smile on her face. She never accepted to take selfies with me but she smiled for Dr. Adrian's camera. She must have been excited by the thought of leaving the hospital on her feet. At this point, the thought of losing her made me wonder why we still had to do the surgery, but I had to be her beautiful necklace.

I smiled, hugged her and prayed silently in her chest that this wasn't going to be the last time we would hold each other. I prayed we would have another fight, even if it meant her shouting at me for the rest of her life, I needed Mother back.

Dr. Adrian with the help of a female nurse in an army green dress whisked her off to the theatre. They whisked my heart away.

*

Mum is popular in Ruyonza, our home in the upcountry. Sometimes I think the fact that she can't walk must contribute largely to her popularity. She has lived so long that way, disproving so many people. They would say "This woman, now crippled, her back never standing straight, weighing over 70kg in her yellow skin, her face always clad in a smile, her short french haircut always combed and neat, has evidenced death. She that was the smartest among all women, wore trousers in the 90's when it was taboo, wore her fancy armless body-hugging dresses, short with slits, her shoulders bare. She that wore African print shorts to the garden, wore the highest heeled shoes at church and perhaps in the entire village, owned the cutest jewelry. The Kampala woman that turned Ruyonza dress-tales upside down has seen death. She that is almost half the height she was then, she that can't put on her fancy clothes and jewelry anymore, has seen death," they say.

Her healthier friends, the ones that could walk or even run, the able-bodied ones who teased her about death, have succumbed to mere colds and headaches.

The other reason for her popularity is her almost-booming business in the land, her creativity, and her energy. She conducts most of her business over the phone. She talks to her suppliers miles away and buys magnificent home appliances from them. The people of Ruyonza love her taste in such products.

Every morning, Rose, as beautiful as her name wakes Emily and Honest up, *orders* them to take a bath and prepare for school. They are accustomed to the tone of her voice. They are used to the toughness it comes with.

Emily, eleven, and Honest, eight are big young women. Staying with their helpless auntie has taught them things they would normally have learnt a bit later in life.

Each time they rise, they run, one to the bathroom, the other to the kitchen. When one is done bathing, she takes over the matters of the kitchen, mainly to watch over the milk on the *sigiri*, and the other will go to bathe. Their morning schedule also includes heating water for Mum to bathe. They pour the water into a little jerry-can and put it next to her bed with soap, sponge, a basin and a rag.

Mum will command from her bed, “sweep the shop, dust the tables, have tea very fast *mwiruke muze kushoma*.” Most times, they get to school late. The chores can be cumbersome.

Mum, my beautiful Rose, wakes up every day at around 7:30am. She gets out of her bed with the aid of a stick about a meter and a half long, three centimeters wide. She holds it with her left hand which doesn't hurt as much. It is less inflamed than her right one. She presses the stick on the ground, lifts herself up. A step after a minute, her right hand clenching her right knee, another step after a minute. Then she falls onto her wooden “office chair” half a meter from her bed. Once on her chair, she is in her bathroom.

About forty minutes later, she will be at the front door of her shop. How she gets there, with the aid of her stick and a little plastic stool is a story I will skip.

This, for many years now, has been how her day begins; her daily bread.

Mother is arthritic. The luxury of walking, she has long forgotten. People call her *ekimuga*, a lame person. I remember the first time she was called this. It was around 2014. A young boy, Abu, called her that. That day, she had cried on my shoulders, she was helpless. A woman that had once worked her own gardens,

fetches her own water and firewood, gone to the market, carried her children on her back, was called *ekimuga*.

Then, only her feet were swollen; she still walked with a bit of difficulty. Her right hand was dislocated at the wrist. I had hopes she would get better. I told her she was not lame. God was going to do a miracle.

*

My phone rang. It was Arnold, my favorite cousin. He was in the parking lot of the hospital. He had come to check on me and Mum. With Arnold here, my anxiety lightened. We left the hospital and went off to Kyadondo Rugby grounds. Though Nancy was pregnant, I pulled her along with us. We stopped via the beautiful tree shades near Shoprite Lugogo. We held hands and crossed the heavily trafficked and noisy Jinja road. Arnold suggested we could not cross the road independently, he held our hands and “helped us.” Truth is, I am forever indebted to him. I don’t think I would have been able to stand the smell of disinfectant at every point of the hospital while I waited for my miracle...

The rugby grounds were a welcome change. Arnold’s idea of Kyadondo was always mouth-watering pork skewers with noisy music playing under the hot sun in the huge open rugby grounds.

Arnold was hilarious. He teased Nancy a lot. Nancy also seemed to have attended comedy school. She teased Arnold back in equal measure. There was lots of laughter all around.

Arnold called his sister, Ann, who was studying at Makerere University Business School (MUBS) in the nearby neighborhood to come join us. By the time she arrived, we had had an ample portion of the skewers, each of us stealing the others' occasionally. I ate it mechanically, the environment had washed all the fear out of me. Just as Arnold threatened to order for the third round, Dr. Adrian called.

Professionalism be praised, he sounded much calmer than the situation was. I fought a gruesome raw battle with fear. I saw with my eyes, fear flexing his muscles before me. His biceps against my timid face, a grotesque memory.

Mum was convulsing. She struggled to beat the anesthesia. The foam boiling in her mouth had noticeable traces of blood. Her body on the stretcher in the grey hospital room looked cold. I still do not understand the power that kept me standing. The fact that I didn't faint or black out, that I am able to tell this story now beats my comprehension.

"Mummy, Mummy", I called, trembling five feet away from her stretcher. I dreaded the thought of getting close to her or even

touching her. I did not want the news that my siblings and I were to be orphaned to come from me. I couldn't fathom that my God whom I had always assured Mum would heal her, had eventually let me down. I stood in fear. The smell of the hospital disinfectant which had irritated me all day went unnoticed

Dr. Adrian, stout, pacing by and by like the clouds of the Kalahari came over to me. "Rachael, that is your mother. Call her, she will respond," He held my hand and pulled me over to her. I touched Mum's bare shoulder with trembling hands, "Mummy, Mummy." No response.

He pulled her ear and called, "Rose, Rose." No response. He pulled and called again, this time harder and louder. He wiped off the foam in her mouth. Then, she coughed. Unsure if it was her last cough or if she was recovering, I praised the LORD for the chance to hear her once more. The sound of that cough has since been music to my mind, a lyric I dream to write.

Since that day, Mum has had to come to reality with two facts - she may never walk again, and the love of her life, the father of her four children found himself a suitor, a more energetic suitor to meet his needs.

*

JEWELS CAN BE INHERITED, and so can strength. Dad's attention had been divided over years, almost fully taken away. Our old mud and wattle house on Rwenzori hill that was miraculously hugged by cement, a plaster-finishing and kissed by grey and yellow paint bent a bit - I think to prove right the scripture in Genesis that says '*...for dust you are, and to dust you will return.*'"

I remember the day mum 'threatened' she was going to build us a house. We all didn't believe her. Besides, she was paying part of my tuition at school. Her savings in *ebigombe* couldn't build her a house. "*Ninza kweyombekyera enju nyowe*" she would tell me and my two brothers and sister. Often times we laughed at her. We assumed we knew her financial standing.

Dad did everything a father should in our lives, we all have no regrets, but he didn't care much about the house. "It didn't bend so much, I will repair it, work on the raptured walls and we will have an amazing place to call home," he said.

Mum continued to threaten us for a while. A year, two, three, she made her treats. She had always threatened us anyway. "*Kuri nashomire, kuri ndi omunaasi,*" had I gone to school, I would have made a wondrous nurse, she would brag after relieving herself of pain after self-medication. Her nursing threats we were used to. She injected us as children, prescribed us medicine

which eventually healed us. She would cram the names and doses of her own medication - she can't read much in English.

"Ninza kwombeka enju." Year four and now, we allowed her the liberty to *shock* us. Back from school in Kampala, we returned to an almost straight road that led to our home on Rwenzori, a very sharp rocky hill. The simple road dug by men with hoes and spades was the talk of Ruyonza.

"Omukazi wekimuga nahinga ata oruguuto?" How dare a lame woman dig a road? They murmured. Later, her brother-in-law, my own uncle and a family friend blocked the road. The sight of a beautiful house right ahead of theirs' built by a *lame* woman deserted by her husband scared them.

In her sitting position at the 'positive energy shelf' - a place so named because it is her resting place where she spends entire days there, and once there, her feet covered, you would never know she was ill. She wears the broadest smile there and her voice has always been strong - she has supervised and managed the building and furnishing of her house, a woman in Ruyonza, among the very arrogant Banyankole men who don't believe a woman should build a house on her marital land.

For a number of years now, we have stayed in our new home, built by our mum with a bit of my father's assistance. Our new

home is a permanent structure, a modern home, a four bedroom, self-contained bungalow.

Waking up every morning knowing that I have a strong and visionary mother is the greatest gift my memory has ever recorded. I've seen strength in inflamed bones. I've seen courage in dislocated bones. I've seen zeal in swollen feet. I've seen and known a heart so hot, so thirsty for growth and progress in a body so beaten and broken.

To look back on the day of that surgery is to tremble before God. To look back on seventeen years of pain and stigma is to believe that He does everything for a reason. To look at her beautiful house is to believe that we are never limited if we try, and to look at her smile or hear her loud laughter over the phone is to appreciate life how it comes; to love the Rose and grace its thorns, to go to battle and to never give up, to wear a necklace even if it means borrowing one.

6

REMEMBER MY NAME!

Sakina Traoré – Côte d'Ivoire

As we all know, Black Africans have always transmitted their stories in an oral form.

Our legends and tales would only be told by elders to the younger generations through pieces of advice or late night gatherings around the fire.

This is one of the reasons why most of our stories and historical figures are still unknown to the world. This is even more accurate when we talk about the francophone historical figures from our part of the continent.

We have heard about Nzinga from Angola, Pokou from Ghana or Malika from Nigeria. But not many of us know about Queen Tassi-Hangbè from Danhomè, the actual Benin Republic.

Queen Tassi-Hangbè was the only woman to ever rule the Kingdom. Daughter of King Houégbadja and twin sister of King Akaba, history reports that her reign happened during the 18th century.

As unique as her story and position were at the time - and still are today - she is less popular than the earlier mentioned figures. Hence why this story has been pieced together from research and the anecdotes on her life.

I do not think Queen Tassi-Hangbè acted to be remembered. But I do believe we owe it to her and all these other figures to pass down their names and accomplishments.

End of 1708.

Tassi opened her eyes just when the moon was shining at its brightest. Her forehead was soaked in sweat and her heart was beating fast from a nightmare.

A few minutes after she woke up, she extended her arm and touched the sleeping man, snoring by her side. His hand was loosely resting on her waist.

As her eyes wandered around the room, she saw her rafia dress by the side of the mat, grabbed it and hit him with the cloth. His hand immediately freed her as he woke up. As soon as their eyes met, she asked him to leave immediately.

He stared at her for a couple of seconds, startled by the brutal awakening. She turned her back at him, trying to relax and

remember her dream, while her one-time lover got dressed and silently left.

As soon as he closed the door behind him, her voice filled the room. It was as if she needed to be alone to hear the message of her heart. She started singing an old Fon song her mother had taught her years ago:

“Cakatu wè ton bô mi mô glo ton, dé hla sô èdu le ômimô a?”

When the cakatu went out, you found his glo, but did you find a way to escape the ravenous hyena?

She sang that song about carefulness over and over again, until her head was cleared from the haze and her heart calmed down. When she felt better, she called in her maid for her morning bathing rituals.

Tassi heard knocks on the door as soon as Fumilayo, her maid, left her room.

“Royal guard, Nan Tassi.”

She slowly walked to the door, opened it and let the two men in without saying a word. She had recognized Dotou, the chief commandant of the Kingdom and his deputy.

After the usual royal greetings, a heavy silence filled the room. Clearly, there was bad news coming. Tassi took a deep breath in and said, “I had a nightmare last night. I don’t remember it completely but I know it was about my twin brother, and here are his war chiefs a couple of hours later. So, Dotou, what happened?”

“Nan Tassi, King Akaba... *dah yi allada*, he passed away yesterday.”

As the news hit her, she grabbed the edge of the window behind her in an attempt to find some support. Her eyes immediately filled with tears while her left hand covered the sob coming from her heart. A teardrop fell to the ground as she wiped her eyes.

“What happened?”

“He died of a short disease, really. One day he was fine and the next, he was fainting and having all sorts of pains.”

“*Eh, Mawu!*” she sobbed and added nothing for a moment.

Then she walked towards the wooden trunk next to her mat and asked:

“So, is the Houngan announcing it to the people this morning?”

After a brief hesitation, Dotou answered:

“We won’t have the Houngan announcing the news yet”

“Why?”, she asked, startled.

“Well... as you know Nan Tassi, your brother was leading a crucial war against the Ouèmènous. We believe that revealing the information of his death would deeply affect our warriors.”

“So, what is your plan?”

“We want you to disguise as King Akaba and lead the troops during the battle.”

“You want me to... Did the council agree to this?”

“Yes, Nan Tassi. You are a great warrior and leader. And your resemblance to the late King will make everything credible.”

“When are we leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning, if that is okay by you.”

She nodded in silence and said nothing. The two men extended their condolences and left as quickly as they had arrived.

Tassi sat on her mat for a while, tears dropping on her cheeks as she thought about this umpteenth loss. Her father had passed away several years ago and before that, she had had to divorce her beloved husband, judged unworthy of her by the throne.

Now with the death of her twin, she was feeling the weight of life on her shoulders.

She was afraid, almost terrified, but somehow ready. Somewhere deep down, she knew she would do all that was necessary for her people and succeed at it.

The next morning, Fumilayo brought her some clothes from the King's wardrobe. As the closest servant to the Queen, the young woman had been taken into confidence.

After dressing up and shaving her hair, Tassi wrapped her head in a turban and went to her children's room. It was important for her to share an intimate moment with her four babies, before her leave.

The mother and her children talked for a while that morning. After holding each other in a big hug, Tassi left. Her heart felt heavy as she closed the door behind her, but a queen thinks about her nation above everything else.

As she joined the procession with Dotou and his deputy, she thought about a popular saying she had always particularly loved:

“Houn djê koho ma si kpo” the tambour that arrives at the public place does not fear the stick.

Now that she had said yes and was about to fill in for her brother, she would have to be stronger than ever and accept the entire burden that would come with the position. She was prepared to be beaten by the stick of royalty.

End of 1709.

The caravan finally approached the village after a two-week journey. From the back of her horse, Tassi acknowledged the crowd waiting for them at the entrance.

Men, women, kids and elders were all waiting for their king to show up. And so, as soon as they saw the royal attire from afar, they started shouting to his glory and singing in unison:

“Ô houi ô tchéé dié, mè hou houi ô, Kpolou Yahassa...”

Here is my sword, murderous sword for you, Kpolou Yahassa...

Indeed, a month before, word had been spread around the kingdom that the great King Akaba of Danxomè had defeated Kpolou Yahassa, the war chief of the Ouèmènous, piercing his body with his sword.

Tassi and Dotou, proud as they were of this accomplishment, felt their subterfuge had become a huge lie to the people.

An hour after her arrival at the palace, someone knocked on Tassi's door. It was Fumilayo, coming to welcome her queen and deliver a message.

After answering Tassi's questions about her kids – how were they? did they do well during her absence? did they cause trouble? – she finally told her,

“Nan Tassi, the council is gathered in the meeting room. They are waiting for you.”

“Okay”.

With a smile, Fumilayo helped Tassi put on an outfit from her brother's wardrobe. Then, the queen made her way to the meeting room.

The chatting stopped as soon as Tassi entered the place. She greeted everyone and sat in the only seat left - the king's.

Around the table were members of the council and five of her brothers and sisters: Sèkpazin, Kpayomin, Gnansounou, Adonon-Dédagbé and Bokodaho. Tokpa, the first of her siblings, had refused to come for the meeting.

The Migan, prime minister of the Kingdom, opened the meeting.

“Queen Tassi, we are very sorry to disturb you so soon after your arrival.”

“It is okay Hassou. I know we have a lot of things to discuss.”

“Indeed, we do! First and foremost, we all agreed we must officially announce King Akaba’s death to the people.”

Tassi looked at everyone around the table and silently nodded in agreement.

“Great. Then we’ll do so by the end of the month. That being said, as Prince Agbo-Sassa is too young to rule after his father, we believe you should, until he’s ready.”

“What?”

The assembly immediately turned to Gnansounou.

“Why would she rule when I could?”

“And why should you rule?” asked Sèkpazin.

“Because I am the Dossou, in case you forgot. Tokpa refused to submit to the rituals imposed by his rank as first son after the twins so I did. That makes me the right heir to the throne!”

“Gnansounou!” called Kpayomin.

“Sister,” he answered.

“As much as we value and appreciate everything you did, it takes much more than that to be king.”

“But...”

“Your sister has been ruling with her brother since the day he sat on the throne. She knows the kingdom as no other contender and I should remind you of the prowess she accomplished during the battle?” added the Migan.

“But... she is a woman! Only men can rule Danxome’s kingdom!” he shouted.

“A woman who fights and leads way better than you could ever,” said Kpayomin.

“Don’t you ever talk about her like that again!”, she added.

As his heart filled with anger, Gnansounou murmured some harsh words but said nothing. A heavy silence filled the room as the Tassi said:

“I would be honored to rule our kingdom until Prince Agbo-Sassa is able to. Now, if there’s nothing more to discuss, I have a ton of things to do.”

“Sure, Queen Tassi.”

The assembly rose as she got up and left the room to go see her children. After almost a year without them, her heart was beating fast from the joy she felt, being home with the ones she loved. Not even Gnansounou could take that feeling away from her.

Little did she know, her real fight began on this day.

Mid 1711

“What is the word around?”

“Ah Nan Tassi, our men still believe that a woman should not be ruling. They say you have to go, at all costs.”

“So my brother is going on with his propaganda?”

Fumilayo nodded as she looked at her queen. Tassi was standing by the window, admiring the stars in the sky.

Since her return to the palace as Queen, her brother had done nothing but revile her everywhere he went. From rumours of her having orgies to her disrespecting the ancestors, he persecuted her in every way he could.

And even if no one dared to say it, Fumilayo was convinced he was the one behind the death of Tassi's children. Indeed, in the past two years, Tossa, Houéssoukpè and Médéwonnou had all died in mysterious conditions.

Unfortunately, the Queen had no proof to confront her brother yet. Until she did, the only thing she could do was to protect her last child, Sé mangblon.

“What do you think about our *agoodjiès*?” Tassi suddenly asked Fumi.

Almost a year and a half after her return to the kingdom, Tassi created an all-women military force: the *agoodjiès*. At first, it was just a group of women chosen to protect her children. But as the women around grew more and more interested in the idea, the queen decided to go for something bigger. Unexpected.

“I think it is a brilliant idea. But I fear it will reinforce the plots against you. Maybe you could be more careful.”

“I cannot do the great things I have in mind for his kingdom if I have to be careful, Fumilayo. I believe being an amazing ruler to this kingdom is the best payback to my brother.”

“I understand.”

With a sigh, Tassi put an end to the conversation. Fumilayo quickly finished her task and left Tassi to her work.

Three weeks later.

“Nan Tassi!”

Fumilayo’s terrified voice got to the queen before she even reached the door. Tassi woke up immediately, her heart pounding hard in her chest.

She was already getting up when Fumilayo barged into the room. Her hair was a mess and sweat was flowing down her forehead into her eyes.

“What is it?”

“It’s... Nan Tassi, it’s Sé mangblon!”

Tassi immediately ran out of the room. Fumilayo followed close behind.

“Is she in her room? What happened?”

“She’s in the backyard,” Fumi answered, crying.

As her feet anxiously led her to their destination, Tassi murmured prayers to her ancestors. She was terrified and her whole body

was shaking as she was walking. She just wanted to find her baby.

A couple of seconds later, Tassi slowed down at the sight of a little body on the grass. She recognized the braided hair, the red cloth and the bracelets around the right wrist.

“*Vi cé wè!* It’s my child!” she shouted.

And then a scream, a visceral one resounded in the kingdom as she let herself fall beside the corpse of her last child.

Fumilayo threw herself on the ground next to her, in an attempt to show her support. She landed on something hard, lifted her knee and found a tiny piece of wood that looked like a broken *mankpo*, the royal scepter.

Two hours later

“Nan Tassi, I am sorry to disturb you but I found this next to Sémi...”

The queen raised her head. Neither of them said a thing. As numb as her body felt, Tassi made an effort and took the object out of Fumi's hand.

“Is it...?”

“A broken mankpo.” Fumilayo confirmed.

Tassi immediately stood up, still shaking a little bit. As she looked at her hands holding the toy, still tainted with her last child's blood, tears came back to her eyes. Another scream, full of anger this time, filled the room and reached every soul in the palace.

“So they really killed my babies for the throne?!” she shouted.

“For power?!”

Fumilayo sat still, crying and sobbing while her queen destroyed her entire room. Tassi thrashed and cried, broke and cried, shattered and cried, ripped and cried... until she could no longer shout and only a sad melody was coming out her mouth.

“Gan nabi mè wè hwe zivô na houn? Mi go alo nun mi!” When does the sun come up? Help me!

Sitting on the floor, in the middle of the mess she had created, she sang until she could no longer breathe. Then she calmly said

“Call in the *agoodjiès* for a meeting in my room, in ten minutes.”

Fumilayo got up and left the room.

The next morning

As she had requested, all the members of the council and the dignitaries of the kingdom were in the meeting room when Queen Tassi came in. She was beautifully dressed in her red cloth, wearing gold jewelry on her braided hair and arms. Every step she took was praised by the tambours following her.

Nobody talked as she quietly walked to her throne; all around her, were the *agoodjiès*. She sat down and saw Gnansounou playfully smiling to some other men in the room. She could see his excitement and could feel it slashing her heart.

As soon as her body touched the chair, a voice rose in the room and a woman started singing to the queen. Her song was a tribute to Tassi’s courage, wonderful leadership skills and her suffering as a mother.

After a couple of minutes, Tassi raised a hand and the music stopped. Fumilayo appeared in the room, carrying a basin full of water with another servant. They dropped the recipient at her feet and she stood up.

Before the men could understand what was happening, she untied the knot of her dress and let the entire cloth flow to the ground. And there she was standing completely naked. A hubbub rose.

The men, both excited and shocked, hurriedly tried to leave the room but were stopped by the guards. The women forcefully took them back to their seats and forced them to watch and listen.

Once they were all back around the table, Tassi stepped into the basin and started washing her body and her intimate parts while saying:

“I, Tassi-Hangbè, Queen of Danxome, have done nothing all my life but serve and protect our nation. I have abandoned my husband for you. I have left my home for you. All I ever did and wanted, was to be a worthy Queen of her people. And what did you give me in return? You have killed my children! You have taken the fruits of my womb!”

As murmurs rose again, she shouted and brought the silence back.

“Dossou vilè wa kon sin zozo do dè!” Dossou’s children invoke the ancestors with warm water!

Tears running down her cheeks, she collected some of her bath water and started pouring it on the assembly.

The men started shouting in anger but she continued, pouring most of the liquid on her little brother, cursing him, his descendants and the entire kingdom.

Finally, Fumilayo handed her a cloth which she wrapped around her chest. She collected the rest of the water and walked towards the door, to the *Assin*, the sacred representation of all the previous dead kings and poured the water on it.

Then she turned back to the men, looked at them for a last time and left, followed by her guards and Fumilayo.

While they were walking to her room, a smile blossomed on Tassi's face. These men had taken her child and her happiness. But today, she got payback. And in her heart, she hoped the world would never forget what she had just done and everything she had given to her people.

The end."

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTINUITY OF
AFRIKAN NARRATION

Dismas Okombo - Kenya

Genuine and generous. Her smile will forever remain distinct in my memory. It was the first pure smile I became conscious of. That graceful smile that seemed to massage all her facial muscles. That magnificent open smile! Whenever something tickled her - and almost everything tickled her - her lips would curve, revealing her toothless gums; her wrinkled cheeks would fold back and she would heave with a prolonged gentle snort, a glint of jollity in her eyes. If the other party failed to find amusement in what she was smiling at, she would lick her lower lip and say: “You take life too seriously.”

Every morning, before heading to their busy jobs, Mama and Baba would hand me over to Dani, my Grandma. And every morning when I stepped into her mud house, the warm smile would crease her face with untamed excitement. My presence made her happy, and to my young mind, that’s all I wanted to do. She would prepare sorghum porridge, sweeten it with sugar, cool it by immersing the *agulu** into cold water and then serve me

some. After which, because of the disruptive experiments I had performed on her crops the previous day, she wouldn't allow me to accompany her to the *shamba*.

