Excerpt translated by Patricia K. Pabst

*My Congolese father’s*

*Romanian daughter*

My name is Nili Makasi, it’s an unusual name for a Romanian. I was born in Iaşi, in the Moldavian region of north-eastern Romania. I had a mother, or rather I was the shame my mother bore for a long time, and I didn’t know my father, a Congolese student who left after the 1990 revolution. When I was born, the dictatorship was still in place. The great *Conducător* brought lots of students into the country, Africans, Egyptians, Syrians. They came to learn about communism so they could then return and try to establish something tolerable at home, become an enlightened vanguard for the international proletariat, the great minds of global equality. Actually, the *Conducător*’s idea was to rub elbows withall the other neurotic despots who could help him to fill his empty coffers, and he found one he was particularly fond of, a murderous field marshal who held power in the Congo, the country they called Zaire at the time. They were buddies, thick as thieves, and that’s why there were so many young Congolese on perilous tribulations in Romania during those years, and the foreign students’ campus at the faculty of sciences at Iaşi, the city where I was born, was chockablock. It was there, at a small party one night in March 1989, that my mother, a freshman in the college of humanities, met my father, Exaucé Makasi Motembe. I didn’t know much about him until Africa *blossomed in me*, and I came here, to Congo, just east of the heart of the world. My mother once told me that my father was the handsomest and smartest of all the young men studying mathematics at the time, an idealist destined for a great career in his country, a pan-African who wanted to found the United States of Africa. And later she told me that, in fact, he wasn’t so handsome, just a dreamer in calamitous despondency, but that he was brilliant and that’s the most important. When she threw that in my face, I didn’t understand anything. I had no idea what Africa was, apart from the damnable continent that inevitably caused the bitterness I felt each morning as I looked into our cracked bathroom mirror.

How could I love myself before you existed within me? You must understand. When you grow up in a country that abolished slavery of the Romani–that’s the gypsies –on its own soil barely one hundred and sixty years ago, where the majority of people, raised under the dictatorship, had never seen a foreigner in their life, and your father was a privileged student, who enjoyed a government grant, who came from far away, who ate in restaurants every day while the locals lived on ration tickets and had never tasted an orange, they express their animosity towards you pretty freely. For being different, if I don’t speak out of anger. You can come to hate yourself rather quickly. It’s hard to explain it to you here and now, but in the eyes of the Iron Guard’s grandchildren, the grandchildren of the members of that typically Romanian fascist party, the heirs of the deporters, the dispensers of slow death to all those who in 1941 weren’t deemed Aryan, in the city where I was born, I was nothing more than half primate, or a supernatural being for the most dim-witted among them, but never a normal person. That’s my country.

To justify to the world, and especially to herself, why I didn’t end up in an orphanage, as was customary for mixed-race children, my mother incessantly recited that she knew I would be an exceptional child from the day I was born, that I had a singular destiny and nonsense of that sort. You’d have to hear her with that thick Moldavian accent. Anyway. All that to say that there were only so many ways I could react to the hatred, and despite my efforts to contain my *superiority*, in the end, it caught up with me. Biracial diarrhea. The alien’s superiority complex. The being from another world, with transcendental intelligence, destined to save humanity but who finds themselves horribly limited in a semi-white body, sweating and hairy. I contracted this childhood disease early enough to become easily accustomed to it. On the other hand, getting rid of it was a very different story, why would I as long as I was trapped within the boundaries of the region where I was born? Since I was a local curiosity, as a grew up I looked down my nose at everyone. I chose to show a proud face to the public, pose a pair of sunglasses on my nose and stuff headphones in my ears so they would leave me alone. But out there, it’s nothing like here, the only place that matters anymore, you need to repulse the flaw of arrogance, quickly put off the syndrome of half-blood masters. I’m warning you that you can become a monster, through laziness, through self-esteem, with this whole question of skin that’s lighter than someone else’s.

