

REVEAL!

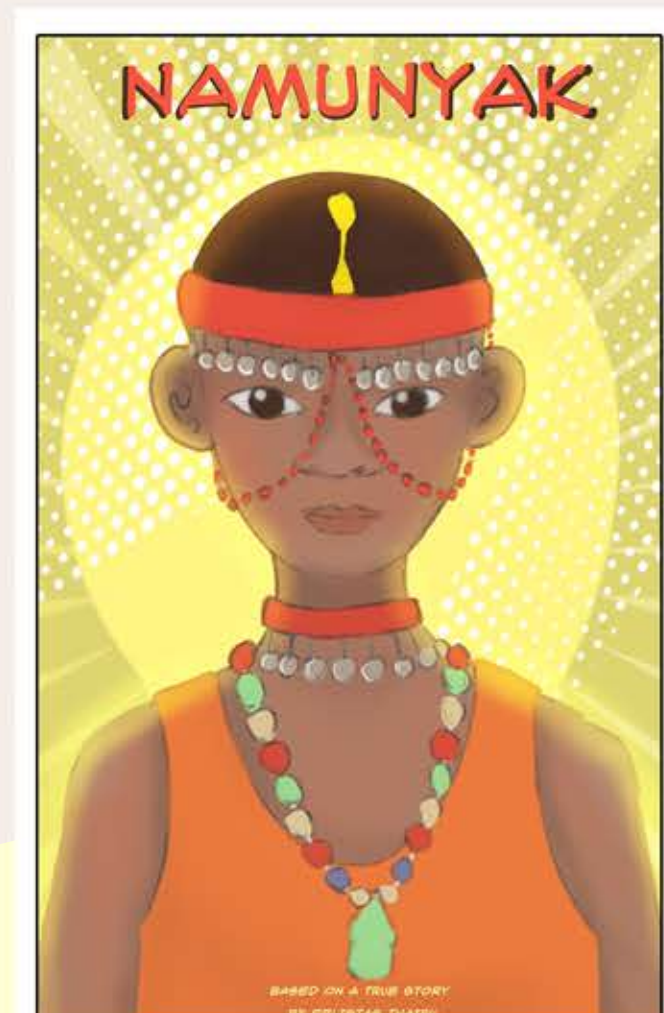
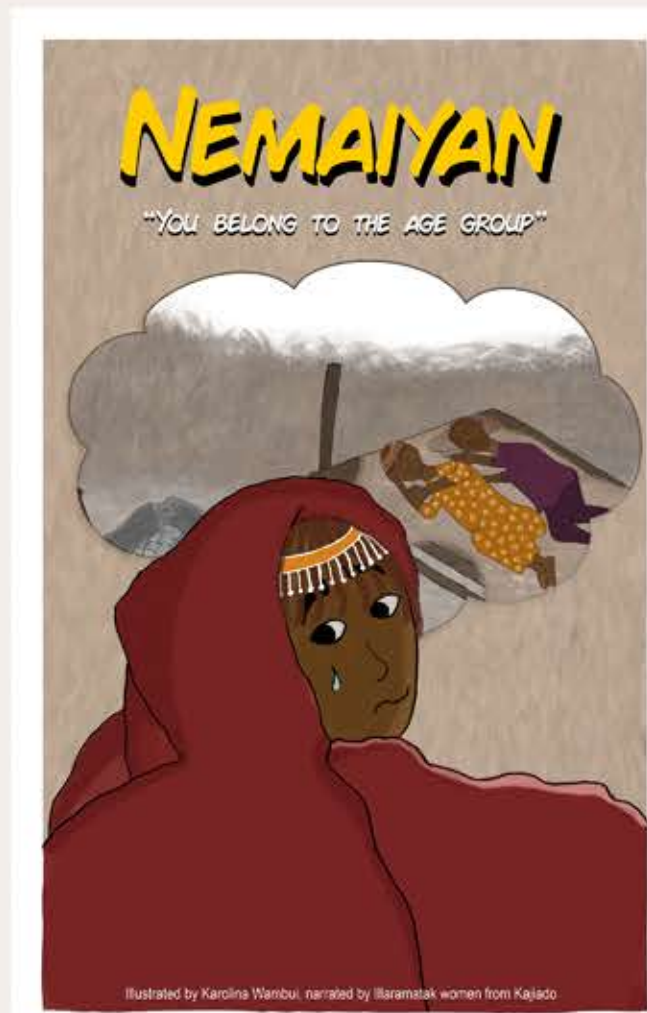
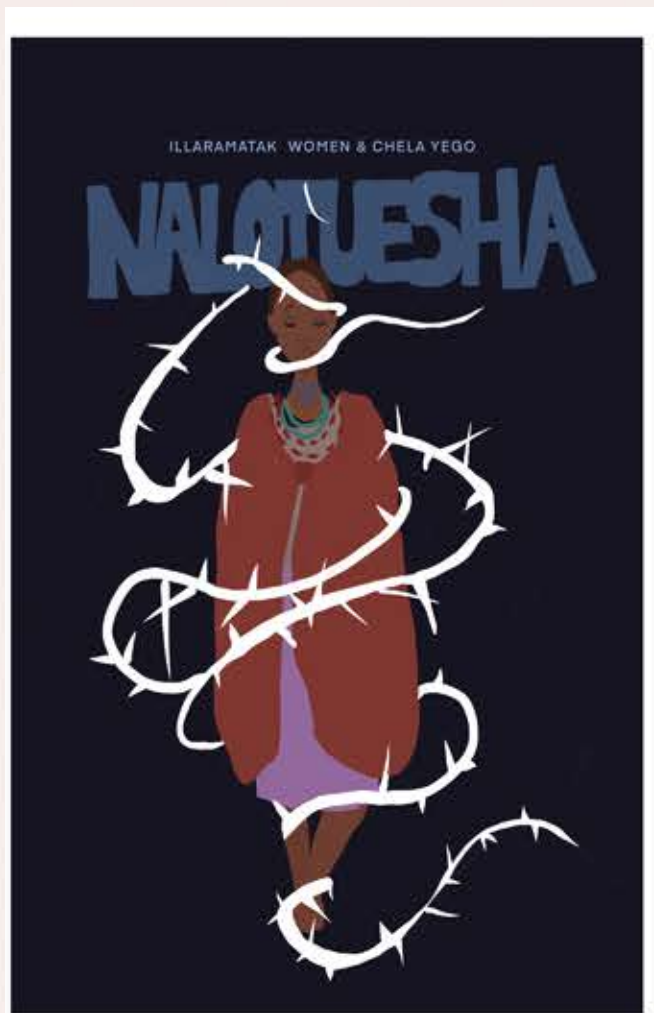
Women's Comics East Africa - UK

EXTENSION

NALOTUESHA. NEMAIYAN. NAMUNYAK.

— Three Tales —

Inspired by real-life experiences of FGM



Acknowledgment

Curator-in-Chief: Msanii Kimani wa Wanjiru

Partners: Special thanks to the Il'laramatak Community Concerns (ICC) in Kajiado, Mama Agnes Leina, staff of ICC.

Contributors: Felistus Thairu, Chela Yego, Karolina Wambui, the Il'laramatak Community Concerns members

Front Cover: © Karolina Wambui

Back Cover: © Chela Yego

Published by Kymsnet Publishers & Distributors

First printed June 2023

Printed on stock from renewable sources

All contents of this edition is Copyright © the contributing artists and contributors

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from Kymsnet Media Network, Kenya

This publication is not for SALE.

ISBN 978-9914-49-685-7

Kymsnet Publishers and Distributors

(Kymsnet Media Network, Kenya),

Box 18203 00100 GPO, Nairobi.

Email Address: kymsnetdistributors@outlook.com

Phone: +254 101 630383

About REVEAL! Extension Kenya

REVEAL! Women's Comics East Africa - UK is a British Council International Collaboration project. It is a partnership between graphic novelist, comics scholar Dr Nicola Streeten, director of UK-based LDComics CIC (LDC) and artist, Arts Journalist Msanii Kimani wa Wanjiru, director/Curator-in-Chief of Kymsnet Media Network, Kenya (KMN).

REVEAL! EXTENSION emerged from delivery of REVEAL! activity in 2022. When East African REVEAL! artists joined together in Kenya, we visited the village community in Kajiado County near Nairobi. We met Kenyan activist Agnes Leina and Il'laramatak Community Concerns (ICC). Agnes explained to us the following example of how climate crisis is intertwined with gender...

A drought-ravaged Kenyan landscape has left cattle with nothing to graze, and so they are dying. This means traditional livelihood for many has been decimated. Alternative income has, for some families, come from payment received from marriage of a daughter. But, to marry, a girl must be recognised as a 'woman'. This status comes through genital circumcision, or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). We can therefore trace a route from hunger - caused by climate change, to the female circumcision of daughters at an increasingly younger age, sometimes 14 years old.

What are alternative options for such examples of climate crisis impact? How can debate and reflection on such issues take place transformatively? What is the role of art, specifically comics in this process? How can we connect such experiences in Kenya to those of us living in the UK? Our approach in REVEAL! is that storying small everyday experiences can be a way to engage with wider issues. Comparing and sharing cross culturally can highlight our similarities and guide our understanding of difference. This offers potential for empowerment. Our conviction is that comics is an accessible art form, a valuable communication tool. We are committed to the loosest definition of 'comics' as combining text and image (even this is not essential).

For the **REVEAL! EXTENSION** we invited individual REVEAL! artists to work with specific partner organisations in Kenya and the UK. In the UK we commissioned Nancy ArtMusic to run comics workshops with a group of community members introduced to us by African Advocacy Foundation and Red Ribbon Living Well CIC. She was supported in delivery by LDC artist Wallis Eates. It is from this activity that we have collected the wonderful pages of this comic to share with you.

In Kenya, Msanii Kimani worked with 3 talented REVEAL! artists Chela Yego, Karolina Wambui and Felistus Thairu to run the comics workshop with the ICC women and the 3 Tales of Nalotuesha, Nemaian and Namunyak was born.

Dr Nicola Streeten & Msanii Kimani wa Wanjiru

June 2023.

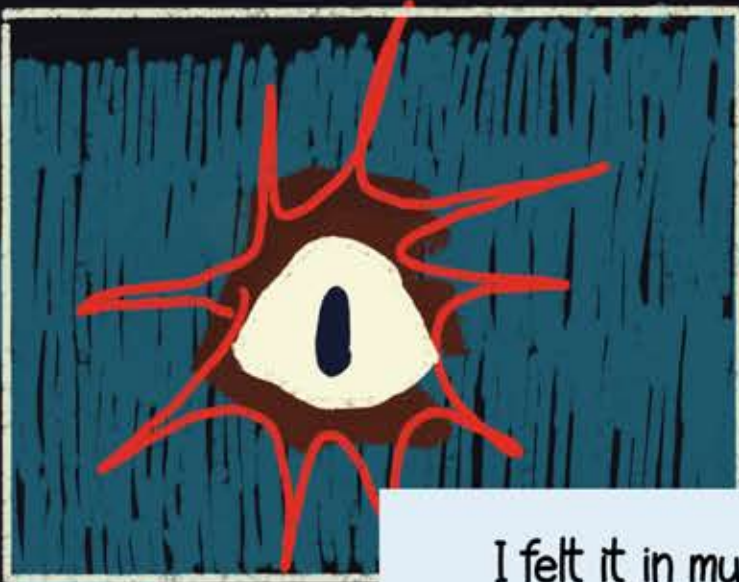
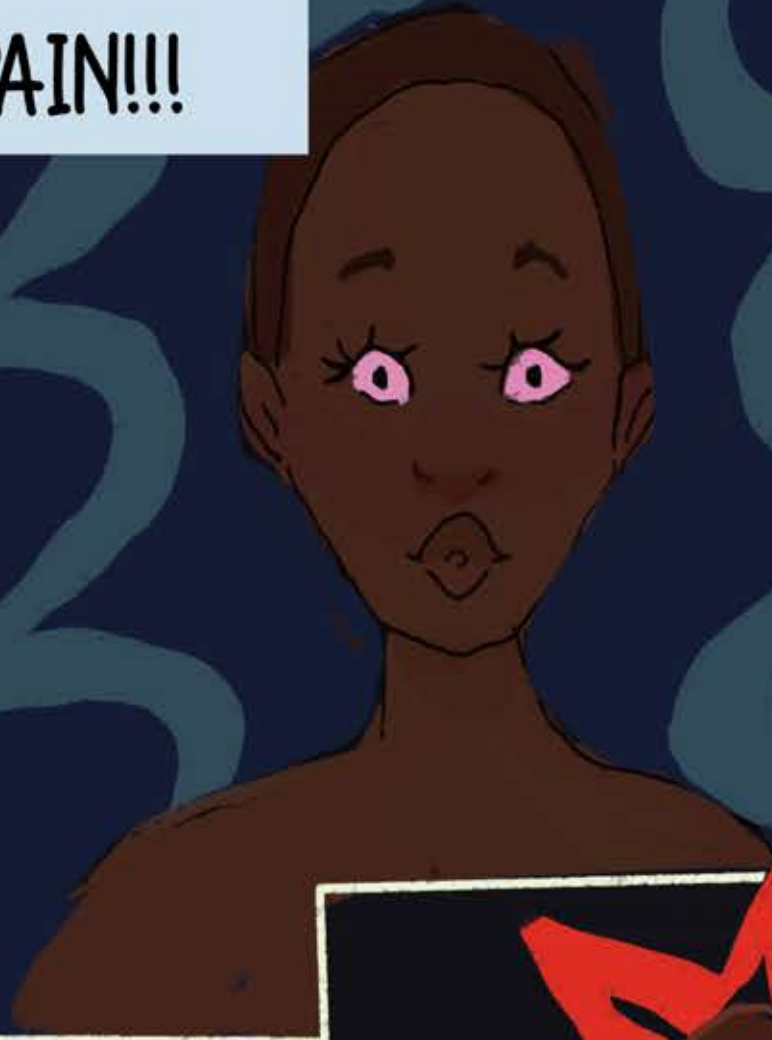
ILLARAMATAK WOMEN & CHELA YEGO

