

The Continent

with Mail & Guardian



THE
AFRICANS OF THE YEAR
EDITION



Illustrations: Nzilani Simu





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A flame still burns

More than half the available coronavirus vaccines are headed to the wealthiest countries in the world. “If all those doses are fulfilled, the European Union could inoculate its residents twice, Britain and the United States four times over and Canada six times over,” a *New York Times* analysis found.

And for the rest of us?

Most of us in Africa can expect to reach herd immunity as late as 2024.

Until then, the coronavirus will remain a fact of life on the continent. And, as the Zimbabwean journalist Percy Zvomuya neatly pointed out on Twitter, proof of having received the coronavirus vaccine will likely become a condition of travelling to north America and Europe. So, we are stuck not so much in space, but in time.

The year may be ending, but its anxieties will persist. Somehow we have to find a way to keep even our dimmest hopes alive. But it would be for naught if we are to hope simply that we may soon go back to the way things were.

What is essential is that we use this moment, this moment so heavy with the realisation of the inequities of the world, to ensure that we envisage something altogether different. We have to build a better world, a better society and better instruments to ensure that a girl born in Abidjan and a boy born in Austin have the exact same chance of success, the same

opportunities to fulfil their potential. And we cannot accept that it is a far-off dream, a possibility of some distant time and place. It is this moment and the people we are now that must propel us there. Indeed, it is the stories of people who have already started this work that must fortify us.

When we began considering ideas for this special year-end edition of *The Continent*, we considered the weariness all of us feel with the news – there just has not been enough of the good kind this year.

So we thought instead about all the people who have risen above the pandemic to show us the potential of human endeavor and the utter triumph of living full lives when a deadly pandemic stalks your every move.

This, then, is a collection of anecdotes, interviews and stories about the people who have been extraordinary this year. It is by no means comprehensive, but rather a small snapshot of what we need most: fuel for our highest hopes. ■

– *Khadija Patel*



The 'Africans of the Year' edition was guest-edited by Khadija Patel. Patel is a former editor-in-chief of the Mail & Guardian and co-founder of the Daily Vox, and is vice chairperson of the International Press Institute.



A gift from The Continent

The illustrations in this edition were created by the Nairobi-based graphic designer, illustrator and data visualizer Nzilani Simu. We thought they were so beautiful that we wanted to share them with you – not just in this edition, but also as exclusive posters available to download and print at home.

The Continent's 'Africans of the Year' posters are available to download for free from bit.ly/ContinentAOTY20 – and make sure to check out the rest of her portfolio while you are there!

INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITY

The Continent is offering a three-month internship for an aspiring layout designer, starting in February 2021. The three-days-a-week position comes with a stipend of \$750 per month, and can be done remotely. Experience with layout software is a must. To apply, please go this link: adamela.org/continentintern

Inside:

- **It's the 'Africans of the Year' edition.** The line-up is incredible. We're not going to give anything away here – you'll have to keep reading to find out who makes the cut! Begins on p10.
- **We are counting down** the best books, movies, songs and photographs of the year. How did your favourites rank? Begins on p8.
- **Some of our regular contributors** have opened up their notebooks to share their reflections on the year we've just had, starting on p6.

The irresistible feel of fresh newsprint



This week, *The Continent* was printed for the first time on real paper, and distributed alongside the *Mail & Guardian*. Get your physical copy in

stores across southern Africa. Who said print was dead?

That's not the only major new development. This issue of *The Continent* is carrying commercial advertising. We hope you don't mind. Journalism is expensive, and selling ads is one way to keep the lights on. It is also a way for companies to support free and independent journalism. We promise to make sure that ads do not detract from the reading experience.

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The Continent
with Mail & Guardian

Reporter's notebooks from a year like no other

We asked some of *The Continent's* regular contributors to reflect on their 2020

What was the biggest news story of the year?

Covid-19 was all-consuming. But the singular focus on the pandemic sometimes obscured other, equally important stories.

“The biggest news story in Cameroon in 2020 was arguably the Valentine’s Day massacre of at least 21 women and children in Ngarbuh village, in the restive English-speaking part of the country,” said **Amindeh Blaise Atabong**, a Yaoundé-based freelance journalist. “The government initially denied its soldiers carried out the killings, but later conceded following national and international pressure.”

For **Abdul Samba Brima**, a health journalist living and working in Sierra Leone, the Covid-19 pandemic headlines at home were almost drowned out by the furore surrounding the current president’s continuing attempts to charge and prosecute his predecessor’s administration with corruption. “This investigation will set an important precedent in the fight against corruption even for serving government officials and others to come,” he said.

According to **Kiri Rupiah** – the *Mail & Guardian’s* Online editor and *The Continent’s* head of distribution – the biggest newsmakers of the year were Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who launched a war on one of his own provinces, and journalist Hopewell Chin’ono, who was repeatedly jailed by Zimbabwean authorities.

“Abiy’s fall from grace was spectacular, akin to that of Aung San Suu Kyi,” said Rupiah. “Whereas the Zimbabwean hospitality Chin’ono has experienced is not the type you’d see on TripAdvisor.”

In Malawi, **Golden Matonga**, a journalist with *The Nation* newspaper, had a front-row seat as his country’s courts stood firm against an authoritarian president – and then reported on the rerun election that saw the opposition take power. “The five judges of the Constitutional Court delivered a landmark ruling whose effects will be felt not only in Malawi but across the continent and the world. They rejected bags of cash, braved intimidation from all corners and delivered a ruling that saved democracy itself and put a check on impunity.”

Who is your African of the Year?

“Master KG and Nomcebo Zikode, for *Jerusalema*, a song that transcended global culture, language, and religion to provide comfort and unity during the worldwide pandemic lockdown,” said New York-based writer **Jakki Kerubo**.

