



KAZI YA MKONO

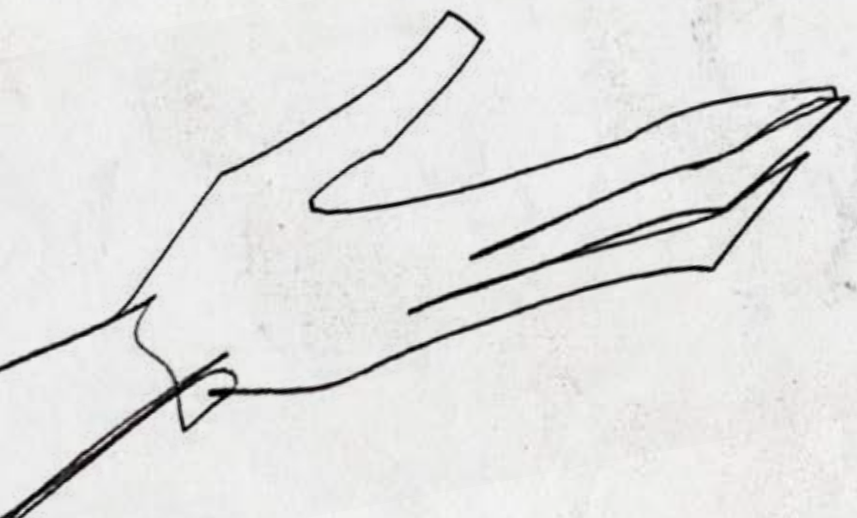
ISSUE 001 / SPRING 2022





INTRODU

KAZI YA MKONO CONCERNS ITSELF WITH ARTISANS; SPECIALISED, SKILLED, BLUE COLLAR LABOURERS WHO WORK WITH THEIR HANDS. THOSE WHOM PLAYWRIGHT AUGUST WILSON DESCRIBED AS PURSUING “A WAY TO LIVE LIFE WITH DIGNITY AND WHATEVER ELOQUENCE THE HEART CAN CALL UPON”, PEOPLE OF “DEFINITE AND SINCERE WORTH”. THEY WORK WITH THEIR HANDS IN WAYS THAT CONSUMERISM AND MASS PRODUCTION READS AS TOO SLOW, REPLACEABLE OR UNNECESSARY.



THEY ARE ‘WANJIKU’ IN THE WAY PROF. WAMBUI MWANGI EXPLAINS: “THE VOICE OF THOSE WHO ARE SUBJECT TO THE ACTIONS OF THE POWERFUL BUT NEVER POWERFUL THEMSELVES.” WE SEEK TO PRESENT THEM HERE AS COMPLICATED PROTAGONISTS WITH AS MANY DREAMS, TRIUMPHS AND AMBITIONS AS THE DISAPPOINTMENTS AND TRAGEDIES THEY’VE FACED.



DUCTION

PHILIS ERNEST, DANIEL NJUGUNA AND JOHN NJOROGE ARE OUR MUSES. WE SPENT QUALITY TIME WITH EACH ONE, SEEKING TO DRAW THEM OUT OF STEREOTYPE AND TROPE IN ORDER TO PAINT THEM WITH SPECIFICITY, DEPTH AND GLORY. WORKING WITH CARE AND ATTENTION SO AS NOT TO ASCRIBE SPECIAL MEANING TO THEIR LIVES IN WAYS THAT UNFAIRLY DEMAND THAT THEY TELL SOME LARGER STORY THAN SIMPLY BEING WHO THEY ARE.

TO KEEP THIS IN FOCUS, WE WERE GUIDED BY OBSERVATIONS MADE BY BEN, A CHARACTER IN MEJA MWANGI'S "GOING DOWN RIVER ROAD": "HERE AT LAST ARE PEOPLE. PEOPLE HE UNDERSTANDS, PEOPLE WHO ARE PEOPLE, HUMAN BEINGS. STRUGGLING, WORKING, DRINKING, EATING, HUNGER-ING, LIVING MEN".

Solab is a culturally responsive project that will design and build the digital platform to create and host online spaces for artists living in Africa and from the African Diaspora (AAD) to imagine, discuss, develop, and audition ideas through projects.

Solab Kenya sees us partner with arts collective Maasai Mbilli & Kazi ya Mkono project artists Wanjeri Gakuru, Bethuel Muthee and Naddya Adhiambo Oluoch-Olunya, curated/project managed by Rose Jepkorir, to commission new artwork between artists based in Kenya and Northern Ireland in this key part of our R&D activity.

Supported by the British Council, Solab Kenya is interdisciplinary, supporting cross pollination of Music, Visual Art, Film, Dance and Literature. It allows space for positive mental wellbeing through a lens of cultural identity, inspired by the concept and cultural aesthetic of Afrofuturism that connects African ancestry, technology, innovation, and creativity.

SOLAB

**BRITISH
COUNCIL**

REFLECTION

For the longest time I've been thinking about 'small intimate jobs', pursuits that have to do in many ways with grooming and always some special skill. I was curious about the lives of cobblers, shoe shiners, knife sharpeners, and the *mari-kwa-mari* guys. When the pandemic hit, I figured it had likely affected their ability to work but it wasn't hard to imagine that things were already tough for some of them long before that.

In March 2020, I reached out to Naddya and BM, two friends whose talents I have admired for a long time, and asked if we could jointly explore a series focused on artisans engaging in these jobs. Naddya is an incredible illustrator and graphic designer while BM writes poetry and essays about Nairobi and Nairobi living in such powerful and intimate ways. My contribution would be in words and (moving) pictures, while talented graphic designer James Cunningham beautifully weaved together all our ideas.

Grant support from SoLab facilitated the project's creative production with a portion set aside specifically for the MUSES. It was important that we did not arrive empty handed, *lazima tungeleta maziwa na mkate* and a little more besides, as is tradition. After many discussions across emails and conference calls it was wonderful to finally gather together to observe, speak and listen to the MUSES. The process was clumsy, heartwarming and joyful in turns. Everyone has a story and we hope we did Philis, Daniel and John justice in telling a small portion of theirs.

Wanjari Gakuru

Artist, Kazi ya Mkono

ARTIST BIOS



NADDYA ADHIAMBO OLUOCH-OLUNYA

Naddya Adhiambo Oluoch-Olunya is an Animation Director and Musician from Nairobi, Kenya. For the past 12 years, she has relished the challenge of diving into a new story world, researching its histories, growing its palette and pushing graphic language to a place that only animation can go.

With a practice spanning comics, animation and XR she has worked with studios from all over the world including Netflix Animation, Shujaaz. inc, Facebook and ZanaAfrica.

As Founder and CEO of Nalo Studios, her goal is to tell fresh nourishing stories however and whenever she can.



WANJERI GAKURU

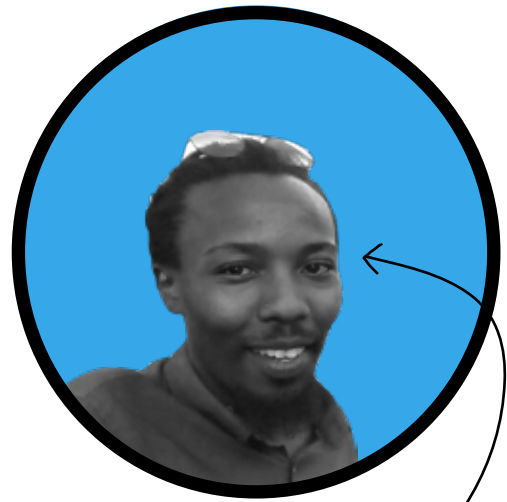
Wanjeri Gakuru is a freelance journalist, essayist and filmmaker. A cross-section of her writing has appeared in Transition Magazine, The Elephant, CNN, The Sunday Times, LA Times Magazine and The Africa Report among others.

She is an alumna of the 2014 Farafina Creative Writing Workshop. She was selected as the 2018 Literary Ambassador for Nairobi by Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel and is a 2021 Baraza Media-Fringe Graph Fellow.

Between 2018 and 2020, Wanjeri served as Managing Editor of Pan-African writers' collective, Jalada Africa and in 2021, she was appointed Jalada Africa's Board Secretary.

Wanjeri has contributed variously to curatorial projects and publications including: Just A Book (Goethe-Institut Kenya, 2016), Jalada Mobile Literary and Arts Festival (Jalada Africa, 2017), #RafikiZetu: Kenyan LGBTIQ Stories, as told, by Allies (Denis Nzioka, 2019), Family Matters (Goethe-Institut Namibia, 2021) and Archive of Forgetfulness (2021).

