

Mlango wa Navushiku

(Navushiku's Lineage)

a solo exhibition by

Rehema Chachage

March 30th - April 18th 2017



Curated by Asteria Malinzi



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Front and back cover:
Rehema Chachage
Details from UNTITLED (whirl) and LETTERS TO..., 2016
Video

"There is a continuity between art and ritual. Ritual and art are essentially connected, and art plays a similar function today to that which ritual played in the past"

- Cynthia Freeland (2001)

In her book *But is it Art? An Introduction to Art Theory*, Cynthia Freeland (2001) suggests that there is a theory of art called the ritual theory. It is derived from thinking about the relationship between tribal rituals and what we today call fine art. Weighed against each other, there are indeed many similarities and differences between these two practices, and there seem to have also been a revival of interest in ritual, especially in the art world since the 1970s. Contemporary art (and especially performance art), arguably, gets us back in some way to tribal rituals and many feminist artists have, for instance, been interested in rituals and have used ritual-like imageries, actions and performances in their art.

Mlango wa Navushiku makes use of the motif of ritual performances to explore nuances in gender, generation, and sexuality. My curiosity with this motif is inspired by a personal interest in historical ([her]storical rather) narratives that started with personal stories of my mother, grandmother, and great grandmother generations of hardship due to discriminatory social, economic, and political systems. They used cultural and spiritual rituals and performances such as rites of passage—birth, marriage, death, etc. as mediums for molding, resisting and subverting the status quo. This body of work is inspired by a passage that caught my attention during my visit to Goree (slave) Island in Senegal in 2012, the year that this project was birthed. This passage captured a moment in history with a special significance to black female identity. It is written in French, but the English translation reads;

"When one of these unfortunate was pregnant, wrote Schoelcher," a hole was dug in the ground to accommodate her pregnancy while she was receiving 29 lashes regulatory that tore her flesh."

The project explores rituals from the 'traditional' patriarchal social sphere, including what became 'traditional' as an experience of cultural conquest of the African people through slavery, colonialism and neo colonialism; and the impact that has had on the female body, identity and emancipation. One can easily look for clues in ritual performances, where factors such as class, generation, gender construction and other identity formations are inscribed and demonstrated. Essentially, at the end of this project, I will visually explore 29 different ritual performances.

History depends on sources and their interpretations, and in the study of Africa, there are limited written sources from pre-colonial times. Because of this, the growth of historical research methods to include other sources such as oral traditions is proving beneficial, although there is; of course, need to take in consideration different interpretations for the research to be credible. With this in mind, *29 Lashes*, will base its research on both written and unwritten historical narratives that I will gather through verbal storytelling.

This particular chapter, *Mlango wa Navushiku*, uses verbal storytelling as research medium, and traces history (or rather [her]story) from my matrilineal line, exploring rituals tied to stories about some descendants of Navushiku, my matrilineal ancestor. Intergenerational dialogue is integral to my process of working, and of the obtaining of the stories explored in this body of work, I have found myself collaborating in majority of the works with my Mother, Demere Kitunga, a poet and an author, who has created text in response to my visuals.

Rehema Chachage
Visual Artist



Rehema Chachage
Mshanga, 2012
Photographic prints on dibond mount
60 x 50 cm

The re-telling of (Her)stories

The works of Rehema Chachage (2012 - 2017)

Photography has been used throughout history and into the present day as a tool for science and exploration; as a means of documenting people, places and events; of telling stories and recording histories; and as a mode of communication and critique in our increasingly visual culture. The medium is being continually reinvented and rethought, shaped as much by technological advances as it is by the ever-changing dialogues surrounding photography's use.

- MoMA on photography

It was at the Circle Art Gallery booth in the *Tomorrow's/Today* section at the 2016 Cape Town Art Fair that I had my first encounter with Rehema Chachage's work. The familiar image of a woman wrapping a blue khanga around her waist drew me into the booth. In those images, I saw myself. I saw my sister, my mother, my aunt and my grandmother. I saw home. On the opposite wall was a video screening of a woman in a red skirt, continuously spinning across a wooden floor. The booth contained a solo presentation of Rehema Chachage's two works *Mshanga* and *Untitled (whirl)*, which she had produced during a residency in Japan. This was the first time I was seeing works by a fellow Tanzanian artist at an international art fair. For the next three days that I would work at the art fair, I would pass by the booth and couldn't help but feel excited, proud and optimistic about the future of the Tanzanian art scene. One could easily confuse this feeling for patriotism. Rehema's work was reassurance that there is a small existing art scene in Tanzania.

