SOMA

– A PORTRAIT

soma
burudani • utamaduni • maarifa

Foreword by Hope Chigudu

SOMA–A PORTRAIT

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Foreword

I am happy to present the work of Soma Portrait to you. Soma, as an organisation, was born out of many years of feminist organising, transgressing, thinking, dreaming and reflecting under the stewardship of Demere Kitunga, its founding Executive Director. She is a versatile activist capable of being raw, refined, funny, smooth, public intellectual, and artistic. Her decolonial journey has brought her to deeper feminism, and deeper crossroads about the times we're in. Demere who is widely recognized for her unconventional, and counterintuitive take on global crises, civic action, and social change is the chief curator of Soma, and Soma Book Cafe.

Since its birth, the Soma Book Cafe has become a home to creative minds and spirits and somehow not so much a home for the everyday thinking that puts women, girls, boys, people with disabilities, and non-binary groups at crossroads. The spaces Soma creates are for exploring and celebrating humanity in all its forms. They are places for liberation, and not inclusion for the sake of it. Soma weaves a place for a kind of emancipatory intergenerational fabric. The organisation is an example of what a collective, a community on the African continent, and a conscious world would look like.

Soma community 'constantly innovates, reads between the lines in the ever-evolving local and global contexts and listens attentively to its growing intergenerational community'.

The organisation continuously looks for the voices of the youth, the young artists and poets, and inspires them to embrace many varied forms of organising and dialogue through their differences. Soma walks with them as they unfold and spread their wings even if they are not sure about the future.

The organisation embraces children whose stories invite us to see things that we never noticed before and to meet the world anew. It thus makes space for the children to be powerful by letting them tell stories that thwart the productivity of the status quo.

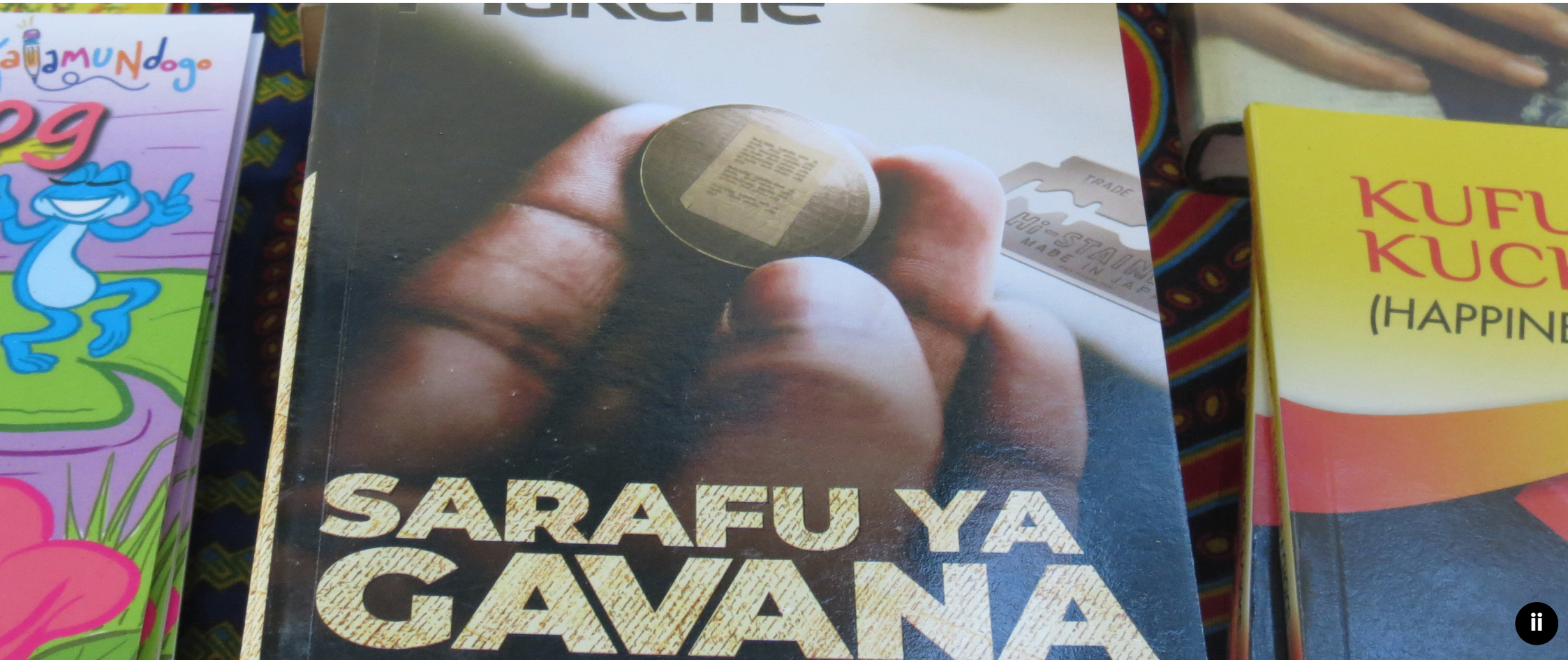
Soma packages feminist knowledge and information experientially; 'with freshness and diversity in form and content, mobilises large audiences, teasing out audience feedback and generating interest and participation among diverse groups of people at national and grassroots levels to engage with; and become feminist content producers and users.' The Soma curated narratives disrupt linearity and binaries and tease out many streams from the mainstream. They entice us to see and notice differently, provoking us to think and do differently.

The Soma Portrait shows that as Soma walks, it reflects on things, it is like thinking alongside; hence part of its function is to create spaces for both reflection and contestation. And going beyond reflection on practice and rigorously embracing theoretical work, reading and writing.

(1) I mention Demere but in fact she worked with many allies and comrades in conceptualizing and starting Soma; and convergence of cocreators, curators and hosts of events and forums; institutional and individual.

This Portrait opens wide the doors of the organisation so that we can see its wealth, abundance, and beautiful gifts of thought and conceptualization. The Portrait also gifts us some resources that we could use to support our activism as well as to keep marinating on. The invitation is for us to slow down as a function of awareness and presence and listen politically to Soma; we might find the magic in other worlds and becomings.

Hope Chigudu,
December 2024



Preface

How do or can women tell their own stories as a means 'to balance the telling of their lives and history they take part in making, but which has thus far been predominantly told from the perspective of external gazers and mostly men?' Feminist activists have been grappling with this question as they reclaim their rightful space in society, thus rewriting history with their activism, pens, paintbrush, and an array of other more recent and still unfolding media and technologies.

This coffee table book is an attempt to create a portrait that captures ways in which Soma has understood knowledge and expression as a contested arena for transformative politics; and more specifically, a site for feminist activism.

When Soma Book Café opened its doors to the public in 2008, little did we know how political the space would become. Our desire was simple and down to earth within the prevailing context. To create an inclusive urban space for 'leisure, culture and learning'. As publishers and literary people, this included the need to make books accessible to the reading public--prolific readers, reluctant and those yet to discover the beauty of the creative word.

This is within the backdrop of a learning environment where teaching was by rote with scarcity of learning stimuli, the curriculum textbook based and the learning environment unexciting. As the context has continued to shift, so has the scope of our activities grown in breadth and depth. What has remained constant is our conviction that 'knowledge is power'.

Our clientele cocreated and shaped the politics of their platforms; and we as curators and facilitators, allowed ourselves to learn; and grow diverse forums and events in which audiences were also creators and controlled the narrative. With time, Soma community challenged us to be bolder in projecting our identity, as a feminist space which embraces storytelling as a unique language for self-understanding and a method for experiential learning.

During a decade and a half of learning by doing, Soma has translated its actions interlacing space, skills and narrative into an integral approach. This portrait brings to the reader a bird's eye view of what informs Soma, its heartbeat, and a promise of its dreams yet to unfold.

Demere Kitunga,
December 2024


soma
leisure • culture • learning
Kestori
kavazi
SEMA
soma

Acknowledgments

As a public space, Soma's existence and vibrancy owes to multitudes who doubled as audiences, cocreators. It is, therefore, not easy to mention by name everyone from whose creative energies Soma pulsated. Allow me to recognise you all in group; and my apologies if any of you feels left out. In all earnest, my all-times colleagues and I appreciate every one of you without exception.

Let me start with the different publics, media and people of goodwill who made it their business to ensure our crazy idea of establishing a readership space named Soma Book Café as an alternative and inclusive urban space for leisure, culture and learning for giving it a reason to sustain for as long as it did, and later, a multimedia feminist storytelling hub whose unfolding is still nascent.

My business partner with whom we initiated the idea and committed hard earned resources to actualise it, thank you for continuously engaging in different capacities. Our cheer leaders and detractors, thank you for providing us with the necessary dialectics to stay the course. Soma's initial staff, consultants, volunteers and interns, professional associates, enthusiasts, service providers and suppliers who helped with baselining, initial infrastructure and organise products services that helped Soma to take off.

We thank you and everyone else who came after you, carrying forward the spirit, energy, innovation and flexibility in discharging your mandates beyond the call of duty. Know that you have always been and continue to be valued.

Friends and family and book lovers who volunteered themselves and mobilised their networks to ideate brand, promote and curate a weeklong series of events to mark the launching of Soma Book Café, which defined the texture of the space and galvanised its initial audiences some of whom become enduring clientele we wouldn't have had without your ingenuity and selflessness. Asanteni sana.

Events hosts and organisers of intergenerational forums and events mentioned and not mentioned in the pages of this book, thank you so much for making Soma's identity felt experientially and written in indelible ink.

Cocreating partners in the herstory platform of the Transformative Feminist Movement Building Coalition, and the cultural ecosystem including the book sector, thank you for allowing us to define our politics and exhibit our unique contribution to both collectives. We count on your support for us to stay relevant, effectively fulfilling our role contributing to but not replicating any of your roles.

Partners who resource us, big and small, in cash and in kind, local and global, old and new, thank you for having confidence in us and supporting our cause. Your resourced did not go to waste. In case where we did not strictly adhere to your instructions; know that it was a capacity issue and not imprudence.

Local government officials and neighbours for facilitating peaceful coexistence between Soma and its immediate environment and joining the rank of our regular clientele. WAMATA we especially thank you for lending us event facilities until we were able to acquire our own.

We acknowledge and appreciate dignitaries in government, parliament, foreign embassies and the public sphere who officiated in our events and/or found them interesting enough to partake among audiences.

And finally, our Board of Directors, project/programme advisory groups and members. Thank you for helping us steer with purpose and focus even when our demand on your time seemed overwhelming. Thank you for your oversight, commitment, enduring interest and ownership. We couldn't be better supported.



Introduction

This book is about a unique space and organization in Tanzania, popularly known as Soma. It is a portrayal of Soma's one-and-a-half-decade existence and prospects for its future. A blend of texts and visuals, it paints a vivid picture of why and what Soma has been doing, with who, and for whom.

As a portrait of an organisation curating intergenerational spaces, this book is organised in sections and subsections customized for children, youths, and adults, respectively. However, the format speaks to people of all reading levels and literary interests. In this brief introduction, the dear gentle reader is introduced to Soma's herstory and what defines it.

Soma means read or learn in Kiswahili, a popular name for a non-governmental organisation based in Tanzania known as Readership for Learning and Development. Until 2019, Soma was a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee known as E&D Readership and Development Agency.

The organisation promotes readership by creating and expanding spaces for creativity and co-creation. For more than a decade, its main space, named Soma Book Café, located in Mikocheni, Dar es Salaam, has widely opened its doors to storytellers of all ages and walks of life to develop skills, interact, learn together, and build audiences.

However, Soma prides itself in especially engaging children and youth as readers and storytellers in their very own right. Essentially, Soma promotes the creative word as a catalyst for transforming, deconstructing, reclaiming, and reimagining cultural identities and her/histories. It is a learning organisation and part of the global movement for transformative literacies, *authoring* alternative futures. It is thus constantly innovating, reading between the lines in the ever-evolving local and global contexts and listening attentively to its growing intergenerational community.

Soma Book Café is both a readership/cultural space and a feminist storytelling hub.

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Soma's Journey

Soma's story began with two women publishers with a dream to foster the unity between reading for learning, culture, and leisure; a conviction that knowledge is power; a belief in the power of storytelling; and a commitment to making a lasting contribution to the creative and literary landscape.

Soma was registered in 2007. It became operational in 2008 when it launched Soma Book Café, a first-of-its-kind readership space in Dar es salaam, a converging point for the promotion of reading for leisure, culture and learning.

Soma Book Café started as a hub, housing a bookshop, coffee shop, and lawn with an open podium. It immediately became a vibrant literary space, hosting book clubs and an array of readership forums. Since then, it has grown to become the face of Soma, encapsulating its mandate and identity to the extent that to the public, Soma Book Café represents both the space and the organisation.

In November 2019, Soma changed its legal status and official name due to changes in the Tanzanian law governing not-for-profit organisations.

