



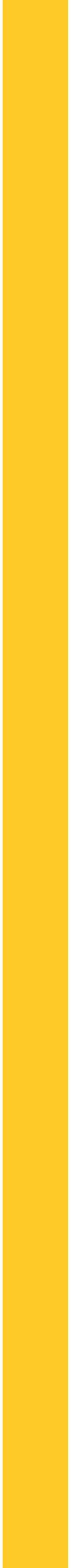
**FORUMCIV.**  
Power to change

# ARTIVISM

FELLOWSHIP COHORT IV

Regional office for Eastern and Southern Africa





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ForumCiv strives for a just and sustainable global development. This work is founded on the equal worth of every person and their right to a dignified life, as well as on the sustainable use of the Earth's resources.

Our activities focus on empowering people living in poverty by supporting their right to organize, claim their human rights, and participate in the decisions that shape their lives.

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# Acknowledgements

## **Sparking Change: Where Art Becomes a Pulse, a Protest, a Promise.**

Sometimes it is a whisper. Sometimes a question. Sometimes a young artist stepping onto a stage, heart trembling, voice steadying into truth.

When I think of the Artivism Fellowship, I do not see a programme. I see a small fire that refuses to go out. A fire that leapt from one cohort to the next, across borders, across languages, across the fault lines of our histories. What began as a modest strand within ForumCiv's Eastern and Southern Africa initiatives has grown limbs, lungs, and a heartbeat of its own. It has become a living organism that is restless, bold, and hungry for justice.

Over the years, something extraordinary happened.

Spoken word collided with muralism. Photography found rhythm. Film discovered its activist bones. Artists who once worked alone began to braid their visions together, weaving stories that stretch from Nairobi's graffiti-stained walls to Kampala's poetry cafés, from Dar es Salaam's cultural collectives to rural villages where art is often the only language people trust.

Cohorts 1, 2, 3 and now 4 have taught us one truth: art is not decoration; it is disruption. It remembers. It resists. It rebuilds.

This photobook is not simply a gallery of faces and moments.

It is an archive of courage. A testimony to what happens when young people dare to look at their country, their continent, and themselves with unflinching honesty. Every photo is a heartbeat.

Inside these pages lies the pulse of a generation refusing to wait for permission. A generation that meets inequality with imagination, apathy with colour, silence with sound. A generation shaping freedom in real time.

As you turn these pages, I hope you can feel what we have felt in every





workshop, every village dialogue, every late-night rehearsal, every trembling first performance: that creativity is not a luxury, it is a lifeline. It is how communities reclaim dignity. How stories heal wounds. How young people carve new futures from old scars.

May you read these stories not as observers, but as witnesses. May they pull you closer to the artists, to their communities, and to the work still unfinished.

May they ask something of you, as they asked something of all of us: What will you do with the fire they've sparked?

Because when art meets activism, when imagination meets purpose, transformation stops being a dream. It becomes a tide. And tides, once they rise, do not retreat.

**Behind every moment of brilliance is a constellation of believers.**

To our partners and donors, the Embassy of Sweden in Nairobi, the Ford Foundation, and the Hewlett Foundation, thank you for choosing to stand at the crossroads where democracy meets creativity. Your unwavering support has watered this movement, allowing ideas to grow roots, wings, and momentum.

To our fellows, twenty luminous artists whose courage is both mirror and torch, you have turned lived experience into truth-telling, pain into poetry, memory into movement. You remind us that activism is not merely expression; it is a form of becoming. The world will remember the light you carry.

To the faculty at Masson & Associates, guided by the steady brilliance of Gregory Mwendwa and Alix Masson, your mentorship has been both compass and catalyst. You turned questions into conversations, conversations into clarity, and clarity into action. You taught our fellows not just how to make art, but how to make art matter.



To Fulfillment, led by Mwaura Timothy, thank you for documenting not just faces but souls; not just events but evolutions. Your lenses have preserved the heartbeat of this journey so future generations may witness what courage looked like in our time.

To the ForumCiv Eastern and Southern Africa team, with love and gratitude to Jackson Obare, Clarine Bowa, Mercy Munene, and Daisy Kibon, your behind-the-scenes dedication stitched this fellowship together. Every logistical puzzle, every call, every quiet act of support became part of the invisible architecture holding this movement upright.

And finally, to the twenty graduating artists of this cohort:

Go forth with fire.

Go knowing your voices carry legacies.

Go knowing your art shakes walls, lifts communities, and stretches the imagination of what justice can look like.

May the spark you carry become a wildfire: awakening, illuminating, and transforming.

Together, we reaffirm this truth: Activism is not a trend. It is a tide.

It is a living, breathing declaration that creativity belongs at the centre of social transformation, where imagination fuels justice, and art continues to speak truth to power.

– **Winfred Nkatha**

*Programmes Lead, ForumCiv Eastern & Southern Africa*



# Artivism Fellowship

Holding Space for Becoming:  
Notes from Behind the Curtain

When I think back to the beginning of this fellowship, Cohort One, a handful of eager artists, a programme still finding its shape, I am struck by how much of our work was, in truth, an act of listening. Listening to what artists needed beyond the curriculum. Listening to the silences between their stories. Listening to what transformation actually asks of a person.

When I founded Masson & Associates seven years ago, I did not imagine we would become midwives to artistic courage. Yet here we are, three cohorts later, realising that this fellowship is less a programme and more a living ecosystem. Each year, it teaches us something new about how humans grow, how communities heal, and how creativity becomes a language for reclaiming power.

In the first cohort, we believed that meeting once a week would be enough. It wasn't. People arrived with their stories in fragments, their fears tucked just beneath the surface. They needed more than workshops; they needed a bubble: a protected space where the noise of life softened enough for them to hear themselves again. And so the residency was born.

The first residency was a revelation. When artists finally had uninterrupted time to sit with themselves, and with each other, what emerged was not just creativity, but grief, doubt, memory, and longing. Wellness, we discovered, was not an "extra." It was the







quiet engine behind every breakthrough. The artists' bodies told stories long before their words did. Their emotions needed room. Their histories needed care.

So we evolved. We brought in someone to hold space, not a therapist, but a gentle guide who could accompany them through the swell of emotions, help them name what felt heavy, and then help them return to the group with more grounding and self-compassion.

Along the way, we learned another truth: that artists, despite their boldness on stage, often carry deep questions about their worth, their practice, and their belonging. Many are balancing multiple lives: full-time jobs, commercial work, activism, and survival. They needed a space to untangle those knots.

That is how coaching entered the fellowship. Half an hour. Just thirty minutes between two phases of the programme. And yet the depth people were able to reach in that small window astonished even me. In those conversations, artists confronted what held them back: fear, exhaustion, trauma, the pressure to produce, the confusion of navigating clients and commissions, and the uncertainty of how to speak truth without losing themselves.

Sometimes the greatest transformation was not in producing art, but in understanding why they had paused, hesitated, or shrunken themselves in the first place.

Working with activists for over twenty-five years taught me that people often enter activism through opposition, through the instinct to say "No, this cannot stand." But this year, something shifted. Through the spectrum of allies, many fellows learned that activism is not only about fighting against something. It is also about finding those who stand with you.

That revelation softened something in the room. It made the work feel possible. It reminded them that change is not always grand; sometimes it is the steady work of influencing what is within your reach.

Across three cohorts, Kenya, then regionally into Tanzania and Uganda, I've watched artists realise that speaking truth is already an act of resistance. That creating from lived experience is already political. That they do not need to contort themselves to fit a grant or a trend; their stories are already enough.



What moves me most is witnessing a shared struggle emerge. A recognition that their challenges are not individual, but collective. And in that recognition, something profound happens:

Art becomes companionship,  
Activism becomes community,  
and transformation becomes possible.

As I look back on these years, what stays with me is not the logistics or the curriculum design, but the human moment. The long pauses before someone names their truth; the laughter that erupts after a tough conversation; the courage of a survivor learning how to begin again; the discovery that one's voice does, in fact, carry power.

This fellowship has changed them, yes. But it has changed us, too. It has taught us that designing a learning journey is not about content. It is about space, permission, and deep listening. It is about creating a world, even for a moment, where artists can return to themselves, and in doing so, return to their purpose.

And so I offer these reflections not as a consultant, but as a witness to becoming. To the ways people bloom when given room. To the ways creativity reveals the truth we have long carried. To the quiet miracles that unfold when art and activism meet in a holding space built with intention, care, and love.

– Alix Masson  
Founder, Masson & Associates  
Co-Lead Designer, Artivism Fellowship Learning Journey



# Stories



“A woman she never met, but who lives inside her energy field like a steady pulse. **A guide. A guardian. A mirror.**”

Nile Dawta

She never quite knows how she does it, how she steps on stage and becomes someone else. She says there are two versions of her: the quiet one who moves softly through life, and the other, a fierce, charged spirit born from her womb. Her sacral chakra is her engine room. Before she performs, she speaks to her womb and invites her grandmother into the room. A woman she never met, but who lives inside her energy field like a steady pulse. A guide. A guardian. A mirror.

People have told her, more than once, that she is never alone. That there is always a presence, a shadow of someone who walks beside her, sits with her, stands behind her. She never doubts who it is.

She believes in African spiritual practice, not witchcraft, not the fear-laden version colonisation framed it as, but alternative magic, ancient knowledge, ancestral technology.

She was named after a musician, a grandmother whose music moves through her even now. She is convinced that is where her power comes from.

Her name, Nile Dawta, was born from water. Jinja, 2019. Her first international performance. And the worst.

A man had promised them heaven, only to abandon them with chaos. The only place she found peace was the Nile. Every dawn, she walked to the water. Sat by the waves. Sometimes she slipped inside. In those hours, the Nile reassembled her. People would laugh, “Are you the Nile Daughter?” They didn’t know they were naming her destiny.

Later, when she learned she was Nilotic by ancestry, when she travelled to South Sudan and met the Luwu people, everything clicked. Their faces looked like hers. Their language brushed against her ears like a familiar lullaby. Their energy, their food, their extravagance, Luo on steroids, she says, felt like home.

She realised then what she had always been: an embodiment of the daughters of the Nile. Her love for music started long before she knew how to name it.

In childhood, she sprinted home from school to catch Beat of the Week. She kept a lyric book, an exercise book turned sacred text. Her mother never understood why she needed to write down every lyric. She didn’t understand that words were her way of breathing.



By age eight, she was already speaking on stages, given random topics and told to go. Water. Trees. Courage. Anything. Her voice always knew what to do. Music and performance braided themselves around her life without permission.

But childhood wasn't soft. She grew up in Shaurimoyo, less than a hundred metres from Kamukunji grounds, the epicentre of Kenya's multi-party struggle. And her birthday? SABASABA\*. Always Sabasaba: tear gas drifting into their tiny 10x10 house like an annual guest. Protesters running. Police charging. She remembers her dad coming home clobbered. She remembers her mother clutching her hand and whispering, "We are not doing anything wrong. Let's go."

Her lungs learned activism before her mind could define it. Sometimes she says she started inhaling tear gas before she learned her times tables. One time, they clobbered her father.

She didn't always plan to be an artist. She went the "right way." University. Actuarial science. A pensionable job as an underwriter. Health insurance. A predictable life mapped in grayscale.

The day she quit, her boss was waiting with a promotion letter. Two futures sat in her hands; one promising stability, the other promising truth. She chose herself, placed the resignation letter on the table, and walked away.

Her father didn't speak to her properly for a while. She didn't tell her parents she'd quit until a year later. Every Sunday, she'd go home, eat with them, and leave as if she had work the next morning. Meanwhile, she was

surviving Nairobi one performance, one gig, one prayer at a time.

But she knew.

She always knew.

Her first-ever song wasn't a love ballad. It was a story about struggle, about Shaurimoyo, about the memory of her father's bloodied face after protests. That song made it to Beat of the Week. Producers came knocking, asking if she could write love songs, radio songs, "happy" songs. She tried. She failed. They dropped her.

But introspection is her mother tongue. Her music is a map of her childhood, her neighbourhood, the country's tension threaded through her voice. She writes from lived experience, not always her own, sometimes the collective ache of her people.

Trauma is a strange muse, she says. It shapes you without asking for permission.

There is a bar in Shaurimoyo called Ong'ere Men's Pub, which means "People who know each other" (Swahili: Watu wanajuana).

A members-only space once used for secret planning during the multi-party era, led by Kenneth Matiba, Martin Shikuku, and other organisers of resistance. Her uncle-grandfather used to own it, and when he retired, he handed it to her.

Not to her father. To her.

A young woman inheriting an ancestral political space once reserved for men, she still doesn't take that lightly. Ong'ere represents brotherhood, comradeship, a kind of coded loyalty you don't enter unless your name is understood. Now she is the one responsible for preserving it, modernising it, honouring its legacy.