NALOTUESHA



This story is based on real life experiences, as narrated by the Illaramatak women from Kajiado , captured and re-told by Chela Yego

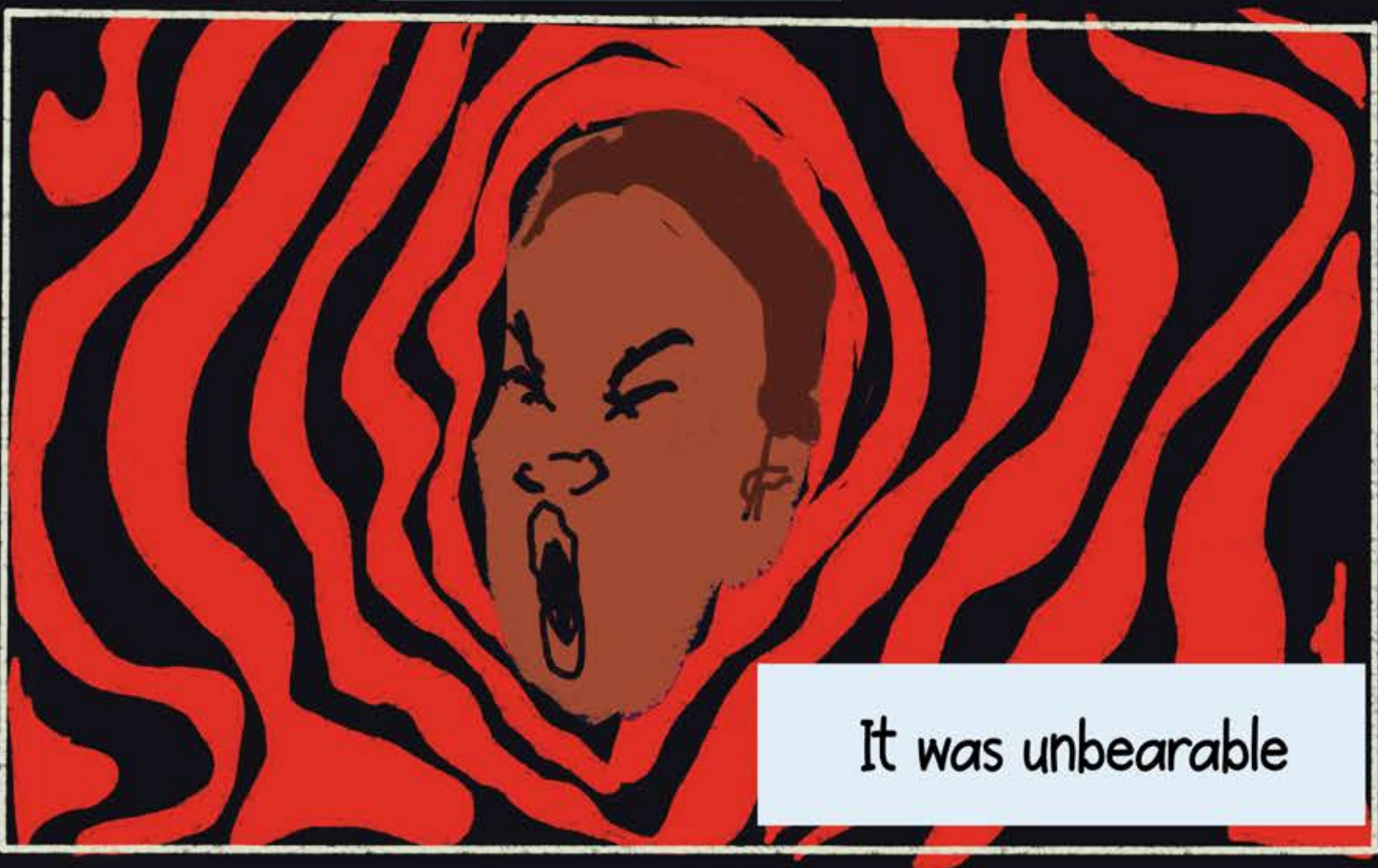
THE PAIN!!!



I felt it in my eyes



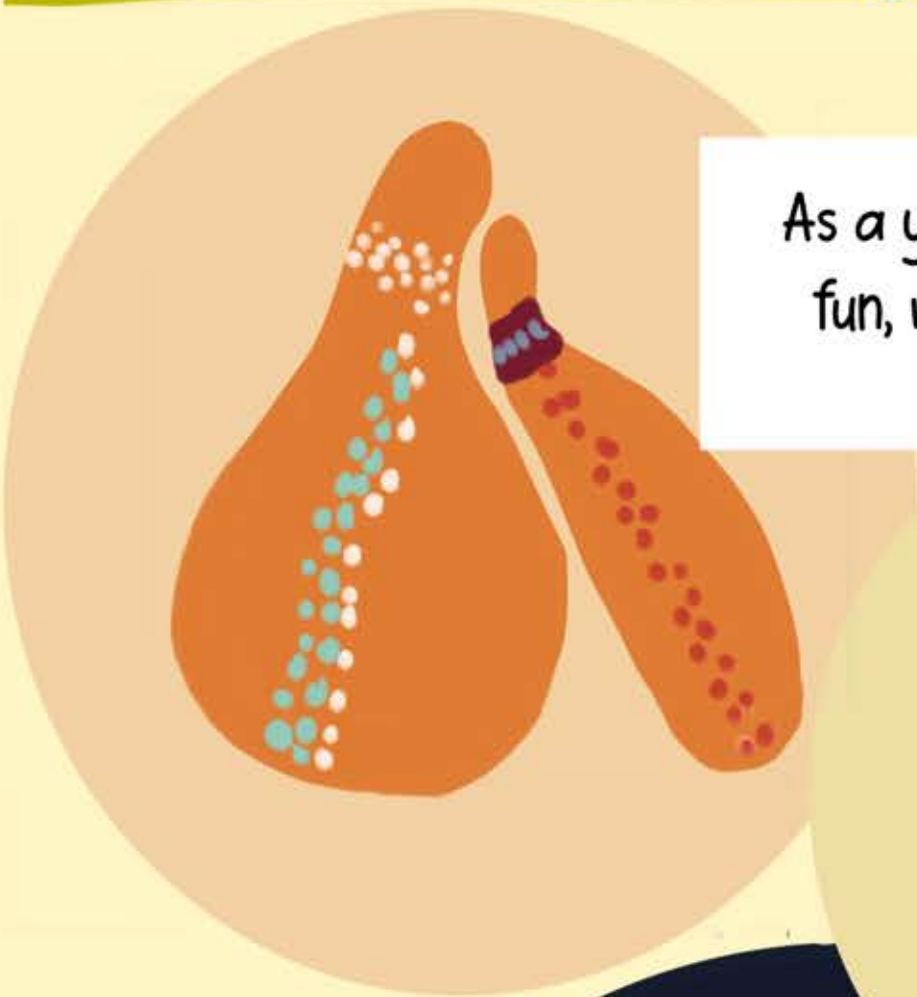
I felt it in my ears



It was unbearable



My name is Nalotuesha and
I live in the Maasai
community



As a young girl , life was peaceful and
fun, we would decorate gourds and
help with chores



And in the evening we
would dance



One day after our evening meal ,my mother told me to put out some water



Though strange an instruction, I
thought nothing much of it



Then went to sleep



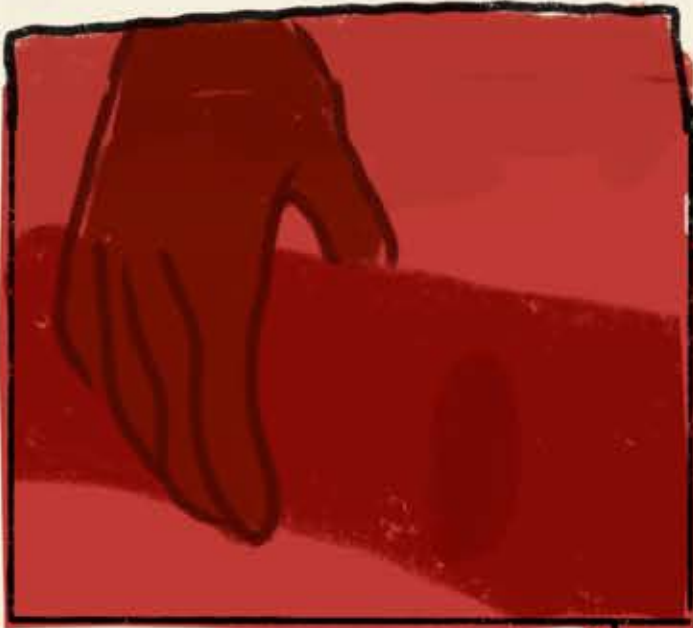
Then before the sun
even rose ,

I felt someone waking
me up



"Today , you
become a
woman"

