

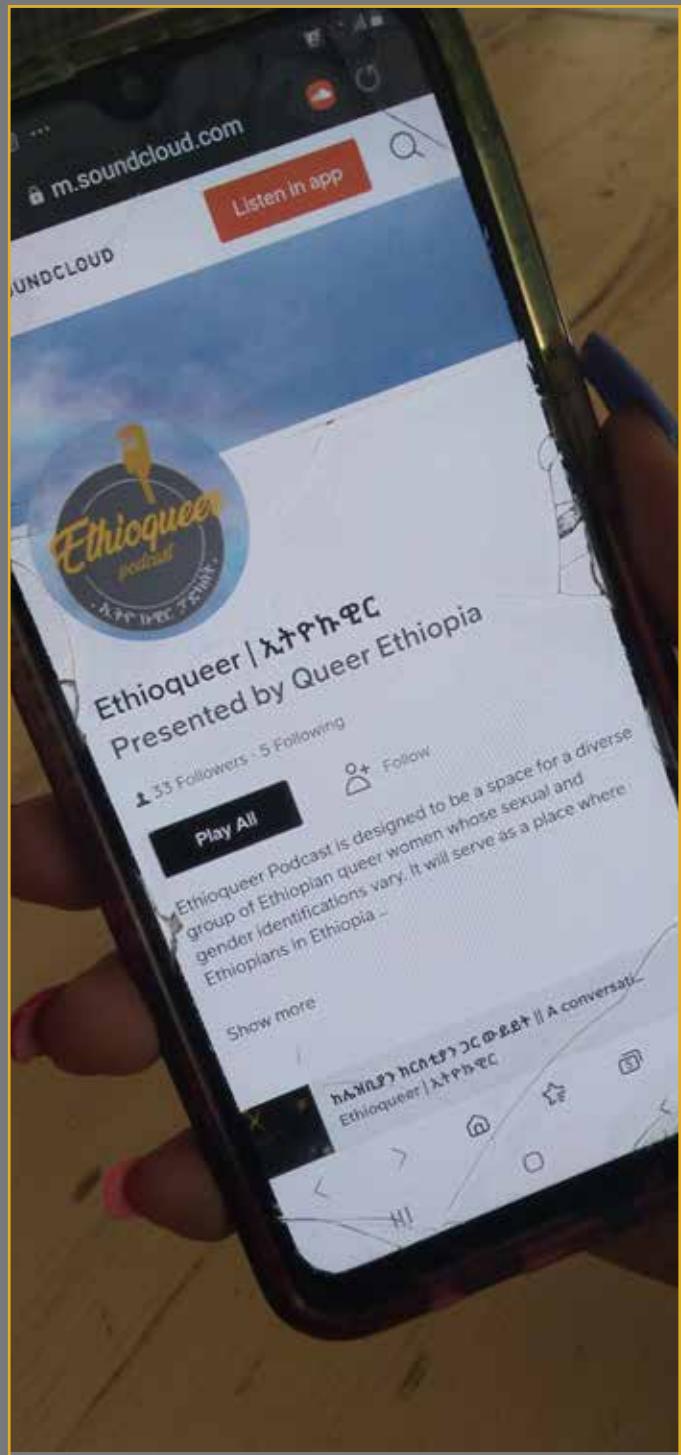
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Nismis - quarterly magazine focusing on LBTQ issues



# Chosen Families



Hear yourself reflected

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Volume 2, Issue 2

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

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Published by Queer Ethiopia,  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,  
© September 2022

# QUEER ETHIOPIA

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“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.

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# from the editors

"It has been liberating to celebrate in ways we wanted with our loved ones, without having to edit ourselves," one of our contributors writes recalling the way that she celebrates holidays with her queer friends – her "chosen family". Another describes her "chosen family" as her "real family".

Chosen families are defined as "nonbiological kinship bonds, whether legally recognized or not, deliberately chosen for the purpose of mutual support and love". In societies such as Ethiopia, the importance of chosen families cannot be overstated.

Welcome to the fifth issue of Nisnis. This issue is dedicated to discussing the various ways that queer friendships impact our lives and sustain us. We discuss the myriad ways that we experience our chosen family and the role that they play in making our lives richer. As we have discovered while working on this issue of Nisnis, while we may love our family of origin, it is our chosen family that gives us the freedom to be who we are.

"The difference is obvious. The difference is freedom. You feel free," Edlawit perfectly captured this sentiment when she reflected on how her chosen family makes her feel in comparison to her family of origin. Another topic covered is the way that we in the LGBTQ+ community choose to remain friends with our previous romantic partners. Betselot gives us an insight into the important role exes play in our lives when she details the way that they offer us support, friendship and the space to grow.

Another contributor reminds us that friendships are about shared values. While being queer and Ethiopian gives us commonalities, we need to have more in common to develop a friendship that has depth. "It is impossible to be friends with someone who has different values. Values determine how we interact with each other, how we see each other, and the space we make for one another," she writes.

Other topics take us back to the first queer person we met and the feelings that arose as a result of that experience. It makes us nostalgic about our own first queer meeting and the sense of finding home.

This issue of Nisnis is also a reflection of how we learn to redefine "chosen family" and about who is allowed to be included in it. One of our contributors argues that her biological family is very much included in her "chosen family" by writing "while I value my queer community and the sense of 'home' that I have been able to create with them, my biological family often proves that the two are not incompatible". Another includes their straight friend as part of this chosen family.

As queer people, most of us create our homes in other queer people - in our chosen family - as a way of creating a kinship of sorts. For most of us queer people, our chosen family is our lifeline as it is the defense that we use to continue living our best lives despite the marginalization that we always face in this heteronormative world.

We hope you find yourself reflected in the pages of this Nisnis and hope that you are challenged to think about families and friendships in new and expansive ways.

As always, we would like to thank all of you who participated in this issue of Nisnis. We appreciate the work that you all have done from editing to translating to writing stories to photographing to illustrating to reading and to being interviewed. Nisnis is only possible because of you.

Enjoy.