We live in a time where the visuals we as Africans, encounter are more often of a western construct of beauty, culture and aesthetics. We see westernised images in our schoolbooks, on our billboards and on our television screens. Throughout history and to this day, those with access to modern technology and equipment have produced images of Africa and "African life". As Wambui Mwangi and Keguro Macharia put it the *Mwangalio Tofauti* (2010) essay.

"In the twenty-first century, images of Africa remain stubbornly anachronistic, testifying if not to the complete absence of modernity, then to an always

attenuated one that has not yet caught up to an idealized western modernity. A side-by-side comparison of images taken in the late nineteenth century and early twenty first too-frequently suggests that while the photographic techniques might have improved, the subjects profiled remains stuck in time."

Rehema's work is a breath of fresh air. It stands to defy and transform the glance on Tanzanian culture and traditions. She offers a perspective that shows a positive, loving and supportive aspect to tradition and ritualistic practices. Using the media of photography, video, sound and performance, she turns the lens to look from within.

She gives a visual representation to the verbal storytelling culture of many African societies, telling the stories and histories of her people. Her works act as a record of traditional practices that have not been documented due to the lack of availability of equipment and skill in Tanzania through time.

In *Mlango wa Navushiku*, Rehema performs and records (with the added literature from her collaboration with her mother, Demere Kitunga) the narratives of the women from her maternal line. Rehema shares a rare and honest glance into intimate settings and traditions of the Pare people of Tanzania. Working with verbal storytelling, as a means of research, she attempts to recapture history.



Mshanga tells Orupa Mchikirwa's story of sacrifice and survival. Orupa Mchikirwa, Rehema's great grandmother, raised many children in her family including Rehema's mother. With many mouths to feed, she would sacrifice the food that she had leaving her hungry. To distract her self from hunger and to continue farming for more food, she would tie a mshanga (the Pare people's term for a cutout from an old rug and then a khanga/leso that women would tie tightly around their waist). Using a series of photographic prints she creates a sense of motion and continuity of time similar to moving film to demonstrate how a mshanga is tied.

In contrast to the dark background of *Mshanga*, *Letters To...* tells the story of the support and restoration women give to each other. The video component of the installation shows a performance of the intimate ritual of *Kukandwa* (hot water massages), a widely practiced Tanzanian ritual. Done to a new mother after childbirth daily for one to two weeks, the ritual acts as a way to restore the new mother back to health. Believing that the new mother's body undergoes a trauma during childbirth, she is scheduled to receive hot water massages and oiling daily. The new mother's mother or grandmother carries out this practice. In response to the video work, Demere Kitunga writes intimate text consisting of two letters, one to her mother and the other to her grandmother, Orupa Mchikirwa.

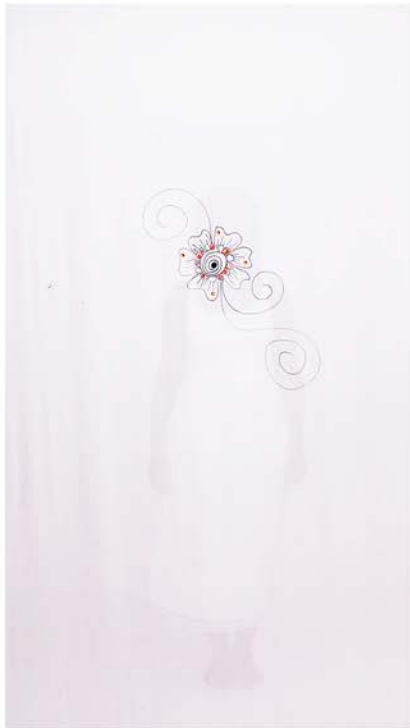
The Flower tells the story of loneliness, which sometimes comes with marriage, using the henna ritual as a motif. The video depicts a woman in a white dress, veiled with white fabric. As the video progresses a henna design gradually occupies the frame. For the sound, a woman wails a Mwambao chant that tells the tale of a woman who is giving birth alone and is crying out for her mother's support.

In the works *Untitled (whirl)* and *Nankondo Part III*, Rehema tells the story of meditation, spirituality and self-denial. *Untitled (whirl)* consists of a video of a woman in isolation whirling continuously in the frame. Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam that is based on the belief of whirling as a form of devotion, dance and worship, inspired the video. Rehema performs the whirling motion as a form of meditation and portrays her great grandmother, Orupa Mchikirwa as she would have done when she

needed to meditate and gain strength during hard times. Demere Kitunga response to the video with a text titled my legend dancer, which tells the story of how Orupa Mchikirwa love for her traditional dance of *ngasu*, which later on was forbidden by Christianity, stopping her from ever dancing it again because of her new belief.