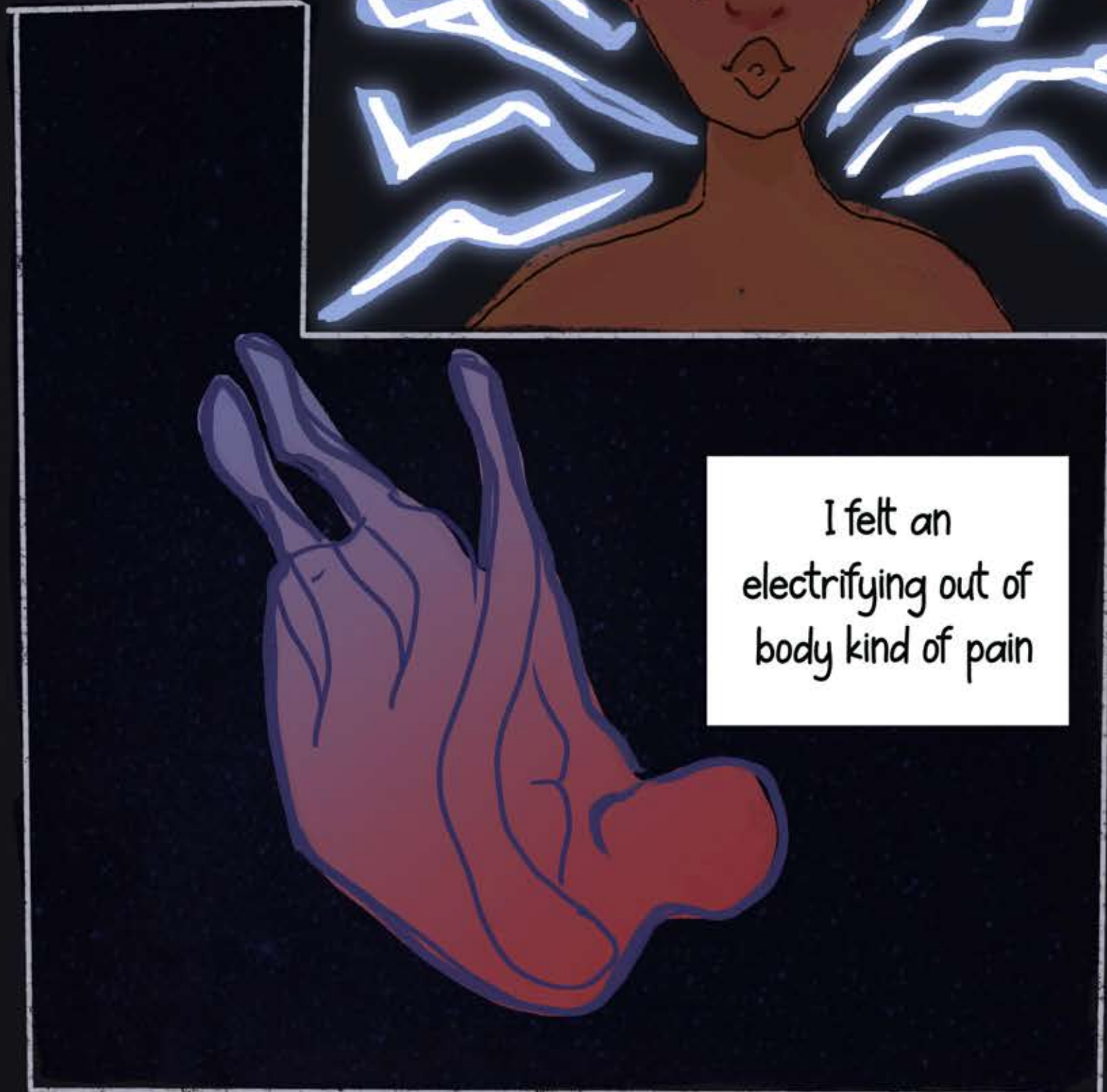
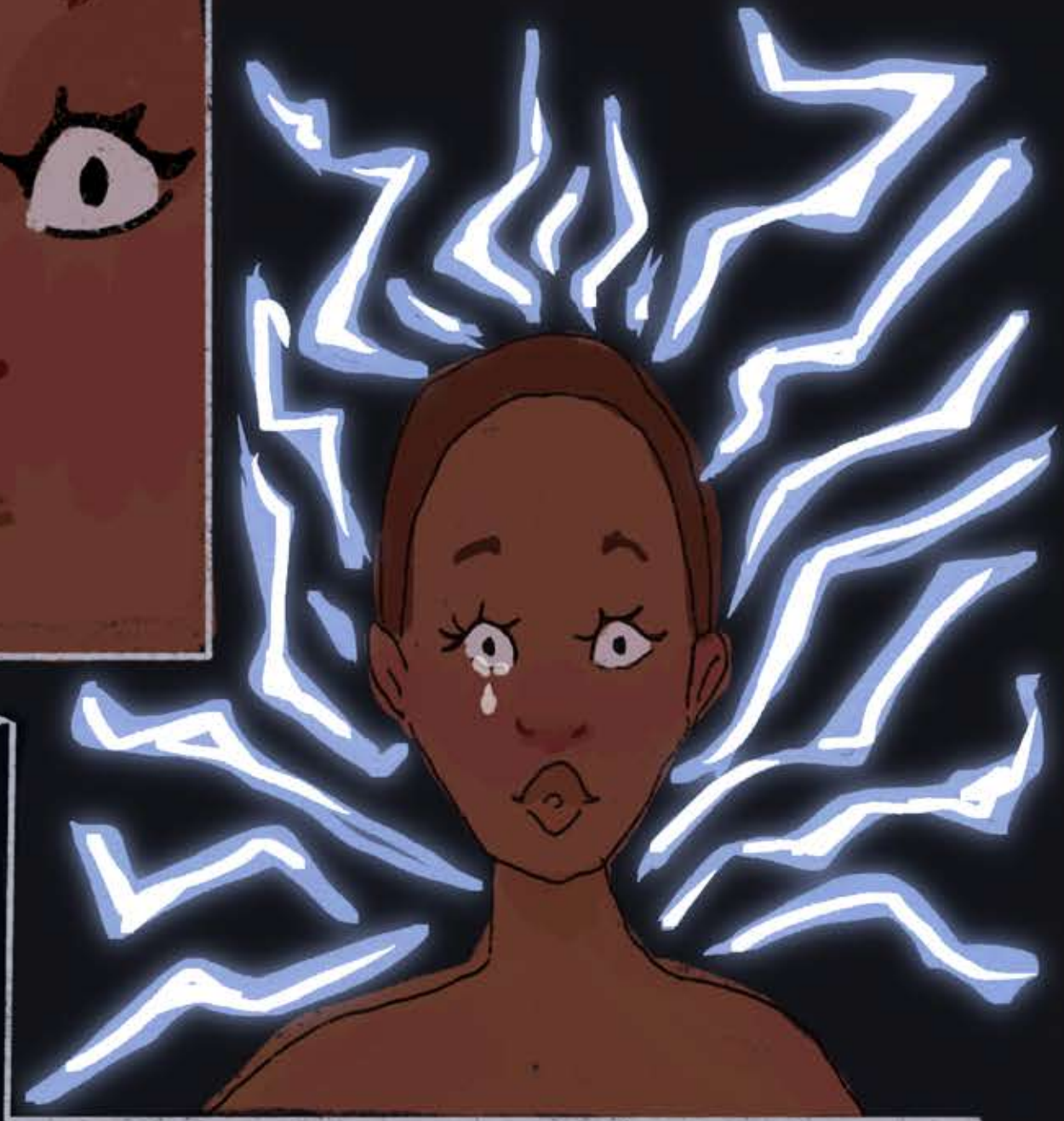
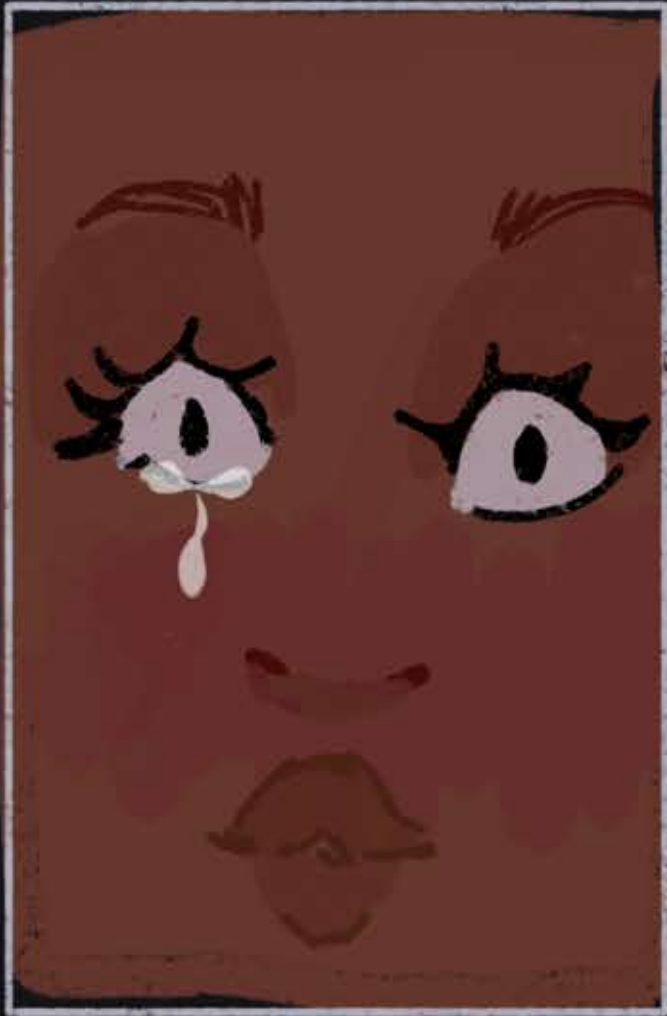
Then everything happened so quickly as I felt
the chill of cold water on my body



My legs were tied down
and so were my hands , I
couldn't move



Then they cut me.

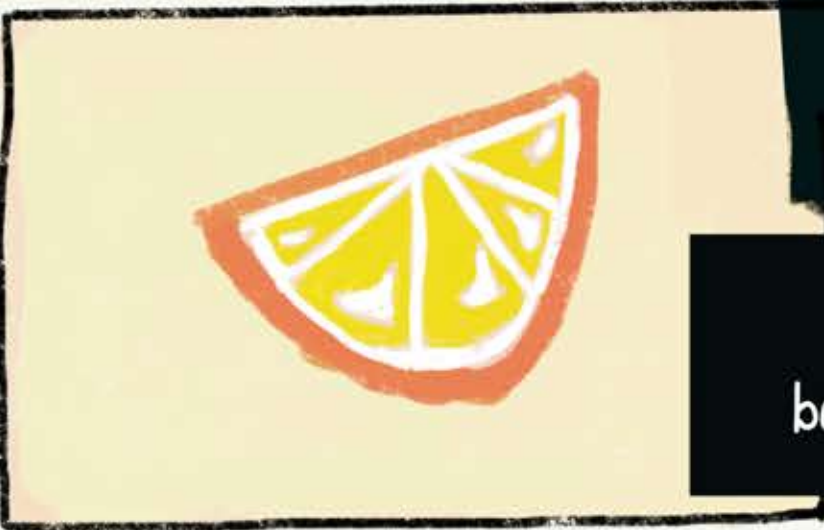
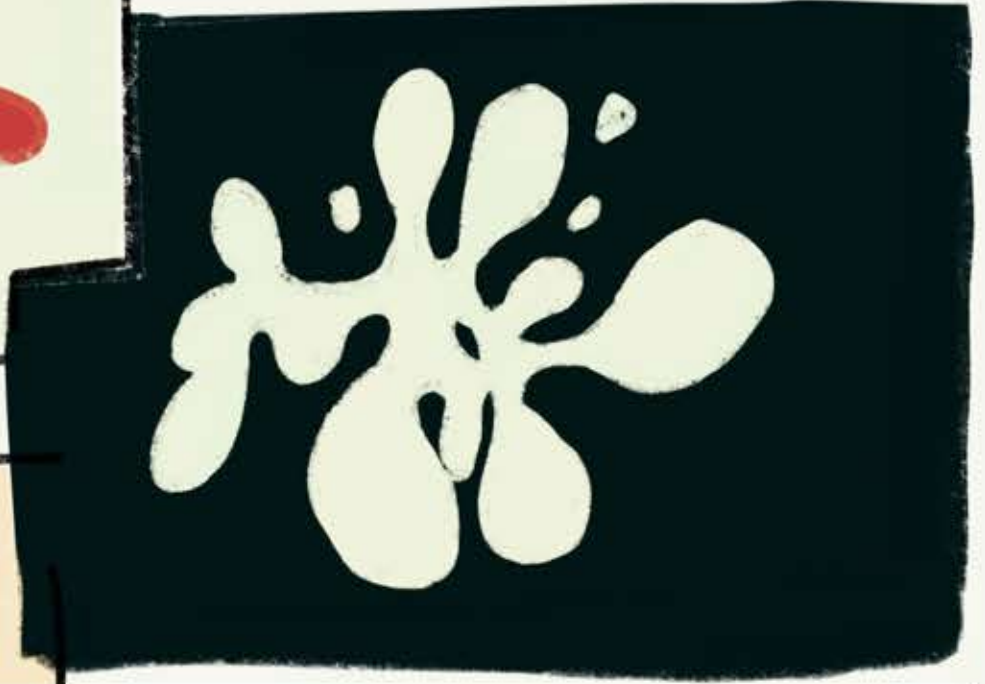


I felt an electrifying out of body kind of pain

I had never felt a pain like that before .



I remember being made to drink some cow blood afterwards



They then applied the cream from boiled milk and a fruit peel to the area



My legs were then forced shut as my mother pleaded with me that crying would only bring shame to me for the rest of my life

As the days passed, I was told the pain would too.



The days passed and so did the nights but the pain did not stop. Was this the cost of womanhood?



In my pain, I swore to do everything I could so no one would ever have to experience this kind of pain

The Storytellers of Nalotuesha



These are the stories as told by the Illaramatak women from their point of view in it's raw form that I based the story, Nalotuesha on.

Margaret Toirai

When i was a young girl, when men used to have three wives we struggled a lot with poverty, we would use cow dung to patch houses when the husbands weren't able to take care of the family and we would also use the hide of a cow to patch house during rainy seasons to avoid the roof from leaking. Women were constantly beaten in the household and demeaned . We were not allowed to work and thus didn't have money so whenever the men couldn't take care of us ,we would even have to walk naked while pregnant because of a lack of fitting clothes. Without having any of their own income generating activities the men would beat us at any given point even when we were doing day-to-day chores. Things started changing when we started getting income generating activities and gained some bit of financial independence. I started selling my own milk and with the money used it to buy clothes and to patch the house. Back then, before we knew the dangers of FGM I was one of the circumcisers I would use that to get a bit of money to sustain myself and my children. Life had gotten a bit easier with money until the drought hit. Due to the cattle dying we can no longer sell milk. We have no money and our troubles are coming back. We have to walk without shoes. The struggle that women thought they would never face again is coming back again because of the drought which has been the longest so far (6 years).

In the past ,in Maasai land ,the morans were handsome and dressed in beautiful shukas. They were feared and respected. They would tie their Spears and carry them and sometimes go fight amongst themselves for things like land. Bomas had exactly 49 houses . Life has changed a lot since then.FGM was done on girls in the Maasai community when they were around 10 years old and they were then told that they have become women and told that they're ready to get married and start a new life even though they were only children. They were often married off to older women who are around 40 years old and have to sleep with them till they get pregnant even though some had not started their period yet. They would often use cold water that has been left in a basin overnight and pour it over the girls before the circumcision .They would use a small machete to do the circumcision , they would then cut the clitoris and labia minora after the girl is held and tied down on both their legs and hands. But now they only cut the clitoris. They would take a fruit peel and the cream that comes up after boiling milk and apply it on the area. They would then take a fat cow and draw blood from the cow while it's still alive and give the girl the blood to drink after FGM. The girl most of the time couldn't work because of excessive bleeding. The girls were not allowed to scream at all because they're told it would bring shame to them for the rest of their lives and there's a name that should be given to girls that screamed during the process. They were all told to close their legs because there was a gaping hole and since they could not be taken to hospital . Sometimes the girls would die due to excessive bleeding. Overtime they just started cutting the clitoris. Once the women started knowing the dangers of FGM and after the government banned FGM ,most stopped doing it but there were challenges because as the community men were told that FGM was illegal some men refused to marry the girls that were uncircumcised because of wrong beliefs. But after being educated ,most men agreed to marry them regardless. Some midwives also refused to attend to pregnant women in labour that were uncircumcised and most of them would carry out the process of circumcision on the women before helping them give birth thus causing the women to go through both the pain of childbirth and FGM.