And so, I would remain at her door. For a moment, seated still. Her doorstep had three rectangular rocks arranged to form steps. When boredom finally set in, I would stand on the highest stone, jump over the other two and land in the grass yard. Again, and again. At first with wild enthusiasm, but that would quickly become dull, and I would change to walking around the mud wall scanning for *aluang'ni** opening. On finding their waxy entrance, I would, with an innocent ignorance, hastily gouge a hole into the wall in hopes of finding nectar.

Oftentimes when returning from the *shamba*, Dani would come with varied herbs. She would tell me *Oluoro Chieng'** is used to stop bleeding in case of an injury; *Akecha** is for stomach ache. In the evening as she rests under the mango tree shade, I would catch grasshoppers nearby, pretend they were cows, scare away butterflies, chase after dragonflies.

When Mama enrolled me in St. Joseph's kindergarten, the rigid, serious phase of life began. The unfamiliar faces scared me; the predictable life bored me. I would trick the teacher into granting me permission for a latrine visit. Behind the latrines was the

fence. Crouching below the barbed wire, I would crawl on my belly and escape back to the exciting safety of her smile.

School never proved adventurous; mean kids, mechanical teachers, long dull hours. Dani had thought I was too young to begin school, so she sheltered me. On my part, I wanted nothing of that 'serious life'. But against Dani's vehement protests and my stubborn resistance, Baba dragged me to class and, with threats of a thorough thrashing, ensured that I stayed in school. Thus, my separation from Dani began.

Fate was not to dictate the course of our love. After school I would pass by her mudhouse, and, with stories and laughter, we would recover lost time. One day, when I was in class four, I returned from school to find her lying on a mat. It was midday and the sun's searing heat was unbearable. Yet, there she was - her clothes damp with sweat - in the middle of the room instead of under her favorite mango tree. As foreboding built up in me, I hastily glanced at her feet. No red dirt clumped on them. *'She didn't leave the house for the shamba. Everything bad must have happened!'*

I tiptoed towards her, my steps clumsy, afraid to confirm my premonitions. I stooped beside her and shook her at the shoulder. She stirred to consciousness and opened her eyes a slit. In her

eyes where an endless smile would usually be, stark agony resided. Terror immobilized me.

She squinted, and for a moment struggled to recognize me. A spasm of agony took over her and she groaned, “*Atur! Atur!...*” I’ve fractured! I’ve fractured! Awareness abandoned me. In a voice squeaky with fright, I shouted “Where?!” She raised her left hand towards her hip. Before pinpointing, her hand collapsed in helpless anguish. She shut her eyes and tears flowed.

Opoo, a locally renowned bone-setter arrived. His black, dusty, side-bag contained all the equipment of his practice. In the hour that followed, as Opoo displayed his expertise on the patient, Dani’s moans shuttered my heart.

In the evening, after Mama had bathed and fed her, and the pain had subsided a bit, Dani re-counted to us how her right foot had tangled the left one. She had tripped at the door and fallen on the stones forming the steps. When Baba took her to a reputable orthopedic, they advised that with her advanced age it was unlikely she would heal naturally. So, they fixed the bone with a metal.

In the subsequent years Baba would take her to physiotherapy sessions. They massaged and massaged. Nothing. Hope of her ever walking again dwindling. Baba took her to traditional

herbalists. Still, nothing. It was time to accept that Dani would remain bedridden for the rest of her life.

Year after year, I watched her smile fade. Intermittently, glimpses of her former self would resurface. I would wait at her bedside for such moments. And when they arrived, she would stop conversing with Owidi -her long dead brother- gradually open her eyes and turn to me, “*Nyakwara*, you are still here?” Her voice faint at first. Overwhelmed with empathy, I would just stare at her. She would then clasp my tiny hands into her feeble palms and pronounce blessings upon my life.

The conversation would ease into reminiscing of the days, when after harvest, we, her grandchildren, would gather in her front yard under the moonlight. There, from a communal bowl, with eager appetites we would attack the ugali and *obambo** she had prepared. Her voice now trembling with joy, a glint of nostalgia in her eyes, she would narrate to me her youth, and teach me the songs of her younger days.

In every discourse on culture and cultural identity, my mind often reflects on my relations with Dani. It was from her that I first learnt and experienced my culture. Through her, my identity is grounded; in the songs she sang, in the stories she narrated, in the foods she prepared, in the lessons she gave.

Ruminating on Dani's role in my life, contrasted with the busy schedule of Mama and Baba; the disjoint in Afrikan narration is pronounced. In present time, there is no [or little] conscious effort from parents to connect their children to their cultures. From dawn to dusk the Afrikan parent is occupied with capitalistic endeavours, utterly deluded that there are only two ways to secure theirs and their children's future. First of which is, accumulation of material wealth. Second, education.

The pursuit of material comfort ought to be maintained at its bare essence, that is, of enabling one to explore and improve the quality of their existence. Beyond this, it becomes a distraction. And in regards to the continuation of the Afrikan narration, inculcating the Afrikan identity in the young, it is a disjoining factor. A parent indoctrinated with capitalist ideologies has no time to engage the children in activities that connect them to their cultural identity. A child not culturally grounded will be incapable of attaining psychological balance as an adult. This implies a lack of self-worth as an Afrikan.

Regarding education, it is unfortunate that Afrikan parents still send their children to school for the same reasons as during the colonial times: so that the child learns the ways of the whites. What an absurd idea! And, they are deluded that the earlier the child is enrolled in this ridiculous education system the better.

The child's physical and psychological capacity is unbalanced at a very tender age.

Actually, the education system itself is designed, and is used, for capitalist ends. There is not a shred of cultural substance integrated in them. The end product? A psychologically imbalanced Afrikan caught in the cultural dilemma, driven by an insatiable desire for wealth and constantly yearning to be white.

At this point, I am eager to state, the further we distance children from their cultures, the harder it is for the Afrikan race to attain genuine equality with other races. To bridge the disjoints in the Afrikan narration, the focus must now shift to promoting Afrocentric ideas. Our ideologies on economics, education, religion and so forth, ought to center on who we are as Afrikans. The precepts needed for this endeavor are already distinctly stipulated in Molefi Asante's *The Afrocentric Ideas* and Julius Nyerere's essays. Our urgent task, therefore, is to continue the Afrikan narration; to connect our children with the beauty of Afrikan culture.

For grandma; the gentlest of Angels...

Glossary:

- i. Agulu: A traditional pot used to prepare food.

- ii. aluang'ni: Tiny insects that live in colonies within the mud walls, or in the ground. Just like bees, they produce a nectar like substance. In my childhood, we would gather as friends and search for them.
- iii. Oluoro Chieng': A low growing herb with white flowers. *Ageratum conyzoides* is its scientific name.
- iv. Akecha: A sunflower-like plant with very bitter leaves. The thought of drinking the pounded leaves can make one deny their stomachache. *Tithonia diversifolia* is its scientific name.
- v. Obambo: A dried fish recipe. A common delicacy in my Luo community.

8

THE AFRICAN IN SCIENCE TODAY; **THE PAST AND FUTURE**

Fiske Serah Nyirongo – Zambia

It is the second week of the African Writers PenPen residency and we are discussing themes for our creative non-fiction contributions to an anthology which will feature all 12 residents from around the African continent.

My theme, The African Identity in Creative (Scientific) Non-fiction Literature, is a tough one.

After another typical Kenyan meal, we sit around the table, all of us in our own thoughts trying to conjure words out of our dwindling research nets. Kolabomi Adeko, our soft spoken and entertaining host, takes our questions and encourages us with ideas.

“I have no idea what or who to write about,” I enunciated quietly. Truth is, I was out of my depth.

“You can pick on Nnedi. Nnedi Okorafor,” Kolabomi said.

“Nnedi?”

“Yes, Nnedi Okorafor. She writes science things.”

“Oh! Nnedi!” I exclaim, like he has just mentioned a mutual old friend of ours. I know little about Nnedi Okorafor. Our conversation stirs up another name. I met Mohale Mashigo – whom I know more about - a year ago at a writing workshop. Though tentative, I decide to anchor my work on these two writers. My research into Okorafor's life and career reveals similarities between her and Mashigo. The word Afrofuturism pops up a few times as I read article after article on the two writers, another word comes up, Africanfuturism.

*

I meet Mohale Mashigo on a cold and rainy morning. We are on a *kombi* taking us to the German cultural institute, the Goethe Institut, in Johannesburg, South Africa in February of 2019. It is my very first writing workshop and when I first see Mashigo, I think she is one of the writers picked for the Young Adult writing project.

When I discover who she is, I am taken aback for a good minute. I had researched on the minute details of the workshop and this included who the facilitator was going to be and the organizers of the project. The project was put together by South African writer

Zukiswa Wanner and our Johannesburg facilitator would be Mohale Mashigo. I am sitting next to the woman whom I have been anxiously waiting to meet. She doesn't make her position known.

The "Hi. I'm Carol" which she says to me feels like a trick. Mohale Mashigo is far from what I had expected.

When we arrive, as an icebreaker, she reads from *Manuka*, the opening story in her book, *Intruders*, a collection of short stories. It explores the themes of mythical deep sea creatures. Her husky singer voice fills the small Goethe Institut auditorium and I was spellbound by this world she reads from.

Manuka, the main character, is discovering that she's different upon the birth of her daughter. She is the first African character I encounter who was given a non-evil water spirit characteristic. She is a well rounded character who isn't the stereotype portrayed in many African fictional works of water creatures.

Mohale Mashigo is the first Sci-fi and fantasy African writer I have met whose work describe as Afrofuturism. I am taken by her work.

Mark Dery writes in his 1993 essay titled *Black to the future*, '*Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of the*

twentieth-century technoculture and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future might for want of a better term be called Afrofuturism,’.

A quote from George Orwell accompanies the essay *“If all records told the same tale, then the lie passed into history and became truth. Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”*

Mashigo asserts this in her work when she writes ordinary people into extraordinary circumstances. Like Manuka, an ordinary girl from Soweto township who is really a mythical creature.

In her boldly titled essay, *Afrofuturism is not for Africans living in Africa*, Mashigo suggests that Africans need a new term(s) to describe writing that has science and fantasy in it or a future Africa that’s scientifically and technologically enhanced. She says *“there are stories that take place in the future but cannot strictly be called Afrofuturism because (I am of the opinion) Afrofuturism is not for Africans living in Africa. This is not meant, in any way, to undermine the importance of Afrofuturism. So why even mention this? Well, it’s probably because South Africa is a country that suffers from low self-esteem and too often parrots the United Kingdom and United States of America (hi, Cultural Imperialism).”*

As I well know, Mashigo is not the only African or African emigrant writer who is choosing to go with a different term for imagining a science and technology advanced future for the African continent. Her stories encompass the ordinary African - two sisters who catch monsters for a living; a woman who creates a baby in a test tube in her lab; a young girl from Soweto who is really a shape-shifting creature; all these stories have Black South African women and girls at their centre.

Mohale Mashigo did not coin a new term for imagining an African future, even if I wish she did, she instead suggests that you call it by what you like. With work that has science, science futuristic and fantasy characteristics and as a Black woman, people will place her under the Afrofuturism umbrella. Saying Afrofuturism is not for Africans living in Africa is a battle cry, a way to forge an identity in a world that wishes (and succeeds) to box a Black person as *one thing and one thing only - something* Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's 2009 Ted Talk, The Danger of a Single Story warns against.

So what do we call this genre that is being explored more earnestly in recent years by the modern day African writer? Nnedi Okorafor helps me colour in one piece of the puzzle. My first encounter with Okorafor is through a Twitter account called *Periwinkle Chukwu the Cat*. Periwinkle is Okorafor's house cat.

During her American summer holiday in 2019, Periwinkle Chukwu's account sent out tweets mimicking the thought process of a child left home alone for days. These tweets caught my attention when a friend of a friend who happens to be an Nnedi Okorafor super-fan retweeted Periwinkle's 'cat thoughts' onto my timeline.

Okorafor writes science fiction and fantasy for both children and adults. In her memoir, *Broken Places and Outer Spaces: Finding Creativity in the Unexpected*, she details her path to writing, with scenes from her teen years when she ran track and was well on her way to an athletic career. In the memoir, there's a recreating of oneself and a discovering of strengths that Okorafor goes through. She writes her first creative words after a surgery gone wrong.

Recreating or rediscovering oneself is a major theme in the characters Okorafor creates. In her blog, *Nnedi's Wahala Zone*, she introduces a character in an excerpt from her book *Akata Warrior*. The character, Sunny Nwazue, is a 12-year old Nigerian-American - or NaijaAmerican as Okorafor refers to herself. Born in the United States to two Nigerian parents, Sunny feels the pinch of splitting in half or threes that third culture kids (TCKS) experience. TCKS are "people raised in a culture other than their parents' or the culture of their country of nationality for

a significant part of their early development years. This un-belonging is captured in an excerpt found on Nnedi's Wahala Zone blog.

I sort of moved from group to group. I didn't fit in anywhere. I was African, but not really African. I was born in America but not really African American. Half the time, I didn't understand African American slang. I had a bit of a Nigerian accent that I'd picked up from my parents, which was strange since I was born in America. I loved the Caribbeans, but we all knew I wasn't one of them either. I was light skinned like the whites but my puffy hair and the way I look, I could never fool anyone.

Sunny also has albinism which further complicates her efforts at trying to fit in. She doesn't have as much melanin to fit in like another Nigerian-American character mentioned in *Akata Warrior*. She's not white enough or African enough or American enough.

This sense of un-belonging can also be said of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism was coined for African-Americans by an American who had encountered their work.

In a blog entry titled *Africanfuturism Defined*, Okorafor says “*I started using the term Africanfuturism (a term I coined)*

because I felt; the term Afrofuturism had several definitions and some of the most prominent ones didn't describe what I was doing, I was being called this word [an Afrofuturist] whether I agreed or not (no matter how much I publicly resisted it) and because most definitions were off, my work was therefore being read wrongly and I needed to regain control of how I was being defined.

Africanfuturism is similar to “Afrofuturism” in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or centre the West.”

I see why writers like Mashigo and Okorafor are saying there's a need for Africans, (whether they are a writer or reader) to have choices for what they call works of literature that centre an African science (fiction) future, present or past. Okorafor, unlike Mashigo, gives a name to what she prefers. Africanfuturism is an umbrella term like Afrofuturism, though I don't personally prefer it, it is useful for literature produced on the continent or for the continent.

Perhaps this imagining of African futures, presents and pasts can be brought closer to the home and the city I have lived in since birth, Lusaka, Zambia.

I am watching a YouTube video and in it, it is the year 1964. The video is grainy and the sound effects remind me of (old) Turner Classic Movies. A man dressed in a khaki military style uniform and a black silk cape with medals on it (a Zambian superhero outfit) is standing on a hill about 10 kilometres away from Lusaka, the Capital city of newly independent Zambia. He is surrounded by teenagers who look like they are either exercising or having a drug-induced euphoria. A reporter is asking him what it is he wishes to achieve with the chaos around him. The man says he will fly to the moon from Lusaka using a rocket which he will build. The rocket is already taking shape in the background. There is no hint of sarcasm in the man's tone. The reporter, a British man ends the interview with these words, *“to most Zambians, these people are just a bunch of crackpots and from what I have seen today, I am inclined to agree.”*

This man in the Zambian superhero outfit is Edward Mukuka Nkoloso. In Zambian-American Writer Namwali Serpell's New Yorker essay, *The Zambian Afronaut Who Wanted to Join The Space Race*, Nkoloso is eulogized as more of a satirist than someone who wanted to make a career in space explorations.

Edward Mukuka Nkoloso was born in the Northern part of Northern Rhodesia in 1919, he was educated - as was common then - in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) as a missionary and a teacher. He was later drafted to serve in the Second World War. During the war, one of the senior ranking soldiers showed Nkoloso a microscope and it birthed his curiosity for science.

In her New Yorker piece, Namwali interviews Edward Nkoloso's son Mukuka Nkoloso Jr. He says that people have misrepresented his father's story.

"He was teaching for the program but hidden from the British Government. Teaching the youth so they could be active," Nkoloso Jr. says this in reference to the guerrilla style fighting that Zambian freedom fighters used back in the day.

Edward Nkoloso wanted to join the Space Race of the 1960s, in a small corner of the world that wasn't as interested in space programs or finding out what was out there in the universe. Edward Nkoloso studied the moon, the galaxy and wanted to find himself among the people who were competing to be the first to land on the moon. He didn't think he was unfit for this aspiration because he was African. In fact, he saw himself as the right person to be at the helm of this space program.

This brevity in him is what drew me to Nkoloso's story. Most people who knew him called him strange. Like my mother who came to know him as a neighbour in the early 1970s, she describes him as a scruffy looking man who didn't really care about what people thought of his physical appearance. They all agree he had an IQ that was impressive.

He wanted to send a woman into space, a Black African woman with a dog, some cats and a missionary. Nkoloso used tongue-in-cheek humour for the missionary, he said he wanted to civilise the primitive species of other planets, a specific dig at British Colonisation. This futuristic attempt at science, right at the birth of a new nation led me to believe that Afrofuturism or in this case Africanfuturism (or what you want to call it), this imagination of an African future or present full of scientific and technological enhancements, free from borrowed terms that really don't fit our collective reality as a continent, was Nkoloso's strong suit.

I am not on a search for a specific term to coin like Mohale Mashigo nor do I prefer the word Africanfuturism like Nnedi Okorafor. What I do know now, is that writing creatively about science or Africans in science on the continent will have some realistic and idealistic components to it. Like Edward Nkoloso, some of it might make your audience pause, laugh or call you a dreamer. Choose your own word for it.

9

GROWING IN TIGHT SPACES

Ernestina Edem Azah - Ghana

"Awo Lo, magblɔe na mama".

The children in this area play a lot. I moved here with my family about a year ago and the children are always noisy. The landlord, a short and stocky man, and his wife have two grown daughters. One is married with a child. She and her husband own the house but her father is the one we call the landlord. The other daughter has five boys and doesn't live in the house, but she comes to wash here and her children bathe here too. It's cheating because she doesn't live in the house and doesn't pay for the water she and her children use, but my dad says we shouldn't talk about it and since the house belongs to her sister she can do whatever she pleases and we don't have a right to say anything. Our people say *if you don't want to be cheated, build your own house.*

This place I live in is called Ho. It is the capital town of the Volta region of Ghana. The house we live in is a compound house.

Compound houses are the most common houses in Ghana. This is because most Ghanaians live in the 'extended family setting'. The compounds usually have 3 or 4 houses built together but as separate apartments to accommodate the extended family. In the traditional compound house where only family members live, they all share the same bath, toilet and kitchen so these spaces are situated outside the living apartments. The house we live in is not the traditional compound house because the owners are obviously renting it out. Dad built his own house in his village. It's a thirty-minute drive from Ho. We had transportation issues when we lived there because he has no car, so we had to find somewhere in Ho, somewhere closer to school. Dad rented the place because it was affordable and he was comfortable with the landlord. That's why we are here.

In my home, I live with my father and my sister. It's hectic to live with a divorced retiree even if he's your father. It comes with the demands of being a woman even though you are just beginning to want to know what life is, learn to enjoy it and be young, playful and beautiful. When you live my type of life, it makes you a housewife and ages you quickly.

It's Wednesday and my turn to cook the family meals. From the kitchen I can see the children in the area. Today, they are singing and drumming on paint buckets under the mango tree opposite

the house. They are sitting in a semicircle, on cement blocks left out to cure, with the drummers in the middle. Some of them are topless with tattered shorts while others are in nothing but their underwear. Their baked dark brown skins have been made dirty with sand as if they had a sand bath. Some of them are watching on as others dance. They make life look so comfortable, so enjoyable, an easy feat. They remind me of an adage that says *'the laughter of the child is the light of the home'*.

I was never like them when I was younger. I never will be.

As a child, I was always at home inside the room I shared with my sisters, at the library or at school. It was so lonely. I loved the library and school because there, I could play, have fun and learn new things. Back at home, I had to be quiet and study my books, but I did not have the ability to sit still. My body and I always had to be doing something other than sitting down and reading textbooks, I had already done a lot of reading in school. My father however, did not think so. He wanted a proper child, quiet and humble, where humble meant doing everything I was asked without question, not exploring anything at all and living a boring life. Back then, I was sure my father hated me and in return, I hated him too. Now, I see he must have been trying to be a good father, albeit one with poor communication skills. I no longer hate him.

I am sure that when I was still in my mother's belly, I could not wait to get out and see, touch and feel so many things in the world. Despite my eagerness, there is a feeling I don't know. That I will never know.

I will never know what my mother thought about how a child should be raised because my parents divorced when I was seven and I have no recollection of how she treated me during those seven years. Though I am grown now, I still do not know what she thinks because we do not know one another well enough to become friends.

I am angry that I did not have a physical mother-daughter relationship. I still do not have one. I am annoyed at my mother for not trying to be a mother regardless of the situations she may have been going through. I feel I have the right to that anger. I feel I should not try to be her friend even if I know she is nice and makes wonderful food that makes my eyes fill with tears, tears of happiness, of what I might have had. Maybe she does not deserve this from me. Or does she?

Mothers are not in shortage when you have my dad. I had two stepmothers who somehow did not like me much in the beginning. It was the same with both of them. When they eventually became nicer I never felt confident enough to talk to

them as I now wish I could, so my secrets were kept in my heart and my thoughts were shaped only in my head by what I read.

As my father tried to enforce his ideas of who a proper child should be, I wondered if he was that way because he was raised like that or he just wanted to treat me like that. I feel sorry when I think he might have gone through worse situations than I ever will. But even if he was treated that way, did he have to make me go through the same things he went through? Did he not know that a child belongs to the ancestors and not the mother or father? Did he not know that the child can only do what she sees her parents do? As a child I had to do all the studying while I never saw him studying. This man would only glance through newspapers sometimes and go out with his friends when he had programs.

My father - like many other African parents - believes in the existence of evil spirits also known as smaller gods in African traditional religion. He also believes in the supreme being as he is now a Christian. These beliefs influenced the way he saw the world and as my door into the world, he in turn influenced me. I was not allowed to bring friends to the house or participate in activities that normal school-going students engaged in. I could not go for class excursions because somehow evil spirits only knew my father's family and it was as if the moment I entered the

vehicle the sky would fall and crush it! He made me feel bad. He made me sad. He made me mad.

Through much of my younger years:

I felt guilt. I do not know how I began thinking my parents' separation was my fault, but it became a headache I would carry for almost twenty-and-three years of my life. I guess because I was the last born, my little mind assumed that they were always fighting because of me. I cannot remember their fights properly, but I have flashbacks of thrown objects and terrified family members hiding.

I felt scared. As if everything so far was not punishment enough, I started thinking that truly the evil spirits detested only me and I was scared that if I made friends, the spirits would use them to hurt me. So, I became more and more reserved despite being naturally restless and talkative. I became scared of people and school was very difficult for me. It still surprises me that I was able to go through 9 years of schooling successfully and no one ever knew I was weird in that way.

I felt crazy. After a while, I started having palpitations when anyone stood by me longer than I thought was normal. I hated being sent out on errands too because I would meet people and they would try to talk to me or I would have to talk to them. I

always looked over my shoulder every few minutes to check if I was alone. I still do that now. At school, I felt flustered whenever there was a crowd. I always thought it was weird that I was okay with my classmates but the whole school was somehow overwhelming, like at school assemblies, so I kept with my classmates and whenever I had to go to such gatherings I would go with my friends even when I wanted to be alone.

I felt alone. I learned at an early age that I could not trust anyone and I had to take care of myself or else I would not survive, so I created a pseudo mother in my mind who knew what was right and what was wrong. This way I had the chance to be me sometimes. I still cannot understand how I was able to separate these two people in my mind, but I am glad I had thought to do that because she was a great comfort to me and helped me mask most of my feelings from the world - she would later become a woman who hated my parents.

I felt hate. I could not tell anyone how I felt because I felt it was a shame to say that I was scared of people and that they made it difficult for me to breathe properly. This feeling persisted until I met good people and made good friends as I grew older. People like me. Later in life I learnt it could happen to anyone and I am not so ashamed anymore. I feel *loved, liberated*.

I hope that yet to be fathers will understand that their children do not belong to them as a flower vase or a pair of colorful socks would. They are entities of their own with different perceptions and understanding of things in the world. I hope that they do not push their ideals on their children but allow them room to explore while tactfully guiding them.

“You cannot make the corn you plant grow, you can only provide the necessary conditions that will allow it to grow and hope for it to grow.”

I still struggle. I have ended up a boring hoax. Unable to live and love as freely as I want because I'm scared, and stuck in wanting to improve. I look like things are getting better finally, but I'm at the edge of a cliff ready to throw myself down. I have always wanted to be free like the children.

