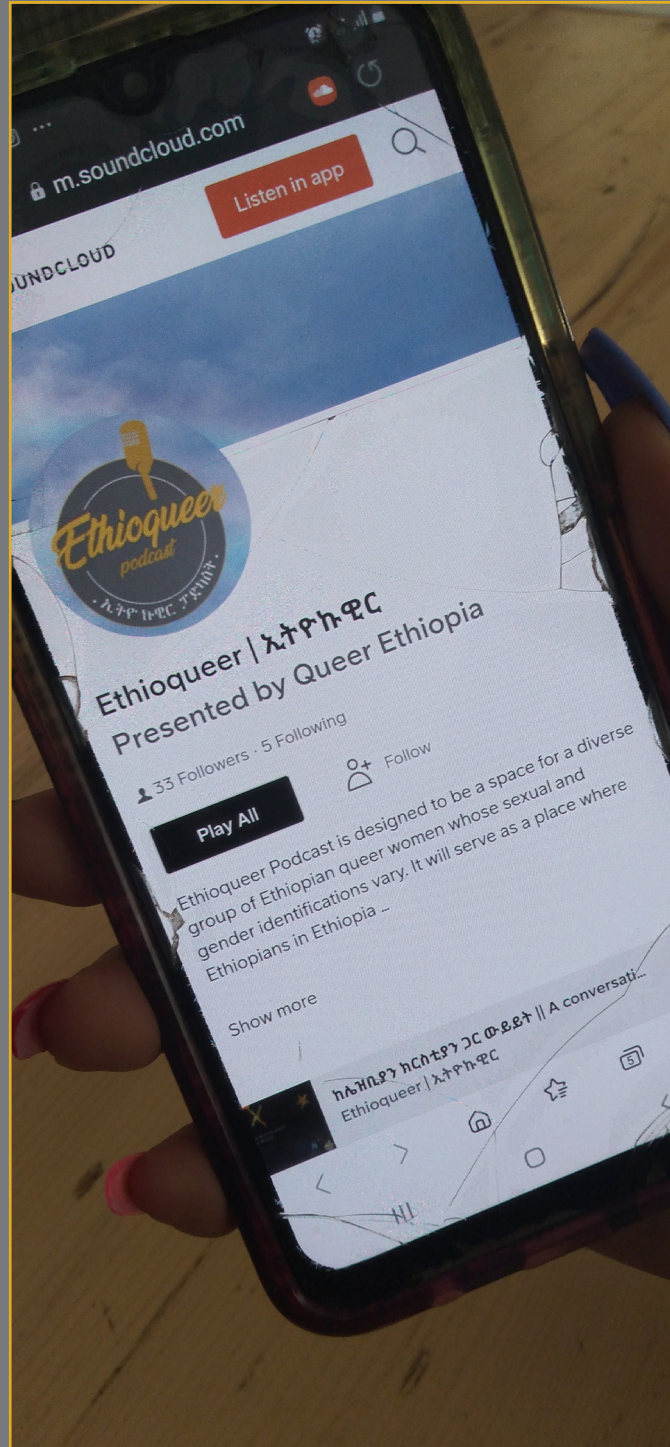


ንስንስ

ትኩረቷን በLBTQ ላይ አድርጋ በየሩብ ዓመቱ የምትታተም መጽሔት
Nisnis - quarterly magazine focusing on LBTQ issues



Pride



Hear yourself reflected

www.soundcloud.com/ethioqueer



Volume 1, Issue 2

Nisnis is a quarterly magazine that focuses on the issues of LGBTQ Ethiopians in Ethiopia and in the diaspora.

For all inquiries:
etqueerfamily@gmail.com

Published by Queer Ethiopia,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,
© September 2021

Contents

3	Editorial
4	Pride: In our own words
12	What was your first Pride like?
14	My first Pride: Coming home
16	Flying: Raising the flag of liberation within me
19	Origins of Pride
20	My own private Meskel Square
23	History of Rainbow Flag
24	Allyship: Redefining “normal”
26	Do you envision that Pride as an event will happen in Ethiopia in your lifetime?



QUEER ETHIOPIA

ኩዊር ኢትዮጵያ

“Queer Ethiopia” is an alternative space created by a group of queer Ethiopian women. It is designed to be a space for a diverse group of Ethiopian queer women whose sexual and gender identifications vary. It includes cis and trans women who may be lesbian, bisexual or asexual. This is a space where the experiences of queer people takes center stage. We hope to include personal experiences from our daily lives as queer people, various stories, interviews, original artwork and poetry. We hope it will also serve as a place where Ethiopians in Ethiopia and Ethiopians in the diaspora come as themselves to explore and create an online community.

 queerethiopia.com

 [ethioqueer](https://soundcloud.com/ethioqueer)

   [QueerEthiopia](https://www.facebook.com/QueerEthiopia)

 etqueerfamily@gmail.com

from the editors

Welcome to the second issue of Nisnis magazine.

In this issue, we focus on Pride both as an event and on what it means to us in our daily lives. Us LGBTQ Ethiopians, both at home and in the diaspora, grow up learning that who we love or how we identify is wrong, that it is a sin and that it is a shameful feeling or expression. It is difficult to not internalize the homophobia, transphobia, biphobia and queerphobia that we grow-up hearing and experiencing.

How do we then learn to develop a sense of who we are that is not steeped in shame? How do we learn to love and to respect ourselves? How do we empower ourselves? How do we develop our sense of Pride? What does Pride mean when you come from a society where you can be killed for being an LGBTQ+ person?

We raised these issues and we were pleasantly surprised by the expansive manner by which our community defines pride. Based on interviews and stories that were submitted, it is plain to see that our LGBTQ community understands pride as more than just a one day event.