If a woman did not accept to be circumcised the midwives would rather the lady die than touch anyone who is uncircumcised. About 8 months after FGM, when you are ready to get married, two men would come to your household one being your future husband with one cow that has had a calf. You would get shaved bald and they would put on traditional jewelry on your arms. They would then apply red ochre on you and tie cowhide on you. They would fill a gourd with milk and put it on your back as a sign of future children.

They would make shoes made out of cow hide and puts grass on your feet that your father has gotten from outside. You'd be married off young and you cannot say no to this man that you're supposed to marry. You are told that you cannot come back home until you have given birth to at least five children and that your husband's home will now be your new home. You will leave your house and go with the two men to your new family. When you reach your new home you'll find a celebration in a place where the community drinks and celebrates a new marriage you're welcome and told that this will be forever home. Because you're not allowed to go home until you've given birth to five children which is a long time and by the time this happens you have grown old and your people no longer recognize you because when you left you were very young. Many women were beaten by their husbands because they were allowed to. Sometimes you would battle with the thought that you need to run away but then you remember that your children depend on you and you would rather stay there and be beaten then leave your children motherless. And oftentimes you will develop some resentment towards your child because they're the only reason that you're staying with your husband who abuses you often. A lot of gender based violence would happen in so many forms like for example even when you're pregnant and vulnerable you would have to do chores like carrying a calf when you really don't have energy and sometimes even having to sit down and wait for the cows afterbirth even if it takes the whole night. If you are poor it would even be worse because you would have to drink the yellow undrinkable milk of a cow that has just given birth and even use cow urine to wash your clothes and dried cow dung to wash your utensils.

Magdaline

Why FGM was practiced in the community, it was done as a way of controlling women. When men used to go away for long periods of time they would come to find that their wives had slept with the men that were still in the community and gotten pregnant and so this was just done to control the women. This is my story of giving birth. When I was pregnant I was told that pregnant women were not allowed to eat certain foods. They could not eat meat or even drink milk and they only had to eat in the evening but only light foods. Oftentimes because I was dealing with the cravings that came with pregnancy, whenever my mom left some milk out I would drink it and even when I'm given my normal amount of food in the evening I would hide an extra plate so I can eat it at night when everyone is asleep. The reason why Maasai women when pregnant were not allowed to eat a lot of food is because once FGM is done ,the scar tissue develops preventing dilation to a certain level and if the child was not very tiny it would be hard to give birth and the birth would be very painful. My grandmother said that I couldn't go to hospital once it was time to give birth because of the negative perception with hospital births. Most of the time women develop fistula due to FGM and there's a shame that comes with fistula because it still has not been destigmatized. My FGM story It was 2011 and I had just finished my class 8 exams , a lady who said she was my mom's friend came to the house and she even slept in the same room with me so I did not think anything of it. My mother was educated and I did not think FGM was going to happen to me. In the morning once I was held down I knew what was happening this lady was coming to circumcise me, she injected my genitals then went ahead and performed FGM.It was very early in the morning at 6:00 AM and I was told that the pain wouldn't end until the goats zitoke zizini. I was then given cow fat to drink and my mom would often come to Check on me to ensure that I had not developed an infection. It was a culture and it was the norm but it was extremely traumatising.

Jackline Elijah

The effect of climate change The Maasai community depends on cattle and puts them in high regard. When the famine hit, most of our cows died and we couldn't sell milk or even sell the cows for slaughtering because they were so scrawny. There was a homestead of a man who had 100 cows and all of them died bringing grief to the whole household. The women who were depending on cattle as an income generating activity like selling milk now lacked the financial independence they had gained because even that side hustle like bead making has no market and all they can do is stay at home.

Emily John

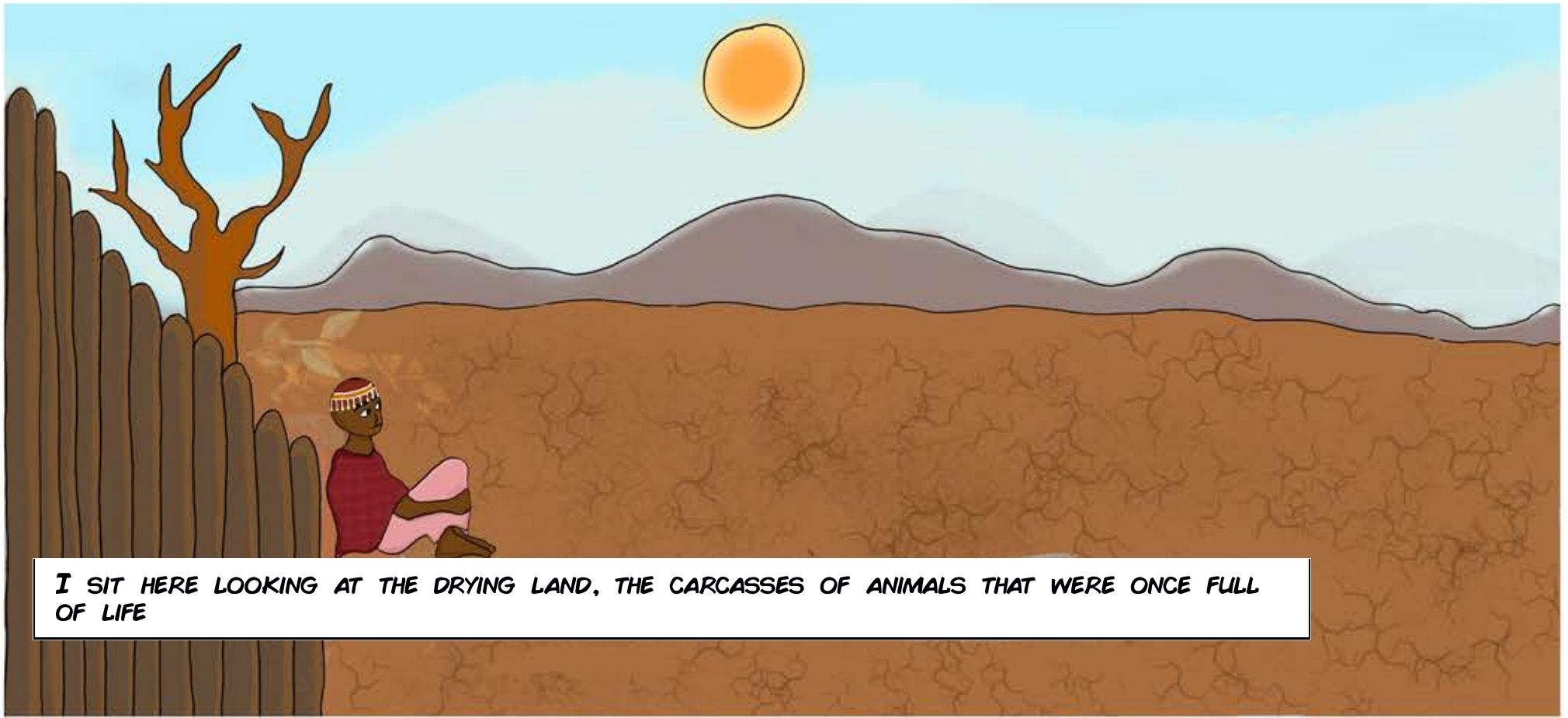
When we were young we wouldn't go to school. All we did were chores and after we're done with chores we would make gourds and then go swimming in the river and at night time we would just sing and dance around with our friends. This was before circumcision. After circumcision our childhood would be taken away from us and we would no longer do these things that we considered fun because we were now regarded as women and not girls anymore

NEMAIYAN

"YOU BELONG TO THE AGE GROUP"



Illustrated by Karolina Wambui, narrated by Illaramatak women from Kajiado

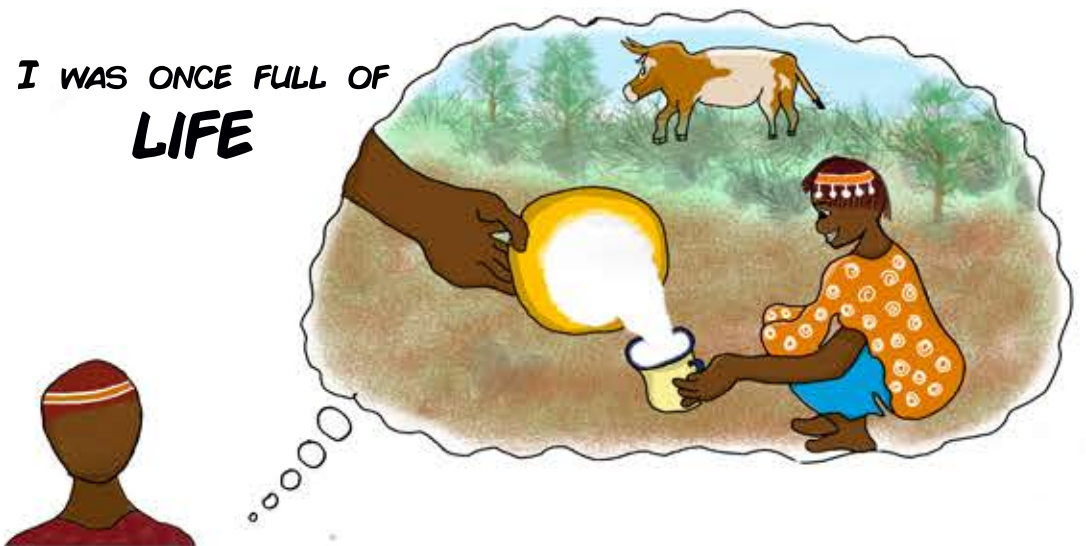


I SIT HERE LOOKING AT THE DRYING LAND, THE CARCASSES OF ANIMALS THAT WERE ONCE FULL OF LIFE



AND I CAN'T HELP BUT THINK OF HOW IT ONCE WAS AND HOW MY LIFE IS DRYING UP LIKE THE LAND.

I WAS ONCE FULL OF LIFE



HERDING COWS



SLEEPING ON TOP OF TREES, LOOKING FORWARD TO DRINKING MILK IN THE MORNING. WELL, NOT REALLY HAPPY BUT IT WAS LIFE. I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY I COULDN'T SLEEP IN THE HOUSE. WHY DID I HAVE TO LOOK FOR SOMEWHERE TO LAY MY HEAD EVERY NIGHT?

THE NIGHTS THAT I SPENT ON THE TREES I WAS HAPPY BECAUSE AT LEAST I WAS NOT SLEEPING IN THE COW SHEDS. THE LICE, TICKS, AND JIGGERS THAT WERE IN THOSE SHEDS WEEEH! NOT A BEAUTIFUL SIGHT.



I LONGED FOR THE DAY I WOULD TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD AND ME AND MY HUSBAND WOULD HAVE THE WHOLE HOUSE TO OURSELVES AND EAT ALL THE GOOD MEAT. TO ME THAT WAS **THE DREAM**.



I HAD DELIBERATELY DECIDED NOT TO FIND OUT ALL THE STEPS INVOLVED BEFORE GETTING A HUSBAND. MY FRIENDS WOULD TRY AND TELL ME ABOUT THE INITIATION TO ADULTHOOD AND I THOUGHT THEY WERE BEING TOO NEGATIVE. I FELT THEY JUST WANTED ME TO LET GO OF THE DREAM TO OWN AND SLEEP IN A HOUSE.



MY BREAST STARTED SHOWING AND I WAS SO EXCITED. I KNEW THAT WAS MY TICKET TO GETTING WHAT I WANT.