Read her work at www.wanjeri.com



BETHUEL MUTHEE

Bethuel Muthee is a poet living and working in Nairobi. He is a member of Maasai Mbili Artists Collective. He was series editor for Down River Road's inaugural issue "Place".

As a member of Naijographia he has co-curated three exhibitions:

1. Naijographia (2017, Goethe Institute Nairobi)
2. Wanakuboeka Feelharmonic (2018, British Institute in East Africa)
3. From Here to When (2019, Goethe Institute)

Magazine Design & Layout by
James Cunningham
james@field.fyi

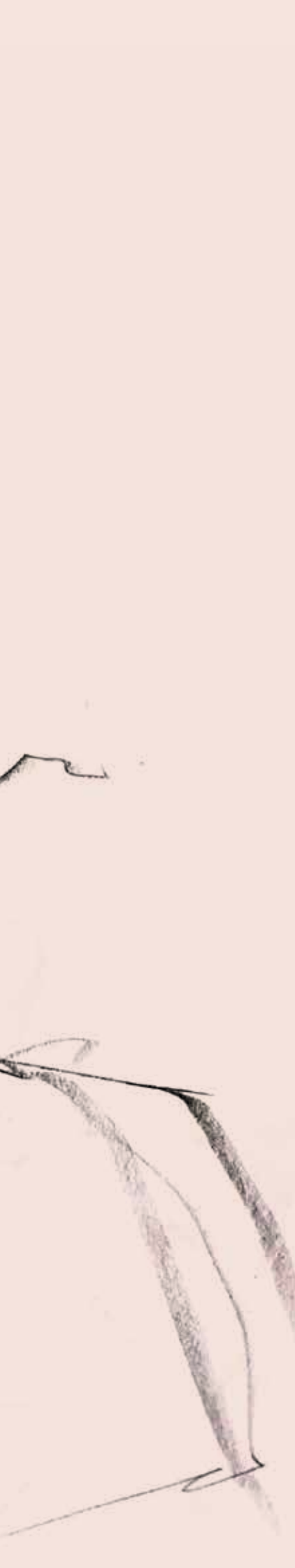
HABARI ZA PHYLIS

Philis Ernest is a self-taught hairdresser. Forced to drop out of secondary school in Form 3 due to lack of fees, she turned to hair braiding to keep herself going. Philis started her trade in Kenyatta Market and within two weeks had landed a lucrative job at a salon in Valley Arcade shopping centre.

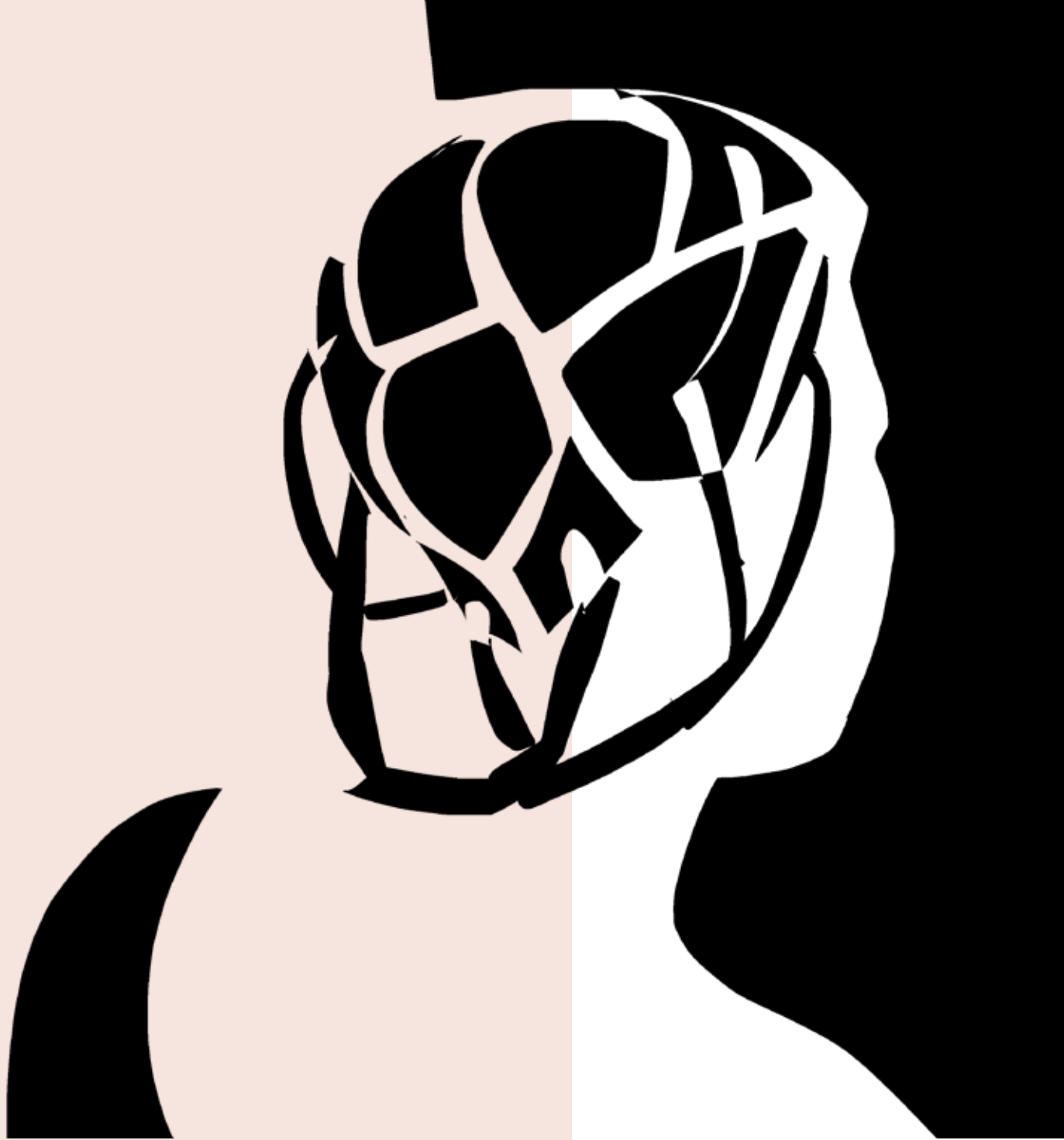
She was 27 and already building a reputation for herself through an uncanny ability to memorize and perfectly recreate elaborate hairstyles and designs.

Her customers over the course of the last 19 years attest to her gentle hand on the scalp and creativity. When she isn't working, this mother of five enjoys spending time on her shamba which she purchased through the work of her hands.










HATA SIKATAAGI MBOGA! YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL AND CARE ABOUT YOUR CLIENTS AND YOURSELF. SIEZI KATA MBOGA JUU UKISHAJIKATA, CLIENT AKIKUJA APATE UMEVAA ELASTOPLAST ATASEMA AIIIII PHILIS HUWEZI NISHUKA.

A photograph of a hair salon. In the foreground, there is a red hair salon chair with black legs and armrests. Behind the chair is a black washbasin. The wall is light purple. On the left, there is a pink shelf with a white bottle. On the right, there is a yellow shelf with several colorful jars. The floor is tiled.

**“KITAMBO WE HAD CLIENTS WENGI BUT NOW
WAMEAMUA KUKAA NYUMBANI KWA SABABU YA
COVID. WAKISEMA KUNA LOCKDOWN, HAMPATI
CLIENTS. WAKINYAMAZA KIDOGO, MNAPATA.**