# choosing our families





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**I am not as open with my ‘normal’ [straight] friends as there are some things that one should not discuss ...**

Yodit

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“Mahi doesn’t have anything to hide from me, whether she is at fault or not. I am much closer to her than my sisters and I think of her as someone who understands me a lot, and vice versa,” says Yodit speaking of her relationship with her friend Mahi.

Yodit is a queer Ethiopian who easily captures the oft-cited concept of “family of choice” within queer communities.

She is one of a three-person friend circle that includes Mahi and Koki. As is common among many queer Ethiopians, Yodit initially met Mahi six years ago on

Facebook and the two were online friends as they built enough trust to risk meeting in person. The six-year friendship started when Mahi braved sending Yodit a friend request.

“Mahi and I never thought that we would be friends. In fact, I didn’t even really talk to her that much,” Yodit remembers. “I didn’t respond timely to her friend request but then we exchanged phone numbers and we started talking and we got along well”.

Yodit and Koki met three years ago through mutual friends. Their friendship became stronger as they shared interests and





would interact online often.

The three friends talk in an open manner with each other and laugh easily. They are quick to tease each other and playfully refuse to answer questions about their memories because they say the memories are too embarrassing. They are all, however, eager to discuss the value of their friendship and the many ways that they feel supported and seen in this friendship amongst queer people.

"I am not as open with my 'normal' [straight] friends as there are some things that one should not discuss," Yodit said. "But my friendship with

Mahi is different. She is the person I tell everything about my life".

Having queer friends has opened the door for a more honest friendship, Koki said. While character and the way that her friends look at life matters in building and continuing the friendship, Koki has been able to find a support system and the space to be herself with her queer friends.

The spaces that queer friendships create is also articulated by Betty, another queer woman who lives in Addis Ababa. She describes having a chosen family as "a big deal" and as providing a space where "you can be yourself".

While she has many friends who are straight, she places a unique value on her queer friendships. The fact that she cannot be open about her feelings with her straight friends also makes her friendship with her queer friends more valuable. The simple lack of ability to answer questions such as why she is sad after a breakup leads her to be silent because she knows problems would arise from her honesty.

"Yes, you have fun with straight friends, you can laugh, enjoy your time and eat and drink like everyone else," Betty said. "But you don't have discussions that come from the heart. For example, I can't talk about the woman I love with them, but I can talk about that [with someone who is queer]".

For Betty, her chosen family - a queer friend she has known for some time - has

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**Since meeting her, I have realized that I can even ask God to give me a wife.**

Betty

had a major impact in her reconciliation of her faith with her sexuality, she said. She had struggled with practicing her religion after coming out to herself as she felt that being a lesbian was inconsistent with being a good Christian. She had stopped going to Church.

“Being in the [queer] community, I used to think that God would not hear my prayers and that I was one of those things that God wanted to destroy,” Betty said.

Her deliberations with herself did not lead her to embrace her faith and she had made up her mind that God did not like LGBTQ people. It was her friendship with her queer friend that finally led her to build a closer relationship with God and prevented her from completely severing her ties with her church and religion. She has been able to rid herself of the fear of going anywhere near a church, she said.

“Since meeting her, I have realized that I can even ask God to give me a wife. She has made me realize that even as a homosexual I can go to church to worship and to take part in services, and just be present everywhere God is” Betty said.

Betty places a huge value on her chosen family and tries to spend as much of her free time as possible among them. She is involved in the creative arts and much of her day is spent in places that are frequented by members of the community. From the café, she frequents during the day to the spaces where she works and to the bars, she goes to at night she

chooses to surround herself with people from the queer community.

Edlawit, another Ethiopian lesbian, met someone she now considers a family member two years ago. Although she was “friends” with her on Facebook, they met in person through the friend’s ex, and they have been close since then.

For Edlawit, being with her friend gives her the space to freely express all aspects of her life without the necessity for editing parts of her life that may not be palatable to her straight friends.

“The difference is obvious. The difference is freedom. You feel free. Even if you don’t want to talk about [queer] issues, being in the community gives you a sense of ease and you understand each other more. You feel free to talk about anything,” she said.

She now has limited interactions with her straight friends because she doesn’t feel free and at ease to be herself. She often feels that she can only bring her “half-life” with the straight friends that she used to have which makes it difficult to maintain a friendship with people with whom you cannot be authentically yourself. This has led to her choice to be friends with queer people because she feels closer to them and because “it is nice to be friends with someone who is similar to you”.

While Edlawit met her best friend in person, most queer people meet each other online. Betty met her friend via Facebook but says that people



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Edlawit

in the community now meet each other in various ways such as at parties and events. Edlawit has met many people via social media and continues to meet more people via introductions by others who are in the community.

While she speaks highly about the need for community, she also questions the way that those in the community sometimes interact with each other.

"There are some in our community with whom every fun time usually ends up being about dating and being constantly hit on," she said. "I hate that it often leads to that. Such people don't understand the value of platonic friendships and want everything to lead to something sexual".

Yodit articulates the importance of the fundamentals of friendships. She says the critical element to being friends, regardless of sexuality and gender identity, has always been shared values and shared characteristics. The fact that she gets along with her friends and that they agree on basic ways to behave within the friendship has helped in terms of growth. Yodit also says that the friends travel in similar directions. In other words, they all agree that just being Ethiopian and queer cannot be the basis of their friendship.

"The main thing is being able to understand each other's characteristics. We have been able to continue being friends because our characters align," Yodit said.

Koki agrees that their friendship and the choice that



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**We have a lot more to go, but this is a good start. ... But we still have a lot to learn from the queer men community**

Betselot

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they have made to be each other's "family of choice" would not have worked if they had not based it on the basics of friendship. The fact that they hold each other accountable plays a major role in their efforts to build and maintain a friendship that helps all of them grow.

"The difficulty is not in understanding each other. Being able to tell each other openly about our good and bad qualities is fundamental and you have to be able to understand each other to help one another," Koki said.

Betselot, a lesbian who lives in Addis Ababa but has spent a significant time outside of Addis, is adamant that her "chosen family" is her real family. While she loves her biological family, her chosen family is the place where she can be herself. Her primarily queer community is centered around gay men and she says they have been able to afford her the freedom to be her authentic self and she feels "as proud to be amongst them as she does when she is with her biological brothers".