Nankondo Part III is the story of Nankondo, a bar maiden and Rehema's great grandmother, who disappeared a long time ago and is believed to have been captured into slavery. Village religious fanatics believed that she was to blame for her captivity as she had low morals and worked in a bar. *Nankondo Part III* marks the end of the first chapter of Rehema's on going project, *29 Lashes*.

Asteria Malinzi
Photographer and curator



Pleasing to the eye your veiled familiar rendered unbeknown
A blanket of colour so snugly hugging as if it were your second skin
Beautifully patterns traced on your limbs akin to the blooming of a creeping vine
Garbed as a sensuous wrapper of modesty to which you are partially beholden
To the ritual of pleasing, a wedge for thriving in a woman's station

© Demere Kitunga, 2014

My legend dancer

I have seen her really dance once and only for a fleeting moment but her prowess left a lasting impression on me. It was in a ceremony to welcome a newly born member of the family. I was young then and ignorant of the significance dance or *ngasu* had on the yesteryears of *Vaasu* spiritual and cultural life; or that essentially, to be *Mwasu*, one had to be uninitiated through as special *ngasu*.

In Later years, I prompted her to dance but she has always declined, ever cautious of what it would mean to her acquired spiritual practice which made partaking in *ngasu* a mortal sin. Yet, from her own account and those of her peers, it is certain that not partaking to *ngasu* and other rituals of her 'people' is one of the major sacrifices my grandma has ever made for *Jesus*.

"Mph", she draws a long breath, her wizened eyes sparkling in recollection of a savoured life experience.

"Harika Orpah Mchikirwa mwana Shode!" She swears by her baptismal and given name, each representing a part of her life's paths. The one she lives by and the one she left behind but often reminisces about nostalgically. Christian hymns and *ngasu* are representative of each, the former she does when in total despair, the latter when in high spirit.

For pedigree, she swears by her mother's name, 'daughter of Shode' and not her father. I have never known why. Yet, we are a patrilineal ethnicity. Marriage is not a condition for name change among my people, thus my grandpa's absence in grandma's self-naming sequence never surprised me.

When a bit older and curious about that eclipsed part of my identity, it became my fascination to enquire and hear her talk about dance and what it meant to her.

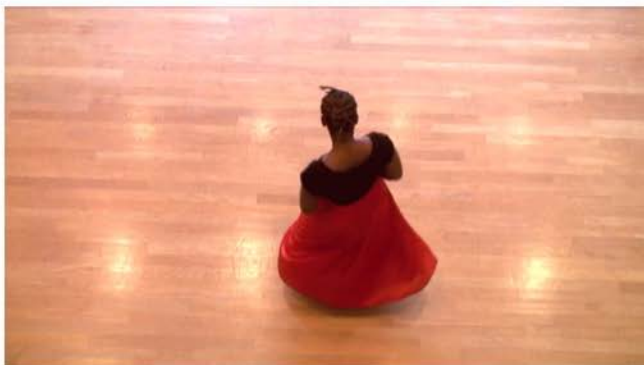
"Mama, *ngasu iziha mama*"/dance is sheer joy, she often would say in reverie. "If it isn't this word of God, mph...!" she once said hesitating, her voice trailed off, mind clouded, I guess for fear of blasphemy. On my prodding, she finished the sentence, "...nothing surpasses its pleasure."

"Show me." She did not need much prodding. There were often only the two of us, so I guess she figured out that God wouldn't be too cross with her.

"*Chenku, chenku kangi chenku*," She would chant in Chasu mimicking the sound of *ngugha*, some bell like anklets that *Vaasu* dancers adorn themselves in, for decoration and to make each step they make accompany the drum to create rhythm. She would make the exact dance movements as she chants, even when seated. The last I had this conversation with her, she was bed ridden, unable to support her weight on her feet since her hip bone completely worn out. In contrast, her upper body was still strong enough for her to make the dance movements while seated.

The drum is the key musical instrument in *ngasu*. There is the big drum often played by men and small drums that women play held under their left arm pit and played with their right hand. That is accompanied by *njugha* jingles, dancers' stamps and singing.

Despite her reputation as her generation's legendary dancer, Grandma Mchikirwa has never danced in a proper arena with all its paraphernalia since she was baptized a few short years before she bore her first child in 1917. Her church made it sinful any communion with traditional rituals and practices including dance. It even created havens for its neo converts including her in safe distance from the 'heathens'. Shode, wasn't so lucky. She converted but her spiritual healer of a husband would and did not. She thus remained in Nkogo where *ngasu* continued in its traditional form to the late 1960s. It is there that I witnessed for the first time an initiation dance and understood what it meant to Mchikirwa to forsake a practice that embodies the spirit of becoming *Mwasu*.



