



PUBLICATION
Jun 27, 2020

CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“THE REAL PAIN OF IRRATIONAL BELIEFS” BY IMMACULATE AMOIT

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



I grew up in a small village in Western Kenya in what I believed was a liberal and progressive family. I saw men supporting women; in fact, my father raised my elder sisters and me. Everyone received equal education, and we all went to school.

But two years ago, my understanding of our culture was shattered when I gave birth to first born twins. **Only then did I realize that people in my village are still held down by these oppressive and archaic values that breed superstition.** In high school, I had a classmate who told me that, because she was a twin, she and her brother experienced unbelievable bias. Some in our village wanted to kill her twin brother and eventually her family was forced to leave their home and move to the city.

I was a teenager and the story touched me, but **it still didn't make me fathom how intense the burden of having twins in Kenya would be, how immersed my country was in irrational beliefs and plagued by punitive witchcraft.** Indeed, according to the Centre for Inquiry, if most African societies don't change their mindsets, they are likely to engage in inhumane activities and create a pan-African human rights crisis.

I was in my mid-twenties, early in my pregnancy, when I found out I was carrying two babies. I told my mum the news, but she asked me not to say anything to anyone—not even my boyfriend. When pressed, she confessed twins were taboo and were accused of bringing bad luck. **(Twins are believed to kill their parents, cause poverty or bring an unexpected death in the families they are born into.)** A woman who has twins can't share the cooking stone or jiko with her mother-in-law or husbands' relatives. These beliefs were passed on by older family members we didn't even know. Recently, I visited a lady who had twin girls and almost threw her babies in a pit latrine out of anger after her husband, as well as her neighbours and the larger community, rejected her publicly. **After we had a series of painful conversations, she decided to raise her twins without her husband. Fear took me over that very day.**

On December 19, 2013, I gave birth to preterm twins at Aga Khan Hospital in Nairobi. They were given the very best treatment: the chief nursing officer even gave them Christmas gifts. But later, when I took my newborns to the hospital, my mother's warnings came to life. A female nurse asked me, “Are these your firstborns?” I nodded, then she said: “Woe unto you! You are too young to have twins. Besides, it's a bad omen for your marriage and relationships—none will last.

Then, a friend of mine who also had twins told me that her children had been poisoned and, heartbreakingly, only one survived. She and her husband moved to another town and have never been back. As for me, each time I took my sons to the hospital for vaccinations or medical check-ups, different nurses echoed what the first one had said. I tried to ignore them, but I was constantly worried about my sons.

Within a short time, everyone in my community was talking about my twin sons. Some whispered; others spoke openly to my face. They told me that I should die and that my twins should, too.

Despite the toxic context, I strived to happily raise my sons. Months after months, they grew healthy, strong, and bubbly. Their father adored them and had grand plans for their future, but when our children turned 10 months old, their father left us without explanation and never to return again. **I know he is alive, but he never asks about us. Everyone tells me it is because we had twins.**

I, however, chose to believe that he left because of another woman. My boyfriend was a medical doctor, and in my mind, there was no doubt that he understood the complexities of reproductive health more than most in the community. How could he be bound to such cultural myths? When I asked his brother and sister why he had left, they insisted they didn’t know, until the day his brother admitted that he had left us out of superstition.

One ill-fated day, I was at work when my house caught on fire and one of my twins, little Ammiel lost his life. Ammiel’s death was very painful, but the feelings of irrelevance, the ridicule, the betrayal, and the shame that came with it made the pain indescribable. We had a lot of land, which should have made burying my deceased child easy. **But my culture prevented me from burying him on my father’s compound. Instead, Ammiel’s body was trapped in the horrifying conditions of an overcrowded morgue.**

This was a double tragedy for me. I was alone, and I was lost.

I insisted on Ammiel being laid to rest on my father’s compound. Eventually, with the help of those supportive members of my family, the elders accepted my request. I was given space to bury him in a corner of my father’s compound and only old men could dig his grave. We were denied a burial ceremony because of his status as a twin.

My brothers and male cousins were asked not to go near the site. His grave remains unmarked, with no name or epitaph. I wanted to write his name and the simple words ‘Rest in Peace’, but I was denied the opportunity because of the belief that such actions would kill his twin brother.

Ammiel’s surviving twin and I were not allowed to go near Ammiel’s casket, view his body, or even go near the gravesite. We were forbidden from even crying.

The only dignity and last respects I paid my son was a nice casket and a wreath of flowers. His twin brother, playmate, and friend will never step close to his sibling’s grave. **I’ve never understood the reason behind this, and he never will either, or perhaps there is none to be found at all.**

A day after the burial I snuck out to go to his graveside and cried my heart out.

Moving Forward

Ammiel’s death has strengthened my resolve to help transform hearts and minds on the continent. **I believe the power to change these prevailing beliefs is to be found among young Africans.** For me, the struggle to help those who are impacted by cultural myths starts with reaching out to teenage girls.

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