This is not to say that people do not value Pride as an event. One of our contributors recalls the significance of her first Pride: "I felt like it could be possible to live a happy, fulfilling life as a queer woman for the first time". It can serve as an epiphany of sorts where we realize that there are possibilities that we have never even thought to think about.

For others, even in the diaspora, Pride has encouraged them to create their own events for fear of being outed and that has helped them create a strong and vibrant Ethiopian LGBTQ community in the diaspora.

Some have tried to create their own Pride including a one-woman pride in Meskel Square in Addis Ababa. She writes about her motivation, which was in part due to her definition of Pride as a form of resistance. This underscores that while the major aspect of Pride as a celebration is critical, it is also a reminder that Pride is an action. Pride is not something that happens on its own and it is something that we actively work toward. It is a journey and we simultaneously do and undo, learn and unlearn as we take tentative steps to live our lives fully.

Another aspect of Pride that our contributors kept returning to is the sense that pride is much more an event. Fikir, an Ethiopian lesbian we interviewed, articulated how pride is something she has learned to celebrate everyday. She said, "I reaffirm with myself, because of the amount of trauma and the experiences that I have had back in Ethiopia".

We have included many Ethiopian voices in this issue and hope you see yourself reflected and perhaps even see new ways of looking at Pride and what it means to our community.

We would like to thank our contributors and those who freely gave us their time to be interviewed, to write stories, to take pictures and to illustrate.

We would also like to thank you, our readers, for taking the time to read our inaugural issue that focused on faith and sexuality and for your subsequent comments and feedback. Your continued support will enhance our ability to better serve you in the collective effort to create a dynamic and progressive LGBTQ Ethiopian community.

Enjoy.

pride

IN OUR OWN WORDS

"I bought a rainbow mask from a street vendor and I was wearing it as I entered a taxi. When I got out of the taxi, I realized a man was following me. He stopped me and asked, "Do you know whose mask it is?"

"Are you asking where I bought it?" I asked pretending as if I didn't really understand his question.

"No, I am not asking that, this belongs to those filthy people".

"Who are the filthy people?" I asked and he responded by saying, "You don't know who the filthy people are? They are these lesbians and such and they will come and ask you for your number and stuff because they will think you are one of them since you are wearing this mask".

"I was thinking to myself 'That would actually be a very



“

It gave me joy, ... It has a lot of freedom. I even wore [the mask] as I passed a police station and I felt like a hero”.

Hibist

good thing’ but I told him that it could also be for other reasons and that they even have it in the kindergartens, I then asked him why he was focusing on this one aspect”.

He said, “This belongs to them and it is shameful. Because it belongs to those filthy people, it does not look good for you as well so you should change your mask and then he left”.

Hibist, an Ethiopian pansexual, while recounting this recent story said she was pleasantly surprised to find the rainbow colored mask in Addis Ababa and felt empowered wearing it on the streets of Addis.

“It gave me joy,” she said. “It has a lot of freedom. I even wore it as I passed a police station and I felt like a hero”.

Ethiopia is one of the 71 jurisdictions in the world that criminalize private, consensual, same-sex sexual activity. While the rest of the world celebrates Pride, Ethiopian LGBTQ+ people are simply not able to come out on the streets to show their true colors.

Globally, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer Pride month is celebrated annually in June to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall uprising in the US. Pride typically involves a series of events and is often capped by a parade involving marchers and colorful floats from the LGBTQ+ community and its supporters.

Despite not being able to participate in Pride, Ethiopians -- both in the country and in the diaspora



-- live and understand pride in complex and multiple ways. Some have attended Pride, others hope to attend one someday and for some Pride is a daily celebration that is not completely associated with an event.

While a major Pride event or gathering has never been held in Ethiopia, people have gathered in small groups and a few brave souls have shown their pride by displaying the rainbow flag



in the outskirts of the city and some have held signs in public spaces outside the eyes of the public.

In the absence of a galvanized LGBTQ+ community, Ethiopian LGBTQ+ people show their pride in who they are in multiple ways and some have even managed to attend pride events outside of Ethiopia.

Rahel, a queer Ethiopian who resides in Addis Ababa, had an

opportunity to attend Pride in Uganda.

"It did not seem like it was made abundantly clear that it was a Pride event due, I think, to concerns about security," Rahel said. "It was a short walk by the lake and there were not very many people".

In comparison to other pride events that she has attended in Europe, Rahel said the Pride in Uganda seemed to more closely mirror the

original spirit of Pride as a form of protest at the unjust laws and attitudes that force LGBTQ+ people to hide and to limit their freedom.

Adey, an Ethiopian lesbian whose family migrated to the US when she was very young, speaks fondly of the Pride event that she attended in New York. She notes that the fact that she was getting more comfortable with her lesbian identity encouraged her to attend pride.



"It was a great experience," she said. "It was like a party. It was really nice to see [such a] celebration".

Yemii, a non-binary pansexual Ethiopian based in the US, consider themselves "a baby gay" due to the fact that they have only found the courage to explore their sexuality and their gender recently.

This new found courage has meant an active exploration of queer spaces in the metropolitan area where they live in search of a place and a community that feels comfortable and puts them at

ease.

"I've had friends to help me navigate those spaces," Yemii said. "And I think it's through being there that I was able to affirm my new identities. And to really kind of give myself that reassurance of 'Okay I think I'm in the right, I'm going the right direction'".

While they have attended Pride in the city where they live, the lack of racial diversity has meant that it is not a space that speaks to them as a Black immigrant non-binary person. Pride, for Yemii, is not only about

“

.. the LGBTQ plus community that is not the status quo is consistently being attacked. So what I really am looking forward to is just a community that affirms me

Yemii

LGBTQ+ people but it is also about being in spaces that mirror them both in terms of politics and diversity.