They are still drumming and singing at the top of their voices. The landlord just came out to yell at them. He is annoyed that they are making noise and asks them to go to their various homes. As they disperse, some dogs run towards them and start barking. They start shouting and begin to throw rocks at the dogs. I admire their courage to shout and throw rocks at the barking dogs even though they know the dogs could bite them. These children are happy and full of life with no care of who they are disturbing or who is stronger than they are. They are beautifully selfish.

I often think that someday when I stop holding my breath and stop shaking with anger, my smile will be as wide as theirs, my body as alive as theirs and stride as confident and unabashed as theirs. Someday.

10

FOR THE SAKE OF NONSENSE

Esther Musembi – Kenya

*There are only two kinds of writers; good writers and
bad writers. - Ben Okri*

“For the sake of nonsense, I am Adhira Wanza. A Kamba who is also Indian. Is that fine?” This is how my friend, Adhira, used to introduce herself. Growing up, I always thought it was a really rude way of introducing oneself. Later, she would tell me that she was getting increasingly tired of people always asking her questions like ‘why do you look Indian yet you speak Kamba?’ ‘Are you even Kenyan?’ “Yes, I am Kenyan. Would you like to see some ID?” She would retort in harsh Hindi. “Why do they care so much who I am at every turn? Am I in some audition that never ends?” In the end, when our chests were fully formed and we experienced our first blood, she decided to take a little break to the UK to ‘rediscover’ herself and maybe audition a little less.

Like Adhira, most of us still grapple with our identity. A lot of things define us - gender, education - but when it comes to the

core question, ‘Who am I?’ we are totally lost. We straddle so many identities that in the end we can’t say for sure who we really are. In a fast-evolving world, the African writer, or who we thought of as an African writer, has been subjected to this scrutiny.

If I had been born and raised in Kenya, done my further studies in South Africa, experienced a bit of winter in the Eastern Cape and decided to write about it, would it be authentic? Shouldn’t I be more worried about the rampant public thievery in my country than the foreign weather in another man's country no matter how bad I wanted to write about it?

Why am I uncomfortable about documenting my most intimate experiences? For the longest time I was guilty. Guilty of thinking African literature means West Africa; to be more specific, Nigeria. For many reasons, one largely being ignorance, I thought of Nigeria whenever African literature was mentioned - don’t blame me yet. At the time, I was exposed to the Pacesetter series written by notable African authors. Some of the names I came across were Obiagiele, Aniake, Yemi. It didn’t matter that in between taking breaks from tales of love and woes, corruption and espionage, I occasionally buried my nose in Meja Mwangi’s works. To me, Meja Mwangi was just some Kenyan author unworthy of a place in the ‘African literature’ landscape. I did not

glorify his presence as an African author as I did Pacesetters. Still, do not blame me; that was what I found. That is what was handed down to me. Young, impressionable, I was made to think of Africa as a singular nondescript dark impenetrable box.

It is a narrative that has stood for a long time. The white man sat around some table in Berlin and decided our fate. Drew seemingly harmless lines that divided us into a multiplicity of peoples, cultures and a multitude of languages including those imposed on us by our former masters. Africa is diverse, so why do we have to box ourselves when it comes to literature?

Despite all the growing up I had done, I was still calling Ngugi, Achebe, Makena; African literature. The atrocity! To put it in perspective, maybe I belong to a family, the smallest social unit. Maybe my father's name is Mukuru and he has five children, each with a name. Now, imagine the erasure that comes with calling all of us Mukuru without at least including each of our first names? We wouldn't be able to tell which Mukuru you are referring to. This is what we let happen when we allowed the world to define our writing in a singularity; as if we all have the same stories. This is what happens when African literature is simply Ngugi, Achebe, Makena and nothing more.

We are complex. African authors are creative, diverse and complex. By all means, call us by our names. Achebe was a

Nigerian writer, Meja a Kenyan author, Barbara Kimenye a Ugandan writer; the African was just an extension of who they really were as whole selves. Their experiences, seen in their writing, are different and diverse.

How often do you hear of European writers? Often? Rarely? What about Russian writers, Danish writers?

In my formative years, I read a lot of American literature. Witches in striped stockings making concoctions with things like blueberry, oxtail and rare flowers. Occasionally they would fly on brooms with a blue full moon as the background. I was fascinated but did not truly grasp what I was reading. I once asked my mother, “do we have these kinds of people in my culture?” She said yes but felt it would be traumatizing for me to read about African witches. But I was curious. Hungry for some kind of connection. Could I maybe understand a witch who used *majani chai* and gave kids *mapera* instead of apples? At the time, I had not tasted apples, they were just as foreign as the white witches in the American stories.

My mother finally relented and read me a story about the *Tokoloshe*. A kind of impish water spirit popular in South African folklore. She went on to read to me some *Maimu* stories, ogres of old who punished misbehaving children, sometimes pulling their noses so hard they resembled emaciated elephant

trunks. It was at this point in my watershed moment that I read my first Kenyan novel.

Mr. PM, who was my social studies teacher and librarian at the time, insisted that I read *Carcass for Hounds*, a Meja Mwangi classic. “But this is not what I want,” I grumbled in a small voice. What I wanted was to go on another adventure with *The Famous Five*. I did not want this musty little orange book that was being shoved into my hands. “Look”, he said, “just read something new for once and see if you like it or not.” I was hooked. There was something fresh and exhilarating about reading my history in such evocative language. Amidst the gore and death, there was fighting spirit, tragic love stories, and I reveled in those pages soaking it all in. These different stories opened a whole new world for me. I understood that Africa wasn’t just some singular facet of stories, but a complex kaleidoscope; each African community special and diverse in its own way. No story was the same even if the characters bore similarities. Each and every culture is different with its own individual identity.

With globalization, the African writing scene has changed a lot. Gone are the days African writers only wrote about colonialism, liberation and ongoing tales of war and starvation. In my case, the story of Kenya under colonialism was important but it wasn’t the only thing that was. We have a myriad of other narratives. We

have love stories; of families lost and coming together, of a town which was once pasture land and grew to become one of the most vibrant cities in Africa. But all we had been writing about were dictators; men who sat at tables in impeccable suits and sold us out to colonialists, of kids who had to learn first the use of *Memsahib* before they could pronounce their imposed white names properly. The preferred stories were about nationalism, ethnography, black pride. Nothing else would do. These stories simply confirm what the world already ‘knew’ about Africa. About Kenya.

“The term ‘African’ is in flux, and has been for quite a while. Many of us were born abroad and have not spent a great deal of time in Africa, and yet our parents have been telling us that we’re African from the moment we were born, and our friends have told us that we aren’t quite American, we aren’t quite British, we aren’t quite Canadian. Our lives and our stories are important precisely because they point to a future in which identity will be a constantly contested topic, so much so that I believe our traditional methods of categorizing ourselves will have to be amended or updated. To put it plainly, I truly believe that anyone who claims that I or anyone else isn’t ‘African’ enough is herself standing on unstable ground.” This was Tope Folarin’s response to his ‘African-ness’ after winning the Caine writing prize. He goes on to say that we all enter this world *tabula rasa*. “We do

not come with a particular identity stamped to our foreheads. We develop and grow in contexts that shape our beliefs and perspectives.”

Identity is becoming more fluid in today’s world. A writer should be judged by their art, their dexterity in using their diverse experiences to effectively communicate their message. Taiye Selasi in his essay, ‘*African Literature doesn’t exist*,’ intimates that his publisher was wary of the title, ‘*Ghana must Go*,’ for his novel as he feared readers would see Ghana and immediately assume the novel was about Africa. Not a particular country but a monolithic continent with the same storylines, the narrative withstanding.

“My writing reflects who I feel I am. How I see the world. Some would call that the African way of seeing the world, because I am African. I don't know that my writing can reflect "us". Because who is "us"? So many nationalities, ethnicities, beliefs, religions, social economic classes, histories, world views etc.” This was Makena Onjerika's answer when I asked her if her writing reflected her African identity. Bottom line, according to her, if the writing truly reflects who the writer truly is, then mission accomplished. This is what pushes what we now want to refer to as African contemporary literature.

We are slowly shedding the restrictions built around us. We are finally writing our own personal stories, not just what we feel the world expects from us. We are finally writing about serial killers, African superheroes, and a black Nigerian who wakes up transformed into a white man. And because it's not taboo anymore, sex scenes are sprinkled in between. When I read Makena's 'Fanta Blackcurrant' I felt a sense of home. It was not ambiguous. It was simply and delightfully Kenyan. It was liberating to see Sheng so elaborately woven amongst the English words.

Writing from Africa should transcend geopolitical borders and color. It should be personal. A service to oneself first before the world. I do not have to write about big bellied politicians if they do not do anything for my psyche. I should feel comfortable enough to write fantasy inspired by my unique Kenyan roots to contribute to other kinds of fantasy from other parts of Africa.

In '*How to write about Africa*,' Binyavanga Wainaina put it quite brilliantly;

"In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving."

Wainaina, in his satirical nature, is implying that this monochromatic African entity exists in our minds alone and so should seek to re-invent and reinforce a new kind of writing through our own personal experiences and unique writing styles.

11

EVIL BEHIND CHANGES

Tom Patrick Nzabonimpa - Rwanda

"When will you buy your own car?" A voice cracked in my head.

I got upset because I had no answer for that question. I was headed to the local stationery store. The street was dusty and humpy, dust had covered my slippers and heels as I walked and I was regretting my decision to put on a white pair of trousers. I had a brown backpack that contained a set of documents and a pair of sneakers I had just gotten fixed.

My skin was burning. I could feel the glare of the East African sun burning my insides and I couldn't help but quicken my steps so I would reach my destination on time.

When I got to the main road, I slowed my pace a bit as I heard the voice of a girl.

"See!" She shouted.

I turned back to see who the girl was. She was beautiful with long strands of hair. She was walking with two boys. They were all

skinny like me. I recognized their faces because I had met them several times before, even though we were not friends. *Muraho*, I greeted when they finally caught up.

The girl pointed her finger to the left side of the road. "See that psycho, what is he doing?" Then she turned to the boys, whispering "Yooh, he's even still young."

She said this in a low voice, but I caught her words clearly. I shifted my gaze in the direction of her outstretched finger and saw him too. He really looked like a psycho. His hair was a mess and had a lot of dust on it. His clothes were old and dirty. He was barefoot and talking to himself.

I stared at him for a few seconds, and then realized his face was familiar.

"Nunu." I called.

"Nunu" I called louder, but he wasn't listening.

At the third call he turned, stared at me and then laughed. He kept talking to himself as he crossed the road. I approached him carefully before politely greeting him.

"*Bite Nunu. Amakuru?*" I said, as we shook hands. He didn't recognize me, I thought. His eyes were red. He looked like

someone who hadn't slept for days. He laughed again and again before he ran and left me on the street. He hadn't uttered a single word. I was confused and frustrated. I couldn't understand what had happened.

"Do you guys know each other?" The girl asked me. I absentmindedly said yes as I resumed my journey, wondering at the sorrow that now sat heavily on my chest.

As I walked on, I kept wondering if he had really lost his mind. It had been 6 months since the last time I saw him. His phone number had been unreachable and all his social media accounts were inactive.

On my bed later that day, my thoughts turned to Nunu, the friend of my childhood.



Nunu and I had spent most of our childhood together. Our parents were friends and so were we. If I needed someone to play football with, he was the second option after his older brother, Gatete. Gatete and I were both the same age and two years older than Nunu. We attended the same nursery School at Gikondo in Kigali before I left and transferred to Rubaya to commence my studies in primary school.

During the period of our academic trimester, I used to miss both Nunu and Gatete. I would write them letters and give them to my mother every time she came to visit me in the village of Rubaya.

One holiday, Nunu, Gatete and their father, Karambizi visited us at home. They brought two cases. One contained Fanta drinks and the other, Mützig beer. It was a Sunday around 6pm. My siblings and I had been happy to see them. We hugged them, full of lively smiles before we took the cases inside the house.

Once all was settled, my sisters and I dashed out of the house to play with Nunu and Gatete. We decided to play *saye*, and I was chosen to start the game. Saye is just like hide-and-seek. I had to search for everyone wherever they hid. I had found three of them. While looking for the fourth person, I passed the window of the living room where the parents were gathered and I overheard Karambizi saying that *Abazimu* had attacked him.

"Go and find Gatete." My little sister shouted from the other side of the house. I immediately left the window mildly curious; I only knew that Abazimu are spirits of dead people but I couldn't understand the context. I was a little kid who at the time was fervent at saye. I went searching behind the kitchen and I found Gatete there.

"*Tapu mwese.*" I said, declaring that I had found everyone who had hidden and that it was the end of the game.

A few hours later, my mother called us in to have dinner together. We were thrilled so we didn't hesitate to enter the living room. We washed our hands under her surveillance and sat on the chairs at the dining table. We were Catholics and we had to say Grace before taking our meal.

"*Ku izina ry'Imana data na mwana na roho mutagatifu.*" My little sister said at the end of the prayer.

"Amen." The rest of us said before we grabbed our forks.

We ate rice and Isombe as our conversations filled the air. We poured Fanta in our glasses while our parents poured their beers. Our smiles were cheerful. You could tell that we were happy together.

At the time, Karambizi was in his 50s. He had a lot of land and about 20 houses around Kigali. One day my elder sister asked him how he got the money to build his first house. She was curious and so was I. We knew that he never went to school and were wondering how he got rich.

"I robbed the Catholic sisters in Kibuye," Karambizi revealed. "What! Seriously?" I asked, confused.

He laughed for a while. Then he removed his hat and licked his lips as if he was lubricating them. He seemed drunk, you could tell by the slur in his words. His fingers pointed to both of us, one after the other before he laughed again.

"You children don't know anything." He said. "Did you know that I was dumped in Kivu Lake with a sack of money?"

"The sisters did it as a punishment after their guard caught me. It was at night. They assumed I would die in the lake, but I survived."

"But how did you survive?" My sister asked. "I swam." Karambizi whispered before he laughed again. "How else do you think I survived? I swam about a kilometer. I am a good swimmer, everyone in Kibuye can testify." He added.

He never specified the amount of money he had stolen. He kept saying that it was a lot at that time. Maybe he was right, because my father used to tell me that 100,000Francs was the price of a three bedroom house in the 1970's. Now 100,000Francs can hardly get you enough cement to lay a foundation.

In our tradition, many families used to practice *Kubandwa*. It was part of our spiritual belief that they had adopted from our ancestors. It was done by worshipping *Abazimu* or *Imandwas*, spirits. These spirits were believed to keep the name and

personality of someone who died, and live where they lived when they were alive. Abazimu, were generally not wanted around. They could bring illnesses, poor harvests, and poverty, because they couldn't enjoy the pleasures of life.

Worship of Abazimu consisted of offering gifts or sacrifices made by the head of the family. These gifts could be small, such as a few drops of milk, beer, or beans. For more important events the sacrifices were more substantial, such as a goat or a bull. These larger sacrifices were accompanied by singing because Abazimu could hear but not see.

In the 19th century when Christianity was introduced, many people quit the traditional spiritual beliefs including Kubandwa. A few of them however, merged both beliefs. Karambizi and his family were one of those few. They never stopped worshipping Abazimu even though they attended mass regularly.

It was believed that Karambizi couldn't stop getting wealthier as he practiced Kubandwa. If he ever stopped, the effects would appear on him and his family. Abazimu had the ability to block all his ways of earning money. Abazimu could not only impoverish him but also his lessees. His houses were haunted, many of his lessees used to say it.

My mother once told me how in 2003, she had seen a leopard sitting on top of his house. It had yellow eyes and it never moved. "That night, I ran back inside the house. I suspended going to the toilet. I was so startled I didn't even know how I reached my bed."

She woke up the next morning and went in search of it, but she couldn't find it. She asked my father if he had seen it too. He said he had seen it once in that exact spot a few days before.

People used to say that the leopard was the spirit of his first wife who died in 1996. They said that she wanted him to break up with his second wife, Mariya. Mariya is the mother of both Nunu and Gatete.

She eventually left her husband in 2012. She took most of their home appliances including the TV, furniture and fridge. Nunu and I were there when she packed them into the car and departed. She had told us that they were moving house. Karambizi knew nothing about such plans. He was bewildered when we told him that his wife had left with all the appliances.

"They took her away from me." Karambizi said in a sorrowful voice.

When he said this, you would think people took Mariya away, but he meant Abazimu.

He stayed with Nunu, Gatete and his last born, Manzi. It was hard for him because he had to take care of them alone. He wasn't used to cooking or cleaning the house and neither were his sons.

A few days later, they found a maid to help them. She didn't stay for very long, but by the time she left, they had learned almost everything they needed to learn about housekeeping.

Aside from his wife leaving, Karambizi had problems with his elder brothers. They had taken over his farm in Kibuye and he sued them to court. After proving that he owned the farm, the court ordered his siblings to hand it over. The siblings got upset and banned him from practicing Kubandwa. He was no longer allowed to gather with them - Kubandwa required one to gather and worship as a family. This was to keep the whole family safe and avoid awakening Abazimu.

"They sent me Abazimu and now they are going to impoverish me. They are bad people." He said once when he was dead drunk. It was a Sunday around 8pm and he was headed to his home. He passed my sister and me on the street at a neighborhood market. We were astonished to see him like that. His strides were crooked and he stumbled as he went on. He fell in front of the gate and we called his children to come take him inside the house. Neighbours were watching as it happened.

The Abazimu didn't take his land or houses. Instead, they made sure that he spent money needlessly every time he got paid. He spent it on beer and forgot that he needed to pay school fees for his sons. His clothes were worn and they no longer fit him. He had also started putting on blue bathroom slippers everywhere he went.

Once when Nunu and I were chatting, he had told me he was afraid the Abazimu from his family would affect him. I remember how scared he was that day and how I had told him not to worry. At that time he was still normal and lively, he had big black eyes and an afro. He was muscular and taller than I - a subject we always disagreed on.



The day I was heading to the stationary store and saw Nunu behaving like he had lost his mind, was the same day I encountered his father, Karambizi.

It was around 9pm at St Vincent Pallotti, a Catholic church in Kigali. He seemed to be talking to himself as I approached him.

"*Mwiriwe Muze?*" I greeted him. He turned and we shook hands. His face tried to light up, but I could see he was pretending. He was trying to show that he was not worried as we talked. We

made small talk for a few minutes before I asked him what really happened to Nunu.

"You saw it. He is demented, that's it." He said. "Did you at least take him to the hospital?" I asked, but received no reply. "Please tell me, did you?"

He finally cleared his throat and told me that he couldn't take him to a hospital because the doctors could not help. "He is haunted by Abazimu and there is no cure for that in a hospital," he said.

His face was contorted and he seemed so upset. I was at a loss for what to say, I shook my head as fear rose in me. Hearing that left me feeling perplexed. Even saying sorry would not help.

"The Abazimu chose Nunu because he was my favorite son. They want to take everything I love away from me," he whispered in a sorrowful voice.

Nunu became the sacrifice for his father's acts of religion and spiritual beliefs. When I tried to put myself in Karambizi's place, on one hand, I felt like his heart and soul were grieving; on the other hand I felt like judging him for bringing trouble to his family. He should have quit Kubandwa many years ago.

On our way home, we kept talking. I told him to consult pastors to pray for his son. He told me that he had already thought about

that. A pastor and his fellows had come three times to his home but it had done nothing to change Nunu's mental or social conditions.



Nunu was eventually taken to Ndera Asylum in January of 2020 by Mariya. His condition remains the same. His father says there is no way he can save his son from being a psycho.

I believe that prayers can chase away demons like Abazimu. I have seen people who had conditions like Nunu's and are now okay. One day Nunu will be back to his normal senses and enjoy the world as he used to.

Every day, for this, I pray.

12

THE REFUGEE AND THE MOSQUITOES

Modou Lamin Sowe – The Gambia

I had made sure I didn't inform anyone about my going - *if it's heard from your mouth, let it be found on your mouth*. Over the years, The Gambia has witnessed various forms of crises in our social system, including the persecution of writers, and the disappearance of journalists. We were shocked by the silence of Gambian writers to the situation. We wanted to provide a responsive and responsible leadership that can fearlessly address our challenges in a society governed by dictatorship. In my search for that, I left The Gambia on May 15th, 2016 for Senegal. As destined to happen in my life, I chose to live peacefully in a more democratic society where I could write without the fear of being imprisoned.

The taste of fresh sour milk from the she-camel, the eye-catching Muslim style of dressing and way of life of the Sahelian countries could not stop me. The tersely virgin sandy soils, the dry wind of the Sahara Desert could not make me change my decision. I went

through Niger. There, I heard that culture is a virtue and art is the natural resource freely available to be tapped by anyone.

Senegal

At a bus-stop, I waved eagerly at an entourage of smiling travelers returning to their various countries. I found the service center nearby and where I would place an order for my travel ticket. Once there, I yelled at a gorgeous Senegalese lady who tried to sell me a ticket at an outrageous price. What did she take me for? I shook my head and spoke Wolof to her glibly, taking off my Gambian sun-glasses and drawing my ears nearer to be sure I had heard what she said - 60,000 CFA for my trip!

'*Lo wakh*', I stressed, stamping my foot in a bid to resist the urge to kick her head like the last goal I scored two years ago at Masroor Senior Secondary School football ground. She gave a loud laugh and smiled at my smartness. "*Balma*" Sorry. She looked me in the eye and said "the business is no longer working for us." With a romantic smile on her face, she handed me my ticket - 'Seat 7'. She had wanted to cheat me but upon recognising my Gambian heritage, she changed her mind. I couldn't help but wonder, could this be the first sorrow of my exile? Why are custom officers everywhere so corrupt? No wonder, corruption is rampant in Africa. I chose to conduct a final check to ensure that my porous brain wouldn't forget any vital thing I'd need for this adventurous journey.

The bus was loaded to capacity, its happy engine willingly bid a prolonged farewell to Senegalese soil as we journeyed across the country excitedly. As we drove on, I effortlessly pulled down the handle of my window to get a look at the Monument de la Renaissance Africaine, which reads in English as the African Renaissance Monument. It stands on the height of Dakar towards a round-about on an island, which is not far from my home at Quest Foire, Yoff, Dakar, close to the Aeroport Leopold Sedar Senghor.

I started missing the scent of Senegal as the journey began. I sat in the middle seat of the bus and happily squeezed the sweet Senegalese orange in my hand I had been sucking passionately like a woman. For some reason I think: how can contemporary African leaders choose to send people to exile?

On the bus, I see a bevy of ladies and a group of gentlemen sitting in front of me, all of them, chatting in many different African languages. *'i ni ce, i ka kene wa? i tɔgɔ?'* An old woman says to me in Bambara 'hello, how are you? What's your name?' I barely understand the language, so I simply reply with a thank you.

Elsewhere on the bus, a nice-looking lady, probably in her 20's, winds down her window and spits so much uncivilized saliva from her soft lips and African mouth. I look at her and my African lineage with great disgust. Does she really understand

what it means to be an asylum seeker? My heart contests answers to explain her act of pregnancy. I realize I am staring and look away.

Someone on the bus recognises me. I squeeze my orange while she looks at me and she smiles. I look at her from the corner of my eye and I smile because that's what you do when people smile at you. I turn my eyes back to the window.

After a while, I notice she is still smiling at me.

"Hi, do I know you?" she asks. "You are an acquaintance; I don't think I am seeing you for the first time. Um... what..was it ... the writers retreat in Ethiopia? You were there and there was another lady from Zimbabwe. What's her name?"

"Emelda?"

"Yeah. Emelda."

"Right."

"Yeah... You don't remember me? Clara."

Last year, I went to a writers retreat. There were motivational seminars and a weekend of conferences and lectures. I remember her.

"I admired your eloquence and have been following you on social media. At the Young African Thinkers Convention held at the African Union headquarters in Ethiopia, I was there too. So was

Nadia from Ghana and a few other people. There was another lady. She was a speaker at one of the seminars and might have been there, I think. I didn't remember her name.

"I know... Benita, right? She held a hand around the microphone and sang into it like a singer."

I look at her and after a while I nod.

She laughs at this. I didn't know why. She must think it is funny.

"Oh man, you were so great. You were the highlight of the conference. That thing you did off the stage..."

During the breakdown, I had managed to slide off the stage on my knees. I was nervous and sang all the way to the podium.

Clara looks at me and smiles again, and drinks some palm wine.

"So, how's life?"

"Good."

"Okay. Good. Good."

We are silent for a while and then she asks, "Do you care for some wine?"

"Sorry, I am Muslim and I do not drink wine."

"Is it good?"

I ignore her question. "I beg your pardon. I don't smoke either."

She laughs at this. Before we can continue the conversation, we arrive at her destination and we part ways. “Goodbye, it was nice to meet you.” she says.