PART II: CONVERSATION WITH MAMA

Mama, it is not that easy to address you in your given name. A lovely name convention makes it taboo to use until it passes on to my daughter as it has. Today, dear mama, since I want to talk to you about intimate things, allow me, just this once, to address you by your given name Mkunde, the beloved. Conversation of this nature as you know, only takes place among intimate friends; and friends address one another by their given names.

I want to let you know that I remember and appreciate the way you carefully steered me through the path of awareness of who I was as a girl child and woman to be without crossing the mother child barrier that you were raised to observe. Silently but consciously.

The first lesson I learnt under your tutelage is about birth and death. I was barely five and you had just had a baby. The following morning my brother and I tiptoed to your bedside to greet you. You were very weak and the matrons helping you gave us instructions not to disturb you. I later learned that you had difficult labour and nearly died. After your *marahaba* to our *shikamoo*, you said to us without preamble, 'see, your little brother is dead.' You must have been too defeated to indulge in niceties. My brother wept and I wept along with him. The baby was later that day buried in a little patch in our garden. You did not leave your room. I still recall the mood, the place and shape of that little grave. I can still see in my minds' eye the single marigold that grew on it. Forced to abandon our homestead barely five years later, I left with those memories buried in my hearts, in patch nourishing a single marigold.

Many a time have I unearthed those memories and wondered how you must have felt during those painful days. Going through the rituals of child birth, your breasts screaming for a suckle, your tummy violently contracting, the matrons massaging hot oil on your skin but the product of your labour that you anxiously nurtured in your body for nine months lying in the cold, buried with a single marigold as a mark of his sojourn on earth. I learnt. I learnt what women go through in the course of giving life. That they must support each other through thick and thin. That they must raise again when they stumble and fall. When it was my turn to go walk that route I needed no telling. I knew. That bond tying us together in battle where no song is sung for fallen heroes is ever so palpable!

Oblivious of your loss, or in spite of it, the matrons took turns to keep you warm and nourished as is tradition. It is all they could do. You would not make it to hospital alive, the rural medical aid said. They soothed you; they bathed, oiled and massaged you. Young as I was, you made sure I witness all those grown up rituals. When they were gone it was I, not my brother three years my senior, attended to the chores of changing your chamber pot and putting your soiled cloths in soapy water to soak. I remember asking you why only me? I do not recall your answer but whatever it was, I understood and never complained again. We continued with this routine even after you got better. For no reason apparent to me then, you always summoned me from the warmth of the hearth at twilight, to come out in the cold to pour water for you as you washed and rinsed the blood soaked rags you used for your days. It was your way of giving me knowledge I would need some day, I later learnt. There were no sanitary towels those days, so when my time came, no one taught me what to do. I knew.

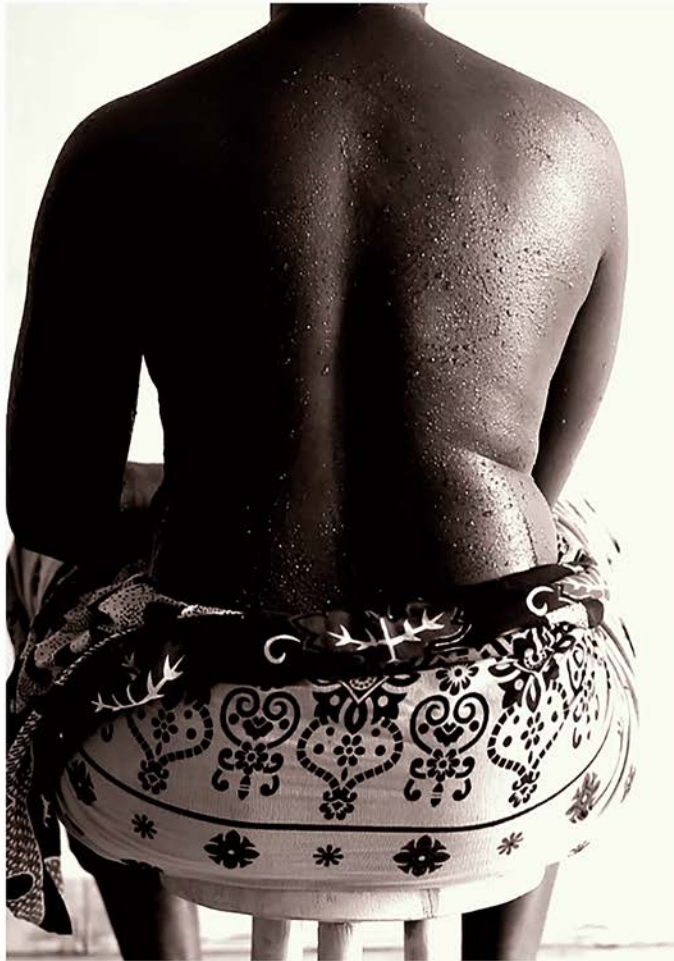
Mama, my children are grown, raised in a different time and era. The muteness with which we shared knowledge and wisdom is in the past. We now learn to talk with each other about nearly everything. It hasn't come easy but we are trying. Talking to you about these memories is my attempt to find my tongue for that thread of sharing in solidarity to go across generations. I want to learn how to talk to you mother about all those things we shared without talking... to name them and give them meaning in my life. I want you mother to give your thoughts voice for your granddaughters and me as a mantle of strength to them, their children and children's children... Let's talk.