“The main thing I am looking forward to is just community, I do feel like the LGBTQ plus community that is not the status quo is consistently being attacked. So what I really am looking forward to is just a community that affirms me,” they said.

For others, being outside of Ethiopia does not necessarily create a sense of safety that encourages one to be visible. Fikir, an Ethiopian lesbian who lives abroad has yet to attend pride due to concerns of being outed. She comes from an ultraconservative Christian family who are well known and respected in the immigrant community in which they are embedded.

Fikir was subjected to a conversion therapy while still in Ethiopia after a pastor told her mother that Fikir had the “spirit of homosexuality floating around”. Her mother

“

[It’s] like a double homicide. It’s incredibly dangerous to even come out or anything like that, .. A lot of people know me around there so I haven’t felt safe enough to attend Pride”

Fikir

tried to get the “demon out of her daughter” through prayer for 21 consecutive days. This traumatic experience shaped Fikir’s understanding of both her sexuality and her journey to accepting and affirming herself as a lesbian who grew up in a conservative Protestant household.

“[It’s] like a double homicide. It’s incredibly dangerous to even come out or anything like that,” Fikir said. “So unfortunately, I have not been able to attend pride. Because the only pride that I know about is in [my area]. And my dad works in the same area and he’s very much known. A lot of people know me around there so I haven’t felt safe enough to attend Pride”.

While the place where she lives might make it acceptable and risk free from physical harm to participate during Pride, the lack of acceptance from her Ethiopian family has made it difficult for Fikir to attend Pride.

What choices do Ethiopian LGBTQ+ people then have to make Pride have meaning even when they are not able to attend Pride events?

For Fikir and her Ethiopian LGBTQ+ community in her area, they had to create a Pride event even if it was not as big as the Pride event in the area where they live.

“We did have our own little thing where we were able to kind of have our own personal space,” she said, recounting the Pride gathering that they were able to put together within the Ethiopian





Pride is a lot more than celebration, it's about changing, like changing your internalized views, to better fit the life that you want to live".

Adey

LGBTQ+ community that live in the area. The joy that comes from being with fellow Ethiopian LGBTQ+ people is central to Fikir's ability to connect with the larger LGBTQ+ and Ethiopian community.

Alternatives to the regular Pride events are also critical for Yemii who thinks that recent Prides have turned into very capitalistic corporate affairs geared towards consumers. The Black Pride events in their city are more progressive and are definitely filled with joy. They said they are "also hoping we'll have a lot of critical dialogue about how we can best support one another".

For Adey, Pride was not necessarily affirming.

"Attending pride was never something that I thought would be more affirming to me, but it's a good experience," she said. "What I really prefer is small groups. I don't really like the whole party scene. But it's fun with friends."

The lack of opportunities for Pride events however has not translated into a lack of pride in being an Ethiopian LGBTQ+. Ethiopian LGBTQ+ people have learned to define what Pride means to them on various levels.

"I think honestly, Pride means community. To me, it means community and struggle together because I try to go back to the roots of how pride originated, and the fact that it was a riot. So I try to find grounding in the fact that through community, we can struggle together and hopefully be able to create a

more accepting society," said Yemii.

This sense that pride is separate from a once a year event marks the importance of learning to accept one's self despite the homophobia that is so prevalent in Ethiopian society, both in Ethiopia and within the Ethiopian community in the diaspora.

Hibist understands pride as something that is internal and separate from the acceptance that she may find from others.

"Pride for me is self acceptance, I relate it with myself," she said. "The person you name as proud is a person who has accepted themselves as they are. A person who refuses to be ashamed of who they are and who says 'This is what I feel' without any shame. That for me is pride. Coming out is a bonus".

Adey's understanding of pride mirrors Hibist's and she thinks of pride in a more expansive manner.

"I think being queer, can be very isolating. Even when you're in a place where it's allowed, it can feel isolating when you have internalized homophobia and all of these thoughts about who you should be and all of your thoughts about who you think other people should be too. It's about working through these limiting beliefs," she said. "Pride is a lot more than celebration, it's about changing, like changing your internalized views, to better fit the life that you want to live".

(Editor's note: Names have been changed to protect people's identities.)

“

A person who refuses to be ashamed of who they are and who says ‘This is what I feel’ without any shame. That for me is pride. Coming out is a bonus”.

Hibist



Pride



as an Ethiopian

What was your first Pride like?

“It was so freeing to see people openly celebrating and owning themselves”

Summer 2016 was my first pride. I had just turned 20 and had been quietly wrestling with my queerness. Was I queer? What did this mean? How could I ever be out?

I have two younger brothers, one of whom I am pretty close to. I decided to tell him one day and was so nervous of his reaction. He was a little surprised but was so happy that I told him and could feel safe enough to confide in him. So when I was able to go to Pride for the first time, he came along to support me. My first pride was actually the same day as his graduation from high school, so it was a day full of celebration and joy!

It was so freeing to see people openly celebrating and owning themselves. My brother and I watched in awe as the parade moved through the streets and groups of people clowned the bigots. I felt like it could be possible to live a happy, fulfilling life as a queer woman for the first time. All I had ever heard from my mom was that queer people's lives would be miserable, but I saw Black queer people and families at Pride that were so full of love. It made me less fearful of a future as an out, queer, Ethiopian-American woman.

“I felt invisible in the sea of mostly white people.”

It was 2017, the year I finally figured out that I have romantic feelings for women and - for the first time in my life - I felt okay with that realization.

Still, I was determined to live a closeted and safe life in which I would either be alone or date cis men and silently pine after women. The internalized shame and fear was as potent as ever.

At that time, one of my cishet friends whom I was out to worked for an organization that had an HIV / AIDS initiative. Her and her co-workers were walking in the Pride parade that year and she invited me to walk with them. I felt like it was the perfect opportunity to safely participate in my newfound identity. I was very excited. I had it in my mind that I would find instant community, one that I was secretly hoping would help me to truly step into and explore my identity.