**“MKONO
HAICHOKI.
PAHALI PENYE
NDAKUAMBIA
TUNACHOKA NI
EITHER MGONGO
AMA MIGUU.**



**“NAWEZA KUWA
NASHUKA NA
AKILI YANGU IKO
KWINGINE.**

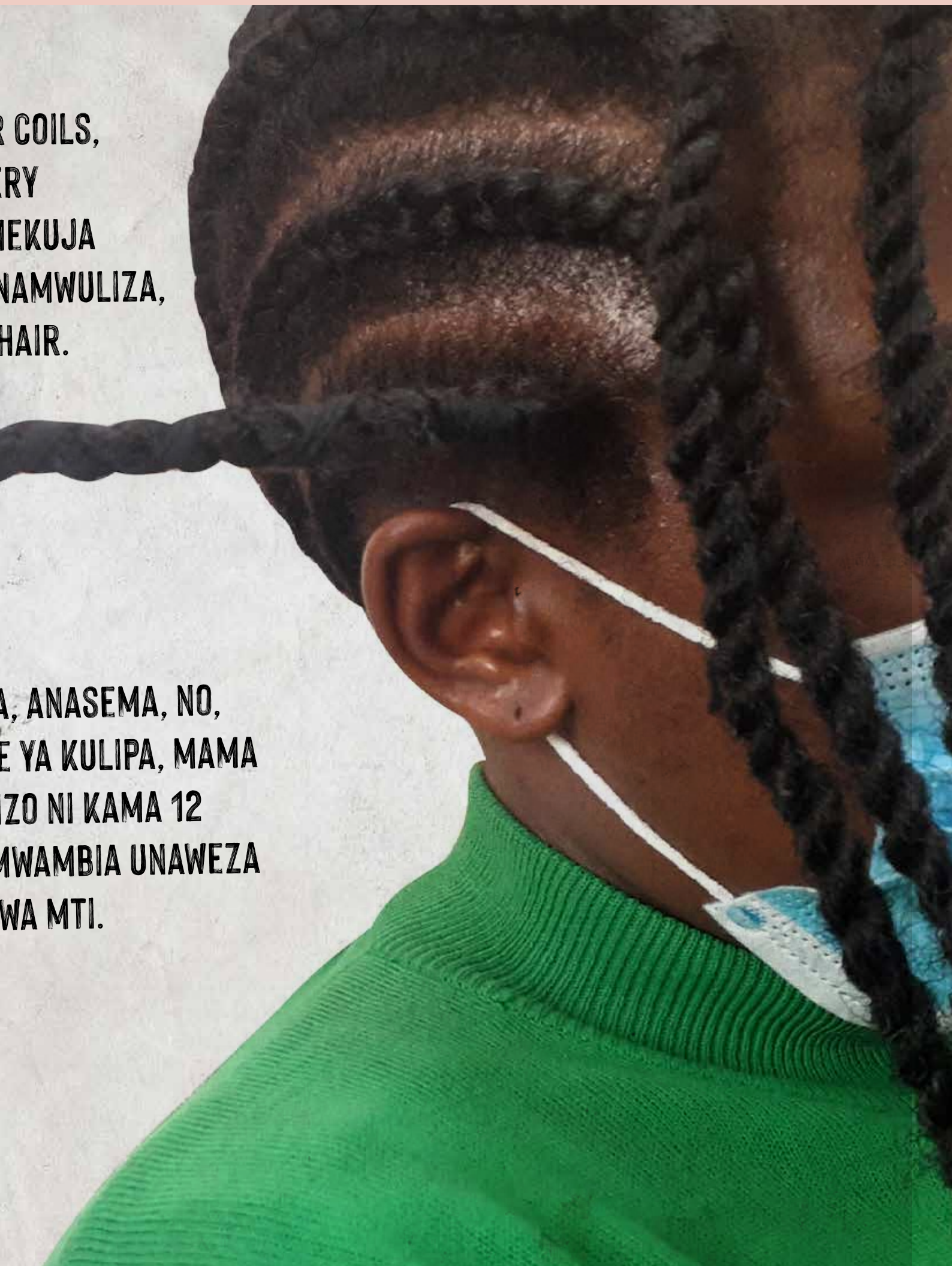
“STYLES ZILE ZIKO POPULAR SAA HII NI TWISTS ZA NYWELE, FINGER
SISTERLOCKS, BRAIDS NA SASA BRAIDS ZINAFIKA HAPA (YAANI, VE
LOOOOONGI) HIZO NDIO TUNAKOSANIAGA NA WAZAZI. TEENAGER AM
ANASEMA I WANT THEM UNTIL HERE (HIZO SASA VERY LOOOOONGI). M
DID YOUR MUM ALLOW THIS? ANASEMA YES, YES, JUST BRAID MY H

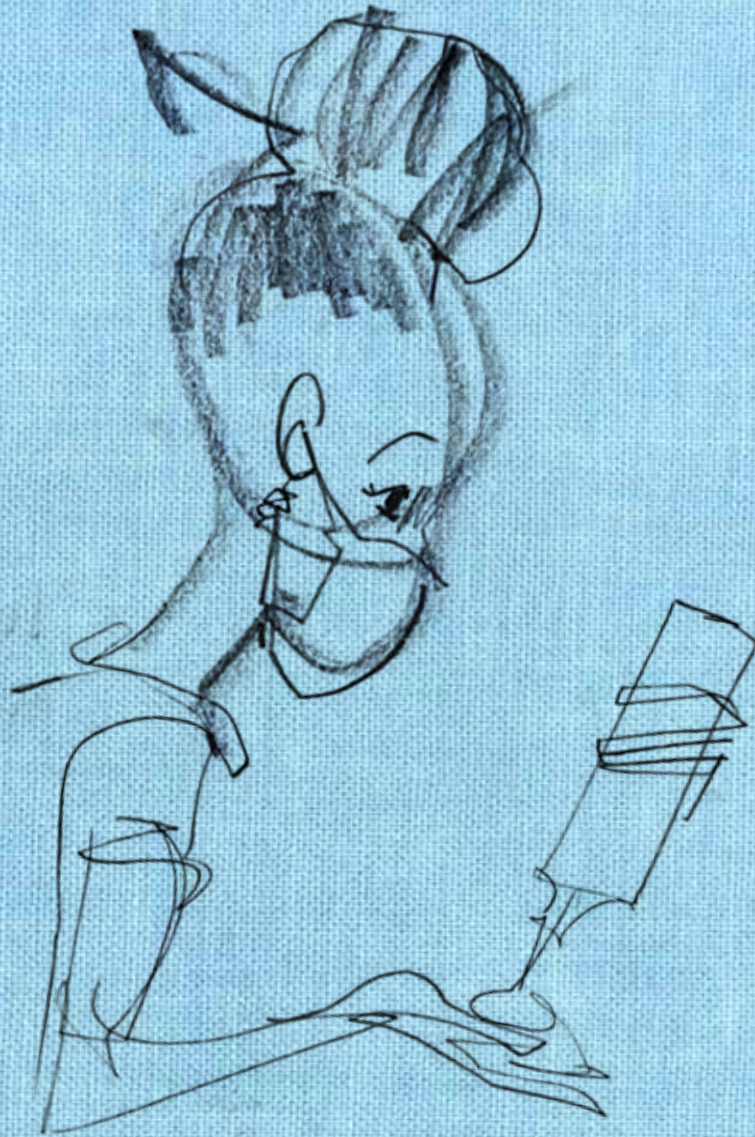


“NACHUKUA SIMU KUULIZA
NO DON'T ASK. SASA TIME
ANASEMA NO WAY. SAA HI
PACKETS OF BRAIDS. NAM
KOSEA MTU AKUFUNGE K

R COILS,
RY
MEKUJA
NAMWULIZA,
HAIR.

A, ANASEMA, NO,
E YA KULIPA, MAMA
ZO NI KAMA 12
MWAMBIA UNaweza
WA MTI.





**KAZI YA MKONO NI MUHIMU SANA
KULIKO HIZI ZA WHITE COLLAR. NI
KAZI NZURI, ISIDHARAUWE NA MTU
YOYOTE. WATU WA KAZI YA MKONO NI
WENGI SANA. HATA IWE NINI UNAFANYA
NA MKONO, IT WILL PAY BACK.
UKIWEKA BIDII UTAGET ANYTHING YOU
WANT.**





LAZIMA CLIENT ATOE STYLE KWA
ROHO YAKE ALAFU UWEKE KWA
KICHWA YAKE.





HUYU NI DANIEL

Daniel Njuguna is one of 50 watchmakers operating in Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD). He has worked in the trade for a decade and spent the last three years operating out of a small open stall at the Ambassador stage.

Starting out selling rubber stamps on the roadside for four years, Daniel credits his friends; a group of old timers based at Gill House for teaching him all he knows about horology. He still offers the stamps service alongside watchmaking and key cutting. Daniel also sells lithium batteries sourced from a supplier on Accra Road as well as plastic and leather watch straps.

A big believer in paying it forward, Daniel knows that if he ever needs help he only needs to look to his vast network of colleagues; some of whom he taught the ropes himself.