PART I: RUMINATION WITH ORUPA MCHIKIRWA

To you my grandmother, friend and soul mate, I salute you from wherever old souls reside. It has been many years since you departed. Nearly 23 years have passed; my promise to write your life still unfulfilled. But a promise is a promise, *ahadi ni deni* as the Swahili adage goes, it is coming, it is coming.

Today however, I want to talk to you about me. Since you left things have happened. Twenty-three years is a long time. You left me a young mother. Like you then, I am now a grandmother. Like you, I am long time a widow. As I watch my grandchildren grow, my daughters graduate from maidens to lovers, wives and mothers, I begin to more and more see myself in you... or is it that I see you in me? My grandchildren fascinate me even when they are knotty. They remind me of what I used to be: knotty and incorrigibly curious. Only you in your mysterious ways were able to calm me down. You grabbed my attention with your tall tales of how babies were brought in by the crow! Imagine me believing that, even when you took me to every midwifery errand you ever run! No lesson came out of you naked. One had to burrow deeper and deeper to arrive at that aha! Moment. Learning through experience, observation, listening and riddles, some of which I am still unravelling today as a mother and a grandmother; because I am a mother and a grandmother.

Tell me though grandmother, did I have to wait this long to know that some lessons take so long to be learnt? Take the *mshanga* for example. I thought it only helped sooth your hunger pangs. Never knew it centred you. That all women whenever they set off for battle. As they constantly battle to preserve life, even at the threat of losing their own! It centres them in triumph; and more so when they have lost; and when one of their own is fallen! Profound lessons... I am still learning.



Rehema Chachage and Demere Kitunga
LETTERS TO..., 2012
Video and text installation



Rehema Chachage and Demere Kitunga
PART III: NANKONDO, 2016
Video and text installation

A whisper for Nankondo

Nankondo, my great grandmother, I never met you. Nor did your grandchildren. But this I know. If your spirit was released from your physical bondage as I believe it did, you must have joined the army of my ancestral spiritual guardians. Thus, I can rightfully commune with you as I do now. I am sure your spirit made its way home, for if spirits earn their release after departing from the bodies they are twinned with in life, where else would yours rather be than among your people; where you are still remembered by offspring of the only daughter you left behind, my grandmother Demere.

I don't have to tell you Demere is my namesake, I being the first daughter of her last born son. Unlike your daughter, I grew up wrapped in the care and guidance of my mother. In contrast, growing up without your motherly guidance your daughters spirit withered, constantly hungry for news, any news that could help her make sense of what took you from her at such a tender age. She was ready to believe anything people told her, good or bad. In the process, she fed into fable given with evil intent. Don't take it the wrong way, she was only five, poor thing. What they said to her stuck to her, gnawing her heart and generated a loath for herself and the very memory of you. How cruel!

This adage that every cloud has a silver lining makes sense however, because the little I now know of you comes from a seed of doubt she planted in my mind, leading me in a quest to get to the bottom of whatever it was that made her think of herself and you the way she did. I figured out that there must be a real story masked beneath the story they gave her as the reason for your abduction. I writing to you now about it so that in your spirit form you may cleanse us from its shame; release us from its guilt; and if you can find it in your heart to forgive us, then heal us from its pain; not the physical one, but its emotional and psychological pain that is leading us to self-loath and spiritual abyss. But I am writing to you not only about that....

I am also writing you about the brutality of whatever social system it was that snatched people from their families at gun point, severing the bond between mothers and their children, forcing spirits to take flight from their shrines, and uprooting people from their ancestral lands. I am writing to you not only about that, but also about the cruelty with which it created an episteme and generated a corpus of knowledge and a spiritual realm that made it look, feel and sound natural for a certain kind of people; my kind of people to languish in servitude for centuries to enrich another kind of people; for a promise of salvation in the thereafter.

A system that has continued to pervert the collective psyche of the modern world like an insignia of a heretic world order built on a hierarchy of hues, beliefs and deity; with structures and relations changing only in name and tactics, refusing to relent no matter how much blood is spilt. I am not only writing to you about all that....