It has since undergone significant institutional and strategic changes while it retains its literary persona and continues to create spaces and processes for storytellers to emerge, grow, and thrive within and beyond Tanzania. Soma also identifies as a feminist organisation that curates and cocreates feminist storytelling and learning spaces. The story of Soma is, therefore, that of change, resilience, and continuity.

Soma Book Café has grown as a readership promotion space and innovative co-creation hub for literary expression and multimedia storytelling approaches anchored in Pan-African Transformative feminist philosophies and approaches.

It provides different arenas for literary expression and discourse; promotes reading for pleasure and encourages the independent pursuit of knowledge. As a space, it has also expanded to include creative experimentations with fusions of indigenous knowledge production and dissemination with contemporary storytelling genres and digital media.


Soma Children's Hub
& Studio

Soma's Persona

In its literary and feminist persona, Soma has continued to curate co-created spaces where groups and communities meet, connect, interact, and grow together around shared ideas, experiences, and expressions.

Together, they create and organise forums and events to hone their skills, build an audience, and amplify voices. Invariably, books, stories, and shared experiences have been and continue to be a converging point and prompts.

As highlighted in this and the subsections below, regardless of whether a space created is formal or informal, happening within or beyond Soma's physical and virtual vicinity, there is always an element of learning, sharing, and mentoring.

Since its inception, Soma has supported and co-created diverse spaces within its premises and beyond. Starting with the weeklong Soma Book Café launching festival, for example, Soma co-created a spectacular performative exploration of 500 years plus of written Kiswahili poetry with Professor M. M. Mulokozi, Neema Kambona and a few members of Chama cha Ushairi Tanzania (CHAUTA).

Also, during this event was a three-day workshop and public dialogue on spoken word poetry cocreated with a Goethe Institute and KWANI? featuring Falko Herning, a German poet and workshop lead, Neema Mawiyo from KWANI?, Elieshi Lema, Edwin Semzaba, and several upcoming local poets.

→ **Other literary learning platforms Soma organized include Swahili to English creative translation workshops in partnership with Commonwealth Writers and English PEN in 2016, initiated by Emma D'Costa (lead person) with Ida Hadjivayanis and Richard Mabala as lead facilitators.**

Soma coordinated the local content, including recruiting participants from Tanzania Mainland, Kenya, and Zanzibar on a competitive basis. One of the outcomes of this initiative is the publication of Times and Seasons (An Anthology of Short Stories and Poems) with a foreword by Mukoma wa Ngugi, published by Moran Publishers in 2024. Participants have since taken up creative translation and bilingual translation assignments and workshop facilitation assignments across Africa.

Various illustrious poetry workshops and public conversations followed suit, including

- A one-day Maneno Express 'art and social change' colloquium cocreated with Amanda Lichtenstein and Twaweza, featuring KWANI?'s editor Billy Kahora in 2014
- Badilisha Poetry workshop, a cocreation with WAKA and Badilisha Poetry Xchange facilitated by Sandra Mushi and Prof. Mulokozi in 2015
- Poetry workshop in 2016 and 2017 with the Embassy of Ireland led by Irish poets Vona Groarke and Seamus Cashman, respectively
- Poetry as Preservation workshop and public event with SAWTI in 2019

In Dar es Salaam, apart from Kijiwe cha Usomaji further described below, children's activities include literary tents during the Gender Festivals convened biannually by the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) and Annual Book Festivals organized by the Book Development Council of Tanzania/Baraza La Maendeleo ya Vitabu Tanzania (BAMVITA); Alliance Française; chapchap writing workshops at Nafasi Art Space; children's storytelling spots in open day and career days at the International School of Tanganyika (IST), Dar es Salaam Independent School (DIS), and Academic International.

Soma also shared its research and writing with children methodology in a public dialogue session in Arusha, followed by two children's creative writing workshops during which children were facilitated to write works with publishable potential.



Part I: Soma in the Last 10+ years

Part One looks at two core sides of the same coin in Soma's last 10+ years. Soma as a literary space and Soma as a feminist space. Overlaps between them show that its literary content is feminist and vice versa. Similarly, Soma as a learning space intersects with Soma as a co-creation space.





Soma: A Literary Space

In its formative years, Soma initiated various forums as it built a literacy space that cut across generations. These included the children's, youth, adult, and intergenerational forums portrayed below.

Children Storytelling Forums

Children are the first cornerstone of Soma's intergenerational forums. As portrayed below, they fulfil Soma's purpose of creating an inclusive co-creation space for children to engage with contemporary social issues at their level and interest in a process that actualises their agency and validates their storytelling prowess.

A: Watoto na Vitabu

All activities with, by, and for children at Soma fall under an overarching program known in Kiswahili as Watoto na Vitabu (Children and/with Books), seeking to cultivate creativity, love of reading, self-understanding, and critical consciousness among children. The Watoto na Vitabu forum was regularly convened on Saturdays at Soma Book Café since it was launched. Over the years, however, it has expanded to include other in-house and outreach children's programs and activities.

Scan to watch: Watoto na Vitabu Research and Writing Workshop





B: Saturday's Children's Program

Soma carved an autonomous and children-owned space where they met to read and experiment with various literary genres and creative media. They have read and talked about books, researched and written stories, painted pictures, weaved beads, played scrabble, cards, and chess, danced, played musical instruments, practised journalism, performed stories and poetry, hunted for treasure, and much more. From time to time, authors, performing artists, oral storytellers, poets, dancers, journalists, students, parents, etc., from all walks of life volunteered to co-facilitate with Soma staff of all ranks who are regular facilitators of the sessions. Mariam Ismail Mponda (popularly Mama Mipango), Kiswahili poet and traditional dancer popular in her local community in Mbagala on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam, facilitated regularly and bonded with children for a decade. Occasionally, groups of children from other children's programmes joined in.

C: Kalamu Ndogo

Creatively translated as Little Scribe, Kalamu Ndogo—literarily, 'Small Pen/Pencil' owes its genesis to Saturday's children's program. Books in this series are written by and for children in experimental research on how to facilitate children to research and author original stories inspired by Tanzanian storytelling traditions and their experiences, imaginations, and aspirations. Four best-authored stories were selected for publication out of 40 written by children who participated in the research and writing project in three centres.

Children from each centre chose the three best stories, and the selected authors were facilitated to review and make the final selection of three titles. Four were chosen because of a tie, but only three were published as e-books. The highest-ranked title was also translated and published in print and as an audiobook. Published under the Creative Commons open license contract, the Kalamu Ndogo book series can be accessed in any form for free.

→ **Efforts were made to further develop the children's space into a multimedia library and recording studio in which children can access reading and fun learning materials from various sources and select stories to be rendered into audio and e-books.**

They included soliciting donations of two containers to house the facility. A crowdfunding campaign was launched to raise money for refurbishing, furnishing, and equipping it with library resources. However, efforts fell short of the target; hence, other than roofing, a coat of paint, and architectural designs, the project remains a work in progress

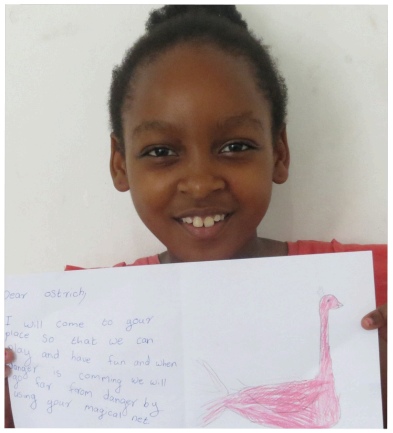




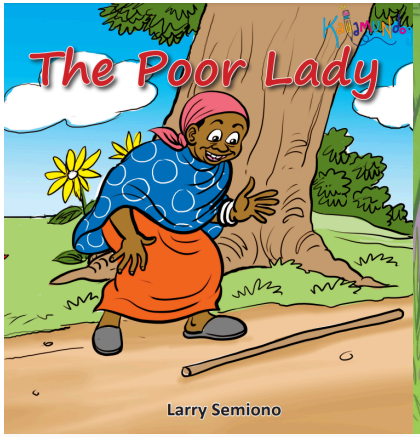


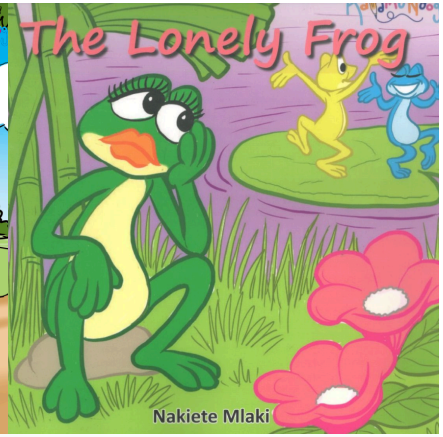

SATURDAY CHILDREN'S
PROGRAM
soma
Creating a Readership
Culture in Tanzania
+255673014071




Dear ostrich
I will come to your
place so that we can
and have fun and when
is coming we will
you from danger by
your magical









The Poor Lady

The Poor Lady by Larry Semiono tells about an elderly lady who wants to fly and realizes her dream when a wooden stick turns into a flying wooden tray

The Lonely Frog

The Lonely Frog by Nakiete Mlaki is about a young frog who feels alienated from her peers but possesses an unappreciated gift that will save the community. The Lonely Frog has been translated into Kiswahili as Chura Mpweke.

Mbuguma na Nasiru

Mbuguma na Nasiru by Sharifa Shemputa is about two half-brothers braving a journey into the jungle to fetch medicinal plants to save their ailing and squabbling mothers' lives.

Chungu cha Ajabu

The fourth story (third in ranking), Chungu cha Ajabu (A Mysterious Pot) by Farida Chacha (not her real name), could not be published due to parental reservations. It is about two friends, a prince and a commoner, who became ensnared in trouble because of the king's avarice and bad faith.

Scan to watch and listen to the Audio Book of Chura Mpweke



D: Kijiwe Cha Usomaji

When a seed grant supporting Watoto na Vitabu ran out, children from Michungwani, a working-class/slum area in Mikocheni A, continued coming to Soma Book Café every Saturday. To secure their safety against traffic, in 2013 Soma staff volunteered to facilitate the running of a self-managed street library. They named it Kijiwe cha Usomaji in Kiswahili, which could be translated to 'Reading Hangout'. As an approach, it had to start with children's donations from the limited books and stationery they possess. Soma complemented their efforts with additional stock purchased with a marginal surplus obtained from Saturday's children's storytelling program, which restarted on a cost-recovery basis.

Children also organised fundraisers under the guidance of their facilitators—Paulina George, Ibrahim Mdachi (Soma staff) and Millicent Lema (a volunteer). Ibrahim and Millicent went on and started similar initiatives when they transitioned from Soma. Soma twinned privileged students from Dar es Salaam International School (DIA) on community service with about 50 member of Kijiwe cha Usomaji. Through storytelling, the two groups co-created a social-cultural exchange and experience sharing season which influenced their view of society.

Kijiwe cha Usomaji children went places. In 2014, they participated in a Children's Book Festival at the National Museum in downtown Dar es Salaam that Soma organized under the motto 'Mpe Kila Mtoto Kitabu (creatively translated as 'Place a Book in the Hands of Every Child)'.



"Our initiative seeks to turn gossip centres into avenues where people become intimate with books, and from there, they are able to discuss transformative topics"



DEMERE KITUNGA
Soma CEO

There they stage performed *Mfalme Ndevu na Masikini Mkata Kuni*. Salma Kikwete, then the first lady of Tanzania, was the guest of honour. A primary school teacher by profession, she led an interactive reading of a children's story book with children. She also conferred prizes to winners of the writing competition. In 2015, Kijiwe cha Usomaji children hosted a public event co-created with Soma, Nafasi Arts Space, and Africultures in an open space near Mikocheni A Primary school (where most of them attend). The purpose was to launch their tin trunk library to the public; to fundraise for replenishing books; and to showcase their storytelling skills. These children organised several other public events in the neighbourhood serving as a showcase and fundraisers.

"What impressed me the most is that this event was totally dominated by children…. They used the theatre to do storytelling through dancing, narration, and acting. Everything was in Swahili, hence very sweet…. I cannot stop thinking of a young girl (maybe 8 years old) who narrated the story of "Mbwa na Panya" …. Her talent cannot be contained and her star shines. She was the overall winner of a creative writing competition and the youngest competitor. The story was of her own creation. Another story that was narrated by acting and dancing was 'Mfalme Ndevu na Masikini Mkata Kuni'"



AIKANDE KWAYU
Guest at the Children Book Festival, 2014



"We wanted to expose the kids to other delights in the art world that will continue to nurture their imagination, fuelling their curiosity, ensuring they continue to read…"



DEMERE KITUNGA
Soma CEO

E: Tamasha la Watoto na Vitabu

When the Saturday's children storytelling program started in 2008, it included occasional Children's Book Fairs (Tamasha la Watoto na Vitabu) held at Soma Book Café and in outreach spaces. This was followed by quarterly fairs over the years.