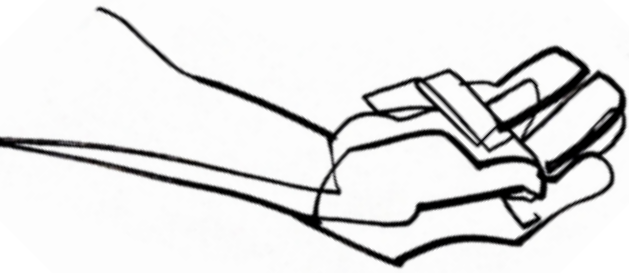
Njuguna, The Watchmaker

RUBBER STAMPS
COMPANY SEALS
KEY CUTTING
WATCH REPAIR
BATTERIES FOR; WATCHES, REMOVING
AND WATCH STRAPS



“

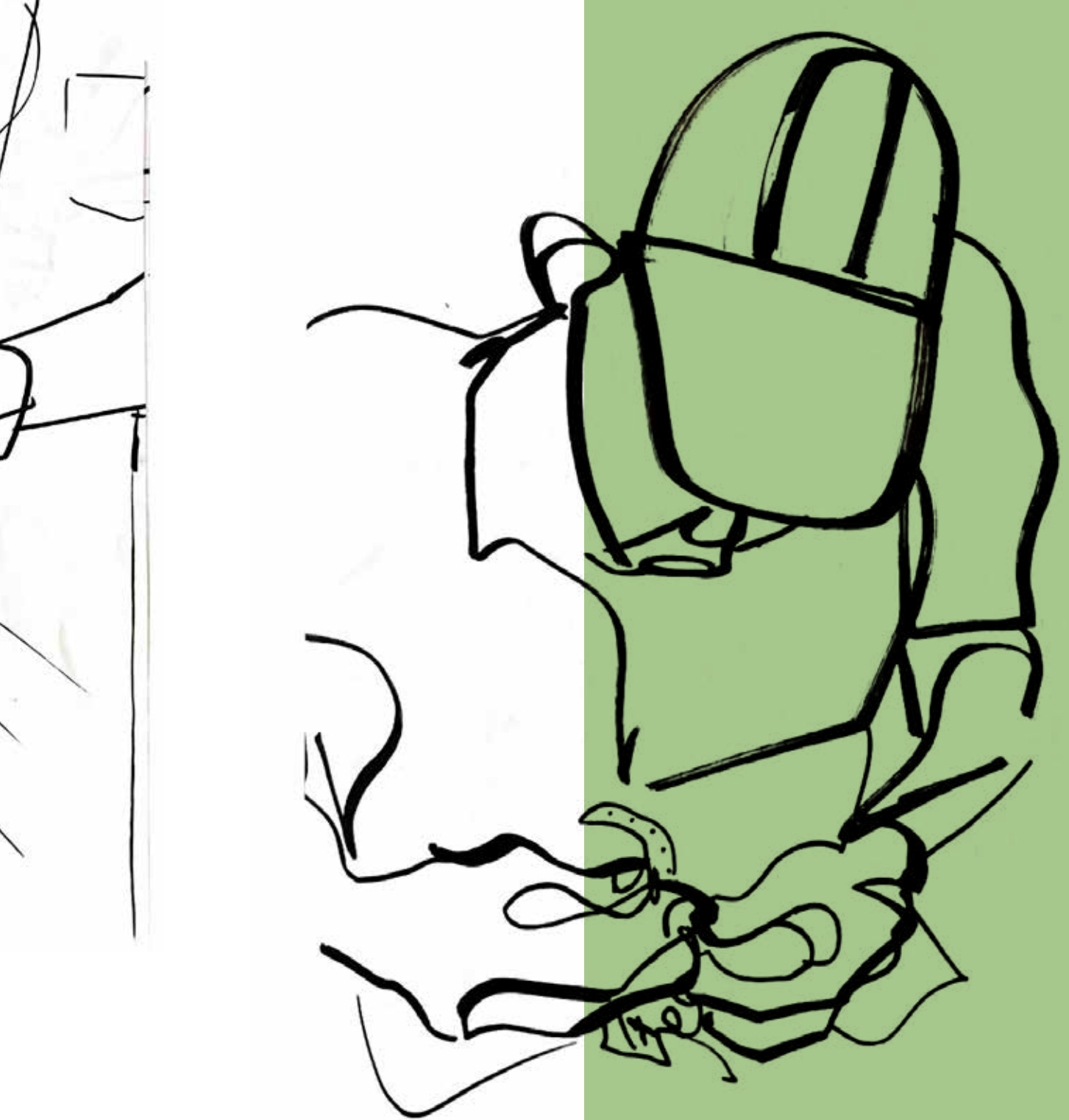
**KITU YA KWANZA
UNAFUNZWA NI
KUCHUNGA SAA YA
CUSTOMER, USIHARIBU
NA USIPOTEZE. KILA SIKU
LAZIMA UPANGUZE KAZI.
WATCH HAITAKANGI
UCHAFU.**



“

**WATCH NI KITU YA MAANA SANA.
INAFANYA HATA MTU ANAKUWA
RESPECTED MAHALI MINGI SANA.**

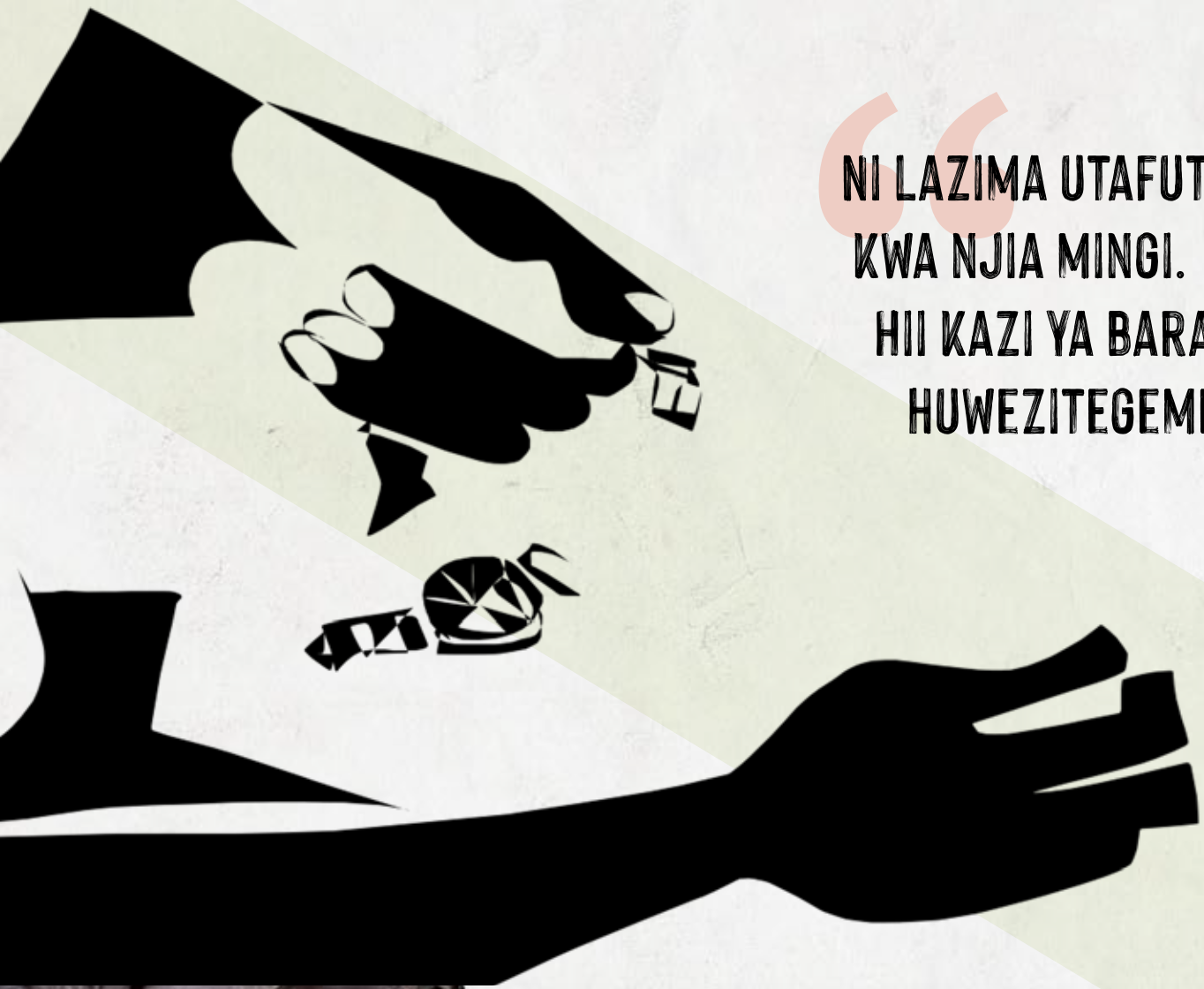




UKIFUNGUA SAA NDANI, SASA UNAJUA SHIDA YAKE NI NINI. MBONA INAKATAA KUSONGA, NI BATTERY AMA NI NINI? KUNA SAA HAINA HII HAND YA SECOND, LAZIMA UFUNGUE UANGALIE. UKIWEKA BATTERY, HUWEZI JUA KAMA ITAFANYA. LAZIMA USKIZE KWA ENGINE NDIO UJUE KAMA INAFANYA.

