

FAMILY

IN COLLABORATION
WITH ISDAO





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ABOUT Q-ZINE

Q-zine is a Queer African Youth Network (QAYN) project

Website: q-zine.org

Digital magazine: issuu.com/q-zine

Facebook: [Q-zine](https://www.facebook.com/q-zine)

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INITIATIVE SANKOFA D'AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST (ISDAO)

ISDAO is an activist-led fund dedicated to building a West African movement that advocates for sexual diversity and sexual rights through flexible grantmaking.

Website: www.isdao.org

Facebook: [InitiativeSankofa](https://www.facebook.com/InitiativeSankofa)

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A collaboration with Initiative

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ABAKAR MANSA

was born and raised in Accra, Ghana. She graduated from Senior High School in 2015 and got the chance to partake in a free Microsoft Office training by the British Council Ghana in 2016. Later, she studied a short course in Media Production and Scriptwriting from a popular media house in Ghana. She is a passionate Lesbian and Human Rights

Activist currently working with the Interfaith Diversity Network Of West Africa (IDNOWA) as Gender Equality Programs Officer. She enjoys conversations and work revolving around gender diversity and equality, especially when it has to do with marginalized groups. As a Christian who believes in God and spirituality, she cherishes loyalty and humanity in her everyday life.

AFFOUA NOELLY AKA

is a young woman who graduated with a Master's degree in Private Law with a specialization in Judicial Professions. Born into a modest family with a strict education, her passion for reading and writing was revealed in high school. She participated in several literary competitions such as the Cocody Book Fair Dictation in March 2022 (3rd Prize); the My Gender, My Talent 2021 Competition with her poem on HIV/AIDS awareness (3rd Prize); the Miss Spelling Bee 2015 (Finalist), sponsored by former National Assembly President Mr. Soro Guillaume. She has also co-authored a short story collection entitled *Thérapie Sans Conversion*, as part of the project *Un Café-Un Livre*.

Young, ambitious, dynamic, respectful and humble, she hopes to leave an indelible mark on the world through her writing.

AMANDA T. MCINTYRE

is a Trinidadian writer, artist, and advocate. She is the current Art Director at Pride Trinidad and Tobago. She was formerly the Art Administrator at New Local Space (NLS), Kingston. In 2020, McIntyre was part of the faculty for the La Práctica Group



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Residency and an advisor for the NLS, Curatorial, and Art Writing Fellowship. In 2018 she founded She Right Collective (SRC), a Caribbean feminist advocacy network that hosts platforms for contemporary literature, visual arts, and performance.

Her art practice is mainly rendered through performance, photography, and film. She is the creator of Dolly Ma and Dolly Ma Brigitta Baby Doll masquerades. In 2017 she was awarded the title “Ole Mas Champion”, by the Bocas Literary Festival and the National Carnival Commission of Trinidad and Tobago.

AMBER BUTTS

is a storyteller and scholar of delight whose practices are rooted in building reparative, joyful and interdependent relationships between the living Earth and all of its beings. She lives in Oakland and is currently at work on an intergenerational speculative fiction novel.

ANANIA T.

is an LGBTI+ activist and artist from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. They have been working in the Ethiopian queer movement for close to a decade, with particular focus in media, storytelling and international advocacy. They are interested in investigating culture, particularly the underground Ethiopian queer culture and movement building in oppressive environments. They're currently the lead editor of a digital magazine and media initiative called Negn, an expansive platform for LGBTI+ Ethiopians to share their authentic realities without censorship, judgment and restraint.



CAROLINE KOUASSIAMAN

is a queer, bilingual (English/French) African feminist of Ivorian and African-American heritage. She is a citizen of West Africa but currently calls Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana home(s). Caroline works with Initiative Sankofa d'Afrique de l'Ouest and is a decade-old in human rights and feminist philanthropy. She sees herself as a builder, a connector and a perpetual question-asker. She is passionate about coffee, family building, queer love, reading multiple books at once, cooking competition TV shows and mangoes.

CHIKA ANYANWU

is a trans man based in Nigeria. He is a student, a visual artist, and the founder of Chika Anyanwu Art, an art and craft business in Nigeria. He also teaches and mentors kids and adults interested in art.

As someone who understands the struggle of being an LGBTQI+ in a country like Nigeria, Chika still finds value in the life journey with every art he creates. He intends to never stop expressing his thoughts and imagination.

CLAIRE BA

is the managing editor of Q-zine. Queer and feminist, she finds joy in music, laughter, stillness and building things with her hands. She is most at peace when facing the ocean or staring at the sky.

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CLAUDIA & THÉO

met in November 2011 at Theo's birthday party organized by his girlfriend at the time. It was love at first sight! It only took one dance for the two to realize that they were soul mates. Since then, life has never been the same.

After a year of intense passion, Claudia and Theo separated, only to meet again in 2018 in unexpected circumstances. And their story, which never really ended, continued on. In 2019, they moved in together, and in 2021, the couple matured the desire to consolidate their family with a child via a double insemination that unfortunately did not work.

In April 2022, the couple flew to South Africa to make their love official in the eyes of the world. With the technical and financial support of IRANTI, Claudia and Theo exchanged their wedding vows on April 22, 2022.

Since Theo's coming-out as a trans

person, Claudia has accompanied him in his transition process. With the desire for a child growing stronger and stronger, the couple plans to start another IVF procedure very soon.

EHIKIOYA ATAMAN

is a dedicated administrator interested in equality, inclusion, and diversity. A graduate of Economics and Statistics, he has over 4 years of experience in the development sector focusing on advocacy for the girl child, quality education for out-of-school children, as well as human rights of sexual and gender minorities. Ehikioya currently serves as the Program Officer-Community Engagement for Equality Triangle Initiative. In this role, he has led and supported diverse projects including safety and security workshops for sexual and gender minorities, regional consultation and strategy plan development, and the 4Gates Project supported by the US Centre for Disease Control.



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GAYTURE

is a Burkinabè woman, a fervent defender of human rights and an independent activist from the diaspora. In her activism, she has worked extensively with LGBTQ women. However, she has often participated and collaborated with associations led by GBT men. She is passionate about music and sports :)

INZA & NOÉ

are heart-sisters. Life made them find each other, but nothing predestined them to meet. It is in their differences that they came together. Two women: one transgender, the other cisgender; one African, the other Western; one activist, the other ally of

the LGBTQIA+ community. They have learned from their differences through dialogue, listening, and caring, and together they have grown and evolved to replace their differences with commonalities.

Inza is the co-founder of the NGO Fondygender which advocates for the transgender community in Côte d'Ivoire. Noé is a creative artist interested in redefining gender and its place in society.



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on different societal issues, which has earned them a publication in Q-zine in 2022.

As a singer and performer, Kévyynn has four melodious songs to date that highlight their activism. These are all available on YouTube, the most listened to being AKPE (2020). They've also proven themselves in several artistic spaces in Benin such as Karaoke and Live-Acoustic events.

JUDE MUOJEKEPE

is a Nigerian human rights activist, development practitioner, and a healthy masculinity champion who has lent his voice in advocating for sexual minorities, youth, women and girls across different platforms.

As a gender advocate, Jude believes in and promotes the use of nonviolent communication to engage young people with a view to get them to turn around issues of gender, sexual and reproductive

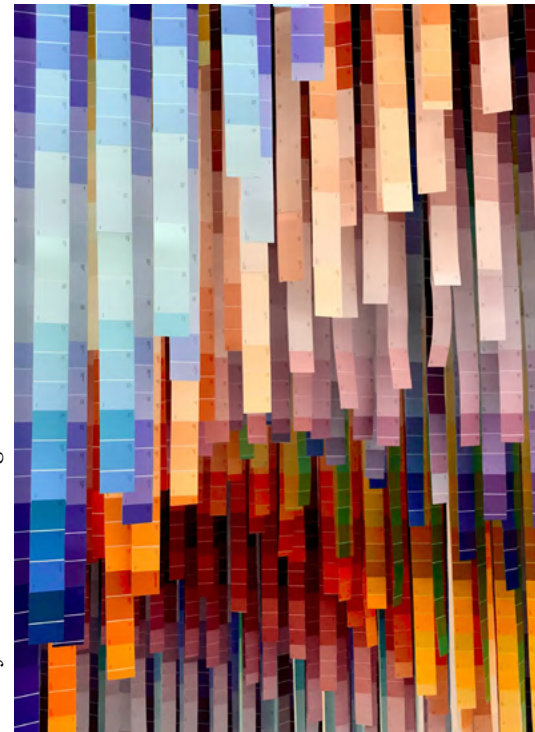
health, leadership, migration and conflict management within their communities. He believes in a world where everyone is respected regardless of age, status, sex, religious and gender identity.

His hobbies include reading, traveling, writing fiction and engaging young people in conversations that facilitates self-awareness, respect for all and inspires them to live a meaningful and purposeful life.

KÉVYNN HONFO

is a young non-binary activist, from Cotonou, Benin. After three years of English professional training at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Porto-Novo, Kévyynn is now involved as a volunteer in several community associations in Cotonou, spaces where they can finally be themselves. They participate in the sensitization and coaching of their peers on HIV/AIDS, and work to reduce the spread of the virus.

As an SEO web content writer, Kévyynn is also passionate about writing where they can express themselves and share their thoughts



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Kévyynn is a winner of the 2nd Edition of Mon Genre - Mon Talent (May 2020), an artistic expression contest organized by the Maison de la Culture des Diversités Humaines (Côte d'Ivoire) for members of the community. He also won Isolated But Connected (July 2020), a global virtual campaign, organized by EGIDES to sensitize LGBTIQ+ communities on the impact of COVID-19.



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KÓLÀ

a neurodivergent, Nigerian man of trans experience whose pronouns are He|His|Him, is a transgender rights & liberation advocate, youth advisory council co-facilitator & trans youth mentor, working in DEI at Davenport University.

He's a social media creator focused on the experiences of trans people, especially as it pertains to his home country, Nigeria. He takes a special interest in understanding language, the power we hold to change it, and all the ways it helps us interact with our personal identities and communities.

Kólà's online work stems from what he calls invisible visibility™. His work is often informed by lived experiences and focuses on the transmasculine perspective due to the added layer of invisibility they face within the queer & trans community.

Kólà also facilitates multiple online groups for queer & trans Nigerians. His work is centered on community, collaboration, education, self-determination & amplifying experiences that are often underrepresented. The only thing Kólà is as passionate about beyond this work is the gym & fitness.

LEE MODUPEH ANANSI FREEMAN (THEY/IT)

AKA Daddypuss Rex, is a Berlin-based, first-gen Sierra Leonean Yorùbà transgender multidisciplinary artist, writer, performer, creative event producer and community organizer. They are a breaker of chains, a storyteller, a somatic healer and educator. It is most times a good witch and sometimes a bad bxtch.

LYNN AURÉLIE ATTEMENE

Is a young ivorian LGBTQ feminist activist, cisgender lesbian residing in Burkina Faso. She is committed to the struggle for the right to freedom of LGBTQ people.



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Coordinator and Manager of the podcast and web radio of Emma. LInfos, a digital LGBTQ feminist and pan-Africanist media, with a degree in Business Management, Lynn Aurélie is passionate about communication, reading and writing. Her love for spirituality allows her to have an open mind and a benevolent approach towards others.



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Committed and determined, her discourse is always in favor of inclusion, freedom and acceptance of LGBTQI+ people. Lynn has great admiration for her community and it is this that motivates her to bring the stories of lesbian women to life to leave a record of their experiences, both sad and beautiful.

MAJINI YA MOMBASA

is a myriad of bodies. A lawyer who wishes she was a forensic chemist. A writer who writes to keep sane. An overthinker in a love-hate relationship with her sleep. A radical feminist. A lover of words and white wine, a night owl and a procrastinator, and Nina Simone's



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greatest fan. Her work has been featured in the 2022 James Currey Non-fiction Anthology, Jalada Africa, Brittle Paper, Ukoo Critique, Writers Space Africa among a few others. She was also longlisted for the 2020 Toyin Falola Writing Prize. When she is bored she googles owls.

MALIX CAMPBELL

is a 30-year-old transgender woman, poet, and Afro-trans feminist activist from Burkina Faso who advocates for the rights of transgender people in Burkina Faso.

As a psychosocial project reference, Malix promotes community health projects within the LGBTQIA community in Bobo-Dioulasso, her hometown. She is also the president of an identity-based organization based in Burkina.

In her writings, Malix explores spirituality, discrimination, as well as gender-based violence.

PACIFIQUE SOGNONVI

is a young feminist activist who advocates for women's rights in general and those of LBQ women in particular. She studied Chinese and is also a slam-poet. Through her writing, she is committed to making an impact in the LGBTQI community and leaving a mark in history. In this issue, she presents her conception of family in the form of poetry.

PHIDELIA IMIEGHA

is a writer and communications strategist passionate about using storytelling and the media for advocating for the human rights of women and LGBTQI persons. Phidelia's work is driven by a desire to live in a world where everyone lives in equal dignity and with equal rights, access and opportunities regardless of their statuses, orientations or identities. She enjoys spending time with her people, traveling and creating.

REGIS SAMBA-KOUNZI

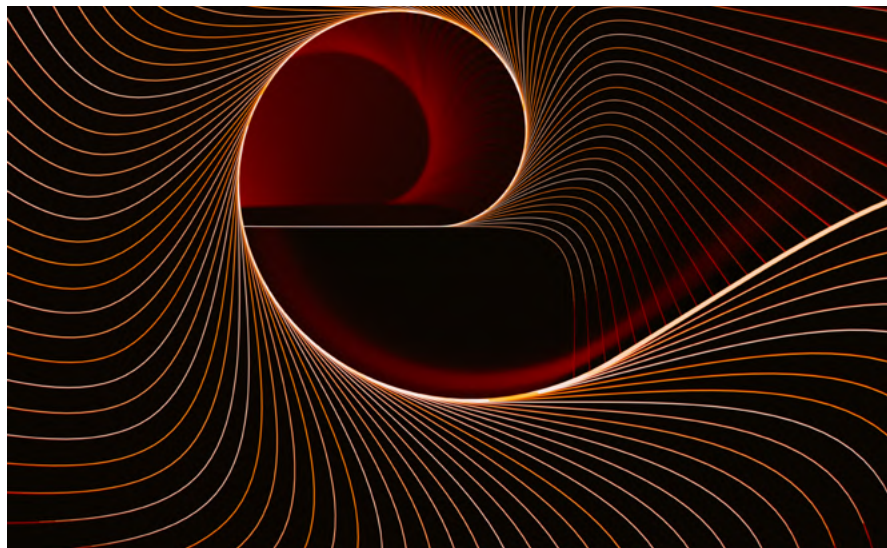
is a visual artist and photographer born in Brazzaville and working between Paris and Kinshasa. His multidisciplinary practice,

including collage, sound, video, text and installation, focuses on subaltern social groups, relegated to the margins of colonial and post-colonial history. He drew from his experience to develop a visual archive entitled "Projet Minorités" (The Minorities Project) that questions notions of coloniality and identity through the prism of AIDS. A former member of Act Up-Paris, he was an activist there for many years. His works were recently exhibited at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford from June 2021 to June 2022 and at the MUCEM in Marseille as part of the new collective exhibition HIV/AIDS: The epidemic is not over!

ROLI

is a 29-year-old Ivorian queer woman who has spent all her life in Côte d'Ivoire, but has traveled across West Africa. She currently resides in Morocco. Having done her coming-out for over five years now, she has been advocating in her own way to help queer people in Africa, including a lesbian women's group and an LGBTQ listening page on Facebook. Through fundraising and counseling, she tries to help people living in difficult

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situations. She has also set up a collaboration to organize LGBT ceremonies such as engagements, mock weddings, depending on the interest of community members.

She is curious by nature, loves to dabble in everything and is passionate about writing and reading. After winning third place in a queer writing contest in 2021, she continues to hone her skills, even though she already has a novel that she is hesitant to submit. She is also thinking of creating an association to help the social and professional integration of queer people in Africa.

ROSIE OLANG' ODHIAMBO

is a writer, artist and independent curator based in Nairobi, Kenya. Her current artistic and curatorial interests explore zines, artist's books and other unconventional book structures as formats to play across various disciplines, (primarily visual arts, literature, and poetry) engaging with decolonial, queer, feminist, and black radical traditions. Rosie has worked in research, communications, writing, and project management roles with arts and culture organizations in East Africa and the United States. She is the co-founder of MagicDoor, an experimental imprint in Nairobi, and has previously served as the Head of Programs at the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute.

RUFARO GWARADA

is committed to a world animated by unhu (ubuntu) – the understanding that collective and individual well-being are one and the same. She is a writer, facilitator, and organizer, working for gender justice, migrant rights, African-led solutions for Africans, and utilizing art and cultural expression as conduits for healing, liberation, and joy. Rufaro is home in Zimbabwe, Northern California, with Sangha, on the dance floor, and among creatives and those who strive for liberation of all peoples.

RUTH LU

is a 26 years old black Congolese woman (DRC) living in France who sometimes ventures where she is least expected. Freshly graduated

from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne with a degree in Gender and Development, she deploys her energy in various projects such as photography, writing, activism and entrepreneurship.

As an Afrofeminist activist, she is committed to issues of education, health, women and girls' rights, among others. With an overflowing curiosity, she sometimes writes texts for/about women and sexual minorities' rights. She recently made a documentary that gathers women's testimonies on the Mobutu period in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

SINGANO UACHAVE

is a Nairobi-based writer. Through their writing, they wish to explore the aspects and manifestations of loneliness and intimacy as experienced in different settings and



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age groups, addressing how we react to lack and the overarching impact our decisions have on other people's lives.

Their work has previously been published in *Down River Road*, *Jalada Africa*, and *Iskanchi Magazine*. Their work was also shortlisted for the inaugural Tiran Burrell Chapbook Prize.

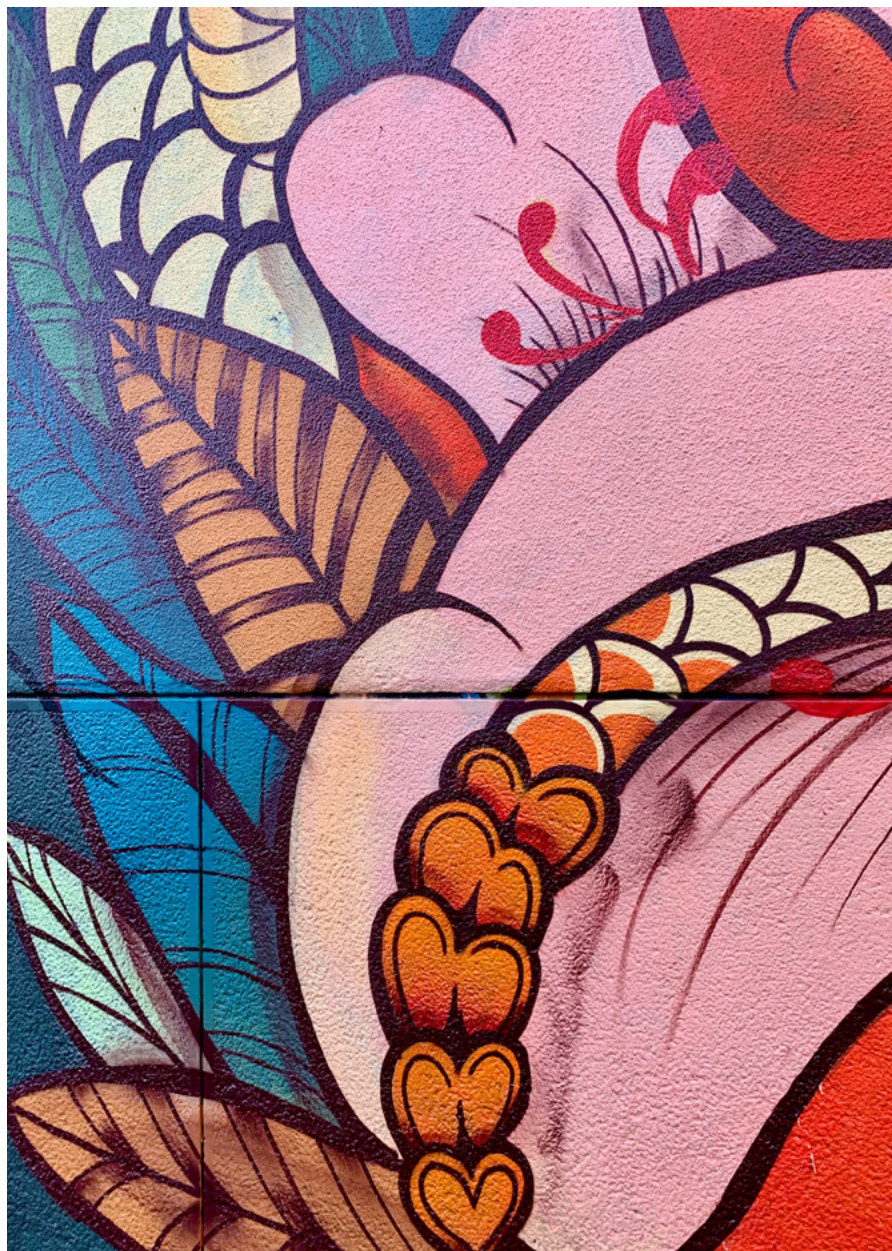
STÉPHANE SIMPORÉ

loves artistic expressions in all its forms, notably writing, photography, dance, and cinema, which address issues related to politics, feminism, culture, music, literature, gender, decolonization, and African queer culture. Since the creation of *Q-zine*, he has contributed to several issues.

UCHENNA WALTER UDE

has been writing stories since he was a child, and has write-ups which have appeared online, including in the 2012 anthology *So We Do Not Forget*, which was dedicated to the victims of the Dana Air Crvash. He also made it into the 2015 Writivism Short Story Longlist with his story, *To Have And To Hide*, which was published in the anthology *Roses for Betty And Other Stories*. He was a participant of the 2013 class of the Farafina Creative Writing Workshop, after which he became part of the creation of an anthology, *A Handful of Dust*. He debuted his first novel, *The Event*, in 2014, and co-authored a novella, *Love Eventually*, in 2016.