She has not spent a lot of time around queer women as she has not always felt as comfortable around the LBQ community. While a lesbian friend has told her about gatherings of queer women, she has often been hesitant to join the meetings.

"The all-female gatherings feel like a gathering of exes. Maybe not my exes, but still exes of people I know. That makes me a little uncomfortable," she said. "With the men, however, there is something freeing about it.

You don't even feel ashamed about your body because they are so confident with everything they have; They're great, and they are proud of themselves. I feel a lot more critical of myself when I'm around other women because we compare features with other women".

Body image issues and a general sense that women judge each other has thus far made her avoid events where queer women meet. She, however, emphasizes the need to create safe spaces where queer women can have an opportunity to meet each other and build community.

"I think we're in a good place. We have a lot more to go, but this is a good start. At least we live our lives with acceptance. We're not living in confusion as before. But we still have a lot to learn from the queer men community," Betselot said. "We each need to do what we can."

A small gathering of LBQ women that was held in Addis Ababa recently is indicative of the need to connect and create a community that provides nonbiological kinship bonds that offer queer people a sense of mutual support and love. For a few of the attendees, this was the first opportunity to meet and socialize with other queer women.

"It is nice to have people that you can talk to openly and who can relate to you", Sara, a lesbian who currently lives in Addis Ababa said. "It is awesome to have friends like that and you can only have that with people in the community".



## What was meeting your first queer Ethiopian like?

### Gabriella

The first queer person I met was Selome. I first started talking to Mahi when I started opening up about myself. She was the first person I had the guts to talk to about these things. She felt easy to talk to, that's why I spoke to her about things. It's after her that I found the interest to meet more people like me.

I was happy to meet her. I think in our community, it's not just your or my opinion, I think we all have the feeling. I am mostly happiest when I meet more people like me.

### Tsion

The first queer woman I met was called Lidya. She was from Dire [Dawa]. We first met on Facebook and started talking about ordinary things. But after some time, she told me she was a lesbian. Things changed up and it was all lovey-dovey after that. She had a girlfriend though, so she would say no to meeting up with me.

One day, I was hanging out with my crew around Piassa and randomly called her. When I told her where I was, she told me she was in the area too. That was the first and last time I met her. We had a really good evening together. The next day, she called and asked me to meet her where she was. I wasn't able to, so I didn't go. I don't know what happened after that, but we slowly stopped talking until we lost touch completely.

# Building communities

- exes as friends -



Yohanna was having a difficult time getting along with someone new she was dating. She was getting angry and annoyed with her and had a sense that there were a lot of misunderstandings. Yohanna needed to talk to someone to help her sort out her issues. So, she reached out to her ex-girlfriend.

Her ex advised her to really listen to the person she was dating and to understand where she was coming from. Yohanna was inspired to really listen to the person she was seeing and to try to see the situation from her perspective which eventually led to the two getting along better. As a result of the conversation with her ex, Yohanna was able to reconcile and continue dating the woman.

In the Ethiopian LGBTQ+ community, friendships with exes are almost the norm. Research done by R. L. Griffith and colleagues in 2017 and published in Personal Relationships shows that those in the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to stay friends with their ex romantic partners than heterosexuals.

Betselot, an Ethiopian lesbian, is proof of this.

"I have a lot of exes - like multiple! And with most of them, we have an okay friendship. We meet up for coffee/tea, we talk about our personal problems and try to work through them. I would say I have a strong friendship with most," she said.

Yohanna has also remained friends with almost all of her exes. Unless the ending of the relationship

**What would make sense is for us to let go of the hate and come together as friends.**

Betselot

had turned acrimonious for various reasons, she sees the value of remaining friends.

"I prefer to end things on a peaceful note with all of my exes. I can say that most of my exes are my friends. Even if we're not super close, we at least say hello to each other," Yohanna said.

Part of the reason that those in the LBQ community remain friends with their exes is a question of practicality. The community is so small that one risks alienating themselves from the LBQ community if they were to avoid their exes. Yohanna

points out that those in the queer community mostly meet each other through people. Her exes introduce her to other queer people in the community.

"I think straight people have the option, if they choose, not to see their exes," Betselot said. "But in the [LBQ] community, the people who have accepted themselves are so small that if you choose to stay away from them, you'd be by yourself".

While this makes it almost a necessity to at least be on a cordial basis with previous romantic partners, both Yohanna and Betselot also see the value of their friendships with exes. The close platonic friendship that Yohanna has built with her exes has enabled her to count on them as her extended support system. Her exes are an active part of her "chosen family". She reaches out to them for advice, as fun people to hang out with and as a way of having close people with whom she can be her authentic self.

Not being close with exes does not make sense, Betselot added. "What would make sense is for us to let go of the hate and come together as friends. Because you always need to put on another persona to be around straight people. But when you hang out with other lesbian [and queer] women, they get to see a hidden part of you. I think we all need that so we shouldn't stay away from one another," she added.

This however does not mean that those in the LBQ community always remain

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**... you learn  
to forget  
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What stays  
behind is the  
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you have  
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**Yohanna**

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friends with all of their exes. For Betselot, she has difficulty remaining friends with exes with whom she has had long-term and complicated relationships. Some of her concerns include the possibility that they may end up continuing the romantic aspects of their relationship without resolving their issues which may result in hurt feelings.

The transition from being friends to exes is also not always smooth and it often comes with a degree of discomfort.

“It is a bit awkward at first. The feeling of dating doesn’t go away immediately after breaking up. It’s hard because you’re still kinda flirting, you get really bothered when you see her with other women and the first few months are really hard,” Yohanna said. “But eventually, it becomes necessary to let things go, you learn to forget

what you had shared. What stays behind is the connection you have developed”.

Yohanna, who has dated men before she came out to herself as a lesbian, said she has not remained friends with them. She said the main reason she has chosen to not remain friends is because of the lack of depth her relationship with them had. “With men, nothing comes out of it beyond “I love you’s”, so once that phase of the relationship is done, there’s not much else going on, with women, I forged a greater understanding and connection,” she said.

This leads them from just being exes to more meaningful friendships that help her grow and offer mutual support. In essence, ex partners become a part of a “chosen family” providing each other with a sense of home and ease, helping provide emotional support and trust.