“Feyikemi Abudu,” said freelance Nigerian journalist **Aanu Adeoye**. “She was a reluctant leader in the #EndSARS movement and would probably recoil at the idea of being a leader. But she was. She organised and ensured protesters across Nigeria were taken care of in terms of security, food and legal aid.”

“Matshidiso Moeti for leading the World Health Organisation in Africa, or Trevor Noah for keeping the world informed and entertained throughout the pandemic with *The Daily Social Distancing Show*,” said *The Continent’s* production editor, **Refiloe Seiboko**.

“I would nominate Ugandan marathon runner Joshua Cheptgei for smashing two world records during the pandemic,” said Kampala-based journalist **Andrew Arinaitwe**.

What story deserved more attention?

Luis Nhachote, an investigative journalist and executive coordinator of the Centro de Jornalismo Investigativo, is covering the growing insurgency in Mozambique. He said that the severity of the conflict is not reflected in the amount of coverage it receives. “We are talking about more than 400,000 displaced people, villages burned, innocents killed.”

This year, most people have had to deal

with multiple crises and traumas – but we have not reported enough on what this means for people’s mental health, argued **Tolu Olasoji**, a journalist in Lagos. “The pandemic, coupled with cases of police brutality, the #EndSARS protests, and the regressive economic situation mean a lot of people are mentally stressed, but are stuck in an unbothered country such as Nigeria.”

Tanzanian journalist and *Jamii Forums* Investigative Editor **Simon Mkina** is concerned about the shrinking space for human rights and freedom of expression across the continent. “It seems many African countries are squeezing their citizens so hard that we are struggling to breathe,” he said.

What story are you watching in 2021?

David Mono Danga, an investigative journalist and founder of South Sudan’s *The Insider* magazine, will be looking at whether the terms of South Sudan’s peace deal will be properly implemented. “If this happens early next year, the rest of 2021 will be a happy year for South Sudanese,” he said. He’s also hopeful that the vaccine will be made available in Africa relatively quickly, allowing daily life to go back to normal.

Cameroonian journalist **Daniel Ekonde** has his eye on what could be the most significant business story in generations. “I’m keen on seeing what the African Continental Free Trade Area will bring for a continent of more than 1-billion people. It goes into effect this January,” he said. ■

THE COUNTDOWN

In a year when we have needed entertainment and media more than ever, this is our list of the best tunes, reads, flicks and pics in 2020.



MUSIC by Sabelo Mkhabela, a Johannesburg-based music writer.



BOOKS by Efemia Chela, a Zambian-Ghanaian writer.



MOVIES by Wilfred Okiche, a Lagos-based film critic and culture writer.



PHOTOS by Paul Botes, the *Mail & Guardian's* photo editor and the winner of the Contemporary African Photography Prize in 2018.

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PHOTO

Searching the airwaves: After being displaced from his home by conflict, a man stands at the top of a hill to pick up a radio signal and listen to the news near the internally displaced persons camp of Bijombo, in South Kivu Province in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. (Photo: Alexis Huguet/AFP)



DOCUMENTARY

Finding Sally

A revealing look at one family's search not just for a missing relative, but also for their place in the country's collective history. The documentary connects director Tamara Mariam Dawit's personal history to the larger historical situation as she searches for her aunt. Intimate and accessible, *Finding Sally* draws renewed significance in light of the political situation in Ethiopia.



MUSIC

Jeje by Diamond Platinumz

The king of bongo flavour, Tanzania's Diamond Platinumz lays his romantic Swahili lyrics over production by Nigeria's El P in what is one of the biggest Tanzanian and East African songs of the year.

African
POETRY
BOOK SERIES

SACRAMENT OF BODIES

Romeo Origun



POETRY

Sacrament of Bodies by Romeo Origun

"Do I offend you with my freedom?" Origun wields words in a way that feels sacred. His debut poetry collection is an intimate rendering of memories, accounts of survival and dreams weaved from the luscious natural world.

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

ELSA MAJIMBO

ELSA MAJIMBO

Laughing out loud

For making millions of people smile in difficult times, journalist **Samira Sawlani** recognises comedian **Elsa Majimbo**

She's been described as the “crisp-eating, sunglasses-wearing comedian on social media”.

True, that's how it began, but at this point the Nairobi-based 19-year-old Elsa Majimbo is so much more than that.

So let's start again: Elsa Majimbo is a social media sensation, comedian, host of her own Instagram show (*Bedtime with Elsa*), Fenty ambassador, chess champion, multiple award winner and all-round bad-ass featured in *Forbes*, *British Vogue*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *W Magazine* and now *The Continent*.

Her fanbase is global, and features a host of celebrities. She's working with renowned make-up brand MAC, a podcast is in the works and so is a book. And she is just getting started.

But beyond her own success, Majimbo has managed to bring laughter to millions in a year filled with darkness.

Many of the comedic monologues filmed in her bedroom on her phone have gone viral. Some favourites include her telling us, “I would have wanted to meet up ... but ... it's a pandemic! I would

have let you come to my house but ... pandemic!”

In another video, she begins slowly: “Ever since isolation started we've all been in isolation and I miss ... NO-ONE! And these ones that keep saying ‘I miss you’ ... Why? WHY? Why? Do I pay your school fees? Do I pay your rent?”

Majimbo has spoken about not fitting in while growing up and the fact that “dark-skinned young women never have the opportunity to represent Africa internationally”.

She said: “So the fact that here I am, and I'm able to do it and make people happy – I feel like it's a chance to show other women in Africa that they can do it, too.”

Just what do we love about her? The delivery of her monologues, the fact that she's saying what we're all thinking (who among us has not used “it's a pandemic!” when asked to participate in something social) and the joy her comedy has

**“Since we've been
in isolation, I miss...
NO-ONE!”**

brought to so many are high on the list.

But the real elation comes from seeing this incredible young woman unapologetically doing her own thing, exuding confidence and slowly taking over the world.