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THANK YOU ALL FROM

Q-zine & ISDAO

Editorial *Note*

“

*We are teaching our son to
be free, to develop critical
thinking, to be respected.
His very birth was a cry
for freedom.*

”

-Régis Samba-Kounzi



To build family as a queer, trans, intersex, or gender non-binary African is a revolutionary act. Samba-Kounzi captures this in his piece *Homoparentality: A Revolution Through Love*, which joins others in *Family*, this edition of *Q-zine*, that collectively challenges conventional understanding of family, and speaks to the ways in which we, as LGBTQI Africans, are expanding and deepening understandings and experience of family.

This issue of *Q-zine* came from a “meeting of the minds” between *Q-zine* and ISDAO. Over the past year at ISDAO, we have been discussing the question of family and its role in West African LGBTQI people’s everyday lives. We have also been inspired by the activism we have seen across the region, including in our own lives as members of the community. We were excited to collaborate with *Q-zine* to curate a space for our reflections on this. *What makes a family? How do we engage with and navigate our families of birth? How are we building our own families? How are LGBTQI people expanding and deepening others’ understanding and experience of family?* The pieces in this edition explore these questions and much more.

Family is not static. Family is dynamic. Family is evolving. In his piece, Regis Samba-Kounzi challenges us to redefine family to include relationships, connections, and bonds beyond those of blood or biology. Arafa Hamadi, in their interview with Claire Ba, titled *Family: People Who Choose to Understand You*, terms “ties of the heart” – the ways through which we maintain or build our families through the ties that we have. That these bonds have varying prominence and importance at different points in time in our lives. This idea resonates in several other pieces throughout the edition.

Family is about connection. As contributions by Pacifique Slam, Gayture, Ehikioya Ataman, and Kólá remind us, family comes from the bonds that we create, often with the people who comprehend us – but sometimes even with those who don’t, but love us. Family is at times difficult to define or explain. As Gayture

beautifully captures in her piece *The Family My Heart Chose* when speaking about her best friend’s younger brother: “I can’t find the right words to describe him. He is simply my family. And if there was a stronger word than family to describe how I feel towards him, I would have used it.”

Family is about choice. For many of us, our chosen families are those that we are closest to. Several contributors emphasize that the concept of a chosen family is not new or foreign to our contexts but is deeply embedded in many African communities. Anania T. in *Beteseb* reminds us that phrases like “ubuntu” and “it takes a village to raise a child” are not just good slogans but come from our contexts, highlighting the importance that community holds in our relationships and the role of community in sharing responsibilities.

Family is about loving, existing – and resisting. Abakar Mansa, Théo and Claudia testify about being intentional and making choices to love and to exist as queer families in Africa, in the face of all odds. Being affirmed as family often means doing so in private, as shared by Roli in the piece, *A Silenced Love*, where she chronicles her journey to, and experience of parenthood.

This compilation of voices comes at a critical moment – a moment to shift and reframe narratives. LGBTQI communities are increasingly coming under attack from “anti-gender” actors who claim that the existence of and advocacy for LGBTQI people constitute some of the biggest threats to African society and traditional family structures. For some of us, our families of birth have been sources of rejection, conflict, and trauma. While we recognize these realities, we also seek to tell other stories – stories that are not often told about LGBTQI African experiences of family. This issue of *Q-zine* celebrates and affirms the ways in which we often embody the very essence of family, but also how LGBTQI Africans are boldly challenging and expanding what family means.

Enjoy!

B. Caroline Kouassiaman

ODE TO MY FAMILY

By Inza & Noé
Photos by Noé

All photos were taken on September 25th, 2022, at an emergency shelter in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.



The making of a family

The family experience isn't always a walk in the park. There are arguments, disagreements, jealousy, fights, tears, but also love and laughter. Our family is like any other, with as many individualities as there are people in it. Our family is not bound by blood but by a common choice: to have the courage to be true to who we are, transgender women and a queer man, in a country that does not acknowledge us. It's in society's rejection and in precariousness that we found each other, and today, we form a family, away from our biological families.



Hair salon chit-chats

In a world without discrimination, we would be stylists, pastry chefs and traders. We wouldn't have to hide in this masculine prison and would express our femininity to the fullest. While we wait for happier times, far from the violence of everyday life, it has become our tradition to gather in our hair salon for our beauty makeovers.



Ode to my daughter

My dear daughter, when I look at you, I see a very beautiful woman whom I would have loved to look like; a woman whose silhouette, feminine features and beauty I envy. When you get your make-up done, I imagine you in fashion magazines or on the runways of renowned fashion designers. But in your eyes, I see sadness, violence, pain, loss of confidence, fear, doubt. The world is so cruel to us, but your courage and strength make me infinitely proud.



Mama Téné and her children

I smile because I have you here with me. I am your mother, the one who supports you, the one you can count on, the one who does not judge you. You are my family, the one I chose. With you, I feel loved and supported. With you, I can truly be myself, and feel valued. We have been rejected, humiliated, and abused. We have been accused of copying “white people’s stuff”, but today, together, we assert our Africanness as much as our identity. We are proud of our individualities as much as our ties to this beautiful family.



Stolen Smiles

Our life is not easy but we exist and will continue to exist. We will assert ourselves and will fight for society to acknowledge our diversity and the fact that we are just like everyone else. We are a sisterhood, bound by trust and camaraderie, in good and bad times. And, together, we will keep smiling through all of life’s trials.

fiction



Papa's Tea

By Amber Butts

Illustration by Creative Power

When your father first got sick and the whites of his eyes started turning yellow and your nightmares were filled with yellow eyes swallowing you whole, there was no one to tell. You'd wake up in cold sweats terrified. Your mouth aghast and dry. Your skin prickly. Your father staring at the altar with your grandfather's picture on it. His loose skin sagging off of everything; the bed, the wicker chair, the couch, the old sweet potato gone moldy, your heart.

Your father doesn't remember you anymore. His slow, loud, devastating breaths call out for his mother and never you.

Your hand curls around the mug you made for him before he was diagnosed with cancer. And he says, "Not that one."

His nose reaches up in a sneeze as you fill a new mug with cinnamon tea and a splash of rum.

You imagine all of his memories come back. Or at least, the memory that you are his child. Or, that he knows you somehow.

You hug yourself quick and then let go, the warm frost of something gone and present and burning.

You take his talking as a sign. Let the steam paint a version of what you want this relationship to be where both of you are remembered without the pain, the long nights, the horse whistles, the silence. And without the medication that makes him scream late at night in terror.

Your mother is not here. And his is dead.

You imagine a glass mirror with a voice near worry, cradling you. Asking you to settle into yourself before the hollow road grabs your belly and shakes. This is a moment when you want to just be here. But there is no here, your father's body sits jagged. An ocean of sadness. A relentless button made soft and gory.

When you were younger, your parents sang in a band. They liked to mix languages and dance on top of tables, with mouths full of food. And when that food fell, you were right there to pick it up and place it between your teeth or in an old handkerchief to feed the crawdads later on.

There's a poultice you learned to make from your grandmother and your father asks for it, even when his skin isn't swollen. One day you bring Mama Evette to him and she tells you, "Make your peace. He won't last long." She gives you three teas meant to last before he goes and you don't give them to him because you are tired of everyone leaving.

Eventually you do though, because his eyes sag like pothos when they don't get enough water or sun. But not before he develops jaundice and gout.

Because you have waited so long to administer the teas, they change color and taste bitter. You know you'll need to go get more but for now you just

want him to remember you. Want your name to touch his tongue and slip into memory. You want it to take hold. It doesn't. Even when he's confused.

So you go out and avoid the girl who tries to meet your eye. The girl who asks you everyday if you're okay.

Oat tea is first on Mama Evette's list. She says that your father will need it to fight his depression and fatigue. You're used to the grain in bread, porridge and sometimes meat. But the tea has a dry flavor to it that makes your throat crack. It isn't for you anyway, but you've made a habit of trying everything before you put it towards your father's lips. **You feel closer to each other like that somehow. He wasn't a particularly good father. He barely paid you attention.**

Since the stems have gone bad, you make it into a salve and put it around your neck, where the eczema is the worst. When your hand is returned to you, a layer of your skin is shining and flaky.

Because you've already chopped the leaves and put them into a flower jar, you search the house for a lid. As soon as you find it, you step onto a curved nail that sends your body convulsing like that one time Tia asked you to lift your arm and

point at the telephone wire on Pino Street. And she grabbed the tip of your hand and pulled it down like lightning. You wail, but only on the inside because your father is in the next room and he still doesn't know who you are.

After cursing, you grab the rest of your tequila, pour some into the bottle top and use it as a suction device. While you wait for it to do its thing, you take three swigs. Then you fill the jar with leaves and pour tequila until everything is a bath. You close the top, but because you don't know how long your father will last without it and you can't wait two weeks for it to hold, you bury it underneath the loose floorboard in the living room, shaking it once a day.

You leave for the afternoon. When you return, you have the freshest oat leaves you've ever harvested. You wrap them in string and flip them upside down. Letting them hang above the sink in the kitchen, near the broken cabinets and starfruit. The fruit flies dangle beside you but don't attempt to approach the oat.

While you wait for them to dry, you make a small tincture that sedates your father. Within 48 hours, you have to double the dose. He never falls asleep but he does stop asking for his mother. Yes, your face is still hers so this is a sort of remembering you think. But then he stops asking for her too, even when you get close to his face and wipe the drool off his chin, the spittle dancing in groups.

Wood hunters find orange-leaf nightshade the easiest because they are always out. So you ask the girl to gather it for you. She says you've never asked for her name. You don't ask now. You also don't miss the way her body jumps out for a split second before she turns around sharp like a wolf. Her eyes alight and swaying. You ask her what that was and she shrugs. You don't have time to wonder.

Mama Evette started to tell you what the nightshade was for but you knew already. It helps prevent cancer cells from regenerating. And yes, you already know that your father's ailments are beyond cell regeneration, but he doesn't keep food down and you think this might provide some kind of relief.

If gathered correctly, the berries can even be made into a pie. When cooked, the viciousness of poison decreases substantially and turns into a bittersweet syrup. The initial smell is still poisonous, so anyone who cooks it is recommended to do so outside. Last year, you cooked it inside, biting into the still warm nightshade pie and nearly died.

You decide to make nightshade tea instead of pie just to be safe. You put gloves on to remove the stickers because they're also poisonous. You miss one of the stickers later on and it pokes you. So you sit waiting to die again on the prickly floor.

You don't die.

The berries are still in the bowl and the water is cold now. You light a fire again and start the process over. By the time you get the tea to your father it's late and you've forgotten to soak the leaves in oil. Had you done that, they'd have helped purify what blood he has left and prevent seizures.

You can find honeysuckle anywhere. Your father's pancreatic cancer has traveled to his stomach and now blood. So you place the honeysuckle on some paper in the oven and dry the leaves for five minutes. His voice comes back for a while and he sings a song you don't know. But it makes you sad anyway. Makes you miss your mother and everyone else.

When he sings, he keeps his eyes wide open and you swallow a fist sized lump in your throat every time.

The tumor outside his belly is bathing in a honeysuckle salve. And he blames you for trying to save him when all he wants to do is be left to die. You know that. He calls you a name you don't know and asks you to stop making him tea.

Actually, he throws his mug towards you and the hot tea makes a welt the size of a sword below your navel all the way to your foot. His eyes are wide like when he sings and you stagger back, suddenly woozy. You eventually give him three times the dosage of oat tea and he falls asleep, mouth as wide as a gulf. And you imagine covering his mouth for the rest of the night.

You still have the honeysuckle berries. Their poison laughing at the base of your neck, the way the fruit flies gallop towards the great seed. You eat one of the berries and wash the bright fleshy taste down with some tea hoping that you won't wake up.

When you wake up the next day, your door is ajar and your father who hasn't gone to the restroom without you in five years is staring at your feet. He isn't wearing what you put on him three days ago and his mouth is plasma, star rocket, clutter. You think one of the tonics has stimulated his muscles, allowing him to get up. You shuffle to your feet, convinced he'll fall soon.

As you lift your body, a large cluster forms in front of your eyes and you start to vomit. It gets everywhere and for a few moments you're choking. You're choking and blood is rushing to your head and you want one breath to come out even if it means it's your last one. And for some reason the girl is there then. A slow smile spreading across her face and a quick knuckle to your back like a storm.

You wake up like that. A storm, a bucket, a sheet and an echo. Your father is still asleep after you've cleaned everything up. Your throat is raw and you know you should drink some tea or water but you don't. All you want is to climb into the river of her hair and braid a knuckle into her skin.

When you lift out of the bath and lotion your back, you see the bruised shadow of a fist near the tea leaf tattooed into your skin. The mirror shakes against the floor and you're ready for it to fall, ready for everything to shatter finally.

You had the tattoo done five years ago. That was before your father was sick-sick. You had friends then and were supposed to get it cleaned that same year with them but your wants shut up like a clam a long time ago. And no one wants to be around a clam.

When you had asthma, your mother'd change up her honeysuckle tea recipe:

- 1 spoonful of fresh honeysuckle flowers
- 2 spoonfuls of mullein
- 2 cups of honey
- 4 boysenberries

You still have a half jar of the last one she made. The times when you can no longer take missing her, when your skin aches and you start convulsing, you ration out one spoonful and mimic the way she'd put it in your mouth. At first you are embarrassed for doing this. You wonder what people would think if they saw you like that. And then you stop caring because she was your mother and no one watches you now but the bluejays at the window. No one checks on you anymore.

Your father is finally awake and the spittle on his gown is near dry. You decide to make him bread without yeast because it's one of the only ways he'll take his pills now. He knows they're in his food, but he still wants it this way. You imagine his pills melting like his memory, picture the bright spots fading on his brain. You wonder like you've wondered for the last several years who will die first. And how.

You give him some more rum tea as you wait. Once the bread is done you roll it into nine balls (one pill at the center of each ball) and place some miso soup in front of him. He dips it and smiles stupidly as you go outside to take a hit of your cayote tobacco.

The breeze immediately cools the hot pang belting up inside you. You sit on the half rotted weaving chair, thinking of the shape of the basket in the kitchen and the girl's smile. This mixture makes you dizzy and a quick whoosh has you giggling. You didn't pound this tobacco yourself and somehow that makes it better. You go inside to find your father snoring at the table, all his food gone. You take him to his room and lay him on his side, scribble a quick note ("I'll be back in two hours") and kiss his forehead. As if he will remember. As if he can read.

By the time you get to the last spot you saw the girl, there is no pain in your body and you feel like running. So you do. The tobacco makes you feel alive and light like smoke from a hot fire people are always trying to plug. You stop thinking about that. You let your legs move up and down, let them burn and fill your belly, your breath hot and shining.

And then the girl is there. And then you are in her bed. She holds the knife underneath her pillow in her left hand and when you squirm to move to the other side you're all at once awake and remembering your father. She doesn't even open her eyes when she tells you that you can go. She says she knows.

You don't leave yet. You turn her body over in your tongue and wait for all of her to pour out. When she does, she tastes like nettle leaf and slippery elm. You remember their benefits:

Soothes sore throat

Reduces inflammation

Lowers blood pressure

Heals burns

Helps with diarrhea

Then you remember the first time you had it. Your mother outside over a pot with what looks like pieces of tree bark. Her face awash and colicky. Her skin blistered, voice feeble, smile gone. The trees around her not moving. Your body stone.

And you run from the girl's house into your own. Your father is coughing, you hear it before you get inside. The oven is not on but you see stars anyway. He looks at you then. Eyes wild and alive.

And starts to sing.



ON HAPPINESS

BY SINGANO UACHAVE

If you ask me of happiness
I will tell you I lived by the sea
And had died three times over
Before I gave its scent a body
Did I know then, the meaning of abundance
To jump in the water to splash it at my kin
Delight that it wouldn't end
And hear family warn me that so vast so greedy the sea
That it would steal me if lacked care
I confess I never believed it
I had known greed because I had died three times before
In the dawn in the moonlight and the midday
The waters' only sin had been giving themselves too much
If you asked me of happiness I would tell you of this sin



Photo by Ian Gichobi

And I will tell you
Of this mother who sings a lullaby
With no radio or village to share
The sounds the words the kindness
All of which she slowly forgets
So she hums
Promising me and herself
Of happiness to come

Also on songs I will remember
Slow elephant herd that carried friends from school
My chasing their merciful pace
As one Bluetooth transfer turns to three
And of those few 200 megabytes of storage
Three songs were given by me
But that is not all
The herd had slowed
Even with the abundance of tomorrows back then
It slowed enough to say goodbye

On sea too I will tell you
I have never dreamed of happiness such as
What I feel today
And it started with a sibling telling me
Of how our bodies bear our pain
How the gut the brow the heart all of these crumple
But then
Love too is stored in our bones as we steward it
And oh, to be one with a thing so beautiful
That can't wait to go where it belongs
A kiss a hug the arms of its creator
And so I will tell you
That home is not a place but a moment
And the waters I claim
Live only tomorrow when I'll next see them

And if you ask me of happiness?
I, like my favourite poems, will tell you
My children have a family that spans the world
I am rich in lullabies and I remember their words
We sing together
I know greed yet met boundless abundance
I've much to give
And we sin together
So much space was I offered that I count it in songs no more
And in between kisses, hugs, and my arms
I will tell you of happiness
Not as a promise but as the woman who gives it

non-fiction

Twin Souls

BY LYNN AURÉLIE ATTEMENE

Illustration by Creative Powerr

“The more I listened and talked to her, the closer and more connected I felt to her.”

I had met her several times. Our interactions were brief and mundane. She was an ordinary person that I could have met anywhere but would probably never have paid attention to.

A “hello” had always been enough.

One beautiful rainy and windy morning, I was in a mood to open up to the world, read articles, watch tutorials, and laugh at funny videos. The weather was perfect for dreaming and lazing around. Cup of tea in one hand, I moved a chair to the balcony and settled down, trying to immortalize the social scenes before me.

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok. That’s when I came across the twins. I became captivated by their resemblance and synchronicity. At that moment, without really knowing why, I wished that I had a twin sister, a sister, or at least an older sister with whom I could have had a similar relationship. It was a silent wish, a wish that came out of nowhere. I already had a family and I loved my siblings, but I wondered how strong our relationship was; I wondered if blood was enough to create a synchronicity as perfect as what I had just watched on the video.

What does it take to build such a relationship with someone?

I needed to be able to see myself in another person, to find parts of my story and my experiences in that person, to share similar beliefs. I wanted more than a twin. I needed someone who had a soul like mine.

This got me thinking and I realized that I didn’t feel connected to the people I called family since I was born. Although we shared the same blood, the same parents, we were so different. This realization raised many questions. Being born from the same womb was not enough. I became convinced that our first mission on earth was to find our true family, the family that we would share our values, principles and aspirations with.

When I woke up a few hours later, it was still raining. Yes, these questions had put me in a deep sleep. The rain was falling heavily and there was nothing one could do except wait and enjoy the sound it made as it fell on our roofs and watered our lands.

Suddenly, as if she had read my mind, I received a message. She had contacted me on Messenger.

She wanted me to contribute to her project.

- "Hey, I know you! I see you every now and then", I answered.
- "We also follow each other on social media. You often like my posts, but you never say much.
- "Nothing to say."
- "That's a shame! So, about that project?"
- "What about it? What is it about?"
- "I want to start a lesbian book club and I thought we could work together"
- "I'm flattered, but no thanks."

She called me immediately after that last message and without knowing why, I picked up. It was the most beautiful and sincere conversation I had ever had. At no time was I afraid of the unknown. The universe had guided me to this stranger, and from then on, our simple "hellos" turned into long and interesting conversations. We were truly interested in each other.

"The more we talk, the more I feel connected to you."

This project became our project. You opened your world to me and I found people like us, like you and I, people who were just as vulnerable as we

were. The universe had chosen us to be twin souls. We were twin souls.

I had wished for a sister to whom I could open up to, to whom I could talk about myself; this self that my "family", the one I was born into, did not know.

I had wished for a sister with whom I could let my tears flow; these tears that my "family", the one I was born into, would never see.

I had wished for a sister with whom I could share my experiences; those experiences that my "family", the one I was born into, will never know about.

I had wished for a sister with whom to fight my battles; those battles that my "family", the one I was born into, would never fight with me.

Today, I cry and I laugh with you.

Today, with you, my dreams, our dreams, come true.

I can see and feel your fears, just as you do mine. And from this shared fear, we find solace.

Knowing that you loathe the things I loathe comforts me.

With you, I am happily lesbian and imperfect. We have similar stories and this makes us feel safe.

Together, we face highs and lows, and come back stronger and even more motivated.

Gesus, a Cameroonian friend, once told me: “Family is not only blood, but it’s also bonds, experiences, similarities, knowledge, patience, tolerance and lots of love.”

I found a family in you and you led me to other people who’ve become family. We all need a family that listens and understands us.

I made a wish unconsciously and it came true. I had a need, and that rain that had lasted a whole day had answered it. That rain had come full of magic and positivity. I had felt it. I connected with it and in turn, it had connected us with each other.

“Would you like me to be your big sister?”

“I am your little sister, the one who loves you, who will always love you regardless of your flaws and imperfections. Our family may have emerged from nowhere, but it will become the most beautiful family. Much more than blood, resilience will keep us together.”



Beteseb

BY ANANIA T.
ILLUSTRATION BY ROSIE OLANG

The equivalent word for "family" in Amharic, Ethiopia's official working language, is *beteseb*. It's a combination of two words: in its literal sense, "bet" means a house, and "seb" (depending on how it is used) loosely translates to kin, so "beteseb" is used to refer to blood or marriage relatives who share the same dwelling.

Translations never capture the full meaning of words, but the essence is still there.

I was always told growing up that blood is thicker than water – that family is the most significant relationship in life and the fundamental building block of society. This was further reinforced by religion and the media, which only painted a single image of what families should look like – a man and a woman sharing traditional gender roles and children that look like them. Anything that veers outside the line is deemed unconventional or downright unacceptable.

But the bonds you choose are also just as significant as those to which you are bound by blood. For example, "Beteseb" has another layer of meaning when used by Ethiopian LGBTI+ communities. We don't have a lot of words describing queerness or same-sex relationships in our local languages, and those that we do always tend to be pejorative. The lack of language forces one to self-define, to add meaning, or appropriate.