Instead, I felt invisible in the sea of mostly white people. Everyone had a group or a buddy and they all seemed very excited to be there. I wouldn't and couldn't be excited while carrying so much shame. I didn't know anyone like me that could guide me or share in this experience with me. I do remember seeing another queer Ethiopian American person I knew of in college and feeling jealous of how open they were about their journey. How they had pink hair at Pride and felt free to express themselves. In comparing myself, I felt grey and like an outsider.

My lack of experience in processing these negative feelings exasperated the situation. For years, I struggled with the reality that I was an imposter in the cishetero world and I was not good enough for the queer world. I have not been to another pride event since then.

My first pride was not the magical place I expected it to be. It made me retreat further into myself. In hindsight, I see that disappointment with this amorphous idea of an LGBTQIA+ communal space led me to focus on cultivating nuanced individual relationships with other queer people. And those connections and friendships have been the community I've always wanted and needed. They provide me safe spaces to explore my understanding of queerness, sexuality, and gender. We guide each other through shame, fear, and sadness. Most importantly, they help me feel good-enough even when I don't have the appropriate amount of pride.

“It was impossible not to shed tears of joy.”

The first time I attended Pride was five or six years ago when I had the opportunity to travel abroad. My first Pride memory is set in a European city with a colorful Pride event.

It was joyful to watch so many queer people dancing on the streets in a similar way as when people enjoy the Great Ethiopian Run. It was hard not to cry! It was impossible not to shed tears of joy.

Who knew that freedom could provide this much joy? The ability to live as your authentic self is transforming. Watching a street beaming with so much color was entrancing, celebrating and being respected even more so!

MY FIRST PRIDE: Coming home

My first Pride. I was 18 and had just relocated to the United States. Gays and lesbians were a peripheral issue in my homeland - they were almost never brought up as a topic and if they were it was at best a brief and random comment. But within six months of moving to the US, I had gone from not knowing much about queerness to attending Pride.

Amidst a sea of rainbow flags and white people, I remember a small contingent of Dykes on Bikes, some of whom were topless and with their nipples taped, revving their engines and rumbling down the street to a roaring crowd as they started the parade. Most of them were decidedly butch and owned their gender expression and sexuality with such comfort and ease that I found it impossible to take my eyes away from them.

I saw drag queens in full regalia and I remember thinking that I had never even considered this as a possibility! How did I not know that this was a possibility?

I remember hearing a deafening roar from the crowd at some point during the parade. The PFLAG - Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays - contingency was marching. Some of the signs that they held were "There is nothing wrong with our gay



I was an 18-year-old Ethiopian kid who was perhaps as equally intrigued by Pride as I was by the idea of women going topless in public and men - I did not yet have language for the complexity of gender - in drag.

son," "Gay and straight my kids are great" and "I love my gay daughter".

I did not need context to understand these signs and the sentiments behind

them. I learned to cheer just as loudly at subsequent parades whenever the PFLAG contingency passed by me. It remains one of my favorite parts of any Pride. It is always powerful and moving to watch moms, dads and other family members offer such utter, unconditional and visible love and support to their loved ones.

Given that I lived in a small town in the US, my interaction with the LGBTQ community was somewhat limited at that point and so I had not really had a chance to spend time around queer couples. Same-sex couples kissing and holding hands was not something that I had come across in my own culture and watching people being openly and visibly affectionate was something else that was new. Open expressions of love were something that I paid attention to both because they were not something I grew up seeing and because I knew that they were risky even on the streets of the United States and on the streets of this small city.

I was an 18-year-old Ethiopian kid who was perhaps as equally intrigued by Pride as I was by the idea of women going topless in public and men - I did not yet have language for the complexity of gender - in drag. I had never learned to be homophobic and had never thought of myself in disparaging manners so I

cannot say that I learned to be proud of who I was at that Pride. I was just me, with yet unarticulated attractions to women that I had yet to act upon. And unlike my American classmates as an Ethiopian my not having explored my sexuality at 18 was a non-issue.

The queer friends that I went with to the Pride were mindful of the fact that this was my first Pride. While we were of a similar age, most of them had already been to previous Pride events and knew what to expect. I was clueless. It was at a time when the internet was not readily available and social media was not yet in existence and as someone who grew up in

Addis Ababa, I had completely missed out on the intricate details of queer culture.

I recall that Pride back then was as much a call to action as it was about celebration and there were some colorful chants: "Hey hey, ho ho, homophobia has got to go," was something that was oft-repeated and that the marchers belted out with gusto. I also remember the call-and-response chant "What do we want? Equal rights. When do we want it? Now!" and "2, 4, 6, 8 - gay is just as good as straight". It was electric. So many were so invested in celebrating, being visible, being with other like minded people and creating community while at the same

time working towards making this world a better place for the coming generations.

So, I sat on the sidelines repeating "Hey hey, ho ho, homophobia has got to go". I was a baby dyke who was not very clear about what this all meant but by mid-day and at the conclusion of the march, I was clear that this was indeed my tribe: Complete with topless dykes and fierce drag queens who refused to take shit from anyone, including what I learned were the requisite anti-LGBTQ contingent on the sidelines preaching that all these queer people were going straight to hell.

I knew I was coming home.





Flying

Raising the flag of liberation within me

Pride is where we stand united and visible, where we say “We are here!”, and where we remember that the struggle for human rights will continue. This is a time when not only those in the queer family, but also those who say they are concerned with human rights can openly show their support. It’s a place where in the midst of a world that’s ruled by cis-heteropatriarchy, we show up to demonstrate and show respect to the existence of a multitude of genders and sexualities. I am happy because it is a time when I see photos of queer lovers, a place where I read different stories of pride, and where I see social media decorated in bright rainbow colors.