Most of them were held during the Book Bazaar, introduced as an add-on to afford regular literary forums space to engage with larger publics of book lovers. Several attempts to start annual festivals culminated in the first and thus far the only Children's Book Festival in 2014 which showcased best-authored and illustrated children's books in Africa.

The festival also featured children's storytelling workshops with illustrators and children's book writers, children's writing competitions, and stage performances of stories (Kijiwe cha Usomaji children stage performed Mfalme Ndevu na Masikini Mkata Kuni directed by Aloyce Makonde, a renowned choreographer; and produced a collective picture story canvas facilitated by John Kilaka, a famous Tingatinga illustrator.

F: Other Children's Creative Platforms

Apart from its regular programs, Soma has been hosting and cocreating various initiatives with diverse partners. For instance, in 2013 Soma collaborated with the United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) to promote/facilitate the establishment of book clubs in Hananasif, Kumbukumbu, and Oysterbay primary schools.

In 2016, Soma hosted the World Children's Poetry Day (WoChiPoDa) in which thirty-three students from Maktaba and Chang'ombe primary schools and Chang'ombe secondary school participated. It also facilitated outreach readership activities with several schools in Dar es Salaam, and organised reading tents at the Gender Festival and National Book Festival as mentioned above. After the outbreak of COVID-19, Soma adapted its program by initiating an online Children Corona Virus Writing Challenge to "provide space for children to voice their concerns on the coronavirus pandemic."





Youth Storytelling Forums

Youths are the second cornerstone of Soma's intergenerational forums, seeking to encourage in and out-of-school youths to make books and book reading 'a companion' as they face teenage challenges. Youth forums also sought to prepare youths (girls and boys) to become critical thinkers and scribes, capable of 'authoring' prosperous African futures founded on equality and equity. Illustrious initiatives under this cluster are portrayed below.

A: Andika na Soma

Write and Read (or write with Soma) is what the Kiswahili phrase Andika na Soma means. It was aptly chosen as the catchword of Soma's annual short story competition for secondary school students throughout Tanzania. The competition was initiated in 2009/2010.

Soma envisioned it as a contribution to 'the generation of interesting and relevant literature for reluctant young readers authored by young people themselves'. Among other things, it aimed at mentoring young authors, validating them as creators; and creating role models for aspiring writers. The initiative was expected to stimulate reading and creative writing interest, galvanize public interest and agency in supporting and promoting literacy using competitive approaches, and promote Kiswahili literature and young people's voices and perspectives into the corpus of Tanzanian literature.



"I didn't want to miss this chance. The training has equipped me with skills that I can use in writing as many short stories as I can. A visit to publishing companies during the training was an eye-opener for me. I personally met a famous literature writer, Shafi Adam Shafi, the author of a famous book 'Mbali na Nyumbani'".



EMMANUEL MINJA
Andika na Soma contestant while a student at Benjamin Mkapa Secondary School in Dar es Salaam
Source: The Citizen, 18 December 2018


soma
Andika na Soma
Manano Thuwmba
FUNGILO
NA TULENGE JUU
GIRLS SECONDARY

Andika na Soma was nationwide and one of the most successful initiatives. By the time Soma organized its latest competition in 2019 before the COVID-19 disruption, more than 2,000 stories had been submitted. Writers of the ten best entries from each year were invited to a five-day creative writing workshop to strengthen their skills and help them perfect their stories. The intent was to assist some students to become enduring authors and some stories to reach publishable quality and be published.

To that end, Andika na Soma published its first chapbook with 10 short stories in 2017 shared with contributors and their schools. One can only imagine how excited the ten young writers felt when the Soma Executive Director, Demere Kitunga, uttered these words during the launch of the chapbook: "You can now call yourselves writers as you are published...it would be a shame though if you ended on these pages. A real writer keeps writing, it's like a knife, if you don't use it, it goes blunt...."

More chapbooks followed. At the time of publishing this book, Mapenzi Kidigitali na Hadithi Nyingine, an anthology carrying 17 stories selected from different cohorts of Andika na Soma is newly published as an e-book. Preparation for submission to Baraza la Kiswahili Tanzania (BAKITA) and the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) for consideration to become used in secondary schools as a supplementary reader is underway.

Scan to read: Andika na Soma chapbook with 10 short stories



B: Kwangu Wapi?

Translating as Where do I Belong? *Kwangu Wapi?* is the title for a life skills book on the plight of the girl child authored by Richard Mabala on commission by TGNP.

In 2009, Soma partnered with TGNP, to facilitate ward secondary school students in poor neighbourhoods of Manzese, Sinza and Magomeni to debate its contents. This culminated in a grand debate at Soma Book Café among the fifteen best debaters from all three schools (five each).

Students also stage-performed their poems, stories and plays inspired by the book. They met and dialogued with the author; and engaged with invited members of the public including youth organisations and the media. They also shared personal stories parallelling stories in the book.

Their narratives like the contents of *Kwangu Wapi?* illustrated how gender discrimination erodes the social fabric and hurts the dignity, welfare and development of women and children. Two of the students participated as guests on the Fema talk show aired on ITV.

On popular demand, six follow-up youth forums were convened at Soma Book Café on Sunday afternoons, attended by 20 to 45 participants on average. They were facilitated by life skills peer facilitators, including radio drama icons. Conversations centred around gender and sexuality, drugs, and HIV/AIDS, among others.

C: Other Young People's Creative Platforms

Soma has also been a cocreation hub of multiple platforms for youths to engage in social, cultural, and political issues. It has curated and co-created an average of 35 regular convenings per year with young people aged 18 to 45 within its space and satellite spaces; attracting at least 20 people per each."

For instance, as a co-creation partner in 2019, Soma hosted the 16th residency and closing ceremony for winners of Franco-Jeune. This is an annual international creative writing competition aiming to create space for young people in Eastern Africa to get together and appreciate their common cultural heritage.

Sixteen winners from Tanzania, Mozambique, Comoros, Djibouti, Madagascar, and Mayotte pocketed 100 Euros each and a certificate. Soma also co-created with Waka a nationwide Poetry for Change contest, which received 530 entries and trained 50 juvenile poets. It also co-hosted with Waka the launch of Dar Youth Poetry's Paza Sauti [Raise Your Voice] Festival in 2017.

Scan to watchi Franco-Jeune

Adult and Intergenerational Storytelling Forums

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) describes Soma's "approach as intergenerational," an affirmation of how Soma has distinguished itself since its inception. This approach has been adopted even when designing programs that seemed to cater to a particular generation. This is however, truer in relation to adults, the third cornerstone of Soma's intergenerational forums. Membership in regular forums is fluid while occasional events are public. A representative few, cutting across book promotion, leisure, literary, and intellectual discourse are portrayed below.

A: Soma Writers Club

In 2009, a Soma Writers Club was started. Its members met every second Friday of the Month in the bookshop. Among other things, members wrote and shared their stories while receiving constructive criticism. Eventually the physical convenings stalled due to the fluidity of members.

In 2015, another attempt was made, championed by Lauwo George and Elias Mutani, the then Soma programme coordinator and Andika na Soma creative writing facilitator, respectively. The platform was started online. It currently has 170 members.





B. Taswira Book Club

Taswira, 'Reflection' or 'Image' in Kiswahili was founded in January 2016 by Joan Kimirei, Asha Abinallah, and Sauda Simba—as a shared forum for discussing books." They selected Soma Book Café as a co-creation partner and host. Members opted to focus on African literature, broadly defined. Books were selected by consensus.

The club met every Thursday between 2016 and 2019. The first book they discussed is the club member, Sandra Mushi's Stains on My Khanga. Others books include:

- Taiye Selasi's Ghana Must Go
- Yvonne Adhiambo Oduor's Dust
- Zukiswa Wanner's London Cape Town Johannesburg and The Madams
- Adam Shafi Adam's Mbali na Nyumbani and Kuli
- Ousmane Sembene's God's Bits of Wood
- Maaza Mengiste's Beneath the Lion's Gaze
- Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones are Not yet Born
- Elnathan John's, Born on a Tuesday
- Leila Aboulela's, The Kindness of Enemies
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's The Thing Around Your Neck, Half of the Yellow Sun and We Should All be Feminists
- Imbolo Mbue's Behold the Dreamers
- Igoni Barret's Black Ass
- Karim F. Hirji's The Banana Girls
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Wizard of The Crow and Decolonise the Mind
- Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter
- Lubacha Deus's If She Were Alive
- Enock Maregesi's Kolonia Santita
- Suleiman Addonia's Silence is My Mother Tongue
- Teju Cole's Every Day is for the Thief
- Trevor Noah's Born A Crime
- Jennifer Makumbi's Kintu
- Sophia Mustafa's Broken Reed
- Elieshi Lema's In the Belly of Dar Es Salaam and Parched Earth
- Tendai Huchu's, The Hairdresser of Harare
- Said Ahmed Mohamed's Asali Chungu.



Scan here read our blog "Klabu ya Usomaji Vitabu ya "Taswira"

C: Waka Poetry Club

Waka started in April 2013 as a safe space for emerging poets to strengthen their skills and build confidence for public performance. Waka meeting at Soma provided space for established and emerging poets to grow together and a support system for emerging poets to hone their skills and build an audience. Caroline Uliwa, a poet with many other talents ranging from drumming to writing, is the founding host. It holds the record for hosting many sessions at Soma Book Café.

In 2015, Soma and Waka "worked with Badilisha Poetry (The biggest online archive of African Poets)" to "amass over 40 Tanzanian poets' works for their website." Their beautiful profiles appear on https://badilishapoetry.com/countries/tanzania/. Caroline Uliwa also performed at *Badilisha Poetry Exchange Live* in South Africa.

In 2019, Waka facilitated a session with two poets from Art Hub Zimbabwe: Tinashe Tafirenyika, winner of the National Arts Merit Award (NAMA) in Spoken Word Poetry in Zimbabwe in 2017 and 2018, and Morset Billie. Waka went online during COVID-19 and continues to convene online and offline in multiple venues. The current convenors are Gervas Lusajo and Eunice Urio. Many of its founding members are published poets and perform in popular spaces in and out of the country.



Badilisha Poetry X-change

Scan here to read Badilisha Poetry (The biggest online archive of African Poets) with over 40 Tanzanian poets



D: Vunja Mbavu Comedy Night

In 2012, an evening cultural event was co-created with Aloyce Makonde and Richard Mziray, featuring known and upcoming comedians as entertainers. Stand-up comedy shows were accompanied by music, contemporary dance, and board games such as chess, scrabble, monopoly, and cards. Artists and entertainers were nominally compensated from a voluntary 'coffee pot' contribution from the audience. Eluka Kibona and Rehema Chachage volunteered regularly to help with organising and promotion.

E: Other Creative Platforms

Soma's open-door policy to invite creatives to use its space has seen the creation and co-creation of various ad hoc platforms for and by adults and/or intergenerational. These include Iftar gatherings, creative workshops, networking forums incorporating spoken word poetry, and other live performances.

Some of these are: Book Valentine, convened for 3 consecutive years as Soma's attempt to 'interrogate the consumerist tendencies associated with Valentine's Day'. As its posters indicate, it attempted to connect people with mutual reading taste as 'soul mates'. The first Book Valentine was co-created with TGNP and featured oral storytelling with Rupal Ganatra who performed a Mexican folklore befitting the occasion named Cucarachita. Other oral storytelling events included former BASATA Director Gonche Materego's solo performance of 'Nyangeta', a Kurya folklore, and Tololwa Mollel's rendition of a childhood story intended to go into a memoir he was writing.



He titled his story 'Little Husband' and the conversation that followed was themed 'The Fiction in Nonfiction and the Nonfiction in Fiction.' Also falling under this cluster are three colourful poetry events: The launch of Maya Wegerif's poetry into the Dar es Salaam audience in 2011 in collaboration with Vitali Maembe, a gifted musician and long-time friend of Soma; the launch of Zuhura Seng'enge's collection of poetry CD in 2016; and a poetry evening to commemorate the women in liberation in Tanzania and Ireland; a co-creation with the Embassy of Ireland with an Irish guest poet Vona Groarke. The collage below gives a glimpse of these platforms over the years.

Soma also co-organized a colloquium with Tanzania Socialist Forum/Jukwaa La Wajamaa Tanzania (JULAWATA) and Rastafari United Front (RUF) to pay tribute to Fidel na Castro, the late Cuban revolutionary leader in 2017. The main topic of the discussion was, "what does democracy mean to small-scale producers in rural areas?"

One initiative that deliberately bridged the generational gap was started in 2009 as a collaboration between Soma and ThinLine run by a psychologist, Sadaka Gandi. She is its founding facilitator; with Shanande John as a guest facilitator. Known as Rika Tatu (Three Generations), it was "a free-for-all-safe, and disarming space for constructive engagement across three generations."