For a long time I believed, wrongly, that my father, Exaucé Makasi Motembe, simply found my mother beautiful—how could you resist that willowy stretch of well-bred muscle under the thick tuft of cropped hair so blond it took your breath away—and that night, at the *Mărtişor* student party, the spring festival on the Iaşi university campus, my mother must have been drunk on *ţuică*, and they made a mistake, they got undressed inadvertently, for a few minutes, and that my father immediately ran back to join the fight to liberate the African continent without a moment’s thought to the possibility that I might exist one day. And you must think that I was too hard on him because that’s not at all how the story went, but you will also learn what it’s like to grow up without your father. So just imagine what it’s like if no one tells you why he isn’t there or why you look so much like him, even though you don’t even really know what he looked like, no one tells you who he really was or about the love that pierced his heart straight through until it was strangled by the remorse that he would never know you. I thought my father was just an asshole, a pathological abandoner that the Carpathian climate couldn’t entice enough for him to grow some balls and persevere. I was wrong, my little boy, both of us know that I was wrong. Now that I have the letters my father wrote to me over all those years. I have those letters in the back of my mind, and so often open in my hands, here in the house, that you and I know your grandfather, well, he was different.

If I had understood how to read between the lines of what my mother said, she who had no idea of the dazzling comet flash that she had the chance to touch in the body of Exaucé Makasi Motembe, I wouldn’t have had to wait until I was twenty-five and came here to Congo to get to know my progenitor. My father was his name, *Makasi*, strength. Virtue embodied in the scope of a short life that began in flight, when his father had to escape Bukavu in December 1960, after surviving the cursory execution of all the partisans of independence in that city in north-eastern Congo, where we are now. Exaucé Makasi Motembe was still a fetus in his mother’s womb, like you are today in mine. My father was the living embodiment of a possible future for this country of red clay and endless galleries where I started digging to find him and kick him in the teeth. I didn’t know about his ill fate, already sealed twenty years before, on a night of pre-war shortages in a street in Kinshasa.

Not a day went by that I wasn’t so mad at him my bones ached, furious with my father, not a day during my childhood in that ancient, rotten corner of Europe when I wasn’t angry with him for not being there, for never having called me on the phone, for being nothing more than a sort of clammy wound that adhered to my skin at birth and made me the target of ceaseless mockery from all my moronic classmates and, later, the lecherous regards of vulgar, acne-ridden teenagers convinced they would become local stars if they managed to grab me in a corner in such a way that the whole neighborhood would know about it. You know, I hated my father so much. I talked to him in my sleep, insulted him as I sat on the toilet, walked along the street, zapped endlessly through television programs. I recounted to him all my pain at never belonging because of his whim to hook up one night before he packed up and left.

You’ll see, my dear, there’s nothing we can do about those who are absent. You’ll learn later that they don’t often choose to leave. You shouldn’t be angry with them. When I finally realized at what point disappearing isn’t always a choice, when I came here to Congo, it was too late: hatred had already eaten away at my gut. Even if I didn’t hate myself like before, I couldn’t stop myself, even today, as I caress you with my hands to build a wall of tenderness between you and the hatred, to make sure that hate can’t infiltrate the umbilical cord through which I’m feeding you Exaucé Makasi Motembe’s strength, I can’t stop myself from feeling guilty, and from hating myself for having hated him. Hatred, my son, is a curse. In it, millions of silent continuators one day mutiny against the one who allowed it to enter their heart just once, then kill them.

Exaucé Makasi Motembe, your grandfather, was a revolutionary. He would never have abandoned his family to the caprices of a free-falling day after. When he met my mother at that party on March 1st, he saw in her what I have never been able to see, he saw vital life imprisoned in a radiant girl. Personally, if I had been there before I was conceived to witness my parents’ meeting, I would have found her much too beautiful to not arouse suspicion, my future mother, I would have whispered in my father’s ear: *Choose someone else*. But, my father always saw the best in everyone, I can tell by reading his letters. He was always trying to extract human intelligence from places no one would have dreamed it was hiding, trying to offer others the chance to be better than themselves. He gave my mother the chance to be something more than a pretty, blond egghead, open to the world, but deep- down, even more racist than the poor, ignorant wretches in her country of fools. My father wrote to her, in a letter dated January 1992:

*… Elena mea, when I saw you for the first time, I thought you would be strong enough to accept me into your life and face the prejudices of the old guard and the insults from reactionaries… today I’m asking you to have that same strength and not give in to the pressure of those around you or the path of least resistance. Don’t cut me off from my little Makasi, let me call her on the phone. A daughter needs to know that her father is there for her…*

