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with Mail & Guardian

The Continent

Namibia's first lady

And the golden
thread of
misogyny

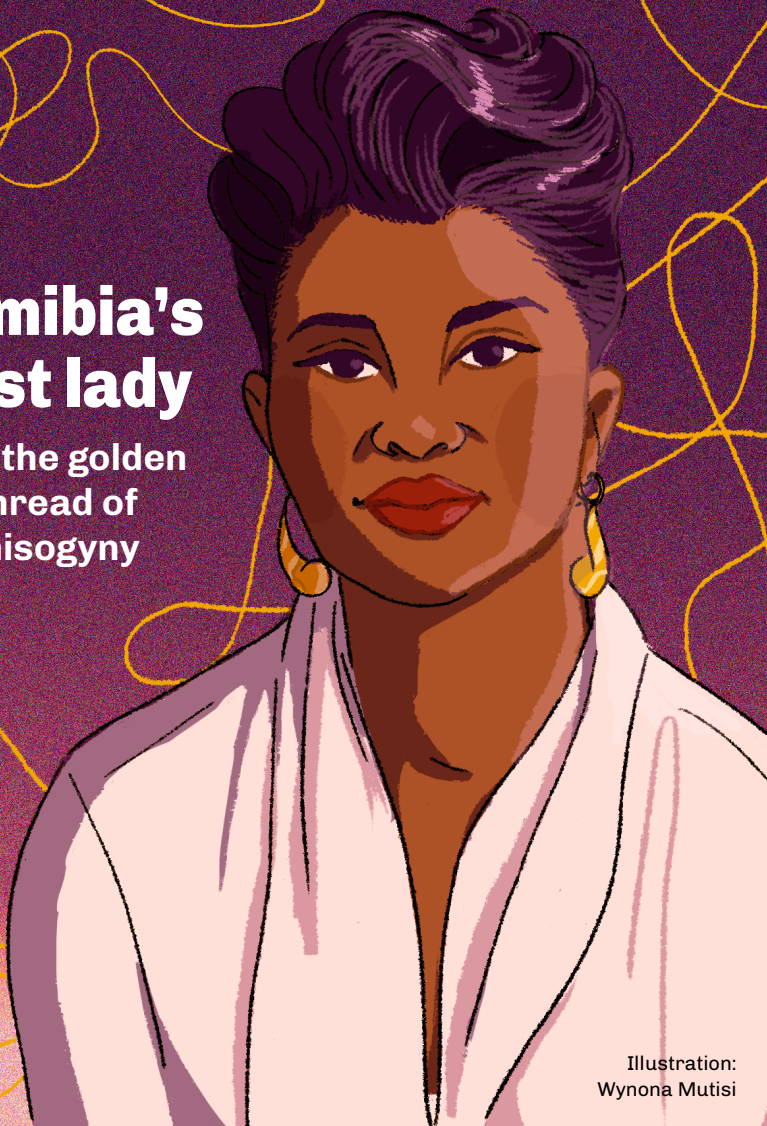


Illustration:
Wynona Mutisi

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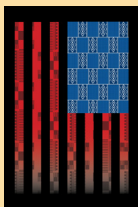


COVER: Monica Geingos is one of Namibia's most successful business people. She is a dollar millionaire. In 2015 she married Hage Geingob, shortly before he became president. Since then, she has faced a torrent of sexist vitriol – the 'golden thread of misogyny' as she calls it – in a country where violence against women is common. In a candid, gracious and honest interview, she speaks to Samira Sawlani about what it feels like to be the victim of sexist abuse – and why she's fighting back (14)

The Continent's year-end fundraiser

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fundraiser.thecontinent.org

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The Continent with Mail Guardian

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



The case against Facebook

Dear Editor,

Yes! Facebook has grown from an aid into the primary poison of our brains ('Should we delete Facebook?', *The Continent* Issue 66). The level of interdependence that many people have on it is really crazy and it's only in good faith that we do away with the application so as to look deeply into other communication models.

Today, very many groups and accounts are spreading misinformation across the app but nothing is happening. For example, groups that post and talk about pornographic content do it without even caring about who the message is intended for. The worst is posting pictures of accidents and crime scenes. Facebook is no longer a safe space for communication since it is invaded by a lot of misinformation.

Charles Odimo

Mzungu Privilege

Dear Editor,

Shouldn't we rephrase to "American-African", as a reminder that whatever we may wish to be, ultimately we are the product of where and how we were brought up? Hence David's characterisation of Dexter and his wife as "mzungu" and Dexter's feeling more American in Kenya than in the US. The very need to take a "Black Break", ending up with a Kenyan guide, is quintessentially Western. I don't see many Africans needing (or being able to afford) an "African Break".

John Chileshe

Dear Editor,

The exchange between Dexter and Christine was touching ('African... American, and the spaces between', *The Continent* Issue 62). From Alabama and Kenya, you expand and expound through time, weaving in James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Binyavanga Wainaina. In your intimate introspections and carefully crafted back-and-forth thoughts, I sense the process of "suturing" to help heal deep and complicated wounds as we learn to live together differently in the future.