You love to see it. ■

Samira Sawlani is a freelance journalist and columnist for The Continent

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

DJ SWITCH AND THE #ENDSARS PROTESTERS

DJ SWITCH AND THE #ENDSARS PROTESTERS

The goats that chase the lions

For challenging Nigeria's ruling elite, editor **Sean Jacobs** nominates the **#EndSARS** protesters

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and has been its largest democracy, since the end of military rule in 1999. However, its democratic politics are essentially the domain of two elite political parties, who take turns governing Nigeria and dividing the country's economic spoils. They've been very good at managing challengers to that order.

Occupy Nigeria was contained, as was the movement to secure a fuel subsidy the government was trying to take away in 2012. #RevolutionNow was quelled in 2019. Journalist Omoyele Sowore was imprisoned just for running for president.

But in October this year a movement – composed of mostly young people organising via the internet (they also revived the #EndSARS hashtag associated with earlier versions of the same protests in 2017) – began to protest police brutality. The catalyst was the police murder of an unarmed young man in Lagos.

The activists targeted the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), notorious for abusing especially young people

(beatings, arbitrary arrests, extortion, among others). Four days after protests began, the government disbanded SARS. The protesters, to their credit, didn't stop. They also demanded accountability from the president and his cabinet.

By the end of 2020, the protests had slowed (government harassment and exploiting differences in the movement may have something to do with it), but this hasn't dampened the energy of protesters. Next year could get interesting in Nigeria.

Sean Jacobs is the founder and editor of Africa is a Country

For standing tall amid the bloodshed of the Lekki Massacre, journalist **Shola Lawal recognises DJ Switch**

Not many will know this, but musician Obianuju Catherine Udeh has always carried an activist's soul. A decade ago, Udeh, aka DJ Switch, co-produced the hit track *Pray Sote*, where she wished for a day when politicians in Nigeria would cease to oppress ordinary people; a day when 'goat go pursue lion'.

That day came on October 20, the night security forces in a Lagos suburb opened fire on peaceful protesters demonstrating against police brutality.

Switch, a well-known DJ, had

mobilised protesters through the two weeks of the protests and was performing on stage at the Lekki Toll Gate area. When authorities imposed an impromptu curfew and deployed soldiers, she calmed panicked protesters and told them to raise their Nigerian flags in a show of peace.

It was around 6.45PM that people started to share the link to her Instagram Live feed. On it, you could hear her voice – angry and unrelenting – before seeing what she was narrating. In the dark were bloodied bodies, bullets, and the faces of people who knew they would not see tomorrow.

The news of her Live feed spread so fast that within minutes, thousands within and outside Nigeria bore witness to the horrors unfolding.

Switch defied the instinct to flee or freeze, recording a good part of the shootings before her battery went flat. “Please guys, record my Live...let the world see what is happening,” Switch said. She was lucky to escape the scene unhurt.

The Nigerian Army, undermining

the power of technology and the consequences of Switch’s heroics, has tried to deny its part in the Toll Gate shootings.

But with every denial, the army has come up hard against Switch’s damning legacy, a light separating truth from falsehood.

If Switch had not been at the Lekki Toll Gate with her mid-level celebrity power and the willingness to stare death down, the world may never have known about the shooting of innocent protesters.

Such is the power of this slight, tomboyish, silver-tongued woman.

Although Switch has now sought asylum in Canada to escape threats to her life, she has not stopped haunting the army by speaking out online and to media houses.

In a recent video, Switch urged young Nigerians to keep the protests alive. She is still, in many ways, the goat that chases lions. ■

Shola Lawal is a Lagos-based journalist and filmmaker



AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

FRONTLINE WORKERS

FRONTLINE WORKERS

We owe you, we admire you, and we thank you

**For risking their lives
to keep the rest of us
safe, **Matshidiso Moeti**
and **Chikwe Ihekweazu**
recognise frontline
health workers**

Dr Matshidiso Moeti is the World Health Organisation's Regional Director for Africa. Chikwe Ihekweazu is Director General of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.

To all African health workers – from volunteers serving in remote communities, to nurses, midwives, physicians and all others working for a safer, healthier and better tomorrow – you inspire us all. We owe you. We admire you. We thank you.

This year, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, African health workers were instrumental in ending two Ebola outbreaks, selflessly saving lives despite security risks and difficult terrain.

Almost a quarter of a century ago, wild polio paralysed around 75,000 African children every year. No more. In a historic milestone for humanity this year, wild polio was wiped out on our continent.

And then there's the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite shortages of protective equipment and staff, and in the face of fear, stigma, burnout and separation from loved ones, millions of African health workers stepped up to fight this new and unknown virus. Their brave, life-saving efforts are exemplary.

More than 56,000 African health workers have been infected with Covid-19 and nearly 900 have made the ultimate sacrifice. This is tragic, but not in vain. Countless lives have been saved.

Every day our health workers are doing everything to keep us healthy. From delivering emergency care to essential services such as immunising our children, to specialty cancer treatment – health workers are the backbone of a better future.

In recognition of this, governments, the public and the international community must make the tools, resources and support available for health workers to get the job done.

**Over 56,000 African
health workers have been
infected with Covid-19 and
nearly 900 have made the
ultimate sacrifice**

And in 2021, we will rely on you even more as we roll out the Covid-19 vaccine, which will be the biggest immunisation campaign in the history of the continent.

I know we can count on you to make this a success.

Words will never do justice to the bittersweet mix of pride, anguish, admiration and gratitude we feel, but to all African health workers, from the depths of our hearts, we thank you. You are the heroes of the year.

Since the beginning of this year, the lives of frontline health workers and public health professionals have changed incredibly. Health workers have put their lives at risk in fighting a new virus.

We know that in providing care to those suffering from Covid-19, thousands of healthcare workers have contracted the virus, and many died. Many healthcare workers affected are

friends and colleagues, so this is also personal.

Despite this, you have continued to save lives and contribute to strategies for the control of this pandemic.