Charlotte O'Neil (Mama C), a lyricist and poet, formerly a member of the Black Panther party shared a stage with Zuhura Seng'enge, then an emerging poet and member of Waka poets. Ibrahim Mdachi, Martha Zambetakis, Bandele Djassi, Hayqal Mushi, Olajomuke Adeyanju, Caroline Uliwa, and Tendai Karonga curated the event with behind-the-scenes inspiration from Chavunduka Sevanhu from A-AWRU.

Every Friday, they met to discuss thematic topics, including: 'Breakdown of Communication'; 'Family as a Foundation for a Strong/Stable Nation'; 'Gender and ageism in leadership'; 'Who is a leader?'; 'Who has to say to whom about sexual education?'; and 'Rika Tatu Katika Kizazi cha Dot.Com (Rika 3. com)'. In 2008, Music Mayday Tanzania's musicians performed in an intergenerational discussion on corruption organized at Soma Book Café. It featured other musicians of the day, such as Fid Q and Vitali Maembe. Wanazuoni, a network of young Tanzanian intellectuals, organized Q&A sessions at Soma with young politicians from ruling and opposition parties in 2009.

Tanzania Njema, an initiative co-founded by Soma's former program coordinator, Omar Ilyas, started a series of sessions to brainstorm on the future prospects of Tanzania. In its inaugural session in 2010, promising young politicians from the ruling and opposition parties engaged with a predominantly young audience. Soma co-created with the Booksellers Association of Tanzania (BSAT) a policy dialogue on '50 Years of Independence: Reflecting on the State of Education and Literacy in Tanzania, and Beyond' in 2011.

Soma hosted The African Liberation Day 2015, a co-creation with all African Women's Revolutionary Union (A-AWRU) of the All-African People's Revolutionary Party (A-APRP) Tanzania chapter. The event was feminist—pan-African—liberationist—multimedia. Characteristic of Soma's events, the discourse was a fusion of didactic, literary, and artistic; entertaining and educating; grounded historically and culturally.

Book Forums

Books have defined Soma as an organisation and a space evident through its various book forums as portrayed below.

A: Book Launches

Soma opened Soma Book Café, its physical space for authors and publishers to launch books and for readers to access books, convene book talks and celebrate authors. As early as 2008 it organised an event to celebrate the life and times of the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, hosted by Haroub Othman.

In 2009, Soma hosted E & D Vision Publishing in introducing a book on *Women's Land Rights and Privatization in Eastern Africa* edited by Birgit Englert and Elizabeth Daley. Through its then-monthly sessions known as Meet the Author, in the same year Soma launched Sandra A. Mushi's anthology *The Rhythm of My Rhyme*.

In 2010, following the launching of *Africa's Liberation: The Legacy of Nyerere* edited by Chambi Chachage and Annar Cassam, Soma hosted a panel discussion featuring contributing authors. "I was lucky enough to meet and chat with the award-winning author M G Vassanji over the weekend during an event organized by the Soma Book Café" blogged Soma's current Chair of the Board Elsie Eyakuze. After the turn of the decade, Soma continued to host/co-host similar events.



In 2013, Soma hosted Professor Ron Aminzade to celebrate the publication of his book on *Race, Nation, And Citizenship In Post-Colonial Africa: The Case Of Tanzania*. Following the launch of Clairmont Chung's book Walter Rodney: A Promise of Revolution, in the same year Soma hosted the author for a book signing and conversation accompanied by public sscreening of Walter Anthony Rodney (W.A. R.) Stories. Kitabu Nilichosoma/Kitabu kwa Maendeleo Tanzania launched, Richard Mabala's book Run Free in 2014 at Soma Book Cafe.[i] Soma also launched Mageuzi: Mashairi ya Kulikoyela Kahigi, a poetry anthology, by Professor Kahigi in 2015.

Udadisi, a multimedia platform, partnered with Soma in 2016 to convene a public talk and book signing by Professor Andrew Coulson based on the second edition of his seminal book, *Tanzania: A Political Economy*. Wanazuoni has also been at the forefront of using Soma Book Cafe for book launches, talks, and celebrations.

In 2019, it partnered with Soma to hold a colourful intellectual fete to honour a prolific writer, Karim F. Hirji. Kitabu Nilichosoma/Kitabu kwa Maendeleo Tanzania also held a Round-Table Discussion in 2014 to discuss Hirji's *Growing up with Tanzania: Memories, Musings, and Maths—A Memoir*. Hirji also graced a colloquium that JULAWATA convened with Soma in 2017 where his book on *The Enduring Relevance of Walter Rodney's How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was launched.

During the annual Mwalimu Nyerere Intellectual Festival Week hosted by the Mwalimu Nyerere Professorial Chair in Pan-African Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Soma put up exhibitions and launched books authored by special guests of the festival. In 2013, when Ngugi was Thiong'o was conferred an honorary degree by UDSM, Soma offered its space to the Writers Association of Tanzania/Umoja wa Waandishi wa Vitabu Tanzania (UWAVITA) to host a conversational session with him. Soma also generously supports other initiatives. In 2009, Soma hosted public seminars on music, health, and literature run by Freddy Macha and organized by the then Lucky magazine under the editorship of Anna Rugaba and owner Innocent Swai. Soma also hosted a public event on African Writing consisting of Public Reading and Conversation during the Caine Prize Workshop in 2017 held in Dar es Salaam.

To cater to the digital generation, in 2017 Soma hosted the launch of the then IswapMyBooks.com, an innovative platform to facilitate the online exchange of books among readers. In 2018. Mkuki na Nyota Publishers also used Soma Book Café as a space to launch *Increasing Production from Land: A Source Book on Agriculture for Teachers and Students in East Africa* by Andrew Coulson, Antony Ellman, and Emmanuel Reuben Mbiha. In the same year, Daudi Mwidima's novel, *Siku ya Kwanza Kaburini* [First Day in the Grave] was launched at Soma Book Cafe. When 14-year-old Yusuph S. Ndala's book titled *Mbwa Mtiifu* (Loyal Dog) was published in 2021, his family opted to launch it at Soma Book Café. Many other books have been launched in stand-alone events and in the book bazaar.

B: Book Bazaar

Book Bazaar, a space where all literary forums and book lovers converge to curate and co-create fun and learning activities. "Take a book and donate", read a poster on one of the tables full of second-hand books for exchange in the Book Bazaar held in April 2019 as a way of raising funds for literary activities. It is a space where all forums hosted at Soma Book Café and beyond together with book lovers converge to co create and curate leisure and learning through literature. The bazaar also included a children's safe corner where Watoto na Vitabu children showcased their reading and storytelling routine and accomplishments. Typically, this includes reading aloud, prize giving—every child gets a prize for things they did better than the previous quarter or exhibited as exemplary character trait. These range from who read the most books, the most fluent reader, most prolific author, best behaved, most helpful, taking leadership, etc.

"Take a book and donate", read a poster on one of the tables full of second-hand books for exchange in the Book Bazaar held in April 2019 as a way of raising funds for literary activities. Soma Book Café bustles with activities simultaneously such as exhibitions, poetry, workshops, book talks, and readings – it is a kind of literary/book fair. Every quarter Soma showcased books through public exhibitions, launches, swapping, talks, and reviews. Some of the books launched include Issa Shivji's Poems for the Penniless, Dickson Mtalaze's Kijiji Kisicho na Makaburi (A Village with no Graves), Spark in the Dark: A Poetry Anthology by Children for Everyone compiled and edited by Richard Mbuthia, Richard Mabala's Love Bombs, and Nahida Esmail Karafu: A Freed Slave.



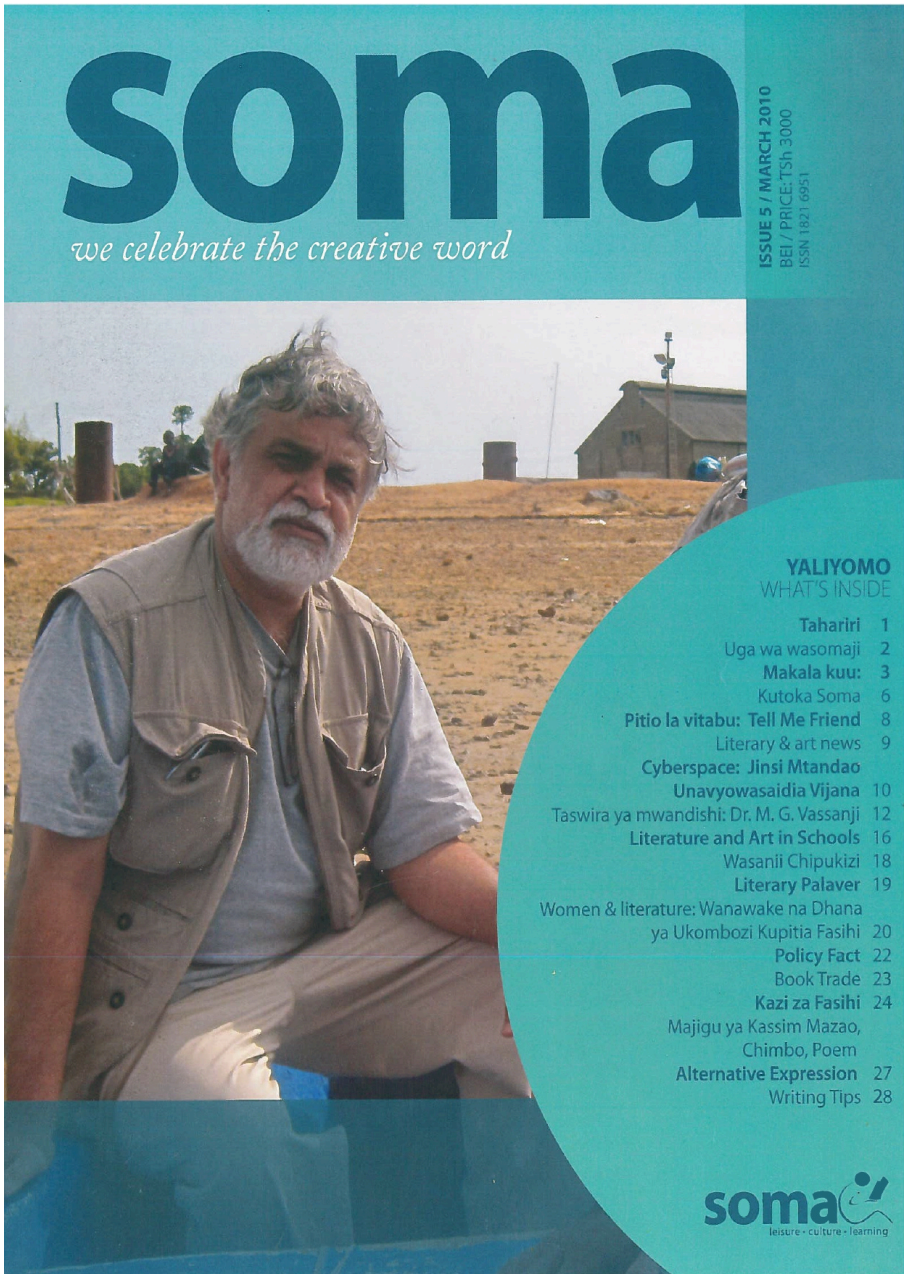

MAERSK
SEALAND

Soma Literary Magazine

In January 2009, Soma ambitiously launched a magazine with a motto, "We celebrate the creative word." This publication stands on its own league, as a mouthpiece for forums Soma curates and a platform on its own right. It exemplified Soma's original idea about resource mobilization and cost recovery approach. The first (seed) grant from Mfuko wa Utamaduni Tanzania/ Tanzania Culture Trust Fund purchased computers and other infrastructural costs for the magazine plus an advance bulky purchase to distribute to schools.

This was complemented by HakiElimu and Femina both of whom agreed to support through bulky purchases for distribution to the libraries and clubs they respectively support. This and a few advertisements from friends of Soma supported production and distribution for the first three issues. However, due to various challenges, it was short-lived. By 2010, a total of six issues had come out under the able editorship of Fatima Bapumia, Eric Kalunga, and Vicencia Shule, in succession, and designer Petra Sutila. During its heydays, the magazine featured famous writers and artists. From seasoned novelists M.G Vassanji, Martha Mlagala Mvungi, Chachage Seithy Chachage, William Mkufya, and Edwin Semzaba to the then-upcoming poet Maya Wegerif (now a famous musician professionally known as Sho Madjozi), Langa Sarakikya, and Sandra A. Mushi as well as writers such as Freddy Macha, Mwafrika Merinyo and Nadir Tharani, and Salma Maoulidi, to mention just a few





Each magazine had a central theme:

- 'Reading Culture in Tanzania'
- 'Literature and Art in the Cyberspace'
- 'For Whom do we Write?'
- 'Women and Literature'
- 'Youth and Readership'

Each issue of the magazine also featured an author who also appears on the front cover. The content structure was such that each issue attempted to capture all key areas that Soma was engaging with in its physical and digital spaces. All issues opened with an editorial followed by *Uga wa Wasomaji* i.e., reader's forum. A lead article followed suit, then news from Soma, book review, art and literary news, coverage from cyberspace the designated author's profile, literary palaver, alternative expression, budding artistes, women and literature, policy facts, book trade, and creative works.

