

## Tightening the lesa, loosening it – a Short story

By Muthoni wa Gichuru



A lesa/kanga is a piece of cotton cloth worn by people in East Africa. The section with the line of text is called *jinn* and usually has a message or a quote. The message on the lesa above is, *Tabasamu yangu ndio mekapu yangu*- My smile is my make-up.

Photo: Simon N. Kamau.

I have a pepper plant at one corner of my compound. The colour of the peppers is a deep crimson, beautiful and fiery hot, like the centre of a wood fire. I wear a brightly coloured lesa while harvesting the pepper. The pepper will add zest to the food I cook, the fieriness, a sting to the tongue. I wash my hands with soap afterwards; it would bring tears to my eyes if I were to touch my mouth or eyes.

The Corona virus has changed the things that were good for us, added a sting like that of pepper to our lives. How can we not shake hands? In Gikuyu, we say, even goats greet each other with their horns. Now a shake of hands could spread the virus, a kiss could be a kiss of death. Our smiles remain hidden behind a mask.

There is something that people say, I was in that place when it happened; I was doing that when it happened, and I too remember. The first reported case in Kenya, on a Friday, a day nicknamed *furahiday*. *Furahi*, Swahili for – be happy, rejoice. A mixture of joy and sorrow for me that day. I had gone to Corner House in the heart of Nairobi city, to sign a publishing contract for my latest manuscript. I remember the lift I took from the twelfth floor. The air inside was thick with the musky odour of a mixture of perfumes and stale sweat. People were crammed in, elbows touching. I felt as if there was not enough air for everyone to breath. When we got to the ground floor, I took a deep breath, filling my lungs.

All around me, people were spilling off lifts, jostling each other. Then I saw people, coming out of another lift, covering their mouths with handkerchiefs. A couple of men of Chinese or Japanese descent, were getting off that lift. I thought then of the months when the Corona Virus ravaged China and the feelings of most of us in Kenya. The virus does not affect dark skin, it won't come to Africa. Even when it was reported in Northern Africa, in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, we said it won't come to Sub-Saharan Africa, these people in the North are too light-skinned. But then here it was, March 13<sup>th</sup> 2020, a twenty-seven-year-old woman, with skin as dark as the coffee berries that we grow in Kenya, had it.

Enterprising Kenyans already had masks out in the streets to sell and I thought, I don't ever want to cover my mouth and nose with that ugly thing. In a WhatsApp video, shared among the various groups I am in, an old woman is asked in Gikuyu, what she can call a face mask. She says, gatangarigakùgiririamùrimùwa ngoma – a small rag to protect one from the devil's disease. Now I wear a mask while in public. I have even found some that are pretty, made from pieces of lesò.



**Makongeni open air market in Thika, Kenya. The author, Muthoni wa Gichuru, is wearing a mask made of a piece of lesò. Photo: Simon N. Kamau**

The lesa or kanga, is a piece of cotton cloth with a jinn– a section of the lesa with the message. It is worn by people in East Africa. Sometimes its worn while out in the farm, over the clothes to protect them from dirt. In the weeks following the onset of the pandemic in Kenya, and the cessation of movement between counties, I find myself at loose ends. I cannot attend literary forums. Stay at home, stay at home, the government extolls, avoid public places. Schools were shut down in March; we cannot go to church. For a person used to waking up with places to go and people to meet, a day stretches before me, hours crawling into each other. My small compound in Thika, an outlying town of Nairobi Metropolitan, feels stifling after a few days. The walls of my house hem in. It is as if the air is being squeezed out of the rooms. My husband and I begin taking long walks in our neighbourhood, discovering new trails and routes. The scent of wild flowers and the earthy smell of wet building sand, heaped along the Thika- Garrisa road, fills our nostrils. We walk between rows upon rows of pineapple plantations, which Thika is known for, smelling the sour sweet smell of ripening pineapples.