We celebrate all frontline workers across countries in Africa and the rest of the world. From Ebola to polio to Covid-19, you continue to show your resilience and dedication. Even in often difficult circumstances, you have stayed true to your calling of saving lives.

I thank you deeply for the work you do, and recognise the sacrifice you have had to make. I also recognise the family members of frontline workers who have often had to make sacrifices as well.

To all frontline workers – we will always remember your courage, selflessness and dedication. ■



Forefront: Throughout the year more than 56,000 health workers contracted Covid-19 and more than 900 died from the virus. (Photo: Patrick Meinhardt/ Bloomberg via Getty Images)



MUSIC

Imali Eningi by Big Zulu (featuring Intaba Yase Dubai and Riky Rick)

In his biggest hit to date, South African rapper Big Zulu evokes the mood for South African summers – spending money, looking fly and engaging in flings. His Zulu raps are larger than life, fitting of the man's character, while the song owes its success to Intaba Yase Dubai's minimal but effective hook.



PHOTO

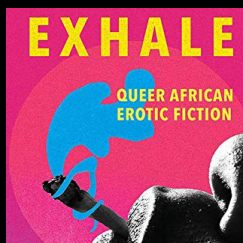
Clouds on the horizon: Volunteers from the Sonko Rescue Team, an NGO privately funded by then-Nairobi Governor Mike Sonko, fumigate a street to curb the spread of Covid-19 in April. (Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP)



FILM

The Milkmaid

Ambitious and epic in scope but with plenty of intimacy and feeling, Desmond Ovbiagele's thriller *The Milkmaid*, Nigeria's submission for the 2021 Best International Film Oscar category tells a universal but wholly specific story of human resilience in the midst of devastation. Adopting a non-linear structure and an unmistakable feminist bent, *The Milkmaid* lays out in clear detail, the human cost of war.



BOOK

Exhale: A Queer Erotica Anthology by Various Authors

Pages dripping with sex, desire and naughty playfulness. Need we say more? Featuring fantasies by Nakhane, Mubanga Kalimamukwento, Tshегоfatso Senne, and more. Each contributor will take you and your heart rate to places it may have never been before. The African continent has never been this sexy.

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

She stayed and fought

For her acts of defiance, whether they be on the page or beyond it, novelist Maaza Mengiste recognises fellow writer Tsitsi Dangarembga

For more than 30 years, Tsitsi Dangarembga – writer, filmmaker, playwright – has been quietly and insistently changing the world. *Nervous Conditions*, the title of her profound and moving first novel, comes from Sartre’s introduction to Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, “The status of ‘native’ is a nervous condition... maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent.” It is this assumption of consent that Tsitsi Dangarembga has been disrupting for decades through acts of defiance that extend past the page.

In July 2020, not long after the magnificent *The Mournable Body* was announced on the 2020 Booker Prize long list [it was subsequently shortlisted], Tsitsi was arrested in Harare during an anti-government protest. It was a moment that brought global attention to Zimbabwe’s violent repressions against dissent. “There was a deathly silence in the streets, where neither cars nor

pedestrians moved. There were no groups of demonstrators,” Dangarembga says of that moment just before she was taken to jail. This is what violence does: it takes away words, it moves bodies into specific spaces, it empties streets and holds the entire world still. Dangarembga was with a friend that day, but in my mind, she is a solitary figure staring down a deserted road. Her first step is an act that cements her protest. It grounds her into Zimbabwean soil and the Earth briefly pivots to gaze at her, the force behind this subtle shift in the universe.

This is what violence does: it takes away words, it moves bodies into specific spaces, it empties streets

Tsitsi Dangarembga lives in Zimbabwe. Who will stay and fight, she has asked in interviews, if all of us leave? It is an unflinching stance that reminds us that all art is inherently political, and that our imagination is fraught territory.

It is this landscape that she works to expand at the same time as she deepens our capacity to envision a world where a step is just a step, and a woman walking on a silent street – as extraordinary as she is – is of no more consequence than a breeze moving across a rooted tree. ■

Maaza Mengiste is the author of The Shadow King, which was shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize, and Beneath the Lion’s Gaze

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

MASTER KG AND NOMCEBO ZIKODE

MASTER KG AND NOMCEBO ZIKODE

Soundtrack to the pandemic

For writing a song that brought joy and comfort to millions, music writer **Sabelo Mkhabela** recognises Master KG and Nomcebo Zikode

Neither Master KG nor Nomcebo Zikode saw *Jerusalema*'s success coming. Yes, it was one of the biggest songs in South Africa in 2019. But, like most songs that peak in December, it was expected to be forgotten by the time the new year came along.

Then the world caught on.

Jerusalema travelled across the globe, becoming one of the most searched songs in history and peaking on charts everywhere from Burkina Faso to Belgium.

Even as the world sank deeper into pandemic-related despair, *Jerusalema* only became more popular: something about its rhythms and lyrics tapped into the zeitgeist of this strange moment in history.

In early 2020, the song was snubbed by the South African Music Awards. But it has gone on to win a raft of prestigious international awards, and became a self-sustaining fire that is still raging to this day.

By December, its music video had amassed nearly 270-million views.

The accompanying dance routine, invented by Angolan dance troupe Fenómenos do Semba in February, has been re-enacted countless times in hospitals, homes and offices around the world as part of the eponymous #JerusalemaChallenge.

Master KG and Nomcebo Zikode are no strangers to success, although not on this level. Master KG made his name in bolobedu house – a genre of house music that combines catchy hooks, autotuned vocals and digitally-produced beats with a blend of electro house, deep house and pop music.

Zikode, meanwhile, began by singing backing vocals for gospel and Afro-pop artists before conjuring up her own hits with house DJs such as DJ Ganyani and Mubi Dixon. Her latest album *Xola Moya Wam'*, like her others before it, taps heavily into gospel music.

They have both had big hits in South Africa before. But never before has South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa referenced one of their songs (or any song, for that matter) in an address to the nation; never before has Jay-Z included their track in his favourites of the year.