*Elena Abramovici*

You see, my son, anyone can make a mistake. Even if my father wasn’t just anyone, he was undeniably mistaken about my mother. As he was writing from his house in Kinshasa letters that would never reach me, even though most of them were addressed to me, letters that my mother hid from me all my life, and even sent back to Congo so that I wouldn’t read them, as my father was writing from his home, he had no idea who my mother really was, the woman he called *Elena* *mea*, my Elena, and even less what my life with her was like at the time. I often thought, after having read my father’s letters, that my mother must have deluded him, talking about the Marxist-Leninist revolution, or lured him into believing that she’d go back to Congo with him to help establish the global socialist program, all out of curiosity about the exotic, to spend the night with a man who wasn’t like her compatriots. So, she lied to him. How else can you explain why he let himself be so easily trapped between the graceful abductors of this woman so different from the one he thought he knew? Maybe you’ll meet her one day, my mother, I doubt that you’ll ever know her, but in the end, it’s always a possibility, and you’ll think I’m extremely hard on her, that I’m exaggerating everything and that she isn’t really like the woman I’m describing to you. You’ll say I’m a liar, that I have no right to judge her, and you’ll defend her. Well, you know, I still hate myself for having unjustly hated my father, but strangely enough, I don’t have any more anger toward the woman he chose to bring me into this world. I can’t blame my mother, it’s not her fault that my father was wrong about her. A woman with so little memory of what it is to suffer, you can’t really ask her to be truly intelligent, and even less to be courageous, and then where would it come from anyway, that intelligence, and to what purpose?

My mother, Elena Abramovici, was ashamed of me my entire life, or rather, she was ashamed of me until having a daughter like me became fashionable in the capital, after Romania entered the European Union in 2007. I was about to turn eighteen, so if we do the math, she was ashamed of me throughout my childhood. When I was little and my mother took me to the store, she would dress me in two layers of clothing and would stuff cotton balls in my ears, *You shouldn’t talk to people; There’s a lot of noise outside, it’s going to scare you mamicoutsa,* she rammed her two fingers into my ear canals and we went shopping as if we were setting off to war. I didn’t need to imagine what it was she didn’t want me to hear, how many times did I hear it growing up. Romanians have sharp tongues*: Oh, did you see that, look, a mulatta*. The term mixed-race, even if it isn’t more delicate, doesn’t exist there, in Romanian you say mulatto, even today. There was also*: Mom, look at the monkey!* I still can’t forget about that one, the little shit at the supermarket, I was 5 years old, he pointed at me and imitated a macaque scratching its armpits, he had the look of a future Teutonic soldier, totally fascist. I still remember that demonic child’s face, his specter showed up to torment my nightmares until I was eight or nine. The face of a cruel, fair-headed child, his teeth covered in plaque, repugnant, the noble descendant of a long line of Dacian alcoholics. And then, later, at around 10 years old, my mother gave me a pair of earplugs that I fastidiously kept in my pocket, but still, sometimes I forgot. Once, when I was about twelve, on a street corner, a mustached man of about forty asked: *Do you screw?* And several times after that, because my breasts were starting to develop and you could see it a bit in summer, I heard: *You’re a mulatta, do you charge less? How much?* After the age of ten, when I could stay home while my mother went shopping by herself, we exceptionally went to a shoe store together for my birthday. The rictus glued onto the face of one woman as she spoke to another in a different department engraved itself in my memory: *Did you see the girl? Look at her mother, I’ve seen her on television and it turns out she’s a whore who does it with Blacks!*

She’s a whore who does it with Blacks. I don’t need to explain further why I grew up with foam stoppers in my ears, it’s much too violent for a child, nor describe to you how my mother never reacted and summoned the courage to ignore the vilest obscenities that she, who didn’t have her ears obstructed, heard very distinctly. She would lift her nose in the air and look away from her aggressors, who were mostly women, uptight and embittered women, jealous because my mother was superb, an extraordinarily stunning nymph, whose beauty was so rare that once, a man from modeling agency accosted her at the market, an American chasing esthetic treasures across the vast stretches of slender Balkan legs, he hounded her to take his card until he saw me and curled his lip, more because my mother had a child than because of my skin, which he surely didn’t give a damn about. But why did she ignore them like that, all those insults directed at my mother? She couldn’t stand up and defend herself once and for all? Tell them where to get off, tell them: *Hey, bitch, that’s my daughter, shut your racist mouth or I’ll do it for you!* No, my mother would never do that. Let her aggravation escape the walls of our apartment. You could read on her face that she was trying to assume her error with as much dignity as possible. That’s probably also why we got insulted so often, it wasn’t normal, it must have been written all over my mother’s face: *Insult me, I’m a slut who slept with a Black man and I’m dragging my ball and chain with my head held high,* I think that’s really the impression she gave people when they saw us walking down the street side by side, the impression of a convict saddled with a millstone.