When we, as queer Ethiopians, talk about family, we are often focused on those lifesaving and affirming relationships that we have forged on our own. When we ask "Beteseb nachu?" we are saying "Are you part of our large extended gay family?" It is a form of acceptance, a welcome.

A code word

For us LGBTI+ Africans, our identities are often in direct conflict with our cultural norms, traditions, and societal attitudes. As a result, in order to survive, we hide parts of, or all of ourselves. We rarely receive the support we desire from our families and are compelled to create our own. These families, at times, mirror the heterosexual models that reject us and sometimes stand beyond binaries, redefining what relationships mean, feel, and look like for us.

Interestingly, **the idea of a chosen**

family is not a new concept, especially in Africa, where our interactions are steeped in communal relationships.

Phrases like "ubuntu" and "it takes a village to raise a child" make more apparent the place community holds in our social and cultural relationships, fostering the sharing of responsibilities. I have aunts and uncles that are not related to me by blood but with whom I have closer familial ties than those in my extended family – all of whom are friends of my parents and have played important roles in my upbringing.

So, this begs the question, is blood really thicker than water?

A quick Google search reveals that the proverb is one of the most frequently misquoted sayings. The original adage means the exact opposite. The phrase "The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb" is the correct expression and implies that the bonds you choose to form are as significant (if not more) than those to which you are bound by blood.

As queer people, we tend to emphasise our similarities over our differences. We accept one another because of our shared identities, similar experiences, and the understanding of the challenges that come with navigating a heteronormative world in a queer body. The ties we forge are particularly precious because of our openness to the infinite ways that family and friendship manifest.

There's a lot of tenderness and intimacy in that.

We often think of sexual relationships when we talk about intimacy, but the most extraordinary and intimate moments I've had in my life have been platonic.

My best friend and I have this unspoken understanding that, whenever we get the chance, we oil each other's hair. There is a lot of care in that act: having someone between your laps, their head gently pressing against your belly as your fingertips deftly pass through their roots, tracing shapes and patterns on their scalp as they go. Your hands express how invested you are in their comfort and the nourishment of their crown.

It's a form of healing.

That intimacy is also there in the casual but powerful "u good?", "hey bitch!", "yo!" texts you receive after a few days of ghosting; it's in the curated memes living rent-free inside your

DMs, each one seemingly fitting your current circumstance perfectly; it is in the silence on the group car ride home after a long day together.

One of my favorite TV shows of all time is Pose. The show was groundbreaking in part because it not only showed the authentic lives of black and brown queer people in New York in the late 1980's and early 90's at the height of the AIDS crisis, but also because it showed queerness in all its flaws and glory. Central to Pose's premise is the chosen family, in all its perfect imperfections.

In the words of Blanca – the heart and soul of the show – "A house is the family you get to choose [...] I provide a support system for my children and housing if you need it." **I too was once a young queer kid in need of a community, and meeting my tribe changed my life.** This fortuitous encounter has come to define my life, allowing me to expand into my truest form, with no restriction and judgment.

I once received a text message from one of my queer siblings, telling me they consider me to be the older sibling they never had and the younger sibling they always want to protect. We are the same age, but we fill different roles in each other's lives – we're parents, confidants, caretakers, co-conspirators, and, at times, a voice of reason – a much needed reality check.

"Family" might translate to "beteseb" in Amharic. And beteseb might literally mean "house of kin," but my beteseb, my chosen family, is expansive in ways that sometimes words fail to capture. It transcends four walls.



in conversation



Knowing Our History To Redefine Family

A conversation with

**JULIA
MAKWALA**

*INTERVIEW AND PHOTOS BY
RUTH LU*

Advocating for the rights of LBTQ people, especially in Africa, is a daunting task. Yet, activism can also open the door to a larger community that can become a source of acceptance, safety, comfort and support. For this issue, Q-zine met with Julia Makwala, a dedicated LBTQ activist from the Democratic Republic of Congo who shared with us her activist journey and her thoughts on family.

Can you introduce yourself to our readers?

My name is Julia Makwala, I am an Afro-feminist activist and I serve as the national Executive Secretary of Oasis DRC, a feminist LBTQ association based in Kinshasa, with branches in other provinces.

How did you start at Oasis?

It all started from questions I had about the situation of LBTQ women. Specifically, I wanted to understand why we were not taken into account in our country, why we were unable to benefit from certain health services, especially in terms of sexual and reproductive health, including HIV/AIDS. In DRC, the issue of HIV is a gateway for discourse on homosexuality. In HIV policies, there is a general call for no one to be left out, but the reality is that sexual minority women are. There are sexual and reproductive health programmes in which lesbians are not specifically included. For instance, in order to access certain HIV services, sexual minority women are forced to pose as sex workers because

sex workers are recognised as a key population in the fight against HIV/AIDS, alongside men who have sex with men, drug users, and more recently, after years of advocacy and lobbying, transgender women.

But when it comes to lesbians, bisexual women and trans men, there is still a certain lack of diligence. Initially, this neglect was explained by the misperception that sex between women was not a transmission channel for sexually transmitted diseases. Simply put, our sexual orientation was not taken seriously, and the health risks were overlooked. Of course, **we know that patriarchy plays a very important role in the invisibilisation of LBQ women, even within the queer community.** In DRC, when we talk about homosexuality, we think more of men who have sex with men

than of women. So, it's all these questions that led me, alongside some friends, to set up an association for sexual minority women and feminists. And that's how Oasis RD Congo was born as a feminist LGBTQ association.

How would you describe your work and what have you learned about yourself through your involvement with Oasis or the wider LGBTQ community?

I would describe my work as striving for the emergence of recreational spaces, spaces for free speech, for socialization, free from religious and cultural restrictions. I also work to deconstruct prejudice and combat the exclusion, discrimination and stigmatization of women in general, and sexual minority women in particular. **Through my activism, I have learned that despite our different perspectives and unique experiences as women, we all share the same vision: to defend and promote the rights that are most legitimate to us so that we can live in dignity.**

As you know, this Q-zine issue is about family, so we are curious to know what this theme means to you.

For me, a family is a safe space that guarantees that one will be accepted with their differences. This acceptance is the foundation of social cohesion and is the starting point of this relationship. When I think of my family, I think of my father, my mother, my siblings, and the community I was born into. Because of my open-mindedness and my involvement in the LGBTQ community, **I would extend this notion of family to any community of individuals who love and support each other.** I strongly believe that family should be based on principles of care, kindness, solidarity, and comfort. These, I believe, is what makes a family, because one can be born to individuals who do not embody these principles.

It's interesting that you started defining your family as the people you were born to. You alluded to it a little bit, but besides your biological family, who do you consider family?

The people I consider family are people with whom I share similar values, people who strive for peaceful co-existence and are open to difference and diversity. It's true that the concept of family has evolved over time, but for me, family is a safe, reassuring, socializing space that also provides support. I believe that family is first and foremost about values, bonds, unity, and principles for which one is ready to fight.

For a long time, the concept of family has wrongly been limited to the portrait of the father, mother, children, etc. How do you think



we can change this perception of family, especially for those of us who live in societies that do not show examples of families outside the “norms”?

Well, **when you are outside the norms, you build a family outside the norms!** (laughs) We only give what we have, right? Luckily, things are changing. We are no longer in the Stone Age (laughs). I often say that we need to ensure the dissemination of legal instruments, as well as historical and social knowledge. Take DRC for instance! The country has ratified several legal agreements, yet the population does not always know about the provisions of these agreements. For a long time, the norm was a father, a mother, etc. This is true, but things are changing, people are beginning to see things differently. We used to say *“this is our culture”*. But I often wonder what our culture is. When you ask people to explain the culture in question, they are unable to do so. And when you explore that very culture in more depth, you realize that all of this existed [in reference to homosexual practices]. If you do some research, you can learn about the *Bitesha*, in the Kasai. There is also another

tribe in the Central Kongo province, known as the *Woyos*, where when a girl reached puberty, she was interned with the older women of the tribe to learn how to live with a man in all respects, sex included. These women were in charge of the girls’ sexual education and had to show them how to do it. So, they had to have sex with each other to show the girls. Of course, sexual intercourse does not equate sexual orientation. But what would you call what they were doing? Homosexual intercourse? Maybe? I don’t know. All of this to say that it’s often ignorance that makes people say certain things. I am convinced that **to change mentalities, it is important to conduct research, to produce knowledge on our experiences, because if we don’t, no one will do it for us.**

Any final remarks for our readers?

I would like to take this opportunity to pay a heartfelt tribute to Nancy Bitsoki who was an LGBTQAfro-feminist activist and my partner. She passed away recently but I will always consider her a member of my family.

And to the readers, I would simply remind them that a family should be a safe space where people are accepted with their differences.

non-fiction

A photograph of a couple in wedding attire. The man, on the left, has dark dreadlocks tied back and is wearing a white dress shirt. The woman, on the right, has long dark hair with a silver headband and is wearing a white off-the-shoulder dress. They are embracing and kissing. In the background, there are wooden pillars, a mirror, and a table with a white and black checkered tablecloth, glasses, and a vase of flowers.

WEDDING VOWS

BY THÉO & CLAUDIA

Theo's Vows To Claudia

Deep down, I've always known that each one of us
had, somewhere in the world, another half who would
complete us.

I have always been certain that somewhere on earth, in
heaven, among the stars,

In this life or another, my other half was waiting for me.

I have wandered from one soul to another, without ever
finding myself.

I had almost lost hope, until that 22nd of October, 2011

When I set my eyes on you.

At that moment, I knew I would never be alone again.

Because I found you, I will never be lost again,

Because I love you, I have fulfilled my destiny,

Because you said yes, no other "no" will ever hurt me,

Because you love me, no weapon can ever hurt me.

Never have I seen the world as I see it in your eyes.

Life has never seemed so bright as it does in your arms.

I vow to keep the flame of our love burning.

May the sparkle of our love pierce the sky way beyond
our lives now united.

May our united hearts forever beat in unison throughout
the universe.

I will love you to the brink of weakness.

And even then, I will love you even more.

My love, my destiny, my eternity.

Claudia's Vows To Theo

I am not one to improvise, so I wrote this down.
Theo, I wanted to tell you that ever since we met, and especially since we decided to be together, it hasn't been an easy ride. Despite our sexual and gender identities leading to the rejection of our love by society, We also have very different personalities (especially mine which I admit can be difficult), and have had to face lots of trials which nonetheless made us grow closer. All the difficulties that we have overcome have made me realize that we were made for each other and that you were the only person that I needed in my life. It's true that we promised to never hide anything from each other, but there is one thing I never told you. When I was younger, one day during catechism classes, our instructor had asked us to trust the Lord and challenge Him by writing down our wishes, and that God would grant us our heart's desires. My wish was to meet the man of my dreams. This is how I had described him: shorter than me (laughs), strong enough to support and protect me. He would be attractive, generous, outgoing, kind, funny, sincere and faithful. I had also written "who loves alcohol", but later crossed it out. I don't think God noticed that I crossed that out (laughs). Lastly, the man of my dreams would be affectionate, charming and love me above all. Today, on April 21st, 2022, it is with deep emotion that I thank the Lord for this beautiful gift because that



teenager wish has become reality.
I thank the Lord because He has
put by my side the person who
comes closest to perfection.
May He be blessed and may He
continue to bless us, my darling.
I love you beyond the imaginable.
I love you even more than what
you can see, and everyday, I will
strive to make you the happiest
man alive.

I will end my speech by telling
you that no time spent with you
will ever be enough so let's start
with eternity.



non-fiction

Family And The *See-saw* Of Coming Out

BY UCHENNA WALTER UDE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY AISHA SHILLINGFORD





Coming out can be an incredibly freeing experience for some of us as we are liberated to finally openly identify as who we are.

Freed from all those expectations that are placed on our lives by family and friends; the lies we tell to thwart suspicion; the silences we respond with to situations that demonize our identities; the damaging relationships we endure because they come with the territory of being in the closet; the fears we live with over one day being found out; living as ourselves secretly.

And for many queer people, this freedom is beautiful. It makes us better people, because we can only be our best selves when we no longer have to hide who we are. It puts us in more honest relationships and

creates an environment around us where we can be compasses pointing to each other's humanity and away from prejudice. Yet for some people, coming out is bittersweet. It's a combination of some of these beautiful experiences with some of the more trying ones. And, for other queer people still, coming out is just the beginning of another hurdle they have to conquer. My coming out was bittersweet.

I came out to my mother – and by so doing, to my family – in September 2018. As someone who'd only ever cared about how my life affected my immediate family, coming out to them was all I ever cared about.

And when I finally came out, I refused to be held back by anything else. I made myself as free as I could be under the circumstances of the society I live in, speaking out, using my life to try to normalize my reality as a gay man...

And constantly locking wills with a mother who has refused to accept the truth of who I am.

I used to tell close friends that I'd always believed that should I ever come out, my mother would be the one to support me and stand by me because of the closeness I shared with her. Whereas my father, who raised me and my brothers with a "do not spare the rod" mentality, would probably disown me.

When I came out, the reverse happened.

I realized that the older my father got, the less intractable he became. And so, when he learned about my sexuality, his reaction, after the initial wave of disappointment, was to struggle with acceptance while wishing and praying for a son that would stop being gay. In his private moments, I'd overhear him pray for God to "cure" me, and then emerge to ask me questions about my welfare, my struggles, my past. The day I told him about how lonely it was for me as a child who had started to realize how different he was, he broke down in tears, saying in anguish to me: "How could I be your father and not know?"

My father would talk to me about getting married, saying things like, "Are you sure you are gay? What

if you're really bisexual? That way, you can still get a wife..."

But he would also ponder things with me like, "Are you happy? Does this make you happy? Do you have other people in your life who know, who support you?"

He would express his mortification over how he should respond when relatives ask him about why it was taking me long to get married, and his dread should my homosexuality ever be something that'd be publicly known by other family members.

And he would also listen whenever I talked about gay rights in Nigeria and the advocacy I am involved in, always responding with some encouragement here and a word of prayer there.

My father didn't know any better, but the reality of a homosexual son was making him want to know, to understand, to accept.

My mother, on the other hand, was a different story.

She doubled down on her homophobia, so wrapped up in her religiosity that she was sure that there was no way I could have a good life as long as I claimed to be gay. And that is what makes my continuing estrangement from her very sad: the



fact that I can see that she loves me but loves me so wrong.

In the years since I came out to her, we have alternated between fighting and not speaking to each other. In those rare times when we manage to talk on the phone without any outbursts of anger, the exchange is usually wooden and joyless, or tense and awkward. I keep waiting for her to want to know, to ask me to tell her about me, about how I got here – and all I get is a mother who stays triggered by what she believes is my wilful disregard for the will of God in my life.

During a homecoming in 2019, my parents called a pastor to pray for the family. The man of God was supposed to pray for the house we had just moved into, pray for the endeavours of everybody in the family – and pray for me.

“You see, Brother Emeka,” my mother said as we were all seated in the living room with the somber expressions of people about to go into the serious business of prayer, “there is something I’m asking God for my son. I have been asking God to deliver my son from this particular will of Satan for months now. I need you to help me ask God to loosen him from this shackle of the enemy.”

For a moment, the pastor looked at my mother, undoubtedly expecting her to go ahead and elaborate, to tell him what satanic shackle it was he was supposed to pray for to be broken. He looked at her and she looked back at him, not saying a thing.

And I chuckled inwardly, wondering if I should give in to the sudden temptation to say to the pastor: “Oh sir, what my mother means is that she wants you to pray for me to stop being homosexual.”

But I didn’t.

And the pastor prayed.

And then we went back to our lives, while this incident became yet another knot in the growing tensions between a son who just wants to live and a mother who won’t accept that.

The past few years have been a journey of freedoms and frustrations for me. I am always grateful for the circumstances in my life that have made it relatively easy for me to live out and proud of who I am. That has made it so that I still enjoy close, loving relationships with people in my life who I am now out to and are accepting of me. And it means that the first time I typed something that was very openly gay for an update on Facebook, I was able to click “Post,” and after a few heart-pounding seconds, realized that I was okay, that it was now okay for me to be me on social media.

I am now more keen on identifying and relating with people in my community, unencumbered by internal battles of my identity, freely relating to these people based on shared trauma and individual journeys to self-acceptance.

I came out, and suddenly, there was an end to everything that made me scared and doubtful and loathing about who I am.

My coming out became a new beginning, a time to reassert myself and say to people like my mother, “Yes, I’m gay and it’s perfectly fine that I am gay.” When new doubts about outcomes in my life, as a result of my mother’s beliefs creep up, I stop and tell myself: “No, you did not experience that failure because you’re gay. Your mother may believe so, but you know better.” Or, “you are not cursed for being homosexual, no matter what your mother says.”

My coming out is beautiful, and I sometimes must remind myself to constantly guard against moments that make me lose myself. In this practice, I am able to choose my family again, both from the one I am related to and the one I can relate to.

It can be exhausting, but what then is the alternative?

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Illustration by Cedric Eboumbou

BE READY!

BY RUTH LU

Before talking about family, look around,
The ideal family lies within the norm,
In their eyes, your wish is non-conforming.
A decried desire, placing you outside the box,

In which God to trust in the face of loneliness,
Patriarchy burns, and it burns with a thousand fires,
Be ready dear allies! Let's raise our voices
For the demise of obscure norms! For the same
rights!

In the face of our States' velleity,
Let our bloody struggles be joyful,
To the snarl of our rights, the utopia of happiness!

To the happiness of family, we are eligible,
To the bursts of comforting laughter, all is permitted,
Remember, dear comrade, what is possible...
Remember your family!



Homoparentality:

A Revolution Through Love

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY REGIS SAMBA-KOUNZI



“A people without knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” – Marcus Garvey

Despite abolition, African and Western societies remain marked by the transatlantic slave trade and colonization. When analyzing the experience of black men and women under slavery and colonization to uncover the particular forms of violence they faced, it can be noted that enslaved people were historically the figure of anti-parenthood; the anti-parent par excellence. **Today, officially refusing to recognize same-sex parenthood is part of this legacy of dehumanization,** provided we do not adopt a restrictive definition of the phenomenon. Similarly, one of the oldest legacies of the so-called “African traditions” on the continent is also materialized under the seal of silence, invisibilization and erasure, notions that sometimes lead to favoring and masking social realities and inequalities. It is from this angle on the history of slavery and colonization that I want to associate and

make analogies with our contemporary family experiences as minorities.

The violence of social relations of domination on the basis of race, color, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation or religion experienced by minority groups is universal, regardless of geographic location. One of the functions of the exercise of power is to force individuals to follow norms. One of its drifts is the application of dehumanizing injunctions and rules under the guise of public good. This explains how states or heteropatriarchal societies enforce, on sexual and gender minorities, the prohibition to exist, and a fortiori, to build their own family, using any and all means to stigmatize us, pathologize us, discriminate against us, and instill in us shame about ourselves through the internalization of a pseudo-indignity and inferiority. We, sub-Saharan Africans, did not wait for slavery and European colonization to experience violence. And although customary slavery is not comparable to colonial slavery – massive, systemic and racialised – it remains an act of dehumanization.

I understood through my own childhood what it was like to experience domination as could be exercised by adults, especially when you are different from the norm they have chosen for you. So, I had to show resilience early on, learn

to transgress when possible, and in turn build my own homoparental family; with the desire to do things differently, and the need to fight publicly, to give others in similar situations a sense of dignity, and to bear witness to the importance of family and childhood in one's journey. Family roots are extremely important and I am reminded of how privileged I am, even though there is still a long way to go.

Looking back, as far as I can remember (at least the 1980s), whether in France, Zaire or Congo-Brazzaville, there have always been people in my environment whom I could associate with sexual minorities. Not all of them identified in this way, but some dared to take the leap. And the majority of these people are now parents. What I mean is that **homoparenting, in Europe as in Africa, is not new. What is new is visibility**; it is the fact that it has become a political issue and visible as such in the public arena, especially in the global north, in South Africa and in South America.

I became a homoparent in the late 80s, when I was 19. My daughter, Lolita, was born of a classic sexual relationship with a heterosexual woman. There was no “plan” of parenthood. It was, as they say, an “accident”. But it was my shame at being homosexual that pushed me to have this adventure. I wanted to prove to those around me that I was heterosexual. I fell into the trap of denial. I also became brutally aware of the dangers I had exposed myself to, driven only by family and social pressure and the human need for acceptance. And the first questions were whether, in addition to a future birth, I could have contracted or transmitted HIV. A lot of questions would obsess me later on. At that time, there was no treatment. AIDS was a death sentence. And this is still the case today in some



regions, particularly in Africa, for the millions of people who do not have access to medication due to lack of funding, but above all lack of political will. I had family members who were HIV-positive and had AIDS. Some of my mother's employees were also sick. It was then that I decided to get involved, without imagining that it would become my life purpose, that it would lead me to Act Up Paris, an anti-AIDS association founded by the homosexual community. As a young adult, I was interested in agriculture and food sovereignty issues in Africa, like my heroes at the time, Paul Panda Farnana, a Congolese agronomist and nationalist, and Amilcar Cabral, a revolutionary from Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. But most of all, what I had come to understand was the importance of carrying my own dreams and making my choices respected.

I joined Act Up in 2000, and it was in this organization that I finally created my chosen family. In 2003, Claire, Julien and I, then activists and employees of the association, spoke for the first time about the desire to have a child. Our parental project took time to mature. And two years later, our son Tiago was born, conceived via home insemination. **Conceiving our child under these conditions was illegal and punishable by two years in prison and a 30,000 euro fine.** The dehumanizing system in which we lived could not stop us from freeing ourselves like others before us. Our homoparental family simply shows that individual trajectories have always flouted society's injunctions, and that nothing abolishes the will, the desire for parenthood, including for homosexuals or trans people. The system cannot abolish agency, our ability to be actors of our own lives.