She laughs sometimes, saying she didn't





choose activism; activism chose her long before she knew what song she would write or what stage she would touch. She was born on Sabasaba. Raised between tear gas and resilience. Named after an ancestor who sings in her bones. Handed a space that once shaped political resistance. Called by the Nile. Claimed by the Luwu.

Her purpose was carved long before she learned to spell it.  
She doesn't write love songs because her love is bigger.  
It is the love of people, of community, of history, of memory.  
A love that carries nations.  
A love that refuses to be quiet!



SCAN  
to connect  
with Nile



"Joy visits me  
in **unexpected ways**"

Aluwa Hamisi Mkilindi

I used to think confidence arrived in a single moment, like a bright light switching on.

In the way you smooth your clothes, steady your breathing, remind yourself that you are allowed to take up space. I stood there telling myself that nothing needed to be perfect. I could be soft. I could be honest. I could simply be myself.

People often ask where my joy comes from. I never have one simple answer. Joy visits me in unexpected ways. It rises gently into my days even when I do not call for it. It rests beside me when I have no words left. Sometimes it has no reason. It just exists and chooses me. Maybe that mystery is what gives it so much meaning.

Professionally, I was a journalist, but I would describe myself as a feminist. That truth sits deep in my bones. It guides how I think, how I speak, how I move in the world. It asks me to imagine better possibilities. It pushes me toward community, toward justice, toward expression. There has always been a part of me that wants to tell stories, to create work that challenges and heals. Activism and art grew naturally from that place inside me.

When I discovered the Civic Activism Fellowship, something shifted. It felt like a doorway I was finally ready to walk through. The application process was overwhelming at times. It stretched me. It exposed my doubts. But it also revealed my resilience. I trusted that there was room for me in spaces where voices shape change. I believed that I had something real to offer.

Now I am here, learning and unlearning every day. This fellowship is rich with ideas and practices that pull you forward. It holds Pan African thought, creative exploration, digital awareness, narrative building, and emotional grounding all at once. It asks you to show up fully. It asks you to think deeply. Some days are heavy. Some days are bright. All of them matter.

Often, people tend to think that art is just about dancing and acting, but I feel it's more than that. Art is a powerful tool; I am not stuttering when I say that art is the largest tool to create change in the community.

In this season, I am also learning to take care of myself. To nourish my body. To rest without guilt. To be gentle with my mind. To choose kindness again and again. I am learning that softness is a powerful force. It grows quietly and patiently when you allow yourself to breathe.

Every day teaches me something about showing up for myself and for others. About trusting my voice. About honouring the path unfolding beneath my feet. Nothing is insignificant. Every thought, every exchange, every moment of doubt followed by a brave step forward becomes part of who I am becoming.

I am grateful for this journey. Grateful for the people I am meeting. Grateful for the shifting within me. I can feel myself stepping into a fuller version of who I am meant to be. Someone bold. Someone rooted. Someone ready to express without fear.

And I am ready. Ready for the work. Ready for the discovery. Ready for the unfolding ahead of me.



SCAN  
to connect  
with Aluwa





**“I promise you this is my natural voice.”** Mwaringa Mae smilingly says as he adjusts himself on the seat”.

## Mwaringa Mae

“I promise you this is my natural voice”. I performed a piece in Giriama and Swahili during the Activism Fellowship Residency, where I fused contemporary and traditional storytelling techniques that heavily rely on melody. I decided to use art to spread positive love from the Giriama people while also enabling the longevity of the community. I was raised in an area where Italians were basically residents in Malindi, which is why it’s known as the Italian city. Our grandparents were working in the hotel industry, so most of my peers knew hotels would be more in the future, so we would be able to communicate with the Italians and eventually leave the area. We often mixed Giriama and Italian, which enabled us to interact with the Italians. Growing up, my parents didn’t love such interactions, so I was often holed up in our house. They were strong believers in education; thus, my socialisation was limited.

I represent art that has been neglected. I used to do spoken word to change the mindset of people as poetry has power of the words. This art developed in me quite early and as I was in the Nyanza region I found myself practicing. Eventually when going back to Malindi I discovered I had assimilated the Nyanza spoken word rhyme and structure, and literally no one was doing poetry. I was one of the few people from Kilifi who participated in poetry. Despite this each time I performed it felt like it lacked authenticity, as if I was aping someone. I realised I would be a fool if I didn’t adapt into my own style. I started rhyming Swahili and Giriama, which attracted the locals.

With the main aim of changing people’s mindset this tactic was resourceful and rewarding. While using it to preserve the Giriama community, I am also tapping into societal issues such as Gender Based Violence. I grew up seeing GBV so we always thought it was normal but once I grew I realised it creates trauma to the family. I didn’t act on it until it happened close to home and saw the need to speak out. I feel like traditional problems should have traditional solutions and that’s how I use my art. I also feel it was a calling, I studied civil engineering and went on to teach in school but it wasn’t working out. I was always scribbling something in my note pad. Corporate life wasn’t working so I applied for the East Africa Activism Fellowship and got accepted. I couldn’t believe it. The residency has not only helped me build my network but it has also expanded my eye view when it comes to using my art. The residency was focused on using art as a method of activism, which brought together and promoted collaborations. We also got to learn about other interdisciplineries. Right now I understand how deforestation affects herbalists and also poets. It’s all interconnected.



SCAN  
to connect  
with Mwaringa





# Speaking in **Tongues of Fire**

Laker Patience

There's a certain hush that falls when Laker steps on stage. It's not the polite kind, it's reverent, electric, as if the air knows something divine is about to happen. Then she begins to speak, her voice steady and low, each word landing like a confession.

"Bitch, you're so dark that when the Lord said let there be darkness, you appeared instead."

The audience shifts uncomfortably. It's not the insult that bites, it's the mirror she holds up with it. The poem, one of her earliest, unfolds like a wound being dressed in public. Each verse burns through the absurdity of colourism with the grace of someone who has learned not to flinch. "I should have thanked them," she says later with a half-smile, recalling that performance. "But I didn't. I just said sorry sorry because they're ruled by a stereotype of beauty. Sorry, because I am beautiful. Not 'black beauty'. Just BEAUTY."

Born Laker Patience, she grew up between Kampala's noise and her own silence. "As a kid, I struggled to speak," she admits. "You know how in African homes, children are seen and not heard? I had things to say, but I didn't know how to say them."

So she wrote.

Little notes. Scribbles. Secret monologues in the back of exercise books. Writing became a survival mechanism, a form of therapy before she even knew the word. "You can only swallow so much," she says. "At some point, silence makes you sick."

That sickness of being unheard, unseen eventually became her art. When she discovered spoken word, it felt less like a new path and more like remembering one she'd always been walking. "The first time I performed, I realised I wasn't writing for myself anymore. A woman came up to me after and said, 'I saw myself in your poem.' That's when I knew: the words were no longer mine."

Onstage, she performs with the quiet authority of someone who has wrestled with herself and comes out with scars worth showing. Her poems orbit around womanhood, colour, grief, and the small violences that shape our lives. But beneath them all runs one steady current hope.

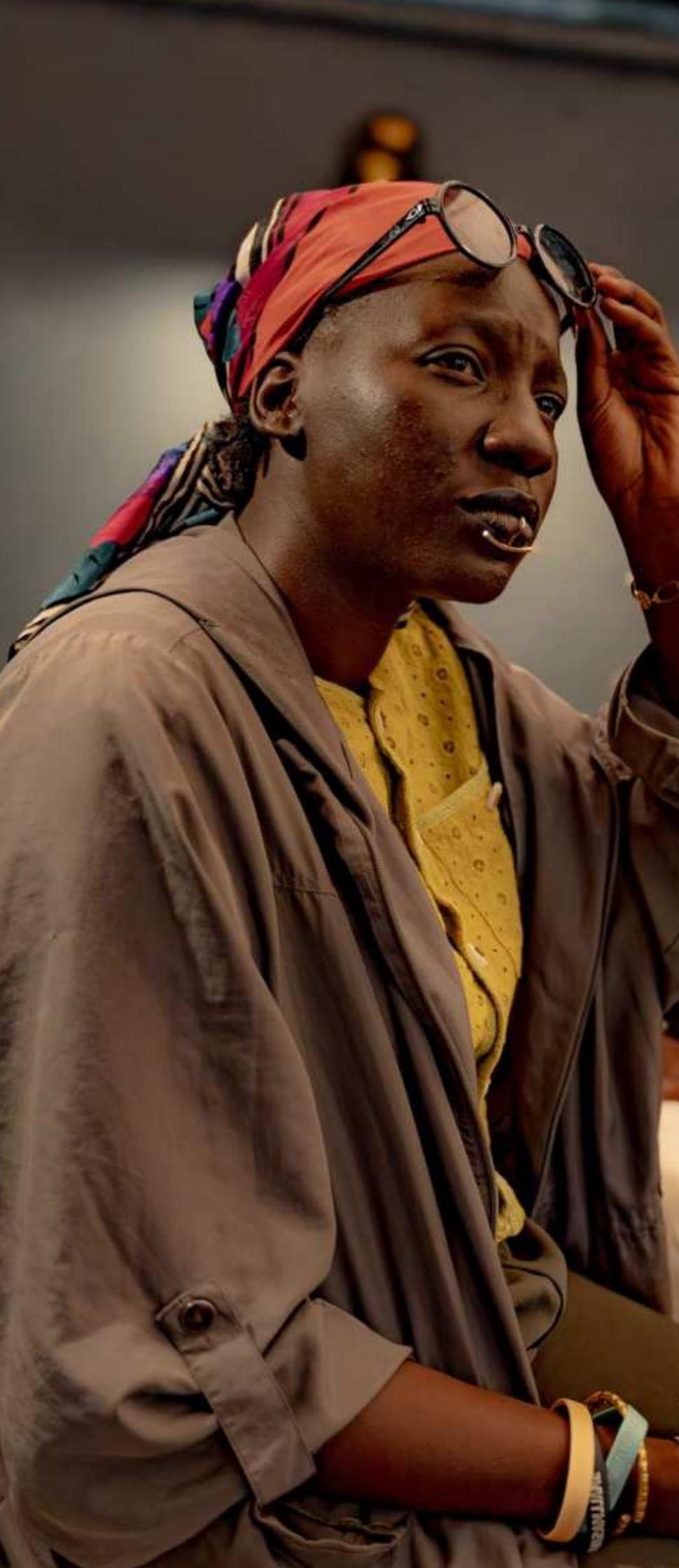
"My art is a love letter," she says. "To women first, especially those who look like me. But also to anyone who's felt too much. The ones who hurt quietly. I want them to know it's okay to cry. It's okay to feel." There's a radical tenderness in that. In a world that rewards numbness, Lakei insists on emotion. "If you're ashamed to be sad in public, I'll be sad in public for you," she says. "That's my offering."

Art, for her, is both personal and political. She doesn't separate the two. "I believe art is a tool for change," she says with conviction. "I work with what people call trash, discarded things, discarded emotions, and I try to turn them into warmth. When people gather around art, they start to see the world differently. That's where change begins."

That belief has led her into spaces that merge creativity with activism, including her participation in the Artivism Fellowship, a residency bringing together young artists from across East Africa. The experience, she says, has been transformative. "The room is mostly Kenyans," she laughs. "The energy! It makes you question things. You start to ask yourself, 'Are we, Ugandans, thinking hard enough about certain issues?'"

But it's less about competition and more about awakening. "Being here has done something to my soul," she adds quietly. "It's given me language for things I used to only feel." There's a part of Lakei that still sees the world through the eyes of that quiet child watching,





absorbing, rearranging what others overlook. "I come from a lineage of women who survived the sun," she says. "Women who worked in the fields until their backs curved but still found ways to laugh. I think of them every time I write."

Her grandfather was gunned down during a period of political unrest. Her grandmother lived through it all. "I carry them when I speak," she says. "Every word I say is a continuation of their stubborn spirit. I am their mark." It's that sense of inheritance of carrying voices forward that fuels her activism. "We are here to make things easier for one another," she says. "That's what I'm doing with my art. I'm giving hope. I'm reminding people that it's possible."

When she talks about fear, her tone softens. "People think bravery means not being afraid," she says. "But it's really just doing it anyway. Every time I step on stage, I'm terrified. But silence is a different kind of death."

The fear she feels isn't just personal, it's political. To speak boldly as a young woman in Uganda, to call out colourism and misogyny and state apathy, is to take a risk. Yet she insists it's worth it. "If I'm ever silenced," she says, "I hope the community I've built will speak for me because I've spoken for them too."

At the fellowship, collaboration has been her biggest revelation. "An artist is not an island," she says. "We survive because of the structures around us, people who believe in what we do."

It's something she wishes she could tell her younger self, the one who thought she had to fight alone. "I'd tell her: reach out. There are people who are willing to help. Energy is a resource, don't waste it on those who don't care." That philosophy now shapes how she works. "Collaboration is everything," she says. "From the people who share their stories with me, to the ones who sit in the audience, to the

women who raised me. My art is made of them all."

