

At home abroad

Photography. From borrowing his mother's analogue camera in rural Wakiso to documenting life across Uganda and Germany, photographer Jacob "Zuma" Mukalazi has turned migration, memory and identity into a visual language that connects two very different worlds.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

The first camera Jacob "Zuma" Mukalazi ever held did not belong to him. It belonged to his mother. In the early 2000s, long before digital photography became common in Uganda, Ms Christine Naluwoza moved through ceremonies in Kitagobwa in Wakiso District with an analogue camera hanging from her shoulder. Weddings, introductions, baptisms and community gatherings all passed through her lens.

In rural Uganda, then, a camera carried mystery. It announced importance. It transformed ordinary moments into memory. Mukalazi still remembers watching her work with quiet fascination.

"With analogue technology, you had to be intentional. Film was expensive. Every shot mattered. You couldn't just keep pressing the button the way people do today," he says.

Eventually, his mother stepped away from photography and returned fully to tailoring, exhausted by the demands of freelance work. But before she did, she handed the camera to her son.

"That camera changed everything for me. I was still young, but suddenly I started seeing the world differently," he says.

Today, Mukalazi lives in Germany, where he works as a photographer navigating two emotional landscapes at once. Uganda's vibrant cultural rhythms and Europe's quiet, structured stillness. Yet beneath the modern equipment and polished exhibitions remains the memory of a boy in Kitagobwa learning patience through an old film camera.

"I define my work by my eye, not my passport. That is very important to me," he says.

Mukalazi did not initially plan to become a photographer. At Makerere University, he pursued a Bachelor's degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management while working as a chef to support himself through school.

Like many young Ugandans in Kampala, survival came first. But tourism slowly altered his perspective. Traveling through Uganda exposed him to landscapes and stories that pulled him toward photography almost instinctively.

"The more I travelled, the more I realised how visually rich Uganda is. There is beauty everywhere, in the wildlife, the people, the markets, even in ordinary roadside moments," he says.

At first, he borrowed cameras from friends during trips into the wild. The borrowed equipment was never enough. Batteries died quickly. Memory cards are full. But each photograph sharpened his curiosity.

Then, in 2019, his brother, Prof Moses Nsubuga, bought him his first digital camera. "My spirit was rejuvenated again. That camera made me believe photography could become more than just a hobby," Mukalazi says.

With it, Uganda became both subject and classroom. He climbed the Rwenzori Mountains three times, eventually reaching Margherita Peak. He photographed the valleys near Virunga, the slopes of Sabinyo and Muhabura,

From Wakiso to Germany

and the vast stillness of Kidepo Valley National Park. He wandered through Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, Kibale National Park and Queen Elizabeth National Park searching for moments many Ugandans themselves rarely stop to observe.

"For me, photography was never only about taking beautiful pictures. It was about preserving memory and changing perception. I wanted people to see Uganda beyond stereotypes," he says. "Our stories are deeper than what the world usually sees."

When Mukalazi eventually moved to Germany, the transition felt far more complicated than the polished migration stories often shared online.

"The first thing that shocked me was the light. In Uganda, the humidity softens everything. In Germany, especially after rain, the air feels crisp and sharp," he says.

The landscapes felt disciplined. Rivers were carefully managed. Buildings stood preserved with historical precision. Streets carried an orderliness unfamiliar to someone raised in Uganda's beautiful unpredictability.

"The colours looked unreal. Burnt orange, yellow leaves, grey skies. It felt like shifting from a saturated African film into a muted European one," he recalls.

But beauty alone could not soften the loneliness. What he

missed most was not Kampala traffic or loud music. It was wildlife. In Uganda, life constantly interrupts your environment, birds crossing the horizon, butterflies drifting through space, sudden movement in distant grasslands.

"In Germany, nature felt organised. The first deer I saw was in captivity. German nature is beautiful, but it sometimes feels staged. Ugandan nature felt alive in a completely different way," he says.