What is pride to a young woman who for a long time did not have language for

her identity, let alone know of “Pride”?

At church I was told “It’s evil” and people outside of church said, “It’s not a part of Ethiopian culture.” Even though I knew that I was attracted to girls at a very young age, growing up with these messages that “it is a sin, “it’s wrong”, and “it’s outside of culture” created a war within me. I told myself that “christian” and “lesbian” were not identities that could co-exist and I hid my identity for a long time. When I looked on the internet, I only read about lesbian experiences and not those that were about being a Christian and a lesbian. The exclusivity of each term regarding the other seemed as natural and clear as the statement “Milk is white.” Trying to reconcile my

Christianity with my queerness is what made my journey to accepting my queerness difficult and lengthy.

In my mid-20s, I began to move from knowing about to accepting myself and only then did I have the courage to read about how queerness and Christianity can coexist. I found a lot of places of faith, but the most incredible was the one I found in South Africa. Much of the information available was outside of Africa and it made the connection feel distant. The one about South Africa though felt like it was right next to me. I read a lot; I read all the free and short writings they had available.

Seeing others openly and freely live in the identities that you are forced to hide for years felt incredibly good. It helped check my conscience



Even though we have to cross oceans to celebrate Pride, the similarity of our identities tie us together. It feels freeing to see the joy, struggle and celebration of other queer people while you yourself are existing in an oppressive society.

which was so far rebuking me as a sinner. And this is how my journey as a “queer Christian” started. Though as Ethiopians we don’t have Pride Month, my Pride journey is finding these websites that helped me reconcile my identities and told me that there are others like me out there. Even though I can’t wave the rainbow flag in my city, writings like these help raise the flag within me higher and higher each day.

Churches have endangered the lives of thousands of queer people all over the world through “conversion therapy.” This includes the holy water treatments and prayers we in Ethiopia have tried in order to “become” heterosexual. These churches have exposed us to and aggravated any existing mental health struggles by preaching hate in the name of healing. How joyful is it to see that there are also churches in this world that are against the hate, that say that the house of God is open to everyone, and that God is love for everyone?! For me, the true healing is found in these churches that stand against the centuries of hate preached by the church. Though surrounded by hate in Ethiopia, it gives one strength to see these churches consistently and adamantly opposing hate and all types of harmful conversion therapies.

After this reconciliation of identities, I had a few chances to take part in Pride festivities. For me, taking part in Pride parades renews my soul. How can I describe the feeling of being in the middle of a wide street amongst queer people from all the over the

world after years and years of loneliness?! After years of feeling that I was the only one who felt this way? It was healing to go from being so ashamed that I couldn’t say who I was out loud to myself to being a part of a proud queer family. Seeing queer Christian volunteers and married couples in the parade is renewal for the soul. How can I not thoroughly enjoy seeing many people practicing the very things I was forbidden from?!

These Pride months mean a lot. Even though I don’t always get the opportunity to celebrate with other queer people, it shows me that there are in fact other worlds outside of the country that will recognize my existence. Seeing the joy of other queer people helps me realize that it is possible and that we all deserve the same joy. Sadly most of our stories begin with an inner struggle, so seeing others’ liberation is a ray of hope in the midst of that chaos. It gives us strength.

Even though we have to cross oceans to celebrate Pride, the similarity of our identities tie us together. It feels freeing to see the joy, struggle and celebration of other queer people while you yourself are existing in an oppressive society. Pride is a remembrance and also a rehabilitation. It reminds me of those who are Black and Christian and who struggled in different ways for my freedom. Their courage and heroism inspires me. It helps me realize that tomorrow will be better. It teaches me to be proud of myself.



Origins of Pride

Pride Month is a commemoration of the Stonewall riots, which occurred on June 28, 1969. The riots began when the LGBTQ+ customers of New York City's Stonewall Inn resisted police raids on their bar. The LGBTQ+ community in New York had endured decades of raids and brutality at the hands of NYC's police and they had had enough of the mistreatment.

While the struggle for the rights of LGBTQ+ people has a history even before the Stonewall Riots, the riots provided a new impetus to the "Gay Liberation" movement.

The first Pride event, which had both an element of celebration and protest, was held in New York City on June 28, 1970. This event served as an example and soon Pride parades were established across the globe.

Pride is now an annual global event which is mostly celebrated every June.

Pride is in part a celebration. It is a time for communities to come together to celebrate their love and friendships as well as a time for LGBTQ+ people to openly show their pride. It is also a time to encourage honest conversations about the lives, experiences and histories of LGBTQ+ people.

Pride is also a protest held to demand for the rights of LGBTQ+ people. It is a time to further commit to the struggle to create a world where LGBTQ+ rights are respected globally.

Parades, and concerts are held across the world to advocate for the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

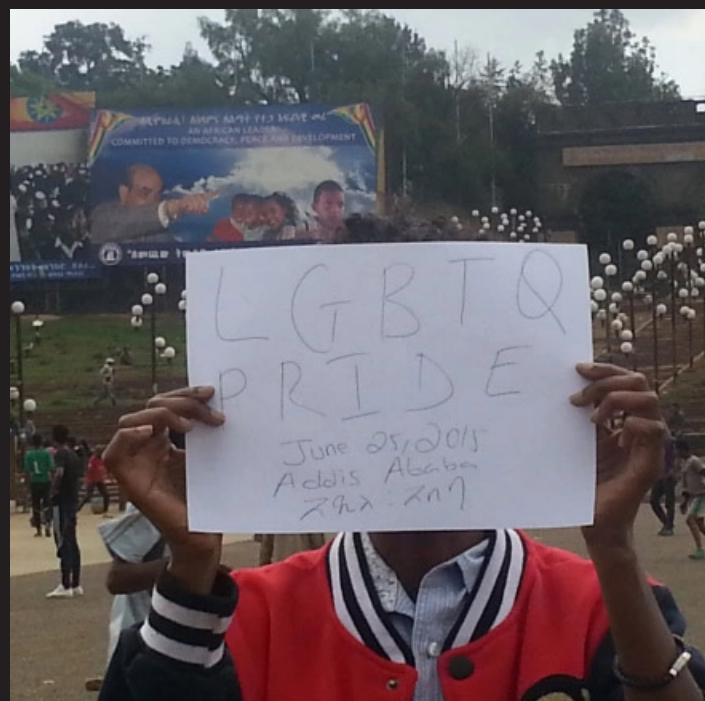
In some places in the world where LGBTQ+ people are persecuted, the events are clandestine and people gather even as they realize they are putting themselves at great personal risk.