Back at home, our small garden, on one side of the compound, has maize that is flowering and banana plants, one of which is heavy with fruit. Outside the compound, on the roadside, long grass grows as we have had steady rain in the last months. My husband, a teacher and a fellow writer, and I, set to clear the grass but then we think, it will grow quickly again.

With a lesa tight on my waist I heft the hoe, digging up the soil. The hoe stick feels rough on my hands but the act of hard physical work, the straining of muscles, provides a kind of relief for the mind. I can concentrate on the ground I am breaking up, the shaking off of soil from the grass and weeds I have pulled up. For a while, my mind does not dwell on the fear of a pandemic that is raging all over the world. A flu that is killing by the hundreds, the numbers piling up daily – more than a thousand people dead in one night, thousands reported to be infected.

In Kenya, the numbers initially grow slowly, small dots in a bolt of clothing, twenty-one cases reported, then 22, climbing to thirty slowly, no death yet. Then it is there in the news, the health minister's brow furrowed above the mask. On march 26, the first death in Kenya as a result of the Corona virus. That day, the lesa I wrap is tight around my waist, the message in the jinn, a prayer...



**Gatuanyaga, Thika. Author, Muthoni wa Gichuru, watching TV inside her house wearing a leso with the message, *Ufalme wa Mungu niwa milele- God's kingdom is forever*. Photo: Simon N. Kamau**

In April, the number of those infected grows, the bolt of cloth stained with spots. Cessation of movement is extended to more counties, Mombasa, Kilifi. In late April, a part of Nairobi, Eastleigh estate, and a section of Mombasa, Mombasa Old Town, are torn off and bunched up. No movement in and out of the estates. In April, too, the month when publishers pay royalties, the emails come. We are sorry we cannot afford to pay your royalties due to the Corona virus pandemic ... We won't get the money my husband and I use for our second term fees. A relief that schools were closed in March. Then Zoom classes start in May for my second born son who is in high school and my daughter and house help's daughter who are in primary school. We have to pay for the zoom classes and the attendant internet charges. My husband fixes things around the house, wrapping a leso on his head like a turban. I weed a crop of sweet potato vines that I planted on the roadside, donning a leso with the words, Bora uhai, mengine muachie mungu, - Be grateful for being alive, leave the rest to God.



**Gatuanyaga, Thika. Author, Muthoni wa Gichuru, is weeding sweet potato vines on the roadside outside her compound. Photo: Simon N. Kamau**

While weeding, two women whom I have before only seen passing by, stop to talk. A good crop of sweet potatoes. They say. Who could have thought that this ground which was thick with grass and shrubs, could yield such a healthy crop? And I straighten up. In that moment, the women and I connect in the wonder of rebirth, of the wilting cuttings planted in the earth and new shoots emerging to spread over the ground.

Gìkùyù saying, iriyaga na mbugi ona kùrì ùgwati – livestock will graze with tinkling bells even in the midst of danger – and so we learn to live with this disease, now a face without a mask seems odd. We learn to save the little we have. I discover that there is a certain brand of bread which seems bigger than the others. The loaf has more slices than other brands although it still weighs the standard weight of 400 grams. We learn to cheat the stomach. The banana fruit ripens, and I harvest the sun-ripened fruit while wearing a leso loose around my midsection, then I harvest papaya. That day, I twirl around with the bunch of bananas in my hands, stepping between the papaya, a celebration of nourishment.



celebrate harvest  
(1).mp4

**Gatuanyaga, Thika. Author, Muthoni wa Gichuru, is dancing while holding a bunch of bananas inside her garden. Video recording: Simon N. Kamau.**

May is the month that those that are employed are celebrated. May 1<sup>st</sup>. International labour day. There is nothing to celebrate this year with so many people losing their jobs. My husband, who is still assured of a salary, is holding up one side of my family's livelihood, while the other side sags, fluttering in the wind of uncertainty. May, a month of loss. Now more people are losing their lives to the Corona Virus. Fatalities climb to a hundred in Kenya. When before people had asked each other, do you know someone who knows someone who knows someone...who has died of the virus, now we say, yes, I know someone who has lost someone. It will not be until mid-June, that I will feel the sting of untimely death of friend, but now the fear of getting exposed, and dying, is becoming real. Mothers, in our Gatuanyaga estate in Thika, have started asking their children in Kenyan speak, you go where? You come back when? My stomach churns with worry when my two teenage sons leave the house.