In a viral age without gatekeepers, *Jerusalema* shows how songs can resonate and find themselves in places that their creators could never have imagined. ■

Sabelo Mkhabela is a Johannesburg-based music writer and photographer.

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



THE PEOPLE OF HAMDAYET, SUDAN

THE PEOPLE OF HAMDAYET, SUDAN

Hospitality without borders

For welcoming the sudden influx of refugees from Ethiopia with open arms, author Nanjala Nyabola recognises the people of Hamdayet, Sudan

The recent outbreak of violence in the Tigray region of Ethiopia has been a disappointing turn of events, not least in the context of the African Union's stated agenda to "silence the guns by 2020". As a result of the hostilities between the central state and the regional government in Tigray, tens of thousands of Ethiopians have crossed the border into Sudan, a nation itself struggling with a transition to democracy after nearly 30 years of military rule that ended just last year in one of the largest and longest-running people-driven revolutions in Africa.

For Ethiopians fleeing Tigray into Hamdayet, in southern Sudan, it has been fleeing uncertainty into uncertainty.

That's why my nomination for Africans of the Year are the people of Hamdayet, who by many accounts have welcomed refugees from Tigray with an increasingly rare hospitality. Sudanese people have opened up their homes

and their communities to the refugees, creating a temporary transit shelter and a base from which international organisations can provide assistance to arriving Ethiopians

According to AFP, Ethiopian refugees in Hamdayet have received water, food and shelter amongst other forms of support, from a community that is itself poor and at the periphery of the third largest country in Africa. One Ethiopian refugee told AFP: "Many gave us food from their farms and some mats to sleep on... they have been very generous with us".

Wealthier countries and regions in the world could learn a great deal from the people of Hamdayet. Particularly important is this reminder that seeking asylum is a desperate last resort. The rapid erosion of the right to asylum is to me perhaps the most egregious symptom of an international political system teetering on the brink of collapse.

Indeed, the principle of a right to asylum is the cornerstone of the United Nations system, put in place after the atrocities of the Second World War to prevent scenes of Jewish, Roma and other minority groups turned away from safety and towards certain death in concentration camps.

When countries systematically unravel this right – creating cages at their borders, allowing boats to capsiz on the high seas, creating offshore prison centres for those who seek asylum – it is really a signal that this international system as we



Warm welcome: Many Ethiopian refugees who fled the conflict in Tigray have been welcomed by Sudanese communities (Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP)

know it is on its way to collapse.

Even in Africa, where states are increasingly consumed by the idea of strong borders and the nebulous threat of the foreign invader, the hospitality in Hamdayet is unusual. Xenophobic violence in countries like South Africa and the mass deportations of Somali refugees from Kenya are just two examples of an anti-asylum logic of statehood that is seeping into the foreign policy of African governments.

Particularly in the context of the war on terror in which Western governments have a vested interest in expropriating their violent borders to other parts of the world, African borders are increasingly militarised and their control ceded to surveillance architectures conceived of and built with the safety of the West in

mind. We have embraced the doctrine of border violence that criminalises asylum; even though human mobility, particularly in search of safety, is far older than the idea of strong national borders.

So this gentle kindness of the people of Hamdayet should be celebrated as a reminder that here in Africa we have a historical practice of doing things differently. The people of Hamdayet are a sign that a different way of organising the world is possible, and that Africa can lead the way in preserving the right to asylum and building a new world order predicated on justice and kindness, and not on bureaucratised violence. ■

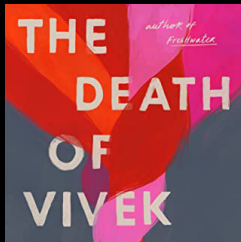
Nanjala Nyabola is a writer and political analyst based in Nairobi, Kenya, and the author of Travelling While Black: Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move.

03



MUSIC FEM by Davido

Davido's catchy hit laced with cheeky lyrics is a fitting message to his haters – and became the soundtrack to the #EndSARS protests. Fem translates as "be quiet", and the song has been interpreted by some as a diss to fellow Nigerian musician Burna Boy. Davido's camp disagrees. But the continent and some parts of the world can agree on one thing – FEM is a banger.



BOOK The Death of Vivek Oji by Akwaeke Emezi

With one of the most striking first lines in all of African fiction, *The Death of Vivek Oji* begins to leave a permanent mark on the reader from the start. Rippled with mystery, tender with grief, Emezi uses visceral prose to unearth the life of Vivek Oji, a queer youth in southern Nigeria and the secrets of everyone who surrounded him.



PHOTO

Shout it from the rooftops: Gonzaga Yiga, a 49-year-old community chairperson in a neighbourhood in Kampala, appeals to residents to abide by Covid-19 restrictions in late March. He is speaking from the rooftop of the tallest building in the area. (Photo: Badru Katumba/AFP)



FILM You Will Die at Twenty

The debut film by Amjad Abu Alala is a sensitive and thoughtful consideration of Sudan's quest for freedom under an oppressive regime of faith. After being cursed by a prophecy on his naming ceremony, the film's protagonist wanders through limbo, in constant uncertainty as he waits on his fate. Abu Alala takes advantage of the stillness to create a gorgeously, richly detailed world.

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

JOHN NKENGASONG

JOHN NKENGASONG

A voice of reason

For leading the fight against Covid-19, editor **Simon Allison** recognises **John Nkengasong**

Nearly four years ago, Cameroonian virologist John Nkengasong became the first director of the African Union's newest agency: the Africa Centres for Disease Control. He was not sure if it was a good career move.

"I wandered around the corridors of the African Union for a year before I had an office," he told *The Continent* in an interview earlier this year.