When asked what her art would become if it were a tangible thing, she pauses. "If my art were a wet cloth," she says, "and you squeezed it, hope would drip out. Love. Excitement. Maybe that water would fall on the ground and make a seed grow a tree that gives people shade."

That, perhaps, is the perfect metaphor for her work: art as sustenance. Art that nurtures, that offers refuge, that insists there's still beauty worth fighting for. As our conversation winds down, she stares at the horizon like she's already imagining her next poem. "I just want to leave the world softer than I found it," she says finally.

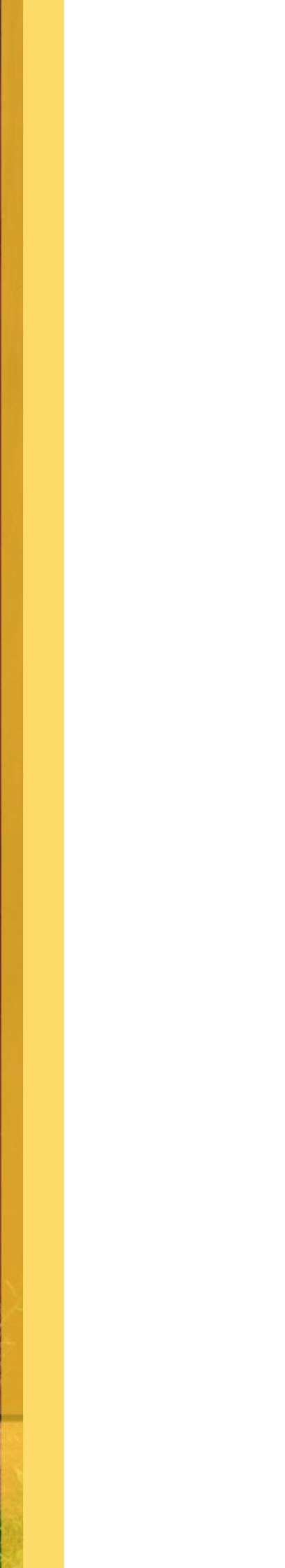
In a time when noise drowns out nuance, Lakei's voice cuts through not by being the loudest, but by being the most honest. Her poetry reminds us that language can be resistance, and softness can be strength.

And when the lights go down and the audience exhales, what lingers isn't just her words, it's the feeling that, for a few minutes, we were all seen.



SCAN  
to connect  
with Laker





# She doesn't begin by painting. She begins by breathing.

Mary Kakesa

The afternoon light settles differently in Mary Kakesa's room, thin, defiant shafts that cut across unfinished canvases leaning against each other like quiet witnesses. A jar of murky paint water sits beside a palette where black pigment dominates, swallowing hints of red and indigo into its depths. Mary moves slowly, almost ceremonially, across the small space, brushing specks of dried acrylic from her table. There is no music playing, yet the room hums with the gentle restlessness of becoming. This is not just a studio. It is a holding space for grief, for memory, for the stories that polite society refuses to speak aloud.

She doesn't begin by painting. She begins by breathing. In this pause, her art is still only an idea, an emotion half-formed, alive beneath the surface of her skin. Tomorrow, it might be a woman breaking through chains of silence, or a masked protester hurling a tear-gas canister back to its sender. Or a girl who survived. But today, Mary waits for the image to reveal itself to her. "I overthink everything," she says, "but when I paint, I get a moment of no thoughts. Just peace." It is in that peace that she makes her most radical statements.

Mary Kakesa is twenty-something, soft-spoken, an atheist from Kitui with roots sunk deep into histories that the nation prefers to forget. She is also one of the newest faces in Kenya's rising generation of artist-activists, a cohort redefining the role of art not as escape, but confrontation. "I am doing this for everyone who cannot speak," she says. "For the people who never got justice. For the ones who survived. For the ones who didn't." Yet nothing in her presence is loud. She paints in silence.

She speaks carefully. What she creates, however, refuses quietly.

Mary grew up in Ukambani, where the sun burns without apology and the rhythm of life moves between drought and devotion. From an early age, she watched women carry more than their share of the world's weight, "expected to hold their anger, their sexuality, their everything," as she puts it. The first time she touched a brush was almost by accident: local artists had come to teach schoolchildren how to paint. She was in Form Two, curious but unsure. What began as fascination turned into fluency. After high school, broke but determined, she painted a portrait of her principal and gave it as a gift. The painting was later featured in the Daily Nation. "It was during COVID," she recalls with a shy laugh. "It was the first time I saw myself as an artist."

Still, art was not supposed to be a career. At Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Mary studied chemistry, training to become a lab analyst. She interned at the Kenya Bureau of Standards, testing food products for safety. "We made sure the food you're consuming is good for consumption," she says matter-of-factly. Yet even in the sterility of the lab, colour called her back.

Her turning point came with Ancestors Awakened, a group project she co-created. Their piece, Kalamuzetu Zinawakumbuka ("Our Pens Remember Them"), depicted Kenya's continuum of resistance from the Mau Mau uprising to the Gen Z protests and



onward to an imagined decolonized future. In the first panel, fighters wield pangas and stones; in the middle, masked youth return tear gas to its source, the words “Karibuni Tear Gas Back to Sender” scrawled above them; and in the final scene, a figure paints not weapons but a book symbolizing the liberation of the mind. “We finally decolonized our minds,” she explains. “Because that’s the first step.”

This moment crystallized something for her: art could be activism, and activism could be art. The brush was not decoration, it was dissent. “Before activism,” Mary says, “I was just painting on order. After, I started painting for survivors, people living through gender-based violence, people who can’t speak out. For victims who left us because of injustice.” She began calling her practice gender-justice activism through art. Her pieces forced communities to confront what they preferred to ignore. “It makes people uncomfortable,” she admits. “But even if they talk badly ‘Why did he draw like that? Why did she paint like that?’ they’re talking. That’s a start.”

Earlier this year, Mary was selected out of more than six hundred applicants for a national fellowship funded by Forum Civ. “I didn’t even remember applying,” she laughs. “I was applying to so many things it was like a gamble.” The fellowship transformed her work, introducing her to digital safety, narrative storytelling, and the history of African resistance. She began reading African literature works by writers she had never known existed and found mirrors of her own defiance in their pages.

Her current project, Beyond Bold, will showcase sixteen to twenty new works during the global 16 Days of Activism (November 25 - December 10). Each piece tackles a wound: FGM, child marriage, workplace harassment, online abuse, discrimination against people with disabilities or HIV. But where others might focus on pain, Mary insists on resilience. “It’s called ‘Beyond Bold’ because it’s beyond bold for people to talk





about their traumas. They are revolutionary," she says. "I want survivors to feel seen and to remember they are more than what happened to them." She hopes the project will spark uncomfortable but necessary conversations within communities. "Change begins at home," she adds. "Before the courts, before the policies we must talk about what we enable in silence."

Mary does not believe in God. Her atheism, quietly radical in a devout society, shapes her vision of justice. "Everybody who's been praying and going to Kesha is equal to the people who've been going to the clubs," she jokes. "In the end, we're all wearing the same clothes." Her heaven, she says, is not celestial; it is earthly. It looks like a world where people are "free to be themselves unapologetically, accepted no matter what, and kind." Justice, for her, is prevention, not punishment. "The goal isn't for someone to be held accountable after violence," she says. "It's for the violence not to happen at all."

Through the fellowship, Mary has learned to navigate collaboration evaluating who her allies really are. "Not everyone you work with is your ally," she says thoughtfully. "Some are passive, some are opponents. I have to know where they stand." She has also learned the ethics of storytelling: how to paint survivors' experiences without retraumatizing them, how to share art online without exposing identities, how to balance truth with care. "Now I'm meditating," she smiles. "I'm trying to sit with silence, with myself. That's something I learned there too."

Mary doesn't have a gallery yet. She paints wherever she can: in her sister's Nairobi apartment, sometimes in Kitui when she

visits. Her materials move with her, a small travelling rebellion. "I paint in my house," she says simply. "I move with my paints around." Her dream is not fame but connection. She wants people to see her art and feel whether anger, empathy, or recognition. "Not everyone will see it from my perspective," she says. "But I hope their interpretation is close to my intention."

In time, she hopes to sustain both paths: chemistry and activism. "I want to be successful in my career and still impact people through my art," she says. "And I hope I don't forget who I am along the way."

When asked what she would tell other young creatives hoping to follow her path, she answers without hesitation: "Just send it. Start where you are. Don't wait. Maybe the right time never comes." Outside, the Nairobi light fades, catching the edge of a half-finished canvas. On it, a faceless woman stands mid-stride, the background rippling between fire and dawn. Mary's brush hovers, hesitates, then lands. One more line, one more act of quiet resistance.

Because sometimes the most revolutionary thing a woman can do is simply to paint and refuse to be silent.

SCAN  
to connect  
with Mary



# Between Trash and Memory

Joachim Ogwado



When we first meet Ogwado Joachim, he's wrapped in colour not loud, but deliberate. Greys, rusts, the faded blue of a once-bright shirt. Every hue feels chosen, controlled. Around him, the room hums with the restless sound of Kampala, a boda-boda sputtering past, someone shouting over a vendor's radio. It's a sensory collage, much like his art.

"I like cool things," he says, almost shyly. "Even though I'm surrounded by colour, they're controlled colours." He pauses, looks down at his sleeves, and smiles. "Grey. I'd say grey is my favourite." There's a calm energy to Joachim like a stream that knows its path but still stops to glisten where the sun catches. He calls himself an African artist, not out of nationalism, but because his practice is stitched into the soil of where he comes from. "Art," he says, "has always been the way I make sense of the world."

His world began in the kind of childhood that smells like dust after rain. He grew up in a community where play was communal, not individual collective imagination stitched together by dirt, bottle caps, and broken wire. "We made toys out of whatever people threw away," he recalls. "A wire car, a ball from a plastic bag. We didn't think of it as recycling; it was just what life was."

That memory of creating from leftovers of turning waste into wonder became the quiet foundation of his art. In university, a sculpture assignment on alternative materials pushed him further down that path. "It started as a necessity," he says. "We didn't have much. So I used what was around me. Found objects. Trash." He laughs lightly. "And it never stopped."

What began as improvisation became a philosophical one that blurs nostalgia, memory, and material politics. His sculptures, built from discarded plastics, wires, and scrap metal, feel like small resurrections. Each piece holds stories of use, abandonment, and renewal. But for Joachim, it's not just about

reusing material; it's about reframing how we see it.

"I keep asking myself," he says, leaning forward, "why something that once opened up a world of possibilities for me as a child, these same objects, these same materials are now seen as a problem. What changed? What did we lose?" That question sits at the heart of his work. His studio in Kampala is part of Plastic Talks, an artist collective born out of a cleanup effort during the pandemic. A friend started it after their neighbourhood dump site overflowed with trash. What was once an illegal waste ground is now a sculpture park, a living metaphor for transformation.

"When people see the sculptures there," Joachim says, "They stop. They get curious. Art becomes a bridge. A conversation starts." And that, he insists, is where change begins.

In his project Building Community: The Art of Reimagining Materials, Joachim explored how discarded things could be reborn as symbols of hope. "People don't value trash," he says. "But if you just do one or two things, change its context, shift its form suddenly everyone wants to know what's going on. That curiosity is powerful."

He believes ideas find you, not the other way around. "You can't summon them," he says. "They ambush you. One moment you're doing something ordinary, and the next, the idea grabs you." But perhaps the most striking part of Joachim's practice isn't the physical art, it's the philosophy behind it. His tone softens when he says, "We are one. I am because we are." For him, every bottle he picks up carries the fingerprint of someone else: a child who drank from it, a vendor who sold it, a city that discarded it. "The materials embody who we are," he says. "My work is just bringing them back together."

When he speaks about collaboration, his face lights up. "Even in childhood, play







wasn't something we did alone. It was always with others. So my art is collaborative, even if people don't know it. The community provides the materials. I just assemble what they've left behind." His words blur the line between art and activism, between creation and care. When I ask if he believes art can be a tool for change, he doesn't hesitate. "I've seen it," he says. "You take what people call trash, touch it differently, and suddenly it becomes a place people gather around. Art warms people up like a fire. It brings them closer."

Joachim's involvement with the Artivism Fellowship came from that same hunger to connect. He describes finding the open call online and instantly feeling drawn to it "because an artist isn't an island," he explains. "We survive because of the structures around us." Sitting beside artists from Kenya and Tanzania, he says, has shifted something in him. "There's an energy there," he says. "It's made me ask questions about what activism looks like in Uganda, and what it could be."

He admits that sometimes, the lessons of collaboration take time to settle. "Not everything changes immediately," he says. "Some things have to marinate in the soul." When I ask what keeps him going, what his art gives back to him he pauses, searching for words. "It's tough to be alive," he finally says, with a half-smile. "Art is my gateway to imagining a world where we can meet each other differently."