I can’t remember a single day, as a child, when my mother took me outside just for a walk, just to be together, so I quickly learned to digest this visceral hate steeped in others’ filth. This hatred, I saw it as a child, in Elena’s eyes—I quickly stopped calling her mom and began using her first name—behind her placid show, each time she buried me underneath layers of clothing in winter, or she shifted away from me when we were walking, her bitter gulf, the proof.

I grew up, I became beautiful and I got my period. On my twelfth birthday. We were both in the narrow bathroom brushing our teeth with food-grade baking soda and oil. I hadn’t put my pajamas on yet. A wide stain, that I couldn’t see, was visible through my worn panties. Elena slapped me, took me in her arms, and sealed a pact with me, and since then, both of us work to develop our minds so they replace our sex…

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My father’s bedroom

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The first to greet me at grandmother Omoyi’s house was a small marmoset whose leash, attached to a tree, was permanently twisted to the breaking point. The whole family was there, my grandmother in a colorful *libaya*, my aunts and cousins, elegantly attired, my uncles popping the tops off beers amidst joyful chatter. There must have been forty people who kissed me and shook my hand throughout the afternoon. I was at home, I wandered to-and-fro in the yard between the mango and avocado trees at each end. My grandmother’s kid goat followed me everywhere, *A joy, my girl, a joy!* I was dizzy with the juice of life my eyes were incessantly drinking in. Night would fall with the headiness of no longer sleeping now that my eyes were open, I told myself: *I won’t close them again*. I could finally savor the muggy liquors of the house where my father grew up. I was going to sleep in his childhood bed. I searched the faces of all my uncles to find the one that might still be a living Exaucé Makasi Motembe, which one looked the most like him, *Are you my father? Or you?,* until I thought: *Today, far away from the old, rotten world, my father is no longer here.*

My son, that night, I entered his heart, his world. I sat by the grill and watched Grandma Omoyi wrap pieces of fish in banana leaves and lay them on the embers she was fanning with a piece of cardboard. Through the half-open doorway that led from the yard to the kitchen, the silhouette of one of my father’s nieces stirred the semolina with a long wooden spoon, while her sister’s hands scooped the pot of jack-mackerel *pondu* into a glass salad bowl, and their mother finished tearing the cubes of steaming goat meat from their metal skewers to serve the *ntaba*. The *ntaba* here is the Romanian *capră*. The *fasole*, white beans, are called *madesu* here. The *fufu* is like *mămăligă*, but it’s wheat meal instead of corn. I explained all that to Grandma Omoyi. I named the dishes from there for her. *Ah, Nili, so your mother made you Congolese food!* Those first hours after landing pierced my body straight through, I settled into myself, I didn’t dare speak to anyone other than Grandma Omoyi. So many visitors came over, sat next to me, kissed me, took photos with me, told stories about my father, *Exauce’s daughter, Praise the Lord, God is good*. I don’t remember their names, their features, what stuck in my mind is the general buzz, raised voices breaking through here and there before giving way to laughter, thrumming in my arteries, I pinched my thumbs, my shoulders pulled inward, my facial muscles aching, I was alone in the midst of our family celebration.