Kathryn Toure, Nairobi, Kenya



Got something you want to say about something you read in *The Continent*? Tell us in 100 words or less. Send an email to letters@thecontinent.org



Photo: Government of the Republic of Barbados

BARBADOS

Independence at last

The Caribbean island nation of Barbados has finally ditched Britain's queen. It became a republic on Tuesday, renouncing the British monarch as its sovereign and replacing her with its recently elected president, Sandra Mason. "It's about us, rising out of the cane fields, reclaiming our history," Winston Farrell, a Barbadian poet, said at the ceremony. Growing sugarcane on the lush island of Barbados, the British perfected and profited from the use of enslaved Africans for plantation farming. The island is the birthplace of pop icon Rihanna, who was recognised as a national hero at the same ceremony.

DRC

Cancel Dan Gertler

The DRC filed a claim for \$154-million against Israeli billionaire Dan Getler, in the International Chamber of Commerce. It also seeks to cancel a licence for two oil blocks held by his companies. Getler has already been hit with sanctions by the United States over corruption. President Félix Tshisekedi recently ordered an official review of all major public contracts signed under former president, Joseph Kabila. *The Continent* recently published reports, as part of the #CongoHoldUp investigations, detailing how Kabila associates siphoned off millions of dollars in public funds.

ETHIOPIA - SUDAN

Border tensions or image laundering?

The Sudanese army says it fired rockets into Ethiopian territory early this week, after Ethiopia threatened civilians and its forces in their border area. Also this week: a top Sudanese general, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, gave an interview to warn European powers that their countries risk a refugee influx from Sudan, if they don't support its army which keeps the borders in check and stop criticising it over the October 25 coup. His 'warning' leans into European anti-migrant sentiments which rose after the Arab Spring.

CULTURE

Death of an icon

Legendary Ghanaian-American, Virgil Abloh, has died of cancer, aged 41. His designs as the first black artistic director at fashion giant Louis Vuitton have been worn by the likes of *Black Panther* stars Micheal B Jordan and Chadwick Boseman. His own label, Off-White, has dressed some of Africa's biggest celebrities, including WizKid. He also designed furniture in collaboration with IKEA, album covers for Kanye West, an art concept car with Mercedes Benz, and sneakers with Nike. He was also known in the music world as an accomplished DJ.



Photo: Pascal Le Segretain/ Getty Images

VACCINES

Local jab vaccine production set to kick off in Africa

The pharmaceutical company Johnson & Johnson has granted a licence to Aspen Pharmacare in South Africa to produce its single dose vaccine for distribution in Africa. More than a year after richer nations started vaccinating their citizens, African countries are still far behind because those with wealth jumped the queue. Local production should help change this, stopping the forced reliance on donated vaccines from Western nations that are close to their expiry dates.

UGANDA-DRC

Terror group's camps bombed

Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have launched joint attacks against the Allied Democratic Front, the group blamed for four recent bombings around Kampala. ADF – which has linked itself to the global terrorist group Islamic State – is also blamed for more than 500 attacks on Congolese civilians in the past three years. Starting Tuesday November 30, Uganda's military bombarded the borderlands of Watalinga, in DRC's Nord Kivu, where ADF camps are thought to be.



Photo: Oupa
Nkosi/M&G

LESOTHO

Ex-PM charged with ordering his wife's murder

Lesotho's former prime minister Thomas Thabane was this week charged with the murder of his wife, Lipolelo Thabane. She was gunned down on June 14, 2017 just two days before Thabane became prime minister. The two were embroiled in a bitter divorce. Thabane's current wife, Maesaiah Thabane, was charged with the same murder last year and released on bail. The two are accused of hiring the men who shot her. Thabane, 82, resigned in 2020, months after being named suspect.

TANZANIA

Dry December

Dar-es-Salaam doesn't have enough water, and rationing has been implemented across the city. The city usually gets rain from October onwards, but this year temperatures have soared to near 34°C, while the rain has stayed away. This has exacerbated existing problems, such as illegal water connections in the main water basin that supplies the city.

NIGERIA

Governor trashes massacre report

The Lagos state government has rejected the findings of an official investigation into the #ENDSARS demonstrations of October 2020. The leaked report called what happened at Lekki Toll Gate, where police and soldiers opened fire into the crowd, a "massacre" and listed 11 civilians who died on that night. The investigative panel was set up by Lagos governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu. The government he heads now says the panel's findings are "totally unreliable and therefore unacceptable." Its November 30 statement rejects the "massacre" finding, and claims there is no evidence that security officials killed anyone as they dispersed demonstrators.

Zimbabwe



Nowhere to go: Zimbabwean special permit holders outside Home Affairs in Pretoria.

Photo: Madelene Cronjé/M&G

Zimbabweans living in South Africa face an uncertain future

Every year, at around this time, many of the hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans who live in South Africa make their way back to Zimbabwe. Over the Christmas period, families and friends reunite, and Zimbabwe's struggling economy gets a desperately-needed influx of foreign currency.

Not this year, though. In a shock announcement, Zimbabwe's government

has effectively closed the border to ordinary travellers. According to spokesperson Nick Mangwana, anyone coming in to Zimbabwe must quarantine in a hotel for 10 days – at their own expense. This emergency measure is designed to prevent the spread of the Omicron Covid-19 variant, he said.

It has also thrown holiday plans into chaos, as few people can afford the time or the money to quarantine.