## What was meeting your first queer Ethiopian like?

### Rahel

I don't remember the name of the first queer person I met. It was about four years ago and we first met on Facebook and we were just talking, we were not flirting. When we met in person, I remember that I sat with her for like an hour and thirty minutes. It really shocked my whole body. I'm sorry but I was disgusted by her. I don't know... I just really didn't like her.

I didn't like the person she was. The person that I met online and the person that she was when we met in person were two completely different people. I don't mean her looks, but her personality. They were completely different people. And at that time, although I may not have been able to articulate it, I knew she was not a good person because I trust my gut. But even after I left, I confirmed that she's exactly that kind of person through various means.

I was not happy at all when I met her! For a long time after that, I chose not to meet other [queer] people. She's the reason I have no experience and queer friends. We did only what she wanted to do so I was disgusted with myself for a while. Urgh... I really don't like her!

### Elsa

The first queer person I met was Meti. It felt so good, I felt very free! I remember finally thinking "at least I'm not the only one!"

### Eden

The first queer person I met from the community was called Nardos. She was actually not a part of the community, no one knew her. We first met in person about 14 years ago. We met by chance and easily got along. I had no idea about this lifestyle until she told me about it. I fell in love with queerness and started seeing women.

After some time, however, I started feeling bad and tried very hard to stop. I even stayed away from women for about seven years. Then I started seeing women again. I have such good memories though so no regrets!

# POLITICS of friendships





Friendships could mean several things to different people. It may be someone to rely on, someone to consult, someone to spend the good and the bad times with. But when it comes to queer people, friendships mean much more. They become the ability to choose your family when at times your blood relatives may outright reject you for being who you are. And for queer people living in homophobic countries such as Ethiopia, friendships become our lifeline to our identity.

For many of us, the only time where we can truly authentically one hundred percent be ourselves is with our friends.

While being queer is something we share, we also hold different opinions and stances. These differences become salient when something happens in our country and in the world. The question then becomes, can we be friends with someone who doesn't share our politics? This is a very difficult discussion we should all be having with ourselves and our friends; especially if you are queer and Ethiopian. We have made

many friends during our formative years long before fully recognizing our sexual orientation/gender identity and they may not share our politics or may outright be homophobic and unwilling to accept us due to our identity.

Whenever I am asked the question of being friends with someone whose politics differ from mine, I always answer with "which politics?" If we are talking about someone who thinks a different market and economic policy is the way to go or someone who wants to have a different opinion on the government structure of the nation, then the answer is "Sure, I can be friends with such a person" and we can then discuss the merits and disadvantages of our respective stances. But if it's someone who has different "opinions" on the matter of who deserves equal rights and protection by the law based on gender identity, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, then we can't be friends. Agreeing to disagree doesn't work in this case. This is not a difference of opinions, it is a difference in value and morality and that is what it comes down to.

I define friendship as a space of kindness where one could truly be themselves without inhibitions or fear. And all this boils down to mutual love and respect for one another because friendships - unlike familial relationships - are something we build, something we choose, and something we need to nurture if we want to keep it. It then by its very nature becomes near impossible to build if one friend is hiding who they truly are from the other.

Friends should provide the space for someone to be truly free to be themselves and not around whom they have to walk like on eggshells fearing rejection. It should also give you the freedom to not be around someone whose opinion and words could inflict mental wounds. In my opinion, it is impossible to be friends with someone who has different values. Values determine how we interact with each other, how we see each other, and the space we make for one another. I don't believe one can be friends with someone who doesn't see them as a full human deserving of all human rights.

So how do we handle this monumental shift in politics when it comes to friendship? Clicking the "unfriend" button on Facebook might be easy but ending social ties that took years to build is much more difficult. And evidence shows that it's counterproductive to cut off all ties with those who disagree with us; after all, they are the ones we need to convince to create social

their life to earn their place in a friendship. Friendships are where we come to seek sanctuary from our daily battles, where we get our support, not our struggles.

So now we will need to learn to walk this fine line with these former friends that we now need to protect ourselves from. This may be a difficult task to manage to learn. It is difficult to raise your guard up against someone you have been very vulnerable with previously, but this must be done as a matter of protecting your mental health. We need to reduce the intensity of the former connections to acquaintanceship and create clear boundaries until a point can be reached where we can build the trust that has been lost and reach an agreement over our values through continued conversations, or we need to reach a point of impasse where there is no coming back to the previous connection.

In the meantime, we would need to build new friendships and nurture old ones to replace what we have lost. These friendships should be healthy where we can feel safe to be ourselves: Friendships that are based on similar values and friendships whose politics are not a threat to our lives and freedom.

We as queer people need to understand the impacts of politics in our friendships and realize some things cannot be settled on "agree to disagree". Some things need to be built on a solid foundation of trust, shared values, and love based on who we truly are.