The evening dwindled into coolness, a cousin led me to Exauce’s bedroom. There was a narrow bed with worn pink sheets, a bookshelf, on one shelf an iron with a burnt soleplate, an old edition of Rimbaud’s poems, a book in Portuguese about Amilcar Cabral’s life, some pamphlets, two tracts on yellowed paper slipped into a dog-eared volume from the 1960s or 70s, written in English, certain pages scribbled on by a child’s marker, the back cover torn away, on which I read: *Africa Must Unite – Kwame Nkrumah*. Next to the bed, in the drawer of a little girl’s blue plastic nightstand, I found some objects. A miniature chess set with magnetic pieces, almost all missing, photos cut out of books and newspapers, one of which showed two men sitting on a couch in front of a microphone, one of them—I recognized Thomas Sankara—was resting his hand on the other’s arm, he was wearing a revolutionary’s hat. It was a portrait of Samora Machel and Thomas Sankara. Written in ink on the back were these two phrases, in quotes with a bit crossed out: “*We have awakened. We won’t sleep again*.” Was this my father’s writing? A bible with a red cover lay on the miniature table. I opened it and found an old photograph. It showed a young Patrice Lumumba, accompanied by another boy, wearing button-down shirts and ties, smiling as they leaned against the wall of a house, both were wearing glasses, there weren’t any indications on the back, not even a date. It seemed authentic. Surely taken at the very end of the 1950s.

From behind the door and window of the garden-level bedroom, the voices of my uncles who sat outside under the mango tree, at the table where we had dinner, stretched on into the night, voices saturated with Grandma Omoyi’s cooking, bottles of Primus, and a mango picked in that very yard and shared before each silhouette made its way toward the bedrooms or the street. My heart was pounding, my son, like never before. Impossible to close my eyes amid that smell, with all those images, in this mysterious room, my first night in Kinshasa. I was beginning to understand who Exaucé Makasi Motembe was, to make out his stature, discover the breadth of his strength. But I, his daughter, I had never taken part in an association, a party, a group, in Romania there weren’t any that were interesting, at least that’s what I told myself. In Paris there were conferences, protests against police violence, inflicted most often on black men who were beaten or killed during arrests or identity controls, committees to protect illegal immigrants’ rights, groups like that, who move things forward, who advance human rights, but with my thesis and Elena’s omnipresent scrutiny, it was, of course, out of the question to let myself be distracted. Because I believed in that thesis, in the title of doctor. You see, when you finish all your college degrees, afterwards they call you Doctor. I hadn’t yet realized that I was still illiterate, a graduate of the void, until I arrived here in Congo, and all the diplomas had I earned to live a life of integrity, sheltered from corruption, well, they were no longer of any use to me. That’s the way it is, my dear. You must understand that recognition from others, foreigners from countries we call rich—I call them the rotten world, or the poor countries, because it’s true that they have absolutely nothing, no sugar, no coffee, no cacao, no oil, no gold, no silver, no gemstones, no iron, steel, zinc, aluminum, rubber for their cars, their trains, their planes, no petroleum for plastics or propane to warm themselves, that’s why they pillage us—won’t provide you with a single thing that’s useful to navigating the winding paths that twist among the verdant hills of our volcanic land. Always remember that Congo is like an island. We don’t need anything. We have the river. The river and the first radiances of abundance in this low and bountiful domain. Swarms of stars planted our land with colors, fruits, hundreds of rivers, the Great Lakes, nourishing fish, the first humans, mathematics, God. So, my son, the farther you go away from here, toward the rotten world that I left behind, the more ignorant you’ll become, an illiterate man in a suit jacket, loafers, and long sleeves totally unsuited to this country, that is, to life, a cloaked man, a mythomaniac, twisted. You really must understand that I have no respect for the morbid and egotistical girl I once was.

I tried to learn a little bit about the history you and I come from, that Exaucé came from, through books, Internet videos, social science journals that I had access to during my studies. Most of these resources were written by men and women from the rotten world, avid for exoticism, but mired in their zeal, maybe because of their language, or because their eyes only see things and never what moves them. Because that, my dear, what moves people, can’t be seen, even though we, in Congo, have been explaining it for a long time, before their stories of body and soul, made up by people in the rotten world, were unleashed upon the entire world, as if we were beings detached from our bodies, as if we lived in a gigantic, sweeping field of separate beings and spirits, that type of malarkey. You’ll understand later, I’ll tell you how to dump that bunk in the garbage, souls disconnected from bodies that will join God in Heaven just because they’re nice and go to Hell if they’re mean, all that nonsense. That didn’t exist here, before. Forgetting your ancestors, dissociating yourself from them. Anyway, I tried to study some of our history, that of the formidable, heroic figures who led our people out of servitude, out from under Western and Arab domination, from colonization. Colonization is a word that people here always have on the tip of their tongue, and even if they are told—the rotten world tells them—that they have to stop talking about it, that they need to think about something else, something happier, that they are independent now and responsible for their own woes. I have no idea how to go about explaining it to you, colonization is truly inconceivable. To start with, the word was invented by those who implemented it and continue to practice it, to make us always talk about what *they* are doing, and to do it with their words. Of course, they wouldn’t call it a holocaust, here in Africa, or the Americas, or the-physical-and-cultural-genocide-of-half-the-planet. But that’s exactly what it was. We were almost wiped out. Through murder, exploiting native peoples, until we built a paradise of blood on Earth, after which they wouldn’t need us anymore. Here, it’s a wound that often still oozes.