This is the second dose of bad news for Zimbabweans in South Africa in a matter of weeks: Last month, South Africa's government announced that it would not renew the Zimbabwean Special Permit at the end of this year. The permit was introduced in 2010 to legalise an influx of refugees – overwhelmingly ordinary people fleeing economic hardship and political persecution – and has allowed more than 200,000 Zimbabweans to live and work in South Africa.

Now, in what has been widely criticised as a populist decision, South Africa says they must go back to where they came from – and has given them a grace period until the end of 2022 to do so.

This decision is likely to be challenged in court. "It's impossible for anyone to do anything to migrate to a [different] permit in that time. It's impractical," advocate Simba Chitando told *CapeTalk* radio station. ■

DRC

Another week, another Kabila corruption scandal

It was dubbed “the deal of the century”. In 2007, several Chinese firms agreed to invest billions of dollars into the Democratic Republic of Congo’s ageing infrastructure – roads, railways and hospitals – in exchange for lucrative mining concessions. But the deal was shrouded in secrecy from the start.

The Continent can reveal now that it was a great deal indeed for the president at the time, Joseph Kabila, and his inner circle, who grew richer to the tune of \$55-million. For the Congolese people, however? Not so much.

This revelation is the latest finding from a major investigation into the largest-ever leak of African banking documents, known as the Congo Hold-Up investigation*.

The documents show how China Railway Group and Sinohydro, the two Chinese construction companies at the centre of the deal, funnelled at least \$55-million into bank accounts at BGFIBank. These accounts are all linked to Kabila’s family members or advisors.

Meanwhile, the infrastructure projects that were supposed to be completed have been plagued by delays and shortfalls.

“One of the biggest deals in the history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is also one of the dirtiest,” said JR Mailey, the director of investigations at The Sentry, an NGO that specialises in tracking dirty money. The Sentry’s report into the dodgy deal, *The Backchannel*, was released this week.

“With access to billions of dollars’ worth of mineral wealth at stake, two Chinese companies pumped millions into accounts controlled by the president’s family. The scheme involved a web of shell companies and a shadowy middleman, but at the center of it all was a bank hijacked by the DRC’s ruling family. Money laundering controls and compliance regimes might sound esoteric, but when they fail, dangerous things happen,” said Mailey.

None of the companies involved responded to requests for comment. Nor did the Kabila family or BGFIBank. ■

**The documents – all 3.5-million of them – were obtained by the Platform to Protect Whistleblowers in Africa and Mediapart, and shared with the European Investigative Collaborations network. They were trawled through by a consortium of investigators representing 19 different media houses across 18 countries, including The Continent, as well as five NGOs.*

Sudan

Protesters die demanding full civilian rule

Sudan's army pre-empted a handover to civilians with a coup, and then reinstated the civilian leader. On the streets, risking life and limb, demonstrators are still demanding the exit of the military.

At least 42 protesters have reportedly been killed in Sudan since October, and as many as 200 have been injured in the demonstrations demanding the full civilian rule that they won in 2019, when their mass protests ended Omar al-Bashir's 30-year military rule.

After an interim period of dual military-civilian rule, power was meant to be handed over to civilians. But in late October, just a few weeks before this as meant to take place, the military grabbed power. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sovereign Council which has run Sudan since 2019, had Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and

his cabinet detained, prompting the mass protests.

As had occurred in the protests against al-Bashir, Sudanese state security forces unleashed violence in response. Under the cover of an internet and telephone blackout, they reportedly killed 14 demonstrators on the deadliest day, November 17. The communications blockade remained in place until November 18, despite a court ordering it lifted nine days earlier.

On November 21, Hamdok signed a 14-point agreement with the military that ended his house arrest and the detention of other civilian leaders, and reinstated him as prime minister.

The main groups protesting in the streets rejected this and continued to organise protests. They chant "no negotiations, no partnership" as they demand what they had fought for in the first place.

Unwilling to give Sudan a democratically elected government, the military and security forces have continued to meet protests with violence. Some of the injured were reportedly dragged out of hospitals when they sought treatment.

This week, media reported that security forces used sound grenades and teargas to disperse demonstrators who were marching towards the Republican Palace, where the country's rulers sit. ■

Nobody is safe until we are all safe

The Omicron variant of Covid-19 has shown up the racism of the West. It has also highlighted existing inequalities and failures in our own countries. We need to tackle these to get more people vaccinated, writes Anand Madhvani

As news of the new Omicron variant broke last week, there were waves of initial fear – and then anger.

Western travel bans were widely criticised as a knee-jerk reaction, punishing the skills and transparency of South African scientists who identified the variant. With cases pre-dating these now being reported on other continents, the bans seem at worst racist; or, at the very least, too late to be useful.

The travel bans will devastate already fragile economies and tourism across southern Africa. Lockdowns are a last-ditch policy, even in rich countries with functioning social security nets. But they are particularly horrific in much of Africa. There is deep fear of their possible return.

It's still too early to understand the

transmissibility and severity of Omicron, or the protections our current vaccines provide against it. It isn't too early to look at how its arrival heightens existing problems of vaccine inequality and hesitancy.

Some Western commentary has been extremely misleading. The idea that Africa is hesitant, fuelling the rise of this variant, erases the reality of enormous inequality and delays in vaccine access. Africa urgently needs increased and predictable supply, to get our populations protected. The West has stood in the way of this happening.