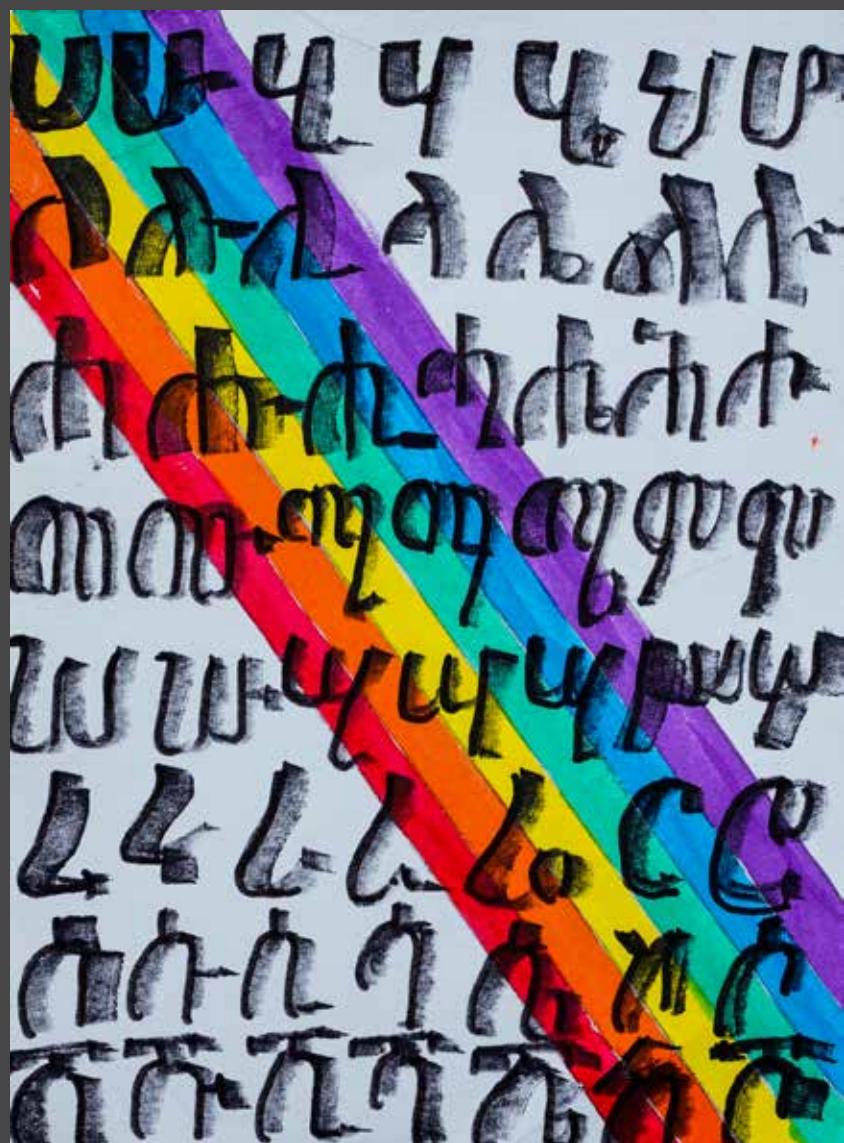


**We as queer people need to understand the impacts of politics in our friendships and realize some things cannot be settled on "agree to disagree".**

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change. But fighting people to change their minds on many queer issues that are steeped in culture and religion feels like fighting a losing battle. No one should be fighting for

*finding home ...*



*... in virtual spaces*

**I didn't know how the little things like being able to text and joke in "fidel", and to read a person's gay-ass thoughts in Amharic mattered to me.**

Online spaces have accelerated my queer journey of self-acceptance and of building community. I am not an active social media user, but I have a good understanding of the landscape. For the longest time, I would follow all the queer East African and Black accounts, but I would never interact with them. The furthest I went was to like or save a post. But when I decided to visit family in Ethiopia, I realized that I needed other queer people or allies that could provide some security and/or safety in real life in case my family became violent. I was panicking about how to find people when my friend suggested contacting one of the pages, I follow on Instagram. I decided to email (it felt weird to DM) them and ask for any leads.

My life changed when I sent that message. In their response, they affirmed me and validated my fears. This virtual interaction was already making me feel seen as I had never felt before. Then, they connected me with a queer person in Addis. After emailing a couple of times with this woman, we moved the conversation to Facebook Messenger. We quickly hit it off and were having long conversations about our experiences as queer people raised in the same culture.

I had never thought it would be possible to see my reflection so clearly. It was a beautiful experience. Because I never interacted with the online communities I was a part of, I only had surface-level knowledge about how queer Ethiopians lived and survived.

Directly talking to a person navigating Ethiopia as a queer person was life-changing. I didn't know how the little things like being able to text and joke in "fidel", and to read a person's gay-ass thoughts in Amharic mattered to me. It felt like I was unlocking a part of my queerness (both trauma and beauty) that was previously inaccessible to me.

This person and I are still in conversation and have built a beautiful friendship. Witnessing their insistence on living their best queer life in such a queerphobic country gave me the courage to start dating. They affirmed me through the process of making a dating profile and even going on a couple of dates. Only a few months before I met them, I thought dating was impossible for me.

My conversations with my friend have completely changed my life. I feel more confident and settled in my queerness. I feel comfortable expressing it in whatever way I choose. Those dates I went on did not end in romantic-sexual connections but both people are now my good friends.

That one tentative follow of a queer East African page led me to an email, which led me to a Facebook conversation and to what I hope is a life-long friendship. This friendship opened up my world and has given me the courage to live my queer life. Today, I have more queer friends than I imagined. I could not have built this life-affirming group of friends if it wasn't for the online spaces that brave and dedicated queer folks provided to me.

# Cultivating

communities in our allies



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**Except for my “other” life, I would tell her everything about campus life. However, I couldn’t confess to her my love for a woman.**

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We have been friends for more than eight years.

We first connected on social media, where we exchanged entertaining Facebook posts, videos, and music videos on YouTube. Since we shared a love of music, it was easy to develop a connection.

Zeritu Kebede’s album was still selling and was on air a lot. We would sing along together and admire her. It was a long-distance friendship as I was on campus outside of Addis and she was working in Addis and so we hadn’t actually met yet.

We grew incredibly close before we ever met in person. We talked about our families, our days, the men we dated, her job, and the nightlife on my campus. She would even give me updates about new cafes and restaurants in Addis. My sexuality, however, was something we never discussed.

I was young, confused, and unsure of myself. My journey of self-discovery was filled with a lot of shame, self-hatred, and a sense of isolation. I felt as if it was something I could never share with others and that I was on my own “healing” journey to become “straight”.

I thought dating a lot of men would help, so I did. I prayed a lot by myself, believing that I would be freed. I never mentioned it to the girl with whom I had a relationship. I had no idea if she was also having identity issues. It was a very lonely time.

Let me skip the

part about my tears of self-acceptance because that is not the story I want to share now. I’m just saying that Yodit, my close Facebook friend, wasn’t someone I felt comfortable opening up to about this. I had no idea how to do it as I didn’t even fully understand it for myself.

I remember our initial meeting. We chose to go out for coffee one afternoon after I came back to Addis on a break from school. We laughed till our bellies hurt and it felt like we had known each other for years so I knew we would always be friends.

We made fun of each other; it felt so natural. We discussed our fears and embarrassments, however big or small.

We grew really close to one another. We would spend time together whenever I visited Addis, and once I returned to school, Viber and Facebook became our virtual hangout spots.