I am also writing to you about the grave silence with which those you left behind coped with that inhuman episode in their cultural history. The manner in which they tried to distance themselves from it hoping it would cleanse them from its stigma; and the depth with which they sunk into a spiritual chaos expressed in such madness no diviner seems capable to exorcize.

I am also writing to you about the five years' old daughter you left behind amidst a cowed and defeated people; who made an effort to cope with the shame of their disrupted life by manufacturing lies that set them apart from those they sacrificed to the hungry monsters named *Valungwana*. These are the people who roamed the plains of *Asu* land and captured any woman, man and child that crossed paths with them alone and unarmed. The fable created for you is that you caused your own captivity. This may be unpleasant news to you I know, but I am compelled to tell you anyway that your daughter grew up believing you could have dodged your captors had you not been a woman of low morals. Why, because you decided to sell beer in a room full of men, refusing to leave until it is sold out. This was in Kimunyu, a weekly market, twenty miles away from your home village where you and your mountain folks battered farm produce for manufactured goods. Like a rape victim blamed of enticing the rapists, you became a scapegoat and your daughter had to bear the brunt of collective shame as the only memory of having had a mother.

Your daughter survived even if her spirit did not thrive. For a five years old made to doubt the moral integrity of her own mother; her *ngasu* and form of worship disparaged and the very sense of belonging as equal and rightful occupants of planet earth questioned, I would say she was resilient. You will be proud to know that she did not forsake her indigenous form of worship to the very end. Conniving agents of the foreign spirits gave her an abluion and a baptismal by emersion in a bathtub week before her demise. As a skunk stalking its pray, they pursued her to the very end. By then however, she was too far gone, only body and not her spirit partook in the ritual.

Since your departure, our forms of worship has been suppressed and our way of being obliterated. Some of its oracles crossed over and have embraced the new forms; but without the cloak of rootedness they are leading their flock adrift.

In Conversation: Rehema Chachage and Asteria Malinzi

Interview as transcribed by Linda Kemoli

In the following interview, Asteria Malinzi will be referred to as "AM" and Rehema Chachage as "RC".

AM: How long have you been practicing and when was the pivotal moment that you decided to follow art as a career?

RC: I started practicing before I joined university, but I was a part of art clubs when the opportunity arose. In secondary school, art was never offered as a subject but only as an after-school activity, so when my mum saw my interest in art, she enrolled me for classes at Dar Art Youth. I went there often but during my A-Levels, my other academic classes got complicated so I had to focus on that instead. After I finished school, I told my parents that I was going to pursue a degree in Fine Art. My dad was really worried. I think he wanted to be an artist, because I grew up inspired by his drawings and paintings, but I think he maybe had fears about it and went on to pursue sociology instead. My mother, whom I am so lucky to have, always encouraged me and, despite his reservations, so did my father. Once I got into art school, I discovered that art is more than just painting and drawing and started to discover my voice from there.

AM: When did you discover your visual language?

RC: I think towards the end of my third year in university and by fourth year, I was completely and utterly absorbed with me and my feelings.

AM: What was happening at the time?

RC: I had just lost my Dad so I made work about my loss.

AM: Did art become a means of therapy for you?

RC: Yeah. I became so involved and engaged with the work.

AM: What is your work process like?

RC: My work is both practical and theory based. To be honest, I sometimes tend to focus a lot more on the theory than the practical. I get lost with the research and forget that I actually have to go back to the studio and create. Concept-wise, it normally depends on where I am and what moves me. Initially, I used to be in front of and behind the camera but found it really complicated so what I do now is adjust the

camera settings that I want and have someone else operate it because I can't do both. Of late, I have also stepped back from being the only subject in front of the camera. For example, in Letters To, I am not the seated woman, I am actually the person washing her.

AM: Why are you trying to take yourself out of the frame?

RC: Initially, it was very reactive because people started to say that my work is very narcissistic so I felt that I had to start showing the audience that my work can exist without me in it.

AM: And are most of the rituals depicted in your work from Tanzania? If not, where?

RC: Everything I have explored for this exhibition is from Tanzania, specifically my mother's tribe, the Pare people (Pare lands). I am exploring rituals and stories that are particular to my matrilineal line. My interest in this theme came about after realizing the fact that most of the stories we hear about women are very oppressive. I opted to look at the more loving, nicer and celebratory aspect of them.

AM: Who would you say is your ideal audience and how has the audience in Tanzania taken to your work in regards to the rituals?

RC: Hmm...I'd say women, be they older, middle aged or young. This allows me to create a generational dialogue, establishing links within Africa. Because I make work that is very out of the box and contemporary, to my knowledge, there are no other visual artists in Tanzania (excluding filmmakers) working in this manner, so it is still considered a strange medium. I would say that my work is misunderstood back home but not ignored. There are people that actually want to engage with it and want me to expand more on what it is about.