**“NI LAZIMA UTAFAUTE
KWA NJIA MINGI.**

**HII KAZI YA BARABARA
HUWEZITEGEMEA MOJA.**





“MIMI NAPENDA
MAROLEX.”



“NILIKUWA NAANGALIA VILE WAZEE WALIKUWA WANAFANYA. SASA HAPO NDIO UNAANZA NA UNAJUA KAZI POLE POLE. NI KAMA TU MTU AKIENDESHA GARI, UKIANGALIA VILE MTU MWINGINE ANAFANYA, UNAJUA TU.



**HII KAZI HAIWEZI POTEA.
NIMEFUNZA KAMA WATU
WATATU HIVI. UNATOA MTU HUKO
KWA ESTATE UNAKUJA
UNAMWAMBIA MKAE NA
YEYE HAPA. AKISHAJUA
ANAENDA ANAWEKA KAZI YAKE.
UNAENDAGA KWA ESTATE
UNAPATA MTU KWA SHIDA
UNAONA AFADHALI UMBEBE
UMLETE HUKU KWA SABABU HATA
MIMI NILILETWA NA MTU.**



KUTANA NA JOHN

John Njoroge is a welder based at Ziwani Jua Kali grounds, an open air garage established in the 1980s. Working out of his uncle's shop, John plies his trade alongside other relatives and colleagues. They carry out cable repair, painting, cushion making and radiator and car body fixes amid vehicle carcasses in various states of transformation.

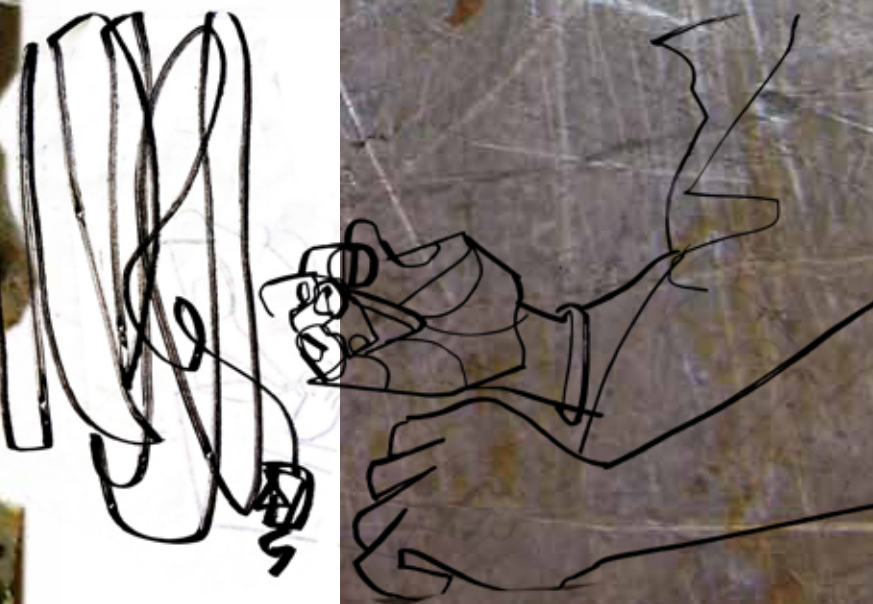
First visiting the shop at age 12, John showed an affinity for the craft and found himself returning as an employee three years ago. He spends majority of his time boring holes into motor vehicle chassis but also likes to design hinged locks that go onto the backs of lorries.

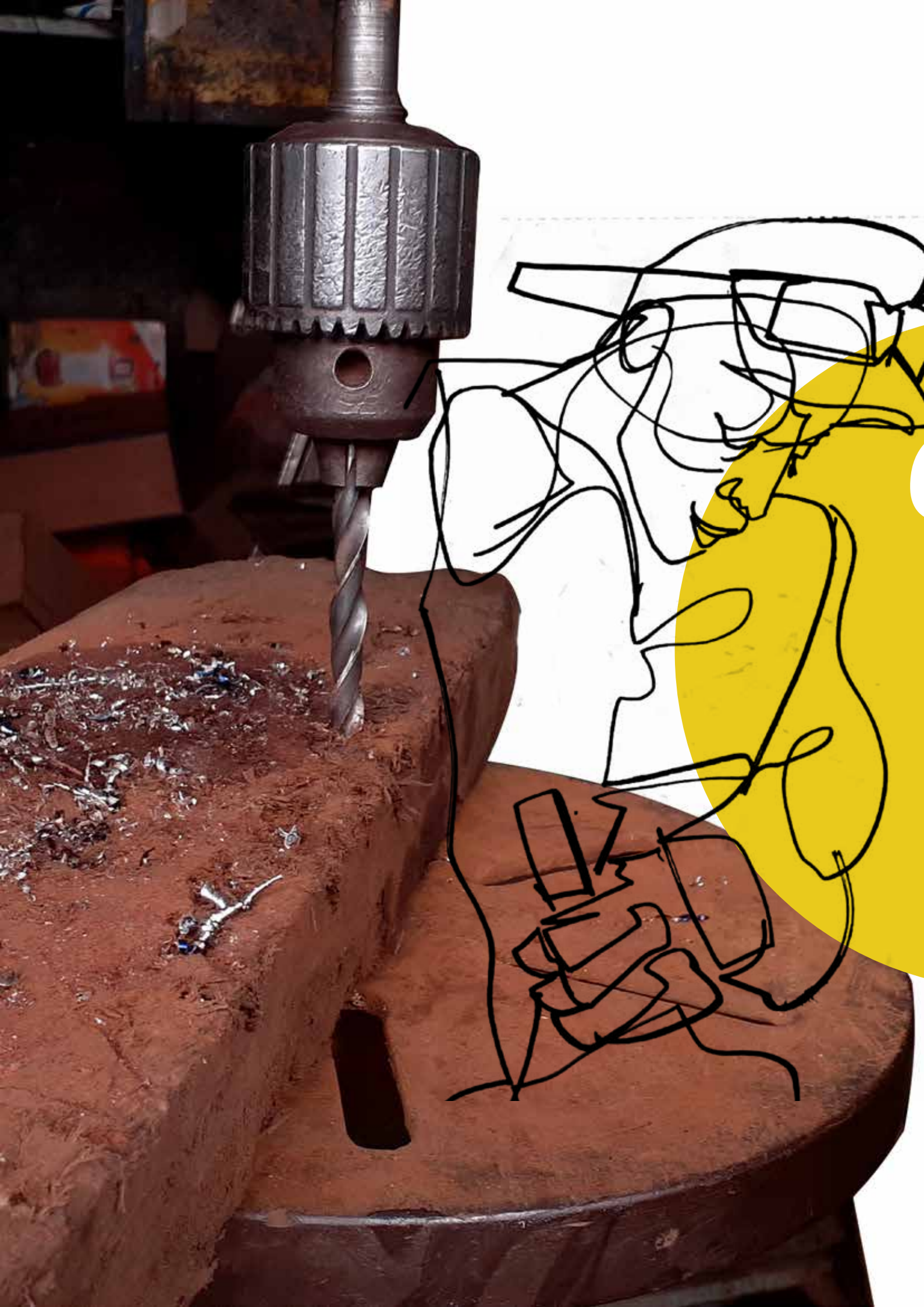
John's family is very proud of him. He likes being able to support himself and contribute to the larger household. John wants to study electronics.