We made an effort to keep each other updated about our days and our personal lives. I was fully aware of all her relationships, bad dates, and great sex. I knew the names of her men. I was familiar with their fashion sense.

Except for my “other” life, I would tell her everything about campus life. However, I couldn’t confess to her my love for a woman. I was unable to tell her that I had slept with a woman. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her how sex with a woman feels. My shame kept me from doing so. That aspect of myself was hidden between

me and God.

Both our friendship and my awareness of my sexuality grew.

As I continued to discover more about myself, I gradually reconciled my sexuality with my faith. I was in my own world. I experienced shame and guilt during our four years of friendship, as well as pride and liberation. She was not aware of any of it. I was still the wild party girl who went out Thursday through Sunday, and I had plenty of stories to share with Yodit.

I'm not sure how I kept myself together on the lonesome path. It got harder and harder for me to conceal this significant aspect of myself after I graduated and relocated back to Addis. Yodit would be perplexed at how miserable I was with men when I dated them. She didn't comprehend why I didn't like men.

Although Yodit wasn't aware of it, I began meeting women in Addis. When I was out on a date with a woman, I would pretend that I was somewhere else. I believe it was five years into our friendship when I decided that I could no longer keep this from her.

She was all a friend could want, but if she knew about me, would she continue to be the same? I continued wondering.

I don't know how I chose the day, but I made up my mind to tell her everything. I came out to her for the first time ever. She was the first person I confided in, and I hoped that she would

keep my identity a secret. I sincerely hoped that the friendship would endure and grow.

After I finished telling her about myself, Yodit didn't even ask questions. She made it simple for me by making fun of the fact that I had been with women, yet she had no idea about it. The day went on as though I had told a "normal" story.

If she had turned me away or decided to urge my family to "rescue me", I'm not sure what I would have done. She decided to love and accept me for who I am.

Even if there is a lot of hatred in this society, having Yodit in my life makes me feel so much better. She pushes me to be more authentic and resilient.

I felt encouraged to come out to more close friends and even my sibling after sharing the most vulnerable part of myself with her. She ended up being my family – my sister. She became my safe space.

Yodit witnessed my growth from a restless kid with a lot of questions to the proud lesbian I am today. Through it all, she was with me. I am grateful to her.

Today, we still talk about everything. Even when we travel together, we both bring back our dates to our little two-bedroom Airbnb for a night of fun, then we laugh and talk about it the next day over our morning coffee. Imagine being who you are without any restrictions.

Yodit, I love you. I appreciate you just being you. I'm grateful for your love.



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# a place just for us:

the joys of spending holidays  
with our chosen families

I had always hated holidays. Since childhood, I viewed them more as a source of discomfort than a time of joy and celebration. My mother had really high expectations of what needed to be done before/on each holiday, and somehow my family always fell short of meeting them. There was always so much cleaning, cooking, fighting, and dressing up – all to sit at home too tired or grumpy to enjoy the festivities of the day. I just couldn't understand why there was the need for such

hassle, and I wasn't shy about expressing my thoughts.

All that changed when I spent my first holiday with my group of queer friends. A few months before that holiday, one of our closest friend's mother had passed away. She was the only family he had left, and he was really struggling with the idea of how to spend that holiday without her, so a few of us decided to go over to his house on the day and celebrate with him. We were broke college kids, so we agreed to make this a potluck gathering so each of us can bring something from our homes to share with him and each other. On the day of the holiday, I spent the morning and early afternoon as usual with my family, then made up an excuse about having to do holiday charity work so that my parents would be okay with letting me go out on a holiday, with food to be shared with others, nonetheless.

I took "kitfo kenebetesebu" with me, while one friend brought "doro wot" and another got beef to make "tibs". We also bought wine, which was halfway done before the cooking even started. It was such a different experience from what I had been taught to expect from holidays. There weren't any expectations on how to celebrate, nobody was yelling, we were all there only because we genuinely wanted to, and it was actually really fun! I stuck closely with one of our friends, who was a chef in the making, watching him mix all sorts of ingredients that in



**We created the space for us, our partners, and others who wanted the company to be ourselves without fear, in a society that won't let us just be.**

theory should not go together to make the best Tibs I had ever tasted – all the while drinking wine and dancing. There was nothing but pure joy, laughter, and delicious food being shared, and I finally understood the joys of celebrating holidays with your loved ones. What started off as a thoughtful gesture, so a friend doesn't spend the holidays by himself birthed holiday traditions with my family by choice, that has now spanned a decade.

I have such fond memories of our holiday celebrations. On one of the holidays where we chose to celebrate in a bar, I remember having to call each friend's parents pretending to be one of our friend's mom to ask for permission for everyone to spend the night together at "my house" ... in reality, most of us were too drunk

and having too much fun to go home. On another holiday, I remember how much we laughed at the shock of one of our friend's neighbors when she came into his apartment to give him a cooking pot he had asked for only to find the men cooking in the kitchen dressed up in aprons, while the ladies sat around chatting on the couch. He went back to her that evening with what he had cooked just to show her how good of a cook he was. A small win towards breaking gender stereotypes!

I'm grateful for the time we've spent together. We created the space for us, our partners, and others who wanted the company to be ourselves without fear, in a society that won't let us just be. It has been liberating to celebrate in ways we wanted with our loved ones, without having to edit ourselves. Through the years, our situations in life and friendships have evolved which has changed the way we celebrate but making time for one another, especially during the holidays is as much of a priority to us, as spending it with our blood relatives. Regardless of the type of holiday, our religious differences, our physical locations, and the status of our friendships, we continue to find ways to celebrate in whatever form makes sense to us. The fact that we hold this space for each other has really improved how I view holidays and helped me become a much more pleasant person to be around during the holidays – lucky for everyone around me!

**Beyond identity:**

# Aligning our values



**“As silly as it sounds, queer friendships are in fact like any other human experience. ... It doesn’t matter sometimes if you share a similar identity.**

Growing up Habesha and realizing that you’re queer can be such an isolating experience. When I first met my first group of queer Habesha people, I felt seen in every way. I thought finally, I didn’t have to hide my identity from people in my culture. I didn’t put any guards up; I was just open and eager to create these new friendships.