Migration, he discovered, is not simply about missing people. Sometimes it is about missing the emotional texture of a place, the sounds, the unpredictability, the spontaneous conversations that quietly reassure you that life is unfolding around you.

Like many African professionals abroad, Mukalazi also quickly learned that talent alone does not erase bureaucracy," he says.

"The hardest thing, honestly, has not been language. It has been bureaucracy," he says.

His Ugandan qualifications required verification after verification. Housing applications disappeared unanswered. Apartment viewings ended politely but unsuccessfully.

"You begin feeling invisible. You realise very quickly that being skilled does not automatically make life easier abroad," he says.

Still, he adapted slowly. He attended small crea-



At the same time, Germany's art culture has deeply influenced him. "In Germany, art is taken seriously; people discuss photography philosophically. They preserve archives. They ask difficult questions about identity and memory," he says. But living between worlds also carries tension.

"Sometimes Europe exoticises African artists and sometimes people back home think migration changes your authenticity," he says. Whenever someone introduces him primarily as a "migrant photographer," he gently corrects them. "I prefer just photographer. Migration is part of my story, but it is not my entire identity," he says.

Looking back now, Mukalazi says his early photographs in Germany carried visible loneliness.

He practiced German in cafés around Bonn and Cologne. Instead of trying to speak perfectly, he focused on understanding social rhythms. Eventually, he noticed something that transformed how he interacted with people.

"In Uganda, silence can make people uncomfortable. But in Germany, silence often means someone is thinking carefully. Once I understood that, I stopped trying to fill every pause with nervous talking," he says.

That adjustment slowly opened doors. Yet the loneliness remained.

"There were moments I asked myself 'Why am I even here?'" He admits. He missed Uganda's warmth. The laughter. The ease of conversation. Fresh fruit from roadside markets. Familiar language. People who smiled naturally without needing explanation.

"In Germany, life can feel efficient but emotionally distant. You can spend an entire day without speaking deeply to anyone," he says.

But he stayed because he believed growth sometimes requires discomfort.

"As I was leaving Uganda, I wanted to experience another path and another kind of art. I needed to challenge myself creatively," he says.

That challenge changed him profoundly. In Uganda, creativity often came through spontaneity. Projects shifted according to weather, conversations or unexpected encounters. Germany introduced structure instead, fixed schedules, boundaries between work and rest, and long periods of solitude.

"There is a discipline Germany taught me. Not only technical discipline, but emotional discipline," he says.

That solitude forced him to confront himself not simply as a photographer, but as an artist stripped of familiarity.

"In Uganda, there is always community around you. Friends, family. Movement. In Germany, I learned to sit alone with my thoughts and my camera," he says.

At first, the silence unsettled him. "When I moved, I thought Europe would automatically make me better. But instead, it forced me to rebuild confidence from zero because nobody knew me there," he says.

Over time, however, the isolation sharpened his artistic eye. He began noticing details he once ignored, condensation on café windows during winter mornings, strangers waiting silently at tram stations, the stillness inside museums where people spoke almost in whispers.

"Photography stopped becoming about spectacle." It became about patience and observation," he says.

Today, his work exists in coexistence between Uganda and Germany. His photographs resist easy categorisation. A portrait captured in Kampala may carry the minimalism of European gallery photography. A quiet German street may somehow contain the emotional warmth of home.

"I am interested in resonance. I want people to see connections between worlds that usually appear separate," he explains.

"Ugandan stories deserve to exist at the centre of global conversations, not as charity stories. Not as safari advertisements. But as human experiences equal to any other stories," he says.



In 2019, Mukalazi got his first ever digital camera

66

The images were technically sharp, but emotionally distant, myself whether I belonged there," he says. Today, the work feels softer. More intimate. "The current work says something different. This is my home too, with all its ordinary magic," he reflects. Home itself has become fluid. Part of it remains in Kitagobwa, where his mother once photographed village ceremonies on film cameras. Part of it lives in Uganda's wilderness, and part of it now exists in Germany.