

The Lost Letters from the Congo

The Lost Letters from the Congo were born out of love and admiration for the Congo (DRC) —the land and people—and its culture, but also out of the frustration with the gross misrepresentations of those three things. Before I came to University, I did not really have much of an interest in my culture. I knew some of the popular songs, ate the food, attended and loved the parties, but I did not think much of it. For example, I didn't speak Lingala much (one of our many native tongues), I tried not to associate myself with other Congolese in Glasgow, and I felt that most things to do with my culture were anything but base. I effectively believed the lies and “mutated” truths about my country that are diffused worldwide. It wasn't until I started doing some research on my country of origin that I began to think twice about the negative things that had been broadcasted almost everywhere about the Congo. On Christmas 2010, I had a six-hour long conversation with my parents about the Congo; this was not the first time we spoke about it, but it was the first time I started to listen with strong interest and curiosity. And it was the first time I truly felt proud and happy about being Congolese. It inspired me and motivated me to embrace my culture and history and find out more about it. The deeper I dug, the more I felt an increasing need to celebrate such an incredible culture and people. The popular negative view was not entirely coherent with my experience growing up in the Congo, and of a lot of the Congolese people I came across. So eventually I started writing the *Lost Letters from the Congo*, to communicate the Congolese voice amidst the struggle, celebrate the culture and to spread the reality and truth about my home country.

The *Lost Letters from the Congo* is based on my experience, and the experiences of my friends and family, when living in the Congo.

I hope to extend this work to discuss Africa.

Joe Makangu

Note: Chapter I and IV are more like rhymes than poems.

Lost Letters from the Congo I

I am a man, from a land,
Far and distant, away from yours,
I understand, that they always paint,
My culture as one full of strife and wars
And BBC news thinks we're savages,
Uncivilised and developing,
thank you for your compliments,
Primitive and simple-minded, so excuse me for my lack of confidence
In front of an audience of
College students
But thank you for letting me take the stage,
I'm from a country slowly dying like a man from old age,
But today I won't talk about anything that's not OKAY,
And surprise you by saying that I used to love,
Sitting and reading on our mango tree, filled with serenity, like a dove
Until our guard dog broke out from his cage,
Yeah I was afraid
but I was brave
And fast enough to run to the back door just to realise it was stuck,
And then back up to the tree I snuck;

and dad used to play the guitar a lot,
Which he used to keep right on top
Of the cupboard, in the living room I remember not
Being able to reach it,
And my dad spoke guitar language he could truly speak it
His voice and the guitar's melody were in perfect harmony,
Especially when he played that song about our cousin Noemi,
But then it'll always turn into anarchy because of me
When I tried speaking guitar language like my daddy, was probably
Not a good idea, like buying things without a manual in Ikea
Even the dog would complain

And what about the rain,
The heavy showers, hour after hour
The pitter patter of raindrops—my favourite lullaby
As I close my eyes
And venture into a world where all of Newton's Laws are broken
and $2 + 2 = 5$, the sky's always open
And clear,
Nowhere to hide, Monsieur Soleil
And as I wake from this dream,
And look outside the window, it seems
Like Descartes, I too can't distinguish dream and reality,
The sky's open and clear

And Monsieur Soleil shines so bright almost as if he was near

These are my letters from me to you
Of a place at the bottom of every league table
And at the back of every mind,
Negatively labelled,
Worst of the worst, Hell on earth,
But heaven to a younger me
It's my home.

Lost Letters from the Congo II

She's a young woman from a place that is known as the "Rape Capital of the World",
Every day it seems, girls and women
With single threaded plaits
Regardless of age, height, weight, or tribe;
Daughters, sisters, mothers or wives
Have their honours robbed away from them
Like pillaged villages,
By uneducated savages
Or savages with an education to dishonour the very same people, whom without,
Life would stop to a stand-still
But with courage, against them, she stands,
She stands,
She stands;
Still in love with this very same place in the heart of the second largest continent of the
world
Dubbed the "Rape Capital of the World";
Her honour still untouched like a treasure within a palace
Built up of blissful memories of a beautiful little girl
Aged six or seven,
With an inquisitive mind that seemed to get her into trouble a lot!
And with single-threaded plaits arranged like a star
For a special girl, in daddy's car,
Travelling far to the outskirts of Kinshasa,
Where Mother Nature's beauty is truly pure
Like the women there;
That day gold was in the air
As the sun shone,
As they ate so much that if she rolled down a hill,
She would have probably made a hole at the bottom!
As they swam in the lake,
Her friend and she discovering fish bones,
Or were they...actually fish bones?
As they explored the lake shore like Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson,
And to their horror, to discover human finger nails!

Which actually turned out to be fish scales
Or so they were told...
But she kept on exploring even on the way back,
Behind closed eyes
Where she became the first person ever to discover the Loch Ness Monster,
Who tried to eat her and so she woke up
And continued her explorations with opened eyes.