Queer friendships can be wonderful. When you’re Habesha and queer and you find a close group of friends that are also Habesha and queer, it can feel like they see you better than most people in your community do. However, when you’re not focusing on the fact that friendships must involve mutual respect and boundaries, you can still end up in some pretty sticky situations.

Queer friendships can make you feel emotionally safe and free to be yourself. Initially, I immediately wanted to be friends - and close friends - with everyone I met. I didn’t assess anything. The fact that they were queer and Habesha and seemed nice was enough for me. As time went on, my friend group started to dwindle. People got into spats, hurtful words were shared, and there was a big blow-up between me and a former friend I thought so highly of.

We can fall into the trap of romanticizing queer friendships. We can sometimes even put them above our other friendships, even those that are based on mutual love and respect. The one good thing that happened with the

friendship breakups was that I finally opened my eyes. Once I took off my rose-colored glasses, I was so deeply hurt. I poured so much of myself into these friendships. I did so because I assumed that we had similar values. As silly as it sounds, queer friendships are in fact like any other human experience. We must assess them as such. Some friends just aren’t for you, and you aren’t for them. It doesn’t matter sometimes if you share a similar identity.

Friendships are still very special to me; I just approach them differently now. I realized that for a friendship to work, it must have a solid foundation. The foundation that works best for me is one based on strong boundaries, a similar value system, and mutual love and respect. Friendships get toxic when things aren’t communicated, when boundaries are crossed and when friends take advantage of each other.

It can be tempting to rush to be a part of a community with people that are also queer and from your culture, but this can lead to being blindsided when they aren’t what you expected. The best thing would be to assess people as human beings first and decide from there whether you are a good fit together. To this day, I have a loving group of queer Habesha friends. I have been lucky to still have so many friends with the same values. The few that didn’t work out hurt but also made me appreciate my beautiful friendships even more.

real family

= chosen family



A family friend and I were hanging out at a café once. We were discussing current affairs and particularly a news story about same-sex marriage in the US. What was a simple conversation about rights in general, evolved into a heated argument when he kept going on about how being gay was wrong and perverted because “the butt is not made for sex”.

I was so annoyed at his reasoning that I responded with, “If you don’t want to get fucked in the ass, then don’t. But you have no right to step into people’s bedrooms and tell them how to have sex. Your desire to do that makes you a fucking pervert” without lowering my voice.

He was at a loss for words and was embarrassed at the odd looks we kept getting from the people in the crowded café. He lowered his voice but continued to further argue that being gay was wrong based on the “naturally prescribed” use of body parts. As we continued the conversation, one of my sisters, who was in the area, joined us.

He was ecstatic by her presence as he felt that she was the voice of reason that he needed to set me straight about my misguided “approval of the gays”. He eagerly briefed my sister about our conversation and told her to “reason” with me. She looked at him like he had completely lost his mind and asked him what right he had to decide how other people lived their lives or, using his logic, how other people choose to have sex. He could

not believe that my sister and I were aligned in supporting “the gays”.

As further proof that being gay was completely OK and, in an attempt to find another voice of reason, I called another one of my sisters and we summarized the conversation for her. Then, addressing the family friend, she asked, “Come on, how can you possibly think like this in this day and age?!” He was at a loss for words and asked if everyone in the family thought this way. Both my sisters informed him that our family agreed people had a right to live their lives in any way that they felt was authentic and that there was nothing wrong with being gay.

I just sat back and watched as my sister carried the conversation with him and attempted to set him straight about his assumptions and the real danger of his arguments to LGBTQ+ people who live in Ethiopia.

I appreciated the effort my sisters made to talk some sense into our homophobic family friend. I don’t know if any of our arguments made him see LGBTQ+ people in a different light or if it made any gain toward making him willing to see gender and sexual minorities as a “normal” variation in human sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression.

And to be honest, what was important that day was not whether he was convinced but rather the sense of “home” that my sisters created for me. I have always appreciated my family for the way that they stand by me and for me as



**And to be honest, what was important that day was not whether he was convinced but rather the sense of “home” that my sisters created for me.**

their queer sibling, but that situation vividly demonstrated the space that they constantly hold for me. It made me realize that they are often my refuge when the homophobia around me gets to be too much.

Their allyship often makes me think of the concept of “chosen families” in queer communities. While I value my queer community and the sense of “home” that I have been able to create with them, my biological family often proves that the two are not incompatible. As queer people, it is often indeed difficult to count on our biological families to protect us. Our biological families are part of the larger Ethiopian culture, which means that they can be active participants in the marginalization of queer people. They are often the first ones to take us to churches to either “pray the gay away” or to subject us to rituals that are meant to exorcise the supposed evil spirit that “makes us gay”. They are sometimes the first to force their queer family members to get married in a supposed effort to “stop” their being queer. The actions or inactions of our biological families are often the sources of so many of our trials and tribulations.

My family of origin proves that this is not always the case. They are a rare case of an Ethiopian family who is invested in being an ally to me. While our being biologically related is fate, the attempts they make to create space for me is an active choice on their part. And my inclusion of them in my

“chosen family” along with my queer chosen family is an active and calculated choice.



# Joyous Reflections





# 20 years of friendship: Meeting my first queer Ethiopian woman

Leaning against a wall with one foot propped against it and arms crossed, I was standing outside my family's store when I first met Mahlet, my first Ethiopian lesbian. I remember her leaving my sister's friend's car and walking toward me. She had short hair and was wearing a t-shirt, men's jeans, and men's tennis shoes. She screamed dyke in the same way that I did. We were both walking billboards of the stereotypical lesbian. In typical butch fashion, I played it cool. I nodded my head and said, "Hey, man". She didn't disappoint and gave me some version of "Hey, what's up?" with a similar head nod.

We didn't really engage on that day but a few weeks later my sister's friend

set up a lunch to connect us, claiming Mahlet and I were very similar. She said, "You are both very odd, you both look like 12-year-old boys and read way too many damn books". While those similarities alone were not enough to have lunch with someone, I assumed I knew of one similarity with Mahlet that my sister's friend did not know.