But slowly his staff grew, as did the agency's capacity. They found an office inside the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa and by early 2020 they had already responded to 17 disease outbreaks in 15 countries, including an Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

No one can say they were ready for Covid-19, but Nkengasong and the Africa CDC were better prepared – and more experienced – than most. Even before the scale of the threat became apparent to the rest of the world, Nkengasong and his small team swung into action, making sure that African countries had access to testing kits and training in how to use them. In February, only South Africa and Senegal had the capacity to test for

Covid-19. By March, 43 African countries could do so.

Perhaps even more significant was Nkengasong's quiet, behind-the-scenes lobbying of African heads of state. His message was simple: this is serious, he told them, and needed to be treated accordingly. With the odd exception – Tanzania's John Magufuli being the highest profile outlier – African leaders followed his science-based advice, implementing strict restrictions and urging their citizens to comply.

It can be no coincidence fatalities from Covid-19 in Africa have been far lower than predicted at the beginning of the pandemic; and far lower too than in developed countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, whose leaders did not listen as attentively to their public health experts.

It helped, Nkengasong said later, that African presidents were being advised by an African expert at an African institution. "They are convinced they have an agency that is advising them properly," he said. "They have prioritised this and listened to their own experts."

This, ultimately, may be Nkengasong's lasting legacy. He has shown us all how vital it is to have a continental institution that is looking after our public health interests; and, in so doing, underscored the significance – and the potential – of the AU itself. ■

Simon Allison is the Editor of The Continent, and the Mail & Guardian's Africa Editor



SO, YOU THINK YOU'RE A REAL PAN-AFRICAN?

Take this quiz to find out how much attention you paid to the news in 2020

1. The president of which country is believed to have died of Covid-19 in June?
2. Which country's president claimed to have a herbal tonic cure for the virus?
3. Name the artist who released the album *Twice As Tall* this year.
4. A miner of what type of mineral became an overnight millionaire in June this year?
5. Paul Rusesabagina was arrested in September. Which 2004 film was based on his life?
6. Comedic group Bizonto was arrested for poking fun at which president?
7. What three unusual things did Tanzania's president have tested for coronavirus?
8. Manu Dibango passed away in March. What 1972 song was he most known for?
9. Name one of the two books by African authors shortlisted for the Booker Prize this year.
10. In which country did the government try to impose a 30% tax on mobile phones?
11. Name an African country that had a general election in October this year.
12. Which artists released *Jerusalem*, which went on to spawn the #JerusalemChallenge (pictured)?

How did I do?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we will send you the answers immediately.

0-4

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

5-8

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

9-12

"Umntu ngumntu ngabantu."

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

STRIVE MASIYIWA

STRIVE MASIYIWA

Not your typical billionaire

For co-ordinating Africa's corporate response to the Covid-19 pandemic, economist Carlos Lopes recognises Econet CEO Strive Masiyiwa

I first met Strive Masiyiwa in Harare in the late 1990s. His wife, Tsitsi, was leading a local branch of a United Nations entrepreneurial programme that fell within my supervisory responsibilities. It was a period in which Strive was fighting – that is the most accurate word – to establish his telecoms company, Econet.

Mobile telephony was in its infancy and few believed this young entrepreneur could do much with his hard-won licence to operate in the field. But Strive's traits were then already on display: family values, faith, a strong work ethic, innovation and, certainly, ambition. I am convinced it was the difficulties he faced then that made him the battle-hardened leader he became, in a sector marked by high returns but also stiff competition.

These characteristics would soon be recognised by *TIME* magazine, which named him one of the most influential business leaders in the world in 2002.

Econet expanded fast, later moving its headquarters to Johannesburg and slowly transforming itself into a pan-African conglomerate that introduced millions of Africans to the world of mobile communications. But it didn't stop there. In fact, one of the first mobile cash transfer systems in the world was conceived by Econet. The idea of moving to mobile infrastructure was another huge leap forward for the company, eventually resulting in Liquid Telecom, another successful venture.

When the Ebola virus hit some countries in West Africa hard in 2014, the then-African Union Chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma summoned the African Development Bank president Donald Kaberuka and myself, as the leader of the Economic Commission for Africa at the time, to design an African response to the outbreak.

This was a moment of truth. We had all been talking about "African solutions to African problems", when it came to conflict. Here was a crisis that had mobilised unprecedented international attention. Africans could not be content to be passive. We needed action.

And we quickly found the champion we needed to mobilise the African private sector: Strive Masiyiwa.

His dedication to the Ebola outbreak response enhanced his solidarity credentials. Although Strive's philanthropic attitude was already well known in his native Zimbabwe and elsewhere, this engagement gave it a

pan-African dimension. It was therefore not surprising to see his name included in President Paul Kagame's AU Reform Group, when it was constituted in 2016. And just this week he was appointed to the board of international streaming giant Netflix. How someone like him finds the time to be so involved in such a range of issues is a mystery.

This year, however, it has been Strive's actions and visibility during the unique combination of crisis and opportunity that have made him a worthy contender for the "African of the Year" accolade.

Without a doubt, 2020 will turn out to be the year in which Strive lost the most money in his life. Covid-19 wiped out almost all the value of his assets in Zimbabwe and dented other important corporate profits, against the backdrop of the most dramatic contraction of economic activity in Africa since the independence years. Corporate leaders across the world are busy figuring out the full impact of the disruption.

Masiyiwa was first to respond to the call to help the African Union put together a joint procurement of protective gear, ventilators and medical equipment

I am sure that is true for Strive as well. Yet he was first to respond to the call to help the AU put together a joint procurement of protective gear, ventilators and medical equipment to



Connector: Despite financial setbacks this year, Strive Masiyiwa played an important role in aiding Africa's response to the pandemic.

(Photo: Charlie Bibby/ Financial Times)

salvage the continent from a wave of trade protectionism and the serious disruptions to supply chains. His actions translated into countless lives saved.