Many external commentators focused on South Africa, but that's an outlier in many ways. Africa is not a country. The large, online, white population – which makes South Africa feel accessible to international journalists – also harbours unique distrust of any black government.

Focusing on African hesitancy through this avenue is ironic. Research by the University of Johannesburg and the Human Sciences Research Council shows that vaccine hesitancy in South Africa is highest amongst white South African males and, as such, is not African, but an extension of the West's infodemic.

The volume and familiar talking points of South Africa's anti-vaxxers mask how their views on personal "rights" and government conspiracies are niche. News of Omicron amplified standard anti-vaxxer talking points online. Despite this, South African provinces saw record numbers getting vaccinated.



Shoulder to shoulder:
A healthcare worker administers the vaccine in South Africa. Photo: Michele Spataro/AFP

As ever, the reality is more complex and revealing. Black South Africans remain more willing to get vaccinated than their white counterparts. At the same time, however, a higher proportion of white South Africans have actually received the vaccine than their black counterparts.

Class – and to an extent race – help explain some of the mismatch between vaccine intention and action. People with access to better health systems are far less concerned about side-effects than those without, who may be wary of even going to hospitals. It's also easier to get vaccinated if you have a car.

Covid-19 creates unusual challenges. Inequality and access are critical.

In many African countries, we have some existing systems for vaccinations, but these require massive expansion and support for mass adult campaigns – even once a steady supply of vaccines is available.

In Kenya, where I work, we needed high-profile local language vaccination campaigns. Instead, politicians facing elections kept holding large public rallies. (This is not uniquely African –

Brazil, India and the USA made the same mistakes.)

Timing also matters. When the pandemic began and anxiety was highest, vaccines didn't exist. Once they slowly became available, there was less sense of urgency. Cases here remained thankfully but puzzlingly low. We saw other highly vaccinated countries reopen their economies, European football stadiums filled with crowds, with little news of cases locally. People relaxed.

Despite anger at the travel bans, and vaccine inequality, we must not be distracted at home.

There is deep inequality within our countries. Relative elites in capitals quickly got themselves vaccinated, but stopped pushing for everyone. Masking and ventilation remain casual, despite planned holiday festivities. Simply receiving vaccines with fanfare, at national airports, is not enough.

That is the real lesson of Omicron: We are not safe, until all of us are safe. ■

Anand Madhvani coordinates the Covid Kenya network

Is your democracy working for you?

Next week's global Summit for Democracy will bring together government, private sector and civil society leaders to discuss threats faced by democracies and set out "an affirmative agenda for democratic renewal".

African leaders representing their citizens' aspirations can report that demand for democracy is strong: On average, across 34 countries surveyed by Afrobarometer, large majorities support democracy (69%) and reject military rule (75%), one-party rule (77%) and one-person rule (82%). Support for multiparty competition (63%), parliamentary oversight of the president (67%) and presidential term limits (77%) is also strong and consistent.

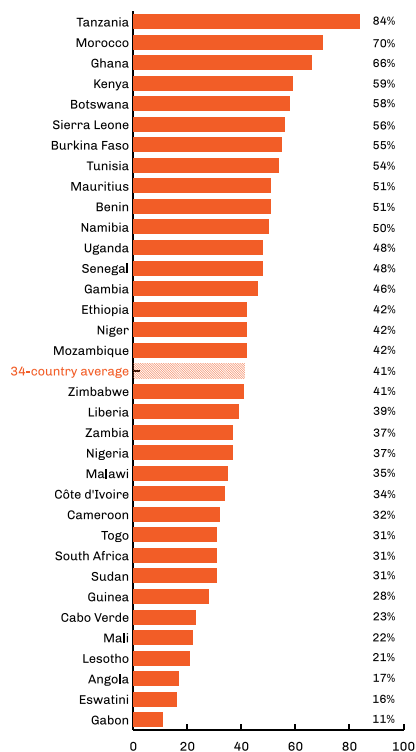
On the supply side, things look grimmer. Four in 10 Africans (41%) say they're "fairly" or "very" satisfied with how democracy is working in their country, while 54% say they are "not very" or "not at all" satisfied (in addition to 2% who say their country isn't even a democracy).

Satisfaction is high in Tanzania (84%), Morocco (70%) and Ghana (66%). But fewer than half of all citizens are satisfied in 23 of the 34 countries: just 11% in Gabon, 16% in Eswatini and 17% in Angola.

Across 30 countries tracked for the past decade, satisfaction with democracy

is down by 7 percentage points. Before their recent coups, satisfaction in Mali, Guinea and Sudan was down to 22%, 28% and 31%, respectively – numbers worth summit attention.

Fairly/Very satisfied with the way democracy is working | 34 African countries



Source: Afrobarometer, a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- 2 to 3 percentage points.



The first lady who took on the trolls

Photo: Riccardo Savi/AFP

A certain level of decorum is usually extended to the spouse of a head of state. But when Monica Geingos became first lady of Namibia, she was called a gold-digger, amid a deluge of hate. In an intimate interview, she tells **Samira Sawlani how she weathered the storm of online abuse – and why she’s fighting back.**

On International Women’s Day, the social media profiles of first ladies around the world are full of posts about equality, women’s empowerment, and their own achievements.

This year, however, Monica Geingos did something different.

