

Umendo: Culture hinders progress

N. Sibanyoni

This is my mother's story as she told it to me. Hearing her story touched me deeply and makes me want to share this with other women, young and old.

As I sit under the tree, there is so much peace here. The sun is hot, birds are singing, flies are flying under the tree, kids are playing in the street. Makhe, my neighbour, greets me. I thought back to where I was before – the days I thought I meant nothing. The days I just wanted to die. The days I thought God had forgotten me. Yes, I remember the day my mother passed away. I was left with four siblings to take care of. I am the oldest sibling. Such pain. It was like something went missing from me or something was taken away from me—my heart. I lost my mother at an age when I still needed her. Yes, my father was around, but he knew nothing about taking care of children. My younger brother was only one year old. My father would say, you know I am a man, I can't take care of him.

Sometimes, tears would just run down my face because we had nothing to eat. It was not that there was no money in the house. My father would not give us any. I had no choice but to start looking for a job as a domestic worker to feed my siblings.

By the grace of God, I got a part-time job. I was not earning much, but it was better than nothing. I stopped going to school as my father refused to let me go to school. He said I should teach myself

to be a wife and education will not take me anywhere. He needed cows.

With the little money I got from the job, I made sure I bought books and uniforms for my brothers so they could go to school. As time went on, I was chosen to be a *makoti* by the family. I had to leave my siblings behind and hoped my father would take care of them. My father was happy with my husband's family because they were respected in my village.

Little did I know what I was letting myself into. Few months into the marriage I fell pregnant. My husband and his family were happy. I was overwhelmed. What was needed of me was finally happening. I would give birth to an heir (boy) and things would start to brighten up for me.

I was happy being a *makoti*, although it came with many responsibilities. My husband worked in the city and I stayed with his family in the village. I would wake at 3 am while it was dark. Trees would be moving because of the breeze, there would be the sound of the leaves, of dogs barking. I remember as if it were yesterday. I would go to the mud house to start a fire so I could cook porridge for the family. I would also put a big pot of water on the fire for the children so they could bath and go to school. I would sweep the yard. I was used to that life. Many would say, why are you staying with your husband's family, why don't you also go to the city to stay with him? And I would say I was keeping an eye on my siblings as they would come and check if I was fine.

When I was eight months pregnant, the family asked me to stop working. They said I would go back when the baby is one year old. They knew I was supporting my siblings with the money. I agreed. For some days they would send food and toiletries to my siblings.

Finally, the day came, and I gave birth to a baby boy. He was named Ntokozo by the family. Ntokozo means happiness. He brought joy into the family. I was happy, and my husband was over

the moon. It did not last long because after two days my son was sick. He was running out of breath and crying but there were no tears. The voice couldn't come out clearly. He was pale. He took his last breath, looked straight into my eyes and then closed his eyes. He died in my arms.

I thought my heart had stopped beating. Tears streamed down my face. I screamed so loud from the depths of my lungs, cried and called out his name 'Ntokozo!!! Why are you leaving me? Haven't I loved you enough?' I had many questions- 'what did I do wrong? Why was God taking the only thing that made sense to me? What have I done to deserve such pain? Am I not good enough to be a mother?'

The room turned dark as there was no light, the walls were silent, nothing moved, not even my eyes. The only thing that moved were tears down my face.

The family came running to my room on hearing my screams. Their faces said it all, their mouths were wide open. My son was gone and no one could do or say anything to bring him back to me. My little baby boy was gone and I mourned his death. His father was present with me every step of the way. I prayed to God to keep my baby safe and protect him.

After the cleansing ceremony my family made a decision that I could go to the city with my husband just to get away from the pain. Everything reminded me of my son. His clothes smelled of him, my room had his smell. I agreed to go. In the ceremony, the ancestors were asked to look after me and my son. They were told where I was going. A goat was slaughtered.

I had mixed emotions. I was happy that I was going to start a new life, and sad and angry that I was leaving the spirit of my boy behind. After a day or two, my husband and I left the village. The family, neighbours and friends sang songs and sent us away with food, blankets and presents. The car was full of goods.

As I said ‘city life here I come’ I felt peace at last. Maybe I will make peace with my son’s death. People were smiling and singing. There was so much happiness. My mother in law came to me and pulled me on the side and said “Makoti, phambili awazi kunani. Qina ntombazane, iba ngumama emzini wakhe” (Daughter-in-law where you are going you do not know what you will find. Be strong and be a woman). She hugged me and held on tight saying “ndlela entle sisi” (go well my child). I replied “Thank you mama, it means a lot. Take care of yourself too.” I kissed her on the cheeks. I went back to the crowd as it was time to leave. People were waving and shouting “We will miss you, do come back to us. In December, bring us sweets from the city.” As we left, we were happy for that moment. The world seemed peaceful.

First time in our shack, everything was perfect, everything made sense. All things had a sense of connection, there was meaning.

But things started to change. The family started to turn on me, calling me names. Years went by and I did not conceive. They did not understand why I was not conceiving. I was staying with my husband, why was it so hard for me to fall pregnant? The people I thought understood my situation turned on me.

