

Remembering Binyavanga: Writing Was Enough

I'd been estranged from Binyavanga for over a decade and a half when I heard of his death. But hearing of his death took me back. To when we'd first met, through Tom Maliti, then an Associated Press Correspondent. At Trattoria, if I remember correctly. He'd been back in Kenya for just a short time from South Africa, was about to move from his family's home in Nakuru to Nairobi. He was starting to gather people around him—to hold court, to pontificate, to talk about writing, our lives and our sense of possibilities.

He was spending time in Eastleigh, chasing down the matatu graffiti artists, bumping up against the Ethiopians and Somalis living there. He was high on sheng, on the then new Kenyan music emerging from Eastlands articulated by Ukoo Fulani from Dandora. This was maybe a year before the '*unbowgable*' sensation by hip-hop artists Gidi Gidi and Maji Maji that swept the Moi dictatorship away and ushered in what we all then thought was a real transition, fronted by former President Mwai Kibaki.

We could taste it, the freedom to come. We wanted to be the new, unshackled Kenyans—our whole selves and not the staid old Kenyan selves epitomised by the then literary space whose walls he was determined to bring down. He moved into my flat. As did, for a while, all the people he was gathering around him. There was food—he loved to cook, messily, things full of butter and cream and everything as artery-clogging as it could be. There was drink—a lot of it—fuelling all the passionate conversations about writing and life. There was Tom and playwright Andiah Kisia and filmmaker Sagwa Chabeda. The journalist Parselelo Kantai and filmmaker Judy Kibinge. And so many more. There were many late nights. At the flat. All over town. At our many centres of gravity.

I'd get up, go to the gym, he might be up when I got back to eat before heading to work. Mostly he wasn't. Either way, I'd get a call each morning at work, telling me what he was up to—mostly meeting people, sometimes working on a piece. If his meanderings took him to my vicinity in Westlands, I'd join him for lunch with whomever else he'd swept up into his dreams. Actor Mumbi Kaigwa. And then there'd be the evening call: 'we're here, come.' For it all to start again.



Read series: Binyavanga Wainaina

He sent off his entry to the Caine Prize in 2002. He preened and primped before he flew out. There were new clothes from fashion designer Anne McCreath at Kiko Romeo. Not so much for the prize or anything associated with it. But for the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the correspondence between them having fuelled his writing trajectory. And too, love.

Correspondence. He hated the distance between him and those he loved. He flailed at it, cut through it with words, always words. I travelled a lot for work. I still have the emails upon emails we sent to each other. He wrote to anybody his singlemindedness about enabling a creative life brought into his ambit. He shared what he was working on. I still have the folder of his early stories: 'read this.' A command I took seriously.

That he won the prize is history. What's not is what it set off. The gatherings of the flock became somewhat more focused. Between the food and the drink and the arguments and discussions into the night. There were planning meetings at all our centres of gravity, the homes on which we descended. Ali Zaidi, senior editor at the East African and his wife, sculptor, Irene Wanjiru's most frequently. Where their daughter Tara was still running around refusing to wear clothes, where Irene's stone and wood sculptures were all over the place, inside and outside, finished and not. Where there was always more cooking (if we were in luck, shami kebabs!) and always more alcohol. We would arrive with bags of supplies, sit outside, argue and debate some more. But also at author Rasna Warah and her husband Gray's.

Somehow, something got done. We agreed on a name—Binyavanga's suggestion. Kwani? We agreed on a Board - basically, everybody in the circle, especially the ones we thought had some gravitas (we wanted to be taken seriously). I wrote up the proposal for the Ford Foundation. We got the money. Everybody dug deep into their notebooks and computers for content for the first issue. Binyavanga

magically choreographed and directed it. He made us believe we could do it. What we probably were less aware of was that he needed all of us to believe in himself and Kwani itself.

It was frenetic. Somewhere in that he moved out to Karen, with Parselelo right next door. Another centre of gravity. I remember Atieno Aluoch's 30th birthday party around the corner. We were, as usual, the stragglers—her mother couldn't believe finding us still there after the sun rose and chased us out. We barrelled back to his place for yet another cholesterol-filled breakfast for the cycle to begin again.

We loved being around each other. There was nothing we didn't know about each other's business. French cultural attache Olivier Lechien and journalist Ebba Kalondo's another centre of gravity—for African music and African film. They travelled. We took Jordan and Leah to the Giraffe Centre in Nairobi—astounded and touched that anybody would entrust their children to us. We had no compunction about offering utterly unsolicited advice and judgements about each other. With care at the beginning. But increasingly viciously when we were unravelling. Binyavanga was the queen of the absolutely devastatingly aimed arrow when he was hurt. Feeling that somehow, incredulously, we—I—weren't seeing him. Him as he struggled with depression and the writing after South Sudan. Him as he struggled to come out. He didn't tell us—but he never forgave us—me—for not knowing.

That time. That place. We started something together. With him at its heart. With his own big and encompassing heart—he dragged us all in, we swirled and twirled around him. We did love each other then. Only love could begin to explain the devastation as we tore apart. But Kwani went on. As did the whole generation of Kenyans it taught to believe that they could write their - our - stories and truths. And that writing was enough.

It wasn't a waste. That time. That place. Him.

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