And at 10 years old
Again, she encountered Mother Nature,
This time outside a town called Hypen, on the outskirts of Kinshasa
And Mother Nature was prettier this time,
No they were no fancy houses with perfectly trimmed hedges
But a rich mountainous landscape like a postcard of the Congo - "from Mother Nature with
love Kiss Kiss",
And air so fresh that it could probably cure your lungs from cancer just by breathing it.
And the most wonderful thing,
A multi-coloured mosaic spring made out of orange and yellow and green and red rocks!
Almost as if life with all its colours sprouted from that one spring
Nullifying science's theory about the origins of life all along!
Or as if that spring was the start of every single rainbow
Travelling from the Congo all across the world to meet a poor soul
In need of cheering up in the other end!

Mother Nature left her excited, intrigued and exhilarated
And basking in the light of childhood happiness
In a place that is now known as the "Rape Capital of the World"
There stands a young girl with single-threaded plaits, blissfully smiling.

These are my letters from me to you
Of a place at the bottom of every league table,
Negatively labelled
Worst of the worst, Hell on earth,
But heaven to a younger me,
It's my home.

Lost Letters from the Congo III—Man of Integrity

They call him the "Man of Integrity"
He came to our village
Speaking of the pillage
Of our country by the greedy man, the true enemy

They call him the "Man of Integrity"
He came to our town
Speaking of the blessed ground

Of our continent, Africa's prosperity

The man of integrity, Patrice Lumumba
Believed in unity, to defeat the munguna
The enemy, who robs us from our sense of belonging and history
So that generations of Africans look back and they see nothing but misery
And a few good music videos on MTV
Ignorant of the achievements
Of our forefathers,
The invention of the stringed instrument
And the discovery of iron,
So I guess you can say that the original iron man was indeed a musically talented African.

Yes the man of integrity, Patrice Lumumba
Believed in unity, to defeat the munguna
The enemy, who robs us from our sense of dignity
As we are constantly reminded about how we kill ourselves on BBC
And even when you read the metro on bus 213
And to me,
Sometimes being African feels like a curse,
Yet according to science all of humanity originated from this Godforsaken part of the Earth,
Then it's clear to me that we are all in need of delivering.

Yes the man of integrity, Patrice Lumumba
Believed in unity, to defeat the munguna
The enemy, who robs us from our future
By stealing minerals that can help nurture
Our land, our economy, the people
Fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers
A place like Africa, there's no other;
It didn't all start with monkeys and slave ships
And African men and women in silver bracelets,
No, there were kingdoms—Kongo in central-west Africa
And Sonkoto, in Nigeria;
Timbuktu, in Mali, where knowledge was more valuable than gold;
With civilisation so remarkable and old,
A place like Africa, there's no other;
As Alik Shahadah says
"African civilisation is not measured by the heights of tall buildings,
But by the quality of human relations."

So let's stand for the elevation,
Of Africa's self-esteem
To become the realisation
Of Patrice Lumumba's dream
And so I sing
"Mboka ya biso, ezali ya biso

Mboka ya biso, ezali kitoko",
Our continent is ours
Our continent is beautiful

Lost Letters from the Congo IV—Hear Me

Yoka Ngai,
Just hear me now,
No, don't look for the who where why what and how
Don't try to understand, why I was raped by savage men
In front of my 5 year old son and 14 year old daughter
As they pinned down their father
Looking on helplessly, with a mixed expression of shame and rage
And how he discards me, afterwards and doesn't want to have anything to do with me like
sewage waste

So just hear me, hear my cries
As the love of my life
Is slaughtered by men with steel cold knives,
And machetes, heartless men with steel cold eyes
With souls darker than Kinshasa streets during blackouts!
No don't look for the whys
Or the hows of how I'm still here
Or the wheres to capture these thieves of the night
These murderers, but please just hear my plight

Hear how my heart skips a beat like a faulty CD
Every time I hear footsteps behind me
As I expect to be snatched away again
And learn to play with an AK47 instead of an Action Man!
I was forced to embrace the change,
I found it pretty strange
How the older boys called it a game
When all we did was induce pain
Finger on the trigger, bullet to the brain
First time, my eyes closed as the gun went "BANG"
And she flopped to the floor,
and all that remained
In my mind was that lifeless body with a bullet hole
In between the eyes;
But please don't try
To comprehend the logistics of this
I just wish
That you'd just listen and hear me!

Please hear me clearly, pay more attention this time

Because it wasn't always pain and suffering in this country of mine;
I was a student in Kinshasa University,
I was a musician singing songs of unity,
I was a baker with the best bread of Kikwiti,
People travelled all the way from Kinshasa to come see me,
I was the best palm oil merchant, fearlessly
Climbing up palm trees,
I was a hunter exploring the rainforest like Columbus navigating calm seas
And my dad never worked on his knees,
A suit and tie man with calloused hands and rolled up sleeves
Who used to deal in the diamond industry!

So just hear me, not as a ruined thing
But hear me, as a human being.
These are my lost letters from the Congo,
I'm glad that they're finally at your front door
Yes, from a place at the bottom of every league table
And at the back of every mind, negatively labelled
Worst of the worst,
Hell on Earth,
But heaven to a younger me,
It's my home