I think to myself while stealing a few good looks at her face and laughing in my heart: Sir, honestly, God can create. I was told Gambian women are beautiful, but as long as we are still in Senegal I will hold my tongue until I arrive at my final destination. I decide to ignore her unavoidable beauty and murdering smiles which could massacre a full battalion of soldiers.

I insert my earpiece into my ears and increase the volume to its maximum. I am listening to famous Gambian singer and cultural ambassador, Jaliba Kuyateh. The song is titled 'Mumeni-Bayo.' I do this despite the fact that our bus is filled with cool traditional music of the early 70's which are foreign to my ears and my generation. The singer with his ugly voice sounds like a Gambian comedian who has been hired in a traditional Mandingo wedding to lie to the bride.

The bus has a television affixed above the bus-driver's seat where everyone can see. It is presently showing shots of love scenes. I realise this is why everyone on the bus is so silent, instantly cautious, watching the scenes as the kissing gets longer - and sweeter. Pants are now down; they are now rolling on the bed, eyes closed... ouch! The man has just scored a romantic goal for

Chelsea. "This is so blue!" I say into the silent air. Looking behind me, I see unenthusiastically veiled women eating and chatting happily to their satisfaction.

As the bus speeds away on the comfortable new road towards the last Senegalese police-check at Kedougou, I notice another unexpected silence. Gendarmerie they are called in French. One of them looks at me for a long time and eventually asks me to hand him my national identity card to which I very much oblige. *Will he demand for something else?* I hold my passport in my hand firmly, in case corruption should erupt in his greedy mind like a volcano and he should demand for something else. Corruption is the soil on which our crops grow in Africa.

Our bus-driver, a Malian, possibly a Bambara, looks exactly like a decorated masquerade paraded during the Atlantic Slave Trade to scare the arrivals of western ships that had landed on the shores of West Africa. He is drunk to drunkenness and has been drinking all day long. It is now 9 pm and we are finally getting closer to Mali. It registers that with all the 15 police check-points we passed on our way, not once did I pay a single amount of money on the journey through Senegal.

We disembark from the bus to present our papers and rest up for dinner at a nearby restaurant in a village on the outskirts of Mali. I can't recall nor pronounce the name of this place. The name is so obsolete that hearing it could probably reduce your life

expectancy rate. I can sense the smell of misfortune from my Fulani nose. I smell trouble around me. *What will I eat or drink?* I keep asking myself.

Immediately I arrive in a foreign country situated on the arms of Africa, one of the poorest countries on planet earth, with an exact eighty-seven point seven percent of her citizens living in extreme hunger and poverty. My discomfort is heightened by my pain for refuge from the presence of the different kinds of *heartless* African mosquitoes that have given me a warm welcome. Is this why Africa will never develop? This is real—an entourage of happily rude children mosquitoes, the first to test my patience.

Pensive and helpless, carrying my school bag on my shoulder containing all my documents, I try to locate the UNHCR office. Everyone I meet knows at once that I'm a foreigner- my looks give me away. I continuously keep flapping myself, an attempt to kill at least one mosquito out of the tens of thousands of rude children mosquitoes disturbing my arrival.

Before I can ask a native to address my concern of locating the UNHCR office, I hear my stomach announce for the fourth time its incipient interest in food. "Do you speak English?" I hastily ask a nice-looking passerby glancing at my shoe. Instead of giving me a direct answer, he responds with a question "Tu comprend Française?" "Thank you", I say to him at once and

head towards the market, hoping to meet someone else, not this boy who dares desire my three-month-old Gambian boots. Wonders shall never end in Africa. This is what Africans do in reality.

Before I could catch my breath from the harsh climatic condition I find myself in, blood starts oozing from my nose. *Could this be the hot sun?* It's extremely hot for a stranger like me. I look tired and hungry in the blue tracksuit I was given at the National Youth Conference and Festival (NAYCONF) of The Gambia in 2014, coupled with a blue and black long sleeve. I still cannot understand how the mosquitoes managed to bite me.

I begin to think of how to spend the last penny I have on me. Exactly 250 CFA. *Can you believe this?* Less than one dollar. God loves us so much so that He sometimes denies us even food and strikes us with pain to see if we're true believers. Is he testing to see if misfortune will make us fail? Anyone who knows me cannot deny that I'm highly talented— even if their lips deny it, their hearts cannot. Some people were happy that my film was condemned and wasn't launched. But that's really okay. I'm too honest and clean-hearted a man to suffer. God will provide, I told myself. If you help people privately, God will always help you in difficulties. Nobody prays to land in adversity like mine at this young age. I am not married and have no child. Who will

remember me when I am gone? Maybe they will only remember my books.

I finally decide to give something to the stomach which has been asking for food. Turning to my right, I see a little boy probably less than seven years carrying a plate of water on his head and shouting in Zjama, 'Hari Yeen' and adding in English, "pure water." "How much is one?" I ask. He replies "Waa ranka" and I realise 'pure water is as far as his English-speaking ability goes. He continued shouting in his local language, "Hari Yeen".

I hand him my 250 CFA expecting some change from it. Instead, he boldly crosses the road to the other side and attends to other buyers. "Should I follow him? I am fast losing my patience. What will I eat?" I ask myself desperately. It is twelve noon and I can see physically fit African mosquitoes everywhere idling about mid-flight. I imagine a happy-looking child-mosquito shouting "Hmmm! Fresh blood" cheerfully to her friends after tasting my blood and escaping the hand that comes beating. To at least, still kill one. There are mosquitoes everywhere in this country because the country is so clean; so clean that they dispose of waste everywhere around them. Some of them have the courage to urinate and defecate in the middle of the road and everywhere else. As if on cue, I see a boy about 17 years old, jump in the middle of the road, avoiding crossing vehicles; he squats down

comfortably, pulls down his trousers and starts releasing fresh faeces from his shameless anus.

Everyone I stop and ask of the location of the UNHCR office speaks French to me or Hausa, Djarma, Arab, or Tuareg. I can't believe I am in the capital city of a country— its name sounds a bit Nigerian but is not Nigeria. I thought it's a nice place to live in and because The Gambia doesn't have an embassy here, a plus for an asylum seeker who thought former Gambian president Yahya AJJ Jammeh will win the past election of December 2016 as usual.

I have been roaming about for the last one hour now. I eventually decide to turn back and return to the market close to the garage where the bus landed me upon arrival. I spend the night there battling the cold and an empty stomach. Around 3 am, I still find my eyes unwillingly open. I am listening to the continuous complain of my belly.

I fight gallantly to at least kill one mosquito. As I turn to my left to enable me sleep comfortably, I discover I can't find my plastic bag containing my gifts from friends, loved ones and family. While searching for it, I notice an energetic looking young man carrying my bag in a marathon flight. Why does he not represent his country in the past Olympic Games? I nod to my sorry self as I decide I can't sleep anymore.

13

MAYBE IT'S TIME TO LET THE OLD WAYS DIE

Hassan Kassim – Kenya

Underneath the forests of buildings in the tangled web of the twisting streets of Nairobi, the first sense I had of home was when I stared at a mannequin. It was one of those beautiful Saturday mornings so common in stories, and we were breezing through the glass displays at the National Museum of Nairobi. Our guide, Ben, was trying to make the most elaborate summaries one could of the cultural relics in the brief time we had left, beating down years of history into several short sentences. There was one display he brushed over that caught my attention; a mannequin in the traditional Swahili bridal attire had me encapsulated in its austere hollowness. I found myself thinking of the women in my family through the years. I had pulled my right hand out of my pocket to touch the glass before Ben called from behind me asking me to stay with the group, reminding me not to touch a thing.

I rejoined the group, but my mind remained brewing with questions about the old ways, culture and my place in it. I make out my ancestors in the background, with their chins raised, noses flared, not wanting to associate with me. They even grumbled “*Mwacha mila ni mtumwa.*” Could my jeans and my KFCs be the shackles to modernity? In my search for who I am, I resign myself to the fact that I am a culture defaulter.

But can culture be more than - my simply put primary school definition - a way of life? I have never updated that definition beyond the norms a person should conform to, to be a part of the collective.

I look back at the mannequin display and it opens up a wound I thought would ache but time seems to have taken its toll. I am suddenly reminded that not all I’ve ever known of my culture is from displays in museums. To think so would be a blatant lie against the community that raised me - and raised me well for that matter. I had seen culture in the flesh.

*

I once saw a little girl within my grandmother. The girl came from a time purer than ours. I made it my purpose to dig in until she was completely uncovered. Grandmother had seen better days. Some days, I would watched her alacrity turn to

contemplation, her eyes dimming imperceptibly, and witness her shift to a total disregard for questions about the cascade that is her past. All my efforts to reach her were always met like stones tossed into a river and the water closing in without a ripple. Silence seemed to be the comforter of old age, when life recedes like a tide and memories begin to foam away.

I have never liked the quiet before. I am constantly agonizing in my endless search for words to taint the purity of it. That's what made my visits a major chore. On this particular day, I am seated on a *kigoda*, directly opposite my grandmother who is draped in two *lesos*. One wrapped around her waist, the other around her lustrous hair, preserved through the years by coconut oil. Quiet, I study her face. Her raisin-like wrinkly face is a collage of all our faces. Her bushy eyebrows sync into a unibrow, barely holding together, as the folds on her skin speak of resilience, a woman who has experienced it all. She has me wondering what her eyes had mirrored through the years.

She looks at me passively as if she does not notice my presence. The buzz of my phone draws her attention, pulling her away from what I assume was reruns of her incredibly eventful life. The curse of old age is having experienced all there is in life, then falling into a routine where nothing excites you anymore. You can't help but relish the good old days. Sadly, there are no in-

betweeners in this waning of time, the young yearn for the will-be's, could-be's.

My grandmother's gaze meets mine and she gives a tired smile.

“Ah, *mume wangu*, you came today!” She says affectionately. I was named after my late grandfather. Though the name has sunk in over the years, I have always found it highly discomforting, often embarrassing when in company. Nonetheless, I blush as a reflex.

“*Naam bi, Shikamoo*,” I begin with pleasantries, cupping her right hand with both my hands and curtsying to kiss it.

“*Marahaba*,” she replies, her eyes widening perceptibly.

Our reunion always thrills her, cementing myself as a top contender for favourite grandchild. Amongst all the others, I have the upper hand being that I am almost always away for studies, so our conversations never veer towards the mundane. I never call for I have always found phone calls highly uncomfortable and she isn't the type of grandmother who can text. All we want to say, we store in our minds to be disclosed whenever we met. There is always a lot to catch up on.

Since starting university, I developed this creeping sense of urgency in search of my identity; the bridge, the missing links to

the people who made me; a link without which I feel incomplete. I resorted to starting with this woman whom I've always known, realising I don't even know her.

She has long since stopped being the adept narrator of her experiences but I am determined to have her ease into it again.

Our conversation follows the usual. How I've gotten darker like the *bara* people. Maybe I don't even shower because of the cold. I boldly interject. She chuckles, forcing her to light up and show what's left of her teeth. She proceeds to make several insensitive remarks about the people of *Bara*. I remain silent. Knowing her story, I can hardly blame her. Growing old in a young country fractured into factions comes with a price. She comments on how thin I've grown. I should take care of myself more, to which I solemnly nod.

I recount a tale of the time I attempted making *chapatis* with a group of friends. Thirteen of us, male, of swahili descent decided we missed properly made *chapati*. With all our vigour, we alternated kneading dough for nearly four hours - from 3 o'clock to almost 7. By the end, we swore never to try it again. She laughs at me and goes on to explain the flaw in our process and how simple it actually is to make chapati.

“In fact, I was watching news the other day and they showed an advertisement for a *chapati* maker.” She chuckles at the thought. “Chapati maker. They’re really babying your generation, especially the girls. I don’t even know what use they’ll be to their husbands. Because everything has a machine now. The love in a marriage grows stronger when you eat from the mouldings of your wife’s hand. Huh...I really fear for these sisters of yours sometimes, you think any of them will have time for their houses after being at work the whole day. Heh...”

She stops for a minute and shakes her head, eyes fixed to a spot on the ground, staring into nothingness, contemplating. She looks up.

“Hassan, what time is it?”

“It’s 11.” I say.

“What? Where is this time going even? Back in my day, it would’ve been around 9 o’clock right now.”

“Perhaps it’s because you didn’t have watches.” I tease.

“Hey,” she points at me, a sign that demands respect, but her lips betray her with a smile she tries to hide.

“When I was still living at my father’s house, I remember we’d wake up at *fajr* and after prayers, we’d go pick fresh cassava from the farm for breakfast, sweep the house, mop it, wash utensils, play and by the end of it all, it would be around time for the 10 a.m porridge. We could do a lot with the time *yaani*.”

“I’m guessing it’s how we were taught in Madrassa then, that at the end of times, we would lose the blessing in our time.”

“Yes, and you’re losing blessings in everything as a result of sinning. Can’t you see the heat increasing even, bringing in strange diseases. What is *Chikungunya*? These things were unheard of.”

“But *bi*, I read online that chikungunya isn’t new, it was there in the 90s in Tanzania.”

“*Yaani* you’re going to teach me? I was there! I’m telling you it’s something new and you’re acting like you know everything with your Facebooks. WHEN I WAS THERE?! This is exactly what Swaleh Mdoe was saying on ‘*tafakari ya babu*’ yesterday.”

“No *bi*, it’s not like that. What did he say though?”

“Wait, don’t you watch the news?”

“No,” I say, hesitantly, biting my tongue as my eyes crinkle, “It’s been a while”

“*Wah!* And you’re living in this world? What if tomorrow they announce that we lock our doors and remain inside. *Si*, you’ll walk out and die!”

“*Bi bana*, if something is important, I’ll be told. Or I’ll just see it online even before it’s aired on the news. Plus, online, I even get to read people’s opinions and share mine on matters.”

“No wonder your generation is the way it is. *Yaani*, you want to have an opinion on news pia. The anchor says if you do this, you’ll die and you still want to bring in opinions. *Yaa salaam.*”

Our back and forth always leaves me hysterical. She leaves me appreciating my generation’s ability to consider two varying opinions at the same time without prejudice.

When the mood is right. *Bi* sneaks in snippets of her past, all the while I admit I don’t know any of the people she mentions. She then goes on and on explaining the relations. This pushes me deeper into confusion. She stresses hard on the point of family and how a man is nothing if he doesn’t know where he’s from. She speaks of the dead, so perfect, like characters of a poor work of fiction. Her tale is immersive, her eloquence unlike any from my twitter-opinionated generation.

In all our conversations, stories about herself are my favourite. Her childhood, how they had little but were really never poor, and how someone would fight you if you called their family poor. She would speak of how she had three names: the one given at birth, the one her family called her when she was young to hide her real name so that she wouldn't get *hasad* from strangers, and the one she chose when she came of age. This way of naming a person is impossible today with our day-old birth certificate system.

She would tell me how like other girls, she never went to school and would only be taught a few things by her brother whenever he got back from school. She would speak of the love for her father, a man who took an office job and his family of fishermen rebuked him for it, reminding him that “*Muungwana hatumwi.*”

Her eyes would glisten a little bit more each time she spoke of her marriage at fifteen, to my grandfather who was in his thirties but didn't look the “scary type of old”. This home they built from the ground up with their ten kids. She often spoke of wounds whose scars were hidden. She lived through the fight the community put on and lost. They lost the right to be recognised for what they are, “*Waswahili*” and were forced into boxes of

indigenous tribes from the interior. It was either that or be sent back to “where they came from.”

With the world moving so fast, she had this fear that we would end up forgetting, neglecting our roots as our culture becomes submissive in its marriage to modernity. She fears we will forget and today, a tourist to my own culture, I feel that fear.

My culture now lives on shelves in museums and clumsy renditions of it exist in books I don't read. Of our rich rituals, only the marriage rites of old remain. We have ditched the sense of community that eliminated the need for therapy for our individuality; cut out the gossiping aunties who enforced morality and kept everyone in check. The lyrical language and all its double entendre in its speech and khanga culture, is an art we're losing. We gave it all away to conform to the times. We kept adopting foreign ways and have turned the celebration of who we are into a one week affair calling it Culture Week.

We're moving on with the times, sadly.

14

SPEAKING OF BURIALS

Tega Oghenechovwen - Nigeria

i

The outcome of life is death.

And when it comes, death must be greeted with life.

Swaddled by the dark, we drove through a bumpy earth road that pierced an ominously quiet jungle and led to Wannune. A cloud of dust over us. An occupied coffin with us. The whirrs and grunts of the old ambulance grating our ears.

Wannune, an agrarian Tiv community, tucks itself between grassy hills that spread into forever. Going to the heart of this community from the North-Bank area of Makurdi was climbing away from a mad scream and easing into the bottom of a sea.

The feeble light of the vehicle showed nothing, save for leaves that slapped their way through the window and filled us with their dusty aroma. I knew nothing of the deceased, except that she was my coordinator's mama. I knew nothing of Wannune

community. I knew nothing of wake keeps but as Fela Kuti put it, “*observation no be crime.*”

It was 23rd December, 2015. I was stationed at Makurdi for the mandatory one-year National Youth Service. All of Makurdi seemed to have travelled elsewhere for Christmas except my next-door neighbour who prayed all day, and me. Sometimes, to give his prayer special effect, my neighbour would bang on the thin wall that demarcated my room from his while shouting ‘Holy Ghost fire!’

I was bored. This day was slow. My neighbor’s voice was echoing in my head, driving me crazy like never before. So, when the coordinator of my community development group called to know whether I could meet him in the evening to pick his mama at a certain mortuary at the entrance of town, I agreed.

Five men waiting for us at a settlement hauled the coffin from the ambulance and jogged with it to my coordinator’s family compound, fifteen minutes away. They placed it on a low drinking table. After they had stretched their bodies and buried their heads in drinking gourds, the men slowly pounded on local drums, as if to invite men and their spirit animals. Their drumming gave the dry earth a little bounce, and in turn, the bouncing earth prepared itself to receive the dead mama.

People pumped in on foot, motorbikes, and honking rickety vehicles. They were with blankets, and oil and bush lamps, with bowls, with foods, with foldable rattan chairs, with life. Their deep and inviolate response to death was fascinating.

The moon was the largest source of illumination. A bony woman in a threadbare wrapper and blouse positioned herself at the base of the coffin, pouring tearful praises on the dead mama's name. As she did so, she received crumpled naira notes from people who came to pay their last respects, or she slapped the flies buzzing a few centimeters above the coffin. I couldn't understand the song the bony woman was almost choking on, but I felt the dead mama was going to like every bit of it.

Before long, women —some with babies strapped to their backs— raised a folk song. The youngest of them took to an entrancing circular dance. Men, mostly those from the city moved about with bottles under their arms, greeting each other with gusto. Their bottles changed arms. A stream of goat meat, beer, and palm wine flowed. An inebriated crew talked about La Liga matches they had placed mighty bets on, and about the women at the dance. The very old creaked all over the place, grumbling about how a lot of things weren't done or had been done carelessly. Kids chased each other around, screaming themselves hoarse. The atmosphere offered such a weird contrast to the

subject of the occasion. Until now, I thought I could only find this kind of euphoria in amusement parks or some kind of magical festival where the happiest person won themselves more life.

I turned away from all the breathiness and dropped my eyes on the coffin. Everyone had lost concentration on the dead mama. I leaned over to take in her ashy face for the first time. The old woman lay there, as if recuperating from the long misery that is life. The neat cornrows on her scalp looked freshly creamed. There was a fly zzzzzzing about her left ear. Her hands were planted beside her, never to move an inch, not even to swat away the rude fly.

A cold hand landed on my arm. I jumped, turning back. The wild fragrance of her perfume caught in my throat. Her smile was like a glass of rose wine. She apologized for disturbing my reverie. She asked, “Are you the corps member?”

“Yes.” I tried to regularize my breath and wondered if I had seen her face before.

Another smile. This one was like a hit song.

“I am happy to finally meet you,” she said. “My cousin has told me a lot about you.”

“Who is your cousin?” I asked.

“From my face, couldn’t you tell I am your coordinator’s cousin?”

I took in her face and gasped in recognition. We began to move towards the parked rickety vehicles. She wanted to know what I wanted to eat. She had brought with her a dinner of Semovita and Ogbono soup from a franchise in Makurdi, wouldn’t I want to have a taste? Did I know she was a writer too? Oh! Never mind. How did I check the journey down here? —Don’t call me ma. Her eyelids fluttered. She held my palms with both hands and applied a little pressure. The supple allure of her palm was like warm groundnut oil moi-moi. Call me Emily. Just Emily. Her eyes widened and took on the moonshine. She had been to a film academy in Germany. She spoke fast. She laughed at things I did not know I had said, and laughed when I asked her to tell me just why she was laughing. I took in her figure. Something in her was not too far from being a child. The smooth caress of her words kept pouring into the unwilling bucket I had become. I looked away from her and thought briefly about the dead mama.

Here was not just a wake for the dead, but for sorrow, for boredom, for loneliness. Here in the dead of the jungle, was the African life.

Later that night, I stared at the ceiling in the room I was put in until I was fit for nothing but sleep. In the morning, from the window of my room, I watched Emily as she walked around the yard, waving her iPhone, looking for a network connection. There were large buckets of water close to where she stood—for people to wash their bodies, she would later inform me. Beyond the buckets, I could see the bony woman. She was getting ready to cry at the base of the coffin. The burial was soon to begin.

ii

The grave's a fine and private place

— *Andrew Marvel*

I was a rebellious child. A relentlessly restless one with a rough and erratic spirit, so that at seven, my father called me into his room. “A fly that doesn’t listen to wisdom,” he said, “follows a corpse to the grave.” Curiosity coursed through my mind. I knew a fly. I had seen too many zzzzzzzing about like crazy. I was one myself. I knew what a corpse was—we found one gathering flies at the dumpsite on the far end of my street. I didn’t know what a grave was. When I found out some days later, I was bowled over by a mysterious enthusiasm. I wanted to see one right away.

That week, as if life was copying my deliciously dark desire, I saw a dancing burial procession wending their way to a grave. They had with them trumpeters and drummers, and commercial undertakers who threw the coffin of the deceased into the air and caught it several times. They flung themselves into the air and landed on their arses with the coffin still balanced on their shoulders.

I chased after this dreamlike procession, caught up with it, and followed it into a potholed street far away from mine. A friend of my parents recognized me as I was pushing my way to the front of the procession. We called her Mama Afoke. She was an *aproko*, an *over-sabi*, a *pepper body*. She clutched my shirt collar and drew me to a corner, spanked me on the back, and told me to get lost from all that wonder because at my age I wasn't supposed to be attending burials. I refused to abandon my investigative mission. Mama Afoke picked up a heavy stick and screamed, "*Oya*, go home before I open my eyes!" I found Mama Afoke's threat illogical because she never shut her eyes while issuing it.

I was sixteen when J's father died. You see, J was my best friend. I didn't like that I had to take permission from my father to attend the burial because I had an anger-based relationship with him. My father's mouth was always shut towards me. When it opened, it was a tactical way to further distance himself from me —a way

to undo me. I can't record any time I anticipated a nice conversation with him. He had stern ideas that I was a tool for my own implosion. Nothing I would tell him, or do would make him think otherwise.

I told my father about J's father's death. Just as I thought, he didn't want me to attend the burial. I told him J was my best friend, my day-one Gee, couldn't he see? I told him that if it were he who had died, J would have accompanied me to any part of the world to bury him. I told him I just couldn't imagine J telling me he could not attend if it were so. My father gave out a long sigh, retreated into silence, and lingered in the corridor the way he did when he wanted to get hot stuff off his chest. After a while, he came to my room, flashing his eyes.

"When you get there," he said with a gruffly voice, "do not drink alcohol." He dropped some money for my fare, walked to the door, and gazed at me. "And make sure you come back home today. And in time. And be good, and..." He strutted out of the house after so many ands. Up until that moment, I had not paid any thought to alcohol or pictured myself going out to a friend's place and not returning home for the night.

Because J's father was an almost mythic man who had *chopped* life to the fullest, a wide spectrum of invited and uninvited people crowded his burial ceremony. But the ones I couldn't miss were

the bank executives in well-pressed suits. J's father had done business with them. The orator of the occasion quipped that there were times J's father lent them money.

I didn't miss the beaded chiefs decked out in traditional attire cut from the same *George* and glittering lace fabrics. They sat on three-seater sofas arranged under a commodious tent, eating the required bull and drinking the expensive drinks. I didn't hear the cannons blasting to lionize J's father's passing. I didn't bother that everyone was talking about how his Italian coffin had cost about 10 million Naira —and that there were fears it was going to be dug up by the community hoodlums because why would any family put such an expensive thing into the ground when starvation was raging against the land? I didn't hear when the MC said the coffin had a deeply satisfying, almost digital look, which made him hunger for instant death. I didn't care for any of these. All I cared for was seeing J. When I found him taking a group photo in the crowd, he placed his hands on my shoulders and said, "Good for you to have come, my friend." And I said, "J, sorry about your father but I really must have some alcohol, right now."