BUT FIRST I HAD TO UNDERGO CIRCUMCISION AND IN MY HEAD I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE A BREEZE



BUT NOTHING PREPARED ME FOR WHAT I WAS TO EXPERIENCE

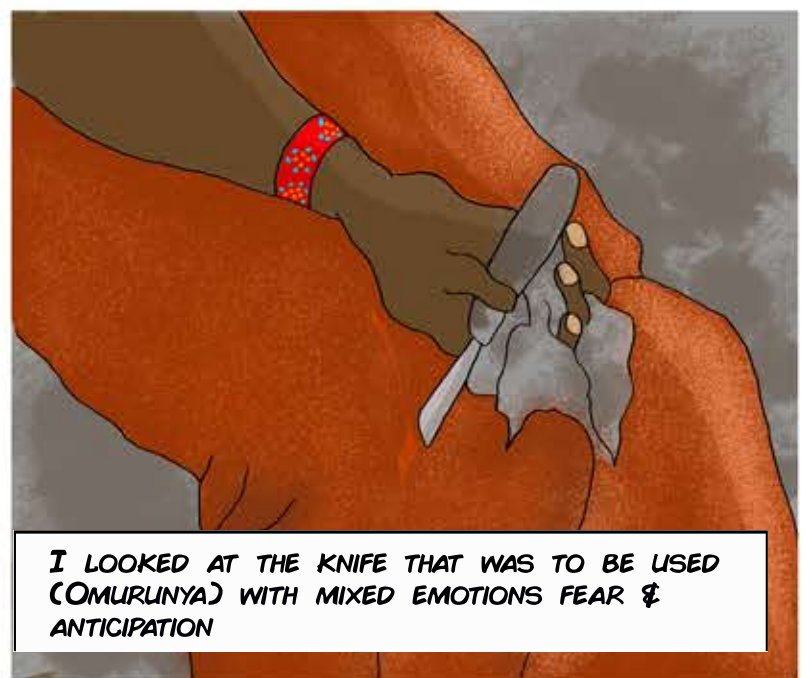
IN THE CORNER OF THE ROOM WAS A BASIN WITH COLD WATER WHICH WAS TO NUMB ME BEFORE THE PROCEDURE I LOOKED AT IT AND I DID NOT IMAGINE THE COLD I WAS JUST EXCITED THAT I WAS FINALLY STARTING THE PROCESS.



THE WATER WAS SO COLD THAT IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO NUMB ME



THE OTHER GIRLS SAT PATIENTLY WAITING FOR THEIR TURN



I LOOKED AT THE KNIFE THAT WAS TO BE USED (OMURUNYA) WITH MIXED EMOTIONS FEAR & ANTICIPATION



I THOUGHT THE COLD WATER MADE ME NUMB BUT.....



THE PAIN I EXPERIENCED IT ALMOST SENT ME TO THE GOOD LAND ABOVE.



AND THAT MARKED THE BEGINNING OF MY HORROR STORY. I FELT THAT KA LONG SINGLE TEAR DROP. YOU KNOW THAT TEAR THAT IS A RESULT OF A SHARP PAIN THAT GOES DIRECTLY TO YOUR BRAIN. YES, THAT PAIN.



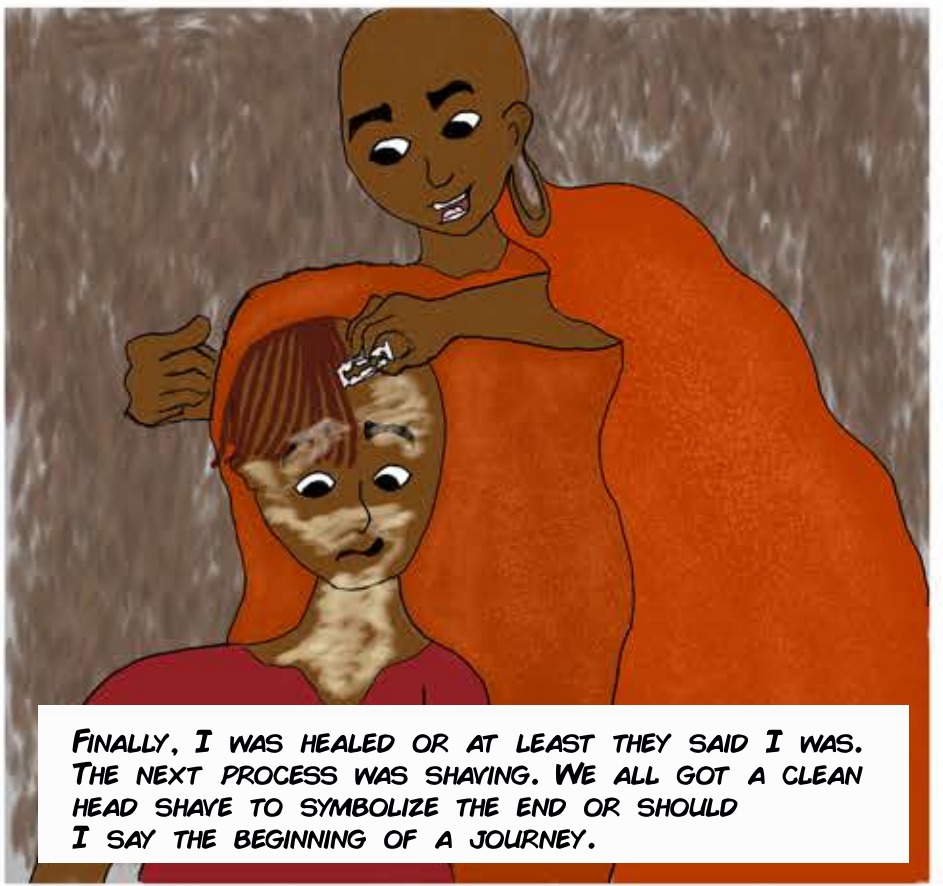


THE OTHER PAINFUL PART WAS HAVING TO URINATE TO HEAL THE WOUND. THAT WAS PAINFUL AND THOSE WHO WERE AFRAID OF URINATING WERE FORCED TO SIT IN A BASIN FULL OF URINE. THEY TOLD US THIS WAS THE ONLY WAY TO HEAL.

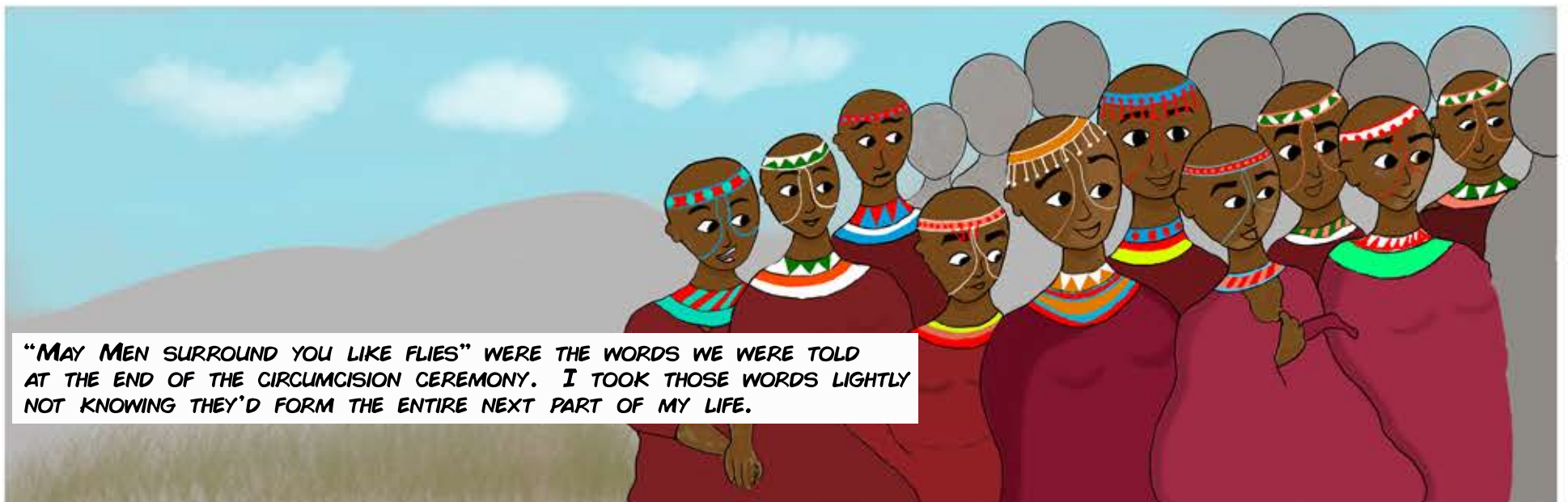
AND FOR THE NEXT 91 DAYS, THEY FORBADE US FROM TAKING BATHS AND INSTEAD WE WERE TREATED TO A DAILY RITUAL OF SMOTHERING WITH SHEEP OIL.



IT ALL SEEMED LIKE A VERY HIGH PRICE TO PAY TO GET TO SLEEP INSIDE A HOUSE AND LAY ON A NGOZI, TO BE HONEST. NOT WHAT I EXPECTED.



FINALLY, I WAS HEALED OR AT LEAST THEY SAID I WAS. THE NEXT PROCESS WAS SHAVING. WE ALL GOT A CLEAN HEAD SHAVE TO SYMBOLIZE THE END OR SHOULD I SAY THE BEGINNING OF A JOURNEY.



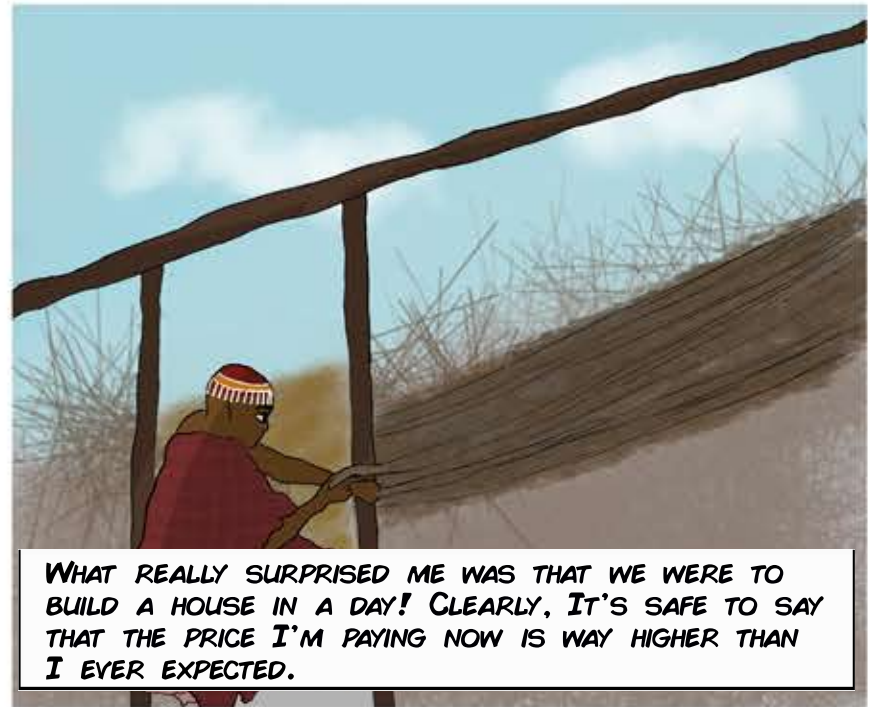
"MAY MEN SURROUND YOU LIKE FLIES" WERE THE WORDS WE WERE TOLD AT THE END OF THE CIRCUMCISION CEREMONY. I TOOK THOSE WORDS LIGHTLY NOT KNOWING THEY'D FORM THE ENTIRE NEXT PART OF MY LIFE.



THE NEXT PHASE WAS NOW LIKE WAITING TO BE CHOSEN FOR A GAME SHOW, EXCEPT THIS TIME IT WAS FOR THE ROLE OF A WIFE. LUCKILY, MY FATHER HAD ALREADY PULLED OFF A CLEVER DEAL WITH ANOTHER DAD, SO I HAD A READY-MADE HUSBAND WAITING FOR ME, LIKE A SURPRISE GIFT!



WE WERE SELECTED FROM DIFFERENT VILLAGES AND WE WERE GIVEN A BIG LAND FOR US TO BUILD OUR HOMES.



WHAT REALLY SURPRISED ME WAS THAT WE WERE TO BUILD A HOUSE IN A DAY! CLEARLY, IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT THE PRICE I'M PAYING NOW IS WAY HIGHER THAN I EVER EXPECTED.

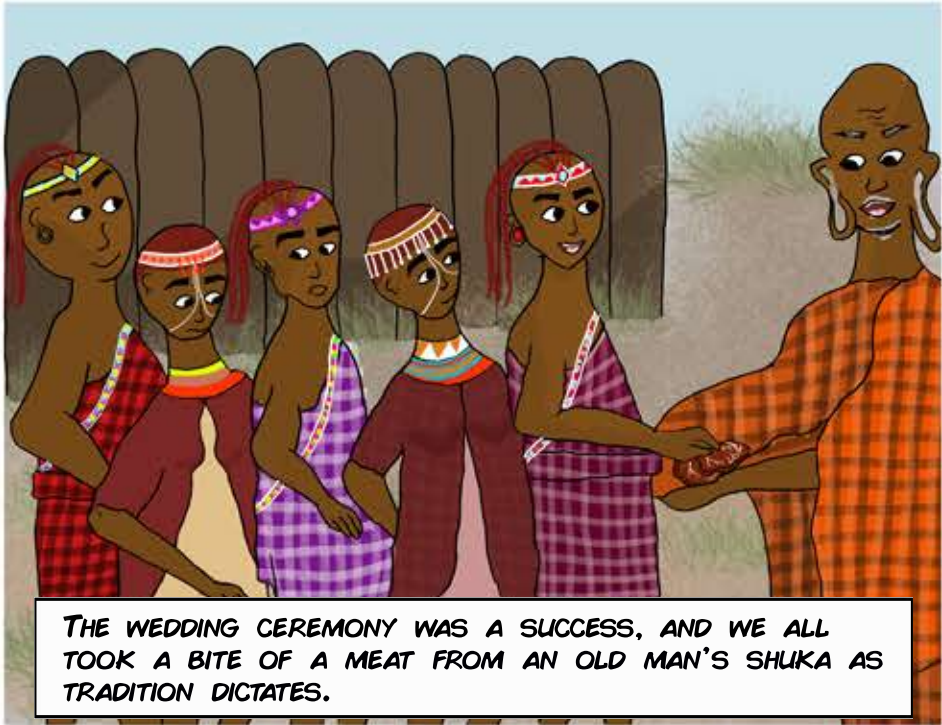
DID I MENTION THAT THE GIRL WHO DIDN'T CRY DURING CIRCUMCISION WAS GIFTED A COW? YES, THAT HAPPENED. IT WAS NOT ME CLEARLY BECAUSE I CRIED MY EYES OUT.



