

COMRADE LEMMA AND THE BLACK JERUSALEM BOYS BAND

By
Parselelo Kantai

It was Humphrey, one of those bullies from my childhood who, together with Tairero and Solomon now constituted the popular neighborhood band known as the Black Jerusalem Boys Band, saw the possibilities of my song Joka. In fact, it was he who intervened when Tairero threatened to beat me up when I suggested that I join the band. Humphrey was the vocalist, both Solomon and Tairero played guitar in the frenzied high-pitched tunes of those days.

"Hold on," he said lazily, leaning against the old lorry next to our courtyard wall.

Humphrey and I were neighbors. Our mothers detested each other. They waged a never-ending war over which religion was superior and you Salvation Army people are so primitive, marching about like a herd of sheep and you Catholics pray in unwashed clothes, we are God's true army, we wear uniforms.

"Let him sing his song at the end of our show tonight," Humphrey said. "The crowd will laugh him out of Jerusalem. That will teach him."

Mr. Ben's bar in the shopping center had the dubious reputation of staying open long after Curfew. Mr. Ben was partners with a police sergeant who made sure that his men went deaf to the noisy bands that played in the bar after the 6.00 pm Curfew. Mr. Ben was a respected member of the community, being the only African licensed to sell beer.

I was quite nervous. The small bar was packed. There were customers squeezed on the narrow, wooden benches, standing and smoking at the dimly-lit counter, leaning against the dirty windows, blocking the corridor that led to the toilet at the back. I gagged on account of the pungent scents of Ten Cent cigarettes and Roosters, and the odours that blended with the flavours of beer and urine. The fat barmaids sweated as they delivered orders, and would scream dramatically when the drunken men reached for their breasts. Behind the counter, Mr. Ben was yelling orders to his skinny assistant, his balding head glistening.

People were calling out Francisca, another round here, and don't forget my change this time, Anna. Nobody saw how uncertainly I held Humphrey's guitar. I closed my eyes and went to Beira.

It was the sound of a man weeping that made me realize that something strange was happening on that night in Mr. Ben's bar. My fingers were racing over the guitar strings like a reckless guerrilla on the run. Then I was in Nairobi and there were people weeping and clapping, weeping and clapping and I was singing Joka again. After that night, Joka was always the last song we played because, as Mr. Ben, whose paunch grew steadily bigger, once said, it keeps the customers drinking.

Humphrey disappeared after that night. We heard he had got a job as a music librarian at the Voice of Kenya.

I took the name Comrade Lemma, not so much to honor that man with the burning eyes in the newspaper photograph, but to prevent my mother Petrobia from hearing that her son was a barroom singer on Saturday nights. Every Saturday people came to Mr. Ben's to weep, people from all over the African quarter, from Pangani and Kaloleni and Ziwani and Bahati. Mr. Ben continued to insist that it was a mortal sin, boys, a mortal sin, to pay musicians any more than they could reasonably drink on a single night.

Rumors about me grew. I was a Mau Mau leader disguised as a musician. No, no, no, he is actually a South African who sailed to Mombasa where he learned Kiswahili from the ghosts in the Old Town and come to Nairobi to steal the souls of respectable city residents, like us. And on and on. I wore my black cap lower, fearing my mother's wrath. When we began to smell freedom, Joka was being seriously discussed as a contender for the new national anthem. By this time, however, I had been cut loose from the song.

Within the first year of the new independent government's life, the song was banned. It was said that the song's disturbing lyrics had annoyed the new leader.

Mr. Ben became uncomfortable with us, and paid us off with enough money to launch Tairero's career as a drunk finance Solomon's trip back home to Uganda, and transform me into a vegetable dealer who, during those slow times in between customers, would read anything he could get his hands on and especially the classics of Charles Dickens. Then my mother Petrobia danced in church. We moved to the empty land by the river.