He looked at me, surprised at my craving. He slowly nodded.

Until that moment, I didn't know that alcohol, especially when consumed thoughtlessly, was some kind of mind alterer. I retched

unabatedly in J's bedroom after seeing to the bottles he brought me. He switched on the air conditioner. He said it was going to make me feel better.

When I regained control of my mind and body, I felt smaller— as if something had sucked my insides. I dragged myself out of J's room in J's clothes. Outside, the day was already dark blue. The burial crowd had thinned out. The beaded chiefs were still there, under the commodious tent, munching and guzzling like royal pigs.

I thought about my father for a while. There was no way I could get home that night or *undrink* myself. I went back into J's room, seeking J's bed.

iii

To be very candyd, sometimes death is sweet

Prayer, my maternal granduncle, had the soul of a thirsty fish. He also had a sweet tooth that pierced any candy, no matter how hard, no matter how stupid. He was the king of Jos Tin Mine before the oil boom of the 80s gradually cancelled it.

Prayer gathered an intoxicated reputation for himself with the help of the legacy brand, Seaman's Aromatic Schnapps, storied

widely as the Number 1 Prayer drink. For this reason, his clansmen nicknamed him Prayer.

When Prayer was 85, he held an emergency court in his dingy room and drawled that it was Seaman's Aromatic Schnapps that made him outlive the Jos Mine, which had blasted the lives of many. As a tribute to the distillers of the life-saving drink, he told his family that when he died they should empty the entire content of the drink into him before a nurse performed the last office on his body. And that, when they had placed him in a coffin, they were to prop his head with a live bottle of the drink, and put one of such bottles in the crook of each arm. He also instructed them to pour in lots of candy into his coffin. He swore that if they didn't honour his death wishes, a curse would trail after them and plug their arses so that they would bring out shit from the same place they took in food.

Soon, it was time for Prayer to join his ancestors. His face was pouring with fear. He wheezed out the names of his children, and said he didn't want to go. He lifted his left hand and nodded when a clergyman asked if he believed in God. It was at this moment that his eldest son argued with him about his will. Prayer agreed to let go of his Schnapps fixation but wouldn't let go of the candy. While they were still bickering over the former, Prayer died with a stubborn frown on his face. His family put their heads

together and advised themselves to honour the standing part of Prayer's will. They knew so much about the potency of dead men's curses.

Before his burial, Prayer's last daughter flew in from England with special confectionaries — the ones Prayer really liked. After a hasty church service, his coffin was opened and he was sheeted with candies and other luxury confectionaries.

THE MELTING POT**Ngang God'swill N. - Cameroon**

Years ago, Howard M.B. Maximus and Dzekashu Maiviban, young creative minds, left from Limbe to Lagos on a literary voyage spun by their adept knowledge and skill in the written art. Their journey brought about an addition to Cameroon's literary space. This year, on October 31, 2019, I left Buea for Abuja, on a voyage of my own in pursuit of the loud call of literary enlightenment. A trip like no other, a trip that changed my life completely. This trip was a vindication of sorts, for my lonely walk through the beautiful garden of written art.

I had been invited to partake in an african writers' residency program in Abuja, organized by the African Writers Development Trust (AWDT) and dubbed the "PenPen Africa Writers Residency". It was a great deal for me and my mom, who had always encouraged my writing, even before anyone else believed in the might of my scribbling. It was a win for us both,

and coming after I had just successfully published my poetry collection made it seem like double blessings.

It was a tiresome journey that commenced the day before with serious planning and arrangements, swapping currencies and kissing goodbyes. I wore a straight face the whole time, acting indifferent about the trip; all the while boiling with excitement on the inside. It was a very big deal for me, the first time I was to leave my homeland, Cameroon.

My flight was at 7:15 am, and we had to be at the airport 3 hours before check-in. That put me in a very tight spot, the airport was in Douala which was another town all together and the number of highway hijacking at night was on the rise. The timing was difficult to say the least. It would have been easier if the airport were in Buea but it is not.

At 1 am, I waved goodbye to my sisters from the front seat of my mom's black minivan as it pulled out of our compound. My younger brother maintained a composed demeanor in the backseat. I assumed he was as excited as I was, but I can never figure out what he is really thinking sometimes. I was happy he came along though, he gave me a sense of home.

Our journey to Douala, the neighbouring town would last one hour. Douala is the economic capital of Cameroon and the closest international airport to the Anglophone regions.

The one-hour journey slowly grew into a two-hour-plus tiresome ride, prolonged by numerous checkpoints manned by the Cameroonian military. At this time, Cameroon was suffering the effects of civil misunderstanding, dubbed the *Anglophone crisis*. The time we lost at the checkpoints could have been gained on the road, but mom doesn't see too well, so she basically walked the car to Douala, tortoise-style driving.

We got to the airport at about 3:15 am and were promptly informed that check-in would be at about 6 am instead. To think we had left home in the dead of night and driven through dangerous areas to get there.

Before long, check-in time had come and I was on a queue, then I was waving goodbye, then I was on my own. I walked through halls to different control stations, still not believing what was going on; it was like a movie.

Take-off scared the life out of me; the entire plane vibrated as it struggled to lift its weight into the air, tussling with mighty gravity and dominating in the end. Despite my fear, I played it cool; no point in showing everyone I was a first timer. The

buildings grew smaller with every passing second, till I could pick them up and make little cities on the white puffs that floated about. It was so beautiful.

The journey was disappointingly short but amazing, like the magic of a first kiss. I had wanted more and almost cursed as the plane started descending from the skies. I didn't think of it then, but I wish I had written a poem. I would have painted a wordy picture about the interaction between imagination and reality, where reality flawlessly outshines imagination. But reality slowly fades, leaving one with memories which will never be as beautiful as the experience itself.

Upon arrival, I met a team from the African Writers Development Trust (AWDT) who conducted a short video interview about my flight, my experience and expectations. It had been fun thus far and everyone could see the excitement pouring out of my face.

The team drove me to the Pen, where I would be spending the next three weeks of my life. The Pen was a beautiful house that was just so Nigerian. It had a strong Nollywood vibe; combined with the accent of the AWDT team, the Nigerian picture was complete. Cameroon consumes alot of Nigerian movies, I personally have watched more than I can count.

I was the first resident to arrive. And would be the last to leave. The other residents were to join me in time, starting from 4 pm that same day, with the resident from Gambia. The arrivals continued the next day with two Nigerians and a Ghanaian. The final resident arrived two days later, from Ivory Coast to complete the number. In all, we were six residents selected from West and Central Africa.

Coincidentally, the residents were evenly matched in line with gender and religious markers. There were three ladies and three gentlemen, three Muslims and three Christians. Despite our commonalities, we were a culturally diverse group. I come from a tribe called Mankon in the Northwest region of Cameroon, the Gambian hails from the Fulani people of the Gambia, and the Ghanaian is from the Ewe people of the Gold Coast. Of the two Nigerians, one was Hausa and the other, Urhobo. One of the AWDT team members who took part in many of our discussions on culture was a Nigerian from the Yoruba people. The Ivorian, was the most intriguing, she hails from a Muslim-Christian home and shares tribal links with the Senoufo people, the Malinke, and the Baoule originally from Ghana, and the Fulani from Mali and Guinea. As is common of Africans, we were all multilingual, speaking at least two languages. The Gambian could express himself in six different languages and was well travelled.

Between the six residents and our facilitator, we had so much diversity that the entire area was filled with the sweet aroma of Africa's constituent ingredients. Little portions pulled from the Central and Western parts of the continent to make a complete meal. We were little pieces of so many things put in one place, with creative writing binding us.

The residency was such a beautiful and mind-blowing event that totally altered my perception of a lot of things, made my views richer and my understanding deeper. I think more than anything else, I learnt a lot about the domain of culture, and its effect on creative writing in the African literary space. On most days, we spent a few hours together, along with some members of the AWDT team, discussing culture and sharing our views on a variety of topics.

I had previously held a view of culture based largely on traditional practices, stretching to encompass religion, feasts, tribal marks, dances and food. However, I had forgotten that *one hand cannot tie a broom*. There was so much my perception ignored about culture that reduced the breadth of the concept. I was oblivious to mannerisms and the effects of culture on the articulation of common languages like English and French. I had not factored in the 21st century global culture of no culture and the ever growing dependence on machines.

Through our discussions, we realized great similarities within our cultures with respect to marriage rites, respect for elders and the current birthing and eradication of some cultural practices. The differences between our individual cultures were great as well, but we realized that we were more similar than different.

There, I learned culture cannot really die, it just morphs from one form to another. From our interactions, I realized that the introduction of foreign ingredients into the cultural mix of a people forces said culture to evolve. I had honestly not been observant of the changes that the introduction of Christianity and the English language have had on the culture of my people. These new ingredients introduce or remove pieces of said culture and could either make it a heterogeneous mix or split it into homogenous distinct pieces.

Food is a massive part of every culture, so too is the manner of eating it. It tells a Hausa from a Mankon, Christian from Muslim and Ghanaian from Ivorian. In my days in Abuja, I was overwhelmed by the richness of the Nigerian cuisine, the wonders I had been missing. They cook and present their food in very different ways from us in Cameroon. They eat different things from my people, and they have different names and presentations for them for those we share in common.

My tastebuds screamed in delight as they were introduced to Semovita and Fisherman soup, and my stomach rumbled in satisfaction as I filled it up with Eba and Okra soup. It was a new dish for me every other day; Pounded and Egusi, and Nkwobi all swept me off my feet in celestial ecstasy. I got a glimpse at the other page of the African food menu, and now I have a deeper understanding of the saying, *“the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach”*.

As part of our activities, all six residents had a day each to cook, and as that week approached, impatience and anxiety gripped me on many a night. The first to cook was the Urhobo man, and he wowed us with yam and vegetable soup. The Ivorian stole our hearts with her delicious rice porridge, Claclo and Attieke. I was the third chef and most expectant in the kitchen. I had been very vocal about the exquisite taste of the Cameroonian cuisine, and they all were eager to bear witness. And that they did. I took them on a rollercoaster ride to the Southwest region of Cameroon with the ambrosia-like Garri and Eru recipe of the Nyangiri people. I settled their frenzied taste buds at supper with white yam and green.

Up next was the other Nigerian, the Hausa lady. We literally shared a meal at the table of the gods, as we wolfed down tuwo and groundnut soup. The Ghanaian had large shoes to fill and she

did not disappoint, with her sweet Akple and Agbametadi from Ghana. The Gambian came last. He had shied away from the whole cooking affair, but we finally got a taste of the local cuisine, Chakiri.

The much-talked-about African identity, which is in essence African culture, is a mix of all the unique cultures of the huge continent. From the light skin northerners to the melanin rich southerners, ebony pearls if you will. The evolution of culture in itself creates new groups of individuals who identify with different pieces of this evolution, the conservationists and the evolutionists; people who seek to maintain the old and those who seek to drive culture forward with new additives. This however creates a third group (and possibly a fourth, fifth and many more), which is a mix of both - little groups within the one. Distinct in their own nature but unified and tied by the same cord.

Culture readjusts itself in fascinating ways to encompass change, make peace with new philosophies and find harmony in the heterogeneity of its new form. In a way, culture breaks to form culture.

Our discussions as a group quickly found their way into my writing and since then, my poetry has flourished. The Pen was no joke; it provided the right environment for the manifestation of artistic genius and betterment of the written craft. Niccolo

Machiavelli must have written “Prince” in an environment such as this.

The residency did not just provide a space for writers to write, but also to interact, exchange and connect. Truly, *people do not gather at the market place during the full moon to look at the moon, for everyone can see it from their house.*

After just a short time spent with people from other countries, sharing our views, knowledge and culture, I felt more connected to Africa than I had my entire life. I saw past many stereotypes and beliefs that I had previously held tight. I feel a deeper connection to the people of other countries and have a better understanding of how they run the race of life.

On the 17th of November 2019, I retired to my room after lunch to complete this story. I lay on my bed with my laptop in hand, keying in one word at a time, all the while thinking of Cameroon, the place I had called home all my life. I worried about the condition of the people and the safety of my family in the Anglophone region of the country, an area hit by war.

I thought of a lot of things; sweet moments with friends back home and how we managed to find reason to live and be merry despite the carnage around us. I never got homesick, but at that moment, I came really close.

I was sure of what I had gotten throughout the residency; the growth I had witnessed, the fascinating people I had met like a Yoruba Pen manager who speaks Hausa and the connections I had made.

I was eager to talk about their food like Garri “Eba” and Eru “Ukazi” and how they eat everything with so much pepper; also how they eat with their hands unlike us.

It was a story I could not wait to share, the story about the melting pot - the story from Buea to Abuja.

MARA SA KUNYA: THE ONE WITH NO SHYNESS

Maryam Ibrahim Boyi - Nigeria

The Marriage between Culture and Innovation in African Literature.

Innovate

Verb

1: to introduce as or as if new

2 archaic: to effect a change in

Gossiping is the devil at work they say, sewing seeds of discord amongst friends and family alike. Gossip though, can also bind people, it can bring enemies together for a few moments, rallied against a common cause. ‘*Sa Ido*’ or observation is the root of gossip; when Hajiya Kande begins to observe Faiza sneaking out in the middle of the night dressed in her hijab, she swears she can see the outline of jeans and makeup on the girl’s face at 12am. She huffs and she puffs and wastes no time in telling her neighbour, Hajiya Lantana. It doesn’t matter if

they weren't fond of each other in the first place, Faiza's nightlife is the rope that binds them together for a moment of friendship.

"Hmmm that girl? Her mother has given them very poor training!"

"Au! ashe you saw her last night too!" the rope has been knotted.

Gossip is not only a pastime, it has essentially become a part of the African culture. We see things, and we make assumptions, even when we do not understand them and things are not always as they seem. If only Hajiya Kande had looked closer, she would have seen that perhaps Faiza had been sent on an errand by her ailing mother, and not to a nightclub like they assumed, but misdeeds are far more entertaining than the good. So, we listen and we tune down the little voice in our head that speaks as rationality and logic until it is barely a whisper.

On another occasion, the same women had been visited with a juicy plate of gist, they lapped and frothed, swallowing it up as it was served, like greedy dogs.

"Kin san Ihsan? Rahmatu's daughter who schooled in the US? Well you know Sadiya Mai Kanti's son has been courting her for some time. You will never guess what she did."

"Mai?" They said eagerly in unison.

“I was shocked, wallahi. The thing really shocked me. Shocked my husband too. She seemed like such a decent girl!”

“What did she do mana?” Hajiya Lantana asked, practically falling off the edge of her seat.

“Hmmm. It’s not a nice thing to hear fah. She carried herself and walked all the way to that boy’s house to look for him. The mother opened the gate and she was trying to have a chat with her!”

“Innalillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un!” Hajiya Kande said, clapping her large hands and clamping them over her mouth in shock.

“Children of these days! Is this how they’ve spoilt? Kai, if she was my daughter, I would slap some sense into her!” Lantana added.

“Yes oh. In fact, Sadiya has forbidden the marriage. She said her son cannot marry a mara sa kunya like Ihsan.

“Good! A girl like that can only mean trouble!” Hajiya Lantana concluded.

You are probably waiting for the part where Ihsan’s crime becomes more apparent, but really, that was it. She had broken

one of the rarely spoken rules of Hausa-Fulani culture; to act as one without Kunya or '*Mara sa kunya*'.

Kunya, in the Hausa language means shyness; it transgresses just a basic definition and has become a way of social interaction. *Kunya* culture dictates how and when to behave in a certain way, and has essentially become a measure for judging one's decency. *Kunya* culture forbids an unmarried woman from visiting or interacting openly with her potential mother-in-law. If they happen to meet coincidentally in public, the girl is supposed to lower her eyes and her head, greet the mother politely as a stranger would, and walk away. Until the knot of marriage has been tied, it is rather unheard of for a woman to interact with her in-laws.

Now, a lot of Northerners know this, but a lot of young northerners also don't. *Kunya* culture much like others is slowly being faded away. It is like a new and brightly patterned *zani* being washed over time, after the tenth wash, it is a few shades duller but softer to the touch.

While aspects of *Kunya* still remain, the newer breed of colourful Hausa-Fulani youth, washed and rinsed with different influences and experiences, are able to pick and choose what they wish. The rise of elitism and wealth has propelled the older generations into being able to afford and buy more modern experiences for their

children, sending them to schools all over the world, and when they come back with their shiny new degrees, they also bring with them, a new way of thinking and new rules for social interaction.

Perhaps that is why Shaheed's Uncle, Baban Umma, thinks the boy is disrespectful. Shaheed's father had moved him to the UK for school between the ages of 13 and 23. Culture is a hard thing to rid yourself of, much like 'the boy out of the farm' proverb, it is the same.

In the UK, Shaheed longs for individuals to speak his tongue with, to sit cross legged on the floor, eating mounds of *tuwo* and *miyan taushe* with his hands. He longs for the soft comfort of his kaftan and trousers and the reassuring presence of his *qube* on his head. But when Shaheed returns to the North, decked in his well-fitted kaftan, tossing *Inawuni* and *ya gida* greetings in the wind, he remembers that there is a part of him that also loves to eat burgers and wear jeans. At his uncle's massive house, which he's been to a dozen times, he goes to greet him, extending a firm handshake. The uncle takes it of course, reluctantly and everything is well and merry. Until the next day, when Baban Umma calls Shaheed's father and chastises him for raising his son poorly.

“He shook my hand! Am I his mate?” He is angry and puffing on the phone, his rage is like hot embers of coal. But Shaheed’s father, ever the cooling cup of water, soothes him and defends his son.

“Haba Baban Umma, Shaheed is not like us, he is a *bature*.” He’s a white man, he jokes. His father cools the coal, but there is still a flicker.

“Shaheed, next time you see your uncle, do not extend your arm to him.” He says to his son later that evening. There is confusion on Shaheed’s face, unsure of what he did wrong, but he nods to his father anyway.

Rashin Kunya does not discriminate by gender, men have their own rules too. A few months ago, Ahmed, a young Fulani gentleman whose wife had just gone through 26 hours of labour and given birth to a healthy baby girl, had the sudden urge to celebrate, jump up and down, smile with his full set of teeth. But to show too much emotion, be it grief, pain or joy was to appear weak. So instead, he smiled gently, shook the well-wishers hands and looked at his new baby girl from afar, as the crowd of women displayed the joy on his behalf.

Kunya is a difficult thing to imagine for outsiders, it's even harder to imagine for young children. My mother told me of when her

sister had gone to live with her aunt, their mother had been unable to protest due to her father's acceptance of the decision. You see, my grandfather had been raised by his older sister, she was like a mother to him, a fact she never allowed him to forget. Baba, my grandfather, was accustomed to believe that he owed Goggo – his sister - his very life, and so set the pace for their relationship. Her word and requests were set in stone. Goggo had come for holiday at my grandfather's house, and she spoke often during that trip of her barrenness and how she longed for a child to keep her company as she was ageing. My grandmother took notice of the side comments, and tried as much as possible to keep her three children out of sight. But alas, Baba heard the comments, and when she offered to take his oldest daughter back with her to Kano, *Kunya* held his tongue and he acquiesced.

My grandmother had allowed her daughter to be shipped off to Kano, with no tears and no fight. My mother, then just a little girl, was convinced her mother was indifferent towards her older sister. After all, she never called her by her name, she referred to her as *waccen*, 'that one' and she barely acknowledged her presence when people were around. The moment of realization for my mother had come much later, on a visit to Goggo's house in Kano with her mother. She had caught them, her mother and older sister, hidden in a room, running her hands over her daughter's *dorina* tainted back, crying and asking her who had

done this to her. There was relief but also pain in that realization, knowing that *Kunya* culture had also held her mother's tongue prisoner.

The Fulani *Kunya* culture dictates that a mother must not show outward love towards any of her children and must instead act as though she is indifferent towards their existence, not calling them by their given names. She must also avoid showing too much emotion like sadness towards whatever afflicts them or too much joy or pride when good happens to them.

The logic behind this stems from sexuality in Hausa-Fulani culture, which is a forbidden subject to discuss. It is like the Hausa-Fulani bride, who must never show joy or excitement during her wedding, even going as far as to outwardly ignore the prayers of well-wishers, because to do this, is to hint towards excitement and anticipation of your wedding night. To show love towards your child is to acknowledge how the child was made in the first place, and to hint at your sexuality is to mark yourself as a *Mara Sa Kunya*.

My cousin, Halima, during her wedding, had fallen into this trap. We all know the rules, but she had smiled and laughed, when she should have been lowering her eyes, and weeping for fear of the unknown, even pausing to take pictures with her in-laws. I still have the picture, Halima, a glowing bride in blue taken to her

new home, the tears far away from her eyes and her large teeth practically spilling out of her mouth. My aunties had spent weeks berating her, calling her a disgrace and disappointment, wondering what her in-laws would say behind her back. But Halima didn't seem to mind, she had worn her joy and excitement as boldly as the red lipstick that coloured her smile.

Over the years, due to inter-marriage between the Fulani and Hausa people, the cultures have seeped in, mixed together, and it is hard to discern where its origins lay, the rules have also been slightly loosened. You can avoid openly loving your first child, but show love to the others.

One thing that is certain is that the kunya culture is still strong especially in certain parts of the North. The newer generation however is less keen to adhere to these rules. Western exposure has made them more lenient, and the elders have begun to accept the new way of doing things. My grandmother at first, had been shocked to hear my mother calling her first daughter's name, but over time, she began to look fondly upon the affection she openly showed her daughter.

There are many like Ahmed, Shaheed, and Ihsan struggling to conform to the norms of the Hausa-Fulani social behaviour, who fight an inner battle between themselves - the modern self and the

traditional - trying to find a middle ground to co-exist, to find a metaphorical seat at the table.

But even when they do, the cultural gatekeepers will not allow them rest. The Hajiya Lantanas, Hajiya Kandes and Baban Ummas of this world will hound and protect the foundations of Kunya culture, through tongue lashings, stern warnings and endless gossip.

A MAN ONCE LOVED**Racheal Twinomugisha - Uganda**

A long time ago, in Koboko village, West Nile part of Uganda, among the Kakwa people, there lived a man called Amin Dada. Amin Dada married Ms. Assa Aate from the Nubian community of Northern Uganda and they gave birth in 1927 to a little boy they named Idi Amin Dada – a boy now famous around the world.

Idi Amin Dada was a brilliant little boy. He was hardworking and went to school with his friends. All was well in the young boy's life. However, while Idi Amin Dada was in Primary three, his mother and father separated. This marked an ugly turn in Idi Amin's life. He was forced to drop out of school because his mother could not afford paying his school fees singlehanded.

For a boy his age, he possessed a winner's mindset, but upon realizing he had no further chances of going to school, he resorted to helping his mother in the fields. It was his job to look after and tether their goats. They always had enough food to eat.

It is said that Amin became a very fast runner because he was always running after the goats he tethered.

Later, Idi Amin grew to be an amazing sportsman. He played rugby, heavyweight boxing, drove rally cars, and swam. It was no wonder he kept the Uganda heavyweight boxing championship title for nine years. Everyone loved Idi Amin.

Considering his excellence at sports, and his body physique standing at 6 ft 4, Idi Amin joined the army. British colonialists at the time believed that a person who spoke Swahili had better chances in the army. As such, having been fluent in Swahili, Amin was promoted to Corporal just three years after he had joined the army.

Idi Amin had great love for his country. As corporal, he fought the Kenyan Turkana cattle rustlers who had invaded Uganda in the year we got independence. Ugandans having regained their cattle, praised Amin for bringing back peace.

Amin was charming and cunning. He was sociable, a happy man who wore a huge moon smile. He occasionally participated in different traditional dances earning him the admiration of many Ugandans.

The year 1963 saw a twist in Idi Amin's character. That same year, he was promoted to the rank of Major in the army. That

same year, Idi Amin, a man once loved, big and strong as an elephant, tall as giraffe, dark like charcoal, with crimson fierce eyes, terrorized Uganda.

As a Major, Amin became larger than life. He was very greedy for power and demanded respect and titles he did not deserve.

Four years after Uganda gained independence, Idi Amin attacked Buganda Kingdom - then under Kabaka Muteesa 1 - causing many deaths. It was alleged that Buganda kingdom had been plotting a coup against the government of Sir Milton Obote, then president of Uganda.

Amin's merciless, cunning, and unpredictable nature did not stop then. He manned killer squads which led to the deaths of over five hundred people. Kenyans living in Uganda at the time also fell victim. Those who survived his bloodthirsty hands were either kidnapped or imprisoned. All of Uganda lived in fear of a man once loved.