"History isn't something you look back at and say it was inevitable, it happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities."

Marsha P. Johnson,
An American gay liberation activist who was one of the prominent figures in the Stonewall uprising of 1969



“... on that particular day, I feared what would happen if I did not stand at Meskel Square more than what would happen if I did.”



MY OWN PRIVATE MESKEL SQUARE

It was an experience fraught with anxiety. I could not predict who would be present or what they would do to us if they caught us. I was well aware of the risks that I and the person helping me were taking by simply standing at Meskel Square holding a sign that, in a manner of speaking, named us as belonging to the LGBTQI+ community.

The logistics was fairly simple. I would remind the person that pride was coming up and we would arrange a time that was convenient for both of us. We would then park as far away from Meskel Square as was necessary. We would choose a location and an angle and then wait until the crowd around the area thinned out. I would then cover my face with the paper and she would snap the picture. Voila. My own one-woman Pride.

The basis for our fear

was not so simple. I know the fate of someone suspected of being an LGBTQI. However, on that particular day, I feared what would happen if I did not stand at Meskel Square more than what would happen if I did. Living in Ethiopia as a queer person was so stifling that I felt I was dying a little each day. I was tired of being isolated, of being constantly afraid, of being faced with constant disparagement of queers, of having to constantly hide basic aspects of my life such as who I was dating or what I was reading, I was tired of the homophobia, I was tired of being afraid of walking the streets of Addis Ababa as someone who presented gender differently and I was constantly outraged about the hetreonormative expectations placed on all of us, particularly as women.

I needed to be free. I needed to revolt. I needed to

resist.

And my one-woman Pride was my way of resisting. Why did I choose Pride as the site of my revolt?

Pride was never a party. Pride was a riot. Pride was an uprising. Pride was a protest. Pride was the collective outraged voice of queer resistance for New Yorkers who had had enough of being harassed by the state and the police.

But Pride did not happen in a vacuum. LGBTQI people in the West have organized for years. The first documented US. gay rights organization, The Society for Human Rights, was founded in 1924. America's first lesbian rights organization, The Daughters of Bilitis, was formed in 1955. The Stonewall Riots did not happen in a vacuum: The spirit of resistance was successful in part because they were able to organize



My one woman Pride at Meskel Square was thus an attempt to breathe again. It was an effort to be seen and counted.

and build communities. Social movements are not built in a day and we have all benefited from the Stonewall Riots because that movement has been able to give us the tools of resistance. It has also encouraged us to scream at the injustices that permeate our lives as queers because we now know what is possible when we organize and build progressive communities.

To this end, I have participated in several Pride events. I have marched in small cities whose pride events drew less than 100 participants. I have also marched with thousands of people demanding social justice. I have also sat on the sidelines to watch others march. While I remain dismayed at how commercialized and corporatized Pride has become, I have always identified with the message of a refusal to hide, to be intimidated and to be silenced. Pride is also an experience that cemented my sense of community with queers with whom I had little in common. Pride, for me, was also about the energy on the streets, about how for a day or two, we “become” the “normal” - the standard bearers.

My one woman Pride at Meskel Square was thus an attempt to breathe again. It was an effort to be seen and counted. Us queer Ethiopians are so invisible that the only voices that speak for us are either Western or located in the West. This in effect renders those of us who reside in Ethiopia silent, which is problematic when one thinks about the number of times we

remain unable to speak because we are Black, women, from the “developing” world and poor. Thus, us queer people who come from places where being an LGBTQ+ is a death sentence often choose or are forced to abandon our countries of origin.

Standing at Meskel Square is thus both a reclaiming of my place of birth as a queer woman and the significance of Meskel Square as a site of both celebration and resistance solidifies my resolve to speak, in spite of the risks involved. I know the real risks that I put myself and the person taking the photo and my speaking is so much more powerful because of it.

To this day, I don’t know that holding a sign with my face covered in Meskel Square was all that brave. I knew that unveiling my figurative veil and showing my face would have been courageous - albeit also akin to dousing myself in gasoline and setting myself on fire - but short of that a picture of me standing at Meskel Square with a sign that represented our pride as LGBTQI+ people was the next best courageous action.

This was my Stonewall riot. My private Meskel Square riot. My resistance in the face of so much hate, risk and lack of simple human decency.

And, in the end, it made me hopeful that we would one day be able to create an inclusive and progressive community of queers and allies in Ethiopia that shows its Pride everyday by the way that we live our lives: Openly and proudly.



Gilbert Baker preserved this 10- by 28-foot section of an original 1978 pride flag. (GLBT Historical Society / Courtesy of Andrew Shaffer)

History of the Rainbow Flag

The rainbow flag was created in 1978 by American artist, designer and then-drag performer, Gilbert Baker. He was commissioned to create a flag by American politician Harvey Milk, for San Francisco's annual pride parade.

The decision to enlist Baker proved serendipitous, as the idea of a flag to represent the gay and lesbian community had occurred to him two years earlier.

