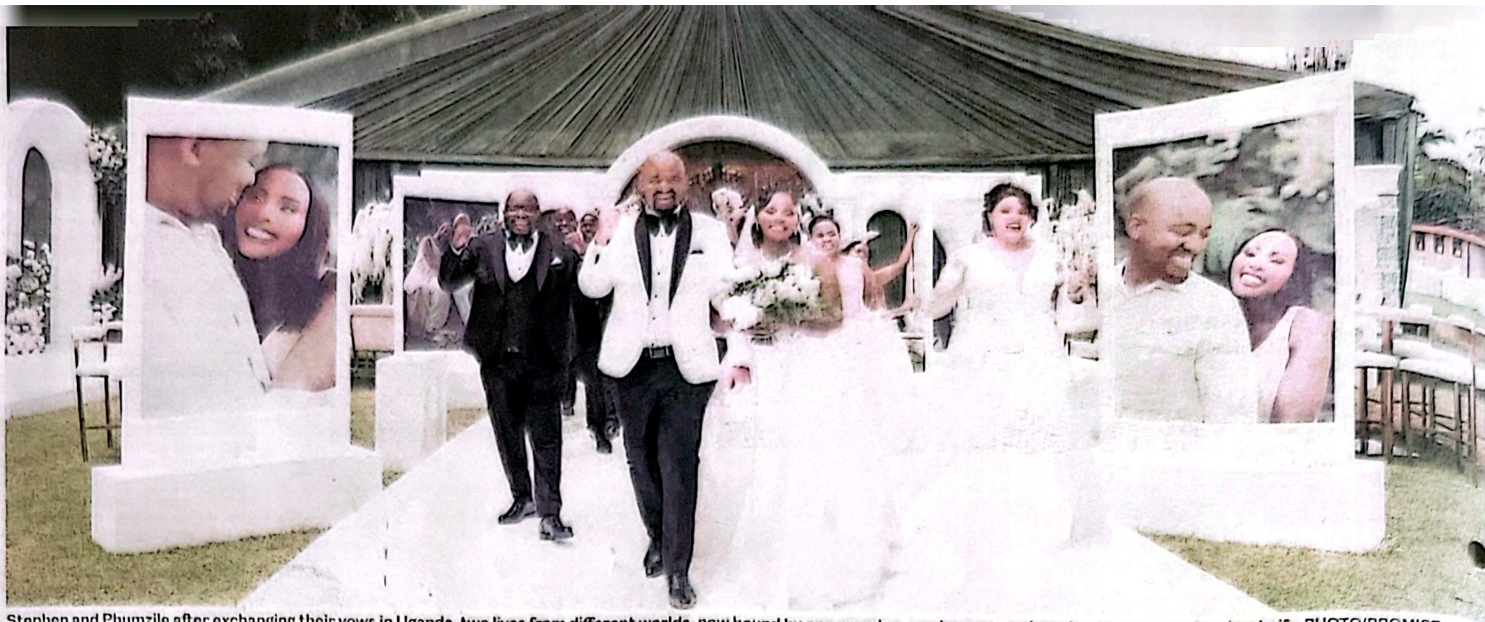




Stephen and Phumzile after exchanging their vows in Uganda, two lives from different worlds, now bound by one promise, one journey, and one beginning as husband and wife. PHOTO/PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

Two countries, one love that defied distance

They met from opposite sides of the map, with miles, time zones, and uncertainty between them, but what began as a chance connection slowly grew into a love strong enough to ignore the distance.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

When Stephen Akandwanaho first saw her, she was on stage, completely in her element. He was seated among academic leaders at a joint institutional event in South Africa, expected to be focused on the programme. Instead, his attention shifted and stayed fixed on Phumzile Mavimbela.

"It was deeper than a physical connection. I found myself distracted, trying to understand what I was feeling," he says.

For her, the moment barely registered. "I was just doing my job. I was actually worried I was mispronouncing his surname because he kept looking at me," she recalls with a laugh.