He paints beauty as a form of resistance and an act of care in cities that don't always nurture the spirit. "Our cities are ugly," he says quietly. "But you make one or two things, and people start to see beauty. They see hope. They start to believe something better can exist." And in that belief lies the core of his mission. "My art is giving hope," he says. "It's telling people it's possible that we can do this." Later, when we ask him what advice he'd give to his future self, he laughs

softly before turning serious. "I'd tell him to look out for people who care," he says. "There are always those who don't but there are others who will help you build your dream. Energy is a resource."

His story starts in school, somewhere between curiosity and necessity. It was during a sculpture class that he first stumbled upon the idea of found objects using what already exists, what has been used, thrown away, forgotten. "It began from need," he says. "Sometimes, you just don't have materials. So you start looking at what's around you, and suddenly you realize these things still have life."

That moment cracked something open. The classroom became a laboratory of possibility. Old wires became cars. Plastic bottles turned into toys. "I grew up in a place where play was communal," he remembers. "We didn't buy toys; we made them. And we learned from the ones older than us how to bend wire to make a car, how to turn a bottle into a ball. Those things have shaped my practice." He pauses, a small smile ghosting across his face. "I still think about how, as kids, we could create worlds out of nothing. And now, as adults, we call that trash. What changed? What did we lose?" That question has followed him ever since.

In 2020, when the world slowed down and Kampala fell into the strange silence of lockdown, Joakim found himself surrounded by waste not metaphorically, but literally. Behind his home, a small piece of land had become an illegal dumpsite, choking with the excesses of city life. "People would throw everything there," he says. "Plastic, metal, food waste all of it."

A friend of his, fellow artist Harry Nitro Peter, decided to do something about it. Along with a few others, they cleared the site. The



act of cleaning up became a form of protest and unexpectedly, a form of art.

"Today that place is a sculpture site," Joakim says, pride flickering in his voice. "We call it Plastic Talks. People pass by, they see a sculpture, and suddenly they're curious. They stop. They ask questions. That's when the art starts doing the talking."

He grins. "The art does the heavy lifting. I don't even need to explain. The sculptures speak. They bring people together." For Joakim, that is the essence of art not as an isolated practice but as a bridge. "Collaboration is everything," he says. "Where I come from, play never happens alone. Someone fetched wire, another brought a bottle, another had an idea. Even now, that's how I work. The community might not know it, but they are part of my process. They provide the materials. They shape the story."

His sculptures, often made of thousands of individual plastic fragments, are not just aesthetic objects. They're archives of consumption, of survival, of connection. "Each bottle once held water for a child walking to school," he says. "Each piece has lived in someone's hand. When I bring them together, I'm bringing their stories together too."

There's a quiet spirituality to the way he talks about material. Trash, to him, is sacred evidence of life lived. His art asks the same question over and over: What do we throw away, and why? But art, like life, isn't simple in Uganda. "It's hard," he admits. "The system doesn't make it easy to survive as an artist. You go to school, and the structure is designed to push you out into the world then it forgets you. You see people with so much potential who never get to practice. Collaboration becomes not just a choice but a lifeline."

He gestures around his workspace, a small, open area littered with tools, scraps, sketches, and unfinished forms. "There's an ecosystem here, even if it's fragile. Everyone plays their part the sculptors, the painters, the welders, the ones who just show up to watch. We keep each other going." Still, he's hopeful. "Opportunities come when you least expect them," he says. "You just have to stay close to work."

When asked about the moment he knew he was an artist, he chuckles. "That's a question I'm still hammering," he says. "I think we're all artists. The human experience itself is art. Since childhood, I've been trying to express myself through painting, singing, and playing. Art is me. I don't think there ever was one before."

That philosophy bleeds into his work a refusal to separate the self from the process. His pieces don't feel like statements; they feel like meditations. "It's tough to be alive," he says quietly. "Art is the portal. It allows me to imagine a world that includes others, a world that feels possible again."

Kampala, he explains, can be a hard city to love. "It's not always beautiful," he says. "It doesn't nourish you when you look at it. But when you start creating when you build something, even small people notice. Someone once told me, 'I didn't even recognize that was our neighborhood in your photo.' That's what beauty can do. It changes how we see where we are."

And that's the point. "Beauty does something to people," Joakim says. "It invites them in. It allows them to see that transformation is possible, that something discarded can become art, that a forgotten space can become a place of gathering."

For him, that is enough. "I love beauty," he says simply. "I love the way art gives people

permission to see differently." At the heart of Joakim's philosophy is nostalgia not for the past itself, but for the imagination of childhood, when nothing was useless and everything could be remade. "As kids, we used to bend wires into dreams," he says. "Now I bend plastic. Maybe it's the same thing."

"The more I work," he says, "the more I realize that what I'm really doing is remembering." And in remembering, he builds a bridge between what was and what could be between the discarded and the cherished, between the child who played with trash and the man who turned it into art.

When you leave his space, you carry the faint smell of metal and earth and something else, too: the sense that beauty, in the right hands, can come from anywhere. He's quiet for a moment, and then adds: "There are people who just want to reach their destination. And there are those who care about the journey. I think I'm both, depending on the time." If his art were a wet cloth, he says, and you wrung it dry, what would pour out? "Hope," he says simply. "Love. Maybe water that could make something grow."

At that moment, we understand what he means when he says we are one. In every crushed bottle, every twisted wire, every scrap reborn through his hands there's a kind of quiet communion. A belief that what we throw away isn't gone, just waiting to be seen differently. And maybe that's the heart of Joachim's work: teaching us that even in the forgotten, there's beauty. Even in the discarded, there's a story still worth telling.



SCAN  
to connect  
with Joachim



“When I wrote, I didn’t have to divide myself into Somali or Kenyan, quiet or loud. **I could just be.**”

## Bint Aisha

When Aisha speaks, her voice is soft, almost too soft for someone who has seen so much, writtten so much, lived so vividly. But under that quiet, there’s something simmering. A pulse. A storm waiting to breathe. She calls herself Bint Aisha. It’s a name she chose, one that feels like both armor and art. “My ID says Aisha Mohammed,” she says, “but Bint Aisha is who I became when I decided to take my voice back.”

Aisha is a poet, an author, a blogger and an artist in every restless sense of the word. She’s also what she calls a fiend for knowledge, always tugging at the loose threads of experience, always asking why. Writing, for her, isn’t just an expression. It’s survival. There was a time when she spoke loudly, laughed freely, and challenged anything that didn’t sit right. “I was courageous,” she remembers. “Fearless.” Then life happened, something she still finds difficult to name and suddenly, silence felt safer than speech. “When fear starts living with you,” she says, “it’s hard to imagine life without it.”

So when the artist residency came calling, she didn’t just see an opportunity; she saw a lifeline. A chance to return to herself, to that voice she once had before the world told her to lower it. Art, she says, “was my way of saying I’m still here.” And she means it. Every poem, every paragraph, every sentence is an act of reclamation. Aisha was born in Namanga, that gentle borderland where Kenya and Tanzania trade languages and winds. Her father, part pastoralist, part visionary, was a man who refused to be confined by tribe or tradition. “He broke away from his family and built his own world,” she recalls. “He spoke Maasai like he

was born to it. He’d greet a Kikuyu trader, a Kamba traveler, a Tanzanian vendor and all of them

would answer like they’d known him forever.”

In their home, belonging was fluid. They were Kenyan before they were anything else. “Tribe didn’t define us,” Aisha says. “My father taught me to start with the country, not the clan.” But when she came to Nairobi, that fluidity was questioned. “People asked, ‘Umetoka Garissa?’ like it was written on my face. When I said no, they looked disappointed, like I’d broken a script.” In high school, she met classmates who had never spoken to a Somali before. They already had ideas of who she was: quiet, conservative, foreign. “They’d ask if I even knew English,” she laughs. “Sometimes I wanted to bring my father to school to confirm I was from Kenya.”

Her father had other plans. He wanted her to fall in love with language. One day, he banned her from speaking anything but English. “He told the teachers too. I’d come home, and if I spoke Swahili or Somali, he’d just stare at me until I remembered.” That silence became her first editor. Books became her companions. Curiosity, her inheritance. But childhood wasn’t all light. In class seven, Aisha had her first encounter with humiliation. She’d finally done well in math after weeks of tutoring from a classmate, only for the teacher to accuse her of cheating. “He said it in front of everyone,” she remembers, her voice tight. “And something cracked inside me.”

Years later, she can still feel that sting. “That’s when I decided no child should ever be made



to feel that small." High school didn't make it easier. "Let's just say it was...shit," she says, laughing bitterly. There, she began writing her first novel, a small rebellion in a world that tried to define her. She'd pass the chapters around school, and classmates would scribble comments in the margins. "Some would beg me to finish it. But I wasn't ready to end that story. Maybe I still needed to live more of it."

Poetry became her refuge. It didn't demand perfection. It didn't ask her to choose sides. "When I wrote, I didn't have to divide myself into Somali or Kenyan, quiet or loud. I could just be." Then came the panic attack.

She was in Form Four, tired and anxious, her grades slipping. A teacher pulled her aside, pointed to a list on the wall. "You see this student with a D-minus?" she said. "You won't even get that." "I remember my heart racing, my chest tightening," Aisha says. "I thought I was dying."

She wasn't. But something else died that day, her faith in authority, perhaps. The belief that adults always protect children. "I became silent. Complicit. Because I knew even if I spoke, nothing would change. If the teacher got punished, she'd come back angry, and I'd become the target." That moment became her artistic genesis, the spark that lit her activism, or as she calls it, artivism. "That's when I knew I wanted to create a world where no child would ever feel voiceless, or small, or unseen."

There's a rhythm to how she speaks now measured, deliberate, like someone who's learning to trust her own echo again. "When I write," she says, "I stop feeling like a rat. I start roaring." The world, though, doesn't always make it easy for women who roar. Last year, she was cyberbullied so viciously it pushed her out of school. "Everyone thought I was okay," she says, "because I kept showing up, smiling, posting. But inside, I was breaking." Still, she came back. She always does. "When you live as a woman in Kenya," she says, "you learn to

survive in public and heal in private."

Today, Bint Aisha is less about pain and more about persistence. Her poems dance between vulnerability and defiance, tracing the emotional landscapes of womanhood, faith, and freedom. She writes about the way fear lingers in the body, how language can both wound and mend, how art can resurrect the silenced. She is part of a new generation of Kenyan artists reclaiming narrative space women who do not ask for permission to exist loudly.

When she performs, there's a hush in the room before the first word lands. The same woman who once trembled in front of a classroom now commands stages with a quiet authority that feels ancient. Her art doesn't shout, it unfolds, like a memory.

And maybe that's the point.

Because for Aisha, art was never about applause. It was about healing. It was about remembering that voice she thought she lost, and realizing it never left it was just waiting for her to stop whispering. Now, when she writes, the world listens.

And in that listening, something shifts softly, powerfully.



SCAN  
to connect  
with Bint Aisha

**“My father was a policeman, but I loved him.”**

Emmanuel Mdaijasho





My first revolution was a quiet one: being a policeman's son while my heart beat as a rebel.

A long, steady rhyme against the expected songs. My mom says that only music would tame my loud tantrums. All she needed was a constant frequency to keep me entertained. Just music and food that is all that I was—until everything changed one day in 1997.

That was the year a hip-hop cassette found its way into our home through my brother, a seismic crackle of something both foreign and familiar. It became more than music; Like a daily prayer, a wake-up call to a mind that didn't yet know was sleeping. Here was a language that didn't just speak but testified. a proverbial, dense with meaning, a revolution condensed into verse.

But revolutions get co-opted. As the new millennium dawned, the genre's conscience began to fray at the edges. The anthems of liberation were slowly drowned out by the clink of bottles and the hollow beat of commercialization. They called it evolution. To me, it felt like a surrender. In the silence they left behind, a few of us found our voice. We stepped from the shadows not to follow the noise, but to become the bridge back to the truth. So now, I plant seeds in two fields: the soil and the soul.

In Ushirombo, we farm. We remember the old saying, "you are a servant of whoever feeds you," and so we fight for food sovereignty, not just security. We stand against the tide of GMO grains—a silent war on our land and autonomy, a battle I voice in my song "GMO."

And we teach.

We gather the next generation, the Gen Z youth, and hand them not just

I am Plate Mdaijasho from Ushirombo, and I have been doing HipHop for the longest time, and I



have seen changes in the Hip Hop industry. Some have been monumental while others have been revolting. When the genre started, it was a form of revolution, a way to speak up against oppression but if we look at the state of affairs, even HipHop for USA doesn't stand close to what we consumed in our days. Despite this, we have stayed true to the roots and principles of Hip Hop.