And, contrary to what one might think, the desire to build a homoparental family does, in no way, mean wanting to adhere by mimicry to heteronormativity. Rather, it is about wanting to raise children, and transmit revolutionary values to break the constructed idea of a one-size-fits-all, classic family that all of humanity should model. **We are teaching our son to be free, to think critically, to be respected. His very conception was a cry for freedom.**

He comes from profoundly free people; people who exercised their right to be themselves by demonstrating civil disobedience, by defying an unjust law, by refusing the prejudices and the "what-ifs" that prevent the truth from being told, and by having a public discourse on the subject, without shame, and without giving a damn about

respectability. Whether our families are visible or invisible, when they foster, through children's education, open-mindedness towards restorative imaginations through principles of equity, equal rights and diversity of families, acceptance of differences, in short, other ways of inhabiting the world, they participate in the transmission of our personal and intimate experiences, and transform the world into a world of human dignity.



From this experience, I wanted to use creative photography as a tool to fight against the erasure of our experiences, through the production of situated knowledge and the generational transmission of the memory of empowerment and agency tools. The "Boling" series, started in 2010, was born from this desire to break the silence and fight against invisibility; to reclaim art as I have reclaimed my sexuality, my family and my politics; to show simple but emotionally charged moments, with our loved ones, our families, of blood and of heart. It was necessary for me to denounce the lie, proof that **legality is a matter of power, not of justice**. It is because we have a homophobic, transphobic and hypocritical dominant order that we end up with a liberticidal law targeting homoparental families in the Congo-Kinshasa

constitution. If there was real justice and if we were in a democratic country, such an article would never exist. If the arts and culture have raised my social and political consciousness, if they have changed my view of our society and its inequalities, then they can do so for everyone. The role of the artist and the activist, of the activist, is to make sure that no one ignores the world we live in and that no one claims ignorance. Art and photography make it possible to expose, to break the silence, to give a face to marginalized people; those whom we are not supposed to talk about, whom we absolutely do not want to talk about, whom we want to make invisible. The simple fact of talking about ourselves, of describing our wounds, whatever they may be, pays tribute to our dented paths and underlines that multiple possibilities are available to us. It is essential to seize this opportunity. Reclaiming the narrative has helped me to begin the journey towards understanding my own story, way beyond the photo series I produced.

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Family: People Who Choose To Understand You

A conversation with

Arafa Hamadi

Interview by **Claire Ba**

Blood isn't always thicker than water and for many of us, the family experience is complex and dynamic. Q-zine had a candid conversation with Tanzanian multidisciplinary artist Arafa Hamadi in which we delved into the intricacies of family. For Arafa, family is a choice rather than a state of being and extends well beyond blood relations. In this conversation, the artist also opened up about how their practice aims to use their personhood, talents, resources and privilege to build a safe community with and for queer people in Dar es Salam.

What should our readers know about Arafa Hamadi?

My name is Arafa, I am non-binary (they/them pronouns) and I'm a multidisciplinary artist. My work is not confined to a specific medium and typically touches on themes of queerness and how we occupy our bodies, how we occupy space. It's an attempt at showing the experience of being othered in a society that mostly wants to be violent towards us. Most recently, I have been exploring how we can choose joy and how we can intentionally create spaces of joy through architecture, vibes, set designs, and various other ways. My background is in architecture so I also do structures and installations, but the love of my life is stage design. I love festival designs and right now, I'm delving more into 3D and digital art designs.

How did you make the move from architecture to the art world? Even though it may not seem like a move per se since you're still creating and building...

I studied architecture because my mom wanted me to study it. As an "African child", I had to get a serious degree and art didn't fall under that umbrella. The agreement was that if I studied a workable subject, I could do whatever I wanted afterwards. So, I went to university in the UK, at the University of Edinburgh. My experience there was great, but architecture is an extremely competitive field, and to be honest, I was just not built for criticism, or success in that sector for that matter. I also didn't like the way it was so structured. I wanted to build, but I wanted to

build for recreation. So, in my third and fourth year, I started exploring small festival spaces in Scotland. It was a great adventure for me to go into these spaces where artists transformed landscapes into dreams; these spaces where you would go in one day, and come out three days later having had no thoughts about the outside world. And that's what I really wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I graduated, came back to Dar es Salaam, and I tried to give the interview process a go to get a job in architecture. I went to about three interviews, but I didn't like the way everyone was trying to check how smart I was..., which I guess is what is supposed to happen in an interview (laughs). It just wasn't for me. Once my mom realized how negative I was being, she made me go volunteer at an art space like I had always wanted. From there, I met someone who was building a festival, the *Ongala Music Festival* in Dar es Salam, and they gave me the great opportunity to design the main stage. Since then, I've just been chasing after festivals and recreational spaces. I also started doing residencies where I started creating my own conceptual ideas, designs, and installations. Today, I'm at a place where I can design whatever I want, and I love it.





Photo credits: Arafat C. Hamadi

What would you say you learned about yourself through your art?

Through the process of practicing and owning my art, I've learned that I am not a 9 to 5 person and that my working hours could come at any point in the 24-hour day (laughs). I like not being constricted by time and I love working at festivals because they give you about a month to get your work done. And while technically the spaces are only opened during certain times, I can decide when I want to create.

I've also learned that painting is a form of meditation for me. I am a painter and while I don't consider painting as one of my strongest mediums, I do enjoy the meditative aspect of painting the same thing over and over again. When you look at some of my larger pieces, they usually look like repetitive patterns, and I like doing large paintings for that very reason.



Photo credits: Arafat C. Hamadi

Specifically with my work around queerness and safety – however we want to define this – and even with the word “safety” in itself, I’ve learned that I feel uncomfortable approaching something so important from just one angle. With my artwork, you’ll see that in the 5-year timeline that I’ve been dedicated to it, I have literally been approaching the same subject from several different angles just so I can give it the respect it deserves. I am aware that my perspective as a privileged city person is completely different from most people’s experience in Tanzania. So, while I think my art can, and hopefully does say something about the queer community, I don’t think I’m the best representative out there and I do my best to give the art and the subjects the respect they deserve.

You make an interesting point about safety, and you address this concept of safe spaces in some of your artwork. What can you tell us about what inspired this interest in safe space creation and where you want to take this in the future?

I think I came across the concept of safe space when it became a buzzword on the internet, and that was the first time I was hearing about it. At the time, I was in the UK finishing my degree. I was part of the campus LGBTQ Society and there, I learned about safety, about how to make people feel comfortable and how to enable young LGBTQ folks to thrive while also teaching them what they needed to learn about being adults in

university. I also learned about how to be a support person, about being someone they could come to when in need. We were taught techniques on how to talk to people, how to answer questions, as well as how to provide facts about sex for instance. *In a way, that period of my life was about learning to make myself a safe space for others, and that was truly a fascinating concept for me.*

When I came back, I couldn’t find any safe spaces in Dar es Salaam, but it was perhaps because I didn’t look hard enough. When I joined Twitter in 2018, I found this safety; I found queer people who were not able to be out in public but who were engaging with each other and living this life online that I was not able to perceive in the “real” world. This experience exposed me to another concept of safety, and it got me thinking about how safe spaces were not just physical. They could also transcend into the digital, into personhood. It got me thinking about how safety could transcend into any space where you could be your authentic self, without the threat of violence.

I’ve also experienced safe space through festivals in Kenya. Kenya has the same colonial laws [against homosexuality - editor’s note] that we have. Yet over there, it seems like queer people, from lawyers and advocates to young DJs and space makers, have been able to come together and create these femme and non-binary spaces. And I remember asking myself why that wasn’t happening in Tanzania.

So in a way, my conception of safe spaces has essentially been informed by these small pockets of safety that I've experienced and now I'm thinking about ways to contribute to the creation of a safe space that would be molded by the community that I am part of here, without forcing western views onto it, without it necessarily taking the form of festivals, or anything that already exists out there.

The idea of personhood as a safe space is an interesting one. Where are you in this journey of contributing to build a safe space for the queer community in Dar es Salaam?

I strongly believe that people with privilege need to extend their privilege, and this is something I've been reflecting on a lot lately. As far as safe space creation is concerned, I try to contribute with what I have, with what I can give through my own skills and the things I love, as well as through my privilege and the spaces I occupy. One way I go about this is to recreate spaces that I could have made for someone else for a lot of money, and instead, do it for myself and for my people in my own space, in my home. I am privileged enough to live in a neighborhood where my neighbours are aware of my queerness and let me exist. My place

also has security and can host a large number of people, so I take advantage of this to create safe spaces for my community. And this is not to say that this is the best way to go about it, but it is one of the ways I've tried approaching safety and the creation of safe space through my being. People often think of events as for-profit opportunities, but I want to approach this with a different ethos. My main objective through creating these spaces is not solely about whether I'm having fun, but rather, about whether people are comfortable, and whether people would want to return.

For the future, I'm looking into ways to get funding for such events, and into different ways to make the events public without having to compromise on safety. Overall, I'd say that this has been less of an artistic endeavor and more of an event project through which I have been exploring the idea of safety as both a physical and a non-physical concept.

As you know, the theme for this Q-zine issue is family. Who do you consider family and what has your experience of family been?

When I was in university, my friends were the people I essentially considered family, and this was because I had just come out to my mother, and she did not receive the news as well as she could have. I was raised by my mom, grandmother, and my aunts so, for a very good part of my life, I was surrounded by women – professional, hardworking, sometimes hypocritical, but mostly

very strong, outspoken women that I love so much. And then I ventured out of the family unit and discovered new thoughts, “gayness”, arts, not working a 9-to-5, and all these concepts that I was never exposed to. *When I came out to my mom, it was the first time I was having a rift with these women who had been in my life and had always supported me.* I came to the realization that their idea of family or of an end goal in life was always going to be me finding a husband, having children, settling down and all these things. And that didn’t sit well with me. I have never wanted children. But of course, when

you say something like that before you are 18, no one takes you seriously. And after you are 18, they think you are trying to spit on the family name or something like that. So, things went quiet with my mom and the rest of the family for a while. When I moved back to Tanzania, I moved out of the family home very quickly because I didn’t feel comfortable being around them.



Photo credits: Arafat C. Hamadi

For a while, I didn't consider my biological family as my family. I leaned more onto friends. *I found friends and various groups of people who, though they didn't have my experiences, were willing to love and support me regardless.* About a year ago, I moved back from Kenya to Tanzania and reconnected with old friends from when I was younger. Now that I was back and more settled, our relationships were developing into more adult friendships. We started participating in each other's lives as adults, attending weddings, funerals, etc. Around the same time, I started hanging out with my biological family more, mostly because the women in my life started becoming more open about their lived realities. I still haven't gotten to a point where I can tell them about what is going on in my life, but I appreciate them choosing to share with me their realities, and what they are going through. This has helped me no longer see certain things as hypocrisy. Instead, I see them as expressions of their humanity. When you think about it, these are just humans failing in the same way I do and succeeding in the same way I do. And perhaps, I was judging them too harshly.

From what you just shared, it seems like you have quite an expansive conception of family. What else can you tell us about how you understand the notion of family?

I'm not attached to family in the traditional sense. I know I would sacrifice myself for many people but for me, family weaves in and out. There are best friends who have been the strongest relationships in my life and whom I don't talk to anymore. This is not to say that they aren't family anymore. I will always be there for them, and our relationship is something that I will always cherish, but they are no longer in my life. For me, family doesn't mean an intense closeness; it doesn't mean to have given birth to me or to be related by blood. I think an important aspect of family is how involved you are in a person's life at any given moment.

Perhaps because I don't deem family more important than other aspects of life, I don't see family as being that different from friends. I don't think family has more ownership of my time than other people or other parts of my life. The idea that I have to constantly go back to my family is not that prominent for me even though I love my family. And now that I think about it, another

defining aspect of family for me is people who choose to understand you. There are people who see you and will never accept you beyond a certain point, and there are others who put in the effort to understand you. For instance, *my mother, who did not accept me 6 or 7 years ago, is now trying to understand what non-binary means*. Sometimes, she sends me videos of white lesbians building tiny houses in the forest and she says “*this reminded me of you*” (laughs) and I think to myself: you know what, we are getting there (laughs). But this shows that we are at a point where she has fully accepted me now.

A little silly question to close this off: thinking about the various materials you use in your daily artistic practice, if you could pick just one object to represent “family” – in whatever sense you want to define it – what would it be and why?

I have recently started using a paper which is a roll of about 80-meter recycled paper which allows me to tell a story as it continues and evolves. Sometimes, I’m tempted to cut out certain sections. I generally don’t like using sketchbooks because I like things to be perfect. But what using

this paper has taught me is that it’s okay if your art changes from here to there. And metaphorically, it’s okay if loved ones come in and out of your life. It’s not necessary to hold onto a moment, because shit gets better, really. It always gets better, so just keep on going.




You can follow Arafa on Instagram [@arafa.builds](https://www.instagram.com/arafa.builds) and further explore their artistic and community work [here](#).

fiction



Paint It *Black*

BY MAJINI YA MOMBASA
PHOTO BY KADESA



We were in the middle of our biology lesson when the school bell rang at 10.20 a.m., a few minutes before our usual tea break. When the first few bell peals echoed through the class corridors, we laughed thinking that the bell ringer had gotten her time mixed up.

But, as the bell continued to roll on, anxiety rose in our chests. The ringing was chaotic rather than melodic. There could only be one reason, and that Monday, we feared that an emergency assembly had befallen us.

Madam Akumu stared blankly at the doorway. Her face was awash with confusion, like ours. "Are we in trouble Madam?" A feeble voice came from the back of the class, causing Madam Akumu's gaze to break.

"Close your books and head to the assembly ground. I guess we will all find out once we get there," she said as she hurriedly walked out.

The assembly ground was an earth symphony of rich and sweet browns, expanding a few meters from the staffroom doorway. As we gathered, we talked, and in the vibrations of our voices were hushed tones woven together trying to figure out what was going on.

Suddenly, a silence fell when the headmistress appeared from around the corner of the staffroom. She was followed closely behind by the head girl who carried a small bundle of cypress canes in her small arms.

We saw as soon as she appeared, that she was boiling in anger. There was a tension in her manner, a tightness in her face and every step she made was as if she got some clock ticking in her head, perhaps the countdown to her next explosion.

"Good morning headmist..." we began to greet her, in barely audible voices, just as we had been taught during our school orientation.

She raised her hand and cut us short. "Tut-tut-tut!" she hissed. "There's nothing good about this morning, nothing!" Her large marble-shaped eyes held an icy hostile stare that had the same affect on us as it did on teachers, constricted and shallow breathing.

"Two nights ago, the teacher on duty saw two students kissing behind the library," she continued as saliva frothed at the corners of her mouth.

"I couldn't believe my ears when he reported to me this morning. Lesbianism in Ugenya Girls Boarding School, God forbid! Some of you want to turn this godly school into Sodom and Gomorrah. Lesbianism is a sin, a grave sin punishable by death! The Bible in Leviticus Chapter..."

I did not hear the rest of the sermon as a silence fell on my soul. I felt the chill in my blood, the coldness bringing my brain to a stand still. This was it, I had been caught.

I lost my balance and stumbled on a huge rock behind me. I turned back and looked at it. If only the rock behind me could hide me. "Please hide me rock," I silently whispered in my heart. But the rock sat there still and seemed to tell me like it told the sinnerman in the Bible, "I can't hide you, I ain't gonna hide you here."

I held my hand to my burning forehead. Then like a slow falling hammer a new thought came. "My parents! What would they do if they found out I had kissed a girl?" There were so many ways my life would go awry.

When the images of my parents flooded my mind, I swallowed hard, trying to get my forehead to remain dry and my mind focused. I did not want anyone to see how shook I was and it was for me to keep my own thoughts and fears away from their prying eyes. Still I stood frozen.

"Beryl Adhiambo, come to the front immediately!" The headmistress' voice snapped me back. Beryl stepped out of the small crowd and slowly walked close to where the headmistress stood.

"Kneel down!" The headmistress shouted angrily. She knelt upon the ground facing in our direction, with her head bowed. "Who is the other girl you were frolicking with?"

When she wouldn't answer, the headmistress seethed, took a cane from the bundle and flogged Beryl across her back. When the fifth stick tore her blouse and cut into her skin, Beryl's scream rent the air. The scream told of pain, an agony that seeped into my skin. I took it in, and when my face almost fell barely able to hold the tears threatening to burst forth, I held my head up and

stayed right there to be with her.

Beryl's chin rose and she looked directly at me. I thought it would be a matter of seconds before she was forced to confess my name. I took a step forward, but she shook her head signaling me to stop. Then she murmured something.

"Speak up!" the headmistress roared.

"You cannot own what you cannot touch or see, and none can see the soul. Whilst you can break this skin, cut until blood runs thick, I am not yours. Do you think the wind only blows for you? That the sun shines only for you? All you are is a bigot, a tyrant under the eyes of God and I'd rather be me than you – a human snake with narrowed eyes and forked tongue. The bitter irony is that you will have to make amends and your sins are many. So, do your worst. I will not tell you her name."

"Sasa," Beryl greeted me when we first met in the dining hall, three months ago. It's the first word I remember about her, and I can still hear it today. Sasa

As Beryl continued to cry from the beating, I shut my eyes, said the word and I was back to that sunny Tuesday afternoon when she walked up to me.

That afternoon, I was trying to balance a tray filled with nyoyo, a pile of plates, a serving spoon and a jug of water in my arms. Beryl came out of the kitchen laughing loudly with one of the cooks and almost bumped into me. "Sorry," she said and walked hurriedly past me as if she had somewhere urgent to be.

I watched as she strutted across the tables headed towards the door. She slipped her hands into the pockets of her skirt, and then shortly after, stopped. She seemed to have misplaced something important from the way she frantically searched all the pockets in her skirt and the one on her blouse.

She turned, walked a few steps back and picked a five hundred shilling note from the ground,

a stone throw distance from where I stood. She looked up and saw me staring at her, and it was at that moment that she walked up to me.

"Sasa" she said, stretched out her hands and took the tray of food from my hands. "My name is Beryl...Beryl Adhiambo. I am the dining hall prefect. You?"

"Sasa". The word, the voice, the smile.

Such a common word, but I'd never heard anyone say it the way she did. The spark may have lit right there and then. It felt as if space and time became the finest point imaginable, as if time collapsed into one tiny speck and exploded at light speed.

"Cynthia," I softly stammered.

A soft giggle escaped her lips. It was more delicate than a wind-chime but just as chaotic and melodic. "Nice to meet you Cynthia with one name," she teased. "If you don't mind, I'd like to help you. Where's your table?"

Maybe the spark lit over the next few days when she'd pass by my table during lunch time and ask how I was doing.

Or perhaps it lit that Friday evening when I found her waiting for me in front of my cubicle. When it dawned on me that I was drawn to her mahogany-brown eyes that shone brightly.

The day Mr. Odhiambo, the teacher on duty, saw us kissing was a Saturday. We had just resumed our seven to nine evening preps when I found a lime green sticky note on my desk. It read:

My lovely Cynthia with one name, I passed by your table today at lunch and didn't see you. And although it shouldn't have, I found my mind aching for you, for the rest of the afternoon. Please come and meet me tonight when the preps end. Everyone will be hurrying for entertainment night and the teacher on duty will already have left by then. I overheard the teachers talking about a football match in the staffroom.

I'll be waiting for you behind the library.

-Beryl

Beryl was expelled from school that Monday morning after calling the headmistress a forked-tongue human snake. Two days later, her parents came to pick her up from school.

During the two days, she was forbidden from speaking to anyone. The headmistress ordered that she be isolated at the old sanatorium building that had been vacated a few months ago due to an infestation of rats. No one was allowed to see her except for the school matron who brought her food.

The day she left school, I excused myself from class and lied that I wasn't feeling well. I hoped to see her one last time before she left. But, by the time Madam Akumu let me go, Beryl and her parents had already left. The only thing left of her was the scent of her perfume still lingering in the air.

Later that day, when dusk fell, Madam Akumu came to see me in the dormitory. I pretended to be heavily asleep under the bed covers when I heard her calling my name.

She walked up to my bed and lifted the covers. "I know you are not asleep," she whispered. "Come with me," she said but this time a bit louder.

She took me to the staffroom. It was empty. The other teachers must have left early. "Have a seat," she said pointing to a wooden chair that was near her station. She handed me a plate of ugali and meat and sat across from me.

We sat knee deep in silence. I was unable to look at her, my foot tapping up and down like some dumb wind up toy. I took a bite of a piece of meat she served me but it tasted like cardboard. My mouth felt dryer than a sandbox and no amount of chewing made it possible to swallow.

"How long have you two been together?"

I kept my head down and watched as the meat on the plate before me floated in a lake of soup. I ran my finger around the edges of the plate as I thought of whether to answer her or not.

The air in the room was so brittle it could snap, and if it didn't, I suspected I would. *"This is a safe space," she coaxed. "I was once where you are. When I was in form four, I fell in love with a young Kikuyu girl in form three. She was my Beryl."*

Madam Akumu shifted in her seat and took a sip of the water in the glass in her right hand. She cleared her throat and said, "tell me more about your Beryl."

"How did you know?"

"First, at the assembly ground when Beryl was being beaten. I saw you trying not to fall apart as she cried."

A short pause ensued before she continued. "Then, in class today, when you claimed to be sick with cramps. You couldn't fight the tears anymore when I wouldn't let you out of class because you were yearning to see her. The tears of an aching heart barely holding on. The tears cried beneath what the rest of the world can see, what the eyes miss yet love renders visible."

I looked up at her. "They locked her inside that terrible place. I can't imagine what she went through. She is afraid of rats. She must have been scared to death and I couldn't be there."

"I would never let that happen to her," she interjected. "I arranged with the matron to take food to her, sneak her out and bring her to my house. Beryl has been staying there with me until early this morning when I sneaked her back."

"I don't understand. Why would the matron do that?"

Clearing her throat for the second time, she said, "remember the girl I told you about, it's the matron. We went to the same boarding high school. When our relationship was discovered, we were both expelled. My parents transferred me to a local school close to home. I enrolled in a teaching college and when I was there, I searched for her.

When I found out she was working here, I knew I had to see her. So, I applied to be posted to this school seven years ago, and we've been together since then."

I pictured her and the matron back in high school. I wondered what they looked like in uniform. As I smiled at the thought of them, I reached out for something in the left pocket of my skirt. It was a photograph of Beryl and me.

