

## SPECIAL REPORT

# When a church called off wedding over HIV status

The wedding had a week before hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons. It had been cancelled amid scenes of violence after the bridegroom failed to produce an HIV status certificate, writes JUMA NAMLOLA

**T**he congregation at the church waited with bated breath as the last words for the nuptials were about to be uttered by a visibly elated pastor.

It was a well-deserved wait for the small church community in the sprawling Bangladesh slum in Changamwe area of Mombasa, as one of their own was quitting the bachelors' club.

It was an occasion when all the miseries associated with slum life are temporarily shoved aside to shower the would-be husband and wife with blessings.

When the clock ticked to 1pm on the Sunday afternoon, the church burst into song and dance in jubilation for Boniface Ojiambo and Lilian Akinyi, whose faces brightened with the crescendo of ululation in their favour.

Happy faces were visible all over the church, as friends and relatives joined the two in dancing for Jesus, apparently for a battle well fought.

This was no ordinary wedding, and the ceremony was a typical case of triumph of good over evil. The two young people in their mid-20s had gone through what must have been hell before the memorable event.

Their wedding had a week before hit the headlines, all for the wrong reasons. They had arrived at the Glory Worship Centre Church in Bangladesh very early for the ceremony.

## Church elders

Thousands of friends and relatives had gathered to witness this once-in-a-lifetime moment. But as the couple were about to take the oath to unite through God, they were reminded about a request that had been made by the church elders.

They were expected to produce their HIV status reports so that the church would not take responsibility in case of any complaints against a future infection.

The bride produced her results, which gave her a clean bill of health. But as the groom was about to enter the church compound, he was whisked away by the pastor and a bishop to a nearby private clinic.

"I was asked to produce some blood sample for testing. They then ordered me to wait outside. It took over half an hour before they emerged from the clinic and asked me to board a car," said Mr Ojiambo during an interview.



He said the pastor kept on driving far from the church until it was almost getting late. They then approached the church compound, but Mr Ojiambo was asked to wait in the car as the pastor went to make the necessary arrangements.

"I obeyed because I believed that there was always an opportune time when the groom is asked to surprise the crowd," added Mr Ojiambo, unaware that something terrible was about to happen.

As the waiting persisted, the crowd, including the bride's family, demanded an explanation about the delay. The pastor informed them that after conducting tests on the groom, results indicated that he was positive.

The pastor kept on pestering the bride's family to call off the wedding because he could not take such a responsibility and unite the two, knowing very well that one of them had the virus.

Meanwhile, the crowd demanded to be shown the results or else they raze the church should they continue being kept waiting.

"It was then that police were called in to quell the tension. Officers from Changamwe Police Station were called in, and I was arrested alongside my bride, mother-in-law and some people I cannot remember," said Mr Ojiambo as he forced himself to smile.

As they were booked into a police occurrence book, little did they know that one of the people they had left behind had been shot and seriously wounded.

Ms Elizabeth Auko Odhiambo, who had attended the wedding, was shot in the back and the bullet exited under her right breast, according to doctors at the Coast Provincial General Hospital where she was taken. Speaking to the *Nation* from her hospital bed, Ms Odhiambo said she had attended the wedding as a good neighbour, but ended up being a victim of circumstances.

"I attended the wedding, but as the commotion started, I decided to find a safe place. The last thing I can remember is

**Mr Boniface Ojiambo finally kissed his bride, Lilian Akinyi, following their wedding last Sunday, when Pastor David Waituge of Jesus Power Church in Mikindani, solemnised the marriage.**

Photo/GIDEON MAUNDU

feeling great pains on my right side of the chest before I lost consciousness," she said.

After the incident, both the pastor and his bishop went underground as the local chief ordered people to disperse and closed the church indefinitely. Although the arrested members were released later that day, the damage had been done.

The wedding finally took place last Sunday — in another church, through another pastor. As friends and relatives finally queued to congratulate the new couple, a woman donning a West African-type dress forced a smile. Ms Phelista Achieng', a single parent and mother of the bride, was yet to believe her eyes that actually the wedding had finally taken place. She had had enough.

"It's not easy as a parent to go through this," she said, putting on a brave face. "The incident has cost me a fortune. I took a loan so that my daughter's wedding could be successful, only to lose everything," she said.

Ms Achieng' lost her husband in 1992 and was left with three sons and two daughters. As a municipal council employee, she single-handedly took care of her children.

Her eldest son Hillary Odhiambo has completed Form Four, while the second born — Lilian — is in college. Another son is at Shimo la Tewa Secondary School, while the last two sat the KCPE examinations this year.

"Bringing up a daughter as a single parent is not an easy task. But my daughter gave me all the respect that I deserved. We always communicate on any issue affecting her, and there is no single day that she has misbehaved," she said.

So when Lilian told her that she had come across a young man interested in her, she asked her to introduce him. The mother asked the daughter to abstain from sex, as true love waits.

"I took my daughter to a counsellor and after that, she visited a voluntary counselling and testing centre (VCT). When I realised that she had kept her word, I was

overjoyed and decided that her wedding had to be a model in this slum area," said Ms Achieng'.

But that was never to be, at least not on the day she anticipated. The council hall that she had hired containing nine sacks of rice and 30 kilogrammes of meat was deserted after the fracas. She was left with the task of arranging to transport her friends back upcountry.

"Considering life in the slums, it pains to take a loan of Sh140,000 and then all the friends you invite, leave behind the food, and in addition, one of your best friends is shot. I can never forgive whoever was behind the incident," she said.

She denied police reports that she was against her daughter's wedding. Mombasa police officer Wilfred Mbithi had said the incident had been orchestrated by a tug-of-war between the two families over the HIV status report.

## Stray bullet

According to Mr Mbithi, the woman was shot by a stray bullet as police officers shot in the air to quell tension after people protested against Pastor Steven Ouma's refusal to solemnise the marriage.

"The two families had agreed that their children would tie the knot only after undergoing HIV tests from a reputable VCT centre. The bride produced her results, which showed she was negative but the groom dilly-dallied with his," Mr Mbithi said.

"The reason why this wedding was cancelled is due to allegations that the groom was HIV-positive. This was the most malicious remark against an innocent young man. I have received HIV status result from two different reputable hospitals which indicated that the two are negative," said Ms Achieng'.

When the pastor finally pronounced the two man and wife, it was like the Cinderella tale in which a marriage that was opposed was finally solemnised against the wishes of jealous sisters.

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