The lawyer, entrepreneur and first lady of Namibia shared a video in which she spoke about the harassment and abuse she

has faced, particularly online. Displayed on screen were tweets and posts featuring hurtful, insulting and misogynistic comments about her, while she narrates: “When I’m not busy being a ‘manipulative, deceitful gold-digger’, I am ‘busy running the country’ as I have ‘bewitched my old sugar daddy husband’ who is ‘too blind to see through my feminine charms’.”

The video went viral, and received

widespread media coverage. The world is not used to first ladies speaking so honestly, and Geingos received plenty of praise – but just as much criticism.

While women in the public eye have often spoken out about the kind of gendered abuse they receive, particularly on social media, it is rare to hear a first lady be part of this collective voice. It's almost as if it goes against protocol.

"You're right. It's not regarded as the diplomatic thing to do," said Geingos, in an interview with *The Continent*. "But I was finding too many young women saying to me they did not want to be in the public eye because they were seeing what I was going through. It made me feel that through my silence, I was doing these young women a disservice."

Geingos was speaking via Zoom, from Namibia's capital Windhoek. She spoke with refreshing, almost unprecedented candour about the pressures of her role – and the fierce criticism she received for breaking its unwritten rules.

"As women, when we speak out on these issues, there is always backlash. As a first lady you'll be told there are more important things to talk about. People will say, 'You're talking about sluts and whores and prostitutes, are you not ashamed of yourself'? The message is, 'You can talk, but don't annoy us.'"

The golden thread of misogyny

Geingos married Hage Geingob shortly before he took office in 2015, in a ceremony described by *The Namibian* as "a low-key Valentine's Day wedding". She was already, at the age of 38, one of

the country's most successful business leaders: managing director of a private equity fund; a member of the President's Economic Advisory Council; and board chair of Ebank Namibia, the first woman to chair a commercial bank in the country.

When Geingob was sworn in as president, the couple voluntarily declared their assets, which were worth around 110-million Namibian dollars (around US\$7-million), of which nearly half came from Geingos.

Despite her stellar career, Geingos was expecting to be on the receiving end of abuse as the couple took up residence in Windhoek's State House. There is, she said, a "golden thread of misogyny which runs through most of our countries".

"The position of first lady is a very gendered role, and ultimately it is yours purely because of your proximity to a man and not on merit. It's an official role, but an unelected one. It's a public role but there is no public accountability. Thus it is susceptible to abuse because there aren't clear rules of how you engage with it," she said.

It didn't help that she did not feel entirely comfortable in her new, unelected position. "The first shock was the legitimacy crisis. Suddenly I found myself with unearned privilege."

This "unearned privilege" was seized upon mercilessly by online critics, many of whom hid behind anonymity, who called her a gold digger. Geingos was bemused: they clearly had not read her balance sheet – which, she says, shows a "material deterioration" in her personal fortune since she became first lady.

**Going places:
Namibia's
President Hage
Geingos and
his wife Monica
Geingos in Paris
in November.**
(Photo: Ludovic
Marin/AFP via
Getty Images)



Instead, the insults seemed to be driven by assumptions based on the age difference between her and her husband. Geingos is 44, and President Geingob is 80. Geingos understands that the nature of society makes this a topic of discussion, but argues that it only reinforces harmful patriarchal stereotypes.

“I am not particularly fashionable or flashy. I don’t have an asset base which I accumulated after being first lady, so the only trope they can reduce me to is, ‘She married this older powerful man,’ and I think our relationship deserves the grace of not being reduced to that.”

Underpinning the “gold digger” narrative is the idea that a woman is only successful because she has slept her way to the top or because of her proximity to a powerful man. That women do not have the skills or talent to succeed on their own. Ironically, this same narrative will often hold women responsible for the decisions the men around them make.

All too often, Geingos is told that she is unworthy of being first lady in the same breath that she is held accountable for the

decisions of her husband’s government.

She cites one example: A church leader was angered after she said publicly that Namibia’s law against sodomy should be scrapped. She made it clear that this was her personal opinion and that she has no influence over legislation. But the church leader would not believe her. “He said to me, ‘You are the president’s wife and you will influence him,’ and that’s why I say: the only time a man is willing to undermine the agency of another man, is when it’s time to blame his wife. All of a sudden my husband has no agency and because his wife thinks a law should be scrapped, it will be.”

Sodomy remains a crime in Namibia.

Patriarchy is a pyramid scheme

In Namibia, as it is elsewhere in the world, the abuse directed at Geingos and other women online has horrific real-world analogues.

In April 2020, a 22-year-old woman named Shannon Wasserfall disappeared in Walvis Bay. Six months later, her body was found, buried in a shallow grave in

the sand dunes that surround the town.

Wasserfall's brutal murder sparked protests against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). According to the 2013 Namibia Demographic Health Survey (the most recent available data), between 32% and 35% of women and girls (15 and older) have experienced some form of violence from their partner: physical, sexual or emotional.

At the time of Shannon Wasserfall's murder, SGBV was "starting to lose policy focus" Geingos said. But, particularly for adolescent girls and young women who are bearing the brunt of this violence, it was one trigger too far. They took to the streets. "Those protests were critical. Even if you did not agree with their demands or how they articulated their message, you must agree that they brought the topic of SGBV back on to the table," said Geingos.

Geingos has put SGBV at the centre of her own policy priorities as first lady – and her campaigns have only further inflamed her online trolls.