"We took that when we went to the National Music Festivals last month," I said as I showed her the picture. "She told me I'd be taken care of if something ever happened. I guess she was talking about you."

Madam Akumu stared at the picture and a smile pursed her lips. "You both look beautiful," she said and gave me back the photograph.

"It's not just me. There are people I want you to meet," she continued and stood up from her table. She called out, "come in girls."

A group of around twenty girls walked in led by the head girl. A few faces were familiar but most of them were girls I had never talked to. Each of them introduced themselves and then stood in pairs.

"I don't understand," I stammered. That is when the head girl explained. *She, Beryl and Madam Akumu had created a small circle of lesbians who knew each other and kept in touch.* They wrote to each other via discreet letters and often met at the staffroom when other teachers were not around.

"Beryl taught us to paint our little pinky fingers black and that's how we've been able to know each other," she further elaborated.

Her girlfriend took over from her. "We take care and watch out for each other. Personally, I deliver love notes and letters, like I did yours. You can call me the post woman," she smiled and everyone laughed.

"Keep it down," Madam Akumu warned and stepped out of the door to see if anyone was coming.

The tears in my soul flowed to my eyes and the other girls rushed forward to embrace me. *"We got you, you're home,"* Mercy, the head girl said.



MY CHOSEN

FAMILY

BY PACIFIQUE SLAM

My chosen family is not only
Those with whom I am bonded by blood,
But also by the heart.
I didn't understand this before,
But I understand it now
Thanks to my friend Alban.

My friends are also family,
Like watermelon seeds.
They are also part of my life.
In sorrow and misfortune,
They support me with dignity and honor,
They see me with their hearts,
And their souls are free of manipulative words.

My family is my organization,
The members of my community,
The people I work with everyday,
To make an impact and take action
So we may earn a place in history,
The story that tomorrow will tell.

You ask what makes a family?
Who is my family?
Allow me to put this in writing,
In a modest poem,
To you who heal my woes,
To my chosen family,
For life!

Illustration by Rosie Olang

non-fiction



The Family *My Heart Chose*

BY GAYTURE
ILLUSTRATION BY AISHA SHILLINGFORD




I was maybe two years old when I heard her cry for the first time. That night, I went up to her to find out what was wrong. In a shaky voice, she replied, “go to bed!”. *These are the first memories I have of my family: a mother in tears, beaten by my father.* And I remember this scene as if it were yesterday.

A few months later, I found myself having to travel to Côte d’Ivoire with my uncle who had just gotten married. Having never left my neighborhood, I was excited to travel to another country, not knowing that the carefree life I had enjoyed

until then would end. At almost three years old, my life with my parents consisted of playing, eating and sleeping. But in this new city, in this new country, I had become a workhorse for my uncle's wife. We lived on a plantation, so we had to pick cocoa, coffee, bananas, cassava, papaya and rice. My stay in Daloa was very traumatic.

I was saved by an uncle who informed my parents back in Ouagadougou after a few days spent with us in Daloa. My maternal aunt was very appalled by what I was going through and insisted that I return to Ouagadougou. I made the trip back home with my uncle, and it was one of the most beautiful days of my childhood. I remember looking in awe at the landscape during the train ride, conscious of my newfound freedom.



Back in Ouagadougou, I stayed with my father for a while before moving in with an aunt. I naively thought that things would be better with her. But after a week, my aunt became violent and the nightmare started. I spent my teenage years in this difficult environment and grew up very envious of other children who were loved and cared for at home.

I started playing soccer with the boys in the neighborhood. At the time, I was the only girl they knew who played football. I was subjected to mockery and all kinds of sexist insults. In high school, I was spotted by a women's soccer coach who recruited me. Until then, I didn't even know that there were other girls who played soccer, and I was excited to be able to play a sport I loved with girls like me. I joined the team and after a while, transitioned to another team, then another, and another. *During this period, my life changed and I got to experience what it was like to feel loved.* I met my best friend and felt very comfortable around her. She didn't put any pressure on me and she understood me. We did almost everything together.

At the same time, the situation with my aunt was becoming unbearable, so I decided to leave the house even though I had no idea where I would go. I went to my friend's house without telling her that I had nowhere to go. I was welcomed in her family and was cared for. *From then on, I decided to live far away from any blood relatives.*

I will never forget the times that I got sick and had to be hospitalized. The person I affectionately call “my love” stayed with me day and night and did everything for my care. During these times, I would sometimes close my eyes and wonder what I had done to deserve someone who loved me so much. Me, who had never experienced the love of a close friend or a family member.

My love, who is none other than my best friend's little brother, is now the pillar of my life. He is so caring and thoughtful. I can't find the right words to describe him. He is simply my family. And *if there was a word stronger than 'family' to describe how I feel towards him, I would have used it.* What is more, their mother has always shown me unconditional love since the first day we met. She never treated me differently than her children. Sometimes I find myself explaining to my mother that they are two to have brought me into the world.

Then there was the one with whom I spent the most beautiful moments of my childhood; the one who made me understand the essence of family.

I was never bored with him. He is really funny and in him I found an older brother from another mother. Once, I even ventured to come out to him and his response was: “So what? It’s your life! I wish you the best!”

I’ll spare you the details of what my biological brother’s reaction would have been.

The moment I moved away from my biological family, I started meeting some amazing queer people. I met people who loved me for who I was, who understood me, who supported my life choices and who continue to do so. And this is how I began to understand the meaning of true love. These people were there for me in moments of joy and sorrow, and we shared similar concerns and plans for the future.

I made my first steps in activism when people saw in me the potential to take on challenges. I didn't think it was impossible to be an activist without a fancy degree. But despite my fears, these people always reminded me that I could do it regardless of my low level of education. These people are my family. They gave me the care I never received from my biological family. And today, my family is made up of all those who, from far and wide, have loved and supported me.



Chika Anyanwu

BY CHIKA ANYANWU



EZI

NA ULOM

In my painting, I try to express my perception of what a family is, using the Igbo words “*Ezi na Ulo*”. To me it is a colorful space, where everyone is part of “the family” regardless of their gender identity, or sexual orientation or even location. It is a safe space with acceptance and love. It is a space most of us wish to be in, where we all can be free.

Details:

Painting Title: **EZI NA ULOM (My family)**

Medium: Acrylic on canvas

Size: 23*30 Inches

Date: September, 2022

Location: Nigeria

Representations Of Queer Families In Trinidad & Tobago Carnival

BY AMANDA T. MCINTYRE





PHOTOGRAPHER, JASON AUDAIN (2020)

In the last ten years, there have been significant queer feminist advocacy and activism campaigns in the Caribbean petitioning for the inclusion, visibility, and positive affirmations of queer cultures in mainstream Caribbean socio-politics. In 2016, Belize's law prohibiting sodomy was struck down as unconstitutional. Trinidad and Tobago's sodomy law was similarly struck down in 2018. Also in 2018, in Guyana, the law prohibiting cross-dressing was struck down. Furthermore, there have been several Pride parades in the Caribbean in the last five years. Together, these legal and socio-cultural events have facilitated a cultural shift from invisibility to open proud expressions of queer cultures in the Caribbean including queer aesthetic codes situated within a wider movement in art that challenges the historical erasure of queer personae.

Within this context, queer feminist politics have been the focus of my public actions. I have been a programming partner with Pride Trinidad and Tobago for the last five years and founded *She Right Collective*. I have also had leadership roles in other feminist and queer organizations. This work in queer feminist advocacy and activism influences my concepts, designs, and performances of the contemporary Baby Doll masquerade. Dolly *Mas is a queer Caribbean futuristic art initiative that utilizes the contemporary Caribbean Baby Doll masquerade*. Dolly

Mas intersects science-fiction themes of time travel and shape-shifting with the history, culture, and socio-politics of the Caribbean and its diasporas. The work reflects on Caribbean history, comments on present socio-political conflicts, and imagines Caribbean futures with close reference to Caribbean feminist and queer theories in its interrogation and presentation of gender and sexuality. Dolly Mas is a cultural intervention that explores possible meanings of personhood, citizenship, home, displacement, embodiment, and dislocation.



Photographer, Jason Audain (2020)

The Baby Doll is the only masquerade in Trinidad and Tobago that, in its traditional concept and design, constructs a family. The mother, her child (or children), and the father who though absent is sought after and ultimately named. There have been contemporary performances of the Caribbean Baby Doll masquerade that were defined by the formal inclusion of queer feminist politics that subvert the heteronormative suggestions of the masquerade's traditional construct. Before the advent of Dolly Mas, there were two performances of queer family life in Trinidad and Tobago Carnival. In 2010 "Leslie the Lesbian Baby Doll" was performed by Stephanie Leitch. This work presented a queer-identified Baby Doll persona mothering the doll child and looking for a wife, as opposed to traditional performances of the masquerade in which the search is for a man who is then identified as the father of the child. "Leslie the Lesbian Baby Doll" was openly queer in its inclusion of same-sex pursuit and in the title which played on the word lesbian. Also, it suggested the possibility of a family with two women-identified parents mothering the child. In 2019 I presented "You are Worthy" in collaboration with Jarula M.I. Wegner. This queer Baby Doll family unit suggested possible structures of queer family life that include lesbian, transgender, non-gender binary, and non-gender conforming people.

In 2020 I introduced the first iteration of the Dolly Ma persona in Trinidad and Tobago Carnival. This work was dedicated to migrant children in Trinidad and Tobago and was performed with reference to the International Bill of Human Rights, the Rights of the Child, and the Rights

of Migrant Workers and their Families. While I was working individually on Dolly Ma, I was also in talks with Hazel Brown, coordinator of the Network of NGOs for the Advancement of Women, about a collaboration. Hazel was one of my mas mentors, having pioneered the utilization of the Contemporary Baby Doll masquerade in Caribbean feminist practice. Hazel's Baby Doll performances advocated for policies to enable and enact protections for women and children within domestic environments. Throughout the years, beginning in 2011, we were in several advocacy campaigns including the 2017 campaign to end child marriage in Trinidad and Tobago, which successfully ended with the amendment of the Marriage Acts to discontinue the legal marriage of persons under the age of 18. In 2020 we met several

times at her office to plan our collaboration. That Carnival season, we shared the same dolls at two competitions. The first was at the Adam Smith Square Traditional Mas Competition that draws a large audience annually. We also performed jointly on Carnival Monday at the Queen Park Savannah, again to a large audience, where Hazel openly advocated against the proposed non-disclosure policy for intimate relationships that was before parliament. In this sharing of art and advocacy, I continually referred to her as the children's Aunty Hazel. This was an extension of her influence on my performance art and advocacy practices. This was also an extension of Dolly Ma's family unit to include a non-romantic non-sexual extended family relationship.



*Photographer,
Shaun Rambaran
(2020)*

In 2021 I presented Dolly Ma Brigitta as part of a narrative in which Brigitte Delamar and her partner Cynthia Betancourt are time-traveling shape-shifting witches focusing on voodoo and co-parenting a child. Dolly Ma Brigitta is a speculative fiction performed through photography, film, and theater. The work is futuristic in its placement of Caribbean protagonists in past, present, and future contexts, even considering the present time as a future context since the storyline begins centuries before the narrative opens. It is Caribbean futurism in that it encompasses the socio-politics of contemporary Trinidad and the historical contingencies of these with illustrations of projected futures to which the characters travel through the use of magical devices that include voodoo, folklore, and masquerades. The work examines themes of dislocation and transition that includes changes in gender and fluidity of sexuality. Global diaspora discourses are used to establish the geopolitical movement of the protagonists through space and time in a nonlinear narrative that follows dream logic. This work includes vignettes, montages, and surrealistic juxtapositions that include queer Caribbean aesthetic codes.

Photographer, Matthew Creese (2022).



The miniature house on Amanda's hat was created and gifted to her by the Trinidadian artist Tremayne Frauenfelder.



In 2022 I furthered these themes with an interrogation of the interiority of the body, and domesticity in performances of Rosa de Oxalá. Rosa de Oxalá was inspired by a gift from another mas mentor, the designer Alan Vaughan, who gave me his copy of Jorge Amado's novel *Tent of Miracles*, which explores Yoruba practice in Bahia. My Rosa de Oxalá was a femme presentation of Obatalá, Orisa Nla Chief of the White Cloth, who is the Yoruba deity associated in Yoruba with the creation myth. Obatalá is also gender fluid combining male and female aspects and responding to the pronouns he and she while married to the female entity Yemaya. Rosa de Oxalá also speculated on how Caribbean women from the mid 19th to early 20th centuries contrived through fashion to continue Yoruba observations, thus contributing to the retention of African heritage information in the Caribbean. These considerations of interiority and domesticity extended

my previous interrogation of aesthetic subjecthood. The work also developed around ideas of the relationship between women and property. The work reflects on the historicity of women as property and how this later affected women's ability to own property. I started conceptualizing this in 2020 when I was part of the faculty for La Practica, an artists' residency hosted by New Local Space, Kingston. At that time one of the residents, Desanna Watson, presented a discussion on women and property that inspired my own interrogation of the subject.

Photographer, Robert Schittko (2021)



I am part of the millennial generation that witnessed and participated in, what I describe as, the great queer Caribbean shift. The first time I heard the word lesbian was at home in central Trinidad when I was a small child in the 1980s. My family was discussing a relative whom they suspected of same-sex attraction. The word “lesbian” was spat out in their conversation with an inflection of repulsion that seemed to mutilate its syllables. In my childhood imagination, I saw a monster; a loathsome creature; a threat. I went through intense anxieties as a teenager and as a young adult due to my same-sex attraction. There was a great amount of social ambiguity amongst my peers about sexuality. I couldn’t tell my best friend how much I wanted to kiss her. I was immensely afraid of possible rejection and humiliation.

At that time, same-sex attraction was labeled and largely accepted as deviant. In my adult life, apart from my formal work in queer feminist advocacy, my artwork gestures towards the normativity of queer cultures in the Caribbean. The Dolly Mas performance art experiments further Caribbean queer feminist discourses on family life through public presentations of queer family units during Trinidad and Tobago Carnival. *These performances question and suggest possible answers about what family means, what it looks like, how it is formed, and what it supports.* The performances have included queer romantic and queer sexual as well as queer non-romantic and non-sexual relationships such as between parents and children and extended family ties. *Dolly Mas utilizes art as a tool of Caribbean queer feminist advocacy interrogating the concept of the family as a political entity.*



Turning To One Another

INTERVIEW BY ROSIE OLANG
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MOGOI

A conversation
with Kedolwa
Waziri from
the Kenya
Trans Queer
Fund

Mutual aid projects are a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on representatives in government, but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable. Mutual aid looks to respond not only to natural disasters but also to the daily life-threatening disasters of capitalism and white supremacy (as defined by Dean Spade and Ciro Carrilo). In this conversation with Kedolwa Waziri, a member of the Trans Queer Fund Kenya team, Q-zine explored family and community: being there for each other in times of hardships and beyond, through Trans Queer Fund Kenya's mutual aid project to organize monetary and non monetary support for trans and queer Kenyans.



How did Trans Queer Fund Kenya begin? What prompted the decision to start the Fund?

Trans Queer Fund was started at the beginning of 2020. At the time, the COVID-19 pandemic was just starting, at least here in Kenya. We founded the organization upon the realization that many trans and queer livelihoods were in jeopardy as the hospitality and entertainment industries, where many trans and queer people work, were hit hard. With all the uncertainty around the pandemic itself and its social impacts, a lot of people were laid off or had to forgo business ventures. Numerous trans and queer people were disproportionately affected by mass layoffs and other forms of loss of income because many employers took [the economic downturn] as a chance to exert their homophobia, queerphobia, and transphobia in tangible ways. At the time, one of the [Fund] organizers and

founding team members who was outside the country, reached out to another founding team member to send some funds that they had for the purpose of distributing to trans and queer Kenyans. From then, the founding team has been keen on mutual aid fundraising and solidarity efforts.

What is your understanding of mutual aid versus charity and how does this influence your approach to the work you do?

For me, *mutual aid is rooted in social movements that center care, solidarity, flexibility, and abolition work*. I think mutual aid subverts many systemic, cis-hetero-capitalistic restrictions in pursuit of building mutually sustainable communities. Whereas, charity hinges on answering to both capitalism itself and the systems that create and enable poverty and inequality. Charity is concerned with stripping groups of dignity by forcing them to pursue solutions whose agenda is external. Charity has a lot of expectations – there are strings attached – whereas mutual aid is based on collaboration. Charity is a lot like coercion. Mutual aid is more political and intentional in demystifying the need for carcerality even. Charity is a surplus of

capitalism, sustaining oppressive categorizations, while mutual aid sustains community building efforts. I have a lot to say about charity but above all else, it's really just a performance of [people] wanting to [show] care as a way of making their own oppressive faults feel manageable for them.

What is the current legislation in Kenya towards the rights of trans and queer people and how does it, if at all, affect the way you work?

Current legislation still upholds colonial era penal codes that criminalize same sex relations. When it comes to legislation around transgender rights, many people will interact with the law from the point of wanting to legally change their names / gender on official documents. While Kenyans can legally change their names, trans Kenyans are often blocked from doing so due to the conflation of transphobia and homophobia, and the criminalization of falling outside of neat acceptable categories of being. Audrey Mbugua has extensively talked and written about this issue. The existence of the penal codes directly and indirectly affects our work. The penal codes not only dent the experiences of queer people in Kenya but they also influence broader legislation around queer gathering, queer content, access to affirming healthcare for queer people, etc. *When the Kenya Film Classification Board bans queer content*, they are simply aligning with state



Illustrations by Mogi

repression of queer lives. *They not only ban queer content, but also make visible the laws that normalize violence on queer bodies, queer organizing, queer loving, queer being, queer existence.* As a domino effect, queer organizing happens in silos of anxiety and fear. We organize knowing that state agencies / authorities potentially monitor our activities, knowing that in-person gatherings pose lots of risks and we also keep these risks in mind when extending / co-creating solidarity and support to the queer communities within which we organize. The luxury of experiencing queer joy and ease is further flattened, and when state agencies invite the larger public to participate in queer discourse via bans, morality debates, or when the president calls queer people a non-issue, the lives of queer people / queer organizing is put on public trial and ridicule daily by everyday Kenyans, online, in-person, on radio shows, on TV, in churches, in mosques, at the family dining table, etc. Almost everything happens in limbo, on eggshells, and *even though the risks of queer organizing in Kenya are great, the risk of not co-creating queer communities of mutual care is greater.*

Mutual aid is often a response to institutional failings that impede marginalized communities from living with dignity. In response, we find instances of people turning to each other and channeling their anger and disappointment towards acts of care and direct action. Could you share with us some notable/absurd / difficult/ humorous stories from your work so far?

Eish, there are so many (laughs). I don't know what to pick – from people cosplaying queerness in order to solicit support, to being threatened with legal action against the Fund, to getting the wildest DMs from total strangers, to getting weird unsolicited advice from people wanting to teach us how mutual aid can be profitable, etc.

I think so far, the wildest thing was when, at the height of the pandemic, we reached out to local LGBTQ+ organizations to help meet the material needs of trans and queer Kenyans because we were receiving so many requests, beyond our capacity. We assumed that since in-person gatherings were not viable, organizations that have more diverse funding streams would potentially be willing to redirect entertainment budgets, for example,

to helping the community survive. But we were told that this was not possible, and could only be an option if these organizations had mutual aid provisions in their budgets, which, as you can imagine, they did not. Many registered trans and queer organizations had funds that had already been earmarked for agreed-upon activities and so they could not simply divert the funds to cushion trans and queer people who had been affected by the pandemic and the response to it. *It was shocking that organizations can have an abundance of resources in their budgets, but are unable to be flexible in times of crisis.* It showed us how incredibly confining bureaucracy can be and reaffirmed our commitment to organize outside strict donor-centered, unimaginative structures of working. Key to our work is our ideological line that we cannot be primarily accountable to capitalism or donors. The interests of the most marginalized trans and queer people exist in opposition to capitalism, which includes individual wealthy philanthropists and their foundations, and a large portion of the international NGO sector that imposes conditionalities that can divert our loyalties away from the communities we work with and instead push us towards meeting donors' key performance indicators.


One notable moment was being featured in a [Pollicy.org](#) report on Afro-feminist data futures.

What is the internal organization structure of the Trans Queer Fund, and how do you maintain relationships with each other while doing this meaningful and demanding freedom and care work?

Trans Queer Fund is non-hierarchical. All organizers and the work that we do hold equal weight and everyone's contribution is equally valid. As mentioned earlier, we also do our best to avoid bureaucracy in our ways of working. We do the work based on a system of mutual trust within the organization and also with the communities we serve. We maintain relationships with each other through group and individual check-ins, by meeting often to re-articulate our mission, vision and purpose, and by engaging each other in political education – readings, discussions – on mutual aid and abolition work whenever possible. Where collaborating and working together are concerned, we commit to dividing tasks as equally as possible to ensure that we are not working more than seven hours a week on Trans Queer Fund-related work and to avoid any one person becoming overwhelmed or burnt out.

What is the place of social media and crowdfunding in the work you do, and what has the response been to mobilizing monetary and non-monetary support?

We primarily crowdfund and build community through social media. It has been like this by default since all of this organizing has happened within [the COVID-19] pandemic. We mobilize funds primarily by issuing calls to action on Twitter and Instagram. Most of our contributors are from Kenya, but we also get quite a bit of support from Canada, the US, and the UK. I think social media is a great tool to communicate with multiple people in different parts of the world all at once, which helps us reach a diverse audience who may be keen on supporting this work. We have also been able to build and have access to transnational solidarity through social media. *Since our founding, we have supported 1000+ trans and queer people in Kenya primarily, but also in Nigeria during the EndSARS protests, and Namibia during the Total Shutdown protests.*



The responses to mobilizing support for trans and queer Kenyans has primarily been great, and because it's a learning process, I think there's a lot to improve and learn from.

Who are some people and what are some organizations in your network in Kenya and on the continent who make the work you do possible?

Definitely our communities, on social media and otherwise, who keep this work alive by sharing our content, making monetary and non-monetary contributions and who keep us and the work accountable to the community. We also have some amazing individuals and organizations who help us meet the material and social needs of trans and queer people; sometimes we can make targeted requests to specific people.