By the grace of God I fell pregnant. I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. She was so cute—beautiful eyes and black hair. She looked like me. I was happy again. God had answered my prayers. He blessed me with a baby girl. I named her Thulisile. The family came to see her and brought her gifts. A ceremony was done and she was introduced to the ancestors. I took her to church to be baptised. We were happy again.

Life took a different turn. My husband started drinking. He would come home drunk and smelling alcohol and tobacco. I asked him if he was not happy with the gift God had given us. I did not know what was the problem.

I remember the first time he laid his hands on me. It was cold outside, the rain had stopped and there was a breeze outside. He came in and sat next to the stove. It was warm in the house and I gave him his food and a bowl to wash his hands. I sat down and asked how his day was. He did not answer, he kept quiet. He just looked at me with evil eyes.

As he ate his food, he started complaining that there was too much salt in the food. I asked after all these years I have been with him, he is only complaining about food now. He slapped me so hard on the face. There were strange sounds in my ear. I screamed. That did not stop him. It made him even more angry. He kicked me while I was on the floor. I screamed so hard out of pain. To this day, I did not know what made him stop. When I opened my eyes there was blood on the floor. He then said 'Clean up this blood and take a bath. Who will you sleep with when you look like this?' He went to the chair next to the stove and started smoking.

I stood up. I took a cloth and bucket of water to clean the blood. Slowly, trying not to hurt my hands as they were swelling, I finished cleaning the blood. I took a dish with warm water, went to the bedroom, locked the door, took my little girl, held her close to my heart and cried. Making sure I did not make a sound, tears went down my face while breastfeeding my child. I asked myself, 'What did I do wrong? Was the food that bad?'

He knocked on the bedroom door and asked me to open. I went to open the door while holding my daughter. He said he was sorry, he did not know what came over him. He asked me to forgive him. I did not answer. I put the child on the bed and bathed. Silence in the bedroom. No word exchanged. I told myself I needed to go home. I thought I would be safe at home. That is the place I know I will not hurt like this. The other part of me said, stay, you said you wanted to be a woman.

I remembered my mother in law's words to me but something came to my mind. He had asked for forgiveness, he did not mean to hurt me. I forgave him, but the fight did not stop. Years went by. I had scars on every part of my body. I was sore. My daughter saw everything. She would scream and cry. Seeing me like that killed me. I made the choice of going back home to my father.

I packed everything, took the first taxi home. I felt a sense of relief, when I got to our village. I did not know what to expect, I did not care. I just wanted to be away from that man before he killed me. Finally, I arrived home. I saw my father sitting under the tree. I just broke into tears. Words could not come out. I wanted to talk but words were nowhere to be found. My voice was gone. The pain came back- all of it. It came back at once. My father hugged me, and calmed me down. He took my bags to the house, made me tea and gave my daughter some sweets. He then asked, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in the city? I told him everything, I mentioned everything, every pain I felt. I poured it out to him. He looked at me straight in the eyes and said 'That cannot be that bad, you agreed to marry him. You cannot come back home now, you cannot leave him. Where would I get the money he paid for lobola? He! Do not shame my family! You know what you are doing is against our culture.'

I had never seen my father so angry. A few days went by and my husband came to talk to my father. They agreed that I must go back. I also agreed. They said once I leave, I must not come back from the marriage no matter how hard things get. I must stay there. I had no choice but to leave with my husband. He was the breadwinner and I did not have a job. I had not been to school, so how would I survive on my own? What was going to happen to my princess? I had no choice but to go with him. But I made a promise to God that I would get out of this situation. I could not raise my child in this family.

We went back. Days changed into months. Things did not change. One day he hit me so badly that he broke me in half. My face was

fractured. Neighbours called the ambulance as they had heard me screaming the previous night. At the hospital they ran some tests and told me my ribs were broken from his kicks. They also told me I was HIV positive. I was shocked by this news. I had a seizure.

I woke up after three days. The first words I said were 'where is my little princess?' They brought her to me. I promised that she would never again see me like this. She cried. That was a turning point in our lives. I told the doctors everything. The bastard came to the hospital to see me. He was arrested and charged with assault.

A few months later, I got a job as a domestic worker. I did not earn much, but I was happy. It was a start. Things were starting to turn to a bright side. I worked for a year, and moved out of our home. I bought a shack and stayed with my princess. I made sure I protected my daughter from harm. I took her to the best school making sure she had everything she needed. I told her everything about HIV and contraception. I told her how culture made me stay in an abusive relationship. I told her about life experiences for women.

Today, I stay in peace in a house my little princess bought me. She is working as a social worker, helping women who are oppressed and abused by partners and family members. Things have turned out for the best. God gave me the strength to get out of that relationship. My husband was sentenced to three years in jail and he died there because he did not take his medication. I took his body back to the village and we buried him. I made peace with him. I have forgiven him. I loved him. I still do. I hope God will forgive him. Whatever he did, it was because of the anger he had. He hated his father so much, his father who used to beat his mother. He thought it was wrong for a man to cry. He had multiple partners and did not use condoms. Rest in peace my husband.

I have learned to love myself. I think about what is good for me rather than what other people think or say. Or what will be seen as right or wrong culturally.