Scan to read: Soma Literary Magazine

The Space(s)

If Soma were a book, the forgoing portrays volume one of its contents. Before we get into its volume two and postscript, let us take a detour into the space(s) from whence such content sprouts.

A: Soma Book Cafe

Soma Book Café, by far the most prominent Soma space was conceived as an inclusive public space that provides different arenas for literary appreciation and discourse. Initially, Soma Book Café housed a bookshop, a coffee shop, and a garden lawn with a podium. "As a physical space", reads Soma's archived 2008 launch program, "it is meant to take the Tanzanian intelligentsia—be it policymakers, academicians or women and men of letters away from normal bars where a significant number of this segment of the civil society spend most of their leisure time for lack of a better alternative."

The program goes on to note that the café "offers instead a coffee and wine bar serving a variety of beverages such as coffee, tea, soft drinks and an occasional glass of wine with a variety of bites; from a well-groomed garden counter from which you step into a well-stocked bookshop with internet facilities."

However, this space "meant to be a hub" was envisioned to expand beyond the elitist confines of the urban literati by hosting and facilitating "the creation of a readers club and promote the creation of similar clubs in different locations countrywide."







"I think it is so important to have such spaces in the country for literature, reading, and writing promotions. As a nation too, people need to educate themselves by reading and opening minds through materials found in spaces such as Soma"

LIBERATA ALIBALIO

This was sparked by the intention "to contribute to the creation of a reading culture among the educated urban population; and with it, the drive to invest in helping others who are less advantaged to access knowledge and literature through reading...." In line with this lifelong endeavour, Soma managed to expand within and beyond its walls as the sections below underscore.

Gradually, a multipurpose open-air space materialised, a remnant of a failed makuti-roofed restaurant to accommodate big events. A container-based children's storytelling hub was installed in lieu of the originally much grander earlier imagined children's theatre. Planned to house a multimedia library, a recording studio, with an adjacent playground for various games, it remains work in progress. A former garage was transformed into a mini-conference holding smaller literary convenings, ranging from screening films, small gatherings and workshops. The latter has since been converted into a Vavagaa studio launched in 2020.

The bookshop traded books of all kinds. It especially stocked books that foster creative imagination and paid special attention to children's books. "Our focus", Soma reports, "is to promote Tanzanian and Kiswahili literary traditions by stocking locally published titles, both fiction and non-fiction, supplemented by East African and well-balanced world literature to stimulate and promote pan-Africanism and cultural diversity." In its current direction, the bookshop is transforming into a multipurpose feminist resource for small convenings and individual working space and library materials.

Until its closure, the bookshop became one of the brands or flagships of Soma. Book lovers frequented it from Tanzania and abroad. This is how one writer captured one such visit by the legendary Jackie Robinson's son: "In 2019, David Robinson was part of a group that visited Soma Book Café in Dar es Salaam with STEMpower CEO, Kidist Gebreamlak to explore the possibility for collaborative STEMpower and virtual learning initiative with Bara Community Learning Centre in Mbozi, Mbeya championed by his Higher Ground Development Corporation. This was a follow up to an earlier visit, to donate books as part of the Books for Africa initiative, a campaign promoting education in Africa by getting more books to the continent."

Pupils from various schools visited the bookshop. Sometimes visitors were treated to free books donated by authors and others from home libraries, bookshops, publishers or shipped from donors abroad. With rapid changes in the book sector due to the digital age, the bookshop also experimented with innovative online marketing through Soma's website and 'kitabu popote' mobile marketing and delivery.

The bookshop also consolidated books for NGOs, such as TGNP and HAKIARDHI, and facilitated reading interest mapping, book selection, and procurement for Makongoro Nyerere Library and Community Centre in Nyegina, Musoma with Umoja wa Maendeleo ya Bukwaya (UMABU), a community-based development organisation.

The café consisting of a coffee bar and garden lawn with shades and a podium was frequented for drinks, snacks, networking; and playing board games such as bao, cards, scrabble, chess etc. Others used it as a workspace, not least due to free Wi-Fi. During FIFA World Cup 2010, a wide big screen was installed for clients to watch the game. One could leisurely sit by the counter while participating in book talks or listening to and watching poetry performance, and comedy shows from the podium.



B: Virtual Spaces

From its inception, Soma took "advantage of developments in the new media by using both mainstream and electronic media to create a wide virtual space where those who cannot access the café as a physical space, may partake in activities related to, or similar to those taking place at the caféto facilitate information sharing on books and readership," notes its launch program. The presence of Soma online has been nothing short of spectacular as the portrayals below show.

- ***Soma's Official Website***

Soma's website was launched in 2013. Since then, it has 20 thousand users, it has been visited over 50 thousand times, peaking at 50 users per day and averaging 9 daily visits.

- ***Social Media Accounts***

Soma's Twitter/X account has over eight thousand followers and posts alike. On Instagram, Soma has garnered over four thousand followers and over one thousand posts. After starting with a Facebook group, Soma shifted to a Facebook page for wider reach. This page has more than two thousand likes and followers alike. Soma also opened a YouTube channel that has more than thirty subscribers and more than 20 videos whereby, by September 2024 five of them had more than 100 views: Franco Jeune 2019 at Soma Book Café; Soma presents "Kalamu Ndogo"; Chura Mpweke by Nakiete Mlaki; 'Mariam na Mbio za Magari'; and Hadithi Zetu Challenge.

- ***Other Online Platforms***

In March 2020, Soma launched Vavagaa online TV talk show focusing on gender and women's rights; and integral to Kestoria Kavazi, a platform it has co-created with the feminist network since 2018. Subsequently, other Vavagaa Online platforms emerged.



Website
20K thousand users since 2013

Twitter/X
over 8K followers

Instagram
Over 4K followers and over one thousand posts.

YouTube channel
More than 30+ subscribers and more than 20+videos

Beyond Soma

One of Soma's hallmarks is mentorship and inspiration within and beyond its walls. In concluding this subsection of Soma's ten years or so as a literary space, this portrait portrays the journeys of two illustrious young women before, during, and after Soma: Latifa and Invioleta.

"I have known Soma since 2017. My story was number 11 in Andika na Soma. I am a poet, there was a day Jasper came to Zanaki and introduced Soma to us. So, I went to Soma to just have them listen to my poems.

I found so much was going on and my engagement started from there. I knew that with the talent I had, I could become something more. So, it was the place/road to my own discoveries. During Thubutu, I participated in the program as a volunteer going to schools and mobilizing groups.

My greatest positive memories of engaging with Soma is Watoto na Vitabu. Seeing kids writing and producing their own stories, the process of writing those stories, it was just one of those moments, seeing kids doing their own thing!

After I left Soma, I worked with the Raising Up Friendship Foundation, mentoring girls for leadership. I'm also supporting child protection against violence. I also created community clubs for children called Kids Rights. We were doing storytelling. COVID-19 then came. Now I do volunteer storytelling in schools part-time. So, I still support young children. I am also still writing children books. I have not published yet but I continue to write."



INVIOLETA MWAKIWONE

Former Programme Assistant at Soma

"When I joined Soma, I was an intern for four weeks to support the Andika na Soma project, so my initial expectation was to get a job. During that time, my life was not stable. So, I just wanted to get a job and create a network for job searching. Every time I heard there were events for books, I attended. I worked for three years as a program and social media person for Soma. After COVID-19, I asked to be on books and sell books. Soma provided me with an opportunity to grow and network. At least I ended up being what I wanted i.e. digital person for books.

After Soma, I started a community library for children and young people in Chunya, Mbeya. We used to have people donate books in English and Swahili. Soma's idea was the one that led to starting the community library. Now I also run a local coffee shop where people can come for evening tea and snacks, and I am thinking of probably adding books in the future, probably from next year.

My biggest dream is to be an innovator and facilitator of libraries in villages and districts here in Tanzania. I know this journey is not easy and is full of obstacles. However, many reasons make me move forward."



LATIFA MIRAJI

Former Soma staff and Watoto na Vitabu Facilitator



A Feminist Space

As a feminist space, Soma has primarily focused on fostering feminist agency by galvanizing its collective energy and mentoring its 'movers' and 'shakers'. Literary expression has continued to be a distinctive feature, with an edge toward collaborative productions across genres and innovation with multimedia approaches. Illustrious initiatives under this cluster are portrayed below.

A: Thubutu

When children play and one attempts to bully another, she/he may respond by saying thubutu! Kiswahili for I dare you! The term thubutu is increasingly being used to motivate people to dare to do something positive or different.

No wonder, when Soma curated "a platform for girls aged 13 to 16 to use literature as an outlet to express their frustration and to condemn any and all acts of unsolicited sexual advances and sextortion", they named it Thubutu!

The conversations centre around mundane teenage girls' experiences with catcalling and groping often downplayed as minor discomforts girls encounter as a 'rite of passage' into womanhood. On the contrary, this is how girls are socialised to become gatekeepers of their own sexual abuse. The normalisation of these incidents, condition them to suffer in silence.



"Among other things, Thubutu "sought to raise consciousness among teenage girls on the fact that unsolicited sexual advances (including sextortion) although taken by society as a 'minor discomfort' in the process of girls 'coming of age'," is in fact: "Psychologically and emotionally harmful to girls and women"; "Leads to further sexual exploitation and abuse in life"; is "Legally not permissible, [as] it goes against their human rights and dignity"; and "They can do something to prevent [it]…."

Female students from Jangwani, Makongo, and Zanaki secondary schools participated in Thubutu's inaugural creative workshop in 2016 at Soma Book Café. They boldly shared their experiences with each other using the five senses to generate words and expressions representing how they felt when experiencing those acts, and when their families and friends trivialised these experiences.

Using the 'scaffolding' creative writing technique, they used those words to prompt renditions of their individual experiences into literary works which they shared. Ultimately, they agreed on an advocacy message in Kiswahili: Thubutu!! Mwili Wangu Sio Wako Msichana Jiamini Paza Sauti Yako (Dare!! My body is not yours: girl be confident and raise your voice).

"There are many things that affect teenage girls. The environment they grow in shapes them to believe that they are supposed to behave in a certain way or do certain things so as to avoid bad things from happening to them, however, it is unfortunate that sometimes, despite all their effort in doing what society has expected them to do, bad things still happen to them. We need to change this narrative, what happens to them is not always their fault and is highly inexcusable."



DEMERE KITUNGA
Soma CEO



Titles from their creative stories and poems archived in an audio collection give a glimpse of what they touched on:

- 'Ni lipi kosa langu' (What is my mistake)
- 'Ua lisilothaminika' (Underappreciated flower)
- 'Vijimambo vya sokoni' (Marketplace trivialities)
- 'Mke wa Baba' (My father's wife)
- 'Sitosahau' (I will never forget)
- 'Kichaka' (Bush)

B: Writing Feminist Struggles

This was the second in a series of experiments seeking to repackage feminist activist narratives into literary works. Taking place in 2017, its stated goal was "To provide space and skills for two generations of women to dialogue and to write and research experience-based literature on women's struggles for gender transformation and feminist movement."

It involved a five-day writing workshop pairing women's rights activists and creative writers to creatively render a grassroots activism story into fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetic forms. Participants (8 women and 2 men) were drawn from a cross-section of the women's rights movement (Herstory coalition), media, youth movements, community-based actors; and independent creative communicators (Mkeka Blogs, Tanzania Youth Vision Association (TYVA), Mkakati Action, Women Fund Tanzania (WFT), TGNP Mtandao, Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA), Afro Radio Network and UDSM and following an open call.

Five facilitators and resource people (4 women 1 man) had a prior two-day preparatory trainers roundtable. In pairs of an activist and a creative writer, each with a written piece submitted prior to the workshop, worked to co-author one or two creative pieces based on their knowledge, skills, experiences and exposure; including the feminist analysis acquired during the workshop. Altogether, eight pieces were generated as improvements or mergers of the originals, five of them works in progress, and three complete and with publishable literary merit.



"These initiatives were imagined as a means to evolve an approach and capacity to flood the reading public with a body of compelling literature that deconstructs notions that convert the oppressed including women into gatekeepers of their own oppression. Why? Because a fiction writer creates characters who live and relate as real people in a real world; with sensibilities and emotional reactions we can identify with. And because, Women telling their own stories is also a means to balance the telling of our life and history which has thus far been predominantly told from the perspective of external gazers and mostly men."



DEMERE KITUNGA
Soma CEO



C: Kijamvi

Mkakati Action, an initiative working to support the urban poor toward a dignified life for all founded by Mwanahamisi 'Mishy' Singano, collaborated with Soma in 2018 to expose young women to indigenous knowledge on traditional African rites of passage.

After setting up a safe and private space - kijamvi (a small leafy mart) - at Soma Book Café, they invited Bi Chau, a kungwi (traditional girls' initiation instructor) to share intimate knowledge about *Unyago*, a traditional initiation rite of women. Participants learned about "traditional forms of sexuality and gender roles education" through a combination of performative, Q&A and instructional sessions.