His unfaltering attitude has placed him at the centre of the co-ordinated continental response. "Mr Tech" has evolved once again. Nowadays he talks vaccines, immunology or health priority funding. Many billionaires content themselves with simply giving money to charity, or paying lip service to good causes. That is not Strive. His deportment is one of involvement and passion, while directing his ambition towards altruistic and encompassing missions. He works for the good of Africa. ■

Carlos Lopes is an Honorary Professor at the University of Cape Town's Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance. He was the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa from 2012-2016.

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

BARBARA ITUNGO

BARBARA ITUNGO

A future First Lady

For her fearless opposition to one of the longest-serving presidents in Africa, writer **Eric Mwine-Mugaju** recognises **Barbara Itungo**

Superwoman is one of Bobi Wine's most popular tracks. It could just as well refer to the Ugandan opposition leader's wife, Barbara Itungo, whom Ugandans affectionately refer to as "Barbie".

While Bobi Wine may have dominated the headlines, Itungo has been by his side at every turn, and is in her own right a vocal and eloquent critic of Museveni's regime. She has been described as one of the most articulate and tenacious of Uganda's prospective First Ladies.

Bobi Wine – real name Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu – is running for president of Uganda in January's elections.

The former pop star is hoping to unseat President Yoweri Museveni, one of Africa's longest-serving heads of state. In the course of his brief political career, Bobi Wine has been arrested, assaulted, tortured, threatened and tear-gassed.

Despite the torrent of persecution her young family has faced since her husband

swapped music for politics, she refuses to play victim.

On the dark day last month when Bobi Wine was arrested and 54 Ugandans were killed in the ensuing protests, Itungo refused to play the victim. "I cannot start to think about myself when there are families grieving their loved ones," she told BBC.

But despite the central role she has played in Bobi Wine's political success, and the sacrifices she has made along the way, she gets a fraction of the attention and plaudits directed towards her husband. It is sadly not unusual for the contributions of women to be downplayed.

One of this year's standout films, *Softie*, documents Boniface and Njeri Mwangi, a Kenyan activist couple.

"I cannot start to think about myself when there are families grieving their loved ones"

As Boniface runs for political office, it is left to Njeri to look after their family, while playing an active role in the campaign herself. "People don't see me for me. They don't know me," says Njeri. "It's like I don't exist."

Barbara Itungo not only exists, but she is one half of a power couple that represents the most serious threat yet to Museveni's regime. For this, she is my African of the Year. ■

Eric Mwine-Mugaju is a Ugandan journalist and commentator



PHOTO

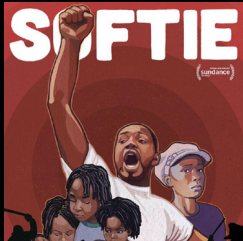
Seeking refuge: Travellers carry a small inflatable boat on the beach of Gravelines, near Dunkirk in France, before embarking on the dangerous journey across the English channel. (Photo: Sameer Al-Doumy/AFP)



BOOK

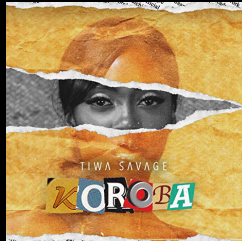
The Shadow King by Maaza Mengiste

Mengiste's 2020 Booker Prize nominated-book is worth all the hype. The seed of the story came from the author's discovery that her great-grandmother, Getey, enlisted to fight in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War in 1935. Mengiste pens a stirring war novel where the battle is fought not just on land, but in the photographs that survive and in the hearts of the brave women who wage a people's war no-one was expecting.



DOCUMENTARY
Softie

Softie may be a documentary, but it has all of the fun and jazzy energy of a studio musical. The Sam Soko-directed film is the chronicle of Boniface Mwangi's activism and his attempt to run for political office in 2017. *Softie* weighs his responsibility to family against his duty to country.



MUSIC
Koroba by Tiwa Savage

While making you dance to an undulating mid-tempo Afro-fusion instrumental, on *Koroba*, Tiwa Savage questions why society shames women for dating politicians for money while the politicians get away with embezzling state funds and cheating on their wives.

02

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

PITSO MOSIMANE

PITSO MOSIMANE

Lord of the pitch

For masterminding one of the finest seasons ever witnessed in African football, sportswriter Luke Feltham recognises Pitso Mosimane

It's been a privilege to watch Pitso Mosimane define his legacy in real time this year.

The stoic coach, affectionately christened “Jingles” during his playing days, had long ago distinguished himself as one of the sharpest minds in the African game. But even by his towering standards this has been an exceptional year.

Less than three months after winning a domestic treble with Mamelodi Sundowns in South Africa – clinched on the final day of the season – Mosimane would secure a historic treble with Al Ahly. Having arrived at the tail end of the campaign, he ushered the Egyptian giant away from any pitfalls and safely towards the glory that the club believed it always deserved but had failed to grasp for so long.

The pessimist might choose to make something of his late arrival; pointing out the job was three-quarters done. But the realist would remember that it is in that final stretch that the pressure is at its most intense. That a weaker coach, less

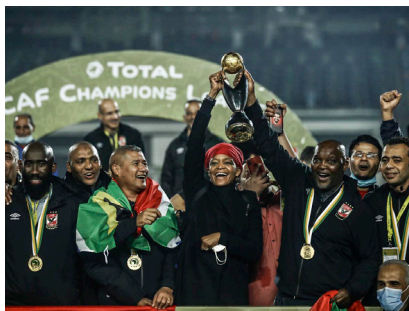
confident in his abilities, may well have crumbled as the team imploded.

After all, Mosimane's predecessor, René Weiler, could no longer withstand the intense scrutiny anymore, deciding to leave despite being on the cusp of three major trophies.

It's hard to blame him. Cairo is hot, dense and football mad. He won't be the last outsider to wilt under the desert sun. For South Africa's best tactician, however, it's a climate built for him to thrive.

No matter the stakes, Jingles remains unbowed. Whether on the training ground, at press melees or in a cup final, Mosimane carries himself with the same distinct swagger. It is that supreme belief in himself – a completely justified belief – that has seen him sign off on one of the most successful years we've ever seen on an African football pitch. ■

Luke Feltham is the Mail & Guardian's chief sportswriter.