History records that the year 1971 saw Idi Amin as the president of Uganda. History records still, that he dropped out of school in primary three. How did Idi Amin rise to power? Who voted him in? How did an illiterate man lead Uganda?

While Sir Milton Obote attended a Head of States conference in Singapore, Major Idi Amin staged a coup against his government

and took over power. “The Butcher of Uganda”, as he was called, had taken over power.

Later in 1972, he took arms against the Israelites and British living in Uganda despite the fact that he had largely depended on their governments to grow Uganda’s economy. He attacked church leaders and government officials whom he suspected would work against his government. He even killed women whom he thought dressed indecently.

Amin demanded to be called by many titles including: Alhaji, Doctor, Field Marshal, Master of all beasts and fishes on earth and fishes in the sea, Liberator from the British Empire and most famous of all, The Last King of Scotland. Anyone who failed to address him with such titles received a merciless beating.

Idi Amin, the illiterate president of Uganda led to the downfall of Uganda’s economy. Prices of simple products were hiked. Later, it became prestigious owning simple home products like salt and kerosene. He blamed the collapse of the economy on the Indian population living in Uganda. The Indians were prominent in business and had great establishments here. They owned and ran most of the factories in Uganda.

To solve the problem, he gave them an ultimatum and ordered them all to return to their homeland, taking nothing with them.

This caused a lot of panic and tension in the country. There were not enough flights for the entire Indian population in Uganda. Amin did not care if they lacked means of transport or had nowhere to go. Those that failed to leave the country were later massacred.

Idi Amin was a misogynist who had no respect or appreciation for females at all. In his book, *Amin and Uganda*, author Grahame Laid quotes Amin to have said “The duty of the woman is to be house woman. She knows how to keep house very well.”

Amin, a man once loved, did not think women could do anything beyond their homes and as such, did not empower them.

Today, I wonder whether children know Idi Amin Dada beyond the ruthless figure shown in movies. Do they have any idea he was once human and loved? I write this story for my younger friends, for their need to know history as much as we do. They are the leaders of tomorrow.

And we should not raise anymore Amins.

18

BULLETS FROM THEIR MOUTHS

Sakina Traoré – Côte d'Ivoire

The words were raging in my head,

and in my heart, this scream I could hear.

But still, the valves were closed,

my mouth would not open.

There is a silence in the car on our way to the doctor. A silence, I have learned to appreciate, for it means no screams, no tears, no mean words, no pain.

Dad is focused on the road and the radio. I look at him, and see him compulsively twitch his nose as he often does, even without his glasses.

Mom is in the passenger seat next to him, but it seems like only her body is with us. She has been quiet the whole time, just like

the rest of us, probably thinking about what it means for her, for them, to take me to a psychologist.

I think it is cool. I have only heard about that type of doctor in movies. I feel privileged that I get to see one. It means my troubles are worth somebody's time and attention. Things I can't get from my parents, as they are too busy fighting and bleeding.

I have been looking forward to this day. I expect a new experience that will maybe change things for me and my family. That will suck up all our energy, leaving nothing left for negative thoughts and actions.

It is a quiet, regular Saturday morning. Most families are sleeping in, and others are taking their daughter to therapy. I try to picture what the session will be like, dad takes a right turn into the small street of Cocody.

Thirty minutes after leaving home, dad pulls up in a parking lot full of green leaves. The place looks old yet welcoming and peaceful. I am welcomed by the soft wind, the pure air and the spirits of all the people around.

We move in silence towards the closest building on our left and take the stairs, dad ahead and mom behind me, searching for the right door to knock on. The right door to get help.

After a short discussion between the adults, Dr Edward - if it is his name - introduces himself to me and takes me into his office. He gives me some water to drink and smiles at me before asking,

“Roxane, do you know why your parents brought you here?”

Silence.

I know why but I can't bring myself to answer. To open my mouth and voice my reality.

A couple of weeks ago, I had my first ever panic attack. I don't remember what I was doing, I just know I was buried in my thoughts, as always, and started having trouble breathing.

After the school infirmary warned my parents, they took me to a pediatrician. When the doctor confirmed that the cause was not physical, she recommended they book an appointment with a psychologist.

So yeah, I know why I am here, in this office, on this sunny Saturday.

I want to tell the doctor what is happening in my head, about the things raging inside my heart and body but I can't bring myself to talk even though I know he is supposed to keep everything a secret.

He asks me questions for an hour but gets no answers. After years and years of learning how to bury myself in my own world to avoid the tension at home, I have become a master at hiding in there and evading anything too serious. Too emotional. Just like this.

“I know all of this must be weird for you so let me ask. Do you think you need therapy?”

His question brings me back.

I look at him and shrug, giving no answer. Do I need someone to talk to? To hear me out? To tell me everything is going to be okay? Not really. I just need to make the screams stop. I need a way to clear my head. To get away from the toxicity of my home. And if I am being honest, I need the attention. But I am not ready to talk.

After a while, I think he understands he will get nothing out of me. At least not verbally. He writes something in his white notebook before looking at me for a second. He sighs, heavily.

“Tell me, how is it at home these days?”

Silence, again.

Does he really need to ask? Does he not see the awkwardness and the cold between my parents? Does he not feel my sorrowed soul sweating from fear and sadness?

I believe it to be obvious enough that it is awful at home these days. The fights don't stop and as they are usually about very silly things, it is more difficult to understand and accept the situation.

For a brief second, I raise my eyes and look at him. I don't think I want to share this with him. I don't think I want to open up. I know he only wants to talk but the only thing my parents have ever taught me about communication, is that it hurts.

Harsh words fly, tears come down cheeks, shouts fill rooms and nothing is ever the same afterwards.

"It must be very hard for you, I know. But I am here to help. Can you try and open up just a little bit? Maybe you want to tell me how it makes you feel when your parents argue?"

But my emotions are buried so deep in my body that I don't know how to find them.

This is the only way I know to protect myself. Because I have always known feelings hurt, I unconsciously decided a long time

ago to go through life as a zombie. Affected by nothing, looking at life without an ounce of color.

I look at my feet. While I know no answer is going to come out of my mouth, I still try to feel my emotions, to decode them. *How do I feel when they argue?*

Lost.

Angry.

Lonely.

Even though I am almost always surrounded by my sisters. Even though I can have a support system if I want to. But being close to humans, as I have witnessed, is a risk I cannot take.

My siblings and I, each have our own way of coping with the insanity at home. I don't know theirs, because I never talk to them.

I let out a heavy sigh. The doctor continues to look at me. It dawns on me that I don't remember the last time someone had paid this much attention to me. I am used to getting questions, looks, and smiles, but nobody has tried this hard, this long and this gently. It feels good, but it's still not enough to get me talking.

“Tell me Roxane, where do you go when your parents start fighting?”

Silence.

“Do you have a safe space?”

More silence. I look up to him and around the room.

I do have a place. I have this world in my mind where everything is so quiet and empty. It is where I hide when my parents start arguing. There, their words don't hurt me anymore. It is an invisible shield that saves me every time.

But I am so buried in that place right now that I cannot get out and enjoy the help I am being offered. I guess everything comes with a price.

“Did you at least tell your parents how their fights made you feel?”

Tell them? I chuckle internally.

And when would I do that? When they are busy tearing each other down? Or when they seek refuge in silence? I don't think that is a discussion they want to have. I don't think that is a discussion I want to have.

“Maybe you feel like they won’t want to hear you out, but they brought you here today. Doesn’t that prove they might be willing to listen?”

The question resonates in my ears but I am no longer paying attention. The session is starting to bore and annoy me, so I automatically tune off, lose myself in my thoughts. I am flying around my memories and revisiting everything that has happened since my panic attack.

Dr Edward calls my name. I raise my head and look at him.

His pen and notebook are now on his desk. He looks more concerned than at the beginning of our talk. It seems like he wants to read my soul as his eyes try to lock onto mine.

“What are you thinking about? It seems like you’re in your own world right now.”

I move a little in my chair, uncomfortable. He takes off his glasses, stares at me for a moment and asks:

“Do you have anything you want to tell me? Whatever it is.”

I stare at the floor.

“Okay. It’s okay, you don’t have to. But I am going to give you a piece of paper and a pencil. I want you to draw your family. Would you do that for me?”

With a smile, I nod.

I don’t like talking anymore, but I love writing. From poems to songs and stories. One of my sisters had introduced me to this form of expression a couple of years ago and it has been my favorite ever since. I feel the same way about drawing. Expressing without having to say a thing, is my thing.

Dr Edward pushes my chair closer to his desk, hands me a sheet of paper, a black pencil and a lollipop. He lays his hand on my left shoulder, squeezes it as if to show me he’s got me, and leaves the room.

In his absence, I feel relieved. I get to my drawing. My hand has more ease expressing my thoughts than my mouth ever does. I feel no fear, no apprehension, no hesitation. My drawing is a house with the typical triangular roof and rectangular body. My parents are in the left corner of the house, ignoring each other. My siblings Alana, Flora, Nadine, Mona and I are in the right corner looking at them. We are all facing the reality of a scattered family. On Nadine’s ears, I feel the need to draw big crosses, to truthfully capture her handicap.

When everything is finally laying on my paper, I look at the entire thing and feel sadness flowing through my soul: this is my family, the strangers I am supposed to share love, laughter and good moments with. The people I haven't hugged in a lifetime. The ones that don't even know I dream about horrific things.

Ten minutes after leaving, Dr Edward comes back with some juice for me. I thank him, take the yellow glass and hand him the piece of paper.

He looks at it for a moment and says,

“That’s a beautiful drawing. May I ask why you drew crosses on Nadine’s ears?”

And for the first time of the session, my mouth opens and I say

“Because she can’t hear.”

“Ohh, she’s deaf?”

I nod, wiping a traitor tear off my left cheek. I guess it is easier for me to talk about other people’s struggles than my own.

“Can I hug you?”, he asks as he opens his arms to me.

I look at him and say nothing. He waits a couple of seconds before smiling and reaching for his wallet.

I want that hug, that safe haven he is offering. I want what I have not gotten in such a long time. But I do not know how to receive love.

Dr Edward gives me his card, points out his two phone numbers written on the paper and tells me I can call him anytime I need to talk. I say nothing. He continues *“if you need to talk, to scream, to cry, no matter the day and the hour, contact me. Okay?”*

I nod yet again and try to smile. I force my cheeks to display a little sympathy. An attempt at showing my appreciation for his patience and attention. I wish I could do more, give more, tell him one thing about me. But it is too much to ask of my sealed mouth.

Dr Edward walks me back to my parents. They rise to their feet as soon as they see us, concern painting their faces with dark shadows. Mom drags me to her left side and asks if I am okay. I say “yes” and look at the card in my hand.

“Can I talk to you two?” Dr Edward asks.

The adults anxiously walk to the other side of the waiting room as I sit in one of the brown couches.

“She didn’t say a word,” I hear Dr Edward announce.

My mom, surprised by the news, turns and looks at me furtively. I guess she thinks my always being silent is just a thing I do at home. She thinks I am just a calm child, not a hurt one. Not one shut silent by the atmosphere at home.

For the next five minutes, I hear Dr Edward tell them how silent I had been, how I only answered one question the whole time. I wonder if he would have also told them, had I brought myself to really talk to him.

He gives them a piece of advice while I fake an absorbed contemplation of the table in front of me. Three of them agree to another session next saturday.

When Dr Edward leaves the room after a wave to me, I see my parents looking at each other for a brief moment, before coming back to me. There's a new kind of silence between us, as we all silently walk to the car, and I sit at the same spot I was when we were coming.

With my head resting on the window, I watch my father start the car and turn on the radio as mom fastens her seat belt.

"How was it ?", she asks.

"It was good, Mom. He's nice."

In the rearview mirror, I see her smile and wipe her eyes with a white tissue. I think about the experience I had just had. About how, despite having all the answers to his questions, I still could not bring myself to open my mouth and talk.

It felt too heavy, too full of hurt, it was too hard for me to do. And now, going back home, I feel guilty about the time and money spent on a whole hour of me saying nothing and staring at someone who just wanted to help.

But how could it have been different, when all my parents have unconsciously taught me about talking is how dangerous it is. Each and any of their words could spark a fight and fill our life with yet, another drama.

As they talk,

bullets come out their mouths,

hitting my mind and killing my soul.

And so, I witness the destructive power of words,

And silence then becomes refuge from the world.

THE NATURE OF PRESENT AFRIKAN PHILOSOPHY**Dismas Okombo - Kenya**

I discovered Al-Yusra Restaurant one month ago, and today, Thursday, is my fifth visit. The restaurant is strategically opposite McMillan Memorial Library, the build of my interest. B12 is the table I sit at. Positioned at a corner on the balcony overlooking Banda street, it is a table for two. In the two instances I found either one or all its seats occupied, I had simply walked out. So, to be precise, I have sat at the table twice; today is my third. The espresso I ordered out of curiosity is resting on the table. I am still staring at the pages of Black Athena.

I shift to the next page, scan through the first paragraph and finding the thoughts therein no different from the previous content, in hasty impatience, I throw the book to the table. It slides over the smooth surface and falls to the floor. Few heads from nearby tables turn, perhaps out of mere thirst for comedy. I don't want to care about them, but I do. With uneasy movements, I stand up, stumble towards the book, pick it and set it on the

table. As I sit down, I feel a few stares still maintained in my direction. I heave a sigh, exhale the tension, and lift the tiny mug towards my lips. But before taking a sip, the cup midair, I survey the neo-classical façade of McMillan Memorial Library.

The six grand granite columns and twin lion statues guarding both sides of the entrance bestow on the library building a majestic grandeur. I see her climb the trapezoidal staircase, her measured steps bouncing on the white marbles as she approaches the library's huge hardwood door. *Finally, she has arrived and the tour is soon to begin.*

A faint ecstasy warms in me. Unaware of myself, I take the sip. The bitter taste stings my tongue, snapping me out of the trance. *Holy Christ! I should have known this' how espresso taste!* I shut my eyes and force the drink down my throat. When I look at the library entrance again, she is gone. She was never there.

I adjust my gaze to the building next to the library, Jamia mosque. By the minute, the traffic at its gate is increasing with mostly men in cream coloured *kanzus* heading for *dhuhr*. Contrasted with the shade I am in, the noon sun feels harsh. My eyes land on the women selling *kashata* and other coastal snacks by the mosque and an urge to look away stirs in me. I don't. Instead, I glare at them like the sun. Under their dark *buibui* the irritating itch of sweat must be very uncomfortable. Three street

kids, two boys and one girl, come from the other side of the mosque and loiter near the women; anticipation and hunger distinct in their mannerism. One woman gives each something, and the kids hurriedly stuff their mouths with it. At her kindness, warm affection floods my heart, my eyes moisten. I look away.

I gulp the remaining content of my mug and shake my head. My first time in this part of the city replays in my mind. The library's architecture had fascinated me and I had decided to find a strategic restaurant to idle in as I took in the details. Looking up from Banda street, I spotted this restaurant and after considering several tables, B12 won my heart. I bookmarked the spot for my relaxation just as some prefer a pub to unwind and others, brothels. On my last visit, seated at this table, on this chair, she had walked in, and despite the empty seats around, she joined my table.

“You look serious!” That was her first comment, her voice calm and teasing. *Perhaps she is part of an elaborate scheme to con me*, I had cautioned myself and scanned her from head to toe. Her hair was stylised in a box-braids bun. She wore an elegant, black, short sleeve dress with patterned lace at the collar. And on her tiny feet, black flats. The only accessories on her were dangling silver earrings and the only makeup evident was clear lip gloss. Her lips twitching, ready to curve into a smile.

I gauged her harmless. *That means I must be thrice alert.* Adjusting my posture to an upright poise, our gazes locked. I replied with obvious scepticism, “And you look friendly?” She took a seat, glanced at the library, then back at me and said, “I have been watching you watching that building. I am an architecture student at University of Nairobi and I am intrigued by it too.”

With the intention to resist her charm, I replied, “Actually, I was looking at those women at the Jamia gate.” But she was a comfortable conversationalist and soon, her composure warmed me up.

She must have sensed that I was new to this part of the city, because she immediately launched into a narration of the mosque’s history; how communities came together to build it and how the contribution from each person was recorded, regardless of the amount.

The chat shifted to the library and her eyes glinted as she described the insides: the high windows, the chandelier, the bust of McMillan over the mock fireplace, the elephant tusks, the marble sculpture by Italian sculptor Cesare Lapini. In between she had said, “I like to think of it as a building of love. It was built by Lady Lucie in memory of her husband McMillan.”

Bits of enthusiasm erupted in my heart. “You should take me on a tour inside the library! Do they allow visits?” She now felt familiar to me. The cold cynicism I had regarded her with thawed.

I watched her face beam, then slightly dim. “Yeah, they allow visits. But I have a class at 3PM. How about next week Friday?” Next week Friday, same time, same place. It was settled.

Our conversation turned to prominent building designs within C.B.D, noting that only the Norwegian architect who designed Kenyatta International Conference Centre, inspired by the Afrikan traditional hut, managed to incorporate an aspect of the Afrikan culture.

An inquiry stirred me. “I understand that Kipande House, the Supreme Court and Parliament Building were built in the colonial era and hence the European influence. But now we are a republic and we are still reproducing the western designs. Why haven’t we reflected our cultures in the buildings we construct?”

In measured words, she replied, “I have also always wondered so. And I think returns from investment plays a major role in the present architectural designs. Although, a critical mind cannot overlook the subtle, persistent, absurd notion that there is nothing inspiring about Afrikan cultures. Just like the ridiculous

assumption in the literatures and philosophies that Afrika hasn't produced any written philosophy that delves into the universality of the human nature."

At the mention of philosophy, without hesitation I said, "They have, but not to the extent of the European philosophers. Besides, most of their works are a copycat of Western philosophy."

In the past three months I had been drawn into the field of philosophy, and most of the names I had interacted with, and which seemed highly regarded, were western philosophers - Descartes, Kant, Aristotle. As I was about to find out, my knowledge of Afrikan philosophers was faint and sparse. Her eyes bulged, her facials tightened. At this drastic change in her features, my enthusiasm calmed and with uncertain intonation, I hastily added, "Until recently in the 1900s when Afrikan students studying abroad returned."

"That is a Eurocentric argument. An argument used by those who don't believe Afrikans endeavoured to write their thoughts down, fools who think that an Afrikan mind is not capable of logical reasoning. Unfortunately, even some Afrikans have allowed themselves to be indoctrinated with this fallacy. For instance, Senegalese philosopher Léopold Senghor when he commented that, '...logic is Greek as emotion is African.' But read the works of Cheik Diop, read Osei. In fact, I recommend Black Athena by

Martin Bernal so that you understand that the philosophies and the milestones of civilization the west boast of originated from Afrika.”

She paused, heaved, glanced at the library building and continued, “For instance, the use of columns in architectural designs was conceptualized in Egypt. The first book of philosophy, The Instructions of PtahHotep, also Egypt.”

Listening to her, I realised I was still at the beginnings of knowledge. There were still numerous writings I had to read, intricate concepts I had to understand, several philosophers to study.

“The field of Afrikan philosophy is not spared the racial spite so evident towards our culture. Just as the Europeans couldn’t believe that a great civilization of Zimbabwe’s feat was possible in Afrika and was built by Afrikans, in the same manner they deny our philosophical ingenuity. And yet philosophy is the field through which the truthful nature of man, and that of the things around him, is achieved. It is those in this field that should better understand the basic concept of humanity, captured by the magnificent poet, William Cooper, when he rightly observed: Fleecy locks and black complexion, cannot forfeit nature's claim; skins may differ, but affection dwells in white and black the same.”

When time for her class neared, without warning, she pushed her seat back and stood. Her earrings dangling, the warm smile still on her lips. She stretched her hand towards me and said, “I am Dalila.” Standing up, I took her gentle palm into mine and replied, “I am Dismas.”

“You are an interesting person, Dismas. I am already looking forward to Friday.” *Interesting? While for the greater part of our chat I was simply listening!*

“Friday.” I replied, still absorbed in the lingering excitements of our conversation. When she withdrew her hand, I added, “I must admit, I like how your mind works.” Her smile widened. She walked away.

In the days that followed, I gave myself over to the study of Afrikan philosophy. I began with the maxims of Ptahhotep, noting its great similarity with the writings of Proverbs, one of the books in the Bible. I then followed it with the introductory part of G.K Osei’s *The African*. In it, through the endless list of achievements and historical records, the magnificence of our Afrikan race and our contributions to human civilizations are affirmed again and again.

I read the nationalistic writings of Kwame Nkrumah, that man whose very outlook of life, even the clothes he wore told the

beautiful Afrikan story; whose philosophy was the beginning of Afrocentrism. Yet Cheik Diop, while commenting on his life, would rightly observe “...the influence of the ten years that he spent in the United States would have a lingering effect on the rest of his life...”

I studied Mwalimu Julius Nyerere’s essay on Ujamaa and, of his endeavours to integrate the best of Afrikan culture with the progression of humanity. I read Okonda Okolo, the Congolese who, in my opinion, came close to comprehending the intricate nature of Afrikan philosophy. The Afrikan philosophy was[is] lived, in the language and in the cultural practices.

And philosopher Odera Oruka’s project introduced me to a whole new dimension of this field, the sage philosophy. His project was a successful attempt to counter the central question in the field of Afrikan philosophy; whether a communal society is capable of producing a philosopher in the calibre of Plato, one who is capable of saying something new, something that, although logical, goes against the society’s customs. And he demonstrated that indeed such sages existed, still exist, in the Afrikan societal setting.

At the end of my study, it occurred to me that two aspects characterise the nature of present Afrikan philosophy. First, half of its existing content is mere response to the fallacies the other

races propagate about Afrika. Second, the other half are thoughts of the Afrikan people mired in chaotic opinions of what the nature of an Afrikan philosophy ought to be.

Coming to this conclusion, I began to look forward to Friday with eager enthusiasm.

When she sees me, she will run to my embrace and rest her head on my chest. The fragrance of her hair will fill my nostrils. I will play with her dangling earrings and we'll hold hands as we marvel at the intricate architectural designs dotting the city. Haa. Silly me, we only know each other on a first name basis. First, I have to construct an overarching line of thought and then begin reading Black Athena.

I took my notebook and jotted down the summary of my observations.

Most of the Afrikan philosophy was[is] embodied in the cultural practices, in the language and in the folktales. The thoughts of our people were[are] preserved in songs, and in proverbs. Perhaps that is why in most Afrikan societies, the art of oratory was[is] highly esteemed. For, this was the major means of passing across the ideologies. And, it is important to stress, it was an excellent way of practicing philosophy like any other. Our philosophy was

logical and moral like any other philosophy. It is only when the whites made their visit to Afrika, for whatever reason, that suddenly, we were told our philosophy was inferior. For a moment, we allowed ourselves to believe this idiocy. We took the sedative pill of their fallacies and slumbered for a while. Then, the time of awakening came.

Some philosophers chose the puritan path; rejecting everything non-Afrikan, and instead focusing solely on building their philosophies on our Afrikan cultures. Some opted to respond to the false claims by the Western philosophers. Others decided to be content with what should or should not be considered Afrikan philosophy. And here schools of thoughts emerge. Like Ethnophilosophy, those of the opinion that Afrikan philosophy is a culture-based thought. Rwandese philosopher Alexis Kagame identified himself here.

Others poured their mental energies into merely pointing out Afrikan's past contributions. These last groups formed the majority. But I should not overlook the rare philosophers like Mwalimu Julius of Tanzania who understood the concept of societal change; whether a society decides to open up or close in, change is constant. With this concept in mind, they took the best of both

cultures, while still emphasising the integral Afrikan ideologies, and developed a philosophy that is cognisant of the present human.

Thursday, yesternight, I began reading *Black Athena* in preparation for this moment. From the first pages, I hastily judged the book to fall in the category of those writings that point, on and on, the contributions of our race. While this in itself is a noble task, it vexed me, perhaps irrationally, since its contents are a regurgitation of numerous past writers. It made no new claims from the predecessor writings of Cheik Diop, Chancellor Williams, John Clarke. Still, I summoned my will to turn to the next page. *Dalila had recommended it. It will provide an excellent piece of conversation tomorrow.* When I couldn't proceed anymore. I switched off the lights and slept.

Late evening is approaching. I don't think she will make it. *I wish I had taken her number.* I survey the library steps we would have walked, the edifice we would have marvelled at together. I survey the people on Banda street, persons of varied backgrounds each headed towards their businesses, oblivious to the beautiful mix of cultures their interactions create. When I look at the book on the table, the thoughts of the discussion I had prepared refreshes in my mind. The anticipation fades. I order another drink, this time, my comfortable vanilla milkshake and continue waiting.