SO LET'S GO BACK TO ME BUILDING. WHEN I TELL YOU I BUILT YAANI I BUILT. DIDN'T KNOW I HAD THAT IN ME.



WE BUILT A COW SHED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HOUSES WE HAD BUILT AND THE BIGGEST COW WAS SLAUGHTERED.



THE WEDDING CEREMONY WAS A SUCCESS, AND WE ALL TOOK A BITE OF A MEAT FROM AN OLD MAN'S SHUKA AS TRADITION DICTATES.



WE THEN SAT NEXT TO OUR HUSBANDS READY FOR THE NEXT STEP.



FINALLY, IT WAS ALL DONE AND NOW I GET TO SLEEP INSIDE A WARM HOUSE AWAY FROM THE JIGGERS, LICE, AND TICKS.



I THOUGHT MY WOES WERE OVER AND NOW ALL THAT WAS AHEAD OF ME WAS ENJOYING THE WARM HOUSE WITH MY HUSBAND. LITTLE DID I KNOW WHAT AWAITED ME!



PICTURE THIS: MEN WOULD COME KNOCKING AT MY DOOR, CASUALLY PLACING A "DO NOT DISTURB" SIGN, AKA A FIMBO, OUTSIDE MY HOUSE. THEY WOULD SPEND THE NIGHT WITH ME, AND EVEN MY POOR HUSBAND HAD NO SAY IN THE MATTER. WHENEVER HE RETURNED HOME AND SPOTTED THE SIGN ON THE DOOR, HE WOULD SIMPLY LEAVE AND COME BACK LATER. IT WAS LIKE A CRAZY GAME OF MUSICAL CHAIRS!



MIXED EMOTIONS CONSUMED ME: WORRY AND ANGER INTERTWINED. I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY MY HUSBAND WAS SO CALM ABOUT IT. I THOUGHT HE WAS SUPPOSED TO PROTECT ME. AT LEAST THAT IS WHAT I THOUGHT HUSBANDS DO.



I ASKED THE OTHER WOMEN WHAT WAS HAPPENING AND THEY TOLD ME "YOU BELONG TO THE AGE GROUP NOW" "WE BELONG TO THE AGE GROUP"



MY HEART SHATTERED INTO A THOUSAND PIECES WHEN I DISCOVERED THAT MY "POOR HUSBAND" ALSO ENGAGED WITH THE OTHER WOMEN.

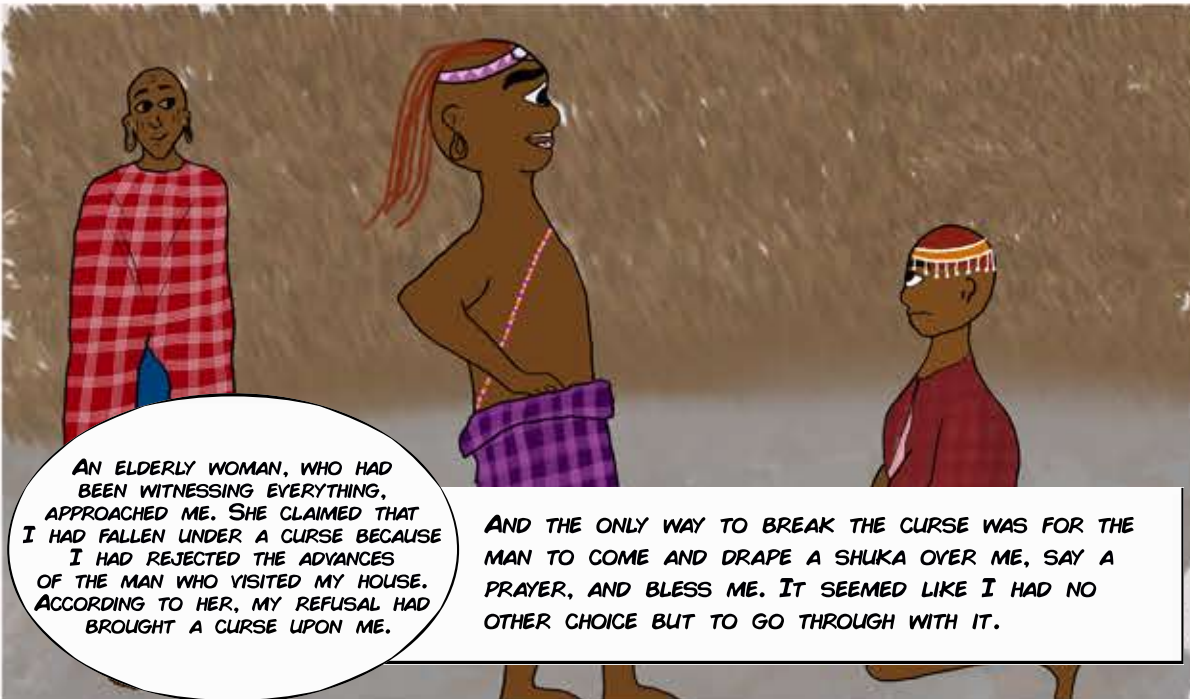
I HAD REACHED MY LIMIT, UTTERLY EXHAUSTED AND FED UP WITH THE ENTIRE "MUSICAL CHAIRS" SCENARIO. IN A MOMENT OF DEFIANCE, I TOOK CHARGE AND CHASED AWAY A MAN WHO WANTED HIS TURN.



BIG MISTAKE !

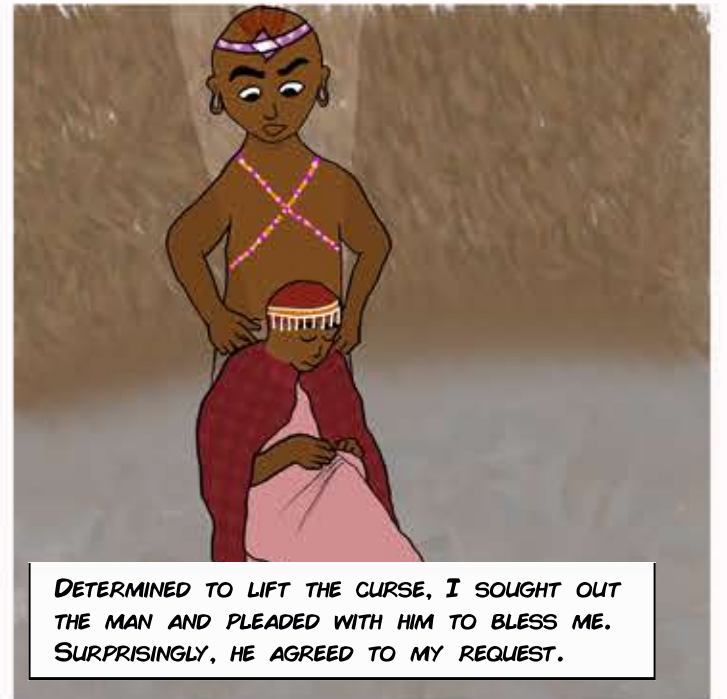
THE NEXT THING I KNEW I WAS COLLAPSING RANDOMLY.

THE CONDITION WORSENERD AND I FOUND MYSELF COLLAPSING WHILE COOKING BURNING MYSELF, COLLAPSING IN RIVERS WHILE FETCHING WATER.

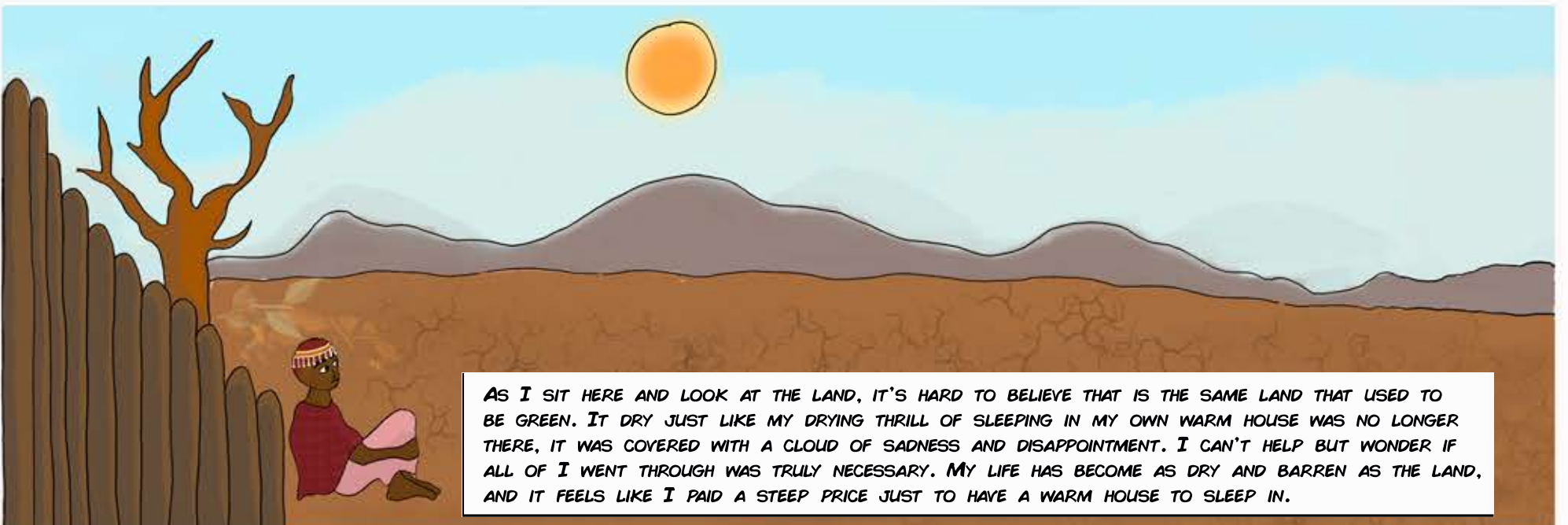


AN ELDERLY WOMAN, WHO HAD BEEN WITNESSING EVERYTHING, APPROACHED ME. SHE CLAIMED THAT I HAD FALLEN UNDER A CURSE BECAUSE I HAD REJECTED THE ADVANCES OF THE MAN WHO VISITED MY HOUSE. ACCORDING TO HER, MY REFUSAL HAD BROUGHT A CURSE UPON ME.

AND THE ONLY WAY TO BREAK THE CURSE WAS FOR THE MAN TO COME AND DRAPE A SHUKA OVER ME, SAY A PRAYER, AND BLESS ME. IT SEEMED LIKE I HAD NO OTHER CHOICE BUT TO GO THROUGH WITH IT.



DETERMINED TO LIFT THE CURSE, I SOUGHT OUT THE MAN AND PLEADED WITH HIM TO BLESS ME. SURPRISINGLY, HE AGREED TO MY REQUEST.



AS I SIT HERE AND LOOK AT THE LAND, IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT IS THE SAME LAND THAT USED TO BE GREEN. IT DRY JUST LIKE MY DRYING THRILL OF SLEEPING IN MY OWN WARM HOUSE WAS NO LONGER THERE, IT WAS COVERED WITH A CLOUD OF SADNESS AND DISAPPOINTMENT. I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER IF ALL OF I WENT THROUGH WAS TRULY NECESSARY. MY LIFE HAS BECOME AS DRY AND BARREN AS THE LAND, AND IT FEELS LIKE I PAID A STEEP PRICE JUST TO HAVE A WARM HOUSE TO SLEEP IN.