**MTU ANATOMIA ILE
KIDOGO ANAPATA,
ANAIFANYIA
EVALUATION.**

**ILE KAZI NAPENDA
ZAIDI NI KUUNDA
VITU ZA BODY. JUU
NAIJUANGA OFF HEAD.
HATA KAMA NIMEDOZE,
NAEZA IUNDA.**





**KUNA MIWANI
SPECIALIZED, LAKINI
KUIPATA NAYO NI
NGUMU; LABDA WATU
WENYE WAKO KWENYE
KAMPUNI. LAKINI WENYE
WAKO JUA KALI
UNATAFUTA TU BACKUP.**






“**SIKU YANGU YA KWANZA JOB SIKUWA
NA UWOGA JUU NILIKUWA NA
CONFIDENCE JUU NILIKUWA NAKUJA
HAPA NIKIWA MDOGO.**”

**“KUNA WENGINE WANAPREFER
KUSOMA, KAMA WEWE HAUKO
KWA HIYO LANE INGINE UNAKAA
HII LANE INGINE YA PRACTICAL.**



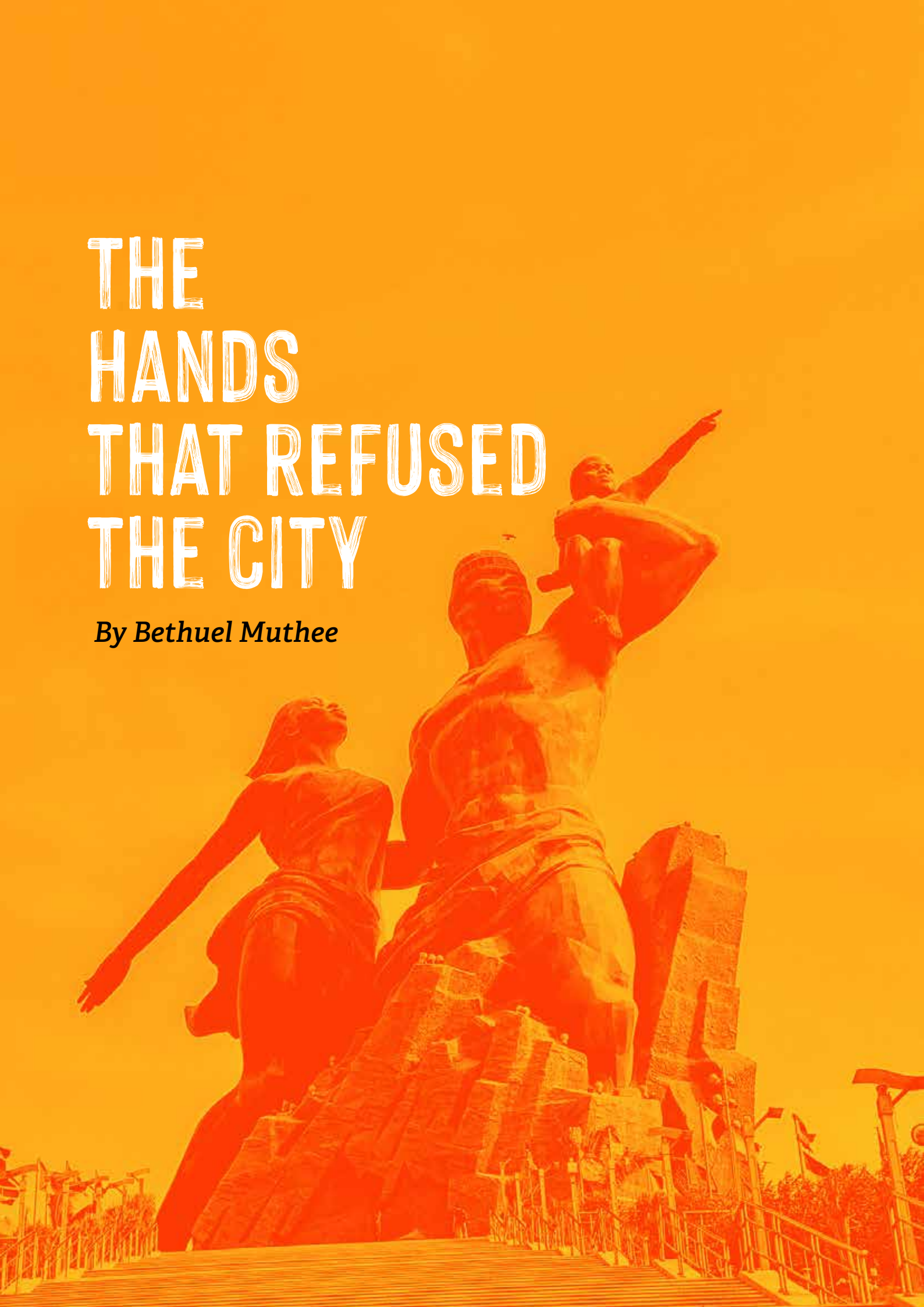


**NILIGONGA CHUMA IKANITAKA
KIDOLE NIKAJIPELEKA NGARA HOSI.
KUGONGWA SASA, NIKAFUNGWA
LAKINI SI NILIKUAMBIA KUUNDA
BODY NI FAVOURITE JOB YANGU?
ILIBIDI NIRUDI NA NIFANYE. SAA
TANO NILIKUWA HAPA.**



THE HANDS THAT REFUSED THE CITY

By Bethuel Muthee



The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.

-Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

Ousmane Sembene's novel, *God's Bits of Wood*, is a fictionalised account of life during the railway workers' strike along the Dakar-Niger line in the Federation of French West Africa (AOF). In the novel, Sembene shows the tenacity, the solidarity, the loss, and the triumph of people in their quest for a better world for themselves and future generations. Anti-colonial struggles were gaining momentum across the continent during the period portrayed in the novel and strikes were a vital means of agitation. A similar wave of strikes had taken place in the Caribbean in the 1930s and played an important role in the fight for independence. Strikes were not simply a matter of labour relations but rather, they were a social adhesive and a powerful means of community protest. The post-war period witnessed a wave of major strikes in Nigeria and Uganda in 1945 (another strike happened in Nigeria in 1949); Gold Coast, Tanganyika, and Kenya in 1947; and Zanzibar in 1948. In the author's note, Sembene writes, "The men and women who from the tenth of October 1947, to the nineteenth March, 1948, took part in this struggle for a better way of life owe nothing to anyone:

neither to any "civilising mission" nor to any parliament or parliamentarian. Their example was not in vain. Since then, Africa has made progress."

A wave of strikes took place in Kenya in the years between 1939 and 1960 which historian Paul Zeleza has described as a 'strike movement' during the period. The nature of the strikes varied in intensity and the number of people involved and some of the most noteworthy strikes of the time are the anti-terracing strike (mitaro war) by women in Murang'a and the Mombasa General Strike both in 1947, and the Nairobi general strike of 1950. The women's strike continued on and off until 1948 and has been described by some as the "Revolt of the Women". Forced conscription of women into digging terraces to combat erosion as a consequence of overproduction had been simmering since 1946 but officially erupted into a full strike on Monday 21st July. Women were not just supporters of male workers but they themselves were labourers and independent activists. In fact, women were leaders of much of the resistance to colonialism among agricultural workers and had their own

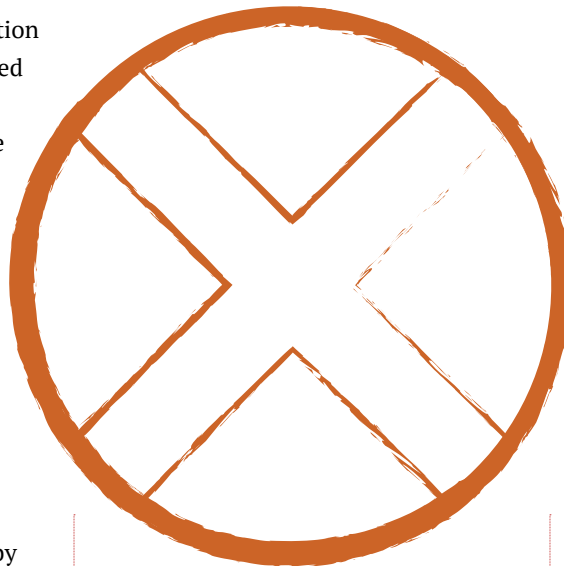
separate oaths long before Mau Mau. The Egyptian hieroglyph for a town or city is a cross enclosed in a circle. A town comes into existence at the intersection of two roads: the military comes to control two roads at the same time; the merchant comes to trade with travellers on two roads. Travellers stop and a town grows out of this stopping to consider one's origins and possible destinations. The story of Nairobi's growth is well told by historians, architects, urban planners, anthropologists, and other specialists. It follows a schema: rinderpest outbreak and ecological calamities that adversely affect the pre-capitalist economy and society; a railway construction; a relatively flat swampy land with cool water and some arable land; a series of annexations, expulsions and expansions; and finally, a city hurtling towards "world-class city" status. Nairobi was granted city charter on 13th March 1950 by order of King George VI, a milestone for the colonial capital. The Nairobi General Strike of 1950 is one of the most significant events that took place in the period before and after the city charter. It questioned the assumptions of what the city was, and for whom it was built.