Since I was a child I always loved music, whenever I threw tantrums as a child my mom would play music for me and I would calm down. In 1997-1998 my brother came home with a HipHop tape and I was obsessed with Hip Hop. It was like a daily prayer that I used to sing along before and after school. I loved Hip Hop because it was very woke, it had numerous proverbial messages. In a short period they were able to communicate so much. In the 2000 - 2011 Hip Hop music started getting lost in the mainstream media and focused on music that promoted alcohol and sexualisation of women. During this time we were also teaching ourselves how to rap and write, the void was loud and we decided to step out of the shadows and bridge the already existing Hip Hop gap.

At the moment we practice farming and teach the youth Gen Z on how to write and perform Activism HipHop. We are also planning to release an album for them so plans have been underway. We are also practicing farming so as to ensure steady flow of food, "you are a servant of whoever feeds you." We are also struggling with GMO grains, there was a time when research of the grains was cut short, even after the new regime there has been no progress in the research. They are just methods to ensure the capitalists dominate the African market. We need food sovereignty not

food security. I have a song called GMO where I state out the adverse effects of GMO

I believe as Africans we need intellectual liberation, we are still slaves of thoughts. We refuse to mature and evolve our thinking. For example in politics people already have a fixed thinking system. Our leaders indirectly plan everything for us but then our youth and leaders have no ideologies. Tanzania was practising communism, it's even in the constitution but do we practice it? Where is the equalism? There is too much imperialism. When communicating to people I need to explain myself, explain to people and follow up with action points. Due to imperialism, our leaders don't care about the public education system. This affects all of us. That is why it is necessary to come together as artists and educate each other then take action.

HipHop has always been ahead creating solutions. For instance our group as farmers has come together to reproduce its own crops due to imperialism, we translate that into our songs as we use it to educate the public. Some children look up to us and that is how you get the young ones educated.



SCAN  
to connect  
with Mdaisho



# The Heart of a Filmmaker

Calvin Ochieng

I was once robbed by a collared pastor. Depression pinned me down for months. How do you mourn a dream you had only just begun to touch?

Today, someone asked me why my beanie hat is red. I laughed because even I didn't have a poetic answer. I just remember seeing it hanging there in the shop, bold among all the dull ones, and thinking: "That one. That one stands out."

Maybe that's how stories work too. Some moments glow so brightly you can't ignore them. And mine began in 2017.

Back then, I wasn't a filmmaker. Not really. I had only managed to squeeze myself into a three-month crash course in fine art, photography, and videography in Eastleigh – free training, the only reason I could afford to dream. I used to travel from Dandora to Eastleigh every day, two-and-four, two-and-four, learning with no camera of my own. And everyone knows: without tools, knowledge begins to evaporate.

So after the classes, I joined a film group called Jipe Afrika later. That is where the spark caught fire. I started as an actor. Then I became a writer. Then I discovered the role that felt like home, Director of Photography. Being behind the camera felt like having a second heartbeat. It felt like the red hat that I had bought; loud, glowing, impossible to ignore.

But passion doesn't buy gear. My first "camera" was a Nokia X2. I would take it to hip-hop shows, squeezing myself near the stage so I could capture artists mid-pose. Those blurry pictures were my training. My proof that I wanted this life badly.

Eventually, the community in Dandora helped me raise money for my first real camera: a Canon 1100D. It felt like holding a future that belonged to me.

Three months later, that future was stolen.

The thief pretended to be a church pastor. He spoke softly, wore a white collar shirt. And just like that, my camera was gone. I walked from Thika Road all the way to Dandora, empty-handed, empty-chested, exhausted. Depression pinned me down for months. How do you mourn a dream you had only just begun to touch?

But after a while, a question woke me up: "What do I want?" I went back to business buying and selling phones. I hustled until I could afford my next camera, a Canon 1200D. And this time, I didn't waste time. I started making small stories on my own, going to parties, documenting life, forcing myself to practice. That camera was my bridge back to purpose.

The real turning point arrived when I joined the Social Justice Movement. At first, I knew nothing about human rights. Nothing about citizen journalism. Nothing about ecological injustices, gender-based violence, or extrajudicial killings. But SJM taught me that storytelling wasn't just about the lens, it was about the world you point it at.

They gave me opportunities. They let me document injustices. They trusted me with stories. I sold my 1200D, bought a 7D. Sold that, bought a 5D Mark II. Then, little by little, a drone, a sound kit, equipment that made me feel like a one-man studio.

My mission crystallised: I would tell the stories of social and political injustice because politics shapes our lives, and our lives shape our stories.

Why are our stories important? Because when we tell them ourselves, we reclaim the narrative. We reshape memory. We trigger change.

One of my proudest stories is the Dandora



Stadium project. When the construction stalled for five years, crime rose, boys lost direction, and businesses suffered. We documented the closure, the voices of residents, and the impact of those metal barriers. We made noise. And eventually the county listened. The stadium reopened. Crime reduced. The youth got opportunities. Businesses revived. I was there the day it was launched, camera on my shoulder, heart in my throat. Because I knew: my work had mattered.

But not all stories are safe. I once filmed an event where someone performed a song criticising the government. When I posted it on TikTok, it went viral comments full of threats, warnings, and fear. People asked if I was safe. Even I considered deleting it, but then I asked myself: "Why start telling the truth if you're going to mute yourself halfway?"

So I left it up. And yes, I'm afraid sometimes. But fear is fuel too. People ask how I stay centred on the days when the world feels heavy. Sometimes I shut everything off. I disappear into silence. I remind myself that God is still watching even when I feel unseen.

As for why I call myself a "walking studio", it's simple. Even without my camera, I have my phone. A storyteller must always be ready. Stories don't knock. They erupt.

Joining the residency felt like divine timing. HOODTV, my online community channel, needed structure. I needed new tools, new frameworks. And the fellowship gave me hope-based storytelling, digital security, communication strategies – things I didn't even know I needed. Now I can imagine

HOODTV not just as a community channel, but as a fully fledged online TV platform with daily programs, impact, and direction.

And the story I still dream of telling?  
A unified narrative that gathers activists, poets, filmmakers, mothers, communities, and everyone fighting political and social injustice into one loud, unforgettable film. A story that reminds the government that, despite their punitive bills, we are still here. Still speaking. Still breathing. Still fighting.

Because at the end of the day, all we really have is our voice. And like that red hat I bought long ago, a true story always stands out.

SCAN  
to connect  
with Calvin



# The Unapologetic Voice of Kenya's Streets and Hearts

Irene Maina

In the sprawling, vibrant chaos of Dandora, Nairobi, Irene Maina's powerful presence commands attention. Raised in one of Kenya's most socio-economically challenged neighbourhoods, she emerged from the dust and struggled with a voice that refuses to be silenced. That voice carries stories of pain, resilience, and a fierce commitment to justice, all delivered through the raw, evocative art of street theatre and spoken word performance. Irene isn't just a performer;

she's a bold, unapologetic activist who harnesses creativity to challenge societal norms and shift the narrative on what it means to grow up in Kenya's ghettos.

From an early age, Irene found her sanctuary in words. It began in primary school, where she wrote a poem about her absent father, a seminal moment that sparked a lifelong love for performance and storytelling. "I realised then that I had a way to express things that were hard to say out loud," she recalls. Poetry, and later theatre, became her armour and her megaphone, tools to confront the realities that plagued her community.

Growing up amidst the daily struggles of poverty, violence, and systemic neglect, Irene witnessed firsthand the normalisation of police brutality and gender-based violence. Explaining the emotional toll, she shares, "Violence was part of life. You saw it everywhere in homes, on streets, even when you just walked down your neighbourhood." Instead of surrendering to despair, she chose activism, the potent blend of art and activism as her path to healing and change.

Her street theatre performances are more than entertainment; they are visceral, unfiltered mirror reflections of society's unfinished conversations. Irene uses her craft to tell stories often ignored: the tales of survivors of abuse, the silenced cries of marginalised women, and the unspoken



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with Irene



fears of youth facing police violence daily. "There's a misconception that the ghetto is just crime and chaos," she says firmly, "but there is dignity and humanity here too. My work reveals that."

What sets Irene apart is her unapologetic authenticity. She refuses to be silenced or censored for speaking uncomfortable truths. A poignant moment came when she publicly challenged victim blaming and gendered violence, declaring, "Me wearing a short skirt does not entitle anyone to rape me." This declaration sparked conversations that rippled far beyond her immediate community, a bold stance that aligns with the global movement against gender-based violence.

Yet, with courage comes risk. Kenya's recent history is stained with disappearances and state violence, making activism a dangerous pursuit. Irene understands the stakes intimately, confronting threats and fears daily. She leverages digital security knowledge and community networks to stay safe, but admits, "Sometimes fear tries to hold you back. But I choose to be louder because if I don't speak, who will?" Her determination underscores the perilous line activists like her walk, balancing fear and bravery in a constant struggle for justice.

Her passion extends beyond protest and performance. Irene is deeply invested in nurturing the next generation of artists and activists. "The future I dream of," she says, "is a country where young people use their voices and talents to build communities rooted in love and respect, not fear and oppression." Her vision is one where art transcends boundaries, becoming a vehicle for education, healing, and empowerment.

The philosophy of Ubuntu, "I am because we are", profoundly shapes Irene's activism and artistry. She sees herself not as an isolated

fighter but as part of a collective movement toward healing and change. For her, activism is about weaving bonds of solidarity and creating communities where everyone looks out for one another. "We must rise together," she insists, "because no one is free until we all are."

Irene's approach to art and activism invites audiences to experience the nuances of life in Nairobi's informal settlements with all its pain, beauty, contradictions, and hope. Her performances pulsate with vivid storytelling, emotional honesty, and calls to action that resonate long after the curtain falls. From intimate community spaces to online platforms, she builds bridges across divides, making the struggles of the ghetto visible and human.

Despite the heavy themes she tackles, Irene retains an infectious warmth and humour. Her charisma lights up conversations, inviting empathy rather than pity. She is the embodiment of resilience, a woman shaped by hardship but defined by strength, resolve, and an unwavering belief in the transformative power of art.

Irene Maina's story is a testament to the power of creativity as resistance and the urgent necessity of voices like hers in today's world. Her journey from a little girl writing poems about familial absence to a fearless social justice performer symbolises the unyielding spirit of Kenya's youth and their potential to rewrite narratives and envision new futures.

In a time when many narratives marginalise and silence, Irene's unapologetic voice challenges audiences to confront uncomfortable truths, embrace collective responsibility, and imagine a more just world. Her work is a luminous call to action for justice, for dignity, for humanity, echoing through the streets of Nairobi and beyond.





# The Voice for the Voiceless

Doricas Kinyonga

A human life in its ideal form is a botanical process. Youth is not merely the blossom, but the critical moment of pollination, a vibrant, delicate, and radiant explosion of potential where identity is formed and the future is set. To neglect this bloom, to poison its soil or silence its colour, is to sabotage the fruit that follows. The fruit is not just a product, but the very substance of a life: the character, contributions, and legacy that nourish the wider world. To compromise the fruit is to deny the tree its reason for being. It is in this precarious and potent space that a young woman named Dorcas understood that the 'buzz' of youth was not noise, but the essential work of pollination, and so she built a hive for it: Kijana Buzz.

"I was fifteen when I wrote my first piece," she says, eyes bright with memory. "It was during COVID. I wrote about the struggles of women and young people, not knowing that it would change my life." That poem, raw and urgent, opened doors she never imagined. It found its way into the hands of UN Women, where it was used to raise funds to fight gender-based violence. That moment, she says, was her beginning the point where writing stopped being a hobby and became purpose.

For Doricas, poetry is more than art; it's survival, it's advocacy, it's truth-telling in a world that often punishes honesty. "I was just this curious kid," she recalls. "I always knew what I wanted to say, but I didn't have the confidence to speak it. So I wrote it instead." Her words became her weapon, and her weapon built her voice. From there came Kijana Buzz Initiative her youth-led organization amplifying the voices of young Tanzanians through storytelling and art. "We give young people a space to speak about what

they're going through," she explains. "We use poetry and storytelling to remind them of their power."

But it hasn't been easy. In Tanzania, creative activism often walks a fine line with censorship. "You can't just draw on a wall," she laughs softly. "You could get jailed for that. So we find softer, smarter ways to push back. Art allows you to say what can't be said out loud."

Her poem *The Voice for the Voiceless* remains one of her most powerful works – an unflinching look at sexual harassment and gender-based violence:

"His name is violence, violence is his name.  
If your name is violence, then a girl should be  
the same.

He takes away freedom, attacks the mind,  
the body parts, and all the physical kinds."

The words spill out of her like a confession and a battle cry. "That poem made people listen," she says. "It was the first time I felt the power of language to change something." Doricas speaks about purpose often – not as a destination but as a compass. "At first, I didn't know what I was meant to do. But every time I wrote or helped someone, I felt more alive. That's when I realized – impact is what I care about most. If someone meets me today, I want them to leave feeling that they can do more than they thought."