NAMUNYAK



BASED ON A TRUE STORY

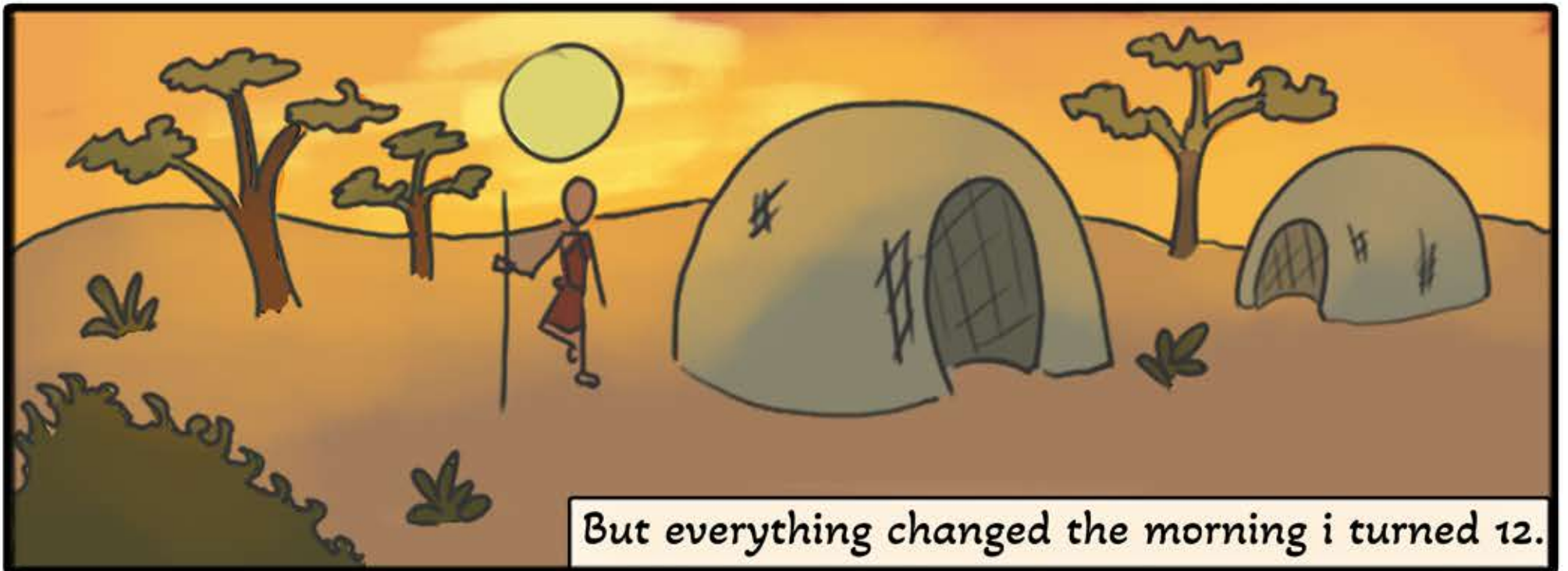
BY FELISTAS THAIRU

NAMUNYAK



I miss when things were easier. I dreamt of going to school and becoming an environmentalist. But now I have to put my daughter first.

Namunyak taking care of her daughter at her grocery stall

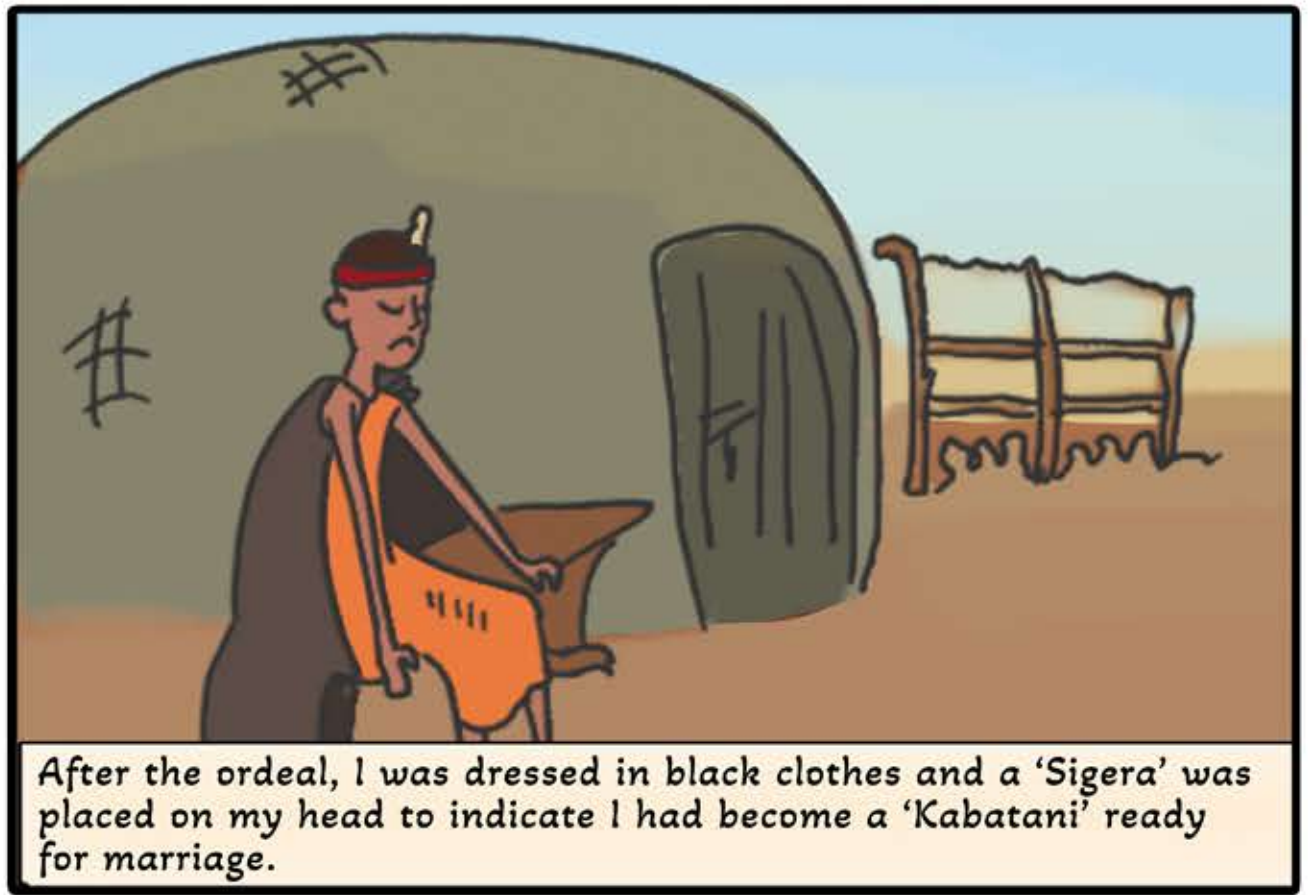


But everything changed the morning I turned 12.



I was forcibly dragged by village women to the circumcision den.



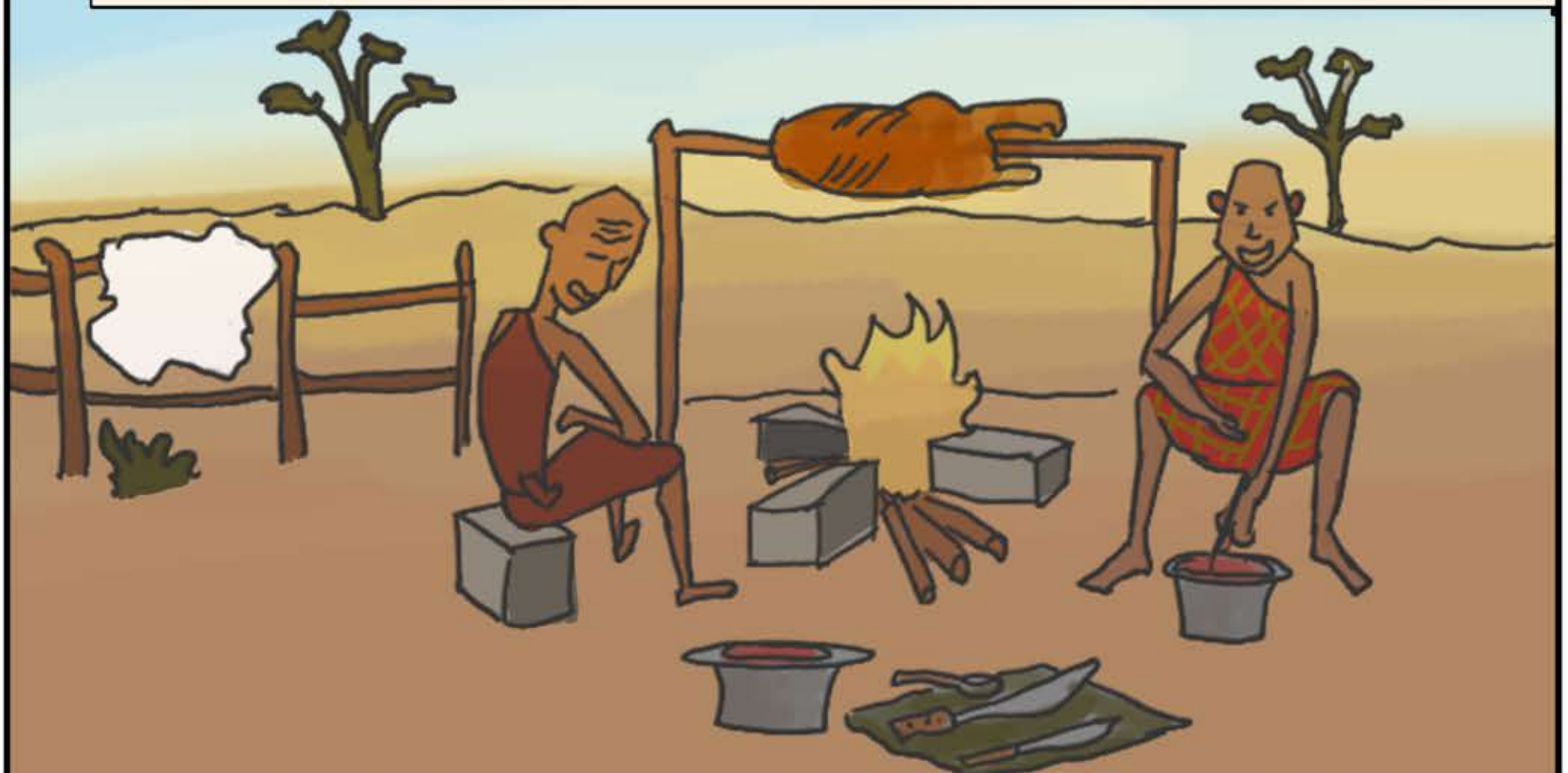


After the ordeal, I was dressed in black clothes and a 'Sigera' was placed on my head to indicate I had become a 'Kabatani' ready for marriage.



Later a strange man 'Ole Melita' walked into our boma with a sheep

The sheep was slaughtered and roasted by both Ole Melita and my father.



Ole Melita drank fat mixed with the sheep's blood first.



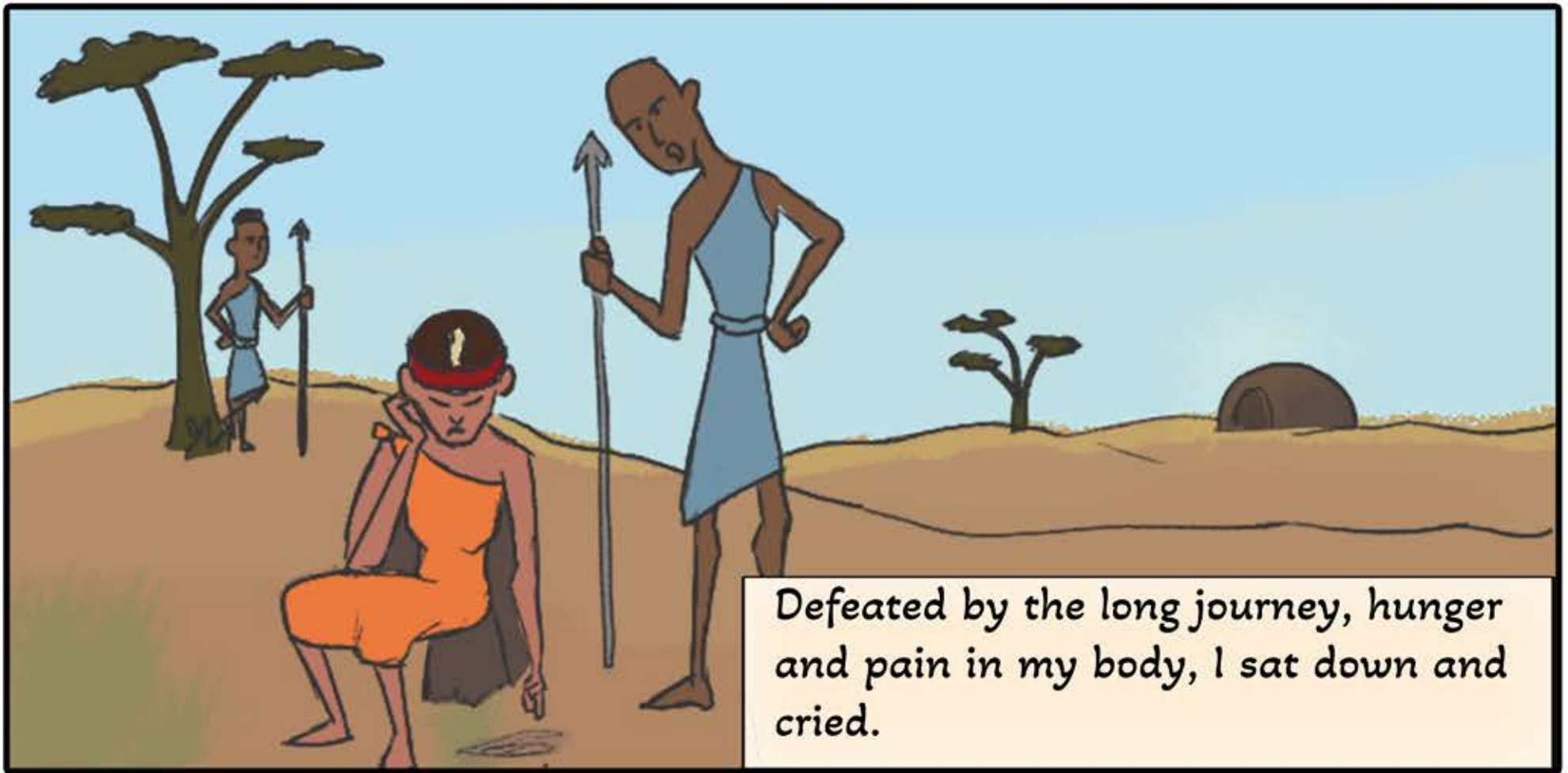
I was then made to drink from the same cup.