What are your plans and dreams for Trans Queer Fund, and what should folks in the LGBTQIA+ community and allies work towards in the near future?

Trans Queer Fund hopes for a future where all people are free from imperialism, capitalism, cis-hetero-patriarchy and ethnonationalism, and a present where trans and queer people are collectively working towards food and housing justice, accessible and affordable/free healthcare that includes gender-affirming care and mental healthcare, rest and supportive community for themselves and each other. We plan to learn about, and actively work towards building the care systems that are necessary to materialize this present and future. *Our dreams for the Fund is that it will inspire other people/groups to build mutual aid structures within their communities.* I would say that allies should definitely work towards recalibrating the realities within which we all live to see that anti-queer, state-sanctioned violence is an attack on what is perceived as difference. As laws and restrictions against queer lives become tighter, so do laws and restrictions against everybody. In Ghana, for example, with the cross-dressing bill, anyone who wears an earring and does not present as a socially acceptable woman could be up for imprisonment.

I encourage allies to look at these violences as more than just queer issues, and in building solidarity with queer people, do so from an immersive point rather than as outsiders/privileged classes looking in.

For people who want to learn more about mutual aid and become more involved, a great place to start is [Introduction to Mutual Aid](#) and [this video](#), especially with the works and reflections of Mariam Kaba. [Millennials Are Killing Capitalism](#) is also a great podcast recommendation.

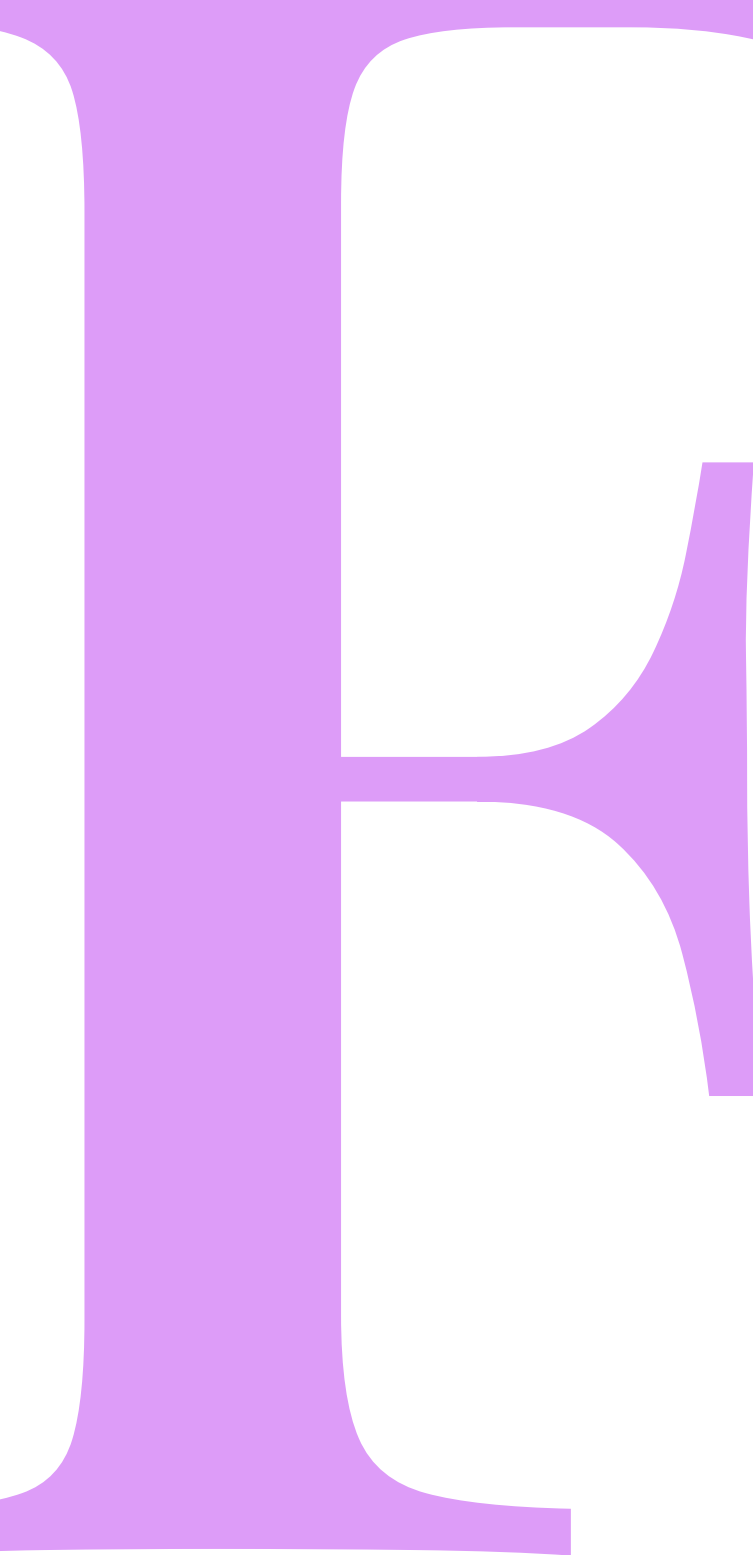
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fiction

Happy Family



BY JUDE MUOJEKEPE
ILLUSTRATION BY CREATIVE POWERR



For most people, family is by blood relation and for some, it is by acceptance. But *for me, family is a person, and that person is my grandma.* I still miss her wattle hut in my village in Bibi. That was home till I left for my studies at the University of Nigeria. Apart from my grandmother, there was nothing pleasant about Bibi but Vera. An outspoken beautiful guardian angel friend of mine.

As a teenager, I had countless questions about my identity and why I was not everyone's favorite. Basic school was manageable with my classmates who didn't judge me, but secondary school was a nightmare. I had so many questions my poor grandmother was obligated to answer.

"I wish I was different," I said with irritation one afternoon after I came back from school.

"Why do you want to be different, Chetachi?" Nnee asked and adjusted her wrapper. She stood up and went into our small kitchen with black walls darkened by firewood smoke and emerged

with a plate of akpu and egusi soup for my lunch. I stood for a while with no words to her question. As if her huge standing figure was an awaking thought, I made an impromptu response at last. "I want to have at least a few male friends. I feel alone most times," I whispered as I went to wash my hands for the meal.

"Vera is enough. You don't need stupid friends; you only need a true and progressive one."

"How do you know she's enough and progressive Nnee?"

She came to sit on a wooden chair beside me, fanned her face with her bare palms and cleared her throat, a remarkable behavior of hers that usually preceded a serious conversation.

"I always looked forward to seeing you during the festive season. My son brought you people only once a year. As a child, you were adorable and played all over the compound with my shoes and scarves. One Christmas celebration, I read a look in your father's face, and understood things I needed not to be told."

I felt her fat arm around my neck. The fat arm was cold in the hot kitchen. So I rested my head on it.

Immediately after I had finished the meal, grandma took me to her room and asked me to stand before a table mirror. With a firm voice she called *"Chetachi, take a look at the mirror and tell me what you see."*

Just about a minute later, she asked again, "What do you see? Draw closer to the mirror? Who can you see in that mirror?"

"I see myself grandma."

"What's the name of the person that you see?"

"Chetachi," I responded wondering what the entire show was about.

"That's the person who has the power to stop feeling lonely, the only person who is going to start loving himself. Chetachi is all that you need in this world to become everything you ever would want. I don't ever want to hear you say that you are alone. Learn to need only yourself. Is that understood?" I nodded without fully understanding her words.

One day, as I layed in my bed in my hostel at university, I remembered those words as though I'd heard them just yesterday. I missed those moments, but what I missed most was my lovely grandmother who passed on seven months after I was admitted to university, along with my friend Vera.

I remembered how I'd wanted to wear a short skirt like Vera's to our send off party, and how I had always wished to wear makeup like her. Unfortunately, my grandmother only had utajele. I put them carefully around my eyes, having watched my grandma apply them on several occasions, and then I excitedly painted my

lips with the red lip gloss I had taken from Vera's backpack a day before. I gleefully pampered my face in front of my grandmother's table mirror, then raced off to mine and Vera's send-off party.

The afternoon sun was mild. My classmates were already in their best attire taking photographs individually and as a group. I searched for Vera's face amongst the mean faces I had had to deal with for the last six years. I noticed strange stares directed at me from everyone. One of the girls who couldn't contain herself blurted "Ugly face!". It seemed like the others were waiting for her outburst. *The voices rained on me with names like homosexual, girl-boy, dirty thing, disgrace.* I stood searching for Vera's appearance. The longer I searched, the more disappointed I got. I stood with folded arms hoping Vera would appear amid the persistent name calling. When all hope was fading, I made a quick attempt to run off but was dragged back by Uche, the lead bully in my class as he slapped me on the face. Everything around me became blurry. I heard ringing in my ear, and landed on the ground.

An unidentified slapper hit my neck forcing a painful scream out of me. I could barely open my mouth when I heard Vera's voice in the background and the voices quieted down.

"Will you stop that? What has he done?" Her voice rang like clapping thunder. She helped me up. I managed to dust a little sand off my trousers and watched them leave. Vera boarded an okada and I went back home in tears.

Vera and I talked often though she was in a different school. In her last call, I narrated to her how I walked out of the fellowship hall because the visiting preacher said all gay people were destined for hell. A sermon that assumed a different dimension the moment I walked into the church.

"So, you no longer go to church huh?" she asked with a giggle that reminded me of our good old days.

"It's better than being reminded constantly of how God despises me."

"I'm sure I would have joined you as you left the hall if I were there. I've got to go now Cheta"

As a third year student, I applied to Brighter F.M, a neighboring radio station around the campus, for my industrial training program as a Mass Communication student. The interview had gone well. *My favorite presenter in that station by the name of Cindy was happy to inform me that I had been accepted into her team.*

I jumped around the room and made a few dance moves. I had not been that happy since I got to campus. Jubilantly, I went to my hostel to get ready for the next day.

The next morning, I took a warm shower, dried my body in a hurry and wore my finest senator sky blue up and down attire. Vera had advised me to

be myself but in order to keep this job, I needed to present myself in an expected way.

I got to the office five minutes early to 8am with the same elation of the previous day.

“Good day Ms. Where should I sign in.?” I asked the receptionist beamingly.

“Sorry, you have been rejected” she sat back and threw her over made face away from her laptop screen.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes Sissy, you are no longer welcomed here” she blinked her horse tail lashes and her conspicuous multi-coloured nails that became palpable as she stroked her cheap ponytail wig.

“What did you call me?” I queried.

“If I were you, I would leave before security helps me out, homo.” She stood up to leave and I immediately pushed her back to her chair.

“Did you just push me?”

“I can see that you lack basic home training but with me, you will not be paying to get it. Now, is there a decent person in this office I can talk to?” my voice went up. I hit my hand on the table. My heart raced rapidly. As I hit the table harder, Cindy

came forth.

“Chetachi, can I see you in my office?” Her pleasant face was inviting but my love for her show had waned.

“No, I don't want to go to your office. Tell me why I was rejected by your office after getting the news of acceptance. Can you tell it to me here?”

Cindy looked away and nodded with the word “sorry”. “It wasn't my decision.” I headed to the entrance door and slammed it. She came after me. I waved down a tricycle that drove me off.

The rest of the day felt long. Time became slower. *For the first time, I felt completely alone in the whole world.* I rolled back and forth in bed with my senator wear I couldn't remove after I kicked off the shoes to where I couldn't remember. Vera had already called ten times but the invigoration to pick the call or to do anything wasn't there. Suddenly, there was perspiration all over my forehead. I managed to drink water but there was no appetite for food. I sat up staring at the evening sun from my widow when I heard a faint knock at the door.

When I saw Cindy, my jaw clenched. I turned and went back to where I was and she followed me.

"I'm sorry about what happened to you. You didn't deserve that."

"Why are you here? I need to be left alone," I interrupted.

"Some people in my office don't like you. But I like you"

"I don't care."

"But we care, Chetachi. When you left this morning, I searched for your resume and found your hostel address and to get here, I reached out to Brain. He is my friend, a final year Management student and the founder of *Happy Family*, on campus." She waved and a tall young black man stepped in. He smiled and waved at me with "hello". I nodded. He looked calm and dapper in black jean trousers and a turquoise short-sleeve shirt that showed off his decent biceps.

"My name is Brain Uche. Cindy told me what happened to you, and I can relate because I have been on this road. But I want you to know that we are here for you."

"You don't know me or what I've been through, and you are nothing like me." I stood up and walked to the window.

Suddenly, I felt two hands on my shoulders. Cindy was rubbing my back and Brain's hand was on my shoulder while he spoke.

"You need to join the family"

"Which family?" I turned and faced him. He was exactly my height.

"They are people like you and I, kind people who would never judge you. Some of them have been through worse. You can come tomorrow." He slipped a piece of paper into my palm.

"We will leave you alone for now," Cindy said.

"My number is there. Call me if you decide to come. Our meetings have no fixed venue. It varies for security reasons. If you call, I will give you the details. You can still call me anytime even if you don't want to come." He smiled. This time, his teeth made him even more handsome than he looked earlier. I watched them leave.

I eventually met the members of *Happy Family* a week later. I wish I had known them earlier. I felt different. During the weekly social meetings where everyone mattered and could be themselves, the welfare of members was discussed. *For the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged.*

Later, Cindy recommended me to a media firm where I now work. Brain became a good friend. In fact, Vera is coming over this weekend and I will be hosting Cindy and Brain for dinner. I wish my grandma could be here.



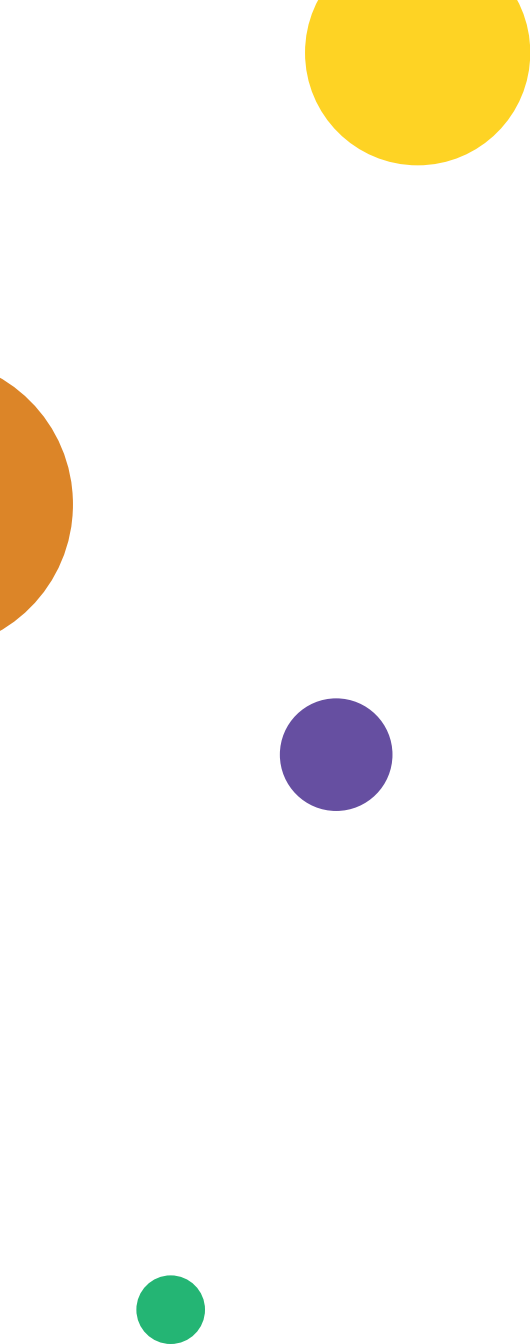
Illustration by Rosie Olang

MUTATIONS

BY AFFOUA NOELLY AKA

Once a haven
A place of perfect harmony
Where one never lost a smile
A place of unity and strength
A source of peace and comfort
The foundation of our being and our future
A spring of motivation and guidance
Family used to be truth and unity

Alas! Times are changing,
People as much,
And family wasn't unwavering
In perpetual mutation,
Today, the source of several illusions,
Center of divisions



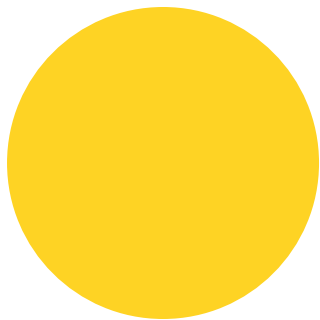
With it tension-filled conversations
The family today is origin of the greatest betrayals

A heavy atmosphere,
People no longer wanting to breathe the same air
Relatives, siblings, cousins, fathers, mothers
Exchanging bitter words to each other
Children losing their bearings
Escape!
To ally with strangers
Strangers turned friends at the expense of blood

Today's lineage is an infernal circle
Where no one is willing to express their pain
Nod and agree
Not complaining or dissenting
For fear of being accused of disobedience
A child's opinion can never supersede a parent's
A yes-man!
To contradicts the elders
Would earn you the title of "*Thiéni Gbanani* the
terrible child"

The family of our time divides us,
A source of humiliation and disregard
We can no longer open up
We are pushed towards other horizons
To build friendships that will become solace

The family nowadays pushes us down



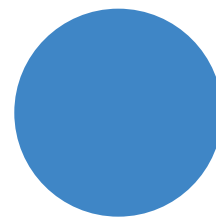
And towards battles, unarmed
Tearful and distrustful
We become bruised beings
Who hide under shells
And little by little, fade away

A tragedy,
The modern family wants the perfect child
Of the values it instills in us,
It expects obedience and execution
Good or bad, they must be enforced
And to God we must surrender

To build a family is our duty
Conceived from a man and a woman
To err is human, to forgive is divine,
But same-sex love !
What an ugly transgression
No difference between LGBTQIA+ and the devil
A being possessed by evil
Ripapapapa!

The devil has taken hold of our soul
“Love thy neighbor,” a forgotten verse
They will forget that family is to love
In spite of qualities or flaws,
In spite of strengths or weaknesses
They will forget their pastors’ teachings
Family love fizzling out to give way to hate
Then to the conversion therapies





And of the life of the possessed, will remain only
perpetual suffering
Without honor nor happiness
Disowned by those who should have protected us
Humiliated, scorned,
Left to our own devices,
Thrown into the jungle,
Alone, faced with their hatred

They will forget that forgiveness is divine
And that to love can never be evil

In the LGBTQIA+ community, we will find
comfort
Chosen family,
Rainbow family, united like fingers on a hand
Living proof that love is not a crime
Neither delusion nor whim
The love of my chosen family is unconditional

Away from temptation and betrayal
My chosen family welcomes
It listens and guides
Defender of the rights of its members,
Lawyer at the bar of life
Guardian,
Protector.

Without honorarium or acknowledgement,
Its greatest happiness is to witness
Its children's success

P R O O F T H A T
L O V E I S N O T
A C R I M E

Braving obstacles, no longer intimidated
Shining through their work and standing on
their own feet
My chosen family, my parallel universe.

non-fiction



Ohana, My Family

lulseget, 15, ethiopia
PHOTOGRAPHY AISHA SHILLINGFORD

BY KEVYNN HONFO
ILLUSTRATION BY AISHA SHILLINGFORD



As a child, I was taught that family is first and foremost a blood relationship. A father, a mother, one or more children. To extend it further, we could include uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, grandfathers, grandmothers; all those with whom we share blood ties. Being part of a family is a tremendous gift to a child because it provides love, protection, prospects and security. Furthermore, family is where core values are instilled in children so that they are able to live well in society, interact with others and be happier.

As I grew up, I realized that in reality, there is no standard definition of family. That it wasn't just about blood ties, but rather, about experiences, similarities, knowledge, patience, tolerance and love. Every era, every generation experiences different forms of family. And *even though the nuclear family appears to be the most widespread today, other family forms have existed and continue to emerge.*

In many African traditions, family is sacred. It is valued because it represents the basic unit of society, but also the center of education and solidarity. The family provides for the evolution and development of parents. It is the place par excellence for the transmission of heritage (financial, cultural, social), and the reproduction of social and cultural groups. Which is why marriage represents the unification of different

families, different beliefs, traditions and customs for the happiness of two people.

The role of the family in today's society has evolved. It no longer represents that intangible foundation, but oftentimes is a mere gateway, without the establishment of strong values. The external environment is sometimes more important and plays a predominant role for the child. The family is no longer a foundation, and barely shapes them. It becomes less essential, because the environment in which the child lives takes precedence over the family.

Nowadays, queer organizations are also considered families. They provide protection, care and support for LGBTIQ+ youth. They take in members of the community who have been rejected and disowned by their parents, sometimes providing them with shelter, food and support. They also provide support to people living with HIV. In these organizations, you will learn self-confidence, empathy, respect for yourself and others, consent, honesty and humility.

There, you will meet brothers and sisters who've gone through similar situations as you; friends who will always be there for you and with whom you will share the simple things in life. They will welcome you with open arms and support you

without expecting anything in return. They will offer you friendship and love you for who you are, without judgment. You will share joy, wigs, dresses and heels. You will tease each other. *And on those nights when you will feel the blues, know that there will always be someone to listen to you and offer you a shoulder to cry on.*

Family is what you have left when you've lost everything, when you hit rock bottom. It is the community of people who are there for you even when you disappoint them, when you make mistakes or poor choices; those with whom you can share difficult moments. It is, or should be, a source of unconditional love. Family are the people you can count on; the ones who stand up for you, protect you, defend you, and are involved in your life through their presence and support. Sometimes, family is the next-door neighbor who offers you a piece of bread, the one who defends you during an attack, or the little neighborhood boys who greet you with a hug.

Family love can be expressed in so many different ways. "Hello auntie, thank you for the gift", "I'm so happy for you sister", "Uncle, are you taking me to the football game on Wednesday", "Please come home soon, I miss you", "Hey girl! I have an idea to share with you", "I'll always be there for you", "Mum, can we have dinner in front of the TV tonight", "I love you dad", "Guurl! I've got tea!"

Ohana, remember that family exists in many different forms, even if it changes from one society to another. It is an incredible richness; the very

essence of the human experience. Only family provides the necessary tools to be able to face the highs and lows of life.