AM: Is that okay with you?

RC: I think it is. I have this belief that you have to create an audience since an audience is not always there and art is not a culture for us.

AM: But at the same time Rehema, you have no one who is constantly asking for this material.

RC: That's the thing and space is also an issue. There are limited spaces back home.

AM: We need to create it.

RC: We do. We need to create alternative spaces to showcase art.

AM: Your work is about women, are you a feminist?

RC: (Laughs) I think there is a little bit of a feminist in me but I don't want to call myself a feminist. I feel like I need to earn that title.

AM: How long do you see the 29 lashes project lasting for? Is it life-long?

RC: I don't think so. 29 is a big number but not that big of a number (laughs). It's going slower than I thought it would because in 5 years, I have made about 10 works. I have 6 semi-completed works and 4 works that are still in the making so I have about 19 to go... that's been 5 years (laughs).

AM: But a lot has happened during these 5 years that you have been working and you have not been working as a full-time artist...

RC: True, so maybe the 19 will go by faster. I thought I was going to pursue my MFA. That, however, hasn't happened, so maybe I need 5 more years.

AM: Now, tell me about Mshanga.

RC: Visually, Mshanga is very much inspired by Japanese culture. I made this piece during my residency in Japan and it's an idea I have always wanted to explore but never got the chance to. I didn't even imagine the piece to be proper and ritualistic but when I look at it, I realize there is a lot of Japanese mannerisms present in the work. Mshanga was the first project I did as we were talking so much about this woman, Orupa Mchikirwa, who is a legend in our family.

AM: Does it refer to your grandmother or your great grandmother?

RC: My mum is the one who grew up with her great grandmother, Orupa Mchikirwa. My grandmother was also raised by her but went on to start her own life. When children were conceived early, they were left with their great grandmother, who also had younger kids of her own that were still living with her so she had a lot of people to feed and not enough means to do it.

AM: Is it right then to say that what you explore in your works are not rituals, but stories?

RC: Yes, they've actually become stories. In fact, in my statements, I call them ritualistic performances. I am discovering myself by exploring stories of people around me.

AM: And Untitled Whirl?

RC: This work was a spin off to Mshanga. I made this work during the same residency in Japan. I was deeply intrigued by the Sufism culture. Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam that is based on belief. Sufis have way of whirling as a form of devotion to God. It's actually a male-based practice so my work may be offensive to some cultures but I liked the meditative aspect of the practice. As I was making this work I thought of Orupa Mchikirwa, who had to somehow keep it together every day for the sake of her family. I just imagined that she might have had times where her mind is spinning. After revisiting the work a few years later, the whirl became more of a dance to me and I collaborated with my mother, Demere Kitunga, adding text titled, "The Legend Dancer."

AM: How about The Flower?

RC: This work is about the henna ritual and the preparation or the packaging of the bride. I think out of all the works so far, this is one of the more oppressive rituals I have explored.

AM: (Laughs) Why the use of the word package?

RC: For me, it is like packaging. The whole pre-preparation marriage ceremonies are about a month long, where the woman is being made beautiful for marriage. You are being packaged to a life of loneliness because most women tend to be more lonely than happy when they are married. That's why I chose the audio of a woman giving birth alone and crying for her mother. The text does not celebrate the ritual but rather points fingers at the preparation. Don't get me wrong, I am not anti-marriage, I am more anti what our society expects from a woman in marriage.

AM: Fascinating. Let's move on to Letters To...

RC: Letters To is so simple. It is purely a dedication to my grandmother. She is 83 years old and for both my children, she came all the way from the village with everything she needed to take care of me. The work feels soft and loving and there are almost no contradictory undertones to it. Even for the text itself, I actually got my mum to write something to my grandmother.

AM: And Nankondo?

RC: Ah, yes. So, I call this work part 3 because it is almost a continuation... of a continuation, of a continuation. It explores spirituality and the way the work developed is a little random. I was in Uganda and was beyond amazed at how Christians are completely entranced, worshipping all the time at any given opportunity. I have never seen anything like that. One evening, I was walking by Makerere University and there was a group of students praying, walking up and down a hill and I said to myself, "I have to record this!" So, I did.

AM: On your phone?

RC: Yes. Although it isn't the best quality.

AM: But it served its purpose. It makes it appear as though you are spying.

RC: And one wouldn't be aware if the person recording is one of the possessed or an outsider looking in. There is a bit of mystery to it. So, I recorded this video and set it aside for quite some time and then one day, I watched it again and just knew I could make it work so I started exploring ways to do that. Actually, one thing I haven't expanded on during our interview is how I work alongside my mother.