Balancing activism and academia hasn't been easy. "Sometimes I don't sleep," she admits with a smile. "People tell me to rest, but when I'm not doing something meaningful, I feel empty. This work keeps me alive." She laughs when she talks about her friends teasing her for being too





serious. "They say, 'Dory, you already have it figured out.' But I haven't. I'm still finding myself just with purpose this time."

At her core, Doricas believes art and activism are inseparable. "Before, I was ninety percent activism and ten percent art. But now I see they need each other. Without art, activism lacks emotion. Without activism, art lacks meaning." She speaks softly but with weight when asked how to awaken a generation desensitized by screens and hashtags. "We've forgotten who we are," she says. "Social media made us loud but hollow. I think art can bring us back and remind us of our roots, our stories, our values. Once you know who you are, no trend can shift you."

Her time at the Pan-African fellowship, surrounded by other artists and thinkers from Kenya and Uganda, deepened that conviction. "It opened my eyes," she says. "In Tanzania, we rarely see art as real work. But here, I saw poets, visual artists, musicians all treating their art as tools for change. It made me realize I'm not just advocating. I'm building something." As she speaks, you can almost see that spark the one her mentor described as "a fire about to be unleashed." And when she smiles, it's the smile of someone who knows her story is only just beginning.

"I'm turning twenty-one," she says. "Still young, but I know my path now. I want Tanzanian youth to have freedom of expression, to speak, to create, to change things. Because when we remember our purpose, we remember our power." And maybe that's what Doricas Kinyonga truly stands for not just being the voice for the voiceless, but helping the voiceless find their own.



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# A stroke of genius

Dennis Gitonga

In the noise of Nairobi's streets, Dennis Gitonga sees rhythm where others see chaos. To him, even the honking of matatus and the chatter of vendors form a kind of music, a messy, unpredictable beat that mirrors his own creative process.

He calls his style "a stroke of genius." Not because he believes in perfection, but because he believes in the rough, unfinished beauty of an idea still finding its shape. For Dennis, the early stages of creation: the sketch, the pencil lines, the unrefined thoughts are where the magic lives. "The sketch," he says, "is the soul before the world forces it to behave."

That ethos guides both his art and his life. By trade, Dennis is a visual artist and animator, crafting storyboards, illustrations, and 2D animations that feel alive even before they move. But by calling, he's an artist using visuals to amplify stories that might otherwise be erased. His pieces carry the weight of ordinary people's struggles: a woman whose land was taken, a young artist silenced by a system that doesn't see value in colour or line.

He traces his curiosity to his daughter, a four-year-old whose drawings remind him that the essence of creation is wonder. "Kids don't draw to impress," he says. "They draw to understand." Watching her fill a page with crooked trees and smiling suns gives him front-row seats to the raw energy that fuels every artist, that unfiltered joy of bringing something into existence.

But beneath his humour and warmth lies a sharper edge, a frustration with how Kenya views art. He grew up in a world that punished creativity. Drawing during a math lesson meant detention, and curiosity was treated as a distraction. "The irony," he says, "is that we were

punished for being what the world needs most imaginatively."

That tension became his mission. Through his animation and design work, Dennis creates visuals that teach, provoke, and awaken. He's collaborated with academics to develop learning materials that merge words and imagery in harmony because, to him, education should look like art and sound like poetry.

He speaks often about *tajiri mshamba*, the tragedy of wealth without wisdom, leadership without aesthetics. "How can you lead a country whose soul you can't even see?" he asks. For him, activism starts with reintroducing beauty and imagination into public life because a nation without art is a nation without empathy.

Dennis doesn't believe in straight lines, not in art, not in life. Nature doesn't draw that way, he reminds us. Trees lean. Rivers bend. People stumble and start again. His art mirrors that same crooked perfection, unfinished, alive, and human. While many chase completion, Dennis finds his peace in the process. He's less concerned with the final product and more with what it teaches him along the way that creation, like living, is about embracing imperfection and finding rhythm in the noise.

To Dennis Gitonga, every pencil mark is a heartbeat. Every frame, a reminder that art isn't just seen, it's felt, lived, and carried forward like memory.

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**DAGE &  
COURAGE**

NEW  
FASH  
TDR  
PAS  
WIY  
1954



# “I was named after my grandmother, **Kwekwe**, a name that translates to unwanted.”

Neema KweKwe

My favourite art piece of all time is my mural at Happening Arts because that is where my journey began. Happening Arts used to be our studio and at the time I was a university student in Kenyatta University. Like every dreamer who knows their calling, I used to miss my classes and go to Happening Arts, that's where I met all the artists I know. I was going through a transitional At that time there was a session known as "Graffiti Jam," and it was there that I created the mural. I honestly think I worked on it for four days. Up to date I still have a strong sentimental connection with it, it's basically my trademark. It's everywhere where it can be visually perceived. When you look at the imagery of the mural, it's a lady's face facing upwards, the hair is made of clouds and between the hair and the neck is the skyline for a city, then on her face there are branches. For me it represented interconnectivity. We are all interconnected.

I was named after my grandmother, Kwekwe, a name that translates to unwanted. Where I come from, the Coast, my mother's Duruma roots carry that word deeply. Kwekwe is also the name of a stubborn weed that grows with beans, sprouting from nowhere and thriving in the harshest conditions. In many ways, I see myself in that; sometimes, I feel I am unorthodox. In my family, everyone was educationally gifted, and I was the complete opposite. I was excited about co-curricular activities. Even in university, artistry was calling out to me. Everyone kept asking me, "How will you pay your bills at the end of the month?" In all honesty, I had no idea, but I was ready for the calling. Kwekwe has always been naturally

non-conformative. This once got in trouble at The Mall when an art I worked on was featured in a video an artist claimed credit for the art.

My art is an accumulation of my different personalities. The first persona Neema does art for herself. What makes me happy and my mood dictates what I paint. Then my second persona is murals. It's about changing spaces and creating a feeling with space. If I see a blank wall, I am always ideating what I can conceptualise with the wall next. "You know artists don't think in words." Then, finally, activism is the baby persona. It started around 2024, and it has taken me to most places. It's made me travel and see that there are places beyond Kenya. It also appealed to my wanderlust side.

When I was in university, I studied Education, so I had already walked the corporate life, and I saw it wasn't for me. Your freedom is limited, and you eventually get lost in the system cause you often forget yourself. As a creative, I have the GRIT to push through, as I am aware of my surroundings, I know what's bothering the community, and I am active in sorting the issue. The aspect of education does come in when teaching guys how to graffiti and generally working with them. My favourite part of drawing has to be improvisation, it makes the work spicy and also when mixing colours and you have to paint. You learn skills on the way, and I learn my students' style, which makes it easier to teach



them. Many people say murals are hard, but I honestly think it's rather easy. My first mural was actually a gig around 2020. I also watched my friends, and it got me thinking, "If I can do it on Canvas, then I can also do the wall murals." The possibilities of and as an artist really excites me. Since I started doing it, I've been religiously loyal to it. I definitely transcend and get into a trance when painting. There is stigma around graffiti, but I believe in my marketing and communication skills. We don't vandalise buildings; we just change the general outlook and make it beautiful. I also gauge my client. Some people see too much colour as too loud for them, so you have to understand the taste of those you are working with.

As an artist, I love to travel and paint, and it's been coincidentally bumping into my new love for backpacking. It has been so fulfilling, and it's slowly becoming a life purpose as I often tie the paintings to the culture and the people of that area, so it gives the piece more meaning. Honestly, musicians fascinate. The power of their words, moving people from one timeline to another, is definitely something that should be respected. I am a little jealous of them; in another world, I would want to collect music because they are all interconnected, and there are memories in music.

Humans often take little moments for granted, not realising it's a new chapter. Another way I express my art is through my piercings and tattoos also represent a different chapter of my life. Each of them is a phase I have had in my life. From my little self-drawn tattoo back in high school, as I was navigating life, to one celebrating moving into my new apartment.

Many people use their art to express various emotions, but for me, I fight through my three personas: Activism, Neema and Murals. In activism, I show the beauty in nature, conservation and our everyday life, it goes back to changing the space. It's subtle activism, but it's all about where I place it. I also address political issues through my painting. I



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remember during the 2024 Finance Bill, I was brimming with ideas that communicated what Kenyans were experiencing at that moment. We aren't supposed to be having back and forth with the police; we shouldn't have to weigh whether we should buy flour and eat it plain or eat a 'kibandaski.' I prompt people to think with my pieces.

I was at a point where I needed my art to serve a greater purpose. The best way is to voice how they feel.

When joining the fellowship, I wanted to learn how other artists make their art with purpose and how they communicate with the general public. We are all so out of touch with reality that we forget we need community. The residence helped me see this. As we are wrapping things up, all I can say is my art has to work out. This is an innate talent that I have sharpened. I feel I am destined for more; my art is supposed to change at least one person's perspective. I did a piece on how I was always self-conscious as a kid, and my art was my solace. As much as you suppress something, it always leaks out. I learnt how to be comfortable with people through my art, and I hope it does the same for others. I once did a collaboration last year on "Stop Abductions," and it blew up. I felt so honoured. You don't have to know or hear me to hear the message. I feel no activist should fear for their life. When I did the collaboration last year, I was also really scared. I thought I might get arrested or killed. You don't have to know or hear me to hear the message. Whether you keep quiet or speak out, everyone is undergoing the same harsh conditions. We need to come together. Despite this, there are a couple of walls I would love to tag in Nairobi, starting with the Ukraine mural that was in the CBD. Why would they give a foreigner permission to tag that wall, while we could use that wall to spread messages that affect the community?

# Tanzania's Bold Storyteller and Cultural Animator

Fadhili Meta

From the rhythms of Tanzania's bustling streets to the quiet classrooms of the theatre school, Fadhili Meta is a man on a mission, a storyteller, musician, teacher, and cultural activist blazing trails with every word, every note, and every frame. His journey is a testament to the power of patience, resilience, and bold creativity to shape narratives that uplift and unite. Fadhili's story begins in the heart of Tanzania, where he discovered early on that stories held the key to transformation. "I am an artist, a storyteller," he shares simply, "I'm also a teacher in theatre, film, and puppetry." But the road to this multifaceted identity was anything but smooth. Growing up in Tanzania, a deep desire to make a difference, and he knew he had to work hard and be patient. The frustrations of the young, the disenfranchised, and the hurt resonated deeply with him, fueling his determination to create spaces where children and youth could learn, believe, and dream. He recalls moments of seeing his community caught between the promise of education and the harsh realities that prevent many from truly thriving. "Our young people and families have been victims of violence and systemic challenges. Education is there, but sometimes the community cannot fully access or benefit from it." Yet amidst these challenges, Fadhili believes fiercely in the power of positivity and community support. With friends like Milla and Deisturi, who share his vision of nurturing the young to grow into responsible, hopeful people, he works relentlessly to cultivate hope and possibility.

Art is central to Fadhili's world. At Gilman Rutihinda Primary School in Dar es Salaam, he

learned early that art was not only about talent, it was a form of expression to highlight the plight of individuals within society, a resistance, a way to seize control amid political and social turbulence. He fondly remembers his teachers and the lessons that pushed him to be bold. One teacher posed a hypothetical one-time question and asked, "Imagine you're dumb and deaf, and just witnessed an accident, and you're asked to give the first witness account of what transpired, how would you do it?" Many tried, but Fadhili's demonstration was the most memorable and accurate one. This was his Genesis.

Almost instantly, he bloomed from a shy and reserved young man into a vocal and extroverted individual. His journey saw him rise academically and creatively, mastering storytelling, humour, and engaging audiences with sincerity. Fadhili's dreams have always been larger than himself. Although he once aimed at becoming a banking and finance career, he found his passion in artistic expression and education. Through secondary school and beyond, he combined hard study with creative exploration, eventually founding Famn Entertainment, a platform for films and musicals that centre young voices. "We make films and musicals that speak to young people, that reflect their realities," he explains, "and we research to understand what they need."

His artistry is deeply intertwined with activism. In a time when freedom of expression is often threatened across Africa, Fadhili stands firm, using his voice to challenge negative stereotypes and political repression. "We live in





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difficult times where activists can be jailed or abducted just for speaking out," he notes with sober resolve. Yet he refuses to be silenced. Instead, he channels frustration and resistance into creating inspiring stories that paint Africa's truth with complexity and beauty. One of the defining features of Fadhili's work is his commitment to collective empowerment and African pride. "We must play our African music, plays, and films loudly and proudly," he insists. "Every African has a story, art and music that belongs to them. We don't just entertain; we tell stories and share our humanity." He rejects narratives that cast Africa as a "land of the dead," and instead, celebrates its vitality, its cultures, and its potential.

Teaching others is a role Fadhili cherishes deeply. Through workshops, fellowships, and mentorships, he shares the knowledge that transformed him. "I have learned you must tell your story without hesitation," he says, recounting lessons from fellowships that strengthened his craft and confidence. "Stories are not jokes; they carry the power to make people think, laugh, and see themselves in new ways."