Because family is one and indivisible,

Because nothing can replace family,

Because there's so much to say about family,

*Because this world would be so empty
without family.*

I send love to all families around the world.


non-fiction



FAMILY

*And Who They
Are To* **YOU**

BY EHIKIOYA ATAMAN
ILLUSTRATION BY
AISHA SHILLINGFORD



Writing this piece gave me mixed feelings because on one hand, I get to write what's entirely my view, my truth, my reality, and on the other hand, I am also writing about hardships I have encountered. Nonetheless, I am pleased to be able to focus on family, an institution with which I have been obsessed for as long as I can remember.

The family I was born into and grew up with was a unique experience that shaped me as a queer person. I believe that we do not usually know

we are queer until one day, something happens: an event, a feeling, a sight or even name calling; whatever. Just something. Then, we begin to realize who we are and gradually, we bloom. Then, we blossom into fully aware, happy people. We bring our colour to the world, we bring our pride. Everything becomes more beautiful, but right about then, we are usually unable to share this beauty with "others" or spread it out in the sky like a rainbow for the admiration of all, primarily because we are scared.

Mr. Esiri was my English teacher when I was in Primary 4. He was tall, dark complexioned, with kind eyes and a patient manner about him that endeared him to his pupils. I was in love with Mr. Esiri. *Even as a child, I knew then that I felt for him what no other person would understand.* So, when

Mr. Esiri was transferred out of my school, I was disconsolate. I got home from school that day in tears. I wept and wept, feeling my eight-year-old heart break into tiny innumerable pieces at the thought that I would go back to school the next day and not see Mr. Esiri forever.

My siblings wanted to know why I was crying. But I couldn't tell them. I was scared. I knew they wouldn't understand. I knew they would pester me with cruel tauntings, and turn what I felt was a special feeling for Mr. Esiri into something ugly and abominable. So, I didn't answer them and kept on crying.

My father asked me why I was crying. I was even more petrified by the thought of him knowing. He could not know. Every child is made to feel like any secret they're holding away from their parents is bad. And my secret was not even the normal kind. I couldn't tell him. Instead, I kept on crying.

And my father, frustrated by my sobs, chose to punish me instead of consoling me. He brought out a cane and whipped me.

"Since you want to cry, I will make you cry more!" he barked as he lashed me.

It was so unfair. Why was I being made to despair over both my broken heart and my bruised body?

But such was the way I experienced family as a growing homosexual. I felt the pain of my private life, but masked my hurts from the prying eyes of my family for fear of what they'd make me suffer for it. Yet sometimes, I suffered all the same.

Since I couldn't even share this beauty and pride at home, what then is family meant for? Many of us learn about the mutual love and care that comes with family, but at some point in our lives, we realize that this love has its limits. We are born into a group of people with expectations of us; a group of people who created a being, yet know nothing about its essence, its aspirations. We are assigned a first name and a last name and live by a list of ways we are allowed to be or expected to be as representatives of our families. Often, our last names are stone-laden ropes tied to our necks. And we, the bearers are tasked with bringing "only honour" to our last names. We become shadows of ourselves, constantly seeking solace elsewhere: in other people, in books, in movies, the woods, forests, maybe even caves. I do not believe that this was the plan for the family as an institution.

The family was meant to be a safe haven, still is, always will be. However, in my experience, the vast majority of queer people have no experience of the ideal family, a safe haven. While every other system has the potential

to utterly fail, the family ought to be the surest point of rest and peace for a queer person, even if this acceptance were to come only from one other member of this group. Well, many of our families have failed us. Mine failed me too. What saddens me most is that I have always accepted their individual shortcomings, whatever they may be, and loved them the same. I never got to hand anyone a list of expectations or explicitly name any limitations to what I can tolerate. Yet, I get to suffer under the weight of the same. *It deeply hurts to negotiate love from the very people who should shield and keep me safe from the loud, furious world.*

I have to be completely honest with you here, these past almost-three decades of living have taught me what family is not and what family should be, queer or not. Despite my difficulties and disappointment with the family I was born into, I have another family, my queer family. We are happy just as we are. This group of people has taught me what an ideal family is. Our family is built on different principles of love, communication, mutual respect and trust. We are literally our own support system because we are all we've got. We watch out for each other and affirm each other. I actually look forward to having my biological children and this is the model I intend to follow in raising them.

This is my resolve for the future model family that I will champion: no stoned-ropes around, no endless list of dos and don'ts, no do-or-die expectations of honour to be brought to a last name and nothing but pure, unconditional love.



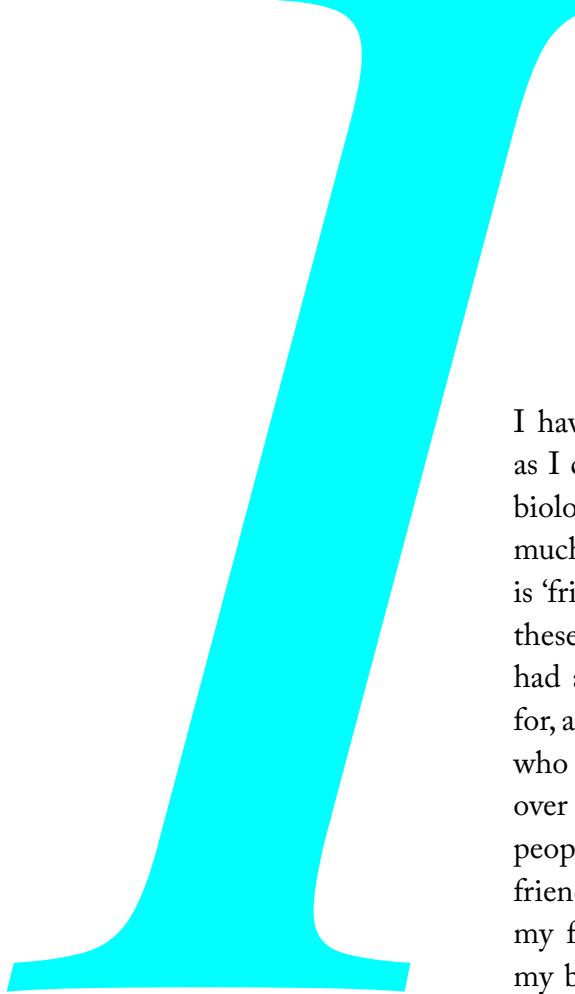
SPOILER ALERT:

You Can Choose Your

FAMILY

BY KÓLÁ


ILLUSTRATION BY AISHA SHILLINGFORD



I have always been a people person. For as long as I can remember, I was told by members of my biological family I had too many friends, I cared too much about friends. “The only thing Kólá knows is ‘friends, friends, friends’”. Little did I know that these “friends” that my biological family members had a problem with, and my ability to find, care for, and choose people outside “the family”, people who chose me back – was going to save my life over and over again. I was raised by a group of people, a biological family, that dreaded the idea of friendship. So, this, who I am, someone who holds my friends dear, has always been a problem for my biological family. You'll find, as you continue to read, that this has been and always will be my truth in more ways than one.

Granted, given the dynamics of my biological family, I did not need much encouragement to redefine what family means for me; to find and make a family with people who have no problem with who I am and love me for all the things that make me me. *I have always been viewed as a misfit in most societal concepts, but none as painfully obvious as in the concept of family.* As a child, I wasn't quiet, I was playful and rough, and got into fights albeit in defense of others. It made no sense to them that I was this way and still doing well in school. I liked sports and activities that the girl my biological family wanted me to be, should not like, and everyone

G R O W I N G U P ,
I W A S N E V E R
I N A H U R R Y T O
G E T H O M E F R O M
A N Y W H E R E ;
H O M E W A S N ' T
H O M E F O R M E .



chalked it up to me being a "tomboy". They could not fathom the possibility that I was just a boy. Not who they assumed I was...The things I liked, the sports I played, and the way I acted, dressed, and behaved were so far removed from the rest of them, and they made sure to tell me about it. I'm sure they would say it was their way of showing affection, but all the scolding and reprimands for simply being myself and doing the things that came naturally to me was the beginning of the end of our relationship. It was the beginning of the rift that would only get bigger over time. They taught me from an early age that who I was, the way I was, that being a boy like me, was not right. For the most part, it did not work. I mean, look at me! But they succeeded in making me into a quieter and calmer version of myself that I did not recognize or love for a very long time. As I grew older, my biological family's denial of who I am didn't get any better, and the reality of who I am – a queer, abrosexual Nigerian man of trans experience – just kept getting louder. It was not lost on me what this would mean.

I had always felt apart from my biological family, never been close to them in the ways I envied people who were close to their biological families, and it showed up in the way I talked to them and spent time with them. *Growing up, I was never in a hurry to get home from anywhere; home wasn't home for me.* I loved school more than most kids and while some people thought it had something to do with how well I did in school, it was more about the people there, my friends, and that became apparent over time. My biological family were not people I could

talk to, be myself with or be comfortable around, so I always sought that in my friends. I could never really go to my biological family with or for anything real. I saw no pieces of myself and no support for someone like me within the perfect image of who they thought they were. I knew they could only love the version of me they wanted and created in their minds; that if I was ever who I truly am with them, I would not be met with the love, care and support they claimed to hold for me. I knew I would be putting myself in harm's way, in the way of emotional blackmail, obligations and demands I could not meet. With my biological family, I was never enough. I was never serious enough or delicate enough or gentle enough, but they concluded it was childhood exuberance. Until the day I was outed.

I could never really blame the rift on the fact that I was outed, being outed only made it bigger, undeniable, and triggered a set of life and personhood-altering events I could never have been ready for. Then more than ever, not only was home not home for me, *I learned that it was not always ok to "come home". The doors were not always open, I was not always welcome home.* Certain failed, flawed versions of me were not welcome. After I was outed, a lot of traumatic events ensued, but my biological family could not, and still cannot accept the man that I am, or the largeness of my heart, or my love and to whom this love is extended. Things changed and I could no longer bear to be around biological family members without it inducing anxiety, panic and general feelings of dread because it was always a time to shrink who I am and put him away. Not even in the ways that I could muster previously.

It took me a while to realize that I could make and choose my own family. I often wonder if it was something they knew and didn't want me to figure out. They didn't want me to know I had a choice because they knew I wouldn't choose them. I have always had support systems made up of people outside my biological family. I have always found myself more accepted and supported by people I was truly and authentically myself with; people I had a hand in letting into my life. That control, that choice is something everyone should have. It just took being outed for me to lean into it in the ways I do now. I instinctively took every opportunity I had to distance myself from my biological family and in that distance, I became more and more of myself, more of who I truly am, surrounded by people who saw me for who I am and gave me what people biologically obligated to care for me, couldn't. Eventually, it became clear that it was not ok for me to go to their version of home, and that home was not a place I wanted to be anymore. Turns out they were right. *The minute I had a choice, I chose me, and the power I have in creating, in making my own family.*

Thinking about my biological family's complaints in my opening paragraph, sometimes I would replace the word "friends" with "people" and wonder why they had such a problem with that. Why it bothered them so much that I cared for people that were not them. I realized over this past summer that they did not want me to have options outside of them. People I could go to for support, for housing, for assistance, for care, for help and love, or their definition of love. In my experience, it is apparent that society's definition of family is built on a constant, consistent sense of dependency that results in indebtedness masquerading as gratitude. Gratitude to people who had all the power in creating the dynamic they expect you to participate in, no questions asked. Debt for things you did not ask for but simply needed because you were born and immediately dependent on them. For that reason, they work hard to entrench this difference between friends and family, in a bid to ingrain the sense of obligation and guilt that leaves many already vulnerable people – who did not have a choice in the demands being put on them – participating in situations that do not benefit them. "Family" paints the picture that there is no choice in the matter, and you must do for them as they have done for you no matter how detrimental it may be to both parties because they see you as

a reward for the hard labour they probably did not want to do. *I am intentional about not referring to my biological family as just "family" because it is a tool oppressive society uses in language to normalize one structure and other another.* Painting one as the default and another as abnormal when both are default and natural simply because they exist. It is the same way I would be intentional about not referring to a cis man as "just a man". Both are families. Both are men. Legitimate and whole.

I now have a group of people who I call friends, who I call siblings. They have become, by choice, what biology could never comprehend or give to me. They choose me every day and make space for me to be who I am, while also helping to make me into who I am. I cannot truly say that I would be the exact person I am without the love, care, support, education, commitment, and dedication they pour into me.

In 2022, Cuba redefined family in their constitution as any group of people who take care of one another. That is my definition of family. A group of people who come together, despite life's hardships, past trauma, and experiences, to heal and care for one another through. A choice to love unconditionally or leave if the need ever arises. It is not a place of entrapment; it is not a place without reason; it is not a trap nor a prison; it is not a place of guilt or a place that demands us to endure harm. It is a place that has your best interests and the interest of the collective at heart; that calls us to hold one

another through life and into growth regardless of damage and baggage. It encourages and helps us to grow out of outdated, toxic norms, into a space of consistent, unwavering safety. Chosen family is power. Chosen family is a choice in a matter my biological family did not want me to have a choice in. *Chosen family saved and continues to save me, to save us.* I am and will forever be grateful for them, for choice, and the choice(s) we continue to make together. Chosen family is EVERYTHING. Everything my biological family never was.

C H O S E N F A M I L Y
S A V E D A N D
C O N T I N U E S T O
S A V E M E ,
T O S A V E U S .

in conversation



Uncovering **The Inner Human Experience** Through Portrait Photography

A CONVERSATION WITH
KADESA

INTERVIEW BY CLAIRE BA
PHOTOS BY KADESA

Where do you draw the courage and strength to follow your dreams when people don't understand them at first? For Q-zine, Kenyan photographer Kadesa opened up about family, her love for portrait photography, and how this photography style she initially explored to develop people skills ended up contributing to her appreciation of the inner human experience.

What should our readers know about you?

My name is Sarah Kadesa, but my friends and family call me Kadi. I am a quiet, bubbly girl who loves cats (laughs) and most people who know me well know that I am a cat mom. I have two cats.

How did you start in photography?

I have always been very artistic. I used to draw and do a lot of calligraphy when I was younger. Later, I decided, or rather, was influenced by my father, to get into sciences, so I studied chemistry at the University of Nairobi. During my last year of university, I developed an interest in photography. Four years prior, if you had told me that I would become a photographer, I would have laughed in your face. This was never the plan. But one day, a friend who had a fashion lifestyle blog needed me to be her photographer. She gave me her camera

and said “*See if you can use it. Try it out*” and that's how it all began. What started off as curiosity essentially became an obsession.

And why portrait photography?

At first, I used to shoot mundane objects. I particularly enjoyed shooting landscapes. However, I ventured into portraits specifically because I was trying to learn people skills (smiles). I am a very reserved person and I wanted to challenge myself to develop more social skills through taking photos of people. And I learned that through portraits, you get to see various shades of people. For instance, when having a one-on-one session with someone, you get to learn a lot about them because at some point, they let their guard down and become more vulnerable. It's something that you have to not only respect, but also appreciate. This process has also helped me let my own guard down because I have come to realize that a photoshoot is a lot like a sharing session. It's not just about taking pictures of someone but having a candid conversation with them. And if you want them to be vulnerable around you, you have to be vulnerable as well. Regarding the people skills in question, I wouldn't say I am where I want to be yet, but I'm progressing. I am definitely better than where I was when I started out (laughs).



What did you learn about yourself through photography?

Usually, before I take a photo, I have a vision in mind, and I don't stop until I achieve that vision. What I learned about myself through photography is that I am very demanding with myself and the teams I work with. Oftentimes, I want to attain perfection, which, I am learning, isn't very productive (laughs). I am learning that it is important to take it easy even though it is still hard for me to let go of this desire for perfection. I highly curate my work and what I show the world. Sometimes, I take several pictures and many of them never see the light of day because I don't consider them good enough.

You bring up an interesting point about the way you curate your work. When I came across your profile for the first time, I noticed that most of your work was in black and white. I later realized that you had a separate account for your color work. Is there a reason for this?

When it comes to curating my work, I have found that I prefer showing it in black and white because I have a lot of appreciation for this style. I've realized that when it comes to portrait photos in color, as a viewer you find yourself focusing a lot more

on the clothes of the model. But when it's in black and white, the viewer doesn't see the clothes, they see [the model's] emotions.

Viewers get a glimpse of the model's inner world, and those are the stories I want to focus on. This is not to say that I don't like color. I still want to show people that I can see them in color as well. And of course, it is also possible to see emotions through color. But through my black and white work, I have to go the extra mile to really see deeper inside the person I'm photographing, and that's something I have a lot of appreciation for.

Now that we know that you are very demanding in your work, I'm assuming that there is a lot of preparation that goes into it. Could you tell us about your creative process?

I usually start with figuring out what the theme of the shoot will be. I spend quite a bit of time on Pinterest for inspiration. The team that I work with is made up of friends, so our creative process is relatively casual. It looks a lot like a hangout, but at the end of the day, we always make sure to produce high quality work. It's a very relaxed environment, we listen to music, and that's one of the ways we create a comfortable environment for the models we shoot. I make sure to play the model's preferred music genre, and mix in things that I like to make sure we are all comfortable. Once the models are comfortable, it's easier for them to bring out more of themselves, and that's what makes a successful shoot.



When I'm editing, I'm mostly at my place so I also listen to music. I listen to a wide range of music, depending on my mood. Music is a big part of my life and who I am as an artist, so it is an important source of inspiration for me.

Speaking of music, is there a song that is particularly special to you in your creative process?

Among the artists that influence my creative thinking, I can name Lana Del Rey. She greatly influenced my creative journey. Blue Jeans, in particular, is one song that has had an influence in my going into photography. I find her music videos very visually appealing and inspiring, and consuming them made me realize: *"I want to do this!"*

As you know, the theme of this issue is *Family*. What does this evoke for you and how is it reflected in your work?

Family has been a big inspiration for me, especially my mom. My mom has been my greatest cheerleader. When I finished university and decided to go into photography and not get a job in a laboratory, my mom was very understanding. I think she knew. I was artistic from a tender age and that has always made me happy. My father on the other hand did not have the same reaction. He didn't really understand what was going on in my head. But to me, it didn't matter because my

mom was supportive. She even bought me my first camera and it's something that I can never forget. My brothers have been a big support too.

My friends are also people who have become family to me. They have really pushed me to where I am today. People taking their time to model for me is something that I truly appreciate because they could have been doing other things. If you look at my social media pages and portfolio, most of the people featured are people I consider family. I enjoy taking photos of them, and whenever the chance presents itself, I take it.

And of course, *no family is perfect, we still have our issues. But at the end of the day, we know that we'll still be there for each other, that we will support each other no matter what...* which is essentially what family should be, right? Providing support and community to each other no matter what. For me, family is everything. I wouldn't be here, and I wouldn't have achieved what I have achieved so far if it wasn't for all those I consider family.

If you had the chance to choose your family and could pick 4 people from this life to carry over to a new life, who would you pick and why?

I'll definitely take my mom! She has basically been my rock, the glue that has kept our family together and the person who we can always count on. She's very dependable and supportive, and there is a lot I admire about her.

The two other people I'll choose are my brothers, Peter and Timothy. Timothy is the brother that has known me all my life and he has always been supportive in every choice that I have ever made regarding how to move forward with my life. Peter left the country when I was very young, so I didn't really get a chance to know him that well.

However, what I do know about him today is that he is a very kind guy and is also very supportive. He is someone that I can call on at any time and who will help without any hesitation. So, he is someone I would want to have by my side. And yes, I'm bringing him to this next life so I can also get to know him a little better (laughs).

Lastly, I would pick my best friend Amos. He is one of the few people, besides blood family, who have accepted me for who I am and has always been there for me. He was also my first model when I really started photography. He is the one person, besides my biological family, who has been with me throughout this photography journey since the beginning.

Of course, there are many other people I would like to carry over to my next life (laughs) but since I can only pick four, these are the ones I would go with.

A last word for our readers?

As human beings, we have multiple shades to our beings. There is the happy side, the sad side, the angry, the tired, etc. Wouldn't you want all of them to be photographed to know yourself better? If so, I am your girl!

You can explore Kadesa's work on Instagram [@kadesasarah](#) for her black and white work and [@kadesa.rgb](#) for her work in color.





THE CHOSEN ONES

BY LEE MODUPEH

We are the ones.

The ones who piece each other back
together when all is said and done.

And even when the pieces are put back
together, sometimes, we still know no
peace.

To all the faggots, the fairies, the pillow
princesses and the poofers

I choose you.

To all the bull-dykes, the tomboys, the
he-shes and the she-hes,

I choose you.

To all the sissies, the LBs, the femme
queens and the butch queens,

I choose you.

To all those who are a disgrace and
bring shame upon their family name,

I choose you.

I choose you for daring to exist.

I choose you for daring to resist.

I choose you for living and loving
authentically.

I choose you for simply allowing
yourself to just be.

YOU are the family that I choose
because we are the Blessing and the
Blessed.

There is joy in our contradictions.

There is hope in our suffering.

There is exaltation in our laments.

For we are The Chosen Ones.

non-fiction



A Silenced Love

BY RQLI



Being gay in Africa? The audacity! Worse, “fighting” for the right to start a family as a homosexual couple? Even the courage of the few trekkers who survived the Annapurna hike would not have been enough. Accepting one’s sexuality was already a heroic act. Adding parenthood to it was nothing short of brave! A bravery stained with shame nonetheless, because love should not be an eternal struggle.

After all these years, although my memory sometimes fails me,

I still remember, with surprising clarity, one of the many interactions regarding my homosexuality between my mother and I. After I told her that I did not need to marry a man to have the grandchild she so desired, she had responded with: “So a pretty woman like you will conceive a child with a man and leave him?”, shock written all over her face. That day, I laughed and told her that I did not have to be in a relationship with a man to be able to get pregnant (neither did straight women by the way), especially since *my plan was to raise my future child with a woman.*

After all our conversations concerning my sexuality, my mother is still alive and well, even though every now and then, she attempts to manipulate me with dramatic fits to express her despair. However, after this coming out, which was

followed by my mother's crying fit – tears that did not make me flinch a bit – my mother, a robust and very conservative African woman, seemed to be prepared for all eventualities related to “my madness”; this madness which made me love women and much worse: made me desire to start a family with the woman that my heart would eventually choose.