"Most days I'll see things and it does not affect me at all but then there are days where you are so worn out and the smallest thing hits you straight in the gut. You feel like putting the blanket over your head and not getting out of bed."

She worries that her children or her parents might see some of the vicious abuse that is directed at her; or worse, might be targeted by the trolls directly. It makes her anxious, especially because, as first lady, responding is not really an option (although "being rough on social media is not beneath me" if the circumstances demand it, she says).

"Every woman has been body shamed long enough for her to have developed an insecurity about something. So first the trolls will target your appearance, then they may take the financial angle because they know that many women struggle to build our balance sheets. And if that does not get you, then come the 'who did you sleep with to become successful' comments."

Widespread violence against women

To protect herself, Geingos only checks her social media every few weeks. When she first became first lady, she would google herself regularly, but she has stopped that now.

She is adamant that women who find themselves on the receiving end of online abuse should be able to ask for help, and speak out. "I think patriarchy is a pyramid scheme which relies on the silence of a woman, because without the silences they can't get more recruits," says Geingos.

But it is also important that women evaluate their resilience, be prepared for a backlash and find a supportive network – because the same system also makes women feel like they are the problem. "I start thinking, 'Maybe I'm on the receiving end of all this because I'm a first lady and my role is undefined, so let me keep quiet'. Another woman will think, 'Maybe it's because I dress a certain way.'"

But women's experiences of gendered abuse are not exceptional. They are only exceptionalised. "The minute we start sharing our stories and realising, 'I've also been scammed,' we walk away." ■

FASHION

Dressing the future

Virgil Abloh, the legendary Ghanaian-American designer who died this week, helped to put African fashion on the world map. His trailblazing career opened the door for the next generation of African designers, some of whom spoke to **Ugonna-Ora Owoh** about their own design identity and influences



Mokodu Fall is a Senegalese artist who is equally adept at working with paint or fabric. He interweaves his art into his fashion, creating colourful, modern looks that are rooted in ancient African history.

“Most of my designs are rooted in ancient stories and simultaneously have realistic meaning. It’s important for me to use these themes because we are used to consuming products that we do not know the story of. Here I’m conveying the story of my continent. My art and creation shows the excellence of ‘Made in Africa’, and I’m proud to show that.”



Doreen Mashika is a Tanzanian designer based in Zanzibar. She combines traditional African fabrics and workmanship with a Western design philosophy, and all her clothes are made exclusively in Tanzania.

"I am emotionally attached to kanga fabric because I grew up with it and a piece would always follow me and it didn't matter where I lived. Sadly I noticed that this noble print was discarded as a print for the poor in society. Those who thrived in society preferred imports. Because I love challenges, I then decided to play with it and I am happy to say that today more and more East Africans and people around the world embrace our designs of kanga dresses. Thanks to us not giving up!"



Joy Meribe never thought she would be a fashion designer. Then she started blogging about fashion and wondered if she could do it herself. Now she's working on her fourth collection, bringing her unique afro-fusion style to the runway.



"I had to use my identity and background to create my fashion. I wanted to use my Africanness to create a cosmopolitan type of design. My outfits are the fusion of my identity, culture (who I am) and the mainstream world. Given I had to study fashion in Italy, that is also a part of my identity. So I merge both into my brand."



Adama Paris is a Senegalese designer based between Dakar and Paris. She has released dozens of collections over nearly two decades, all rooted in Senegalese culture but with a modern twist. All her clothes are made in Senegal.

"My brand is defined by a deeply African and continental intuition: a mix of my culture, my blackness, my Africinity and also my womanhood. I'm doing me. I'm not looking at who is doing this and that. I want women of my culture to wear something that represents us in every circumstance."

Imane Ayissi is a haute couture designer from Cameroon who blends traditional textiles from across the continent – including Ewe Kente, Manjak, Faso Dan Fani and Adire – into high-end looks.



“I was drawing fashion sketches even when I was 9 years old and I started to work for a local brand in Yaoundé when I was 18. Moving to Paris, I was a model. That helped me work with prestigious fashion companies and haute couture houses. Now my motivation is to show that African cultures deserve to be part of this international luxury universe.”

THE QUIZ

0-3

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10

"Unlike Gambia's leaders, I'm not losing my marbles just yet."

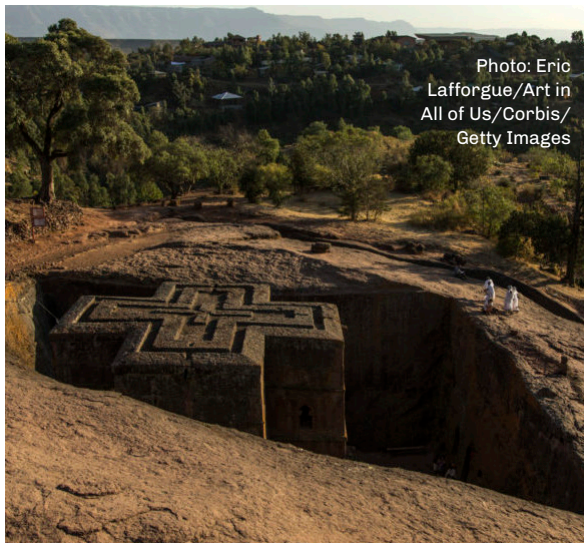


Photo: Eric Lafforgue/Art in All of Us/Corbis/Getty Images

- 1_ Virgil Abloh was the artistic director for which fashion house?
- 2_ Who is the president of Namibia?
- 3_ What is the fifteenth letter of the Greek alphabet?
- 4_ Barbados, the world's newest republic, is an island in which sea?
- 5_ The rock churches of Lalibela (pictured) are sacred to which branch of Christianity?
- 6_ What is the English word for nsenene, an insect that is a Ugandan delicacy?
- 7_ What do Gambians do with marbles on election day?
- 8_ Lake Kivu straddles which two countries?
- 9_ Banyana Banyana is the national women's football team of which country?
- 10_ The taps have run dry in which East African city?

HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

Would you like to send us some quiz questions or even curate your own quiz? Let us know at TheContinent@mg.co.za

The great Ugandan grasshopper shortage

They're a sought-after seasonal delicacy, but deforestation and a growing export market are leaving Ugandans with too little to crunch on.

Andrew Arinaitwe in Kampala

As the sun rises over Katwe, in Kampala, women, men, and children huddle in a muddy field, waiting anxiously for the day's deliveries of nsenene.

"Nsenene" is usually translated as "grasshoppers", but these are technically bush crickets. The insects taste a bit like prawns when fried with salt and oil to get that exquisite exoskeleton crunch. They are considered a high-protein delicacy in Uganda.

And November is their season.

"A season to crunch. A period to lick salty lips," as one Ugandan, Ahabe Jonathan, wrote on Twitter.

A silver Toyota Mark X pulls into the Katwe field and pops its boot open. From it, a man pulls out a sack of nsenene and starts the bidding. It is a sellers' market.

You have to be licensed under the local trading association to take part, and demand is high.

"I started in the grasshopper business when I was 10 years old. Now I am 51," Katende Lawrence, the chairperson of the Basenene Tukolewamu Association tells *The Continent*. Basenene Tukolere Wamu translates to, "Let's work together, grasshopper people."

When another vehicle pulls in, Katende dashes off to run the auction. Standing atop the vehicle, he receives cash from bidders, quickly counts and gives it back if dissatisfied with the offer.

"I want 170,000," he announces. That's about \$48.

"When the grasshopper harvesting has just begun, prices per sack can go as high as 800,000 shillings [\$210] or a



Photo: Kelvin Kavuma/
The Continent



Captain crunch: An nsenene trader sells his wares. Photo: Kelvin Kavuma/
The Continent

million [\$300],” trader Kemigisha Lydia explains. Her business is to buy from the wholesale auction and sell nsenene by the cupful. She says a cup can go from \$2.1 to \$3.8 when supply is limited, and this season has most certainly been a season of limited supply.

“These people have all come here to buy nsenene but they are scarce,” Katende says. “That’s why everyone seems angry,”

Another trader agrees, and laments that much of the supply that *is* available is being exported.

The scarcity is pinching final consumers. On a recent Uganda Airlines flight to Dubai, people swarmed through the plane to buy grasshoppers when one passenger, Paul Mubiru, decided to sell his nsenene stash on board.

The airline has said it might add nsenene to its in-flight menu, but Ugandan police – on instructions from the minister in charge of the aviation sector – arrested Mubiru and another passenger involved in the incident for disorderly conduct.

That's just not cricket

At 10 years old, Basenene chair Katende caught grasshoppers by hand. Today, a harvester must set up complex traps of bright lights and smoke. Naked lights are hung between unpainted iron sheets above barrels, around which the harvesters burn grass. Attracted by the lights, the grasshoppers are dazed by the smoke. They crash into the iron sheets and slide into the barrels.

Harvests are bigger than they were in Katende’s childhood, but he is worried that nsenene will one day disappear because Uganda is losing its dense indigenous forest cover, in which the insects thrive.

“Other countries have places where people work, live and areas dedicated to forest reserves. Here, people cut down forests to plant other money-making tree species and to construct houses. That is what has destroyed our world!”

Nsenene-buyers used to operate in the upscale Nakasero market, but “constant wrestling with city council officials” forced them out and into Katwe, where they occupy land belonging to the kabaka or king of Buganda.

Back at the Basenene Tukolelwamu Association office, the register has signatures from visitors as far as France and the Netherlands while exports frequently go to Sudan, Malawi, Burundi, Rwanda, London, Dubai and Vietnam.

Our own visit is cut short when a woman walks into the office in tears. Her sack of grasshoppers has just been stolen.

Nsenene are an increasingly valuable commodity, but it seems not everybody is profiting. ■

Naughty or nice?



Continental Drift

Samira Sawlani

Well readers it is here ... Dezemba as our friends in South Africa call it. It's time to eat, drink, dance, be merry – and also wear a mask, social distance and get vaccinated if you can and haven't already. We're not saying Santa has issued a vaccine mandate, but he is elderly and so for his sake, it might be a good idea!

Will our leaders be participating in the merrymaking and gift giving do you think? A canister of tear gas for all those that have been “naughty”? A government contract for those that were “nice” (to them, anyway), and turned a blind eye to injustice?

And what about you, dear reader? Are you not sending out gifts and cards to some of our leaders? Do they not deserve some love and kindness after a year of hard work?