As Baker told the Museum of Modern Art during a 2015 interview, he had been inspired by the celebrations marking America's bicentennial in 1976, noting that the constant display of stars and stripes made him realize the cultural need for a similar rallying sign for the gay community. And as a struggling drag performer who was accustomed to creating his own garments, he was well-equipped to sew the soon-to-be iconic symbol.

At the time, the most commonly used

image for the burgeoning gay rights movement was the pink triangle, a symbol used by the Nazis to identify homosexuals. Using a symbol with such a dark and painful past was never an option for Baker. He instead opted to use a rainbow as his inspiration.

The different colors within the flag were meant to represent togetherness, since LGBT people come in all races, ages and genders, and rainbows are both natural and beautiful. The original flag featured eight colors, each having a different meaning. At the top was hot pink, which represented sex, red for life, orange for healing, yellow signifying sunlight, green for nature, turquoise to represent art, indigo for harmony, and finally violet at the bottom for spirit.

(Source: <https://www.history.com/news/how-did-the-rainbow-flag-become-an-lgbt-symbol>)

allyship

Redefining “normal”

Living in a Third World country such as Ethiopia, I am often confused about what being a good ally means. What can one really do to elevate the lives of LGBTQ+ community? How do you advocate for justice for the LGBTQ+ community in a completely homophobic society? In a country where people are threatened and their lives put in danger because of their identity and who they choose to love, how do you protect others and yourself from the harms your own society inflicts? I have no easy way to answer these questions; it is all very hard really, especially in the community I grew up in. One thing is for sure though – the fight, the struggle is for acceptance, equality and basic human rights.

With this in mind my allyship is rooted in listening and being there. It also features anger about lack of access to the best life possible: the lack of access to adequate health care, job opportunities but most of all the lack of access to be one's self. To deny people what is theirs as basic human rights is

wild; to actually believe that it is possible to “rehabilitate” the LGBTQ+ community into a heterosexual and cisgender lifestyle should be out of this world. To define the “normal” based on our own experience and put people in a box that we feel is the right way is what needs rehabilitation; that is what needs to change.

Pride is important to allies for this and more. Pride as an ally is important to me because I learn so much every year. Pride is the celebration of what the LGBTQ+ has achieved since the Stonewall Inn raid but also is a reminder that there is much work left to be done; there are people especially those with the power to change policies and legislations, who are hell-bent on making the lives of the community inaccessible. It also serves for allies to learn, to be there, to support and to be vocal. When we say vocal, it means to speak up; it might be hard to imagine for someone who lives in a society that persecutes someone for their sexual identity. But it is a step by step process which starts by listening and being there;

our allyship should grow to truly stand up in the face of injustice. So it is my wish that with every Pride that we grow bolder, louder and stronger because after all the fight is for equality and basic human rights, isn't it?



[Allyship] is a step by step process which starts by listening and being there; our allyship should grow to truly stand up in the face of injustice.



Do you think that Pride as an event will happen in Ethiopia in your lifetime?

No, no, not in my lifetime. Not in my children's' lifetime. Not in my grandchildren's' time. I think maybe when I'm 85, I might be able to see something like. I do have a lot of Ethiopian friends that live back home and here in this country. And when I have conversations with them, it is very much homophobic. The mindset is the same and has not changed despite the activism.

And I always ask myself, what can we do to really bring change to the way people think, what can we do? And the answer is not easy. We are a people who have had the same or similar ideologies for thousands of years since King Ezana when Christianity came into our country. This is very hard and we have a lot of uprooting to do, we have a lot of work to do and a lot of questions to answer. One way that we can do that is probably

going mainstream somehow, but it would probably be from here and not from Ethiopia.

Ethiopians associate gayness with whiteness and then when Ethiopians are gay, they say we are sick. I don't know how much work we can do from Ethiopia without receiving so much backlash. So I would guess, the diaspora would have to take over, you know, and have a visible face to say 'Hey, I'm normal. I don't do these things. You know, I'm your family. I'm your friend. And I'm someone you know.' We need that kind of work.

And the work you guys [Queer Ethiopia] do is also very important, because, you are sharing stories of people that other people can relate to. And other people can say, 'Hey, I feel like this and all that stuff'.

I would be very worried about being at pride in Ethiopia. We would have to have drones flying over us,



protecting us so we won't die or we will be assassinated. It's not a joke. People are very angry at these kinds of events, because there is so much misinformation out there.

The anti gay agenda is very well rooted in the cultural and traditional norms of our society. So I don't know what we are going to do to uproot that.



**We would have to have
drones flying over us,
protecting us so we won't die
or we will be assassinated.**





I think it would be even more affirming than attending pride here [outside of Ethiopia].

I think it could. I'm not sure how long it would take. But that's my hope. But if it happens, at least, maybe in a couple of years, it's a little optimistic, but I don't know. There are many countries that have outlawed it for so long, and then they have added it so I'm thinking maybe a change in government would allow it? And I don't know how long

that would take.

It would be extremely significant. And I would definitely attend. It would be very affirming. I think it would be even more affirming than attending pride here. It's where I was born. It's two of my identities kind of reconciling with each other. It's a celebration. It's somewhere where I thought that there would be no celebration.



It will take us many years to gain approval.

There will not be one in an open way. I have read a survey that shows that 97% of Ethiopians oppose being an LGBTQ+. I don't think the percentage will go down considerably in such a short time. It will take us many years to gain approval. And for as long as we stop fighting and keep silent, the time without a Pride event will keep getting longer.



I'm not sure if I would feel comfortable fully expressing myself.