I was therefore in a furious mood this morning by the time I had put on my usual trousers, my brilliant white kanzu from those days of Rehema, an old flame of my active years who had come to comfort me as I mourned my poor departed mother Petrobia's death from tuberculosis and shame, and who had left a few months ago convinced that my mourning period was over, and my sandals which I designed myself from strips of abandoned lorry tyres to accommodate the crisis of my twisted feet. I have distaste for mimics as I have suffered greatly because of them, and I therefore intended to reprimand these young men. I was instead met by cheers of 'Comrade Lemma! Comrade Lemma!' and Martha herself staining the newspaper page in her hand with her tears.

"Look at you!" she exclaims accusingly, her voice quivering with an emotion I have never witnessed in all these years of our friendship. She brings the page close to my eyes as only she and a very select few know of the special problems of my eyes. There is a grainy picture of three young men, dressed in the band outfits of my youth. Next to it, incredibly, is a passport-sized photo of myself with my Comrade Lemma locks and all the stains and distortions of my advancing years. The headline reads: COMRADE LEMMA FOUND! And then there is a sentence below that takes me a moment to decipher because of the special problems of my eyes and the fact that my spectacles have been missing ever since the mysterious early morning departure of Rehema some years back. I am just able to make out the sentence below: 'Independence Musician and National Hero Lives In Nairobi Slum Squalor'.

Around me are the shining faces of my neighbours, regarding me as if I were a stranger, even after all these years of our collective struggle for a better life. I was once told, in private, that when reading, an amused expression comes to my face, as if I were laughing at a private joke. I can feel Martha's gaze boring into me, confusing, like she always does, my squint for a smile, because why else would you be smiling if you were not staring at that picture and recalling the heroic years of your youth.

There is a long pause. They peer at me. I squint my way across the tear-stained page, recognizing, in one paragraph the lyrics of Joka that I wrote those many years ago, and how my poor departed mother Petrobia, on discovering that I was Comrade Lemma on the day of our country's independence, had begun her retreat into shame and silence.

"Ni yeye!" It's him, declares Martha, her voice quivering, fading eyes alight with something I shall have to investigate later. There is a roar of approval. Franco and Stish, her poetic grandsons, are already chanting, in their youthful rapid verse, Joka! Joka! and it is soon answered by the feminine response of 'Mwendo wa Com-ra-de siyo halaka' and an impromptu festival of cheering and rapid verse takes over the normal morning noises of my narrow street. Another young man has taken up a tin and a stick and is beating out a rhythm, and I find myself hoisted up in the air, on the shoulders of my neighbours, my kanzu flapping ridiculously about me like a flag that is looking for an anthem.

They put me down long enough for Martha to hold an old black jacket against me. "It fits you," she says. Inakushika. The way she undresses the word provokes a stir in me that I last experienced with Rehema. These days, I rarely succumb to the sin of Onan, to the agony of my adolescence, a little soap and a little water in the quiet of the night. It was much worse in the aftermath of Rehema's departure when I was borrowing so much soap from Martha that I began to suspect that she suspected.

"It's from Marehemu George," Martha says, two youthful, sultry dancers gyrating so suggestively in her widely set pupils that the stirring in my loins becomes uncomfortable. "It's a present for you." She is dressing me with her deft housewife's hands and undressing me with her look. "He says you must look presentable for today's meeting." Her fingers on my back are like little electric currents. She slides them over my shoulders so that she is now holding my lapels, standing very close and looking straight at me. Her oval-shaped face, with the tight wrinkles around her mouth, belies her age, betrays her grief. I am appalled at myself, looking at my friend and neighbour of many years in this way (and at my age!). But this morning, I fear, shy, retiring Martha is suggesting things that would lead to riots when she was younger and the unintended tormentor of young men.

Marehemu George has pulled out another miracle from his little bag of imported hand-me-downs. A year ago, he arrived on foot in our neighbourhood with a bale of second-hand clothes. They were a donation, he said, from a rich American, recently deceased, named George, for whom he acted as a special local agent. And so we took to calling this young man Marehemu, the late George, who provided us with dead people's clothes at a discount price. But a resurrection has taken place in Marehemu George's personal

circumstances in the months since he embarked on a new project to dispense free condoms to poor people. He is now an evangelist of new afflictions and beware the next victim could be you, you are never too young to die.