NOT YOUR (AFRICAN) SUPERHERO(ES)**Fiske Serah Nyirongo - Zambia**

Nursing has always been a career close to my heart. I was born to a midwife and registered nurse who, at my birth, had been in her career for close to two decades. Healthcare, in particular the role of a nurse, has taken centre stage in recent months as a novel virus has shut down the world. I asked my brother and mother (who have worked in healthcare as untrained and trained medical personnel, respectively) what their thoughts were on the state of nursing in Zambia, weeks before nurses would be heralded as heroes across national newspapers and TV channels.

“Have you delivered babies before? If you have, how many have you delivered in the course of your career, bro?” I asked my brother on a day when my curiosity got the best of me.

“Over a hundred,” he replied in a serious tone. “Don’t you think I deserve a medal?” he asked, a wide grin on his face.

People overhearing this conversation, would have thought he was a strange health worker if he needed praise for doing his job. But it was not his job to deliver babies.

My brother graduated with a qualification in Environmental Health from Chainama/Rusangu University in Lusaka and Monze, Zambia. Environment Health workers are trained to deal with the preventative medicine aspect of disease. He had laughed when I told him it was very dangerous for him to conduct births.

“We had 3 weeks theory & practice in maternal health issues. For both rural & urban attachment I would take notes on what to do & what not to do when helping a mother to deliver. Those notes helped me. I hear of mothers dying with a nurse nearby now-a-days. No mother died in the 9 years I worked at Mwasemphangwe. Anything is possible with dedication and heart.” He told me.

“I had 3 stillbirths in all the deliveries I handled,” he added.

“It affected me, those stillbirths. I still remember them. I never lost a mother.”

“You are really Lillian’s son,” I said to him, trying to lighten the moment. “You did well.”

At that, he smiled.

Lillian Kaonga, has had a career in nursing and midwifery that has spanned 40 plus years. She graduated from Lusaka school of nursing in a class of 100. The Lusaka School of Nursing 1975 class was the biggest graduating class at the time. Since then, she has worked in different parts of Zambia, from the urban to the rural hospital; the small health post to the busy, feet-aching-at-the-end-of-the-day big hospital. She has attended to pregnant and labouring women from different socio-economic backgrounds. She has seen the worst and best at the point of new life entering the world. She never wanted my siblings and I to join the nursing career despite it fulfilling her for decades.

When I asked her when she knew she wanted to be a nurse, she told me of a time her family had taken one of my uncles - Wezi or Jando - to the hospital to treat an illness. It was there she saw “elegant ladies in white who were walking around this hospital with such grace” that she wanted to be like them someday.

She was in Form 3, what we now call grade 10 in Zambia, when she decided she wanted to be a nurse. She was never the best in class, but she loved Biology. It was her favourite subject. Despite being a sickly child, she made it to university.

“I was so bad at university life,” she chuckled with a naughty smile. “When everyone else was breaking the night over books, I was snoring and waking up at 7 a.m. in time for class. It irritated

my roommate and when word got around, the whole class would laugh every time I walked past them.”

For as long as I have known my mother, she has preferred movies to books and audio to anything written, so this was not a surprise to hear.

“When we wrote our first test, I thought I had certainly failed the class. My classmates were writing pages and pages of answers, and there I was stuck with the same answer booklet they provided us with at the start of the exam. When the results were pasted outside the classroom days later, I was expecting to find my name at the bottom. I was as surprised as everyone when my name was there in the top ten.”

“Would you still choose nursing as your career path if you were given a second chance?”

“YES. YES!” she replied. “These days nurses are not respected at all. It’s a wonderful career but you are not respected.”

Her son, almost three decades after she graduated from nursing school would be doing the same job she had been trained for; the difference was, he wasn’t trained for it. A fact brought about by the nurse shortage in Zambia. This anomaly begs the question, why?

The answer is in the advertising.

It's understandable that many would not include nursing in the category of "scientific" fields. Too few people outside of nursing know that the profession requires years of intense college-level science education. Few know that nursing awards degrees including the Bachelor of Nursing Science, the Master of Science in Nursing, and the Doctor of Nursing Science. And too few know that, like physicians, nurses use the scientific method to resolve complex health problems, and that their work draws on disciplines including biology, chemistry, and psychology. Nurses engage in evidence-based scientific practice to advance the health of individual patients and entire communities. And nursing journals publish ground-breaking scientific research on topics ranging from forensics to the prevention of neonatal infections.

Few people today would [consider nursing], on hearing that a promising youngster planned a career in "science," think of nursing. The media both reflects and reinforces the common view that nurses merely assist the scientists they view as being responsible for human health: physicians. We recently saw a newspaper columnist react with mirth and scorn at the idea that a local university was planning to award doctorates in nursing. Of course, we're not suggesting that the media is solely responsible. Some nurses may reinforce these views by minimizing their own

expertise or deflecting attention. But the media could be far more receptive.

As published in the blog, ‘The truth about nursing’, in response to a reader's question on whether nursing is a career a student should think of pursuing.

In Zambia, nursing as a career is not seen to be as scientific as the physician’s job. Older nurses like my mother talk of how they are undermined in emergency situations when they offer solutions to doctors who are out of their depth with patient knowledge. In a different article I read in a scientific journal, a contributor notes that nursing is still not included as a health based scientific career. It is seen as a helper profession, something like a cleaner in a hospital. This could be as a result of the history of nursing too. The profession has always been seen as a woman's job. In some communities, male nurses are called doctors, while female doctors are called nurses.

The contributor goes on about how modern nursing is said to have been the sole outcome of the efforts of a British woman named Florence Nightingale. Wikipedia says Florence Nightingale was “Born 12th May, 1820 and died 13th August, 1910.” She was “an English social reformer and statistician, and the founder of modern nursing.” Wikipedia goes further to quote

the Times, where the founder of modern nursing is called “The Lady with the Lamp.”

“She is a "ministering angel" without any exaggeration in these hospitals, and as her slender form glides quietly along each corridor, every poor fellow's face softens with gratitude at the sight of her. When all the medical officers have retired for the night and silence and darkness have settled down upon those miles of prostrate sick, she may be observed alone, with a little lamp in her hand, making her solitary rounds.”

I think about the African Nurse, about my mother. The African Nurse may not be serving in a war zone, but the conditions they work in can be as hard as the one Nightingale worked in. Like Nightingale, nurses can be social reformers and can be statisticians in the health science sector. With an environment that encourages collaboration between doctors and nurses, with a living wage and a working health system, the world will greatly benefit from a nursing board that is healthy and satisfied with their job.

My brother became a nurse because of the shortage in my country. The nurse shortage, he once explained to me, is also as a result of the salary scheme most African nurses are placed in. While nursing degrees or qualifications might not cost as much as a medical degree, the difference isn't as startling as the pay

difference between a doctor and nurse. With this in mind, young people with an interest to join nursing are dissuaded either by their sponsors or parents. Nursing in Zambia is either a last resort career or a passion. In both instances, the passionate and the reluctant nurse will end up with a dissatisfied career and the message they send to the hopeful student is that nursing is not a worthwhile career.

On my mother's handbook, the Nursing Council of Zambia's Emblem has the words Service for Professional Excellence and Growth in bold red. Red bright like the colour of the African soil. I have seen the pride that nurses in this council have for their career. I have also seen how the career breaks an African. My mother had to move out of Zambia to Botswana for over a decade to earn a nursing salary that was equal to the expertise and labour she put into the work. It breaks her sometimes and she would always tell me, "Nursing is a beautiful profession. Nursing in Zambia is not."

My brother is optimistic. He sees a career that blends care-taking and science as revolutionary. He believes Africans will wake up to realise that the African nurse is needed now more than ever.

The African nurse is important. My mother is important. So is my brother and people like him who have had to train on the job.

Qualified or not. Some would go on to say that the African nurse holds our health systems together in all our respective countries. I agree.

21

THIS GIRL

Ernestina Edem Azah - Ghana

‘The rain wets the leopard’s spots but does not wash it off’

Our girl is a woman now. She is one that embodies the souls of a thousand and the soul of one.

“Our girl” is the girl I was told I am, the girl I turned out to be, the girl I didn't become, the girl I never was. She is the girl the world changed, the girl that changed her world.

This girl battled demons and created some of her own. She loved multiple times and has been crushed in dejection. Most of the things she has suffered have only been within, never shown, never seen.

She learned that to be afraid is to be alive, and like the tortoise she learnt to hide in her shell, covering her whole body with the blanket of fear. Fear has been the only stimulus strong enough to make her run her life, a life she just existed in and did not care

about. Sometimes it paralyzed her, putting her before the constant glaring eyes of anxiety. If anxiety were a man put on guard to watch her, he has been dutifully faithful to his master. Mr. Anxiety most times leaves her breathless and static but every now and then, she breaks free and flees, running away from all - both danger and help. Fear has made her a porcupine wishing to be hugged, but pricking anyone who comes close.

'Misfortune does not restrict its visits to one day'

This girl has lived in limbo. The past and the future are her home, and the present is to her a distant past that has been lived a thousand times before, and will be lived again a thousand times after. She has had to live this way so her mind could take care of her, forgetting then remembering, so that she could grow despite the heart-wrenching moments. This girl has learned to shield herself from sadness, with sadness. She learned to summon sadness like a memory so she did not have to deal with feeling empty and hollow like a balloon. When you are happy and the happy moments end, you feel empty, but when you are filled with sadness, you remain filled even when more comes. Half the time, this girl is fighting demons, half the time she is loving them.

This girl has lived in corners, boxed in, never really living, always leaving. Each corner has held her in different ways and has been a home that was never always home.

She has had to live her life for the wind. Always saying goodbye to friends she was about to make, never really saying goodbye because she never made them. She has had to leave her life to the wind, to take her wherever it willed, for she knew not when to setsail nor where to land.

'The knife does not know its master'

This girl had been told she was dumb, that she was no one. She would think about it for a long time. Was she really dumb? What was the ideal teenager like, was she supposed to understand what was going on, was she supposed to rebel or smile or just listen?

She would soak up all the negativity they hurled at her like *gari* would soak water. Afterall, they say that what you don't know cannot kill you. If she did not understand what was happening, it would not hurt her, or so she thought. At first, she did not understand their words; years later, she would feel the pain of things past.

She would hold onto grudges she didn't know existed and they would never know why she distanced herself from their social acceptance.

'A slave does not choose her master'

This girl has learned to love, but not enough to love her body and soul. She has not learned to agree to be a person because she feels she is not the one who truly lives. She watches on as things are done to her body: is this body even hers? She has felt like a stranger in her body, for her mind has always been a thing of its own, choosing when to drag her to the past or jerk her back to the present, to remind her why she cannot do certain things and always asking her to hold her head down so that nobody sees her.

Her body also devised when to draw attention or scorn or embarrassment. Or was that her mind telling her all those things? All she knew was that she did not want things. She waited for people to want her so that she could decide whether she liked them or not. If she did not like them, she would wait patiently till another person liked her. She never had to choose. One alone was enough. She never had the chance to think about what should please her, about why she deserved pleasure. 'Pain is enough for you,' her mind would say without explanation.

This girl would learn later in her life that a normal person was supposed to be happy most of the time, love and desire to be loved. She would later learn that love, and loving, is a choice, not just a reaction.

She has learned to appreciate people. She thinks they are wonderful. She wishes she were as free as they are but she cannot

allow herself to be like them. Her mind says it was not her place to choose that. If she did then she was somehow betraying it. She does not have the courage to defy her mind, not after all it has done for her. Somehow her protector has become her tormentor.

She would learn to appreciate beauty but would not be able to hold it for fear that she would somehow destroy it because she considered herself a destroyer; or was it something someone had said to her once? They told her she was weird, that she was wired differently.

Time had eaten away at her and left her with memories of who she wished she was but felt she could not be because she believed all that had been said about her. She unconsciously accepted the torture to remove from herself hopes for a future and became a wandering mind, walking in familiar haunting pasts.

This girl has been slow to understand love, still struggles with the idea of it. Lovers have come hoping to suckle on the soft mounds on her chest and have struggled to stay in the valley in between her thighs. The people she loved most said that she was useless, rigid, a nuisance and would probably be unhappy for the rest of her life. They said all these even without words. Then, those she hardly knew said she was someone, that she was smart. They said many sweet things about her. They even said she was unique, that she was an enigma. They fed her with sweet

words and grand ideas. They said her world was wrong for making her lose sight of herself.

'It is by coming and going that a bird weaves its nest'

This girl, what did she think of what they all said? This girl laughed at them because laughter seemed a perfect mask for her confusion. She didn't know if they were wrong, or if they were right, because she didn't even know who she was. She wanted finally to be the things she had always wished for, but she could not bring herself to get out of the cycle of always doing nothing for herself and inciting sadness to fill her hollowness. She learned to pour her pain on paper. That way, she had more space inside her to accommodate the things she wanted to do for herself. She would have to pay to learn to love herself. She would learn that death was a difficult decision when all she wanted to do was live.

She was a blank page until writing helped her heal. Even if it was absurd to others, it meant the world to her to be able to hide her feelings and insecurities on paper. She was unsure when the world started seeing her on paper, but she keeps writing regardless.

'Nature gave us two cheeks instead of one to make it easier to eat hot food'

This girl has found in her search, people who decided to help her, people she calls friends. They lifted her when she was deep in depression's mouth, waiting to be swallowed. They smiled at her till she learned how to smile genuinely. They walked with her in the dark labyrinths of her mind and waded in the dark waters too. They held up a mirror when she could not see the reflections of her soul in her body. She would learn love from these people. They would be angels carrying her along, walking beside her always. She would learn about hope, living in the present and wishing for the future. She would slowly open up like a flower touched by the sun's rays, smiling towards the sun, embracing all the warmth it gave and never forgetting the feeling.

'The moon moves slowly but it gets across the town'

This girl was ugly, because she was made so, but she is like an onion, shedding off the bad, starting again - clean, different. She knows she will fall and get eaten by depression several times but trusts that strength will return to her mind. She knows that sometimes her sorrow will fill her eyes with so many tears, but she knows she has friends who will help her heal.

Now she knows she has always had lights, lights that are gradually chasing the darkness away from her eyes, allowing her to see who she is. She now understands why she has had much darkness - so she can see clearly when the light within her shines.

Our girl is growing to be beautiful and more understanding of who she is and who she hopes to become. May this letter remind her to always be who she wants to be.

Dear child,

You are a flower of the universe. You have always been and you will always be, though you will not always know it. It has taken you years of your life to endure the sadness in your heart and the darkness will never completely go away. It will always lurk around. Don't be afraid when you see it. For this world exists with it.

You will go through more tough times and you will feel like your body is being shredded into a million different pieces. There are times when all you will want to do is leave the earth; let go and have some fun. You are not obligated to feel sad. Do not soak up all the negativity the world will pour out.

Make plans and follow them. Give everything your utmost best. Want things and take them. Be excited about your plans so that they do not become a burden to you. Meanwhile, learn new things; be frank with yourself about your situations and give things a thought before doing them. Be spontaneous; you get one chance at certain things.

You'll find love when it's time but consciously make an effort to choose. Do not wait for someone to choose for you. Believe in yourself and be bold about your decisions. You are a wonderful person.

Last of all, I know you don't understand how incredibly beautiful you are inside and out. I know your mind's eye has learned to focus on your flaws only. I know you love. I know your fears and anxieties, your laughter and goofy moments. I know your future and it's not perfect, but it is beautiful and you are happy. Please, learn to love and take care of yourself - body and soul - because in the end they are the only things you're going to have left.

Sorrow has bathed you in its soft waters and made a fountain in your chest that keeps refilling your mood; thank you for holding onto life even when you did not want to.

I love you. I will always love you.

Signed

You - from the past and the future.

Ps: Your children are adorable.

22

LIFE CONTINUES, UNFAILINGLY

Esther Musembi – Kenya

*Sleep, even when you're afraid of what the dreams might bring.
Run, even when it feels like you can't run anymore. And, always
remember, even when the memories pinch your heart.*

*Because the pain of all your experience is what makes you the
person you are now. - Alysha Speer*

We all remember, even when we don't want to. We like to hold onto the beautiful memories more than the dark ones. Beautiful memories are like the undersized dress we no longer wear but still keep to please the eyes when need be. Bad memories stay like a horrible tattoo - the ink sank too deep into the skin.

I have had so many beautiful memories growing up. Like many little girls, I was enamored of my big brother and naturally wanted to be like him. I wanted to do everything with Gangi; run

with his dog, go to school with him, make toy cars from used wire with him. I would pester him nonstop until one day he relented. Mother had bought me a plastic doll with golden hair but she had no house like the ones I read about. Gangi promised to make me one. His promise came with one condition: stop following him everywhere like his dog and not tell Mama.

Three weeks after this, a young man appeared at our door, his head held captive by a thick box-like Afro, a shirt sticking to his back from riding for so many days. With him came a letter from grandmother. Mother read it slowly, in between asking about the weather back home, her lips making a funny shape each time she glanced at the box-like Afro. “Keletu,” she turned to me hiding behind her skirts, “this is Anko, he will be taking care of you when I go to the market.”

*

It was Dorothy’s suggestion. School was out so why not go visit her sister? We were bored and it wasn’t that far anyway. Her sister did not mind that Dorothy was coming with a guest. She would love some company, she had said. “In fact, you will find *githeri* in the pot when you arrive,” she added before her phone crackled and the line went dead. “Network!” Dorothy muttered.

The sun was almost melting my face and the dust was choking me when we arrived but I was too excited to be out of our shoe-box hostel room to really care. My phone battery was just below 50% and blinking orange but Dorothy assured me that her sister had *vutad stima*. Electricity would not be a problem.

Her sister's compound was modest. In it were two mud houses. One looked so shiny it could reflect the sun's rays. "The second wife's house" Dorothy explained. I tried unsuccessfully to mask my shock behind a straight face. The other house seemed...experienced, unpretentious, old. It had two wooden windows: one for the living room, one for the bedroom. The floor was firmly coated with cow dung, shiny from the diligence of good sweeping hands and wonderfully cool beneath my bare feet. There were dozens of *vikapu* hanging from the roof and clay pots of different sizes holding a variety of grains in every corner.

It was not how he looked, more of how he smelled and darted his eyes around looking for something I couldn't see. With a lot of effort, his eyes landed on me. I was eating *githeri*. He wanted to know who I was - from Dorothy, not me -and most importantly, why hadn't his wife told him there would be visitors? Dorothy introduced me and went to get his bath ready. He did not care for the *githeri*. That day he would be bathing in his first wife's compound, in a small muddy shack with blue heavy-duty

polythene spread for a door. And can you get me a *leso haraka haraka*? He ordered as he continually fixed his eyes on me. My githeri had suddenly become tasteless.

“Dorothy,” I was breathless, “can we please go back to school if your sister is not coming?” Dorothy had a way of laughing while slapping whatever thing that was near her. “*Ni nini mbaya na wewe?*” She laughed raucously. My in-law is harmless. “Look, he will go straight to bed when he’s done bathing. Trust me.” I swallowed my fear but I panicked again when I saw my phone blinking red. Dorothy’s sister had not managed to *vuta stima*. Before my phone died, I called my elder brother and told him where I was. A few seconds later, my phone went blank, the night began.

I was still trying to find sleep when the almost inaudible knock came. Ta! Ta! Again. Someone was tapping on the bedroom window. My nightgown felt clammy and I hoped whoever it was would just go away. “Dorothy!” The voice was clear as the darkness that surrounded us. The *koroboi* had long gone. Only Dorothy’s *kabambe* was blinking weakly on the bedside stool.

“Dorothy! I need to eat”. Why was he whispering? I shook her gently. “Dorothy, wake up!” My voice sounded shaky and grating to my own ears. She woke up muttering grumpily as she reached for her phone. “Don’t open the door,” I whispered

urgently but he was already turning the key. I lay there willing my body to stay put and fight the taste of iron in my mouth. The key turned again. A few seconds later, there he was, a dark silhouette. He was holding Dorothy by the throat. He pushed her, towards the bed as he worked his *leso* loose. Her phone fell and with it, went the only source of light in the room. I couldn't move no matter how hard I tried.

“There's no way I can sleep alone when I have two beautiful girls in my compound.” I tasted salt. He was holding Dorothy down, his bad breath choking me sideways.

I am a little girl, in a navy-blue pinafore with this beautiful white ribbon I really like. I am home from school and I have just eaten my after-school snack. He is undressing me even though I usually do it myself. Mama already taught me how.

“Mum will be too tired to wash you when she comes back,” he explains. But why is he also undressing? Children are not supposed to see big people undressed. It happens so fast that I would always wonder if it really happened at all. Then it is over. He bathes me and applies Vaseline to the part that hurts real bad. “Don't tell mum,” his eyes close up are so red. I nod.

Someone was screaming. It wasn't Dorothy. The sound was coming from me. I was hitting him with a big *mwiko* that I noticed in the bedroom when we first came in. Strange, I thought at the time. I was hitting him with all I had. He was cursing me but I was not hitting him. I was hitting Him. I wanted to shave his box-like Afro with my bare hands and draw blood. I was finally protecting myself.

My voice grew hoarse and my hands were trembling so bad I couldn't swing anymore. Dorothy, who had been struggling with the key and had joined me in the shouting cacophony, sprinted out of the house, calling out for neighbours. Her brother-in-law snatched his *leso* and ran out.

The memory was out. The bad tattoo that I had ignored my entire life. If not for the incident at Dorothy's sister's house, I probably wouldn't have remembered. I did not want to. For so long I had avoided him at family functions without understanding why. Now that I remembered, I was ashamed. My brain went on total lockdown. Darkness had descended. I did not want to socialize anymore. My room was now my favorite place; sit and do nothing, lie on the bed and watch the ceiling into oblivion.

I was dirty all over. No amount of tears, blaming myself or blaming him was enough. My parents did not understand. "I don't want to talk about it," I told them. Talk about what, what is

it? My mother would bring me food and talk and talk. One day, I realised if the talking didn't stop, I would go nuts, so I told them. I remember my father looking beyond me, I'm not sure what he was looking at. He bowed his head and tears began soaking into my sheets. My mother just held onto me. She squeezed me a bit too tight. "I am here," she said, anger and comfort all rolled into that hug. Finally, I allowed myself to grieve for the little girl I had been.

A female Kenyan student was recently robbed and then raped by three men. The school authorities issued a MEMO:

In all the three rape incidences reported last year, **a clear case of recklessness on the part of our female students can be drawn.**

It compared the recent case to previous cases and went on to give an example of a drunk student who was gang-raped in the wee hours of the morning. The memo was sincerely signed by the head of campus security.

The memo caused an outrage and an apology followed. Not to the student, but to the entire nation because the Memo had been written in such bad taste. It did not "represent the corporate values and the image of the institution." She never came up anywhere. After all, it was her fault. Neil Malamuth, an

American psychologist, said, ‘they will steal your TV, your watch, your car. And sometimes they steal sex.’”

Myths around sexual abuse have been perpetrated long enough and like a person with an old abusive lover, we’ve grown accustomed. We hear phrases like,

“No really means yes.”

“The harder she struggles, the more she enjoys it.”

“Women ask for it by the way they dress and behave.”

Every now and then, I wonder, was my school pinafore that alluring? I did not have breasts then. Just a mere child. A huge percentage of women have been raped in the comfort of their homes, by people they know. It’s not always the ‘stranger-danger’ kind of situation. It’s unfortunate that most cases go unreported. Why bother when most of the time the first course of action is to blame the victim.

According to Statistics by Crime Scene Investigations (Nairobi), research findings from December 2007-June 2008 show that the best source of national incidence data in Kenya is hospitals. Only one out of twenty will report a rape while just one out of six women will seek medical assistance. It’s because the police don’t

actually do much; a lot of perpetrators will be out by the second day; free.

Ah, it's her big hips that aroused him. Yeah? Not the cleavage? It's not the clothes or the wide hips, or that rapists are all psychotic. If rapists simply stopped raping, rape would just stop.

“Have you completely healed?” I get this question a lot from the few I have shared this part of my story with. The answer: no, not really. There's no formula to the healing process. Every day I heal in different ways. I have forgiven myself. It was never my fault and there's power and healing in knowing just that. My sister once asked me, “how do you know a perverted touch?” The answer: if it feels wrong, unwanted. Do not overthink it or try to explain it.

Dorothy and I don't talk about that day. It just doesn't come up. The morning after the incident, we packed our bags and left. Life continued as it unfailingly does.

A LIFE WITH KAKA**Tom Patrick Nzabonimpa - Rwanda**

My grandma tells me she doesn't drink water and for the 7 years I lived with her, I never saw her drink water. Sometimes I stalked her but I wouldn't find her taking even a sip.