"We had such an amazing time hosting women (old, young, professionals, elite, housewives, unschooled, etc.) in one room discussing #WomenSexuality. The overwhelming conclusion was most women are not enjoying their intimate relationship. Traditions and culture of silence limits women's ability to explore and express themselves. Traditions need to meet modern realities if we have to empower women to have more control of their bodies and enjoy their intimate life"

MKAKATI ACTION
#Kijamvi, Twitter, August 4, 2018



This was "hands-on with lots of fun and dancing," noted Mishy. She also stressed that: "We still have a lot to learn and more to document from #Manyakanga (seasoned kungwi) before it's too late."

On popular demand, Mishy organized for men only to also meet at Soma to share indigenous knowledge about *Jando*, a traditional initiation rite of men. The theme was: "Revisiting Traditional Teaching of Manhood." Ngariba (the male equivalent of kungwi) led the session. Both Jando and Unyago monthly sessions at Soma were well attended.

D: Kestoria Kavazi

In Kiswahili the suffix "-ke" in mwanamke designates the female sex or gender. Since historia, which is the Kiswahili translation of history, has retained the male prefix 'his', it became important to translate herstory as kestoria. Kavazi means archive. As such, Kestoria Kavazi, launched in 2018, translates in English as herstory archive.

It is a growing online (and offline) multimedia feminist storytelling hub of platforms, co-created by active Transformative Feminist Movement Building (TFMB) coalition members as a collectively owned repository of feminist knowledge and expressions. It contains built-in mechanisms to curate spaces for shared learning, disrupting retrogressive narratives, and facilitating public discourse to amplify hitherto silenced voices. It is integral to the Kestoria/Wanawake Historia Yetu-Fahari Yetu (Herstory/Women Our Herstory-Our Pride) coalition formed with a broad mandate of herstory research, documentation, and advocacy.

Kestoria Kavazi provides spaces for secure and sustained engagement with women and men's experience with gender relations among feminist activists, feminist storytellers, innovators, researchers and educators, thinkers, and the public. This herstory archive is culminating from the collective energy invested in experimenting with multimedia feminist storytelling, documentation, and archiving innovations with TFMB coalition members and individuals within the literary and mixed media art ecosystem since 2016.



Among other things, Kestoria Kavazi is premised on the understanding that women engage, disengage, define, and celebrate change and transformation differently. Stories, therefore, should reflect the uniqueness and diversity of women's understanding and telling of their stories and experiences. In most of the current (hi) stories, the experiences of women are trivialised and, in most cases, added on as an afterthought and therefore lacking the authenticity of their subjectivity and diversity as independent human beings and collectively as a group with diverse stories to tell.

It is a collective repository and innovation hub testing and diffusing creative media to propagate feminist stories. Concurrently, it is a catalyst for systemic production, packaging, archiving, and dissemination of feminist knowledge, information, and innovations using multiple creative genres and media accessible to diverse audiences.

Its creation is informed by TFMB studies carried out in 2008 (TGNP) and 2018 (WFT) which observed key traits that have enabled women's rights and feminist organizations to maintain a sustained base, especially at grassroots. These include clear position on issues; the courage to go against the grain and/or to cross the line; consistency and willingness to improvise flexibly or creatively.

These traits have also enabled the movement to maintain distinct identities, solidarity, and autonomous spaces. To harness women's agency and collective efforts to transform social and gender relations. To empower women and girls to internalize feminist ideals of solidarity, self-care, nurturing, and wellness as everyday ethos and repertoire.

This includes sharing empowering stories, ideas, experiences, and actions. However, the capacity to generate and disseminate information with a resounding voice was consistently found to be wanting; thus, the need to create Kestoria Kavazi. Its construction took a snowball approach; bringing on board the members of the herstory coalition in the thinking and experimentation.

Among the most prominent are: WFT, TGNP, Msichana Initiative, Wanawake Katika Jitihada za Kimaendeleo [WAJIKI], Tusonge Community Development Organisation (TUSONGE CDO), Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF), Women's Legal Aid Centre (WLAC), Tanzania Women Initiatives for Development Organisation (TAWIDO), Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC), and Her Ability.

The design of Kestoria Kavazi infrastructure went hand in hand with baselining and testing methodologies for collecting, packaging, and sharing its resources in ways that catalyse public discourse and action. Thus far, this has culminated into (a) development of protocols for research-based profiling and recognition of outstanding contributions; (b) experimenting with creative storytelling approaches and innovation as method for feminist herstory making and public engagement; and (c) establishing a collectively owned online and offline feminist storytelling hub and spaces for discourse, learning and contestation. Some of these are highlighted below.

Protocols

Soma co-created with the Herstory coalition the design and piloting of a staggered archival research on women's contribution to significant episodes in Tanzanian history with lasting effects on women's rights and gender relations. The aim was to develop standard protocols for research-based documentation of individuals, groups, and/or institutions for making outstanding contribution to a process or processes with significant impact on women's rights and social gender transformation.

The first round was an archival research and documentation of women's contribution to feminist legislature since independence. It took as its point of departure the feminist herstory making research methodology used by Suzan Geiger when reaserching TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965.

Organisations and networks within the TFMB coalition adopted this and other action research methodologies to document women's contributions, with varying degrees of satisfaction. The main area of contention was on context analysis and capturing who else contributed to changes attributed to an individual or group of women; and in which way. In the coalition's regular reflection sessions, it was generally accepted that, there is a need to evolve a common but flexible criterion to guide research and documentation; among other things, answering such questions as:

- Why do this person(s) and group(s) actions stand out as a mirror through which to shed light on a particular moment of history?
- What role did other women (and men) individually and collectively play and at which cost?

The coalition needed to ensure that the recognition of women's contribution also aligns with the feminist conviction that significant change happens when individuals' 'power within' is unleashed to harness 'power with' which gives the oppressed capacity to counteract 'power over'.

As a subscriber to the Herstory Platform and a feminist storytelling Organisation, Soma took the challenge by commissioning feminist legislation research out of which a draft protocol was proposed. It included fourteen (14) basic criteria to be taken into consideration when identifying a process, individual or group/institution to be documented; carrying out the research to recognize and flag these contributions in a specific area of feminist work and/or contribution to the feminist cause.

These were shared and validated by members of the coalition. To complete the process, Soma led the testing of the draft protocol by conducting documentary research in two sectors not covered in the original research to see if the 14 criteria apply in the same way. The findings were that the criteria were fairly universal and flexible.

Consensus however was to constantly review and where need be, secondary criteria may be added. Likewise, research reports were to become a catalyst for further research to 'remember' significant episodes/incidents and persons not mentioned by the original researcher; and reflections on what the documented actions signify in our current struggles and imaginings for our futures.

Uliza Wahenga Dada!

In Kiswahili culture, wisdom from the distant past is associated with sages or ancestors who tend to be invoked in proverbs and sayings. Before one utters them, she/he may say "Kama wahenga wanavyonena/wanavyosema..." i.e. 'As the ancestors say/state...' Fittingly, Soma in collaboration with an independent artist, Rehema Chachage and Bookstop Sanaa, in 2019, chose 'Uliza Wahenga Dada!' creatively translated into 'Converse with Ancestors Sistah!' as the name for its multimedia storytelling research, production, exhibition, and public dialogue project.

It facilitated six female artists to explore the subtle revolutions that sometimes emerge from the mundane and the everyday. They did so by unearthing mundane stories and memories of women that tend to be silenced in dominant research and knowledge production methods even within feminist circles. Perceived by the curators as an archive and carrier of 'Swahili' culture, the Indian Ocean was specifically chosen as the main site of engagement.

As a bridge between people brought in through slavery, colonialism, urbanization, or monsoon winds; and those who left through it to uncertain destinations, the wide ocean is a repository of vast knowledge that is not yet fully tapped. Natasha Shivji, a historian of the Indian Ocean World, and Ahmed Ibrahim, a social-cultural anthropologist, both from the then Institute for Research in Intellectual Histories of Africa co-facilitated pre-research workshop on the historical significance of the East African Coast as an untapped knowledge repository.



Subsequent workshops, which punctuated the research and production residency, were led by Rehema Chachage, Sarita Mamseri (Bookstop Sanaa), and Demere Kitunga (Soma), featuring guest sessions by Tinashe Mushakavanhu and Anguezomo Mba Bikoro (formerly Natalie Mba Bikoro). Among other things, the training addressed the whys and how creative expression is a method for feminist storytelling. Valerie Amani coordinated the residency. For a brief period she was assisted by Aminata Kinana.


soma
Creating a Readership Culture in Tanzania
EXECUTIVE
This project is implemented by
soma
Funded by
Culture at Work Africa
Culture at Work Africa's partners
Co-funded by the European Union
uliza wahenga dada!
Ask the ancestors sista!

Uliza Wahenga Dada! also explored women's spaces as archives and research sites in their own right. As such, it became an alternative space for archiving silenced (hi)stories, centring their approach to herstories, and facilitating their making through literary and visual art practices. It therefore involved oral storytellers to eke out mundane herstories of women, to preserve those that could be considered 'not-worthy' and could get lost.

Interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Uliza Wahenga Dada! ended in 2021, a year later than planned. By then, it had produced content and experiences that called for further exploration of traditional women's spaces. It thus gave way to other initiatives such as Uani (Backyard). Its final and public exhibition was titled Kutoka Uani (From the Backyard).

Through learning by doing, the six shortlisted female artists – Abigail Kiwelu, Asteria Malinzi, Liberatha Alibalio, Ngollo Mlengeya, Hawa Ally, and Priscilla Mlay – explored political and cultural memories through excursions to excavate missing evidence of women's contributions across time. The artists then used what they found out to create a visual, textual, and oral/aural archive crafting archaeology of politics, perceptions, beliefs, reactions, ideas, fantasies, utopias, and rituals that defined, are defining, or should define the experiences of being a woman coming from this region.



"I was warmed to learn the photos in the exhibit that were printed on cloth patchworks of hanging sheets, are actually of real Tanzanian coastal women taken during colonial times and archived in newspapers."

EXHIBITION VISITOR













Scan here to Read about "Valerie Amani's live performance in downtown Dar es Salaam on Uliza Wahenga Dada!"

Scan here to watch "Uliza Wahenga Dada - Women Storytellers in Tanzania"

Uani

Traditionally, Uani is an enclosed backyard. It is generally designated as a women's space. An enclosure for 'seclusion' and 'safety' from men's stray eyes. In 2021, Soma worked with six young female artists and event organisers – Haika Gillead, Ngollo Mlegeya, Rhoda Kambenga, Getrude Malizana, Upendo Chitinka, and Editha Gyindo – to experiment with a curatorial reclamation and 'rehabilitation' of patriarchal notions of Uani.

The intervention intended also to 'call out' and purge retrogressive elements, and amplify positive her/history of Uani, whereby some women used these spaces to subvert the status quo. Uani also intended to invoke the predominant character of traditional spaces women occupy, i.e., the interdependence of communal living, the value of sharing life intergenerationally; the spirit of togetherness; and the art of handing down (stories, histories, names, gifts, skills, recipes, clothes, mores, etc.), culinary and healing practices.

Like Kijamvi, Uani was part of Soma's efforts to expose young people to indigenous knowledge and storytelling traditions accessible through coded messages and performative rituals only the initiated women can discern. It is a direct response to young women's 'own' aspiration to connect with past struggles and achievements as voiced in many of Soma's past projects and platforms.

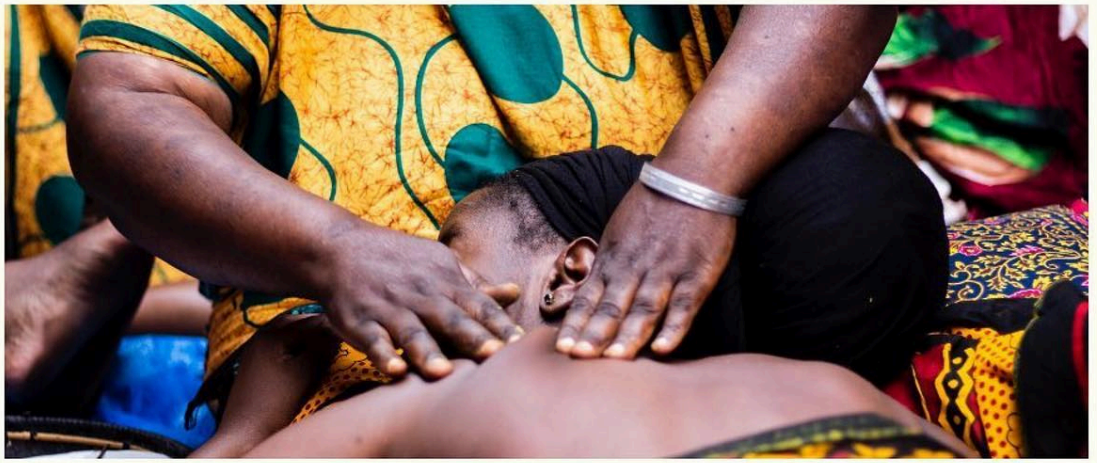




As an attempt to redress Africa's historical disjuncture with its cultural roots, Uani provided young creatives tools with which to challenge the underrating of indigenous knowledge and pigeonholing knowledge exchange taking place in spaces occupied by women. Uani was a creative contribution to a growing repository of women's knowledges and torch bearer for intergenerational storytelling that restores distorted and/or disjointed indigenous knowledge.