His daily routines reflect discipline and dedication, from meditation practices to rigorous study. "Meditation helps you ask yourself the right questions and stay focused. Starting a business or creative project is not easy, but persistence is key." His encouragement to aspiring artists and activists is simple but profound: start now, be patient, do your best,

and never give up.

Fadhili also recognizes the power of partnerships. "Big change needs many voices, singers, filmmakers, photographers, storytellers from all over the world. Together, we can create something beautiful and lasting." His collaborative spirit shines through in projects alongside NGOs and cultural institutions throughout Tanzania.

Despite the weighty challenges he confronts, Fadhili's spirit remains uplifting. His smile and humor light up any room, and his genuine care for community infuses his work with warmth and urgency. "We are the first to do this work in our areas," he proudly says. "We continue because the future depends on us." In a continent often misrepresented and misunderstood, Fadhili Meta gives voice to authentic African stories of hope, resilience, and the transformative power of art. His journey is a call to create, to resist, and to lift one another through the stories we tell and the music we play.

For those who want to witness and join a movement of creative liberation, Fadhili's work is a powerful invitation: listen closely, tell your truth, and believe in the extraordinary power of your voice

# Dominion never tried to be a God, but he was good.

## Dominion

By day, Moses Kiptoo clocks into a corporate world where creativity must wear a tie. But when dusk falls, he becomes Dominion, a poet, performer, and storyteller whose art hums with the same energy that pulses through his homeland, Eldoret. For him, life is a balancing act between two stages: the boardroom and the mic. He jokes that he was “supposed” to be running marathons like every other Kiptor in the Rift, but instead he’s chosen to run the world through words. His verses sprint toward truth, his rhythm sharp as breath. “We all shine differently,” he says. And his light, it seems, burns through syllables.

Dominion sees the world as a constant exchange of energy, what he calls “the vibration of the people.” Every performance is a cycle of giving and receiving: the crowd’s emotion feeds his voice; his words give it back, refined. Creation, to him, isn’t simply making art, it’s continuing God’s original work. “We’re all products of the Creator,” he reflects, “so creation can’t end with us.” He found his power young, at sixteen, standing on a high school stage in St. Patrick’s, reciting a poem that dared to speak truth to power. The mic was



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switched off mid-performance, but that silence only amplified his resolve. That moment, being told his voice was "too political", became the spark that ignited his purpose. From then on, he knew the pen was his weapon.

Now, Dominion's art moves like music, each piece a melody for the unheard, each performance a protest wrapped in rhythm. He writes about the human condition, about pain and pride, injustice and joy. His early poem "State of Emergency" spoke of a nation's struggle, but his later works speak to healing of women lost to violence, of citizens fighting to be seen.

When he steps onto stage, his voice doesn't just echo; it carries. Dominion calls poets "therapists of society" the ones who hold collective pain so others don't have to. Every line he writes bears the weight of thousands. "I am a movement," he insists. "When I stand as Dominion, I carry the voices of many."

His art has the cadence of gospel not in religion, but in revelation. Dominion doesn't preach; he channels. His revolution is gentle but firm, a rhythmic uprising stitched together by verse. "You can't stop the sunrise by slaughtering all your roosters," he once said. "The revolution will still go on."

For Dominion, art isn't an escape from the system, it's a parallel universe where truth breathes freely. And in that world, words run faster than any marathon(er) ever could.





# “Isn’t it interesting how our destiny is already written without our knowledge?”

Robert Musema

My name is Musema Robert, and I am from the Pearl of Africa, Uganda. I have been involved in fashion since high school. As a fashion designer, I often drew inspiration from my friends, using them as muses. Despite this, the journey has not been without its challenges, from which I emerged stronger like a butterfly. Growing up, I didn’t tell my mother that I was into fashion, so raising money to buy necessary equipment was a challenge. I often went to help my mentor, with whom I shared a strong love for reggae and fashion. That was where my passion was strengthened. I also enjoy African music, with favourites like Boloja, Namadingo, Afro Blondie, and more. When I entered the fashion industry, I lacked formal education in the field. For me, passion was the main drive, so I lacked knowledge of many things. I remember my childhood involved community tasks and running to the market to buy fabrics with my hard-earned money. It’s not that my mother didn’t support me; I was simply driven by a fiery desire and didn’t want to burden her already heavy shoulders. I loved tailoring clothes for plus-size women because I used less fabric compared to petite women. Little did I know, I was unconsciously practising sustainability—caring for our environment by avoiding waste and giving new life to clothes. Isn’t it fascinating how our destiny seems already written without our knowing? I told myself I should keep the spirit alive. What’s interesting is that my mother never knew I was in the fashion business until I achieved a major milestone.

At Musema (Culture), we take old clothes, repurpose, reconstruct, and upcycle them to create new garments. It is from this work that I have reached where I am now in Kenya. I have received numerous accolades, such as participating in Kampala Fashion Week, curating fashion shows in Uganda, and addressing issues of gender by creating collections that speak to, uplift, and empower women. At Musema Culture, we run projects that support women in tailoring and design. One such project has been running for four years, and we recently selected the winners for the African Union Call for Good Practices, where I represented Ghana and Musema in 2024. We are here for the Residence on Artivism Fellowship, where we showcase how we use our art to inspire and motivate people in our community and across the globe.

Global fashion is the biggest polluter, playing a fiddle to the petroleum industry. Most fashion practitioners lack discipline in how they produce clothes and how to maintain them. On top of that, fast fashion is becoming a greater threat every day. Clothing manufacturers produce cheap clothes that equally get spoiled very fast and are later disposed of in our environment.

In order to ensure better practices in the fashion industry, we have to train our clients on how to know good fabric and purchase better clothes. Mass education on what fast



fashion is and its downsides can create a ripple effect in the fashion industry. We are creating policies where we get people to donate their old clothes and we upcycle then donate. In Europe, there are policies where the manufacturers have to pick up the old clothes. In Africa, we don't have the capacity to do such, but we can upcycle the clothes.

I came to Kenya for the Artivism Fellowship and I networked with other practitioners from other inter-disciplinaries such as artists, poets, authors and more; exchanging ideas, forming connections and seeing how we can use our art to improve policies, and how our art impacts communities and the political hemispheres in different countries. From this fellowship, I aim to come up with a project that celebrates menstruation. I believe it's a cycle of life, so there should be no shame or stigmatisation around it. It is important for me as a man that I can offer support to the women of our community, as they are our backbone. As children, we were nurtured by our mothers, and our fathers were mostly emotionally absent. This makes our connections with our mothers more sentimental as we spend more time with them. I often ask myself what if my mom were a housewife? Would I have to depend on my father? Where would I be? It is from this that I am supporting women through my story. When I am empowering women through the tailoring system, I make them comfortable and ensure I understand them. This enables an ecosystem.

Over time, I have learned how to build my narrative. I have learnt our stories should start with us before flowing to other people. How

does it touch the community? These are some of the questions I am asking myself as the residency fellowship is wrapping up. We have to make sure the work we are doing has an impact so we can get attention and people to join the movement.

If I can describe the Artivism Fellowship Residency in three words, they would have to be great, inspiring & fun. I am looking at the spectrum of creating allies in the system, making sure I attract more people who are neutral so we can move the stories and make an impact together. Even with my project, I am going to make sure it not only focuses on me but on the community.

Kui (wellness and wellbeing trainer) stood out to me all through, mainly because she helped us trace our ancestral stories and activities. Initially, I have always been the chill guy, but now I feel my mental concentration and creative thinking have been challenged. The whole residency was amazing and all the artists have been amazing. It's as if we were picked from one community. Everyone was kind and supportive, and that's what we need in the East African industry.

As creatives we need to understand our work and the impact that it has. It pushes you more and helps you advance and network with different people. I encourage them to wait for the activism fellowship and join it.

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with Robert





# “To **teach** through tenderness, to **build** through connection, to **love** without apology.”

Michelle Jahari

For Michelle Jahari, creation begins in silence, the kind that sits between thought and feeling, where fear and beauty often meet. She is a filmmaker, photographer, and psychologist, but above all, she’s a listener, to herself, to others, to the quiet tremors that shape the human spirit. Jahari moves through the world like someone who feels everything at once. Her art doesn’t shout; it breathes. Every film she directs, every image she captures, is an act of deep observation, a meditation on what it means to exist gently in a world that demands noise.

She often jokes about her irrational fears, cockroaches, scorpions, and the unknown but beneath that humour is someone deeply attuned to vulnerability. Living with ADHD and mild autism, Jahari experiences life in overlapping layers of sound, colour, and emotion. She laughs at how her brain “hears everything at once,” but it’s that very sensitivity that makes her art so textured. Every shot she composes carries the rhythm of her perception, fragmented yet fluid, precise yet spontaneous.

For her, creativity isn’t an escape from herself; it’s a way back home. “I’m scared of my potential,” she admits, “but I’m learning to walk toward it anyway.” That tension between fear and bravery defines her storytelling. Whether she’s behind the camera or in a classroom, Jahari’s work explores what it means to feel too much in a world that rewards numbness.

Her background in psychology gives her a rare intimacy with the human condition. She treats filmmaking as a form of therapy for herself and for others. Her stories are less about spectacle and more about presence: people learning to sit in discomfort, to hold grief softly, to

rediscover joy without performance.

But Jahari’s life, like her art, isn’t free of contradiction. She grew up in a family that measured success through titles, doctor, lawyer, businessperson and not through dreams. Studying psychology was her way of understanding herself, but film became the language through which she began to understand the world. Every time she tried to “walk away from art,” something, a call, a chance, a story pulled her back. “It feels like Jonah and the whale,” she says. “Every time I try to leave, I get swallowed back into purpose.”

Her work is anchored in the memory of what Africa once was before colonialism, and what it could still become. She wants her films to remind people of softness, the kind that comes from remembering who we were before the world hardened us. For Jahari, activism doesn’t have to be loud to be revolutionary. “We heal through love,” she says simply. “And love, too, is resistance.”

In her vision, art isn’t just political, it’s spiritual. It’s how communities remember their rhythm, how people reclaim their voices, how women re-enter spaces once denied to them. “I want my work to bring us back to ourselves,” she reflects. “To teach through tenderness, to build through connection, to love without apology.”

Michelle Jahari creates like she lives slowly, intentionally, and full of heart. In a world obsessed with urgency, she is a reminder that art can be both protest and prayer. Sometimes, the most radical thing a filmmaker can do is simply to feel and invite others to feel with her.

SCAN  
to connect  
with Jahari







# Evansquez is anything but **ORDINARY. Mabruk!**

Evans Ndirangu

Evansquez speaks the way a match catches fire quietly at first, then suddenly bright, and crackling with truth. He calls Mombasa home, a city whose humid air and salt-tinted breeze shaped the cadence of his voice. He is an urban spoken word artist carved from coastlines and city corners, a performer who bends language the way a magician bends light, turning pain into punchlines and protest into poetry.

He talks about imperialism the way some people talk about weather, ever-present, shaping the day; about police brutality with a familiarity that comes from watching too many young men disappear into the evening patrols of Nakuru. He collects stories the way others collect keepsakes. A mother losing her son. A body was fished out of a river. A friend whose life was stolen by a bullet removed quietly at the morgue. These stories settle into his work, rising in his voice as lines sharp enough to cut, clever and deep enough to stay.

His art sits at the intersection of grief and humour. One minute, he is crafting wordplay from a woman on a matatu overheard mentioning 'Mwaura' and how he thinks that's what people with too much aura go by; and the next, he is exposing how bodies become "riddled with bullets like emphasised points." He threads joy and tragedy through the same needle, insisting that truth can sting and still be clever. He refuses to become a preacher shouting at crowds; he prefers to be a magician, teaching, provoking, and weaving layers so the message sneaks beneath the skin.

His audience is young students between eighteen and thirty-five who look like him, speak like him, and feel the tension of a country balancing hope and hardship. They recognise themselves in his cadence. They know the jokes,

the slang, the exhaustion. He performs for them as if he owes them clarity. He performs as if art can save someone, maybe even himself.

Behind the sharp metaphors and political bars, there is a mother he thinks about constantly. The woman he hopes to lift out of the relentless strain of life. Every time he writes, he imagines her reading a line and finally understanding what her son has been building all these years. He imagines pulling her out of the hood, giving her cool air, comfort, ease. His mother is the silent heartbeat under every piece he performs.

He carries eight years of hair, eight years of rebellion, identity, memory. He grew dreadlocks after a day burned in his childhood, when on a bus trip home from his grandmother's village during the school holidays, his mother insisted he shave them off. He didn't. His first act of divergence? Maybe. Now his hair is a declaration, a protest, a refusal to shrink. He has learned that hair can be political; that on Kenyan streets, having dreads is sometimes enough for suspicion. But he wears them anyway, like a badge of freedom.