If Alpha Condé is on your Christmas card list then please note a change of address. This week Guinea's military junta announced that the former president, who has been in military custody since the September 5 coup, had been transferred to his wife's home in the Landreah district of the country's capital, Conakry.

Now before you go issuing an invitation for him to join you for Christmas lunch, please understand that he will not be able to make it as he remains not just deposed but quite indisposed due to the small matter of still being under house arrest. The junta said Condé would continue to be given “treatment worthy of his rank.” We're sure the loved ones of all those killed during protests under his rule have some thoughts on how worthy that treatment ought to be.

If you are looking for gift ideas for the Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta, a calculator may come in handy. This week saw him give a State of the Nation Address in which he told us all, well... the state of the nation, or rather how it looks from his perspective? He quoted a few figures which did not seem to add up – and barely mentioned the word “debt” at all, despite the fact that Santa (or someone pretending to be him), seems to have left a rather large amount of it in the country's Christmas stocking.

The gift of a calculator may be useful for President Uhuru Kenyatta

Meanwhile, if you're looking for a gift for the Sudanese government, don't bother with tear gas because clearly they have a more than enough. Instead, perhaps a reality check is in order? This

week thousands took to the streets once more as they continue to demand a return to full civilian rule and, predictably, security forces were heavy handed in their response.

The French (missed) Connection

Over in Niger it seems there are people who want to buy the French military a gift; flight tickets out of the country. The government announced that 2 people had been killed and 18 injured after protesters blocked a French military convoy accompanied by Nigerien troops, which was travelling through Niger on its way to Mali.

The government confirmed that security forces “used force”, however French authorities denied their troops were responsible for the killings, telling VOA they did not shoot *at* the crowd, just *above* and *in front* of it. It’s not their fault the protesters are really good at high jump.

While you contemplate the gifts you will be sending to your respective presidents, prime ministers, military rulers and if applicable king (we know a few leaders who are looking on in envy at that title!), here’s who we at *The Continent* won’t be sending any gifts or cards to: a whole bunch of western governments.

It all began when Boris Voldemort Johnson (Harry Potter fans, in case you’re wondering, Priti Patel is definitely Umbridge) announced that the UK would be putting Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe on the travel “red list”.

This came after brilliant scientists



You Know Who: Priti Patel and noted Peppa Pig enthusiast Boris Johnson.

in South Africa detected and alerted authorities to a new Covid-19 variant, Omicron. Apparently Boris and his mates in the USA, Canada and Australia decided South Africa deserved a thank you gift (just in time for Christmas!), and so imposed travel restrictions.

Australia, Belgium, Canada, the USA, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Israel, the UK, Austria, Portugal and the Czech Republic are also among the countries that have reported the variant.

However, they have strangely not been on the receiving end of any travel bans. We wonder why.

So today we would like to wish the scientists in South Africa a happy December. If anyone deserves it, it’s you.

And our thoughts are with all those affected by this racist policy rooted in colonial thinking by governments who think more than a little too much of themselves.

For those governments, we just hope they didn’t have their hearts set on making Santa’s “nice” list this year. ■

What the elections mean for The Gambia

Fabakary Jammeh

Gambians go to the polls on December 4 for the first time since former dictator Yahya Jammeh was forced from power in 2016. But despite his defeat five years ago by a coalition led by Adama Barrow, Jammeh's shadow looms large over the election – representing a major test of the country's democratic transition.

President Barrow's electoral coalition disintegrated due to internal squabbles, and his popularity has been undermined by significant economic difficulties, high levels of corruption, and the government's failure to deliver promised constitutional and legal reforms.

Given the risk of running on the platform of an untested political vehicle – the National People's Party (NPP) – his team decided to enter into a new electoral alliance to shore up his prospects. Many Gambians were shocked when it was announced that this alliance would be with the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC): the ruling party during the Jammeh era.

The news sparked rumours Barrow had done a deal to grant Jammeh immunity.

But Jammeh denounced the arrangement, throwing his support behind opposition candidate Mama Kandeh – himself a former APRC member.

It remains to be seen who will be most effective at mobilising support in this competition between Jammeh and his own party. One possibility is that they divide their vote and allow another candidate – most likely Ousainou Darboe of the United Democratic Party – to emerge victorious.

Given that the presidential race is extremely close, the weakness of the electoral system and willingness of some leaders to play divisive ethnic politics has increased fears of post-election violence.

Darboe is perhaps the country's best chance of seeing justice for the victims of the Jammeh era. The recently released Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) report provides evidence linking Jammeh's government to around 250 deaths.

Given that many APRC leaders are implicated by its conclusions, it is unlikely that either the NPP-APRC coalition, or the Kandeh-Jammeh alliance will be willing to fully act on its findings – undermining the country's opportunity for a fresh start. ■

Fabakary Jammeh is a legal professional, co-founder and current Executive Director of the Centre for Legal Support, a network of public interest lawyers in The Gambia. This was published in collaboration with Democracy in Africa.



THE BIG PICTURE

Last rites: 36 Burkinabe soldiers were laid to rest in the military section of Ouagadougou's Gounghin Cemetery last month. They were killed when gunmen attacked a gendarmerie camp at Inata, near the border with Mali. In total, 49 soldiers and four civilians were killed in this attack, which sparked protests in several cities against the government's "inability to stop the terrorist attacks."

Photo: Olympia de Maismont/AFP



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