Motivated by the feminist rallying call for women to refrain from waiting to be invited to the 'patriarchal table' but rather create their own, Uani was both a critique and assertion of this call. It attempted to excavate and explore dynamics associated with indigenous spaces patriarchy ascribed to women; affirm and interrogate women's agency in them, both retrogressive and progressive, to inform the kind of feminist spaces to be created.

It is an assertion that African feminist 'tables' ought to be grounded within African women's herstorical and cultural heritage as they themselves define it. Uani became a (poetic and artistic) avenue for a nuanced conversation around the genealogy of feminism(s) in Tanzania taking place in intimate groups with women 'knowers' in inner city communities. It moderated peer learning and mentorship with larger audiences culminating into a public dialogue through a curated public event and social media. Activities and conversations during the public event centred around three segments defining Uani; i.e., knowledge hub, culinary, and healing practices (including care and aesthetics).



Utabibu kutoka Uani ; An exploration on how women used different techniques and ingredients to ensure their own healing and wellness. Indulging all the five senses women would plait each other, share gifts, listen to music, speak their mind and scrub each others bodies or apply henna.

These practices brought them together through both great times and sad moments such as funerals/loss ,divorce and sickness.

Even-though, Uani is a safe space but in some cases it has been a source of pain and hate. Backstabbing, jealousy, name calling and body shaming are just few toxic flaws can be experienced in Uani.



Hadithi Zetu

The *Hadithi Zetu* (Our Stories) Challenge aimed to support promising young female Tanzanian storytellers to produce original creative works on feminist issues. The idea was to test a storytelling methodology that can be adopted by the herstory coalition and individuals to generate strategically crafted feminist narratives with which to prompt mainstream discourse.

In 2020, thirteen young women who went through training and orientation on feminist research and production of artistic works pitched their proposed projects to an independent jury. Six were selected to be supported to research and produce works inspired by community-level activists in Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, and Shinyanga affiliated to feminist organisations (TGNP, Msichana Initiative, and WAJIKI), subscribing to herstory (Wanawake Historia Yetu-Fahari Yetu) coalition.

The creative form/genres represented ranged from creative writing; including fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction; to visual art, teleplay, filmmaking, and mixed media. After a learning and production residency, the works were presented for the second pitch and a motion comic titled Mariam na Mbio za Magari by Gwantwa Lucas was selected to benefit from a small production grant. Standard criteria for assessing creative works were used in addition to a gender dimension. The story is about a 12-year-old girl, who wishes to compete in car racing. To realise her dream, she works as a mechanic in her uncle's garage.



The story highlights the challenges associated with sexism and gender stereotyping that she has to face and overcome. Its nuances expose patriarchy as a social construct internalised by both men and women; young and old. It also shows that both genders/sexes can be agents of change. All the six artworks were exhibited for public appreciation and dialogue; and the twelve artists were profiled to feature in Kestoria Kavazi.

Scan here to watch animation: **"'Mariam na Mbio za Magari'"**

Scan here to watch: **Hadithi Zetu Challenge**


soma
burudani • utamaduni • maarifa
CHILDREN'
BOOK FAIR

Vavagaa

Vavagaa (literally meaning trend) is a feminist storytelling platform that attempts to address the “danger of a single story.” It does so by bringing on board expressions of women and men from all walks of life on how they experience life and position themselves in the quest to dismantle patriarchy and intersecting forms of oppression. Emerging during the COVID-2019 context, Vavagaa started as an online platform and then added offline forums to bring on board and centre conversations based on experiences from communities and community groups that have no access to cyber technology and vice versa.

From the start, Vavagaa was and is about listening, hearing, understanding/appreciating, offering an alternative perspective, and disrupting tired narratives. Vavagaa forums are curated conversations open to contestation based on different experiences of privilege and vulnerability. This is prompted with open questions for participants to find common ground and rationale for social-gender transformation and/or agree to disagree.

As such, Vavagaa packages feminist knowledge and information experientially; with freshness and diversity in form and content. It mobilizes large audiences, teasing out audience feedback and generating interest and participation among diverse groups of women and men at national and grassroots levels to engage with; and become feminist content producers and users



Vavagaa provides space for women and men from all walks of life to define and articulate their own notion of gender equality and equity based on their everyday phraseology, experience, and relations informed by their socialization; challenging them to imagine alternatives. Ultimately, it is a space for people with diverse experiences and world views to navigate and negotiate terrains informing individual and collective norms and see the need to foster equality, equity, and dignity for all as the 'new norm' to propel them through the century's local and global realities.



"Vavagaa Mtandaoni was us throwing ourselves into a community we have no control over... a community (mostly) with preconceived ideas about feminism, feminists, and everything gender equality. A space to walk on eggshell...

It was a space we didn't know what to expect. But it's also a space that helped us learn a lot about who we are as people, and the danger of being a woman, a girl, or a non-traditional individual or community. It was a space that opened our minds to explore more, to choose battles to fight, but also a space to laugh, make new connections and networks to grow a feminist family, and also grow... a community to agree and disagree with, ... a space we created and found so many allies...

A space for learning, thinking, reflecting, disrupting, and sometimes a battleground of minds and souls to re-imagine a world where all humans are treated equally and protected no matter what...."



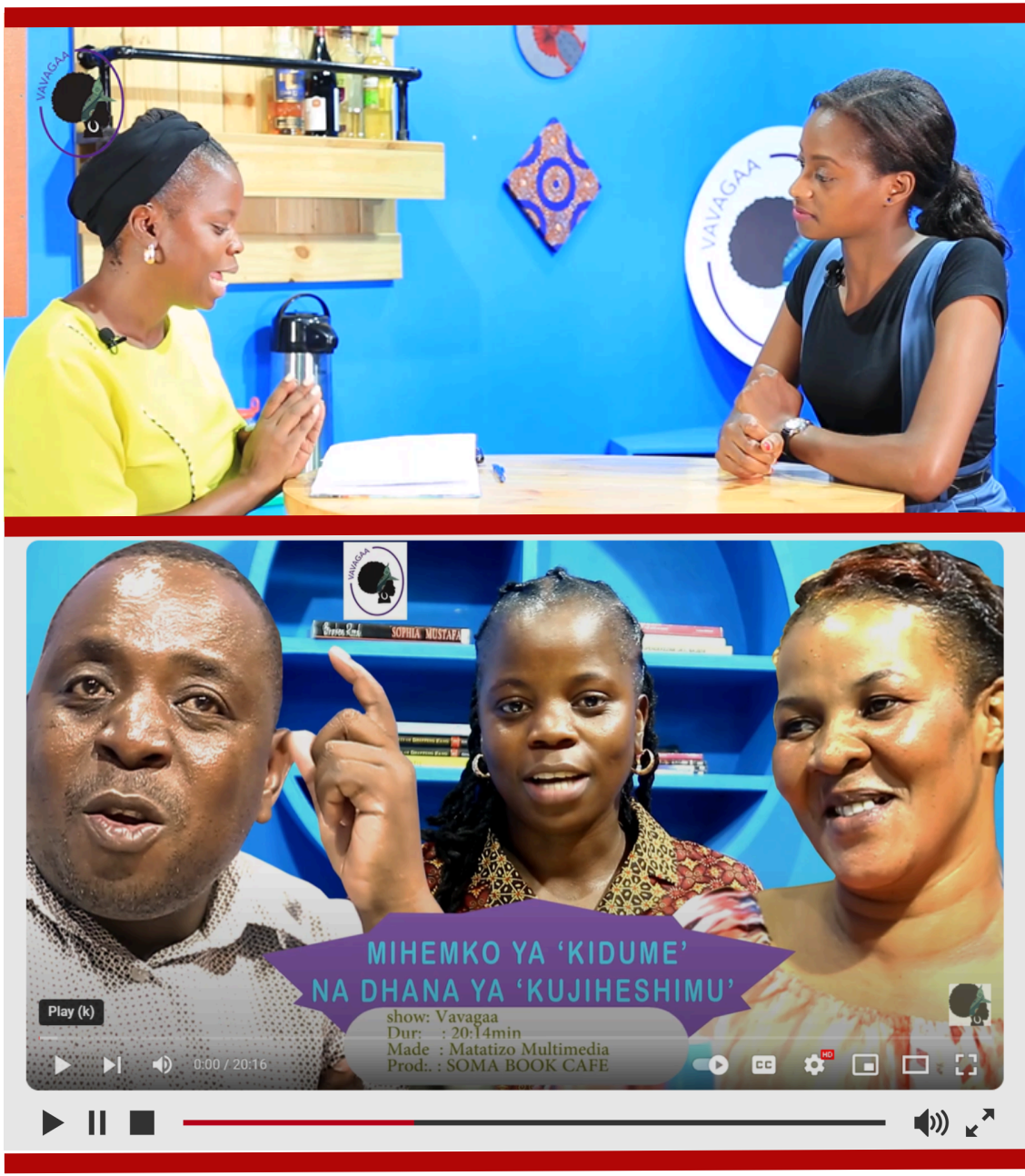
MARY NDARO
Vavagaa Co-curator, and host

A: Vavagaa Mitandaoni

Mitandaoni is a Kiswahili term for online or on the Internet. It started with Vavagaa Online Talk Show which, among others, aimed to dispel "intersecting neo-liberal and patriarchal myths that conspire to give feminism 'a bad name'".

A Multimedia Storytelling Studio located at Soma Book Café became the physical space that hosted a wide range of guests from all walks of life whereas YouTube became the online platform that aired the talks and archived them in 2020-2021. By April 2024, the Vavagaa YouTube channel had 100 subscribers and 34 videos. The long-term vision is to refine the production quality and promote the shows to air on regular TV stations and/or DSTV or Netflix.

Vavagaa's production director for the first season was none other than Vicensia Shule. Co-hosts were Mary Ndaro and Eluka Chelu Kibona. Guests and respective topics discussed included: Gloria Mafole on What is Feminism? Janeth Mawinza on sextortion; Zabibu Juma, Joseph Silayo, and Mariam Chiku Semfuko on single mothers; Zuhura Yunus on who owns a woman's body?; Nuria Mshale and Renhard Usakeli on gender in leadership - what does it mean?; Wilma Juhudi Usu on gender equality and feminism; Anna Mushi and Devotha Likokola on undervalued women's economic and social contribution; Annagrace Ishengoma and Claudia Juma on single motherhood; Lutgard Kokulinda Kagaruki on activists and activism; Caroline Lusingu and Dr. Katanta Lazarus Simwanza on masculine sex drive and self-respect.



B: Vavagaa Mtaani

Mitaani is the Kiswahili word which means Streets or working-class suburbs. Vavagaa also ventured into the streets to prompt conversations with and among men and women on pertinent gender issues impacting their everyday lives and relations. Some of the issues that ignited heated discussions on Vavagaa Mitandaoni were brought into Vavagaa Mtaani as prompts; while Mtaani also informed discussions online. By engaging women and men in everyday conversation on gender dynamics they experience or encounter, Vavagaa Mtaani aims to build consensus among women and men in their communities on which norms are better suited to help them navigate the 21st century with advantage.

"Vavagaa Mtaani grounds us at the community level.... It tries to leave stories and topics as raw as they can be to awaken the spirit of conversation, particularly the uncomfortable ones. It brings on board all human (s) as a safe space that can be owned by all for each and all. It's a home to creative minds and spirit and somehow not so much a home for the everyday thinking that puts women, girls, boys, people with disabilities, and non-binary groups at a crossroads. It's a space to explore and celebrate humanity in all its forms"



MARY NDARO
Vavagaa Co-curator, and host





Mobosoko and Mshikamano Hub

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became an existential threat. It was also threatening the livelihoods of small producers and informal traders most of whom are impoverished women and youths. Soma therefore experimented with digital and mobile technologies to facilitate a TFMB coalition-led hotline to enable rapid response to mental health and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) incidents resulting from and/or compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. To address the impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods of marginalised women and their communities, Soma developed and piloted a mobile marketing and distribution app, connecting groups of small producers and traders in the informal sector to customers on 'lock down' with minimum contact.

Soma managed to reach over 38,813 people through social media sites, collaborate with 25 organisations, and pilot two apps: Mobosoko and Mshikamano Hotline. Soma also collected and shared women's stories of resilience and innovation during the times of COVID-19.