Evans lives simply. On a normal day, he prefers silent matatu windows, cool shadows, and moments where thoughts stretch without interruption. He studies battle rap cyphers, artists who spit lines so sharp they break bones in silence. He listens not to imitate, but to ignite his own spark.

He arrived in Nakuru by accident and fate. A two-day trip for a show in 2017 turned into a stay that stretched into months. He was hosted



by his friend Willy Oeba, welcomed by Oeba's mother, and embraced by a community he didn't know he was searching for. Shows began to trickle in. Opportunities multiplied. He found himself living the life he had imagined from Mombasa life where poems left the page and entered rooms full of people who cared.

He remembers walking from Gilgil to perform in Nakuru and returning at night, exhausted but alive. He remembers his uncle, one of his earliest fans who motivated him to release projects. He remembers carrying notebooks full of pieces with no audience, wondering whether he was crazy to keep writing. Now he knows he wasn't.

Artivism came naturally to him. Before ForumCiv, he was already performing pieces on social and political injustice across Nakuru's neighborhoods. So when he stumbled upon the fellowship link, he felt called. The program taught him the language of what he had felt for years: systems of oppression, capitalism, hierarchy, misogyny, settler colonialism, imperialism, et al. He realized the stories he wrote were not isolated incidents; they were part of larger structures. It finally clicked for him, All oppression IS connected.

The fellowship opened his eyes wide. He learned how land carries ancestral memory, how seeds, graves, and indigenous rituals live under the soil. He learned how colonialism mutated into different forms: some that displace people violently, others that exploit labor and resources while maintaining distance. These ideas sparked his capstone project on land inheritance and cultural preservation. Land, he believes, is a living archive. To lose it is to lose entire worlds.

Watching documentaries of artists like Eric Wainaina, Juliani, and Gidi Gidi Maji Maji expanded his understanding of art's power. He imagined what it would feel like for his own piece to be debated in parliament or set as a university exam like 'Bahasha ya Ocampo' or 'Unbwogable'. He imagined standing where they stood, realizing that talent can place you before kings, presidents, and entire nations.

He dreams boldly. He wants a catalogue of work vast enough to perform anywhere, on racism, land decolonisation, misogyny, imperialism; whatever the stage demands. He wants to live fully off his art, without strain. And he wants to empower other creatives who are drowning in the frustrations of studio fees, producers asking for money upfront, or the struggle of being heard.

Above all, he wants to spark minds. Like Tupac said: you don't have to change the world; you have to spark the mind that will. If he succeeds, his mother will feel it first. Then the young artists in Nakuru trying to make something out of nothing. Then the society he keeps writing about one audience at a time.

Evans believes in showing up because life rewards the bold, not the brilliant. He believes power belongs to those who are certain, not those who only dream.

He introduces himself simply:

Evansquez, an urban spoken word recording and performing artist.

Evansquez, is anything but ordinary. Mabruk!



SCAN  
to connect  
with Evans



We are using art as  
our main **weapon**

Omolo Hamisi



Hamisi's voice booms through the room, carrying the kind of confidence forged by a hard-knock life. He speaks passionately about his peers, Maburuguda, Sigingi, Abudabi Tembekali, Ramsizo, artists he says are doing real Hip Hop activism. "Mainstream radio," he scoffs, "can't handle the kind of truth in their music."

My name is Alex Hamisi Omollo, and I am an artist. I use both digital and visual art to do advocacy and push for change. Apart from that, I am also an activist, trained community paralegal, and I believe in people's power, and it is only we that can bring the change we want in this world.

I'd say I was radicalised from the moment I took my first breath. You see, I was born into a blended family. In simple terms, my mom came with her family, my dad came with his, and together they built one big household. That meant plenty of siblings and, naturally, plenty of clashing personalities, a recipe for chaos waiting to erupt. I grew up in Dandora, 32D to be exact, and the area's history is far from rosy. Between the dumpsite robberies, gang violence (Mungiki, Taliban), the 2007 post-election violence, and prostitution, I've witnessed it all. Life was chaotic, and it was hard for a young person to find a sense of self in that kind of environment. The people we looked up to were often robbers or sex workers; survival was the only goal. Police brutality was constant, and every day carried the heavy uncertainty of whether someone you knew would still be alive tomorrow. Unknown to me, all these occurrences were building up a rage in me that needed transformation not only for me but the community and the incoming generation. I then joined Dandora Hip Hop City, where we started a movement of artists who championed activism through HipHop. I would say here is where I knew what worked for me

and what didn't.

From there, I joined the social justice movement and in 2018, we did the first People's March, it was called "Stop Killing Us". It was a wake-up call for the youth to advocate against police brutality, arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings. This was a new chapter for me as it showed me something different that I can also be able to apply in my advocacy work. A lot has changed since then. The community is receiving a lot of opportunities, people are coming to experience the initiatives the youth are doing; from cleaning up of Nairobi River to the youth repairing public spaces into spaces that can benefit the community, the youth are finding themselves in better places than where they grew up. For me, that is transformation, and I want to see more of it.

From Nairobi, I moved to my hometown in Migori, and the vision was the same, with the initiative of at least teaching one person.. I want to quote the great Ukoo Fulani Mau Mau: "Each one teach one." It means as an individual I will touch one's life, and there will be a chain reaction, making it easier to bring the change we need. In Migori County, we are currently organising farmers to reclaim our lost glory and sovereignty. I believe we wouldn't exist in this world without food. Not just any food, but healthy food that enriches us. We are also doing political education, trying to decolonise the minds of our young people. Information is power, and it is instrumental in the fight for liberation. A person with no information is like someone who doesn't understand their roots. If you don't understand your history, you don't understand yourself at all.

Moving from the city to rural life was very hard. The city is very fast, my friends call it the "concrete-



te jungle." It was in Migori that I decided to start the Uriri Social Justice Centre, to organise, educate and liberate our people while celebrating our unique identities and powers. Collectively, we have been able to see quite a difference. Young people are awake, and they understand what's happening politically. It's no longer a conversation of "politics doesn't affect me," but rather "what can we do to make the systems better?" You see, there is a huge gap between the generation with raw information and knowledge on the laws that govern the country and the young people, and that is what prompted the formation of the Justice Social Centre. It created a transformation in connecting the minds of the old and the young people as they discuss and bring solutions to problems even the government can't handle.

We are using art as our main weapon. The youth like to express themselves, and they like opportunities where they can talk about pressing issues and get an audience which will understand and not judge their creative freedom. Enabling such transformations in Migori is tough, as it's known to be an area of strong political influence. People are scared to speak up; they are afraid of "Sangwenyas" (people who do dirty work for the politicians). Anytime you speak up about injustice, people try to shy away from the topic and call it politics.

Living in the ghetto is not easy. You have to fight issues that derail the growth of an individual; if you don't take action, the problem will persist. I

don't think I ran away from the hood; I was looking for an environment to let me think freely and have the space to organise and build a foundation from scratch. As much as artists would want to produce moving art pieces, the audience is important. I believe people in the rural areas lack access to these privileges, and I thought I would love to experience something new, creating platforms in areas where the young people are the most marginalised, as the political class never budgets for the young people.

At times, it's uncomfortable speaking out against the majority, but what moves me is the strength that an activist has to manoeuvre in this world. I borrow inspiration from those before me, experiencing their growth and consistency is quite encouraging and shows there is power in art, and that is what activism means to me. This also applies to music, even in the new (education model) CBC system; art is an integral part of education, and that is the power of art. If the people can integrate activism, information can be passed to the next person easily. Right now, I am adorned in the Kenyan flag because it is symbolic. Taking it back to the 2024 Gen Z protests, the flag was a symbol of pride and resistance, so for me, wearing the flag is liberation. If I were squeezed, red would definitely fill the bucket. As a country, we are bleeding, mothers are scared their sons and daughters might die in the noble fight towards a better Kenya. We recently lost over 60 Kenyans in the protests, young, innocent lives.



SCAN  
to connect  
with Omolo



# Filming the Revolution of the Mind

Jante Juma

When I first met Jante Juma, she is wearing pink soft, striking, and deliberate. A mismatched earring dangles from her left ear. "It's from Nile Dawta," she explains. "We swapped one each. She has mine, I have hers. It's protective like an evil eye." There's a quiet confidence in how she says it. The kind that only comes from carrying both art and struggle in the same heartbeat. Jante is a filmmaker, photographer, and activist from Nairobi whose work blurs the lines between film, theatre, and protest. "I'm passionate about my country," she tells me. "About where art fits into the state of affairs and how we can make things better for us." Then she pauses, as if reconsidering her words. "If I met God today," she says finally, "I'd ask for more time."

It's not hesitation, it's readiness. After years of learning and unlearning, Jante feels she's only just begun to become the artist she was meant to be. Her work has always defended human rights and social justice, but the last few years have been heavier. "The Gen Z movement felt like walking into fire," she says. "We were going to the streets to die. As an artist, I felt helpless. But this fellowship came at the right time and it gave me a roadmap for how to contribute to the revolution."

Her revolution, she insists, starts in the mind. "I want to cause a revolution of the mind through film," she says. "When we talk about African revolutionary filmmakers, people think of Ousmane Sembène or Haile Gerima. But I want a Kenyan name there too. Not just mine, a generation that speaks truth with style and emotion." That truth, for Jante, is rooted in class. "What's happening in Kenya isn't just politics,

it's a class war," she says, leaning forward.

"We've normalized inequality so much we think it's fate. I want my films to expose that to make people see how absurd oppression is. Because once you see it clearly, you can't unsee it." As she speaks, her words move between vulnerability and conviction. "As a woman, I carry heaviness," she admits. "But that heaviness is my superpower. I have emotions I can make people feel." She remembers the early protests vividly: mothers and grandmothers marching, being arrested and shoved into police trucks. "People saw that and thought, 'They're doing this to our mothers? Why are we letting them stand alone?' That's when the energy shifted. "To her, womanhood is where art and activism meet. "Everything that creates is feminine the earth, the ocean, the womb," she says softly. "Women are portals to our spiritual truth. We remind the world that creation and resistance are the same act. Just like Wangari Maathai did."

Jante traces her creative roots back to childhood. "My dad loved photography," she says. "He had a camera, and I used to sneak around with it. I was shy, so being behind the lens made sense. It gave me control. It let me see." Over time, the camera became more than a tool, it became her weapon, her witness.

"Now I can't separate my art from activism," she says. "I can't just make beautiful things. I have to make true things."

She credits the East African activism fellowship for grounding that purpose. "I didn't even know I was an activist until this," she laughs. "I saw the application on Instagram while I was on my

family's farm in Kisumu. I almost didn't apply. But something told me to try, and now I can't imagine my life without this perspective." Through the fellowship, she's met artists and organisers from Uganda and Tanzania. "We realised our struggles mirror each other," she says. "We're not isolated. What happens in Kampala happens in Nairobi. I have collaborators now across the region. My home feels bigger than Kenya; it feels East African." Working alongside mentors she once admired from afar was a humbling reminder that revolutions need continuity. "It felt like a changing of guard," she says. "Our mentors passed down their wisdom, and we're taking the baton but smarter, with new tools." When I ask what she's learned most from the experience, she doesn't hesitate. "Community," she says. "Before, I thought activism was me versus the system. I used to carry the weight alone. But now I understand, we win by growing the circle. By bringing people closer. By making belief in a better Kenya contagious." Still, there's a fatigue that lingers. She feels it in her shoulders, in her silence between sentences. "The artist I was is not the artist I am now," she admits. "Before, I created it because I loved it. Now, I create because I must. Because there's a responsibility. Because art is the only language we all still understand." She talks about the film as if it's a prophecy. "When you show people an image, they don't forget. That's power. That's a revolution." At one point, her voice softens again. "I'd fill a time capsule with images," she says. "Photos of our streets after the protests, kids running

through tear gas, women standing tall, police retreating. Not because I want to remember the pain but because I want us, ten years from now, to open it and see how far we've come. To see flowers where there was once smoke."

She's currently working on a visual project that documents the unspoken layers of the mandamano grief, resilience, and the humour that keeps Kenyans going. "We're emotional, but we're also funny as hell," she laughs. "Our sarcasm is survival. I want to capture that too, the full range of what it means to be awake and alive here."

When I ask what she hopes to achieve by the end of the fellowship, her answer is surprisingly simple. "Knowledge," she says. "If every Gen Z Kenyan understood the spectrum of allies, we'd already be winning. I want to translate what I've learned into something people can easily access, maybe a short documentary, or even an Instagram series. Because this revolution starts in the mind. But it spreads through art." As the sun begins to fade through the Nairobi haze, Jante leans back and looks out the window. "I think I'm finally becoming who I was meant to be," she says quietly. "A mirror, a storyteller, a witness. Maybe even a prophet."

Outside, the traffic hums, relentless and loud. Inside, her words hang in the air like light, tender, defiant, and unfinished.



SCAN  
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