An argument for local trade unions

Mombasa town was critical to the functioning of the colonial economy and during World War II the population grew rapidly. There was demand for labour at the port due to higher exports and those escaping conscription in the reserves. The town was diverse with workers coming from all over the country with about half of them being Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, and Kamba, the other half comprising other communities from the hinterland. Manpower in the town had been organised into casual labour for many years but by the 1940s there were more people with full-time employment. Mombasa was not new to strikes. In 1939, employers announced a reduction of wages and workers who complained of their miserable living conditions organised a strike which lasted three days. This strike was important since it drew the government's attention to the fact that inadequate or expensive housing could cause social discontent. The government paid attention but did not heed the lessons and the strike of 1947 would return to haunt them.

The Labour Trade Union of East Africa (LTUEA) was formed in 1935 by Makhan Singh and with it the tradition of general unionism was introduced in Kenya. It sought to organise workers from all industries rather than just one organisation or a particular sector. The Mombasa General Strike of 1947 was a turning point in the strike movement as it was born out of this general unionism and mass mobilisation on a larger scale. Workers had started meeting in December 1946 and there were rumours of a potential strike in the coming weeks. On Sunday 12th January dockworkers, with support from railway workers, announced a strike. Between 13th January and 24th January, an estimated 15,000 workers came out—in what was the largest strike then—to demand equal wages for all races, respect for African workers, allowances for children and wives, and wages that reflected the high

cost of living. The strikers assembled in thousands at a football field they called Kiwanja cha Maskini and took turns making their grievances known. Without any formal leadership, they organised themselves and made it democratic. It is written that during the strike Mombasa acquired a “very alien look about it. We had a ‘New Government’, we had ‘People’s Courts’, and we had all the town burglars acting as policeman and calling themselves police askaris.” The strike was largely organised by the workers and as a result of this organising, the African Workers Federation (AWF) was formed. Dockworkers were supported by taxi drivers, hotel workers, and even, perhaps most importantly, by the unemployed.



The prominent highlighting of the intersection between race and class politics had an incendiary effect as news of the strike found its way to towns along the railway network. Chege Kibachia, who was instrumental in the formation of AWF, wrote a letter to the Mombasa Times in January 1947 saying: “Cultural and material well being of the African is dwindling day by day while the career of the capitalist is crowned with success at the cost of African sweat. Racial discrimination is at the bottom of the whole affair.” AWF felt that the Kenya African Union (KAU), formed in 1945 to harness support for Eliud Mathu (the first African in the Legislative Council), which advocated for legal change by constitutional

reform, was slow in demanding self-governance, a demand of the federation. The strike was called off when Mathu, who was Kibachia's former teacher, went to Mombasa and addressed the strikers, convincing them to go back to work with promises that their demands would be met. As a longstanding politician, Mathu had a sway and the workers thought that he would make their grievances known to the colonial government. KAU leader, Jomo Kenyatta repudiated the strike. He termed it illegal since there had been no prior negotiations with employers. In July, Kibachia was in Nairobi where he spoke at a ceremony under a tree in Pumwani to open Ofisi ya Maskini, a symbolic act which had a radicalising effect and would be significant in 1950 when Pumwani and Shauri Moyo were the grand stages of the General Strike. He was arrested shortly thereafter on his way to Nakuru for “conducting himself as to be dangerous to peace and good order” and detained in Kabarnet. Kenyatta had addressed a gathering in Murang'a two days prior (Sunday, 20th July) that marked the beginning of the major anti-terracing strike even though it had not been his intention. The threat of a strike demanding Kibachia's release was imminent and once again, Eliud Mathu intervened. The colonial administration was aware of the threat of a nationwide strike and passed the Essential Services (Arbitration) Ordinance which extended the government's schedule of essential services that could not be disrupted by strike action.

Housing troubles of a growing workforce

Even before the railhead arrived in Nairobi in 1899, the geography of the place was significant to how the city would eventually grow. The “Plan of Survey of Foot of Hill and Edge of Plains” of 1898 was the beginning of the attempts to tame the geography as it envisioned what would be a railway camp. The small camp grew as senior railway and military officials lived in the hills from the North East to West while

lower officials and African labourers lived in the plains toward the South and East. The boundary between the hills and the plains would define Nairobi for years to come. African housing was of no concern to the Europeans since most people worked in the city as casual labourers and spent a decent part of the year in the reserves.

The municipality's African housing was built along the landhies model which provided dormitories for the male railway workers at the African settlements of Mji wa Mombasa, Pangani, Maskini, Kaburini, and Kileleshwa on the Eastern outskirts of the town. The barrack-like housing was similar to those of miners in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. With the demolition of the early settlements (which were generally Muslim communities) the government set aside some land to settle those who could rebuild. They also provided communal water and sewerage. This would be a place of rest and thus Pumwani (from the Swahili word pumua, meaning 'to breathe') became recognised as the first African location in 1922. The location had been aimed at "increasing the spatial efficiency of the [indigenous] labour force while at the same time protecting European areas from racial and health-related contamination".

Following an economic boom between 1927 and 1929, the municipality built the first housing for its workers in Kariokor in 1928. The design followed the same barrack model with 4-6 cubicles for bachelors with women and children not figured into these living arrangements. It would be followed by Starehe soon after. The threat to demolish Pangani over the years had not materialised until its final demolition in 1938. Before the demolitions, the municipality had constructed 175 cement-block houses to accommodate 3,042 Africans at the cost of 46,000 pounds. The new estate was to be the beginning of a new phase of African housing in the city along a garden-city model. There was meant to be more space to accommodate families in addition to schools, churches, a social hall and shops owned by Africans. The

houses were built on a straight grid and some residents were known to say that it was to serve as an example. The new estate came to be known as Shauri Moyo and those who moved from Pangani began building a life there. Shauri Moyo was soon followed by Ziwani which was constructed between 1939 and 1942. This new estate had houses with shared cooking areas. The few houses with indoor kitchens had chimneys and for many years this made Ziwani recognisable for this feature. Kenya Uganda Railways and Harbours (KUR&H)



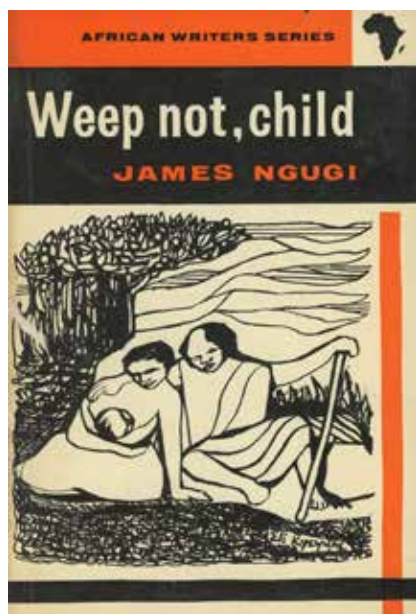
constructed Makongeni in 1939. The Colonial Development Act of 1940 was a legal mechanism that gave provision for the development of African housing with the realisation of an urban class and more people with permanent jobs. This period saw the construction of the prime example of the garden-city estate, Kaloleni aka Ololo, Land of a Thousand Streets, between 1943 and 1948. Despite their close proximity to the town centre, these estates were meant to contain the African communities and this practice was codified in the South-African-authored 1948 Master Plan for a Colonial Capital City. According to the plan, the city's residential space would be divided into two with extensive space allocated to the North East and West which were envisioned as "areas for economic residential development"

while the South and East were designated as "official housing zones". The areas for economic residential development were allocated twice as much space as the official housing zones which were meant for workers' housing given their proximity to places of work. They would later be erected by the Municipality, the government, the railways, and private enterprise in the future. Despite these efforts, housing shortage was acute and living conditions for Africans miserable in the East of the city.

The years of the Second World War were a time of prosperity for European settler farmers in Kenya due to higher demand and prices for their produce. The increased demand for production led to land pressure with evictions following in places like Olenguruone in Nakuru. Colonial prosperity meant African misery. New land contracts came into place that exerted more pressure on Africans. Efforts were made to organise a strike and total boycott of the contracts including a squatter's meeting in November 1946 that did not come to pass. Land pressure, evictions and the search for employment led to Nairobi's population growth in the same period with many Kikuyus coming to the city as a result of landlessness.