The next morning, two morans came and escorted me out of our boma as my parents watched. I didn't know where we were headed but I couldn't ask.



The three of us walked for 2 days before reaching our destination.



Defeated by the long journey, hunger and pain in my body, I sat down and cried.



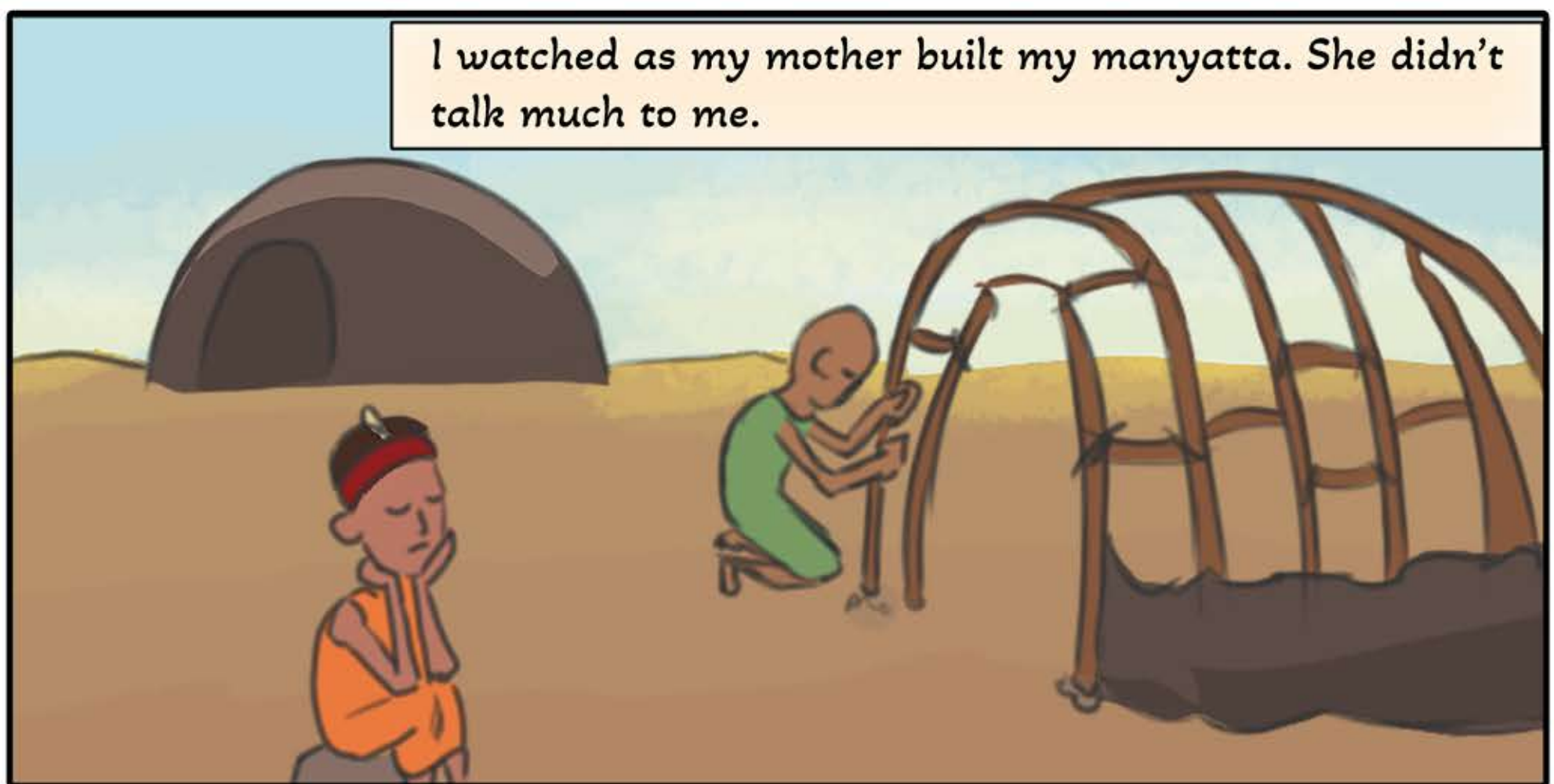
Soon we walked into Ole Melita's boma. The two morans handed me over.



I didn't realize my mother followed us throughout the journey. She joined me in Ole Melita's boma just as the morans left.



I watched as my mother built my manyatta. She didn't talk much to me.



That was the last time I ever saw my mother. She left me in a strange land with a strange man.

Soon I became pregnant.



Ole Melita was arrogant and he beat me up every chance he got.



I wondered constantly when this nightmare would end. I was terrified and alone figuring out motherhood and struggling with my wifely duties.



Despite the challenges and brutal beatings, I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl and the whole village came to celebrate.



A strange man approached me and put a necklace around my neck as he looked at my newborn.



My midwife noticed my confusion.



Do you know what that necklace means?

No! Who is that man? Why has he given me a necklace?

That man is your daughter's future husband. His promise is that necklace.



Ole Melita and the strange man shook hands and he left.



I thought about my dreams and my daughter's future.



So I took my daughter, packed a few things and ran.



I found help at a Women's group.

I got an opportunity to learn and they approved me for a loan.

One day, I looked at the ritual necklace one last time.



I decided to put it away and focus on our new start.



My dreams may have been crushed but my daughter's won't. I have begun a fresh to give her a chance. She will not face the same nightmare I did. I am breaking that hellish loop.

NAMUNYAK

The story of a young Maasai girl thriving against all odds despite being born into a heavily misogynistic pastoralist community known for its strict adherence to cultural practices and traditions.

Growing up I had big dreams for my life. I wanted to go to school, study, and become an environmentalist. But it was never meant to be. I had just turned 12 when my parents decided it was time for me to get circumcised and married off. See, Female Genital Mutilation is a cultural norm in our pastoralist community. On that fateful morning, I was held down by three village women as another elderly woman cut me with a razor. I was then dressed in black clothes and a 'Sigera' was placed on my head. The black clothes and the ornament on my head symbolized that I had become a 'Kabatani' a recently circumcised girl ready for marriage.

Later, a middle-aged man (Ole Melita) came to our boma with a sheep which was slaughtered and roasted in my honor. I was given blood mixed with fat from the sheep to drink as a ritual of acceptance of marriage. Early the next morning, two young morans came and escorted me out of our boma, my home, to a strange place. The trek there was long, taking us 2 days and since I wasn't fully healed from the circumcision, everything hurt. I cried all the way there. I had been taken to Ole Melita's boma. My mother had been following us from afar. Without saying much or explaining what was going on, she helped me build my own Manyatta as I was too weak, too young, and unwell to build one by myself. All she said was that this strange man had asked my father for my hand in marriage while I was still in her womb and she only knew about it once I was born. As soon as the Manyatta was done, my mother told me I was now a woman and then left me all alone in that strange place to figure out womanhood all by myself.

Soon I got pregnant and I watched helplessly as my young body adjusted to womanhood. I also struggled to learn and keep up with my wifely duties. Ole Melita was arrogant and brutal. He beat me any chance he got and punished me severely. I couldn't speak because culture says a good woman keeps her mouth shut. I suffered silently throughout my pregnancy because I was terrified of the man I was supposed to call my husband. I give birth to a baby girl and the news spread like wildfire. During the celebrations, a strange man approached me and placed a ritual necklace 'Emunyurit' on my neck as he looked hard at my girl. A woman seated next to me asked if I knew what that meant. I told her no and she explained that the strange man had obtained Ole Melita's blessings on my newborn daughter's hand in marriage and that I had no say in it.

Aware of the horrific fate destined for my daughter, I decided to break the cycle no matter the consequences. I packed my little belongings into a backpack and ran. I started a new life and joined a Women's development group. They taught me how to handle life as a teen mom. Through hard work and determination, I qualified for a loan and started a grocery business. My dreams may have been crushed but my daughter's won't! She will go to school and pursue whatever she wants without being held back by backward cultural practices. The women's group has helped me grow in many aspects of my life. I can now confidently tell my story to other young mothers and to whoever cares to listen. As I navigate my new life with my daughter and run my grocery business, I purpose to break the cycle of doom. I may have been born in a lemon farm but that won't stop me from making lemon cakes.



**STORY BASED ON REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES AS
NARRATED BY THE ILLARAMATAK WOMEN IN KAJIADO.**

CAPTURED AND RETOLD BY FELISTAS THAIRU



Photography by Felistas Thairu



Photography by Felistas Thairu

BIOGRAPHIES

Kymsnet Media Network (KMN), is a Nairobi-based **Arts for Communications & Communication for Development (C4D)** social enterprise and solutions provider for agencies and institutions undertaking community-transformative actions in different sectors in Kenya and the greater East African Community. The Network is an expert in providing varied skillset including research, writing and editorial solutions, translation of technical information into lay language using art; and coordinating and managing the development and production of communications materials for varying audiences. We believe in **“transforming Africa through Culture and the Arts”** and anchor our approaches and solutions to culture and arts.

Twitter: @kymsnetmedia; @kimaniwawanjiru;

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/OpEdConversations>

LDCOMICS CIC (LDC), UK is a women creator-led community interest company championing graphic novel works, particularly, though not exclusively those by women-identifying and non-binary artists. The aims are to disseminate ideas and discussion around comics and graphic novel works with an autobiographical or domestic focus and to use innovative models to provide platforms for testing new works and ideas within a social context.

www.ldcomics.com Insta @ldcomics

Il'laramatak Community Concerns (ICC), Kajiado County, Kenya:

Msanii Kimani wa Wanjiru:

Msanii Kimani wa Wanjiru is a creative writing & performing artist. He is a seasoned Culture/Arts Journalist and has made significant contributions in culture/arts policy formulation and discourse, as an analyst/commentator, culture/arts journalist, blogger and editor. He is the founder and Curator-in-Chief for Kymsnet Media Network, Kenya's premier arts and culture news and features agency. Msanii Kimani has been researching and documenting cartoons and comics stories in Kenya and across Africa. His book ***Ink & Pixels: The Wild and Wondrous Tale of Kenyan Comics***, is a detailed account on the history, development, trends, social relevance and the future of comics and cartoons in Kenya. He has written extensively about cartoonists and comics in Kenya (www.kimaniwawanjiru.com). His articles have been published by the International Journal of Comic Art ((IJOCA)— <http://www.ijoca.com>).

A published poet. His poems were published in ***Echoes Across the Valley— An Anthology of Poems from East Africa***. In 2020, these poems were translated into German and published in the collection titled ***In 80 Liebesgedichten um die Welt (In 80 Love Poems Around The World) Ed. by Clara Paul***. His other work includes *Utimbakwiri*, an unpublished stage play adaptation of *Shamba la Wanyama*, a translation of George Orwell's satire *Animal Farm*, for the Kenya Institute of Education.

BIOGRAPHIES

Chela Yego (Kenya)

is a Kenya based visual artist. She works digitally and with watercolor. She is also a 2D animator and a comic artist. Chela's art is inspired by her love for literature and the desire to document her everyday life through illustration and collage.

Instagram @chelathereader

Felistas Thairu (Kenya)

is an enthusiastic Kenyan filmmaker and digital artist. Her fields of specialty are camera operations and 2d animation. Her main aim is to create authentic African content through photography, films, and artistic pieces that inspire, entertain and provoke conversations. A love of nature allows her to stay creative.

Instagram @felistasthairu

Karolina Wambui

is a visual storyteller who sees the world in 2D. She is skilled in communications, filmmaking, illustration, and 2D animation. She is passionate about social issues and her dream is to continue telling stories using different forms of art. Through her creative work, she aims to inspire others and raise awareness about important topics.

Instagram @karolina_wambui



Leah Mbanorti