I ask the smaller children, my daughter who is in grade two and my house-help's daughter, who is in grade five, what they feel about the disease. They take the whole afternoon, taking turns to type their responses on the computer, playing computer games in between. Three hours when they don't have to be outside, playing and coming into contact with other children in the neighbourhood. I listen as Naomi reads out her response,

*Since this disease came, we children cannot go to church, to school. We cannot go out to play or even to the supermarket. If we go, we MUST wear a mask. When we are at home, we learn how to cook tea, rice, ugali, porridge and eggs. We also learn how to bake. If you get out the gate, [You will see fire without smoke]. We play games, like tennis, badminton, and football.*

*We can make a lot of things like gloves, mittens and socks. We can make paper boats and paper jets. We plant flowers, beans and sugarcane. We wash the car. I feel bad we cannot meet our friends. I pray this corona stops.*

*The END.*

*By Naomi, grade five*

Then it's Loise's turn

*I miss my friends*

*I miss playing with Stella*

*I feel fine sometimes*

*I feel sad about Corona. I do not like Corona. It makes someone so sick.*

*Sometimes I am happy. I have a doll.*

*I want a puppy.*

*I love my father and mother.*

*I like going to school so that my aunt does not keep calling me, Loise, Loise.*

*The end.*

*By Loise, Grade two.*

When we are worried about our children, how to protect them, how to feed them, the politicians are worried about their political survival. The 2022 elections are in the horizon. Political realignments, which had folded up when the pandemic was first reported, like a lesa that had been washed and pressed, have unfurled once again. The ruling party, Jubilee, whose slogan is Pamoja-together, with a symbol of clasped hands, is being pulled in two directions. We can hear and see the *wreenee* of tearing in our radios and Tv screens. I take the Jubilee Party lesa, given out during 2017 campaigns and scrunch it up, discarding it into the clothes basket like so many of the campaign pledges made by the politicians.



**Kenya's ruling party, Jubilee, campaign lesa with the word *Jubilee* and a symbol of clasped hands, inside a clothes basket. In the background are empty jerrycans of water. Photo: Simon N. Kamau**

There is a dry spell in the beginning of June after steady rain for almost six months. A five shillings worth bunch of Sukumawiki is now three leaves of kale tied together. We sing an old folk song for rain, my husband's baritone leads the singing

Wakahare, Wakahare nì tùrathane, nì tùrathane,                      *Squirrel, squirrel, lets dart one another*

Nawandatha, Nawandatha, ngagùthìnjìra, ngagùthìnjìra. *If you dart me, if you dart me I will slaughter for you,*

Nacionyama, nacio nyama ikaheo aturi, ikaheo aturi                      *and the meat will be given to blacksmiths*

Nao aturi, nao aturi mature tùhiù, mature tùhiù                      *and the blacksmiths will make knives*

Na tuo tùhiù, natuo tùhiù tùrathe igùrù, tùrathe igùrù *And the knives, and the knives will pierce the clouds, will pierce the clouds*

Na rìo igùrù, narìo igùrù riuragie mbura, riuragie mbura                      *And the clouds will rain down, will rain down.*

Nayo mbura, nayo mbura, ìkarera nyeki, ìkarera nyeki *And the rain, and rain will make the grass grow*

Nayo nyeki, nayo nyeki ìkarera njaù, ìkarera njaù                      *And the grass, and the grass will feed the calf*

Nayo njaù, nayo njaù ikagùra mùka, ikagùra mùka                      *And the calf, and the calf will pay bride price for a wife*

Nake mùka, nake mùka agakia ùcùrù, agakia ùcùrù                      *And the wife, and the wife will cook porridge*

Naguo ùcùrù, naguo ùcùrù tùkahandoria, tùka hondoria                      *And the porridge, and the porridge, we will gulp it, we will gulp it.*

Despite our singing, the rains remain high up in the sky. Towards the end of June, the water pipes gurgle and then fall silent. Water for all, a pledge made by politicians during campaigns, remains a pipe dream. I write a film script, *The taps run dry*. And my first-born son, who has been home from university since the first case of Covid 19 in Kenya, shoots the video.