Sometimes I think it’s a very serious disease, colonization, or a syndrome of one of those illnesses that attack the weakest parts of humanity, the selfish, the bloodthirsty barbarians, the least enlightened members of the human race. This psychosis afflicted their society and they became like enraged ancient mercenaries, wandering the streets in their demented confusion they lost all appreciation for space, fertility, goodness, knowledge, sharing, other men’s harmony with creative power, because something strange happened to them, the adepts of the reign of muscle, and they couldn’t fix it. Just imagine. What a nightmare. A horde of criminals and ex-cons irrupts into our fenceless gardens, furious and violent animals storm into our doorless homes, trick us, kill us, enslave us, destroy our trees, bloody our wells with our cadavers, beat our children, feed them to their dogs, disembowel our women, prohibit us from speaking our language, torture us, plunge the bodies of our men who refuse their fury into barrels of boiling water, still on the fire, cook them to death then make the living eat them, burn us alive on stakes when they haven’t done such a thing in their own lands for centuries, hang us from trees and set our heads on fire with our hair, cut off our hands, our breasts, if weakness makes us tired or hungry. And you have to speak their language, a two-thousand-year-old Latin slang that’s aged badly. A bestial language of parked ancient legionaries. With very hard sounds. Sophisticated in the image of horror. And you have to pray to their god, cruel, perverse, who makes you glorify a human sacrifice, that of his own child. And you have to pay tribute to their ancestors, who aren’t even your own, uncultivated and paranoid, who claim to receive divine messages every time the barometer rises. And their posterity is still there. In your house. Robbing you of everything you own. And you live under the stairs. And, in the end, you start to believe them. Maybe we are less intelligent, less refined, weaker, closer to primates, too dark, ugly. But it’s exactly the opposite, my son.

Colonization, at least those who started it, before they came here, were capable of burning alive women who knew how to use plants to heal people, along with midwives and scholars, claiming that they practiced witchcraft. After that they went out to sow death among millions of people on the other side of the ocean—that we still call Indians even though we’ve known for ages that India is elsewhere, as if the rare descendants of those massacred people didn’t have names to identify themselves—before they expatriated Africans to replace them, working for free until their bodies plunged silently into the common grave of exhaustion. Then they came to Congo, to enslave us, force us to convert, but since we resisted, they burned Kimpa Vita at the stake. And now, we’re not supposed to talk about it, at least no *so much*, we should be able to think about other things, about the future, can you believe just how far they’ll go, my son? They stomp on your face, exterminate and exploit you, and then explain to you that all that is in the past, that it was an unfortunate error, but fueled by a sincere fire, that of progress, superior human values, universality, development, and the rest of that bullshit.

My son, listen to me: wherever you go on this planet, remember this, it is always those who govern by violence who lack beauty. Those who behaved, in whatever era, like all the uncivilized brutes who preceded them, all the villains who succeeded them, and, make no mistake, will succeed them. Those who force others, who crush them. Wherever you look in this world, monsters who have no capacity for empathy, no respect for life, are always trying to wrest power by weaving a story that is not their own, glorious, heroic, to support who they are. Renegades, the dregs of mankind. People everywhere are suffering from this predatory, destructive madness that touches a handful of deranged assassins. Me, I don’t believe their web of blather, the strategies of brutes. I wipe my ass with them. I don’t think you can understand what I’m telling you, my son, until you see it, here in Congo, with your own eyes, and then I feel so much anger, it’s better to leave that for later. Here, where you’ll walk for the first time, where you’ll grow up, that’s what the people lived through, before us, a long time ago, that makes us crazy and wise at the same time. Your grandfather, Exaucé Makasi Motembe, he understood, he walked tall. Like his father before him, he said no.