That brief encounter would later become the beginning of a story that crossed cities and cultures.

A deliberate beginning

Akandwanaho, a Ugandan based in Durban, South Africa for over a decade, is the executive dean of Information Technology within

the Growth Ten Group. Mavimbela, born and raised in Johannesburg, is a marketing strategist and creative with a background in journalism. Her world is one of storytelling, branding and communication.

Their paths officially crossed at that event, but the connection deepened afterwards. Akandwanaho had travelled to Johannesburg for collaboration and saw an opening he did not ignore.

"I asked for her number under the excuse of getting photos after the event. But I knew I wanted to see her again," he admits.

When he called and asked to meet, she hesitated.

"I even called my sister and asked, 'Why would I agree to meet someone I have just met?' But she told me to go since I was in my province and a place I knew well," she says.

That first dinner in Johannesburg set the tone.

"I chose my seat strategically. I wanted to see her walk in," he says.

When she arrived, the impression he had formed was confirmed. But she was not easily convinced. After introductions, she asked him directly.

"What do you want? I do not like wasting time," she says.

His answer was immediate.

"He said he was looking to settle. No hesitation," she recalls.

"That surprised me, but it also impressed me. He was intentional. Many people are not prepared for that question."

By the time the evening ended, she had decided to give love a chance, even though it was not her immediate focus.

Akandwanaho cancelled his flight back to Durban the next day to see her again before returning to work.

Love across distance

Their relationship quickly became a long-distance one between Durban and Johannesburg, cities they describe as comparable to Kampala and Nairobi.

"It was expensive, difficult and emotionally demanding. But it strengthened us," he says.

For Mavimbela, consistency mattered more than proximity.

"He is very busy, but he always made time. That gave me security. I never had to question if I mattered," she says.

They built routines around daily calls, shared prayers, and intentional check-ins. At times, they watched movies

together, read the same books, and discussed them. Digital

tools helped them stay connected in creative ways, turning distance into shared experience rather than separation.

Early on, both families were also brought into the relationship.

"It made it clear this was not casual. We were building towards something," he says.

A proposal across the sky

When he began planning the proposal, Akandwanaho wanted it to reflect everything they had built.

He chose her birthday, October 23, and

LOOKING AHEAD

The couple plans to honeymoon in Greece later this year after the arrival of their first child. But beyond milestones, they say their story is anchored in intention, faith and trust in timing.

"Sometimes you think you are in control, but you are not. When you surrender, things align," Akandwanaho says.

ceremonies involving the exchange of gifts and symbolic rituals, blending tradition with family unity.

"In our culture, once gifts are exchanged, families are formally united," Mavimbela explains.

For her, it was also a moment of cultural immersion. "You are not just marrying a person. You are joining families, traditions and histories," she says.

A wedding built against time

After the ceremonies, the couple agreed on a wedding date, March 23, in Uganda. "It is a significant date for many milestones in my life fall on day," he says.

With less than six months to plan an international wedding, the pressure was real.

"It felt like a mountain," he admits. But support from family, friends and colleagues helped steady the process.

In December, Mavimbela was formally introduced to his family in western Uganda, where she was welcomed into tradition and symbolism, including sitting with her mother-in-law and participating in cultural rituals.

A wedding planner came on board in January, carefully selected to bridge both their worlds.

"We had agreed we would rather not have a wedding than have something mediocre," he says.

The day it all came together

On the wedding day, everything unfolded as planned, from morning preparations to the ceremony and reception.

"I cried before walking down the aisle. I do not usually show emotion, but it was overwhelming," she says.

For Akandwanaho, the defining moment was seeing everything come together exactly as envisioned.

"Usually reality falls short. This time, it matched perfectly," he says.

But beyond the aesthetics, one moment stood out for Mavimbela: the speeches. "Hearing his family welcome me meant everything. I felt like I truly belonged," she says.

OCT 23
DAY
AKANDWANAH
PROPOSED