AM: Tell me more about that.

RC: Initially, when I started Mshanga, I did not even think about working with my mum...at all. But when I made The Flower, I showed it to my mum and she saw a poem in it so I told her to write it down for us to include it and the whole exchange became rather interesting.

AM: Before all this, were you sharing your work with your mother? Even in school?

RC: Yes! She didn't make it to my graduation but she came to my grad show. She said, "I can't come to both so choose one!" so I said, "fine then. Come to my grad show," (laughs). I have always shared my work with her but I think my grad show was the first time she was able to truly see my work. From that time, we started collaborating and our combined working process is: I create work; she looks at it; she responds to it; and vice versa.

AM: Meaning, both of you bounce ideas off each other?

RC: I have actually stopped excluding her name from my work.

AM: Were you excluding it before?

RC: Yes. Before, I used to just write "Rehema Chachage", but the text at the end read "copyright Demere Kitunga".

AM: Back to Nankondo, is it about a woman in your family?

RC: A woman on my maternal side of the family. When I showed my mum the video and told her that I wanted to work with this, she immediately thought of Nankondo.

AM: Why did she immediately think of her?

RC: Well the story is about the disappearance of Nankondo. There were many theories to her disappearance. Others thought she had been abducted into slavery. Others believed that she was killed because of her unworthy ways as of working as a bar lady.

AM: I was touched by the letter that Demere wrote in place of the 5-year-old girl. Who is this 5-year-old girl?

RC: Oh, yes. That is my grandfather's mother. So, this 5-year-old daughter never ever wanted to be a Christian. But in her dying days, her brothers carried her to a bathtub and baptized her because they believed she needed to be cleansed. They just carried her on her deathbed in order for her to die a Christian. I mean, we see a lot of this even today. Christianity just dictates so much of what we are supposed to do and how we are supposed to be. This is the reason behind the alter/shrine-like look of a bathtub in the installation. I think, for me, this first work acted as a passageway into the second chapter and for some reason, this is the work that felt like completion.

AM: The beginning became the end. I like that. What should we expect in chapter two?

RC: In my second chapter, I am delving deeper into stories of slavery, among other things. Maybe even colonialism.

REHEMA CHACHAGE **(ARTIST)**

Rehema Chachage (b. 1987 in Dar es Salaam) is a mixed media artist working mostly in video, photography, sound, installations and performance. She graduated in 2009 from Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art degree.

Themes thus far explored in her work are very much determined by her situatedness. The most prominent subthemes are: 'rootedness' 'gender' and 'identity' explored in her earlier works from the point of view of a stranger, the outsider, the other, alien and often voiceless—a feeling gathered from the social alienation she experienced in the four years spent as a 'cultural foreigner' and a non-South African, black female student in a predominantly white middleclass oriented institution. Of late, her interest in these themes has steered her in the direction of exploring rituals as valuable tool for reading into social norms and tensions, including the woman's identity, gender relations and subversion.

Her solo exhibitions include 'Haba na Haba' (Michaelis school of Fine Art, Cape Town), 'Chipuza' and 'Mwangwi' (Goethe Institute, Tanzania), and 'Mshanga' (Nafasi Art Space, Tanzania). She is one of the 42 African artists selected to participate in 2012's Dak'art Biennale of contemporary African art. In 2013, her works were exhibited in the 18th International Contemporary Festival Videobrasil. In 2016 her works were feature at the Cape Town Art fair and the FNB Jo'Burg Artfair.

DEMERE KITUNGA **(COLLABORATOR—LITERATURE)**

Demere Kitunga is a feminist activist, publisher and literacy for empowerment practitioner. She is also a creative writer, poet and creative translator.

She is a founder member of various national and regional feminist organizations (including TGNP, AFF and EASSI); a co-founder of the first women owned publishing house (E&D Vision Publishing LTD); and founding director of a readership promotion facility, Soma (Kiswahili for read or learn) which also runs a literary space named Soma Book Café; the first of its kind, crafted as alternative space for leisure, culture, and learning. Soma's strategic goal is to "Contribute to a vibrant culture of reading, storytelling and enterprise among young people in Tanzania"; as a way of empowering girls and boys; women and men, to deconstruct and interrogate conventional wisdom and knowledge, seeking their own version of 'truth', pursuing and originating knowledge and inventions. Sub-activities include: creative writing competitions, training workshops, colloquia and residencies; literary clubs, forums and events (combining literature and other art forms); children and young adults after school reading and storytelling related fun learning and life skills activities; and other book related interventions such as author profiling book signing, launching and exhibitions; inter gender/inter-generational dialogues and public talks. She has authored and translated several children books and contributed to a couple of poetry anthologies feminist book titles.



The end of chapter one...