It's a lament of things that should be and are not. Of dry taps, when water should be plenty to wash our hands, of scarcity of food, when we should be contained at home to stop the spread of the virus, of Odhis, a friend who has died of Corona virus, bringing the sting of

death close to me so that it scratches at my heart. Oh death, why couldn't you linger and let Odhis go by?

Odhis a Luo, is buried in a hurry when, as per the Luo traditions, his death should have been mourned for several days, the death appeased, told to stay away a while.

In June, it has been a while since we have had an Amka Literature Forum, the literary forum for women in Kenya that I coordinate. Amka – the Swahili word for arise, get up, do something. At the end of June, the participants of Amka get up. This thing, this thing that has separated us, made sitting together a danger, we find a way of beating it back, of reconnecting again. And so, we have an online meeting and I see people; some I have not seen in a while – Riva, who moved to Japan, Isabell, who is in Germany, Amanda, who is somewhere abroad. Before the Corona Virus, some people would have liked to attend the forum and were barred by distance, but now the click of a mouse connects us. We are wrapped around in a virtual world, connected by our love of writing. I cover myself with a lesa. In the warmth of the lesa, I remember my late mother, draping a lesa over my shoulders. I feel again her lesa, tickling my face as I sat near her feet, while she told me stories of ogres. Those frightening one-eyed beasts, that would devour a whole village, until one person found the ogre's weak point and was able to kill it. Then the hero would cut off the big toe of the ogre. The blood would gush out with all the people the ogre had devoured. The village would rise once again.



**Gatwanyaga Thika. Author, Muthoni wa Gichuru, hosting an online AMKA literary furom via Zoom, with a lesa draped around her shoulders. Photo: Simon N. Kamau.**

In July, the pineapples ripen. All around the Delmonte pineapple plantations that neighbour where I live, are spotted with people harvesting the fruit. I walk along the access roads between the rows of pineapples. The air is redolent with the tangy soar-sweet smell of ripe pineapples such that I feel my mouth watering. The harvesters are wearing knee-length boots and long leather gloves that go past their elbows, to protect themselves from the sharp spines of the pineapples. I stop to ask a woman, who is harvesting near the edge of a row, whether they don't get snakes among the pineapple plants. She snorts before she tells me, "hiyo itakuwa tu bahati mbaya," - that would just be bad luck, "We cannot leave the fruit to rot in the fields."

Later at the beginning of August, I will walk to another section of the Delmonte farm and find workers planting a new crop. The young shoots will be heaped in a pile. The workers, now wearing soft cloth gloves, will be handling the shoots gently, putting them into shallow furrows and heaping soil around them. Other workers will be following them with a sprinkler, watering the new shoots.

It will occur to me then that life will just go on. In times of war, people will live. In times of hunger, my people in East Africa will tie a lesa tighter around their waists. In times of this Corona virus pandemic, we will continue to tie that piece of cloth, a piece of lesa or kitenge, over our mouths and noses. We will keep apart from each other. However, a time will come when we will be able to go for that rùracio – bride price negotiations. The bride and other girls of similar build, will be wrapped in lesos from head to foot. The bridegroom-to-be will be asked to identify his intended bride. He will run his hands over the covered faces of the girls, until he is able to identify his chosen one. His aunts will link arms and twirl around, in loosely-tied lesos, while ululating; their son has found a mate and the cycle of life is assured.



**A pencil sketch of girls covered in lesos from head to toe during a rùracio – bride price negotiations. Sketch: Amani Gichuru.**