I, in my heart of hearts wish, there could be. So I left when I was six years old, but I've gone back when I was eight. I still keep in touch with family there as well. I don't think I have the full understanding of the landscape there now but I do feel like because we are so very rooted in a lot of religions that tend to be very anti LGBTQ+. And then that combined with the

heavy patriarchal society that we live under, it's just and all of that rooted in nationalism is, I think, a recipe for making it very unsafe to fully embrace those identities. So I think, from what I've heard so far, it makes me feel very uneasy, like fighting even going back to Ethiopia. I'm not sure if I would feel comfortable fully expressing myself. Yeah, so, but again, like this is me from not having been there in 10 years.

Do you think that Pride as an event will happen in Ethiopia in your lifetime?

These are samples of responses from a questionnaire that was posted on a Facebook page ...



Betel Luci

No I don't think we gonna see that special day in ethiopia...cause this society aydlm ye gay ena ye lesbian fkr lirda qerto straight lehonut rasu heg ena denb yabje civil nw ...snt haxyat eytesera gn ende telq haxyat eminsaw ye same sex sem nw...we can see by corona rasu...every people is saying this diseases is cause cause of our sins but specially cause of same sex mnamn...bcha not only ethio but we can say in every country we r not that much acceptable rn...endwm America ena wedza yalut they r cool gn in africa content bexam kebad situation nw...so I dont think..we can only wish 😞



Mes Robel

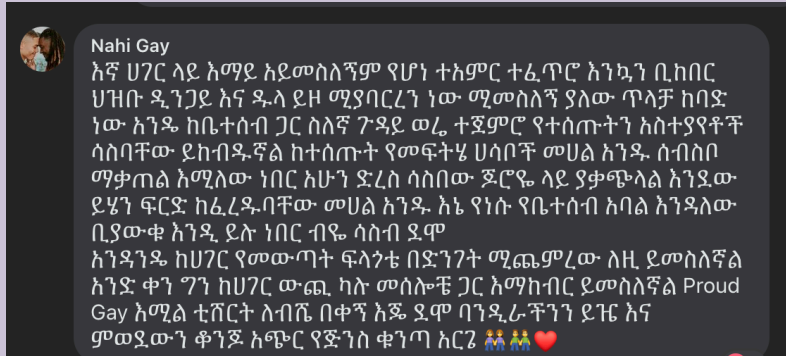
በእኔ የሕይወት...ኋላቀርነቱንና ድንቁርናውን 😞
በታዲያውምና በባህል ስም ሸፍኖ መኖርን ምርጫው ያደረገ
ትውልድ ባለበት ድግሱ የሚታሰብ አይመስለኝም ባይሆን
በሕይወት እያለሁ ተመሳሳይ ፆታ ያላቸው ተፋቅረው ማየትን
በጥቂቱም ቢሆን ማህበረሰቡ እየለመደው የሚመጣና
ተካብቶ የሚወራ ጉዳይ መሆኑ የሚቀር ይመስለኛል 😊

Mes Robel (translation)

I believe it is unthinkable that Pride will take place in this society that has chosen to cover its backwardness and ignorance by religion and culture. On the other hand, I think it might be possible in my lifetime to see people of the same-sex loving each other and the society getting used it and not making a big deal out of it.

Do you think that Pride as an event will happen in Ethiopia in your lifetime?

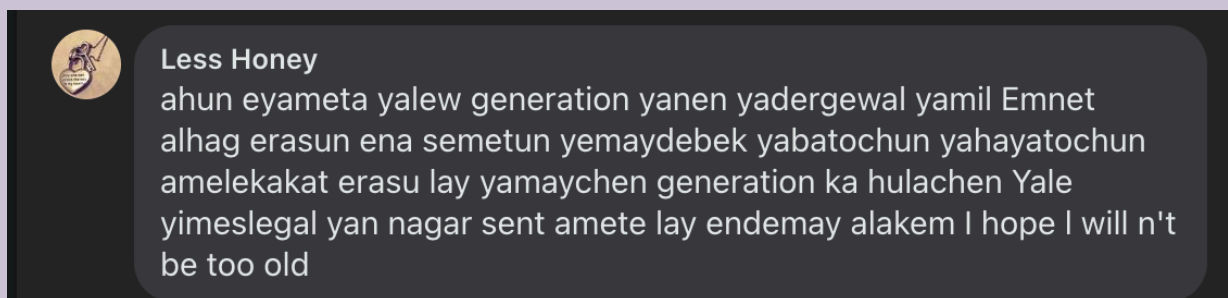
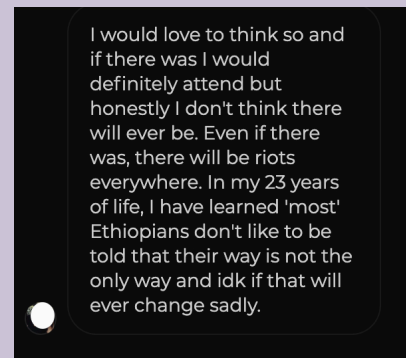
These are samples of responses from a questionnaire that was posted on a Facebook page ...



Nahi Gay (translation)

I don't think I will see it in this country. But if by some miracle if it were to happen, the people will come after us with stones and sticks. People have a lot of hate for us. I cringe when I remember a conversation in my family that happened once about someone who is like us. Some of the solutions that were suggested included burning us. That suggestion still scares me. I wondered what they would say if I told them I, as their family member, was one of the people they were condemning and it is during such times that I feel an urgent need to leave the country.

I think one day I will be able to celebrate Pride outside of Ethiopia with people like me. I will wear a t shirt that says Proud Gay, with short jeans and with our flag on my right hand!



Less Honey (translation)

I believe that the current generation will be able to pull it off. They do not hide their feelings and do not hide from themselves and they do not unquestioningly place the beliefs of their parents and their grandparents on themselves. I think they are more likely than previous generations to celebrate Pride here [in Ethiopia]. I just hope I am alive to witness it.