It is only from my perch on the shoulders of friends and neighbours that I realise how my neighbourhood has grown in the years since I moved here to bury my departed mother Petrobia near the river so that her soul would be carried away from this city of misfortune. We head deeper into this valley of cardboard walls and tin roofs and the greenish sludge of sewers running like snot-nosed kids on a Saturday morning. It occurs to me that all these years, my world of narrow streets and afternoon chats with Martha about how are your late daughter's boys doing, that is a good colour for a growing boy's cardigan, have been this neighbourhood that is Kwa Lemma, where the city's newest immigrants have always settled.

I was the first one here, so they named it after me. Now I can see at least eight distinct Kwa Lemmas, collapsing against each other like a completed game of dominoes. There is the bridge, belching with the arrogance of city traffic, the old stadium in the smoky distance where all those years ago they played the first football match of an independent nation. We are singing Joka, and the women with their clutched babies hanging from them like an extra, cheering hand, are peeping out of their tin-roofed shacks. Spirals of charcoal smoke rise in the early morning air. In my present mood of a conquering neighbourhood hero and without my spectacles, I see a phoenix rising from the ashes. For the first time in many years, I welcome the chemicals and plastic stench of the river. Parked by the smart wooden office at the end of the street, I recognise the immaculate four-wheel-drive vehicle that Marehemu George has taken to driving. Then I see other vehicles, untidily parked. Suddenly, my narrow street has become a cul-de-sac: unmarked saloons and pick-ups, dark blue Government of Kenya vehicles block off the side that leads to the open field where we have our football matches. A small horde of journalists brandishing biros, notebooks, cameras and complicated electronic equipment. This unexpected sight has the quite embarrassing effect of making me fart, briefly and pungently, on my new porters.

I realise Marehemu George has a hand in this morning's unexpected events. I had mentioned to him on several occasions that while condoms were very much appreciated, we must also bring to the attention of the authorities that many people here also fall victim, often even die, to the hidden diseases of our polluted river water. That it is not enough to dispense rubber for the protection of our people during their nocturnal embraces when the same prophylactics end up clogging our already overworked drains in the morning and floating on our river in a most unacceptable manner, especially as this is the same river we all depend on for our domestic needs. It is a subject that I have, in fact, written extensively about. Being one of the more literate individuals in our community, I took it upon myself some time ago to agitate, through the press, for external assistance to help us resolve this problem. Curiously, and it might have something to do with the deteriorating handwriting of an old man with special problems of the eyes, these lengthy articles were never published.

We were seated in my darkened parlour, Marehemu George and I, sipping his mineral water on the evening of our potable water discussion when his attention was diverted to the collection of framed photographs by my bed honouring my departed mother Petrobia. Among them is a misplaced photo of the band outside Mr. Ben's bar and it is the one that has Marehemu George's attention.

"Who are these people, Mzee?"

"Oh, nobody really. It's just an old picture."

"Yes, a very old picture. Is one of these young men you?"

I wanted to get back to the subject at hand so I told him impatiently that, yes, I was one of them.

"Which one?" Marehemu can be very persistent.

"Isn't it obvious? The one in the middle, with the guitar and the hat."

"That's you? Mzee, I never would have..."

"What was the name of your band?"

"Comrade Lemma and..."

"... The Black Jerusalem Boys Band! My God, I've found you!"

Marehemu George is a big, imposing figure, a man of quick ideas. He has put on a lot of weight since he joined us. Now he is excited like a little boy. He is gesticulating hugely,

so that his fingertips brush the walls, telling me how till the day he died, Mzee, my late father always talked about your band.

"Especially that song of yours, remind me, Mzee what it was called..." "Joka."

"That's it!" He snaps his fingers. "He said Joka had changed the way he looked at the world. My family owes you a debt, Mzee. Which one were you, if I may ask?"

I am Comrade Lemma

He looked at me intently for a few moments, then, I am afraid, he removed his scented, white handkerchief and carefully wiped a waiting tear at the base of one of his eyes. Then he said in the voice of a man in a Charles Dickens novel: "And so, this is what it comes to."

He kept on repeating, "So you are the Comrade Lemma?" and standing up and sitting down, trying to catch up with his accelerating thoughts. By the time he was leaving, he had the look of a man who has found his destiny.