What does it mean to start a family? A family is often defined as a father, a mother (or one parent) and children, a definition that I personally find too simplistic. Of 55 African countries, only South Africa allows same-sex marriage, since 2006. Decades later, only a dozen countries “refrain” from criminalizing homosexuality on the continent. Given how clear it is that starting a homoparental family in this context is pure madness, one could measure my appetite for risks. But the risks, or rather the greatest challenges in this undertaking, are mostly intrinsic. The hardest part of being gay is accepting yourself, being at peace with your sexuality despite everything. Given how prevalent homophobia is in the world, there are many demons to fight and steps to take in order for the dream of family to become a reality.

The process begins with finding a woman who loves women, who accepts herself and is ready to

start a family. I find certain internet definitions of family very rigid. Don't a man and a woman, or rather two adults who provide love and a home to a child, count as a family? Don't two women or two men who love each other and conceive a child also have the legitimacy to call themselves a family? They are as worthy of being a family as anyone else. So why were these families, different in their composition but similar in their essence, denigrated? *The most important element, the very essence of family should be love, not the gender of the parents.* This seemed so obvious. Blood ties do not guarantee love. Many families prove this every day.

After the many hurdles of the first stage, the second step consists of deciding how to concretize your desire to conceive. Amongst the infinite possibilities that exist, the most recurrent option is to monitor one's fertile period, then sleep with a man during one or several drunken nights, and disappear once pregnant. Home insemination is also an option, as well as artificial insemination in the best cases.

Legal adoption could be considered but isn't really an option for couples like us. While heterosexuals could have a baby in a snap, *my partner and I, despite having two uteruses and deep love for each other, had to be extremely resilient to fulfill our dream of having our own family.* This desire to start a family (which, sometimes, heterosexuals did not even have), as intense as it was, was unfortunately not enough to get me pregnant. It took an unwavering courage to go

through with this adventure.

Once the option decided upon, the next step was to choose a donor, a man who would correspond to carefully defined criteria, but above all, who would have healthy sperm. Some women choose to avoid any physical contact with a man. Others, due to a lack of financial means or even information, had to make the ultimate sacrifice, each choice depending on what options are available to the future mother.

Then comes the decisive day with its share of ordeals: peeing on a plastic stick. Feverish impatience. Palpable anxiety. All the emotions that could precede the appearance of the two lines that would confirm, or not, the concretization of a pregnancy. The appearance of a single line caused despair, before giving way to bitterness and sadness. The memory of the day of the ultimate sacrifice would come back with a gagging feeling. Those awkward, sometimes even horrible moments that you wished you never had to experience would come back to mind. And sometimes, depression would win the battle and leave you sinking for days, months or even years before hope rekindled the desire to try again.

At the appearance of two lines, however, joy overwhelms your soul and almost takes your breath away. An indescribable happiness. As if you had been waiting for this news all your life. A miracle for which you have prayed and fasted for weeks. After the initial excitement, time to inform the woman of your life! At this news that will change

both your lives forever, she sheds tears of joy that seal the magic of the moment.

As the days go by, euphoria gives way to anxiety that lasts well beyond the pregnancy, throughout your life as parents. You'll ponder over many questions. Will the baby be healthy? Will your diet and lifestyle impair the child's development? After how many weeks should the baby start moving? A series of worry-filled questions that several doctor visits would sometimes relieve. But on other days, tears were inevitable and no words seemed to reassure us.

The days passed slowly, but my partner grew into her new role. She was present at every doctor visit and would carefully write down all of the doctor's recommendations. After the visits, she would rush to the pharmacy and would sometimes have to force me to take my medication despite the angry looks I would throw at her. There were also those times when she would calm me down in the middle of the night when I had a craving for elephant meat soup; or when she would go out at one o'clock in the morning to find me placali. As the months went by, it was impossible for me to take care of

my body like I used to or even shave my private parts without her help. She would also share tips and tricks that were supposed to make childbirth easier. Our bond grew stronger every day because during this period, which seemed to last forever, no one saw me cry as much as she did. *I loved her so much, and she showed me every day that she too loved us, our baby and I.*

After two hundred and fifty-eight days, the wonderful encounter was imminent. The first sound we heard was shrill but so melodious. The cries of this tiny being instantly filled our lungs with love and joy and summoned our tears, choking our throats with happiness. We held hands for a long time and our kisses were proof that we were the happiest and most grateful people in the universe.

Then came the sleepless nights. Most of the time, I felt like she was more involved than I was but it did not bother me because she was as much a mother as I was. However, the morning I went to get our child's birth certificate, I could not include her name on the papers. The reality check was brutal. This reality that I had unconsciously (or perhaps consciously) shrugged off for so long had finally caught up with me like a boomerang. That day, and all the other times when *I could not shout to the world that this child was not mine but ours*, tears welled up in the corner of

my eyes. Those tears even came close to staining the birth certificate on which I had written "NIL" in the second parent box because the only other option was to write the "Name of the father." Each milestone came with its share of painful realities: when in the street, the baby would innocently shout "Mommy", we would both turn around before noticing the hostile looks around us. At school, I had to introduce my wife as my sister so that she could also have the right to pick up the baby. Not to mention *my mother who refused to acknowledge our child as her grandchild because of the way they were conceived*. Our family was only recognized within the four walls of our home and in our hearts; those three hearts that beat in unison, filled with love for each other.

Should we flee to a land of freedom or should we fight for freedom right here and now, even if the day of victory seemed far away? I could see the despair in my wife's eyes even though she tried not to add to my bitterness. Every day, I would helplessly notice her frustrations. This woman had gone through everything with me, before, during and after the birth of our child, without ever being able to receive any acknowledgement from the rest of the world. She did things that many men would never do, but they still graciously received the honorary title of parent. Some nights, I would fall asleep with a heavy heart that *my family could not be recognized despite all the happiness that my wife and child brought me*. On those nights, I would pray for a miracle. I would pray for these challenges not to undermine our love. But I feared this might be too much to ask of fate in this Africa.



non-fiction



Against All Odds


BY ABAKAR MANSA
ILLUSTRATION BY
CREATIVE POWERR



I am a 26-year-old Ghanaian lesbian who grew up in a society which upholds “family” as a union between a man and a woman with their children in higher esteem. I was taught and raised to understand family as a group of two or more people related by birth, marriage or adoption who live together. These people, living together, are considered a family with different religious and tribal backgrounds, and belonging to a specific clan.

Even though the LGBTIQ community isn’t considered legal in Ghana, over the past three years my lesbian partner and I have chosen to live and settle together permanently, for better or for worse. I did this even though it means the family I’m about to build may not look like the heteronormative family structure that is recognized in our society. *A family, to my partner and I, is about being there for one another against all odds, with love as our ultimate commitment.*

Meeting an LGBTIQ-identifying person and starting a family is notoriously difficult for queer people in Ghana. Not only is same-sex love and family rarely represented in the broader society, but, in my experience, it is also hard to find and create. LGBTIQ people with shared sexuality may be attracted to each other, but this won’t necessarily mean they would want to be in committed relationships or start their own families with each other.



Depending on your location in Ghana, currently, LGBTIQ people look for people to date, be friends, and connect with via the internet, especially through social media. People can also meet at private parties, open pubs and clubs known to be LGBTIQ-friendly. Occasionally, meetings happen in public spaces meant for everyone. *I met my fiancée at an LGBTIQ-friendly pub in Accra, in 2016.*

After being friends for over two years, our love sparked in late 2019 making it easier for us to start a relationship. Acting as the head in our relationship, I took up many responsibilities like paying house bills and providing money for maintaining the home. My partner in turn took care of the remaining responsibilities and we shared house chores depending on our availability. We made sure we kept the house going and grew through shared responsibilities, making sure we did not reproduce a patriarchal family structure in our union.

At some point, we thought we should copy the typical Ghanaian family style between a man and a woman...But we realized it would be extremely challenging for us considering that we are a lesbian couple and won't be able to make our relationship open. We were afraid of being discriminated against and even getting physically attacked. So, we decided to practice our own family style, a family of two women who loved each other passionately. Within our local LGBTIQ community, it is quite common to find partners staying together in a rented room as this can give the impression that they are best friends who enjoy each other's company. My fiancée chose for us to live together as though we were merely sisters or best friends. We are very vigilant when it comes to how we show our affections publicly because Ghanaian society believes lesbians are confused and shouldn't stay together without having intimate men partners in their lives.

Maintaining our home has not been an easy journey due to stigmatization from homophobic people who suspect us of being a lesbian couple. We have faced different challenges from our families, landlord, heterosexual friends and loved ones. Over time, we started getting questions like:

“Why don't we see any male friends or lovers coming by to visit either of you?”

“You're growing old, when are you getting married?”

“Do you want to grow old before you start realizing you need a man in your life?”

Additionally, the kind of physical and emotional support we showed each other, even in front of some of our family members, raised further questions. We started feeling the pressure that keeping our own style of what a family should be like would be very difficult. Also, we didn't live far away from the main city where our families could easily locate us.

We faced a lot of additional challenges because I am masculine-presenting while my partner is feminine-presenting. She was subjected to more advances and suitor requests from heterosexual men. She is a beautiful woman. I knew she would attract the opposite gender. There were times she would propose we find men just to make our families believe that we are capable of being in relationships with men and willing to start a “normal” family. We have also had misunderstandings because of the pressure from my partner's family for her to settle with a man, especially for the sake of bearing children.

The kind of expectations society has of LGBTIQ couples in the closet is disheartening and heartbreaking. It's hard to hear that the heteronormative family is the best and only acceptable family type, in the Ghanaian constitution and in the eyes of God. *Our society forgets that everyone, including LGBTIQ*

people, needs someone to connect with spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and sexually.

No relationship is perfect but the connection I have formed with my partner is beyond magic and brings us total fulfillment. *Our family was built on trust, honesty, transparency, and freedom.* The fact that we are two mature women who understood what it meant to take vows to remain true to each other irrespective of the circumstance that may come our way was one sure way to keep believing and maintaining the relationship we had started nurturing as a young couple. Our resilience in standing our ground as a couple has really brought us not only companionship but also a total sense of belonging to each other irrespective of how the world defines our family. We really did (and do) believe in love.

in conversation

UNCONDITIONAL FAMILY

A CONVERSATION WITH
ZAINA KASHEGA



INTERVIEW AND PHOTOS
BY RUTH LU

Among the words associated with family are love, support, solidarity, and much more. Of course, not everyone's experience of family is the same and for some, family can also mean disappointment, abandonment, and rejection. In this conversation, activist Zaina Kashega opens up about her unwavering commitment to the LGBTQ+ community in whom she has found an "unconditional" family. With Q-zine, she also talks about her different experiences and aspirations of family.

Could you please introduce yourself to our readers?

My name is Zaina Kashega. I am an activist and I fight against stigmatization, discrimination, violence and everything related to human rights violations. I am a member of two associations: Jeunialissime and *House of Rainbow*. *House of Rainbow* is an organization that helps LGBTQ+ folks reconcile their faith and their sexuality. We collaborate with religious leaders because we have come to understand that they can be the source of a lot of rejection of LGBTQ+ people from their families. Religious leaders like pastors and imams are held in high esteem by their followers, so when they preach hatred towards LGBTQ+ people, it impacts how families treat their LGBTQ+ children once they discover their sexual orientation or gender identity. Children are rejected and cast out of families. So, we decided to directly engage

with the root causes of this issue: the very people who preach these harmful messages and propagate intolerance.

At *Jeunialissime*, I work as a project manager and run a project called *Talents Pluriels* (Multi-faceted Talents) that aims at empowering LGBTQ+ youth in entrepreneurship and in their job search. We work with local businesses and organizations to raise awareness on inclusion and sexual diversity. *Jeunialissime* also works to raise awareness and educate LGBTQ+ youth, and society in general, on issues of inclusion, diversity, respect for human rights, and strive to improve the quality of life of LGBTQ+ people.

How did you end up at Jeunialissime?

When I was in school, I had the privilege of coming out, if I can put it that way. My family thought it was a phase so they continued to pay for my education and I was able to graduate. It's only later that they realized that I was serious. Since they wanted me to further my education, they sent me to Kampala in Uganda so that I could develop my English and eventually go study in Canada. However, they changed their mind because they thought that sending me to Canada would make me worse sexuality-wise. So they made me return to Congo, and that's when my nightmare started. The

looks from my siblings, the rejection, the slander, it all became a lot harder for me to handle. So I made the decision to not bother them anymore and took off for a city where I didn't know anyone.

Since I studied law, I used the move as an opportunity to sit for the law exam but I never got the results. I had to look for something else to keep me busy and that's how a friend referred me to an association called Oasis. These were my first steps in activism. Later, I was invited to join *Jeunialissime*. At that time, the organization was almost entirely composed of gay men and they needed a lesbian for some of their projects.

Three years have passed since I took the law exam, and I still do not know the results. They've recently announced that another round of applications will be open soon so I'll try to retake the exam then. Who knows, I might become the first openly lesbian judge in Congo! (laughs)

Having come this far, what would you say you've learned about yourself since joining Jeunialissime?

I would say that I didn't know how intensely the activist fire was burning in me. I knew that I abhorred injustice but I did not know to what extent. It is through this work that I got to meet people who had suffered violence and grave injustice and discovered my own deep hatred for injustice.

Working for my community also made me realize how little of my needs my biological family was able to meet.

Being in an environment with people that I can call family, people who are like me, has been wonderful. Working in a place where I'm fulfilled, where no one cares what I wear or whom I associate with, where the only thing that matters is the work I contribute to the community, has had such a positive impact on me. And I can even say that LGBTQ+ organizations are the first entities to have ever given me a real job. Before that, I tried to make ends meet through small entrepreneurial projects but despite my degrees, I couldn't get a job. Oasis, House of Rainbow and Jeunialissime opened their doors to me and gave me a chance to prove myself, and for that, I am grateful.

Could you tell us a bit more about how your work in the LGBTQ+ community has shaped your view of family?

Today, my conception of family is far from the one I held on for a long time. I used to think that my family consisted of the people I was related to by blood. With time, I understand that family is much more than that. Today, I think of family as the people who accept you as you are, whom you share values with, who support you in the things that are important to you. I've come to understand that family does not judge you. Many think of family as people to whom we are similar, people who look like us. But *I have come to understand that family is about accepting the other person unconditionally.* There shouldn't

be requirements for me to accept them. Family strives to understand, no matter what.

The LGBTQ+ community is the family I wish I had when I was 10, 11, or even 18. It would have saved me from making a lot of mistakes and helped me be more focused, which would have been much more beneficial to me and my community. Growing up not really understanding who I was confused me. Sometimes, I feel like I discovered my family a little "late", but I am making up for it now. In fact, I would describe my commitment to the LGBTQ+ community as being at the point where I would be willing to die for the community. I've been arrested before, not because of my activist work, but because my gender expression bothered some people.

Today, who would you say is your family?

First and foremost, my blood family. They are the ones you don't choose and I am deeply grateful to them, especially my older sister who has been very supportive and has helped me to get rid of my insecurities.

Then there is my partner. She started in activism long before I did without even realizing it. Then she stopped. Since being with me, she's been more active in the community and really wants to learn more. Now, she attends community events and supports me in the way I've always dreamed of

being supported by a partner. There is also my boss whom I consider family. I think of him as the dad I never had, although he's not that old. He is a boss, a friend, a brother, a father figure, and so much more. Lastly, other members of the community. They are like siblings to me. We get on each other's nerves, we fight, but we always work things out in the end. But my number one family is my partner.

How do you envision building a family of your own, with children perhaps, keeping in mind that medically-assisted procreation is not really accessible to LGBTQ+ people in Congo?

To me, my family is first and foremost my wife and I. I love children, but not to the point of having any of my own. I can't imagine myself being pregnant, and it has nothing to do with the fact that I am a lesbian. I just can't imagine my body having to go through all these changes just so I can have a child. But if my wife wants to, I'm open to her carrying our child. I won't force her. If she wants to have a child and wants to carry it or if she's open to adoption, those are options we can explore together.

It is important to understand that there are very few lesbians here who are 100% out. Even when they are financially independent, many are convinced that to have a child, they must sleep with a man. And there are others who are so afraid of their family that they always have a guy on the

side, what we call in Lingala “*mufiniko*”, which is a sort of social cover. So many lesbians choose to sleep with men to start their family.

If I were to start my family, we would do it with a gay man, but I wouldn't want someone sleeping with my girl. I don't know if you're familiar with the term “syringe babies” but basically, it refers to artificial insemination. *If we don't have the money to go abroad and conceive our child, we'll make our little "syringe babies."* And of course, if the gay man in question wants to be part of the child's life, that's fine. He can be there as an uncle, or even as a father if he wants, but it will be our child, my wife and I. We won't ask him for anything in return. But these are conversations that will take place beforehand.

If you could choose four people to be part of your family in your next life, who would you choose and why?

The first person I'd choose is my dad because he passed away when I was very young, and I've always been convinced that if he were still alive, he would have understood me and perhaps would have been able to guide me. I think he would have accepted me and would have made it easier for me to get accepted into the family.

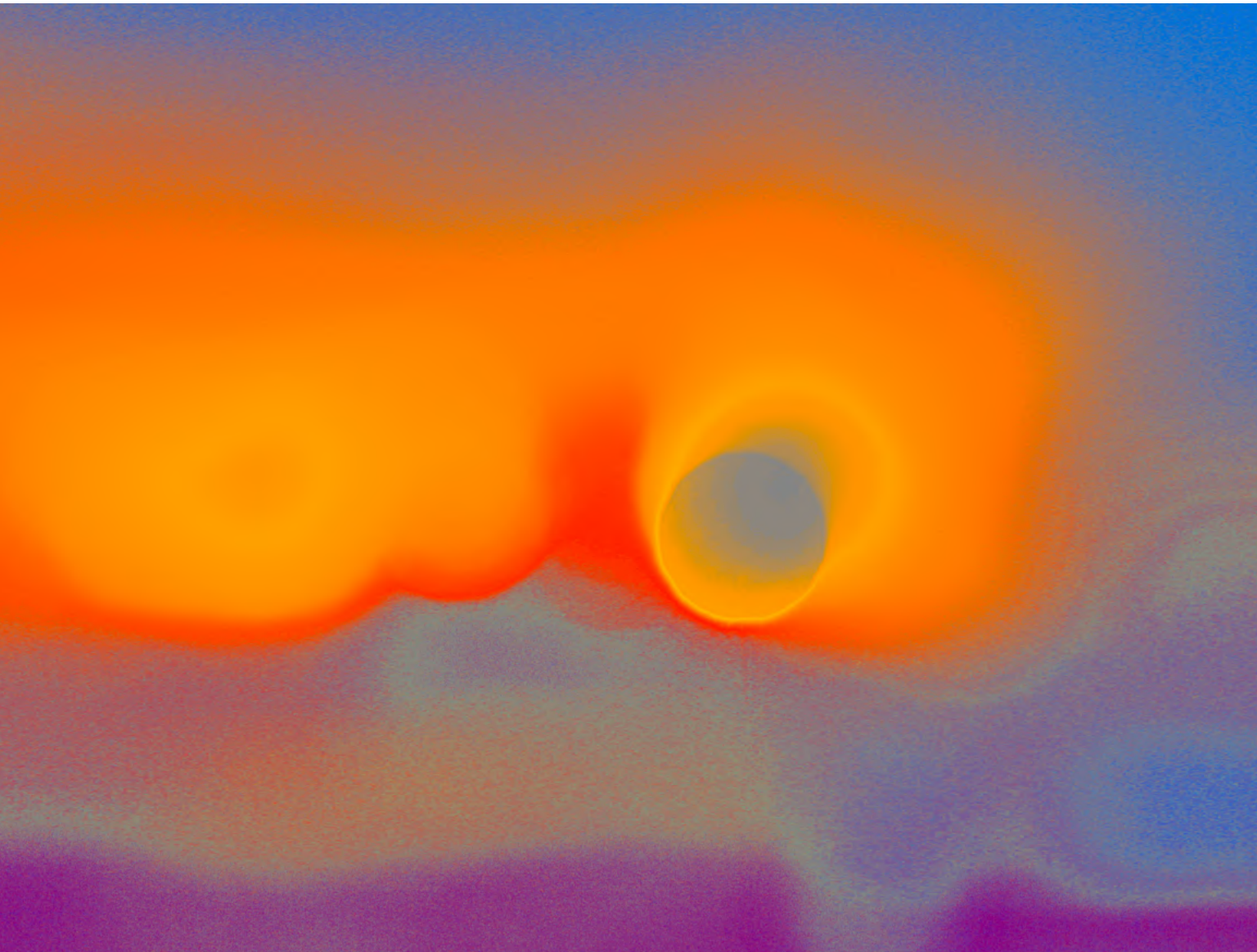
The second person is my mom because she's an amazing human being. She didn't reject me when she found out I was gay. I'm from a Swahili tribe,

and in our culture, saying "mom, I like women" is just unthinkable. It's like wishing death upon yourself. Yet, I did it. I've always been known to have a strong personality in the family, and *when I came out, my mom said "yes, I knew. I was afraid for you because I know things won't be easy out there."* This was so powerful coming from a woman who didn't have any formal education.

The third person would be... hmmm... Although I was rejected by my family, there are still people I like and would like to see again in my next life (laughs). Let's just say the third person would be an ex. She was an ex that really helped me discover the beauty of being with a woman.

And lastly, the fourth person I would choose is my wife!





A CRY OF LOVE

BY MALIX CAMPBELL

A family is a flower garden
Flowers of happiness with a thousand lights
A path of lights,
For children, the best of guides

Brothers, I love you with all my heart
Sisters, I love you with all my heart
Mothers, I love you with all my heart
You did not give me life but you cared for it

Filled with tenderness,
My sweet moms
My sweet sisters
My dear brothers
My dear family

This poem for my wonderful family
Is a cry of infinite love
A love note to the best of families
With the greatness of its people and the
beauty of their souls

Mothers are gifts from heaven
Women through whom eternal love is
born
Queens in the midst of happiness
Fairies who make life loving

You are my gift of life
My role model and my good fortune
With you, I have known but happiness
I love you tenderly, my beautiful
community.

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