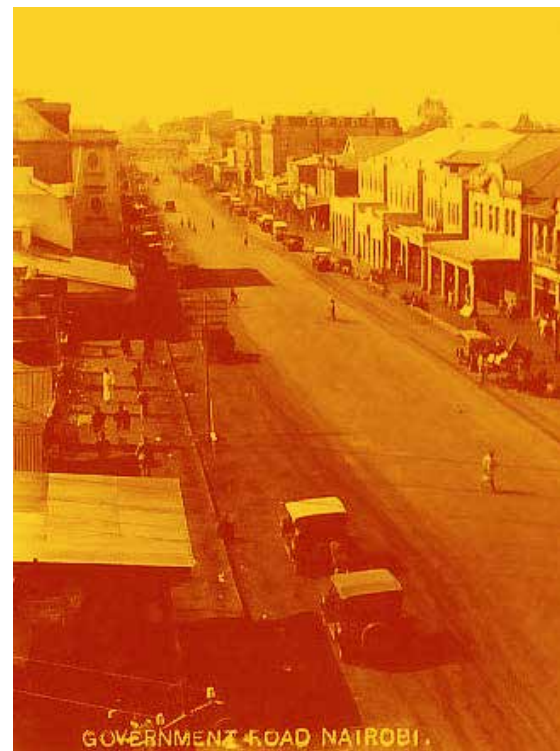
The East African Trade Union Congress (EATUC) was founded on May Day 1949 by five registered trade unions namely the Labour Trade Union of East Africa; Transport and Allied Workers Union; Typographical Union; Tentmakers, Sailmakers and Garment Workers Union; Shoemaker Workmen's Union; and Domestic and Hotel Workers Union. Makhn Singh who had founded LTUEA in 1935, Fred Kubai of Transport and Allied Workers Union (TAWU), and Bildad Kaggia, a clerk, were pivotal in the foundation of EATUC which attempted to overcome racial and ethnic divisions and actively be involved in political mobilisation. Due to stringent municipal by-laws against taxi drivers such as a requirement to speak English and have no criminal record, members of TAWU led a month-long strike in October 1949.

In March 1950, National Geographic Magazine wrote, “Today Nairobi is popping at the seams with newcomers. Hotels are booked and the housing shortage is acute and building costs are high.” Nairobi celebrated charter day on 13th March 1950 at the newly-built City Hall. Makhan Singh told workers to boycott the celebrations and abstain from alcohol, cigarettes, and meat. He told them living conditions would not improve once the municipality became a city, in fact they would get worse, they did. He told people there would be two Nairobi; one for the rich and one for the poor. The boycott gained huge support from workers, market people, and the unemployed. There were rumours about the expropriation of land in Kikuyu reserves—including 32 square miles



in Kiambu to settle 12,000 European settlers—to pave way for the expansion of the city. This fuelled fears of more landlessness and a larger population in Nairobi with little infrastructure or housing to cater for them. KAU moderates Tom Mbotela and Mathu denounced the boycott and the rift between the moderates and radicals became apparent. There was an attempt on Mbotela’s life the following week. Nairobi was in deed popping and the strike would be the needle to pop the inflated colonial ego. The division between moderates and radicals once again came to the fore on Monday, 24th April at Kaloleni Social Hall in a meeting organised by KAU

and the East African Indian Congress. During the meeting, Kubai and Singh moved a successful addendum to the main resolution which stated, “the real solution of the problem is not this or that reform but the complete independence and sovereignty of the East African territories and the establishment in all these territories of democratic government elected by the people and responsible to the people of these territories only, and that the solution should be implemented at an early date.” The moderates were at a loss and national politics reached fever pitch. Despite handing over EATUC’s core leadership to John Mungai, Mwangi Macharia and Chege Kiburu, Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh were arrested early in the morning on Monday, 15th May and charged under section 8 and 10 of the Trades Unions and Dispute Ordinance (1943) with being officers of an unregistered trade union whose registration had been rejected by the Registrar and had refused to dissolve within the three-month notification period. Later that morning, members of EATUC’s central council, Mwangi Macharia and Chege Kiburu, were barred access from their offices and they issued a strike notice for a strike to begin at 2pm the following day. The strike began unfolding that very afternoon. In addition to the release of Kubai, Singh, and Chege Kibachia, the striking workers demanded a minimum wage of 100 shillings with regular annual increments, free accommodation or affordable housing, the freedom of not being arrested at night and less stringent municipal by-laws relating to the work of taxi-drivers. The impassioned plea for “freedom for all workers and the East African territories” was the last and most important demand. An extended schedule of industries and services within which strikes were banned was published in the official gazette on 16th May. Chege Kiburu was arrested that same morning for organising a strike in essential services. The strike has been well documented by David Hyde in his article “The Nairobi General Strike, 1950: From Protest to Insurgency.”



As more people joined the strike most of the organising and mobilising in the neighbourhoods was done by the youth and unemployed who were drawn to EATUC’s stand against the government. It is written that a “holiday atmosphere” was in the African locations of Shauri Moyo and Pumwani where the people organised themselves in daily mass meetings. A large fire was lit in what was called Kaloleni Valley, the stretch between Shauri Moyo and Pumwani (the area that is now Kamukunji Grounds and the football ground of the local team Shauri Moyo Sportiff.) Here people came and danced and the fire could be seen throughout the location, the fire stayed on during the strike, a symbol of defiance and camaraderie. According to Makhan Singh, the strike had gained support in Nakuru, Mombasa, Thika, Nyeri, and Nanyuki.

Without a strike fund, sustenance of the strikers was a concern which was solved by food supplies from the hinterland which came by rail. The food was cooked by women in Shauri Moyo and Pumwani and strikers gathered to eat communally. Women were critical in organising food distribution and coordination. Hyde writes “people from Fort Hall donated sugar cane, beans, and maize.” The success of the strike was largely a result



of solidarity across the country which the media at the time did and would not acknowledge. The strike is fictionalised in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child* where he writes people: "streamed into the meeting ground like safari ants. All knew this was a great day for the Black people... Today was the great day of the strike- the strike that was meant to paralyse the whole country."

In the real world, police descended on strikers in Pumwani and Shauri Moyo with batons. People were arrested and they used teargas to disperse the huge mass of people who had turned up. While all this was happening "a number of bakeries, several hotels in the centre of the city and petrol stations followed the action." Workers from the city council were crucial in spreading the strike. Those who went against the strike in Pumwani were publicly shaved and made to wash the toilets. The toilets in Majengo are said to have never been cleaner. There was a meeting on Thursday evening at Kaloleni Social Hall where Eliud Mathu condemned the strike calling it illegal after which he was called a traitor for standing up for European interests. His success in Mombasa could not be replicated in Nairobi. The strike committee capitulated and lowered the demand for minimum wage to 60

shillings. The strike had reached Kisumu, Kakamega, Kisii and other towns in Nyanza by Friday.

Singh was moved to Nyeri on Sunday morning. Three hundred people had been arrested by the end of the first week. Workers, market people, privileged municipal workers, the unemployed, "the criminals and the criminalised" had come out overwhelmingly to support the strike and with most services almost collapsing, the government was grappling to control the situation. It was at this time when the strike seemed to be hardening into a formidable force that the strike committee decided that "as sufficient protest and demonstration had taken place, it was now time to call off the strike." Striking workers were asked to report to work on Thursday morning. On resumption of work, it is reported that 2,000 Kikuyus who had taken part in the strike had lost their jobs.

During the strike, workers had raised and prioritised the question of nationhood independently of their leaders and it was reported in the press that the "cry for immediate self-government, or cheaper maize or higher wages could be heard in Pumwani and Shauri Moyo". The Central Minimum Wage Advisory Board recommended a 6 shilling increase in minimum wage in selected townships. EATUC was banned and what had been a chance for workers to assert themselves was betrayed by the leadership which instead of standing up for workers and class politics became the "left-wing of bourgeois nationalism".

Lessons for the present time

KAU considered the foundations of the colonial state unshakable and was intent on reform. No reform can undo the colonial foundation on which we continue to live. How do we imagine against, beyond, underneath, this system that never imagined us?

As we think about freedom and love in this time of coronavirus, how can we think of other formations of being? In this time of social distancing when even touch is dangerous, how can we come together? Hypatia Vourloumis reminds me that

"a strenuous intention towards non-touching or the dissenting imperative to not touch or to be touched can be just as much as touching otherwise." She thinks of the Trinidadian dance, the limbo, which is held for nine days after the death of a member of the community involving avoiding touching a bar accompanied by music and dancing. The lower the bar goes, the higher the spirit of the dead rises. The dance is "a bridge between foundational ground and a transcendental plane." We cannot at this time reach out with "trembling hands" as Freire asks us, but what if we found a way to reach each other with poetry, music, photographs, and used beauty as a method? I do not know the answers or how we go forward. If we reached out and pulled the past into the present, would the world stop?