My life with my grandma was a lesson in standing one's ground no matter the adversity - a lesson I still live by today.

We called her *kaka*, a common name for many grandmothers in her village. Whenever she felt thirsty, she would take a cup of *mukaru*. Whether it was hot or cold, it quenched her thirst.

"I can't drink water; I might just regurgitate." She once told me when I was 6. If you were thirsty and you told her, she would give you *mukaru* or *ubushera*, a soft drink from sorghum. She couldn't understand that your body really needed water.

When I was 4, on some occasions if there was milk at home, she would mix it with mukaru in a saucepan and place the pan on a three-stone stove to make chai. We took this with sweet potatoes or *kawunga*, which is made from maize flour. On Sundays, our chai was usually accompanied with *mandazi*.

When my sister was about to start primary school, Kaka spent a lot of time knitting her *invumba*. It was a small bag for pupils, used to carry some school materials. Kaka used yarn and a needle to knit it. She was the best at knitting. It used to be her profession before she retired. All I saw whenever I tried to observe her at work, was a lot of twisting. When the knitting was over, my sister was thrilled to see how beautiful her *invumba* was. It was a mix of yellow, blue and green colours just like the national flag.

The next morning before sunrise, my sister packed her *invumba* with a musana notebook and a beifa pen. She was so happy, not only because of the bag, but also because of her *kontoni* - a blue dress with two ropes attached to its behind. She tied them around her waist before draping her *invumba* across her right shoulder.

"I am going to school, sha! Look at you, when will you start school?" She asked, rolling her eyes in front of me, before she chuckled and left.

I became sad, lonely and angry at the same time. Kaka was farming somewhere far from home and she had left early in the morning without my notice. It was a punishment of sorts because the evening before, the neighbourhood kids and I had been playing soccer in the yard. Because it was muddy and slippery, the front part of my sandals cut. Kaka was angry. She was tired of buying sandals for me every three weeks, even though she always had some money from her old women's savings cooperative.

I was home alone and I had no idea how to cook. She was supposed to return before 12p.m to deal with the cooking. Her room was locked and that was where the flask of mukaru and sugar were kept. I cried, not only because I was angry, but also because I hadn't started school like my sister.

I wandered about the place, trying to see if I could find something to eat. I left home and went to the farm near the house. There, I found sugarcane and maize. Of course I couldn't eat the maize, I didn't know how to ignite fire with a match stick and dry glasses.

I thought, *'let me break one sugarcane and eat it. I will cover the void, Kaka won't recognize.'*

I headed back inside the house and took a machete to cut my sugarcane. My stomach felt at ease as I swallowed it's delicious juice while sitting on *urusyo*; a big stone that was placed in front of the kitchen near the door. We used it for grinding grains - sorghum and wheat.

"*Eeh, Mana we!*" I exclaimed suddenly realizing what I was sitting on.

It is a taboo in our tradition. People believe that if you sit on the *urusyo*, you will cause the death of someone closeby. Kaka used to say this to me many times. I hurriedly walked away from it, breathing heavily, scared by what I had done.

"God, protect me from trouble. I never intended this." I said, heaving a sigh of relief.

I kept eating my sugarcane and pretended that nothing had happened until I was done. Kaka returned around 11am and cooked. We ate lunch together with my sister who had come back from school. She told us she was happy with other kids at school, and sang to us the songs she was taught.

"*Agashuri kacu karimo amashusho.*" She sang to us enthusiastically.

When she was done, tears were rolling down my cheeks. "I need to go to school too, *sha!*" I shouted, and ran to my room. I lay down on the bed and kept crying. Kaka followed me. She told me that I could not start school. She insisted, saying that I was only 5, and that I would have to wait until I turned 7. I couldn't agree to stay home alone while my sister was going to school.

I needed to go to school and I told her I would not stay home alone. She became upset and left me in the room.

In the evening, Kaka called my father on the phone and told him everything. After their discussion, she informed me that my father had told her to allow me go to school if the school director had no problem with it.

The next day, I went to school with my sister. Kaka gave me a half notebook and a pen. She couldn't believe that I would study like other kids, because she thought that being younger wouldn't allow me to.

That day, our teacher taught us about the five vowels. He taught us in a song. We sang to its rhythm and I started loving school. I was happy to see a lot of kids there. We played football together at break and after class.

Kaka finished knitting my imvumba the next day. I was so excited. Little did I know, my class that day was going to start in tears. Our teacher told me to write "i" on the blackboard and instead I drew a long vertical line. He didn't correct me. Instead, he instructed me to lie down and he gave me five strokes of *kiboko* on my buttocks. I cried and other pupils laughed at me.

"I am going home, I am going." I said, sniffing as I left the classroom.

"*Garuka hano.*" My teacher said, pointing the *kiboko* at me with his angry face.

I ran from school without looking back. When I returned the next day, I was ready to write every vowel. My sister had spent the evening teaching me how to write in the sand with my index finger even though Kaka didn't want it. She said that we were playing with dust which seemed stupid to her. That day in school, the teacher praised me. I had surprised him by writing every single vowel he told me to put on the blackboard.

Two months later, all pupils and teachers gathered on a football field for the results announcing ceremony. When it was his turn, our tutor announced that I had placed 33rd in a

class of 50. I felt happy. I didn't even know what 33rd place meant but I had scored 51% and it was a pass.

When I got home, my grandma was surprised. She had thought I would be the last in class. My sister was the first in her class. She had scored 92% and the school gave her a rabbit as an award. She brought it home and kept it with our other rabbits in the hutch. Kaka bought her a lot of mandazi to celebrate. We ate them that evening and on the next day, with mukaru and milk.

I was promoted to continue my studies in primary 2 and despite all my hard work, Kaka still didn't want it. "Yes he should repeat, it's too early for him to go to P2." She said on the phone.

She had tried to persuade my parents by telling them to convince my teacher that I should repeat the year but they ignored her advice. My father said that if I had passed, then there was no reason for me to repeat the year. In 2004 I started P2 and I passed with good marks. I passed the national examination in P6 with great distinction. After this, I was admitted to a local secondary boarding school at the age of 10.

I was the youngest at school and everyone there knew. On one hand, it was good because many senior students liked me.

They enjoyed talking to me, maybe because I had a baby face. On the other hand, every time they called me a child, I felt inferior and belittled. Most of my ideas weren't accepted. They said that they were naive, even though some were smart. I faced this until I was in Senior 5.

“Why are you going to finish school at a young age?”

Everyone asked me this question during my last year in secondary school. I was really tired of hearing it. "*Ndamaze*" was my only answer, it was none of their business.

They used to tell me that nobody would hire me for any job because I was 16 and under the legal working age. I believed it and felt anxious for a long time, until six months after graduation when I started an internship in a local factory. I served as a machine operator and they later offered a stipend of 40,000 Francs. I was only 16, but my boss didn't care. He only cared about what I could do.

Living with Kaka in my first few years wasn't easy. It was hard to believe in myself. But as days passed, she started encouraging me because she recognized how far I was going with my dreams. I was a brave and driven young man. I believed that there was something great in my future. I prayed

to God to help me chase away the negativity and people who scared the hell out of me.

I have come to realise that one's age is not a problem. Whatever the age you are, you can work and do something great, as long as you love it and make good use of every opportunity around you.

When I was still in secondary school, every time I visited grandma during the holidays, she would hug me thrice, both hands on my right shoulder, then on my left shoulder and then with her arms wrapped around my torso - the usual greeting from an old person.

One time, I asked her why she doesn't drink water and she told me that water makes her feel bad and she doesn't like it.

"For how long?" I asked.

"Since I was a teenager, around the age of 16." At the time she was about 60.

Later when I talked to my mother about it, she told me she too didn't know the reason why her mother doesn't drink water other than what Kaka had said.

I still wonder how a person can spend more than 40 years without drinking water. I am stuck between "I think it's possible because she still takes other drinks which contain water" and "maybe she takes water in private."

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MAIMUNA

Modou Lamin Sowe – The Gambia

If you take myth and folklore, and these things can speak in symbols, they can be interpreted in so many ways that although the actual image is clear enough, the interpretation is infinitely blurred, a sort of enormous rainbow of every possible colour you could imagine. - Diana Wynne Jones

In the days when Africa was Afrika without reasons to give rhymes to rhythms of a dirge or to sing in one breath traditional mimes, a princess and a jinn, Maimuna, was born. Maimuna was a lady bird that was caged in eastern Gambia, in the heart of a village called Sutu-Sinjang.

Sutu-Sinjang is a Mandingo word meaning a place with dark and sacred tall trees. This place is renowned as a place to total avoid during the feast of harvest. In the past, during every feast of harvest villagers cautiously avoided idling about anywhere near Sutu between the hours of 11 pm to 3 am. Precisely, when the

Harmattan wind blows intermittently from the North, carrying its pale soldiers of dust residue locally called '*fonkula*' and '*mboyoy*' in the Mandingo and Wolof languages of the Senegambia region respectively.

One day, this custom of avoidance was boldly broken by a lady called Maimuna. Maimuna came from Niamina Dankunku in the Central River Region (CRR) district of The Gambia, in a place called McCarthy Island after then British governor Sir Charles McCarthy. Today, she is well known in Gambian tales and folklore as 'Jinna Maimuna', *Maimuna the genie*.

As the story goes, she is heir to the throne of jinns and daughter of Mama Jankey Wali Sanneh, the last Mandingo king who led the Mandinkas at the Battle of Kansala and was defeated by the Fulani troops led by Alpha Molloh Baldeh. Maimuna's family is believed to own all the sacred crocodile pools in The Gambia - Folonko in Kartong, Berending in Niumi and Katchikally in Bakau.

Maimuna is usually depicted as a beautiful lady in a white gown in this circle of uncircumcised boys seeking her blessings.

In a time when Gambian women had been encountering problems of miscarriage and infertility, the people venerated her spirit for blessings. They sought help from her for their difficulties. Barren

women would bring white and red kolanuts as offerings in order to overcome their infertility; men too would bring offerings to turn their bad luck in business into profits and ward off evil; worried parents who sought protection for their offspring during the rite of circumcision; wrestlers to gain victory, and politicians to be made presidents (politicians in particular did this by sacrificing virgin girls to her).

2010

Armitage High School has a campus with very big and sacred baobab trees. The principal and teachers warn students to always avoid the trees, especially during the night.

Strangely, every Monday and Friday, girls would fall unconscious and many said they were attacked by the jinns. On this particular Friday, the class of 2010 are assembled for a PE class and all the students are decked out in their sporting gear. It is believed that jinns do not want to see ladies unveil their hair and for this reason Oustas Ceesay, the Islamic teacher of the school warns the girls to cover their hairs. But something messy happened, as is wont to happen from time to time.

Ndey Nikol, the head girl, has forgotten to cover her hair. The jinns have possessed her and many other girls at the school. Nearly 157 girls are affected and lessons are interrupted.

Parents from Janjanbureh - a town, founded in 1832, on Janjanbureh Island in the Gambia River - come take their daughters away from the school. They talk about how just before this incident, the psychosis of the phenomenon “Djiné Maimouna” resurfaces in Mingdaw Senior Secondary School, in Farato village where 14 young girls were victims of hysteria attacks.

Many believe that Maimuna's brother, L-Boy, also a jinn who is known for sleeping with virgin girls, attacked them at school. The word going around is that L-boy is back in schools. This psychosis began at the Masroor Senior Secondary School at Old Yundum. Traumatized, students stop classes to return to their homes, a decision supported by the administration - school had only just resumed the week before.

Now, parents no longer know if it's healthy to devote their children to an academic pursuit.

People say Maimuna, the jinn was still in Armitage High School when her brother attacked the girls. As a result of her kind-hearted nature, she goes on to record her first fight with her brother, ‘L-boy,’ and defeats him, thereby saving the possessed girls.

Maimuna appears in the form of the most beautiful girl in the school whom she possesses in order to apologise to the gathering of parents. Things returned to normalcy and people live to still tell this story to this present generation.

Most people who venerate Maimuna in real life believe that she's a very kind jinn and has granted the wishes of so many people.

While many people do not believe in the unseen and don't believe that jinns exist, many Gambians fully believe in jinns. Jann (Arabic: جان, romanized: Jānn, plural Arabic: جِنَّان, romanized: Jinnān or Arabic: جَوَان, romanized: Jawān) is the ancestor of the jinn in Islamic beliefs. They are said to have inhabited the earth before Adam, ruled by a king called Jann ibn Jann. The father of the jinn is known as Abu Al-Jann. In folklore, many believe the jinn were punished and turned into the weakest class of jinn; among the tribes of jinns, the worst are known as the Shaitins.

Gambians believe in other folklore such as Kelefa Sanneh, Mama Jankey Walli Sanneh, Ansu Massin and Musa Molloh Baldeh.

What is most interesting about the story of Maimuna is how hers unfolds like a fictional tale created in a person's mind. Many non-Gambians have no clue that she was an actual person who once lived in The Gambia.

About the Contributors

Hassan Kassim is a Kenyan-based Creative non-fiction writer, blogger and translator of Kiswahili works with over 2 years of experience. He is a beneficiary of the PenPen program by African Writers Development Trust(AWDT) and he holds his Bachelor's degree in Maritime Management.

Hassan writes about the ill-documented Communities of Coastal Kenya. His work has appeared in 'The Standard newspaper' and 'Writers Space Africa Magazine.' You can find out more about his work on his website hassankassim.com.

Tega Oghenechovwen has an MA in Literature from the University of Jos. He is interested in psycho-trauma, human liberty, and the battles between innocence and experience. His writing has appeared in Longreads, The Rumpus, Memoir Monday and elsewhere. He tweets @tega_chovwen.

Ngang God'swill N. writes, amongst other genres, primarily poetry, creative fiction and creative non-fiction which, considering where you're reading this, relates spirit, philosophy and form in a beautiful representation of our world. His works have been published in various magazines and publications (both electronic and in print) across the world. He lives in the Mountain

town of Buea, in the Southwest Region of Cameroon, with his family.

Best known for writing poetry on philosophy, religion and love, he has won the Young Cameroonian Writers' competition, and has published a full-length poetry collection. He occasionally writes drama and scripts and is working on his debut Novel. You can find his writing on his Medium handle [Ngang God'swill N.](#) and on his blog, [Creative Heaven](#). He enjoys Cameroonian cuisine, a little of Nigerian cuisine and lots of tea all day long. When he is not writing or telling some kind of story, he enjoys walks, philosophical and religion-based discussions.

Maryam Ibrahim Boyi is an upcoming writer from Katsina, in the Northern part of Nigeria. She has written several short stories and been a part of various literary programs across the country. She is an alumni of Goldsmiths university of London and Queen Mary University of London. She has a BA degree in media and communications with a specialization in Creative Writing and an Msc. in Marketing. She particularly enjoys fiction and poetry writing and is the co-founder of a Nigerian SME. Maryam currently lives in Abuja Nigeria.

Racheal Twinomugisha is a Ugandan fiction and nonfiction writer of children and young adults' literature. She is passionate about writing the African story that has never been told to

children, or is mostly ignored. She is also a poet who is passionate about talking to peoples' souls with her poems. She tackles interesting and realistic themes of life including fear, battle, failure, determination, decision making, Ubuntu, justice and injustice, among others and leaves a meal for your soul before the poem ends.

Racheal is an editor of Children's Literature and Flash Fiction with the Pearl Pen Magazine, a publication by Writers Space Africa-Uganda (WSA-UG) where she serves also as the Public Relations Officer. She is a literary reviewer and is the proprietor of Food Shop Ug(a grocery store, home appliances, and catering business).

She's visionary, passionate about life, leadership, teamwork, food, flowers, and children. She is currently studying law at Nkumba University, Entebbe

Sakina Traoré is a young Ivorian woman in love with words. From poems to fictions and songs, she started writing at a very young age. She wrote her very first fiction love story when she was 13 years. Today, she writes in the two languages dear to her heart: in French, her first language, on lesdefisdesakina.com and in English on Medium (@sakinatraor).

Through her stories, she wills to give her readers a getaway from their reality and a peek into her world. She also achieves this with her podcast: MDR, *le podcast sur la vingtaine* where she shares experiences and life lessons with her audience to help them get through their twenties.

This anthology is her first published work, fully written in English.

Okombo Dismas is a writer fascinated by all forms of prose and poetry. He is an Afrocentrist, and enjoys integrating Afrikan concepts, cultures and ideologies in his works. Other than writing, he loves chess and cycling. You can connect with him on twitter: [@poet-dismas](https://twitter.com/poet-dismas), and Gmail: writerdismas@gmail.com.

Fiske Nyirongo is a Zambian author based in Lusaka, Zambia. Her work appears in online spaces such as The Kalahari Review, Brittle paper (The Go the Way Your Blood Beats anthology), the Writers Space Africa magazine (February 2019 Edition), Boldly Mental, and Unbound magazine. Her first children's title was published in Cricket Magazine's Holiday themed issue in 2019. She co-created a children's book for the South African Book Dash model.

Fiske was shortlisted for the 2019 Kalemba short story prize and her fantasy novella, *Finding Love in Betrayal*, was published by Love Press Africa in 2019.

Ernestina Edem Azah is a public health nurse who lives in Accra, Ghana. She is a free thinker and an open-minded person who writes fiction and poetry but writes mostly poetry. Her work has been published in *Writers Space Africa Magazine*.

Esther Musembi is a lover of words first, writer of creative non-fiction, fiction, articles and an active blogger. She is also an editor and member with *Writers Space Africa-Kenya*, an affiliate of *Writers Space Africa*. Her work was recently published on the *Marathon County Public Library (mcpl.us)* on their COVID-19 pandemic issue.

When she's not writing, she enjoys reading other people's stories, responding to disasters as a disaster management professional. Occasionally, she goes hiking, camping and enjoys watching wild animals... from a distance. Some of her work is available at thineredbottoms.wordpress.com.

Tom Patrick Nzabonimpa is an electromechanical engineer who writes creative non-fiction short stories. He also writes romance and adventure fiction stories, mainly based on the

African Identity. He is a poet, a spoken word artist and a toastmaster.

Tom lives in Kigali with his father and sister. He mostly writes in the morning after drinking his black chai. In 2019, he wrote two screenplays in vernacular based on street life. Also, some of his work has been published in Writers Space Africa magazine.

Tom is an active member and volunteer at Afflatus Africa, a literary organization that empowers youth, he works as content creator and blogger. He is also an active member of Writers Space Africa and the head of its chapter in Rwanda.

When he is not writing, you can find him operating machines in a pharmaceutical company, playing basketball, watching movies or reciting poems. He blogs at tompoetrwanda.wordpress.com

Modou Lamin Sowe (ML Sowe) was born in Bakau Newtown, The Gambia- West Africa. He's an emerging West African writer and a scholar and an award-winning author, renowned playwright, a poet, novelist, a blogger, short story writer and an academic librarian. He is well known by his pen name, Modou Lamin Age-Almusaf Sowe.

ML is the founder of the Young Writers Association of The Gambia (YWAG) and the current Secretary General of the grey-haired Writers Association of The Gambia (WAG). ML was the

first young Gambian to have his book (The Memories of Reflection) approved by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education of The Gambia (MoBSE), to be used in junior schools as a supplementary reading material.

ML started writing at the age of 14 and his first book, Don't Judge the Book By The Cover, was well received. He is the winner of the Young Gambian Writer Award 2019 and the WAG Laureate for Children's Literature presented to him by the Writers Association of The Gambia, on 26th April 2019.

ML has worked at the African Development University (ADU) in Francophonie, Niamey, Niger, as a university librarian and director of academic research. He currently works at the National Centre for Arts and Culture (NCAC) /National Museum of The Gambia as an Administrative Assistant.

Photo Gallery (eBook Extra)

Nigerian Residency



Figure 1: Opening Ceremony with the Executive Director (Anthony Onugba)



Figure 2: The 6 Participants from West and Central Africa



Figure 3: Sakina Traoré from Cote d'Ivoire



Figure 4: Edem Azah from Ghana



Figure 5: Modou Lamin Sowe from The Gambia



Figure 6: Maryam Boyi from Nigeria



Figure 7: Ngang God'swill N. from Cameroon



Figure 8: Tega Oghenechovwen from Nigeria



Figure 9: Cultural Session with Kolabomi Adeko



Figure 10: Publishing and Marketing Session with Anthony Onugba



Figure 11: Group session - Maryam and Tega



Figure 12: Group session - Sakina and Edem



Figure 13: Group session - Modou and God'swill



Figure 14: Creative Writing Session with Nabilah Usman



Figure 15: Editing Session with Baboshiya Asake



Figure 16: Session on Understanding the 21st Century Reader with Henry Ijomah



Figure 17: Preparing cultural meals



Figure 18: Preparing cultural meals



Figure 19: Preparing cultural meals



Figure 20: Preparing cultural meals



Figure 21: Excursion - Arts and Craft Cultural Village



Figure 22: Excursion - Arts and Craft Cultural Village



Figure 23: Excursion - Arts and Craft Cultural Village



Figure 24: Excursion - Arts and Craft Cultural Village



Figure 25: Excursion - Arts and Craft Cultural Village



Figure 26: Excursion - Mall



Figure 27: Excursion – Mall



Figure 28: Excursion – Mall



Figure 29: Excursion - Bookstore



Figure 30: Excursion - Bookstore



Figure 31: Excursion - Bookstore



Figure 32: Excursion - Bookstore



Figure 33: Closing Ceremony with Journalists



Figure 34: Closing Ceremony - The Residents



Figure 35: Closing Ceremony - The Residents with Nabilah Usman



Figure 36: Closing Ceremony - Residents with the Project Team

Photo Gallery (eBook Extra)

Kenyan Residency



Figure 37: Hassan Kassim from Kenya



Figure 38: Tom Patrick Nzabonimpa from Rwanda



Figure 39: Esther Musembi from Kenya



Figure 40: Racheal Twinomugisha from Uganda



Figure 41: Fiske Serah Nyirongo from Zambia



Figure 42: Okombo Dismas from Kenya



Figure 43: Session on Understanding the 21st Century Reader with Sabah Carrim from Mauritius



Figure 44: Cultural Session with Kolabomi Adeko



Figure 45: Creative Writing Session with Edith Knight



Figure 46: Creative Writing Session with Edith Knight



Figure 47: Individual project - Dismas and Esther



Figure 48: Individual project - Racheal and Tom



Figure 49: Individual project - Fiske and Hassan



Figure 50: Editing Session with Vera Dinda



Figure 51: Group discussion on the need for collaboration among writers



Figure 52: Group discussion on the need for collaboration among writers



Figure 53: Group discussion



Figure 54: Tom and Hassan on Kitchen duties



Figure 55: Esther and Racheal on Kitchen duties



Figure 56: Esther getting set to cook



Figure 57: Excursion - Nairobi National Museum



Figure 58: Excursion - Nairobi National Museum



Figure 59: Excursion - Nairobi National Museum



Figure 60: Excursion - Nairobi National Museum - With Benny Wanjohi



Figure 61: Excursion - Nairobi National Museum



Figure 62: Excursion - Nairobi National Museum - Peace Path



Figure 63: Excursion - Nairobi National Museum - Peace Path



Figure 64: Excursion - Nairobi National Museum



Figure 65: Excursion - August 7th Memorial Park



Figure 66: Excursion - Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC) – Rooftop



Figure 67: Excursion - Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC) – Rooftop



Figure 68: Excursion - Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC) – Rooftop - Dismas with Gabriel Dinda (Founder of Writers Guild Kenya)



Figure 69: Excursion - Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC) – Rooftop



Figure 70: Excursion - Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC)



Figure 71: Excursion - Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC)



Figure 72: All Participants at the Kenyan Residency



AFRICAN WRITERS
DEVELOPMENT TRUST



ABOUT THE BOOK

This book is a collection of philosophies, cultures, joys, challenges, world-shifting actions and mundane everyday activities that define Africa and Africans. The 24 non-fiction stories are a product of the PenPen Africa Residency programme initiated by the African Writers Development Trust in partnership with the Writers Guild Kenya. This is co-funded by Culture at Work Africa and the European Union.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Nabilah Usman is a broadcast journalist, public speaker, writer and editor. She is a radio presenter at We FM, Abuja and hosts the show 'The Morning Mojo'. She serves as Programs Director at African Writers Development Trust (AWDT) and is Chief Editor of the literary magazine Writers Space Africa (WSA).

Kolabomi Adeko is the writer of *A Short Story*, a witty write about a guy called Nicodemus, as well as other non-fiction and flash fiction pieces. With a background in Engineering & Theoretical Physics, Kolabomi's work incorporates a methodology that is often lyrical on the surface but mathematical on introspect. He is currently working with the African Writers Development Trust (AWDT) on Pen Pen Africa Residency program as an assistant project officer.



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