Mobo soko

02

Number of Apps Launched





Part II: Soma in the next 10+ years

Part II looks at two core sides of the same coin in Soma's next 10+ years. What Soma says about itself and what others say about it. Overlaps between them show how Soma has been internalized by its internal and external community and affiliates; albeit on a limited scale since the scope of this publication did not allow for collecting a representative sample of opinions.





Where does Soma see itself in the next 10+ years?

For the past 10+ years, Soma has seen changes happening both internally and externally, with laws governing NGOs changing and having a direct impact on them as an institution. Soma has also seen the feminist movement growing, reflecting, re-strategizing, re-energized, and re-fuelled.

As a Pan-African feminist organization, Soma is aware of the changing context both regionally and in the country. It sees the increased radicalized religious and cultural views on women, girls, people with disability, and "othered" social groups. It is observing the increased shrinkage of space for transformative feminist conversations and processes that mentor a new generation of Pan-African feminists. Soma, therefore, intends "to continue to expand spaces where women, children (girls and boys), youths, and different identities amplify their voices, articulate pan-African feminist narratives, and use media innovatively to 're-member', imagine, and author social gender transformation."

It will remain ambitious yet pragmatic given that human and financial resources have been and would most likely continue to be a constant challenge due to the limiting global and local funding regimes.



Within such constraints, it will "focus on building further partnerships and grow its role as a facilitator and curator of cocreating spaces and platforms." Soma will do so "while fostering innovations in storytelling to bridge the current gap between written and oral, formal and informal, didactic and creative communication; contemporary and indigenous knowledge forms; physical and cyberspaces." Lessons from its past and current initiatives and those of it co-creating partners will be used to continue make feminist narratives more popular in the mainstream arena. Efforts will also continue to be made toward making contestations over controversial issues associated with feminism ongoing and acceptable to the wider population.





Soma's community of partners and allies grows and develops around five mutually reinforcing outcome areas: Space, Skills, Narratives, Voice, and Action.

Converging around curated feminist storytelling cocreation Space(s) where they connect, interact, foster constructive interaction and resilient forms of organising.

Where they nurture talents, increase knowledge, Skills, and consciousness, gain clarity on issues and approaches, analyse, and innovate.

Where they ideate, excavate silenced herstories, interrogate existing and generate new and powerful Narratives, package, archive, and publish seminal contents, and drive public discourse.

Where they innovate with creative and digital media to effectively amplify Voices, grow, and engage audiences, and influence public discourse. Where they strategize and galvanize power and engender Action for social gender transformation.


1 Space
2 Skills
3 Narratives
4 Voice
5 Action
ACTION
VOICE
NARRATIVES
SKILLS
SPACES

Where do you see Soma in the next 10+ years?

Soma as an organization and a space has gone through different phases and lives. It has seen the good and the bad time. Always sustained by the creative energies and resilience of the community growing around it.

As an organization, it has produced projects and programs with tangible and intangible outputs and outcomes, inspiring and impacting hundreds if not thousands of people from all walks of life. As a space, it has created or made friends, family, acquaintances, and admirers each of them with a unique vision of where they want to see Soma in the next ten years or so. What remains paradoxical to many of them is the intersection between Soma Book Café and Kestoria Kavazi. The former has defined Soma as a space until it closed most of its public forums and services during the pandemic.

The latter has emerged from within the former's existence and acquired a life of its own; at once complementary but also with potential to take over. Will the latter be replacement or a refinement of the former? they ask. At the core of it, Soma can only be an amalgam of both. However, while preparing this profile, we were honoured to speak to some of them, and below is their vision of where they want to see Soma in the next ten years. Soma will therefore need to navigate the different expectations as it fulfils its purpose as a feminist literary space.





"It's not a structure but rather a constellation of forums and platforms. It's a community of individuals, networks, and organizations...it is the contents and expressions excavated from different areas of silenced knowledge of women and other disenfranchised social groups... it is the vibrant discourse in the public and mainstream arena on why it is that in the 21st century, Africa cannot afford gender discrimination or discrimination of any other group...that is what I see Soma being behind and/or facilitating in the next 10 years"



DEMERE KITUNGA
Soma CEO

"It's not a structure but rather a constellation of forums and platforms. It's a community of individuals, networks, and organizations...it is the contents and expressions excavated from different areas of silenced knowledge of women and other disenfranchised social groups... it is the vibrant discourse in the public and mainstream arena on why it is that in the 21st century, Africa cannot afford gender discrimination or discrimination of any other group...that is what I see Soma being behind and/or facilitating in the next 10 years"



MARY RUSIMBI
A Friend of Soma

"Soma should be a space for feminists ...where feminists are there to create and document knowledge ... it should be a home for feminist and African knowledge ...that's what I think of Soma and I wish that can be returned to Soma Space...a place to bring all feminists...Pan-Africanists and socialists ...a space to nurture young feminists....because now we have no space...if you want to have a quiet conversation we end up at the bars or lounge... and those spaces are not really our space....so if we had that space...a space to document herstory and feminist analysis...a library....Soma can be that space for African feminist knowledge and that's what I see and wish Soma to become in the next ten years"



MWANAHAMISI SINGANO
Kijamvi's Organizer at Soma

"Soma to continue creating a space for people who come to create reading materials for listeners...that should be a big focus.... Market it like a creative place where people come to produce programs...but conditions have to be a product for the community... Train people on how to use their phones to record stuff and share...the bigger part is the distribution of reading materials...That's the Soma I envision"



VICENSIA SHULE
Former Editor of Soma Literary Magazine

"For me, the vibrancy...creativity, connections, resourcefulness, and a place to be...so for me a physical space...there's freedom to do...as a space I think it's a place of connection. It connects generations.

It's a space that brings people together and also brings the best out of people in terms of imagination....a place where a weird person can go and feel comfortable and express themselves endlessly...it's a place that creates the culture of ART, transformation among young people, children, and older that is real gender conscious space...

it uses readership and art as tools to bring the best out of people...whether it's family event where kids and parents are coming to play... create and connect...creative expression... and that's what I still envision Soma in the next ten years"



JACQUELINE MGUMIA
Soma's Board Member

"I have known Soma as a feminist organization from the day they started, their reading and writing materials as well as the space. In the next ten years, I wish to see Soma that's not donor dependent. Soma should strive to ensure they have strategies that will make donors not resist being part of the movement.... Soma should have outputs that can be attained within a shorter period but also have a long term that shows life in the future so it's important to craft Soma's agenda such that resonates with their community"



AGRIPPINA MOSHA
Friend of Soma

"Soma is not a structure but rather a constellation of forums and platforms. It's a community of individuals, networks, and organizations...it's a product and expressions excavated from different areas of silenced knowledge base....it's a vibrant discourse in the public and mainstream media on why in the 20th century Africans cannot afford gender discrimination or discrimination of any other groups...that what I see Soma being behind or facilitating in the next 10 years"



DEMERE KITUNGA
Soma CEO

It's a safe space where writers, performers, and other creatives meet. It is also a space that fascinates knowledge … when people think of readership activities…they think of Soma…a place to engage in critical and fun discussion just like the three motos… leisure…learning… and culture so that's what I think of Soma, in the next 10 years… should be a place for people who are fascinated about reading and knowledge… also a safe space for people who associate themselves with a feminist line of thinking ….a space which provokes the status quo line of thinking …Soma as a feminist hub in the next 10 years it becomes a reference point for human rights discussion and gender equality ….so a space that the feminist thinking is cooked…grown to provoke the existing status quo… a POT to prepare and cook the minds either subconsciously or consciously … pro-pan African ideals… it can be a Tanzanian hub for African heritage and literature



JASPER "KIDO" SABUNI
Former Soma Program Officer

"I would have wished…there were very few physical spaces for women, especially feminists….

Soma used to accommodate us just like what Nafasi is doing for artists…that's what we expected of Soma…Soma should be that Space for Feminists …where feminists are there to create and document knowledge ..it should be a home for feminist and African knowledge …that's what I think of Soma and wish that can be returned to Soma Space…a place to bring all feminists…Pan-Africanists and socialists …a space to nurture that and wish that could be returned …

now where we have no space we end up meeting at bars…and other spaces that are not our space….so if we had that space…a space to document herstory and feminist analysis…a library….Soma can be that space for Tanzania and African knowledge"



MWANAHAMISI SINGANO
Kijamvi's Organizer at Soma

"Soma is a space of connection... one that bridges generations, inspiring people to reimagine and bring out their best selves. It's a place where a any individual can go and feel comfortable to express themselves. This space nurtures a culture of art, transformation, and inclusivity, fostering creativity and equity among children, youth, and people of all ages, while remaining deeply mindful of gender equality and diversity"



JACQUELINE MGUMIA
Soma's Board Member

"Feminists, writers, Artists, authors expected Soma to be a safe space for feminists to flourish, a space where feminist conversations can take place either through art, storytelling, reading, writing, performing, or just sharing with a cup of tea. Soma was to be that space where feminists, women, and girls, can use it to nourish their brains while having fun, laughing, and discussing different issues"



MARY RUSIMBI
A Friend of Soma

"Soma, to me, is a vibrant hub—a profound center of knowledge dedicated to women, children, young people, and other marginalized groups, with a particular focus on women with disabilities.

I see it as a lemon: its beautiful sourness symbolizes an unyielding thirst for learning and growth. It ignites curiosity, fosters critical questioning, demands self-reflection and active listening, and inspires a rigorous interrogation of the world around us.

It is a space where bold minds venture into uncharted territories, addressing unspoken issues that deeply impact women and marginalized communities. For book lovers and readers, Soma is a sanctuary for challenging perspectives, minds, and expanding imaginations beyond everyday articulation of the world as we see it.



PAULINA GEORGE
A Friend of Soma



Postscript...

In the past 10+, Soma has successfully charted a resilient and unique feminist course. It has navigated and experimented with different financing models, learning to do more with little; innovated with space as a site for prompting literacies for liberation, zeroing in on social gender transformation. It is on this solid ground Soma can be expected to navigate the continuously shifting context to grow and achieve excellence in the next 10+ years.

As a flexible organisation, it needs constant introspection because changes in perspectives on feminism are constantly in flux; and ways of sharing, and internalising knowledge and expression are equally versatile.

"To me, Soma looks like a sky with stars... because Soma is so large it has so many things, it allows itself to change and become anything at any point and I think that's beautiful"



LATIFA MIRAJI
Former Soma staff and Watoto na Vitabu Facilitator



"I see Soma as a flash of paintings, a lot of it....Soma is a point of expression but at the same time colouring into things that have not been clear to most...It's like a paint that flashes and starts to blow and its direction doesn't follow the rule of the world but brings something amazing in multiple colours...In a way, it's not in your control...it's something that along the way gives you the urge to keep blowing and challenging, and still in the end whatever you come up with is as beautiful and challenging to the ears and minds of everyday stereotypes...."



FAUSTA MUSOKWA
Soma's Advisory Group Member

"Soma is like a maze...it doesn't start on a straight line but in a web of interlinked and mutually reinforcing pieces of a puzzle...it is also a journey... a melting pot where communities grow, a space where people engage with ideas, where they meet, connect and interact to share experiences, create knowledge and expressions, learn. Unlearn, and relearn together....In terms of interventions, Soma has layers.... As a space, it exists as a physical and virtual space(s)... and in the realm of ideas."



DEMERE KITUNGA
Soma CEO

"Three images: Safe space for kids to learn and grow, friendly for youth to grow but also a place where women and girls can be proud of their womanhood...also a hub for knowledge and learning. There are a lot of bookshops, but Soma has unique books that meet most readers' standards. African literature, women's rights, freedom fighters.... you get them at Soma...book events... 'meet the author' events...all these are what my picture of Soma is."



JASPER "KIDO" SABUNI
Soma Member and Former Program Officer

"Introverted and bits of extrovert activities...when she can be very attractive and charming and breathe life into other people...but internally quite...A warm but not the knottiest. She doesn't push herself forward... maybe with Vavagaa she is changing and becoming more extroverted...I think Vavagaa is the program that reached out most to people but otherwise, Soma is pretty quiet...Vavagaa reached so many people...but others like herstory didn't reach that many people...Vavagaa is in your face so maybe she is having a makeover...Soma needs to be more visible...."



RICHARD MABALA
Writer

For more than a decade and a half, Soma has envisioned a prosperous and equitable Tanzanian society where women and young people re-imagine and author transformation. To that end, it has thrived to uphold its mission of nurturing innovative storytellers with pan-African feminist consciousness and skills to author transformation. This is the story this portrait has attempted to convey. We hope you have enjoyed reading this book as we enjoyed producing it. Soma has indeed come a long way, and it still has a long way to go. It is our sincere hope that you will be part of this journey.

"Resilient ...I have had many years that I have told Mama Demere to close Soma but somehow it wakes up the next day...and there have also been many times she has said, This is the last year..."



REHEMA CHACHAGE
Soma Member and Enduring Volunteer




kestoria
kavazi
SKILLS
ELATABL
SKILL
RELATA


CULTURE
STORIES
Kestoria kayazi
WOMEN
SKILLS
uhai

FootNotes

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