Supreme reign: Pitso Mosimane has already led Al Ahly to historic wins during his short tenure. (Photo: Ahmed Awaad/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

AFRICANS OF THE YEAR



Illustration: Nzilani Simu

PRESS FREEDOM ADVOCATES

PRESS FREEDOM ADVOCATES

Defenders of the fourth estate

For their vocal efforts on behalf of jailed journalists and other threats to press freedom, researcher

Jonathan Rozen

nominates reporters, editors, lawyers and other press freedom advocates

The press freedom situation across Africa in 2020 could be considered bleak: security forces attacked reporters with impunity, governments sought new laws to silence their critics, and the number of jailed journalists continued to climb, according to data released this week by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). But a closer look at the mobilisation in defence of the press and citizens' right to know paints a more nuanced picture.

In July, only hours after Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono recorded police forcibly entering his home to arrest him, a coalition of local and international advocates mobilised for his release. Within days, as the Zimbabwean government demonised western influence, a network led by Media Monitoring Africa wrote to the chair of

the African Union, and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, requesting support for Chin'ono's freedom.

As Chin'ono moved in and out of detention during the weeks that followed, the number of journalists, lawyers and advocates committed to his release grew stronger. Eventually, the AU's special rapporteur on freedom of expression and access to information in Africa, Jamesina King, wrote to Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa to express concern about Chin'ono's ongoing prosecution.

The pandemic made the jailing of journalists even more dangerous. In early April, as the scale and severity of Covid-19 loomed into focus, over 190 groups (many from Africa) and more than 11,000 people signed communiqués to governments responsible for keeping journalists behind bars, as well as the United Nations secretary general. It was the largest number of participants in any campaign by CPJ since its founding in 1981 and the message was singular: that journalists jailed for their work should be freed to reduce the pandemic's unprecedented threat to their health in overcrowded conditions.

The Covid-19 pandemic made the jailing of journalists even more dangerous

Unfortunately, these dire warnings

PRESS FREEDOM ADVOCATES

fell mostly on deaf ears. At least two journalists – one in Honduras and another in Egypt – died after contracting Covid in detention, while at least two journalists in Ethiopia and one in Cameroon tested positive behind bars, as the number of journalists jailed for their work globally reached an all-time high since CPJ began keeping records in 1992.

The pandemic also drove even more communication online, emphasising the importance of unhindered internet access for journalists to do their jobs. Governments in Ethiopia, Guinea and Togo nevertheless ordered network disruptions. But press freedom and digital rights advocates won a legal challenge that pushed the Economic Community of West African States Community Court of Justice to declare Togo's 2017 internet shutdown illegal.

Press freedom and digital rights advocates won a legal challenge to declare Togo's 2017 internet shutdown illegal

As journalists were arrested for posts in Benin, Niger, Mali, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sierra Leone, local media and civil society consistently raised the alarm and called for authorities to ensure freedom of expression. When Nigeria's government sought to legislate further control over social media, local civil society and the press pushed back to



Detained: Hopewell Chin'ono outside his offices in Harare as the premises were searched by police in July.

(Photo: Jekesai Njikizana/AFP)

#SayNoToSocialMediaBill. Paradigm Initiative, a Nigeria-based rights group, also co-ordinated a collaborative submission calling for revisions to the country's proposed data protection bill that threatened journalists' safety and rights in the name of "national security interests".

There is no shortage of causes for concern when looking at the conditions for the media across Africa. But for all of these challenges there are passionate reporters, editors, lawyers and press freedom advocates asking why journalists are being denied their freedom. The success of these efforts may seem impossible to measure, but the vigorous solidarity that often defies geographic and linguistic divisions is difficult to ignore. ■

Jonathan Rozen is the Senior Africa Researcher at the Committee to Protect Journalists



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01



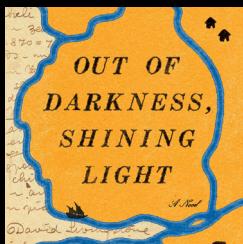
FILM
This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection

Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese's opus features the final big screen performance of legendary South African actress Mary Twala Mhlongo. And what a way to go! Twala Mhlongo burns up the screen as the aged widow fighting to rest alongside her ancestors. Mosese's film grapples with themes of identity, displacement and holding on against the tide of progress.



MUSIC
10 Missed Calls by Black Coffee (featuring Pharrell Williams and Jozzy)

Black Coffee's lush and breezy kinetics flow over Pharrell Williams's trademark drums, forming a perfect concoction for Jozzy and Pharrell's smooth vocals to float in. *10 Missed Calls*, a song about attraction, is the perfect soundtrack to chasing sunshine in the summer.



BOOK
Out of Darkness, Shining Light by Petina Gappah

This work of impeccably researched, imaginative historical fiction is Gappah's strongest yet. Join the perilous journey of David Livingstone's corpse as 69 of his former servants and slaves carry him 1,500 miles from Zambia to Zanzibar so his body can be returned to England. Gappah balances the narrative delicately between Halima, Livingstone's feisty cook and Jacob Wainwright, a dogmatically religious freed slave. Wit, hijinks, hypocrisy and loyalty abound.



PHOTO
Wheels of fortune: Men line up at a food distribution centre in the Kwa Mai Mai area of central Johannesburg during the height of South Africa's national lockdown in May. The lockdown had a devastating economic impact on the country, but not everyone was affected equally. (Photo: Marco Longari/AFP)



Until next year

This is the final edition of *The Continent* for 2020. After taking a breather to let ourselves (and our finances) recover, we will be back in 2021. Look out for the next issue on Saturday, 23 January. Don't forget to subscribe if you haven't already: just send us an email (thecontinent@mg.co.za) or a WhatsApp (+27 73 805 6068) and we will add you to our lists.

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