At lunch, despite the flowing conversation, I think both Mahlet and I were eager to be alone. When lunch was over, we all agreed that my sister's friend would take her own car and that Mahlet would drop me off. My destination was at most only a 10-minute drive away, but the two of us drove around Addis Ababa for more than

**“... she alone  
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only queer  
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for so long.  
She has  
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my family of  
choice. And  
the reason  
for so much  
of my queer  
joy and  
reflection.**

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five hours. We confirmed our queerness to each other less than five minutes into our drive. While traversing the streets of Addis from Entoto to Saris and from Addisu Gebeya to Old Airport, we talked about our queer identity, how we came out, who knew, how we survive in Addis Ababa, and how we make sense of being queer and Ethiopian.

It was an endless conversation. We were so excited about meeting each other that it seemed as if we were trying to cram a lifetime of experiences into that five-hour drive. When we realized that we simply would not be able to finish the conversation during that drive, we exchanged phone numbers and agreed to continue talking.

We would meet for coffee after work and stay up until two or three in the morning engaged in deep and mundane conversations. We would exchange lesbian romance books. We would watch lesbian movies on videocassettes that Mahlet ordered and that were delivered through the Ethiopian Post Office. We took the risk of having them delivered because that was the only way that we could get access to these movies and books. She would watch the L Word on DSTV every week as it was aired, and we would then talk about the adventures of the mostly privileged white lesbians in Los Angeles. This was the way we connected with the outside queer world, snippets of connections in the form of smuggled books, movies, and a TV show that

most didn't know enough about to take off the air. We were our own island in the middle of nowhere.

A few years later, when we both started dating in Addis, we watched as more and more Ethiopians came out as queer. We had a front seat to the changing landscape of queer visibility in Addis. She created a Yahoo group for lesbian and bisexual women, and we managed to meet a few more queer women through them. The first house gathering of lesbian and bisexual women - that we knew of and that was organized by a lesbian we connected with through the Yahoo group - was a phenomenal step forward. Although we were both too scared to attend, hearing about it filled us with hope about the possibility of further connections that could easily be created.

I am now a part of an active queer community in Addis Ababa. I have met a number of butch women - some as young as 18 - and watching so many queer people being themselves and in community with other queers fills me with joy.

It also makes me nostalgic. Mahlet and I have been friends for close to 20 years. Our friendship has evolved as we have grown older (and wiser, we both hope). What stands out though is the fact that she alone was my only queer community for so long. She has remained my family of choice. And the reason for so much of my queer joy and reflection.

**Do you think chosen families - queer friendships and communities- are important?**

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

 Chav Brook  
Because sometimes they are the only one who can understand you and let you be the whole YOU .the laughter ,pain, advice and everything in between feels so comfortable and accepted 😊

JuJu JuJu  
For me queer friendships have been a safe space. I always felt lighter and at ease after spending time with queer siblings who share similar ideals and accept me for me. Sometimes, I think of these friendships as therapy. Sharing the ups and downs of being a queer Ethiopian with my friends makes me feel seen and I'm not alone in the battlefield. ❤️

## Dinbushea Gella (translation)

Having a close queer friend is very important. The fact that my age is racing to hit 40, and that I've been meeting queer people for close to 20 years, I believe places emphasis on how important this issue is. Not only my age group, as I've just mentioned but also the fact that I have been forced to live a double life, demands that I surround myself with queer people to be able to live my authentic self without limitations. Looking for people who accept you for who you are is human nature and thrilling. The thing I thank God for the most is my queer friends – brothers and sisters – that have enabled me to live my best queer life, more so than my biological family has. I have close friends / chosen families that have helped me understand the saying "Blood relations are only in words". It's my wish that everyone is able to savor this experience. Thank you

Thank you

Robin Eyoab (translation)

As a whole, I remember what I had written before on the issue, "Friendships are a way for people to fulfill their natural need for human connections, a shelter when you're running away from your worst self, a space to provide even the briefest of freedom from the pain of the world's discrimination, a support system and a sense of comfort to use humor to escape life's great pains." More than anything, friendships are mirrors that enable us to truly see ourselves, and the deepest connections we are able to forge with others. We know that even relationships can be made better by partners being friends. Friendships are the space for us to be ourselves without fear of judgment.

As queer people, in a world where we constantly need to live double lives, having friends that are like you, and letting you be yourself, understanding and supporting you is more comforting than even finding a romantic partner. In true friendships, you're not compromising for fear of losing that person. Queer friendships are an anchor for peace and joy in your life and are able to be there for you across multiple aspects of your life.

## Do you think chosen families - queer friendships and communities- are important?

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

Fikir Woldekidan

Personally Queer friendships changed my life.

All the loneliness , why am I the way I am , why can't I be normal goes away because now I have people to share it with. queer friendships are a safe space where we could question & share all the heteronormative practices we ended up internalizing.  
It's just beka you give hope to each other and honestly that means the world to me , all the darkness just goes away.  
You don't have to force your self to be something you are not anymore because you're not alone

Lucy West

Our Queer friendships are transformative experiences built on strength and subversion that we think, feel, experience, share, resist together lead to the emergence of queer sociality that are disproved by heteropatriarchy and yet we persist. Our coming together in solidarity and in friendship and forging solidarities through friendship is resistance. We resist by supporting each other live non normatively, counter shame privately and collectively, and share grief emphatically, helping each other navigate queerness while inhabiting and traversing inflexible structures of violence.

Um Jôniba

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## Um Jonibo (translation)

I swear to God, I have two straight friends who have completely accepted my being a *zega* (queer) and they provide me with more support than even the people in the *zega* community.

Patrick Patrick

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Patrick Patrick (translation)

It is very important. We can tell people who are like us the things we would not be able to tell other and this enables us to breath, to support each other and to exchange ideas. So, I think, it is very important.

Mes Robes

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ከሚተችው በግንባር ማውራት ተስስጥቷል... በዋናነት ለገን ለሚሆነ(ይ/ቀብ)  
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Mes Robel

Having close friends in your life that share your views and lifestyle is crucial to at least speak freely about your experiences... It can in some ways provide you with relief from the misery (some even going as far as committing suicide) that comes from not being able to be your true self.